

Islamic Schools in America: Islam's Vehicle to the Future?

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of American Muslim schools in shaping and constructing the identity of Muslim children in the U.S., and shows how Muslim organizations and educators are using these schools to (re)Islamize Muslim children. America's Muslim immigrants believe that without teaching their children the Islamic culture and religion, they will be brought up as anything but Islamic. This paper argues that Islamic organizations and Muslim educators have capitalized on the ills of public schools to put pressure on Muslims to build Islamic schools, where (re)Islamizing Muslim children would be the goal. But, in the process, many of these children may end up alienated and isolated from the rest of the society, and, in some cases, exposed to anti-American, anti-secular, and anti-Western propaganda. This paper also argues that for Islam to prosper and flourish as a minority religion in a predominantly Western, Christian, and secular society, Islamic education must be geared towards Islamizing Muslim children without de-Americanizing them.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of American Muslim schools in shaping and constructing the identity of Muslim children in the U.S. and shows how Muslim organizations and educators are using these schools to (re)Islamize Muslim children. The need to establish Muslim schools, which teach (and preach) Islam to children of Muslim immigrants, stems from the fact that first-generation Muslims (children born in the United States) are adopting American ways and values rather than Islamic ones. America's Muslim immigrants believe that without teaching their children the Islamic culture and religion, they will be brought up as anything but Islamic. These schools teach Islamic practices and beliefs, the Arabic language--which is essential to reading the Qur'an--Islamic scripture, and a host of Islamic topics. Some reports indicate that Muslim children are rejecting the ethnicity of their parents and embracing the American culture. Thus, American Muslims have realized that without Islamic education, many first generation Muslims would likely abandon Islam, when they reach their adolescence, and adopt Christian and secular values.

Because Islamic schools are essential to the survival of Islam in America, foreign and local Islamic organizations and Muslim educators have joined the efforts to establish and support these schools. This paper argues that Islamic organizations and Muslim educators have

capitalized on the ills of public schools to put pressure on Muslims to build Islamic schools, where (re)Islamizing Muslim children would be the goal. But, in the process, many of these children may end up alienated and isolated from the rest of the society, and, in some cases, exposed to anti-American, anti-secular, and anti-Western propaganda, which can be more harmful and damaging to the shaping of the Islamic identity in Muslim children than attending public schools. This paper also argues that for Islam to prosper and flourish as a minority religion in a predominantly Western, Christian, and secular society, Islamic education must be geared towards Islamizing Muslim children without de-Americanizing them. Islamization with Americanization means that Muslim schools should promote and teach assimilation and integration of Muslim children in the American society and provide an education that is more compatible with Western and secular values than with some rigid Islamic values.

Islam in America

Islam made its first appearance on American soil in the sixteenth century when Muslims were brought as slaves from Africa but were forced to convert to Christianity. These Muslims were followed by a new wave of immigrants who came in the late nineteenth century as laborers from Middle Eastern countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. In the second half of the twentieth century, a large number of Muslims came from virtually every country of the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia and were more sophisticated than their predecessors. As these immigrants settled in large cities and small towns, they built mosques, Islamic cultural centers, and schools. Although African-American Islam emerged in the early twentieth century, it was not until the sixties and seventies that Islam became visible, but yet a religion of immigrants, in the American society. Today, Islam is the fastest growing religion in America

and the third largest religion after Christianity and Judaism. Given this fact and taking into consideration the new wave of American Muslims (i.e., first generation children of immigrants, Americans converting to Islam, and the growing African American Muslim community), Islam has finally emerged as an American religion.

American Muslims, who have grown in number to almost six million,¹ have succeeded in transforming Islam into an American religion, but these Muslims seem to be concerned about how to survive as a religious minority in a largely un-Islamic society. American Muslims have so far resisted adaptation and change in a Judeo-Christian society based upon secular values. Today, American Muslims live as a minority “in a dominant culture often ignorant of or hostile to Islam . . . and are challenged by an America which, despite separation of church and state, retains a Judaeo-Christian ethos.”² The questions that remain: will Islam survive? And for Islam to survive, what are American Muslims trying to do?

