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Religious Education and Islamic Religious Education in Europe Reflections for Ireland

by
Youcef Sai

Abstract

Debate about the place of religion in public education, both in Europe and worldwide, has increased in the twenty-first century. The role of faith-based schools in secular societies and the need for provision of religious education [RE] have increasingly become topics of controversy. In Europe, RE is a multi-layered term meaning different things in different contexts. Some have argued for its continued provision, while others have contested the need for it in an age that could seem increasingly 'post-religious'. This paper examines various forms of RE and explores some arguments that might support its retention and call for its abolition in Europe with a particular focus on Ireland. The so-called rise of Islamophobia, in particular, makes these questions more acute. Therefore, after an initial exploration of background debates on RE and faith-based schooling, I introduce issues concerning the specific context and forms of principles in debates on Islamic religious education [IRE] in various European countries.

Empirical research on Islamic education in Ireland is currently very limited, thus (in order to add to the theoretical discussion and understanding of how Islamic religious knowledge is formulated) the paper draws and extrapolates on existing ethnographic research conducted on how Islam is taught in public schools, similar in context to Ireland, elsewhere in Europe. The overall aim is to make a tentative attempt at contributing to our understanding of current debate on the legitimacy of IRE in pluralist societies (understood to mean those that advocate values such as personal autonomy, tolerance, diversity, critical openness and rational morality).

Introduction

Debate about the place of various religions in public education both in Europe and worldwide has seen an unprecedented increase in the twenty-first century. Justification for religious education has raised debate at European level, among religious leaders, RE specialists and more generally. Jackson argues that this new interest in religious education is "partly due to the global attention given to religion as a result of the events

of 11 September 2001 in the US, their causes, on-going consequences and associated incidents that have affected people in many parts of the world”.¹ In addition, in some European countries, there have been claims that the challenge of transcultural diversities and racism, much of it directed at Muslims, has also intensified debate surrounding religious education in schools.² Before exploring this debate and its pertinence to modern European Islamic faith schools, I will discuss the definitions and various understandings of RE, including major recent research conducted on RE in Europe.

RE in Europe

Perspectives on the role of religion in public education are always context-specific, and the differences in approaches to religious education reflect historical and cultural factors. RE is a contested term meaning different things in different countries. The Council of Europe recommends teaching about religions in public education. This recommendation is motivated by the need to express and strengthen respect for human rights as well as the need to foster social cohesion.³ A large-scale European empirical research effort on RE in schools in Europe was conducted by REDCo.⁴ It included qualitative and quantitative surveys comparing views of young European people (aged 14 to 16) towards religion and religious diversity. It also explored possibilities for dialogue, classroom interaction and teaching strategies.

Weisse notes some of the significant results that emerged from the REDCo research. Firstly, students believed “the most important source [of knowledge] about religions and worldviews is generally the family, followed by the school”. In addition, it emerged that most students

1 Robert Jackson, “European Developments,” in *Debates in Religious Education*, ed. Philip Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 168.

2 Taras, Raymond. “Islamophobia never stands still: race, religion, and culture”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36, 3, 2013.

3 Hans-Guenter Heimbrock, Peter Schreiner, and Christoph Sheilke, *Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe*, ed. Eds (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2001)

4 REDCo stands for Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries. The project was included in the section ‘Values and Religions in Europe’ of the EU-programme ‘Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society’. REDCo (*Education, Dialogue and Conflict*), a project funded by the EU Commission Framework 6 Initiative. It was a three-year project (2006-2009) involving universities from eight European countries (England, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Estonia, France, and Spain).

asserted, with regard to promoting peaceful co-existence with people of other faiths, that RE could play an important role. Third, most agreed that: “there should be a place for [teaching about] religion in school” but its role should be to inform, not preach. The study further revealed that many students were discriminatory towards other religions. However, they were “prepared to enter into dialogue with others whom they consider interesting as persons”. Finally, the majority of pupils also viewed “teaching an interreligious understanding at both the personal and the societal level as necessary and possible”.⁵

