

## The Case for Muslim Schools

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Muslim communities all over the world are engaged in what can best be described as a damage limitation exercise in terms of their children's education. Living in societies largely unfriendly to the Islāmic ethos, they are turning to Muslim schools in order to preserve as best they can their communal identity and practice as Muslims. Schools are springing up in Britain, Australia, South Africa, Ireland, mainland Europe and the USA. At a time when schools in 'Muslim' countries are following the Western educational model in increasing numbers, Muslims in largely but not exclusively English-speaking countries are attempting to revive the spirit of Islāmic education through schools which cover all aspects of the modern syllabus from an Islāmic viewpoint and attempt to give their pupils a solid grounding in their faith through study of the *Qur'ān*, the *Ahādīth*, Islāmic history and the Arabic language.

The degree of opposition to Muslim schools, particularly in Britain, is grossly out of proportion to the scale of the projects concerned. Given that there are, perhaps, 3-400,000 Muslim children of school age in Britain, why should schools which can cater (at the moment) for only around 2% of those children be the cause of so much concern, especially when a third of all schools in England and Wales are religious schools based on the Judeo-Christian faiths?

It is often said that the existence of state-funded religious schools in Britain is an accident of history which bears no relevance to society today, wherein many faiths are represented, not just Christianity and Judaism. Such a view could be taken seriously were it not for the fact that voluntary aided (and some grant-maintained) schools with a religious ethos are increasing in numbers, not remaining static or decreasing. In a democratic society such as ours, then, can it be reasonable to allow state funding for some faiths whilst denying it to others? Should Muslims and other faith groups be expected to pay for Christian and Jewish schools without having similar educational choice for their own children? Critics say that the choice is there; Muslims can have private, fee-paying schools if they want 'separate' education for their children, and this is true. But it doesn't help to explain the anomaly of the funding of some religious schools out of the public purse but not others.

However, Muslims do not want to send their children to Muslim schools – and have those schools legitimately paid for by the state – simply because “the Christians and Jews have such schools so we want them too”. Nor are those parents keen on the establishment of Muslim schools ‘fundamentalists’ who want to deny their children the full and balanced curriculum required by law in the state system. They want them because a *complete* Islāmic education as delivered in a well-resourced Muslim school fulfils the legal requirements for an education which “promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society...”<sup>1</sup> in a way which no ‘ordinary’ state school can do for its Muslim pupils.

However, I used the phrase ‘damage limitation exercise’ because I believe this best describes what Muslims are trying to do at the moment and it gives an idea of what – despite the ideals aimed for – we can realistically hope to achieve in the present climate of world affairs.

Now, perhaps more than ever before, secularism is sweeping the world in all matters of public life: religion is being relegated more and more to strictly personal beliefs punctuated by occasional symbols of communal practice. Even amongst Muslims, faith does not play the all-embracing role in life that it should, indeed must, if Islām is really going to be an effective means by which society can be run. Historically, it has been seen

that occupying forces have sought to introduce changes in local education systems as a means of social control to mould the local population so that the ideology of the rulers becomes dominant. Western nations did this wherever they were the colonial powers, as did the Russian communists after the carve up of Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II. The effects of both are still being felt. In Muslim countries, the traditional madrasah system of education was supplanted by 'modern', i.e. secular, Western institutions which grew on the premise that they must be superior simply because they were from the West. Instead of rising to the educational challenge this situation provided, by trying to widen the scope of the madrasahs to include what are now termed 'secular' subjects studied from a solid base steeped in Islāmic knowledge, local populations acquiesced and relegated Islāmic education to an inferior rôle. Such a subservient mentality has survived and exists in Muslim minds to this day.

In Britain this much is obvious, with Muslim parents pushing their children to obtain secular qualifications at the expense of any serious religious knowledge, the latter being entrusted to largely poorly resourced and staffed supplementary schools. Sadly, even this basic Islāmic education is not backed up in many cases by good Islāmic practice in the home. The result is many young Muslims who have little or no knowledge of their supposed faith in terms of the basic beliefs, and no feeling at all that their 'faith' as such can have a vital part to play in every sphere of their lives.