Islam can sometimes be hard to practice. American Muslims do not have the same privileges as Jews and Christians, and the American society has not recognized “Islam and Muslim religious practice as it has for Judaism and Christianity.”³ Many Muslims find it hard to attend Friday congregational prayer at the mosque. The latter has been transformed from a place of worship to a socializing center for families. Fasting during Ramadan is also a hardship for many who cannot endure working long hours without eating. In Muslim countries, offices and schools are shut or operate a few hours during the day to make it easier on Muslims to observe the fast of Ramadan. Thus, as John L. Esposito puts it,

How is it possible to be fully American in a society often characterized as Judaeo-Christian or secular and at the same time retain Muslim faith and identity? If the

¹ See, for example, Council on American-Islamic Relations. Available from <http://www.cair-net.org>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

² John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2005), 216.

³ Ibid.

majority of Americans need to realize that Muslims are indeed ‘us,’ many Muslims also struggle with the nature of their identity, the relationship of faith to national identity: Are they Muslims in America or American Muslims? For American Muslims, as for American Jews, how to simultaneously retain one’s distinctive religious identity and values and also become part of the majority culture, part of the fabric of society, is a major challenge in the ‘American melting pot.’⁴

Esposito adds: “Should [American Muslims] attempt to integrate into American society or would they be better off remaining alienated from society in order to preserve their Islamic identity?”⁵ Muslims in America have thought about this question and similar questions and are deeply concerned with the outcomes. Islamic leaders have called on Muslim immigrants to return with their families to their home countries. Others have encouraged Muslims to practice isolationism and erect their own communities. “Isolationists,” however, “practice their faith privately and worry about losing their children to the attractions of the Western culture.”⁶ For instance, Muslim families find it problematic to see their children join in celebrations that have Christian or pagan connotations such as Halloween, Christmas, Easter, etc. Muslim parents feel that it is their responsibility to act to preserve their Muslim identity and to pass it to their children. “Our future in this world and in the Other will depend on our efforts,”⁷ says Ayse Gul Yesilyurt, a mother of a 6-year-old son. As a result of this cultural crisis, and afraid of losing Islam as a religious and cultural identity, Muslim immigrants who have been secular in Muslim countries are now struggling for the first time to be Muslim observant. In their homelands, these Muslims attended secular schools and occasionally prayed in a mosque. In America, however, these immigrants are regular mosque attendees, do their best to teach their children Islamic practices (i.e., reading the Qur’an, Arabic, etc.), and most importantly have begun to send their

⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁵ Ibid., 219.

⁶ Ibid., 218.

⁷ Ayse Gul Yesilyurt, “Raising a Muslim Child in North America.” Available from http://www.wakeup.org/anadolu/08/1/muslim_child.html; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

children to Islamic schools. In other words, these Muslims are trying to keep Islam alive. Because culture, religion, and language continue in future generations, American Muslims have realized that if their children grow up “un-Islamic,” Islam would become more marginalized in the American society. Thus, for this reason alone, Muslims have rushed to build Islamic schools to teach their children Islamic beliefs and practices, so Islam as a religion and culture can continue with them.

Islamic Schools in America

In *Islam in America* (1999), Jane I. Smith argues that, “many Muslim families are concerned about their children’s experiences in the public schools.”⁸ Indeed, Muslim immigrants’ main concern is that their children may lose their Islamic identity as they grow up in public schools. Thus, to preserve the Muslim identity in these children, Islamic schools are needed to teach Islamic beliefs, values, and practices. According to Smith, some Muslims “see the problems of American schools as an abdication on the part of Christian (and Jewish) America of its basic religious values.”⁹ American Muslims have referred to two solutions to preserve the Islamic identity in their children: Send them to Islamic schools or home school them. Many families have a third option: Send children abroad. Some families though choose to keep their children in public schools, although they risk losing their children from Islam. “No matter what form of education is chosen,” Smith argues, “educators enjoin Muslim parents to provide the resources and environment in the home that will help the child learn not only more effectively but also ‘more Islamically.’”¹⁰ But the real problem lies in the fact that the home is no longer a valuable source to teach children about Islam for two main reasons: (1) parents are away from

⁸ Jane I. Smith, *Islam In America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 126.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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home most of the day, and (2) many parents are not very-well versed in Islam and therefore are unable to provide their children with proper Islamic teachings. Thus, a full-time Islamic school is the best option for these parents.