The REDCo study was limited to eight countries, making it difficult to generalise the findings worldwide. Across Europe however, some interesting findings emerge. Firstly, it was revealed that young Europeans’ views on religion and religious education were far from homogenous. Given the diversity and heterogeneity of religions throughout Europe, it is dangerous to oversimplify by categorising religious people and non-religious people into easily identifiable groups. The sense of needing to understand and depict religion in all its complexity is echoed by the Council of Europe’s recommendation on ‘Education and Religion’ which expresses the view that the media have the potential to play a positive role in society but that news stories, “especially among those aimed at the wider public, very often display a regrettable ignorance of religions, as shown for instance by the frequent unwarranted parallels drawn between Islam and certain fundamentalist and radical movements”.⁶

The provision of RE in Europe is as diverse as its nationalities, each state taking a different approach. One of the most common ways to make sense of the various approaches is to distinguish between confessional (teaching in a particular faith) and non-confessional (teaching about various faiths) models of RE. The differences between them depend on who is organising RE - whether it comes from religious communities, the state, or both in cooperation, and whether it is denominational or non-denominational. Confessional and denominational systems can be found, for example, in Ireland, Germany, and Belgium and in Southern and Eastern European countries. Non-confessional and non-denominational are typical in

⁵ Wolfram Weisse, “REDCo: A European Research Project on Religion in Education,” *Religion & Education* 37, no. 3 (2010): 198.

⁶ Council of Europe, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: ‘Living Together as Equals with Dignity’* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2008).

protestant Nordic countries and in England, Wales and Scotland. The exception is France where there is no specific religious education but the study of religious matters is integrated into other school subjects. Hence, France will be excluded from this discussion. Across Europe RE is taught as a subject in schools on a voluntary or compulsory basis, further complicating the picture.

Furthermore, approaches to teaching RE can be broadly categorised by considering whether the purpose is to have pupils learn religion, learn *from* religion or learn *about* religion, a distinction originally devised by Michael Grimmitt in 1987.⁷ The first of these categories refers to teaching and learning religion from the *inside*, with a view towards strengthening commitment to a particular tradition.⁸ This form of RE is often practised in confessional approaches that pursue enculturation to beliefs and values of a religious tradition. In pluralist societies this approach has been challenged and learning about religions is seen as a more legitimate option than faith-based learning. This entails learning *about* religions from outside, with an historical and descriptive focus without the student's life world considered. The third approach includes the personal experiences of students and helps them to reflect on religious questions without socialising them into any particular faith. Although the categorisation has been widely used, there have been different understandings of meaning of these concepts and based on the choice of approach this will tend to influence views on the matter of having or allowing faith-based schools.⁹ In the next section, I explore contemporary arguments for and against faith-based schools in Europe which have also influenced the debate.

Faith-Based Schools Debate in Europe

The role of faith schools in modern Europe is controversial. The term 'faith school', according to Halstead, aims to describe schools that are "catering primarily for the children of a faith community...and [seek] to provide an education with a religious ethos... [which is] based on religious values".¹⁰

7 Michael Grimmitt, *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship between Studying Religions and Personal, Social and Moral Education* (Great Woking: McCrimmons, 1987).

8 Grimmitt, *Religious Education and Human Development*.

9 Andrew Wright, "Freedom, Equality, Fraternity? Towards a Liberal Defence of Faith Community Schools," *British Journal of Religious Education* 25 (2003).