The state education system aids and abets this sorrowful state of affairs by limiting Religious Education (RE) to one lesson per week, dealing with all religions on a relatively superficial level. To be fair, there are many teachers who make great efforts to ensure that all pupils are given the chance to express their beliefs positively within schools but they are swimming against the tide of secularism which makes RE the most marginalised subject on the curriculum. (This is despite the fact that RE is the only subject it has been compulsory to teach in schools since the passing of the 1944 Education Act!)

It is from this position – an education system which largely regards religion as a nuisance best ignored, a society which places religion out of the public sector and a world which is increasingly anti-Islāmic, even anti-religion – that some Muslim parents have felt the need to open schools where their children can be well-versed in their Islāmic heritage while studying for those still-coveted qualifications which will allow them to compete for jobs in the wider community and become the pioneers in all spheres of life and study which that heritage demonstrates Muslims were in the past.

So what is a 'Muslim school'? Is it, as some maintain, a place where the children are given a *Qur'ān* at 8.30 am for it to be taken from them at 3.30 pm; where they sit and chant verses from the Holy Book with no understanding, being beaten if they err; where girls are deprived of equal opportunity and are conditioned for a life of subservience at home; where Islāmic 'fundamentalism' breeds 'fanatics'? Such is the standard and substance of the arguments against Muslim schools. The answer, quite simply, is 'no' on all counts.

Admittedly, there are some parents who send their children, particularly girls, to Muslim schools merely because the law demands that they receive an education until they are 16 years old and they would rather send them to a Muslim school (which at secondary level will not have the distractions of members of the opposite sex) than an ordinary school. Such parents are in the minority though and most people involved in running Muslim schools are dedicated to Islāmic education in its fullest sense.

This dedication means that schools exist where common sense dictates that they should not; in old factories, terraced houses and portacabins, minor educational miracles take place every day. Teachers – not all of them Muslims – deliver a curriculum which does not contravene Islāmic sensitivities in often straitened circumstances, giving the children in their charge a solid base from which to tackle higher education confident in their self-

belief as Muslims, unlike their frequently religiously-confused counterparts educated in the state system.

It has been said that “Islām views education as a process through which a child’s total personality is developed in preparation for both this life and the *Ākhirah* (life after death).”<sup>2</sup> This gives an insight into the ethos of a Muslim school, in which all aspects of a child’s life are catered for, not merely the secular, material side. Practically-speaking, this means that the tenets of Islām influence every part of the curriculum, something not possible in non-Muslim schools. This does not mean that some subjects are avoided if they contradict Islām or entail un-Islāmic practice; the subjects themselves may not be taboo, but the methodology used to teach them in state schools certainly is. Hence, Muslim schools’ curricula are tailored to meet the requirements of Islām so that the pupils get the benefit of study without having to compromise on religious principles. Apart from the academic value of this approach, it also boosts the self-esteem of Muslim pupils who are made fully aware of the tremendous contributions made by Muslim scholars in many subject areas (e.g. science, mathematics, geography, etc.) over the centuries.

Another benefit of Muslim schools is not directly linked to the academic side of school affairs but is important nevertheless. The schools do not provide an alien environment, differing in almost every respect from what the children experience at home. Thus, by making pupils feel more at ease at school, they have a positive effect on their outlook and academic achievements. The spirit of the Bullock Report (*A language for life*, 1975), which looked into community languages but could easily be applied in this instance, is encapsulated by the role of Muslim schools in the overall sphere of a child’s life: “No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor live and act as though school and home represents two totally separate, and different, cultures which have to be kept apart.”

The criticism that the sheer size (mostly small) of Muslim schools makes it impossible for them to offer a “full and balanced curriculum” is not borne out by reality. Yes, financial resources (or, rather, the lack of them) often impose limits on what can be offered in curriculum terms, but school size in itself is not a barrier to scholastic success. Other, non-Muslim, independent schools (for example, St. Peter’s School in Northampton) are small by ‘normal’ standards (i.e. in official parlance, they are incapable of offering ‘a full and balanced curriculum’) but are tremendously popular with parents and pupils and are achieving academic results the envy of many much larger schools. There are also many small schools in the state system which resolutely refuse to conform to imposed size limits which dictate their closure and fight to stay open; they are popular with parents and some have received official recognition for the quality of their curriculum delivery. A case in mind is Ennerdale and Kinniside Primary School in north-west England which, with 40 or so pupils, was reported to have received “... the British educational world’s most coveted prize: a gold star from Her Majesty’s Inspectors.”<sup>3</sup> It is, I believe, not insignificant for this discussion to note that Ennerdale and Kinniside Primary is a Church of England school. It is also interesting to note that an independent Roman Catholic school in Wales was given grant-maintained status (state funding) in May 1996 even though it plans to have a maximum of 247 pupils, far less than the standard, generally-accepted norm for secondary schools.