The number of Islamic schools across the U.S. has risen drastically in the last five years. It is estimated currently that there are 200-600 Islamic schools, with enrollment exceeding 30,000 students.¹¹ These schools provide education from kindergarten to high school. Their curricula focus mainly on teaching Islamic practices and beliefs, Islamic history, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Arabic, the Qur'an, and prayer. Thus, these schools are geared toward the (re)Islamization of a new generation of Muslim children, who were or are about to be snatched by Christian and secular values. Moreover, Muslim parents had taken for granted the fact that their children "were not only devoid of Islamic knowledge," argues Yahiya Emerick, American convert, writer, and teacher, "but that they actually rejected any Islamic identity and preferred to live as non-Muslims in their values, motivations and habits...they were everything but Muslims."¹² Emerick adds that in his experience as a full-time teacher in Muslim schools, he finds that children of Muslim parents "were never Muslims in the full sense of the word to begin with."¹³ According to the Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA), "Islamic schools now provide education in an environment based on the Qur'an and Sunna [the tradition and life of Muhammad]."¹⁴ These schools have been mostly built and supported by local and foreign-based Islamic organizations. These organizations also "provide correspondence courses, suggestions for new literature and curricula, handbooks for educators, and other useful tools and

¹¹ Valerie Strauss and Emily Wax, "Muslim Schools in America: Where Two Worlds Collide," *Washington Post*, 25 February 2002, A01.

¹² Yahiya Emerick, "Working in Muslim Schools." Available from <http://www.islamfortoday.com/emerrick14.htm>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Smith, *Islam in America*, 128.

information. Thus, Muslim organizations advocate a policy of isolationism and indeed play a big role in the de-Americanization and the (re)Islamization of Muslim children. In order to achieve their goal of isolating American Islam from American society, Muslim organizations have launched a propaganda campaign aimed at alarming Muslim parents of the dire consequences of sending their children to public schools. Muslim parents have been supportive so far of the Muslim organizations' agenda and this support has been reflected in the growing number of Muslim schools across the U.S., as mentioned earlier.

Muslim organizations provide an alternative for parents who cannot afford to send their children to Islamic schools. For instance, these organizations “occasionally offer special sessions on home schooling,”¹⁵ where copies of the Qur’an, *Hadith* (sayings and deeds of Muhammad) and other Islamic literature are provided for parents who wish to home school their children. Muslim organizations are also working on a third option. The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) prepares materials for public schools that are “designed to instill Islamic identity and values throughout the curriculum.”¹⁶ The Council of Islamic Education (CIE) works with K-12 textbook publishers to “produce teaching units that shed light on various aspects of Muslim civilization.”¹⁷ Thus, it is evident that Muslim organizations and educators are increasing their efforts to insure that children of Muslim parents are not lost to Christian or secular values. “If education of Muslim youth does not rest firmly on Islamic principles,” Smith writes, “it cannot be fully satisfactory in the context of a secular pluralistic society such as North America.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 129.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

American Muslims, especially Muslim organizations and educators, are not fond with the idea of integration and assimilation in the greater American society. For many Muslims, the American melting pot is too dangerous to pursue. It means the evaporation of Islam in America. As Mian Ashraf of the Islamic Center of New England puts it, “We’re scared that we’re going to lose our identity. Our kids are going into this melting pot, where they might not be able to maintain their religious values, and we’ll lose them.”¹⁹ Mohammad Abdul Munim, an American Muslim educator, writes: “Today the situation is most alarming. Muslim thinkers opine that most young Muslims have lost Islam and its values to a dangerous degree.”²⁰ Abdul Munim adds that Muslims cannot rely on mosques alone to build and preserve the Muslim identity in these children because the “mosque is no longer an educational and training institution.... If we do not prepare the ground, the Muslim community will lose its roots.”²¹