10 Mark Halstead, "Faith Schools," in *Debates in Religious Education*, ed. Philip Barnes (Oxford:

However, he goes on to say that faith schools are far from homogenous and there exists a wide diversity of provision. Among their distinctive features are their links to various denominations/communities, policies related to admission, the time spent on RE and the type of RE on offer. Halstead also points out that faith schools vary in their “employment of teachers not belonging to the faith, [and] their compatibility with liberal democratic values.¹¹ The goal of faith communities’ schools is to provide schooling founded on particular religious values. This supposed right to avail of this type of schooling has been given support by the wider European community. Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that:

In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions

Furthermore, the Council of Europe also acknowledges the common values taught in faith-based schools, by asserting that:

[The] three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions, and... the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values.¹²

Much of the polemical debate on faith schools has tended to draw on dated historical images of faith schooling. Issues such as ideological advocacy (both for and against), effects of faith-based schooling and how they can have an impact on personal and intellectual autonomy as well as social issues related to co-existence and the promotion of common values in society are often raised.¹³ However, since 2001, there have been a number of academic contributions to the debate of faith schools which have been less clichéd. Some have advocated allowing faith schools,¹⁴ some have opposed their expansion¹⁵ and some have been against their funding, but

Routledge, 2012).

11 Halstead, Faith Schools, 99.

12 Council of Europe, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together as Equals with Dignity*, 10673.

13 Gerald Grace, “Educational Studies and Faith-Based Schooling: Moving from Prejudice to Evidence-Based Argument,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 51, no. 2 (2003): 151.

14 Wright, “Freedom, Equality, Fraternity? Towards a Liberal Defence of Faith Community Schools; Geoffrey Short, “Faith Schools and Social Cohesion: Opening up the Debate,” *ibid*.

15 Human Philosophers’ Group, *Religious Schools: The Case Against* (London: British Humanist Association, 2001); Frank Harris, “Do We Really Want More Faith Schools?”, *Educational Review* 15(2002).

not against them in principle.¹⁶

Halstead categorises the positions adopted on faith schools into four main types and has attempted “to disentangle these in order to avoid confusion and arguing at cross purposes”.¹⁷ Firstly, he states that there is a debate “between those who think that religion and education should be kept separate since the process of religious nurture and the process of education are conceptually different ... [and] others [who] see religion as a concept that affects every aspect of life”.¹⁸ Secondly, advocates of faith schools believe that they provide “a high quality education” and are “in demand”, whereas others see this as a kind of discrimination that involves “privilege[ing] certain sectors of society over others”.¹⁹ Thirdly, some see faith schools as meeting a right on the part of minority faiths in a country, whereas for others they increase the unnecessary “social costs” caused by “the non-integration of minorities”.²⁰ Fourthly, some question the “right to expect public funding for their choice of schooling” as currently exercised by members of religious communities which others defend this as a basic human right.²¹ Having said that, Halstead sets out four aspects of the debate around the very existence of faith-based or religious school. I take these to be as follows.

- A) Religion and education: Should the two be separate or mixed?
- B) Religious schools: Are they better or worse than secular schools?
- C) Faith schools: Do they aid or isolate minority communities?
- D) Faith schools: Do they have a right to state funding?

In the next paragraph, I will discuss each one of these questions.

A) Religion and Education: Separate or Mixed?

It is important to clarify what is meant by the secular world and highlight

¹⁶ Harry Judge, “Faith-Based Schools and State Funding: A Partial Argument,” *Oxford Review of Education* 27, no. 4 (2001); Laura Underkuffler, “Public Funding for Religious Schools: Difficulties and Dangers in a Pluralistic Society,” *Oxford Review of Education* 27(2001).

¹⁷ Halstead, “Faith Schools,” 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

the distinct socio-political forms of secularism that exist. Those who advocate the former position (separation) see it as in society's best interest and, where it (RE) is conceded at all, education about religion is optional. Felderhof notes that there are three basic secular worldviews. The first type refers to a form of life in which religious organisations are allowed to apply their rules to themselves only if they live in conjunction with the state's civic law. Another view is that people ought to live their lives free from religions, but those of religious faith do have the option to express it in the public sphere. The third grants the state the right to impinge on religious life and restricts individuals and institutions from expressing/performing their particular values and devotions in public.²²