The position of Muslim women, who are regarded as oppressed by many non-Muslims (possibly because of the un-Islāmic behaviour of many Muslim men in this respect), surfaces frequently whenever the Muslim schools issue is raised. However, far from trying to restrict educational opportunities for Muslim girls, Muslim schools actually provide places where they can study and practice their faith, something not always possible in non-Muslim institutions. ‘Equal rights’ is used frequently as a euphemism for ‘do not follow your religion’ and I would assert that those who seek to ‘liberate’ Muslim girls

from Islām are themselves placing limits on what they believe Muslim girls practising their religion are capable of achieving. Given the opportunity, any girl can be a fully-practising Muslim *and* a surgeon, solicitor, accountant, engineer or whatever. One lady I know is a wife and mother with six children, all born before she obtained a PhD in mechanical engineering. She is also a practising Muslim in every sense of the word who sees her studies as an aspect of *'Ibādah* (worship). Why should a person's spiritual and religious nature be suppressed for material advancement in the name of 'liberation'?

The sort of problems faced by Muslim girls who wear Islāmic dress are well-recorded because they make good headlines in the newspapers (e.g. the case of the Alvi sisters who were banned from attending Altrincham Grammar School for Girls in 1990 because they insisted on wearing correct Islāmic clothing; and the case of two French girls who were not allowed to wear head scarves in their fanatically secular state school in 1993). However, boys and girls face similar problems relating to dress and personal hygiene which make them ready targets for bullying which, in turn, affects their academic performance. Like many of their contemporaries around the country, some of the girls attending Zakaria School in Yorkshire joined the school from the state system and so, unlike critics of Muslim schools, they are in a position to make comparisons based on experience. One girl has said, "I was taunted about clothes, fell behind in my lessons, dreaded PE [physical education] and worried about school dinners."<sup>4</sup> Such fears do not exist for her at Zakaria.

The fear of intolerance and what has been termed voluntary apartheid prompts many opposed to Muslim schools to claim that children need to be in multi-faith schools which reflect society if they are not to develop intolerant attitudes towards those of other faiths (and no faith). Others propose that schools be made purely secular in nature, in other words religion-free zones, to achieve the same aim. Such arguments fail, not least because secularism is not a neutral position to adopt; those who advocate a secular lifestyle do so out of choice. Why should they be allowed to impose their chosen lifestyle upon others with differing views? This sort of intolerance in the name of tolerance makes a mockery of freedom to choose and, indeed, the law of the land which states that "... so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction ... and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents."<sup>5</sup> The 'multi-faith' argument could be sustained if British, or any, society was truly multi-faith. It is not. Britain's is a society consisting of people with many faiths. The difference is enormous because whilst the former implies that society has many faiths, the latter paints the real picture that people within society only have one faith (or none at all) each. While, therefore, multi-faith schools have everyone celebrating *'Īd* one week, Christmas the next, Passover the week after, and so on, in the real world Muslims celebrate *'Īd*, Christians celebrate Christmas and Jews celebrate Passover. In this respect, religious schools are more a true reflection of a multi-faith society than multi-faith schools. As far as Islām is concerned, it is reasonable to mention here that a deep study of the *Qur'ān* (something which is quite feasible within a Muslim school but almost impossible in a non-Muslim institution) will, as a matter of course, lead to a study of the followers of prophets Jesus and Moses (peace be upon them both) which, in turn, can lead on to a study of modern-day Christianity and Judaism. As for intolerance, a glance at the *Qur'ān* will show that Muslims are urged to "Say ... unto you, your way, unto me mine"<sup>6</sup> and are advised that "There is no compulsion in religion ..."<sup>7</sup>

The public image of Muslim schools needs improvement. The fact that an article such as this is still deemed necessary illustrates that our public relations efforts have been less than successful.