The fear of integration and assimilation stems from the fact that early Muslims who were eager to Americanize lost their Islamic identity as a result. According to Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, the early Muslim immigrants came to the United States “When ‘Anglo conformity’ was promoted as the norm for citizenship and the Protestant establishment determined what is American...[These Muslims] followed the patterns of integration and assimilation that refashioned them into American citizens....”²² Thus, this willful Americanization through assimilation and integration had left its impact on early Muslim immigrants and their children. The result was that their names were anglicized, their children attended public schools (making it

¹⁹ See, for example, Diana L. Eck, “Muslim in America.” Available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2118>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

²⁰ Mohammad Abdul Munim, “Focus on the Third Generation,” *Islamic Horizons*, September/October 2002, 31:5, 50.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Not Quite American: The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004), 4.

easier and faster for them to Americanize), and they became ignorant of important Islamic practices.²³

Islamic Education in America: The Shaping of Islamic Identity

Alarmed and alerted by the experience of early American Muslims, Muslim organizations and educators in America stepped up the efforts to prevent integration and assimilation, which, in their views, would ultimately lead to Americanization, meaning de-Islamizing Muslim children. In an article published online, E. Fowziyyah Ali, a U.S. Muslim educator, states that for the “long-range survival of Muslims in America, it is extremely important for Muslims to establish schools that are inclusive.”²⁴ What she means by inclusive is that Islamic schools should not be separated along Shi‘i, Sunni, and Sufi divisions, as has been the case with many Muslim centers. Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin, also a U.S. Muslim educator, argues in an article entitled “Why we should send our Children to a Muslim School” that in the West today, “Muslim children do not receive a proper grounding in knowledge of Islam...they are often exposed to ideas...[that] tempt them away from the straight path of Islam.”²⁵ He adds that Muslim schools are good for “our children” because (1) they teach the basics of Islam; (2) teachers are Muslims and thus maintain an Islamic environment; (3) students maintain proper Islamic manner and are expected to wear Islamic attire; and (4) there is less pressure to indulge in un-Islamic behavior.²⁶ Thus, the main objective for building Islamic schools, as described by Muslim leaders and educators, is to create an army of believers that is well prepared to lead and spread the Islamic faith. As Amin

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ E. Fowziyya Ali, “Establishing an Islamic Environment for Your School Start-Up.” Available from http://www.4islamicschools.org/parent_start.htm; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

²⁵ Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin, “Why we should send our Children to a Muslim School.” Available from <http://www.islamfortoday.com/mulsimschool.htm>; Internet; accessed 15 May. 2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

states, “[t]he greatest objective of education is to prepare the young generation for leadership.”²⁷ Amin adds that the final goal of Islamic education is to develop an Islamic personality, which will be able to resist alien ideologies. Amin does not specify what these alien ideologies are, but one can easily assume that he is referring here to Americanism, which is represented in Christian and secular values. It is important to mention that Muslim educators try to justify their call for isolationism (I will call it de-Americanism), which, in fact, many Muslim parents oppose, by citing the problems of public education such as alcohol, violence, drugs, sexual experimentation, peer pressure, gangs, etc. Thus, American Muslim educators have capitalized on the ills of public schools to convince the parents to send their children to Islamic schools where the process of de-Americanization begins.

It is apparent that Muslim parents have heeded the calls for Islamic education, although many of them are unaware that their children are being de-Americanized. In an article published in the *New York Times*, titled “Muslim Schools in the U.S.: a Voice for Identity,” Susan Sachs writes on the rising demands for Islamic schools in the U.S. She says that across “the country, Islamic schools...that offer religion and Arabic classes...are expanding and flourishing, with many becoming oversubscribed so quickly that principals are scrambling for money to build more.”²⁸ Thus, the surge in the number of Islamic schools may be attributed to the success and determination of a Muslim community that strives “to define itself as a cohesive religious minority in the secular American society.”²⁹

The questions that remain: What is the aim of Islamic schools? What is on the agenda of Muslim organizations and educators? Is the aim to provide Islamic teaching or to preach the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Susan Sachs, “Muslim Schools in the U.S.: A voice for Identity,” *New York Times*, 10 November 1998.