In the first and second worldviews a relationship between religion and education is plausible, in that these allow for what Tuohy refers to as a "theology *within* [emphasis in original]" the educational system and, to a certain extent, "a theology *of* [emphasis in original] education" in the form of faith based schooling.²³ However, the third form challenges the truth claims of religion more severely, as these are considered unscientific. Therefore, it is inappropriate "to seek to instil [in children] unprovable knowledge such as religious beliefs". Furthermore, as faith schools may have the potential to teach views that are not shared by the society as a whole, such as the unacceptability of homosexuality or same sex marriages, it has been argued that faith schools have the potential to indoctrinate and negatively portray people who do not share certain beliefs or who have certain forms of life. Thus, in this most radical of secularist worldviews, faith schooling becomes, as it were, a problem to be solved, not an essentially harmless 'niche view' to be tolerated. However, Tuohy argues that attempts "to replace one world view ([the] theocentric) with another (atheistic humanism) is a politics that curtails values such as liberty and diversity".²⁴ In addition, it could also be argued that this particular worldview ignores the diversity of beliefs and infringes on people's freedom and right to choose how they wish their children to be educated. Moreover, those who advocate faith-based schooling essentially see their faith as a way of life and thus do not accept that learning about

22 Marius Felderhof, "Secular Humanism," in *Debates in Religious Education*, ed. Philip Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2012).

23 David Tuohy, "Catholic Schools: Schools for Catholics," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 386 (2008): 126.

24 Tuohy, *Catholic Schools: Schools for Catholics*, 127.

their religion is a private affair. Rather, *religion is life* and this should be emphasised in school and society.

B) Religious Schools: Better or Worse than Secular Schools?

School performance and measurable academic success tend to be considerations often used to defend faith schools.²⁵ Questions are sometimes asked as to whether faith schools' seemingly better results are due to the fact of their being faith schools, or other considerations. It has been argued that faith schools are better academically than secular schools, based on empirical evidence. In particular, Roman Catholic and Church of England primary schools in the UK may sometimes make "more progress with their pupils than non-faith schools".²⁶ At secondary level similar success has been documented. For example "in 2008, 71.3 per cent of secondary students at faith schools got five or more good G[eneral] C[ertificate of] S[econdary] E[ducation award]s in comparison to 65.6 per cent of students at non-religious schools".²⁷ Although a Runnymede Trust report in 2008 endorsed faith schools and described them as playing an important role in the education system, it was also critical of them, noting: "they educate a disproportionately small number of young people at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale", with some "more keen in their public announcements to discuss statistical validity than...serve the disadvantaged".²⁸ Jackson points out that the argument used that faith-based schools provide high quality education is a weak one. He argues that the Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], a non-ministerial department in the UK, showed that results in schools were ambiguous. Ofsted's evidence suggests that high performance is not intrinsic to faith-based schooling.²⁹

25 David Marley, "Muslim Schools Prove Stars of the Higher-Performing Faith Family," *Times Educational Supplement* 2008.

26 Tilaye Yeshanew, Ian Schagen, and Suzanne Evans, "Faith Schools and Pupils' Progress through Primary Education," *Educational Studies* 34, no. 5 (2009): 511.

27 Halstead, "Faith Schools," 104.

28 Rob Berkeley, *Right to Divide? Faith Schools and Community Cohesion* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2008), 5.

29 Robert Jackson, "Should the State Fund Faith Based Schools? A Review of the Arguments," *British Journal of Religious Education* 25, no. 2 (2003): 97.

C) Faith Schools: Aid or Isolate Minority Communities?