I once had the duty to escort the local Member of Parliament, Ken Livingstone, around Islāmia Primary School and he remarked that he had expected to find a "school for

trainee ayatollahs”; instead, he found “a happy, ordinary school” which just happened to have Islām as its ethos. It is a sad fact of life, though, that not everyone has been so positive about the role of Muslim schools in our society; many of the schools’ critics would call themselves Muslims but they have failed to see the distinction between their perceptions of Muslim schools, formed by what they read in the media, and reality. The belief in the minds of such people is most definitely that ‘West is best’ and they are so desperate to prove their Britishness that they take every opportunity to denounce Muslim schools in the press. The newspapers, for their part, exploit this split in the ranks of the Muslim community as part of their own agenda against Islām. They use the word ‘separate’ liberally when describing Muslim schools,<sup>8</sup> a term rarely, if ever, applied to other religious schools and which is used by those whose aim is to condemn our schools as the products of a narrow-minded, ghetto mentality. The words ‘Asian’ and ‘Muslim’ are, in the hands of journalists and commentators, interchangeable, as if they are one and the same,<sup>9</sup> implying that one of the criteria for entry to Muslim schools is race (which is not true); the conclusion drawn is that they must, therefore, be racist and thus undesirable. Such reporting adds to the myth that the schools are Asian ghettos which exclude other races (and faiths) but it conveniently ignores the fact that many state schools in predominantly Asian areas (such as parts of Bradford, Batley, Tower Hamlets, etc.) are, by the very nature of the population they serve, effectively ‘Asian ghetto’ schools.

Asian/Muslim interchange was graphically illustrated during the dispute at Stratford School in east London, one of the early grant-maintained schools. The details of the case do not need to be mentioned here, suffice to say that one newspaper leader column<sup>10</sup> referred to the “ethnic element” of the school’s pupils; the unity of “Asians and Afro-Caribbeans” about the school and that most “Asian parents” support a successful school. This was followed by: “There is, of course, a minority of Muslims who want to see Muslim pupils in Muslim schools taught by Muslim teachers.” All along the issue had been about race and one of the main protagonists, a Sikh teacher-governor, had denied that the aim was to have a Muslim school,<sup>11</sup> and yet Muslims and Muslim schools were introduced into the equation totally out of context. This sort of bias in the media is not uncommon. Journalists also tend to ignore the unpalatable truth that if the Jews are definable as a race, then Jewish schools are, quite simply, racist. The fear of being labelled “anti-Semitic” is obviously greater than the desire for balanced reporting. There are some rare exceptions to this but they are still in the minority.

Could it be that the benefits of a full Islāmic education are known to the powers-that-be and this in itself is driving the movement to prevent Muslims from being proactive in the education of their children? Knowledge empowers communities to achieve their potential; does this conflict with ‘their’ plans for Muslims in this country?

It is extraordinary that opposition to Muslim schools is so widespread: politicians, journalists, teachers and the general public all find the will to abandon their sense of justice and equality in order to deprive the largest non-Christian religious group in Britain of access to equal opportunities given freely to others. In my dealings with authorities and the media in this respect, I have always been at pains to stress the multiracial nature of Islām so it is difficult for me to accuse them in particular of racism behind their opposition. Maybe Islāmophobia, one of those ‘new’ words, could be used with some justification. With the public, though, it is a different matter: every time I have had a letter published in the national press obscene letters arrive are received and almost all are racist in tone. Despite my name, the pathetic individuals who write to me assume that because I am a Muslim, I must be a non-white; they ‘plan’ their letters accordingly in a way reminiscent of those 18th century anti-Catholic protesters whom Defoe described as “Stout fellows that would spend the last drop of their blood against Popery that do not know whether it be a man or a horse.” Couldn’t have put it better myself.

So what can be done? One thing is certain: Muslim schools are not simply going to go away just because the government will not give any financial assistance. Some may close due to a lack of funds but that will only serve to strengthen the resolve of the others, especially in areas in the north of England where there are a few schools relatively close together.