²⁹ Ibid.

Islamic faith? Further, what kind of Islam is being taught or preached to these American Muslim children? According to American journalists Valerie Strauss and Emily Wax,

[S]ome Muslim educators are writing a new curriculum that infuses tenets of the religion in every lesson while providing a broad-minded worldview. Textbooks, often from overseas and rife with anti-American rhetoric, are being replaced in some schools. Some parents are...seeking a curriculum that teaches the civic virtues of tolerance and pluralism.³⁰

From this quote above, one can tell that some Islamic schools are de-Americanizing Muslim children for the sake of (re)Islamizing them. Muslim schools that are supported by foreign-based puritanical organizations tend to be more rigid in teaching Islam, such as the Islamic Saudi Academy, which teaches Arabic and Islamic studies as an alternative to U.S. history and government. The textbooks used in the classes at the Islamic Saudi Academy promote “hatred of non-Muslims,”³¹ according to Ali Al-Ahmed, whose Virginia-based Saudi Institute promotes religious tolerance in Saudi Arabia. Al-Ahmed adds: “The 11th-grade textbook, for example, says one sign of the Day of Judgment will be that Muslims will fight and kill Jews, who will hide behind trees that say: ‘Oh Muslim, Oh servant of God, here is a Jew hiding behind me. Come here and kill him.’”³²

American Muslim educators as well as parents have shunned such curriculum and are strongly resisting the de-Americanization of their children. For instance, Abdulwahab Alkesbi, whose 12-year-old daughter attends the Islamic Saudi Academy in Northern Virginia, says: “I wouldn’t be surprised if some teachers are sometimes anti-American or anti-Semitic...But I don’t want it to be that way.”³³ Moreover, Muslim schools across the U.S. are trying to teach a balanced curriculum, which means (re)Islamizing without de-Americanizing. For instance, at the

³⁰ Strauss and Wax, “Muslim Schools in America.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Islamic New Horizon School in Los Angeles, teachers are “stressing tolerance and students feeling connected to the outside world.”³⁴ Moreover, some Muslim teachers are piecing together a curriculum that is more appropriate for American Muslim children. For example, Islamic studies teacher Majida Zeiter “makes photocopies of pages she needs and never uses those calling Christian beliefs ‘nonsense’ or portraying Jews as treacherous people who financially ‘oppress’ others.”³⁵ It is understandable that Muslim parents have the rights to bring up their children. But it is the responsibility of the state to protect the child “against all forms of discrimination on the basis of expressed opinions.”³⁶ According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the state must insure that

The education of the child shall be directed to the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups.³⁷

Islam is relatively new to the American society, and Muslim schools can play an important role in the future of Islam in that society. For Islam to survive and flourish as a minority religion in a Christian and secular society, American Muslim children should learn and implement the following: (1) that they are Americans first and Muslims second; (2) that they can assimilate and integrate in the society without necessarily adopting values that contradict Islam; (3) that it is acceptable to decide on issues that best suit their situation as American Muslims rather than being influenced by Muslims from overseas who live in a different society and have no understanding of the American society and what it expects from its Muslim citizens; and (4) that tolerance and acceptance of other religions is essential for American Islam to prosper. Thus,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marie Parker-Jenkins et al, *In Good Faith: Schools, Religion and Public Funding* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005), 185.

³⁷ Article 29:1d in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

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American Muslims must choose between integration and assimilation in the culture of the host societies and isolation, which would ultimately lead to creating Muslim ghettos.