The dangers of religious/cultural isolation, confrontation and the exploitation of religion for political purposes are significant. However, research carried out by Professor David Jesson of York University cast faith schools in a positive light in this regard. His research involved the analysis of Ofsted reports on 400 secondary and 700 primary schools from various faith and secular traditions. He concluded that at primary level, faith schools were no different to non-religious schools, however secondary schools run by faith groups were better than non-religious schools at building community relations.³⁰ Critics of faith schools strongly argue that the schools intensify social exclusion, community division, cultural isolation and religious prejudice. The legitimacy of faith schools is sometimes questioned when any social unrest occurs among ethnic minorities. One such example is the claim that some ethnic minority groups were involved in most of Britain's worst social disturbances, such as "the Brixton and Liverpool riots of 1981, the Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford riots of 2001, and the Birmingham riots of 2005".³¹ However, others interpret these social disturbances differently. It may be misleading to link disturbances with faith schools as there is strong correlation of these incidents with low income and high-crime areas. In other words, having many faith schools in an area associated with riots may only be a symptom of the problem of social isolation, not the cause. According to an investigation conducted in 2002 by the International Bureau of Education (a branch of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) divisiveness was due to "structural reasons within societies... fuelled by injustice and fear not by differences of faith".³² Furthermore, the Council of Europe attempted to find a middle ground in the debate, stressing that such conflicts are not caused solely by faith schools, but admitted:

There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2005, Recommendation 1396).

30 David Jesson, "A Study of Recent Ofsted Data Assessing School's Progress on the Duty of to Promote Community Cohesion and Tackle Inequality". Church of England Archbishops' Council Education Division. November 2009.

31 Carolyn King, "Faith Schools in Pluralistic Britain: Debate, Discussion, and Considerations," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 2 (2010): 289.

32 King, *Faith Schools in Pluralistic Britain*, 290.

In the end, Muslim schools, like other faith schools, may be a curse or a blessing when it comes to the issue of integration of minorities into the wider community. It likely depends on how they are run, by whom their IRE curricula are designed and how issues, which directly affect minorities are dealt with in the classroom. However, evidence on such issues is limited and research to date has been inconclusive.

D) Faith Schools: A Right to State Funding?

According to Jackson, supporters of funding contend that faith schools: “provide a positive response to racism; promote justice and fairness for children, parents and religious communities; offer education of a high quality and promote social cohesion and the integration of minority communities into the democratic life of the state”.³³ On the other hand, some believe that it is not right to fund faith schools. They claim faith schools: “limit the personal autonomy of pupils; erode social cohesion through separating young people; impose on pupils a restricted view of religion...disadvantage other schools through selection procedures that cream off the most able students”.³⁴ Furthermore, from the point of view of taxpayers, and more specifically as far as non-believing taxpayers are concerned, funding for faith schools may be an “unjustifiable violation of conscience” though taxpayers who are believers could express similar opposition to their taxes going to promote secular schools.³⁵

More broadly, the various arguments put forward on both sides ultimately concern how secular societies perceive the role of religion in life. Some people may find religion unacceptable and, therefore, deem religious schools to be unacceptable by default. People who prefer social cohesion, even at the expense of cultural preservation, may think it reasonable to say that there are satisfactory reasons to deny parents the right to send their children to state-funded faith schools. Religious principles have the potential to serve as the foundation for a peaceful coexistence of various faiths and increase respect for the human dignity of others, regardless of their religious or political beliefs, but this is not guaranteed simply by having faith schools in a society.³⁶

33 Jackson, “Should the State Fund Faith Based Schools? A Review of the Arguments,” 90.

34 Ibid., 93.

35 Halstead, “Faith Schools,” 107.

36 Weisse, “Redco: A European Research Project on Religion in Education,” 188.

Indeed, it is worth stressing that there are clear deficiencies in some faith schools. As far as Muslim schools were concerned the Runnymede Trust report suggested a way of encouraging them to be more inclusive of all segments in society. However, in order to relate this to the operation of Muslim schools and IRE an understanding of Islamic educational ideals is required. In the next section, I explore those ideals, in light of liberal educational values, as well as the contemporary challenges and the debates faced by Muslim schools in the West.