Doubts do exist about whether Muslim schools should apply for what is undeniably their right – voluntary aided, or grant-maintained (GM), status – or whether they should consider what effects such status will have, especially with the requirement to implement the National Curriculum. Aided and GM schools must follow the National Curriculum; independent schools are under no such obligation. Since September 1992 music, drama, art and physical education have been an integral part of the National Curriculum and all, in one way or another, may involve students in work or activities which are un-Islāmic. However, resourceful teachers can and do adapt their lessons to match Islāmic criteria and the National Curriculum Orders, to the satisfaction of Her Majesty’s Inspectors, so this should no longer pose a serious problem. Nevertheless, the implications of the National Curriculum for Muslim schools have not been lost on politicians. In January 1992, Angela (now Dame Angela) Rumbold, an ex-education minister, said, “Some of the things that are being taught within the National Curriculum are not necessarily acceptable to the Muslims, for both boys and girls.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, she was saying that the mainstream educational system will never be able to adapt fully for the needs of Muslim children as long as the National Curriculum is compulsory. Although the aforementioned resourcefulness has shown Mrs. Rumbold to be wrong to credit the National Curriculum with the inability of state schools to cater adequately for some Muslim pupils, it was startling to hear her admission after years of being told quite forcefully that ‘separate’ schools are not the answer to our problems and we should send our children into the state system.

It is true that the National Curriculum could be the tip of the iceberg which will eventually sink the aims and objectives of Islāmic education into the blandness that is the monocultural education of today’s state schools; and state funding, whilst solving the financial problems of Muslim schools, could well lead to necessary compromise in curriculum terms which effectively negates at least some of the arguments for having the schools in the first place. But some will argue that if our schools can only ever be a damage limitation exercise then such compromises may well be the lesser of two evils; if it is a choice between schools with no funding struggling to offer a decent curriculum and government-financed schools which may have to ‘bend’ slightly to get and keep their status, then the latter is both acceptable and preferable.

I do not believe that opposition to complete Islāmic education for Muslim children (and anyone else who wants it) from all quarters will melt away overnight if state funding is granted to any Muslim school for the opposition is not based purely on educational grounds. Being part of the state system may well make it easier for those so inclined to ensure that the aims of our schools are not achieved. As Muslims – as a community – we should be more than capable of funding our own schools without depending on cash handouts from the state, and the very existence of our own schools should not depend on government largesse. The safety-net of financial independence if necessary is vital if Muslim schools are to achieve what they have set out to do.

Muslims must realise that although many excuses for opposing Muslim schools are given, there is one word which says more about such opposition than the thousands of words which have been written and spoken against Muslim schools over the past few years. The word is found in a document prepared by the education officers of Kirklees Council in Yorkshire for discussion by the education committee which had to decide whether or not to support the application for government support made by the Zakaria

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Muslim Girls' High School in Batley in September 1987; it reads as follows: "More difficult to gauge are the less direct effects and the *ideological* [my emphasis] consequences which would follow the establishment of the Authority's first aided school which has Islām as its ethos." Curiously, when a second, public report was available almost a year later, the tell-tale word 'ideological' had been removed. Caution in this matter persists.

If we believe that the issue of Muslim schools is purely educational we are being more than a little naïve. Underpinning the whole issue is a simple case of *Haqq* (truth) versus *Bātil* (falsehood). The education issues affecting (and afflicting) Muslim children in this country are but manifestations of an international phenomenon which sees Islām cast as the main threat to the 'New World Order'. We cannot afford to be complacent and let events overtake us. The education of our children is crucial for the future of the *Ummah* and every effort must be made to ensure that the education provided for Muslims in Britain matches the seriousness of the task ahead. With *Allāh's* help, it will.

#### REFERENCES

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4. *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 1989 CE.
5. 1944 Education Act, Section 76.
6. *Al-Qur'ān*, chapter 109, verse 6.
7. *Ibid.*, chapter 2, verse 256.
8. See, for example, *The Daily Mail*, 8 April 1989 CE; *The Independent*, 30 January 1989 CE.
9. See, for example, *The Guardian*, 8 December 1988 CE; *Ibid.*, 4 January 1989 CE; *Ibid.*, 19 June 1989 CE; *Glasgow Herald*, 13 February 1989 CE.
10. *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 February 1992 CE.
11. *The Independent*, 10 February 1992 CE.
12. *The Times*, 6 January 1992 CE, reporting a BBC Radio interview of 5 January 1992 CE.