American Muslim educators have been working on a curriculum that addresses the issues mentioned above. For instance, in an article titled “Trial by Fire: Islamic Schools After 9-11,” American Muslim educator Karen Keyworth writes: “Muslims in America need to balance not only our internal concerns, but our external concerns as well. We have to design a curriculum for our Muslim children so that we prepare them to live in America, not Egypt or Saudi Arabia.”³⁸ According to Dr. Ilyas Ba-Yunus, professor of Sociology at SUNY-Cortland, approximately 50% of Muslims in America are under the age of 20. These young Muslims, Ba-Yunus adds,

[N]eed an education wherein Islam is relevant to and dynamic in their daily lives as well as their future. We cannot prepare our Muslim-American children for their multi-ethnic American futures as politicians, media executives, journalists, lawyers, engineers, and more unless we value diversity ourselves.³⁹

Thus, American Muslim educators will have to create an Islamic curriculum that is compatible with the values of America rather than the values of the societies of the Muslim world. American Muslim children are different from their counterparts in the Islamic world. For instance, American Muslim children are born in a diverse, not a homogeneous, society; are modernized, not traditional; and have more challenges and expectations from their society, as mentioned above. Thus, Muslim educators should realize and take into consideration that what is best for a Muslim child in the Muslim world is not necessarily the same for the Muslim child in America.

³⁸ Karen Keyworth, “Trial by Fire: Islamic Schools After 9-11.” Available from <http://www.4islamicschools.org>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

³⁹ Ibid.

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Muslim educators should also be aware of, and resist, the penetration of Islamic extremism into the curriculum of Islamic schools. It is very likely that a number of American Muslim schools have fallen prey to ideologies and propaganda that came in the same package with the financial support from overseas. Keyworth tells us that “Islamic schools all across America were initially interested in a free textbook,”⁴⁰ and that a small number of schools that adopted these texts skipped over the propaganda presented inside them. Some schools, however, “did teach the content of the texts to their students.”⁴¹ As Keyworth puts it: “Let us state equivocally for all the world to hear that we Muslim educators reject the teaching of hatred as completely incompatible with Islam as taught in the Holy Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.”⁴²

Moreover, there is a rising demand among Muslim educators to do away with any curricula coming from the Muslim world -- no matter how moderate they are -- and to create a curriculum that is American in nature, which suits the thinking, mentality, and the situation of Muslim children in America. In fact, some Muslim schools have excluded social studies courses (i.e., economics, history, geography, anthropology, archeology, law, philosophy, political science, religion, and sociology) from their K-4 program and replaced it instead with Islamic studies. In these schools, Muslim students, unlike their counterparts in public schools, do not have the opportunity to study any of the subjects mentioned above, especially during the early childhood education, which is a very crucial and important part of the total school program. Not being able to learn American history and politics at an early age would no doubt leave dire consequences on Muslim children when they grow up. To this end, Keyworth writes:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

In America, we cannot expect the larger society to push our teenagers closer to Islam. Therefore, teenagers in America are expected to develop a sense of self-identity that is strong enough to withstand the pressures of American society. The curriculum that will develop this strong Islamic identity must first recognize the need for special emphasis on this trait.⁴³

Thus, American Muslim educators are calling for a compromise between Islam and Western values because they came to realize that it is extremely hard for children of Muslim parents to develop an Islamic identity that has no Western and secular values. This new Islamic identity must be shaped in accordance with the ingredients of the American society, and must exist in harmony with its values. Teaching Islam within the American context will make it easier for Muslim children to construct an identity that makes them American Muslims, rather than Muslims in America, and will produce an Islam that can be American in the full sense of the term.

Muslim Schools: A Threat to Social Unity?

Some scholars claim that faith schools in general are divisive and their “mere existence is bound to fuel enmity between religious or ethnic groups.”⁴⁴ As distinguished scientist Peter Atkins put it,

No single type of school founded on religion...can contribute to the unification of society, even though it purports to instruct its members in toleration. Religions, being fundamentally irrational, are fundamentally intolerant of each other, and schools set up on the shoulders of religions inevitably propagate that intolerance into future generations.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Short, “Faith-Based Schools: A Threat to Social Cohesion?” *The Journal of the Philosophy and Education Society of Great Britain*, 36:4, 2002, pp. 559-572.

⁴⁵ Peter Atkins, “The Church School-good or evil: Against” *The Independent* (Education Supplement), March 1, 2001, 7.