Discussion on Islamic Educational Ideals, Challenges and Debates

Educational systems are an expression of deeply rooted political, economic and cultural factors that are distinctive to a particular society.³⁷ It has been argued that “every system of education embodies a particular philosophy which emanates from a particular concept, from which it cannot be isolated”.³⁸ Thus, in order to understand the complexity of life in modern secular countries as it is experienced by Muslims, Günther advocates understanding cultures, civilisations and religions other than ‘our own’, contending that there is a vital need for “critical, unbiased, and systematic study in the West of Islam’s diverse values, concepts, and beliefs- especially those related to educational theories and philosophies developed by Muslim scholars”.³⁹

From an Islamic perspective, “knowledge claims can only be predicated on the understanding that acquired knowledge is not likely to conflict with revealed knowledge as given in the Quran and the Sunna”.⁴⁰ However, as far as Islamic philosophy of education is concerned its aims have been largely defined by scholars outside of Europe.⁴¹

Merry contends that Muslims can be divided into two camps, one that is

37 Sebastian Günther, “Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory,” in *Islam and Education Myths and Truths*, ed. Wadad Kadi Billeh and Victor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

38 Syed Muhammad al-Naguib al-Attas, *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), vi.

39 Günther, “Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn,” 61.

40 Michael S. Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 68, the Sunna being sayings and actions of Islam’s Prophet, Muhammad.

41 Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*, 66.

“inclined to accommodate Western cultural and political norms and one that is not”.⁴² Some have attempted to bridge the gap by seeking evidence of compatibility of the Quran’s word and the natural sciences. This might be referred to as the Islamisation of knowledge and involves “making all acquired knowledge conformable to an acceptable understanding of Islam”.⁴³ This process, when carried out in the “the complete formal, non-formal, and informal educational system”, is often referred to as the “Islamisation of Education”.⁴⁴ Views on Islamisation are divided. There are those, among some Muslims, who advocate its importance in education, while others, especially among non-Muslims, see Islamisation as a threat and believe that Islam and the West are mutually incompatible.⁴⁵ Other Muslims have gone to further extremes and described “western-style education as a plot against Islam” and, in some cases, have violently threatened teachers who import western practices.⁴⁶

According to Merry, Islamic education centres on “the complete submission to the will of God...and this is what it means to be a Muslim”.⁴⁷ However, others have argued that “the objective of Islamic education in Europe should be the promotion of religious maturity.” That is, “for Muslims to be capable of defining their own religiosity and justifying it before God” which, in turn, “provides Muslims with the autonomy to confess their own religiosity without being patronized”.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Merry also asserts that Islamic education is concerned primarily with the person as a whole, both the spiritual and intellectual being.⁴⁹ Hewer affirms this view and asserts that this cannot be implemented if Muslim schools continue to teach the religion of Islam in isolation from other subjects. Rather, the ideal is that IRE permeates the whole structure of education which is he refers to as a “faith-centred integrated system”.⁵⁰

42 Ibid., 71.

43 Ibid., 62.

44 Anne Sofie Roald, *Tarbiya: Education and Politics in Islamic Movements in Jordan and Malaysia* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994), 57.

45 Lewis Bernard, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

46 Monica Mark, “Boko Haram Leader Calls for More School Attacks after Dorm Killings,” *Guardian* 2013.

47 Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*, 49.

48 Ednan Aslan, *Islamic Textbooks and Curricula in Europe* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 33.

49 Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*, 49-50.

50 Chris Hewer, “Schools for Muslims,” *Oxford Review of Education* 27, no. 4 (2001): 523.

When it comes to the role of Muslim schools in western pluralist societies, Mandaville contends that “it is vitally important to understand the purpose of Muslim education and how Islamic schools of various types fit into the debates of isolationism, the social integration and citizenship”.⁵¹ This cannot be achieved unless there is knowledge of how these issues are handled in classroom settings that actively seek to combine multiple traditions of learning and cultures of pupils.⁵² Similarly, understanding the roles of Islamic schools and the contours of Muslim knowledge in the classroom and how it seeks to reorient students’ intellectual orientation to Islam are important research areas.⁵³