The claim goes on to indicate that faith schools “can result in religious or ethnic hostility given certain conditions.”⁴⁶ According to Rabbi Jonathan Romain, “If Muslim, Christian, Jewish and other children do not mix--and nor do their families--they become ignorant of each other, then suspicious, fearful and hostile.”⁴⁷ More in line with the above views is Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the UK-based National Secular Society, who indicates that single faith schools do not equip children to deal with life in mainstream society and that “children taught at a single faith school could adopt a particular religious belief as ‘fact,’ and...this would essentially result in ‘brainwashing.’”⁴⁸ The education spokesman in Bradford, England, David Ward, said: “prejudice is created when people are kept apart...[and] prejudice is broken down when people mix.”⁴⁹ Sociologists also argue that faith schools are a “kind of infection that prevents existing divisions in society from healing.”⁵⁰ According to the British Humanist Association (BHA):

[If] children grow up within a circumscribed culture, if their friends and peers are mostly from the same religion and hence also, very likely the same ethnic group, and if they rarely meet or learn to live with others from different backgrounds, this is hardly calculated to promote the acceptance and recognition of diversity. We have clear evidence to the contrary in Northern Ireland, where the separation of Catholic schools and Protestant schools has played a significant part in perpetuating the sectarian divide.⁵¹

Some sociologists argue that faith-based schools have negative impact on pupils. Frank Dobson writes:

to separate children on the grounds of religion is bound to be divisive. At its most innocent a school develops the loyalties of its children. Children at their school are ‘us’. Children at other schools are ‘them’. Such fairly harmless rivalry can develop into

⁴⁶ Short, “Faith-Based Schools.”

⁴⁷ Jonathan Romain, “The Lesson of Bradford is not to create apartheid in our schools,” *The Times*, July 26, 2001, 18.

⁴⁸ Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2006.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Short, “Faith-Based Schools.”

⁵¹ British Humanist Association, *Religious Schools: the case against* (London: British Humanist Association, 2001), 35.

something much worse when race or religion are added to the mixture, reflecting and in turn reinforcing the bigotry of grown-ups.⁵²

The counter-argument to the allegations mentioned above states that segregated education is not a factor in community conflict or social division. The research suggests that there is “a considerable amount of material (that) aims to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and education for reconciliation in the curriculum,”⁵³ and that faith-based schools are far from being inherently geared to breeding intolerance. Such schools, according to the research, teach about a range of faiths, prepare the children for a multicultural society, and involve children from different faiths.⁵⁴ Moreover, some scholars argue that it would be “rash... to condone or condemn certain kinds of separate school solely on grounds of philosophical principle.”⁵⁵ The research indicates that it depends on how the schools actually operate and what their effects are on students and the community at large.⁵⁶ Thus, the major determinant of the effects on students is the faith school curriculum. In other words, “the content of children’s learning is likely to be one of the most important factors influencing their attitudes and certainly a factor of more importance than the type of school in which their learning takes place.”⁵⁷

Are Islamic schools a vehicle to Islam in America, or a vehicle to social division in the American society? If we apply the theory mentioned above that faith-based schools, by their nature, breed intolerance and social division, regardless of their curriculum and what they teach, then Muslim schools are not the exception. Based on these findings, Muslim children who attend Muslim schools would very likely be alienated from the rest of society, live as a

⁵² Parker-Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 181-82.

⁵³ U. McNichol, “Teaching Controversial Issues in a Controversial Society” in B. Carrington and B. Troyna (eds.), *Children and Controversial Issues* (Lewes: The Farmer Press, 1988), 111.

⁵⁴ Short, “Faith-Based Schools.”

⁵⁵ T. McLaughlin, “The Ethics of Separate Schools” in M. Leicester and M. Taylor, *Ethics, Ethnicity and Education* (London: Kogan Page, 1992), 115.