One of the main challenges faced by Muslim educators in the West, given the heterogeneous nature of Muslims and Islamic schools, is to produce an Islamic philosophy of education that reconciles diverse views on the nature of Islam “with the on-the-ground needs of Muslim children socialized in a non-Islamic society”.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Mandaville highlights the role of Muslim schools, through their engagement with and participation in mainstream pluralist society, in ensuring that “issues of tolerance, coexistence and relations with non-Muslims [are properly] handled in the classroom”⁵⁵. According to Merry, there exists a “disjuncture between Islamic educational ideals (as expressed by Muslim philosophers of education), the aspirations of school administrators, and the manner in which Islamic schools operate in practice”.⁵⁶ There is thus a dire need to define the contours of a more comprehensive and fastidious approach to religious education in Muslim schools, which needs to be relevant to the daily concerns and issues that arise from living as a minority in a multifarious, pluralistic society in the twenty-first century.

However, it may already be that “those who manage Islamic schools, unlike most Muslim philosophers of education, recognize the importance of training children to simultaneously identify them both as Muslims and

51 Peter Mandaville, “Islamic Education in Britain: Approaches to Religious Knowledge in a Pluralistic Society,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 225.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*, 67.

55 Mandaville, *Islamic Education in Britain: Approaches to Religious Knowledge in a Pluralistic Society*, 225.

56 Ibid; 47.

citizens of the West”.⁵⁷ This could be seen as vital because Islamic schools may significantly influence how Muslims living in the West choose to shape their own identities in ways that are true not only to their individual or collective beliefs, but also to the societies of which they are an integral part.

According to Mandaville, Muslim youths in pluralist European society report feelings of being “strongly alienated from what they perceive as mosque leaderships out of touch with the issues they face and unwilling to engage in discussions about Islam”.⁵⁸ Therefore, Islamic education in schools has the potential to fill this lacuna by addressing an “important terrain in the negotiation of identity, citizenship, and co-existence”. Zibakalam-Mofrad maintains that “serious questions have been raised in recent decades about the Islamic philosophy of education: its goals [and] its value system”.⁵⁹ She has called for a generation of Islamic philosophers willing to offer creative approaches to Islamic education rather than relying on “cultural and social borrowings from the West”.⁶⁰ However, Driessen and Merry contend that the boards of management and parents of some Muslim schools “are orientated towards the religious aspects [of the schools] and the teaching staff more towards improving student achievement”.⁶¹ The fundamental clash between what we might call the progressive or accommodationist approach of the teachers and the conservative or traditionalist approach of some parents could seem to be at the heart of many conflicts in and around Muslim schools (here understood to mean both schools under some kind of direct Muslim management or control and schools where Muslim pupils happen to be in the majority). In the next section, I briefly discuss important contemporary research conducted specifically on IRE in Muslims schools in Europe.

57 Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*, 60.

58 Mandaville, *Islamic Education in Britain*, 228.

59 Fatemah Zibakalam-Mofrad, “Ibn Sina’s Philosophy of Education and Its Application to Modern Muslim Educational Systems,” *Muslim Education Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1999): 65.

60 Zibakalam-Mofrad, “Ibn Sina’s Philosophy of Education”, 65.

61 Geert Driessen and Michael S. Merry, “Islamic Schools in the Netherlands: Expansion or Marginalization,” *Interchange* 37, no. 3 (2006): 217.

Contemporary Research on Formal Islamic Religious Education in Europe

Islamic education in Europe occurs in both formal and informal environments. The latter usually takes place in local mosques or rented prayer rooms, organised by individual members of the Muslim community. This form of education may take place after school hours or at the weekend, with emphasis on memorisation of the Quran. The former takes place in formal settings, either through state schools or recognised institutions. The term IRE, Berglund says, is appropriate as it draws a distinction between informal Islamic education in what are often labelled as 'Quran madrasahs' and something that is a specifically Islamic version of the school subject RE, signalling that IRE concerns Islam but is aligned with the more general education in primary and secondary schools.⁶²

Not all European countries provide formal IRE but where it does exist it may be organised either by religious communities, the state, or both in cooperation. Currently, there is a lack of academic research concerning Islamic education in Europe and what is available often comes from atomised analyses of specific European countries.⁶³ However, Veinguer, Dietz, Jozsa and Knauth⁶⁴ empirical findings on how IRE is represented pedagogically and managed in schools, highlighted the diverse forms in which Islamic education is manifested in Europe. Their results indicated that Islamic schools in European countries varied considerably in management, structure, size, and teachers' forms/levels of training and pupils' academic results as well as pedagogical positions adopted. Such schools are new phenomena in the educational landscape, often with little support at the national and supranational levels. Furthermore, the complex situations Muslim schools find themselves in vary, depending on the structures of the educational system in which they exist and the political relationship between religious communities and the state in question, as well as integration policies in each country.

For example, Jenny Berglund concluded that Muslims schools in Sweden

⁶² Jenny Berglund, *Teaching Islam: Islamic Religious Education in Sweden* (Munster: Waxmann, 2010), 25.

⁶³ Aslan, *Islamic Textbooks and Curricula in Europe*.

⁶⁴ Veinguer et al., "Introduction," in *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe: Islam in Education in European Countries: Pedagogical Concepts and Empirical Findings*, ed. Cok Bakkar, et al. (Munster: Waxman, 2009).

were diverse in the teaching of IRE. In her book *Teaching Islam: Islamic Religious Education in Sweden*, she offers a detailed qualitative comparative case study across three Swedish Muslim schools. In the absence of published ethnographic studies of Muslim schools in Ireland and its neighbours (England/Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), Berglund's research offers an important point of reference. According to Berglund, one IRE teacher viewed the teaching of "ethics, morality and thereby [proper] behaviour" as more beneficial for pupils than memorisation, given the short time allocated to IRE. This in her view, should be conducted at the weekend supplementary Quranic schools.⁶⁵ Berglund also found some teachers who believed that teaching the meaning of the Quran in Swedish increased the possibility of the pupils reaching the fundamental goal of IRE: "to instil a sense of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) within the heart and mind of the pupil" and this is achieved by first learning "the five pillars, [articles] of faith and *Ihsan* [perfection of character]".⁶⁶ Berglund's research not only addresses the much under-researched matter of how faith formation occurs in Muslim schools, but also refutes the claim that Muslim schools are homogeneous and the associated claims that faith schools are concerned with indoctrination.

Conclusion

From a Western, liberal perspective Islamic educational principles are dubious. The unquestionable certainty of 'revealed knowledge' which excludes the possibility of subjecting a belief system to criticism is problematic. Therefore, if Islamic education is to be true to its self, as Halstead argues "skills within education, such as questioning, verifying, criticizing, evaluating and making judgments... [are subordinate] to uncritical acceptance of authority".⁶⁷ In other words, the Islamic view could seem to demand that reason be subordinated or restricted to the boundaries of faith, including in education. Furthermore, some orthodox or traditionalist views might seem to be the main stumbling blocks in constructing an Islamic theory and practice of education compatible with western modernity. However, for others, there is scope for skills such as evaluation and critical analysis of interpretations to be developed within

⁶⁵ Berglund, *Teaching Islam: Islamic Religious Education in Sweden*, 71.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁷ Mark Halstead, "An Islamic Concept of Education," *Comparative Education* 40, no. 4 (2004): 526.

a defined Islamic framework, which are important areas of enquiry if radicalised views are to be curtailed.

The various external challenges faced by Muslim schools, such as societal attitudes towards religious education, as well as internal struggles that may occur within those schools, makes life challenging for Muslims living in Western democracies, as they search for an appropriate form of education. In order to face those challenges, further empirical research needs to be conducted on Muslim education and schools in Europe to contribute productively to the debate on their legitimacy in pluralist societies and to find practical solutions to organising the kind[s] of education that could be considered acceptable by different interest groups in modern multicultural societies.

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