⁵⁶ Short, “Faith-Based Schools.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

segregated community, participate less in the political process, and become less tolerant of other religious and ethnic groups. As Muslim children grow up alienated and segregated, Islam as a religion would be marginalized, would remain a religion of immigrants rather than becoming a major American religion, and the rest of Americans would stay ignorant of Islamic teachings and beliefs. On the other hand, if faith-based schools were not, by their nature, a vehicle to social division and intolerance, but it is rather the school's curriculum that plays a role in shaping the identity of Muslim children, then one may argue that Muslim educators should carefully draft a curriculum that is "American" in nature. A Muslim school with a curriculum that is "American" in nature would teach world religions (rather than teaching only Islam), hire non-Muslim teachers (it is a requirement today in Muslim schools that teachers must be adherents of the faith), promote tolerance and understanding of all cultures (textbooks in some Muslim schools teach the opposite), introduce initiatives involving inter-school links and exchanges, and prepare students for a multicultural society.

Theories on the construction of Religious Identity

M. Kirby et al indicate that 'identity' is constructed in the individual through a process of socialization where individuals are exposed to the values of the culture in which they are born and raised. Kirby et al state: "The human personality is dynamic rather than fixed, and develops as it is exposed to socializing experiences throughout life. This is how our sense of our own identity, or who we feel ourselves to be, is constructed."⁵⁸

'Religious identity,' according to H. Oberoi, is "more than the formal beliefs which distinguish a group."⁵⁹ Oberoi states: "the whole historical process by which a cohesive

⁵⁸ M. Kirby et al., *Sociology in Perspective* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1997), 374.

⁵⁹ Parker-Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 74.

community of believers comes to be consolidated and reproduced through a fusion of texts, myths, symbols and rituals with human bodies and sentiments, often under the aegis of religious personnel.”⁶⁰

People with strong religious affiliation prefer to be identified by their religion rather than by their ethnic background. This truly applies on Muslims who emphasize their religious background and wish to be labeled as Muslim rather than Arab, Asian, or African. With this strong affiliation with religious background, Muslims in America, like any other religious group, look for the means to preserve and enhance the Islamic identity in future generations. Thus, “within a faith-based school, individuals may feel a greater sense of association with religious identity than in a community school.”⁶¹

Moreover, some theorists suggest that people operate with multiple identities, selecting the identity that suits a particular situation. This “situational identity choice,”⁶² as one sociologist calls it, can be implemented without the individual’s need to abandon one identity for another. As some sociologists argue, “second- and third-generation minority ethnic groups...are adding a new layer to their identity.”⁶³ This is seen in Australian Muslims who are

Developing a certain bond with Australia, which in most cases is not at the expense of their Islamic and ethnic heritage. Their Australianness complements and puts into perspective their Muslim identity and their ethnic traditions. The result may be a hybrid Islamic identity based on commitment to the secular norms of Australian society and Islamic/ethnic traditions.⁶⁴

Thus, as this paper has argued above, for Islam to prosper in America, and for Muslims to be fully integrated in the American society, American Muslims have to be under constant change

⁶⁰ H. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

⁶¹ Parker-Jenkins, *In Good Faith*, 74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh, *Muslim Communities in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001), 5.

and may have to consider developing and adding a new layer to their Islamic identity, be it American, secular, or Western.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that Muslim schools in America are being established to help children of immigrant Muslim parents retain their Islamic religion and culture. The paper has argued that although the aim of these schools is the survival of Islam in America, they may after all contribute to social division and the alienation of Muslim children from the rest of the society. No in-depth research has been done on Muslim schools in America and their implications on Muslim children, but it is obvious that Muslim schools are split between those that teach Islam within the American context, i.e., promote tolerance and diversity, and those that have an agenda of de-Americanizing Muslim children as a way to Islamize them. Muslim educators play a great role on how to steer these children. If the faith school curriculum is the determinant factor in shaping the identity of pupils, as some scholars have argued, then it is incumbent on Muslim educators to reject curricula and textbooks from overseas and to produce a curriculum that is compatible with the American culture and society. Muslim children can learn Islam without separating them from the reality of their own nation. While learning about their own religion and culture, Muslim children must also learn and be exposed to American values, i.e., secular and Judeo-Christian values. Muslim educators and the schools' curricula are the only factors in shaping the identity of Muslim children and in deciding the future of Islam in America.

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