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CHAPTER 10

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TO SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY COHESION: *an Islamic educational perspective*

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SUMMARY

THIS CHAPTER DEVELOPS an Islamic education response to the question of RE's contribution to social and community cohesion in Britain. The central dilemmas facing British Muslim communities and the wider Muslim diaspora in Europe are identified. These dilemmas are mainly framed by how Muslims interact and position themselves within a secular, culturally and religiously diverse public space. If British Muslims come from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, their faith constitutes an important component of the core values that define their individual and communal identities. Their religiosity plays a crucial role too in the emerging self understandings of young British Muslims and the way they interpret the diversity around them. Religious extremism and radicalisation pose important challenges to community cohesion that cannot be adequately addressed unless issues around the character of Muslim religiosity within the context of secular and multicultural British society are properly explored.

The broad educational rationale of mainstream RE in England and Wales in many ways represents a unique model of teaching religion in secular multicultural societies. A distinctive feature of RE is that it treats faith traditions as well as other value systems as educational resources to

facilitate 'learning about and learning from religion' in the hope that this leads to the personal, social and, indeed, faith development of the learner. This chapter argues, contrary to popular claim, that this broad 'secular' educational rationale should not be seen as incompatible with the core educational values of Islam. Muslim educational thought contains a strong tradition of critical education, based on the central Qur'anic educational concepts such as *taaruf*, or 'knowing and learning from one another', which certainly supports this broad educational vision.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world we are increasingly witnessing that contemporary Islam and the secular humanism of late modernity are in need of revising and rethinking their overall horizon of meaning in order to interact with each other more intelligently. As we enter the twenty-first century the ground beneath their meta-narratives has already been shaking; while the West has begun to pay attention to the destructive exclusivism contained within its rhetoric of 'rational enlightenment', the Muslim world is beginning to come to terms with the fact that the meaning of being *Islamically faithful* should be reconsidered in the light of contemporary world conditions.

It is unfortunate that the role of faith among Muslims living in the European diaspora is only just being recognized. It is 9/11 and the July 7th 2005 bombings in London that have forcefully brought religion and Islam to the centre of discussions of the policy makers in the UK. Unfortunately, since the debate has been largely framed within the context of national security concerns, we still do not have a long term educational strategy to address religious extremism. There is now a flood of literature (e.g., Roy, 2004; Lincoln, 2006) on political Islam, terrorism, the deterritorialised imagined *umma*, etc. All of these compete to best describe or classify 'the enemy within' by the degree of extremism Muslims reflect in their way of being Muslim.

The scale of the challenge we face is beyond depicting the problem as a matter of 'them and us'. Modern British/European Islam is an undeniable cultural reality but what is at stake is the future of its subjectivity and communal identity. If we, both Muslims and the wider policy makers, cannot offer an authoritative educational vision for young generations of British Muslims, we should not be surprised that their agency will be

forged by the extremism of radical Islam and isolationism expressed as rejection of an exclusivist wider secular society.

To prioritize religiosity and faith development, however, is not to deny that there are other factors at play here such as the historic legacy of colonial trauma, grievances over 'Western' foreign policy in the Middle East, socio-economic exclusion or Islamophobia that are among the contributory factors to extremism. Moreover, there is the reality of non-religious forms of extremist violence associated for example with the far right. This chapter emphasizes the need for investing in a long term educational policy in order to address serious issues of community cohesion and extremism.

MODERN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES AND LIMITS OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Complex historical factors, market driven globalisation and mass migration have brought diverse cultures closer to the extent that a specific tradition-based self definition is no longer a possibility. As members of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural communities positioned within the larger European societies we are now living *in the face of each other*. This reality has tremendous consequences for how we, people of both majority and minority groups, construct our identities. If we consider the case of Muslim communities in the European diaspora we can observe the uncomfortable consequences of this encounter more clearly. We can talk about many commonalities among the diverse communities that make up the totality of society; however, when we attend to differences, the difficulties and challenges of living in culturally and religiously diverse secular societies become acutely clear. One thing is hard to deny: living *in the face of each other* requires reconsidering one's world-view and recognizing, with humility, the limits of one's identity and the presence of the other in one's self understanding.

This challenging contextual reality could also facilitate a positive outcome: the gift of openness to one another. Openness does not mean an unconditional subscription to a different life style for that would actually mean assimilation; openness means, rather, a critical awareness about one's core values and the felt need to be in a continuous dialogue with the other. The alternatives to critical openness are either the emergence of minority ghettos or the dominant group's expectation of assimilation. Unfortunately,

in Europe, including Britain, due to complex political and economic reasons, ghettoisation and assimilation are increasingly becoming the overall policy trend. The values of critical openness, vital to the emergence of an overall sense of belonging in a multicultural society and achieving a degree of social cohesion, need to be nurtured by both the wider society and the so called minority groups.

Modes of religiosity, RE and community cohesion

The fear of being assimilated can be clearly discerned within the traditional reactionary perception of Islamic education. As practised in the mosques and *madrasas* in Britain, for example, Islamic education generally reflects an authoritarian and rigid process of knowledge transmission centred round the authority of the teacher and the text. Hence, most educationalists think that the educational legacy of Islam and Western modernity remain inherently oppositional as Islamic education aims to inculcate specific faith-based values while Western education aims to contribute to the overall development of an autonomous subject. Thus multi-faith RE has been perceived by Muslims with suspicion as it is taken to be promoting secular values that are deemed to be contradictory to Islam.

Perhaps this depiction has some truth in it but it fails to engage with the broad educational rationale underpinning non-confessional RE and most importantly ignores the plurality within the Muslim educational legacy and the possibility that both paradigms can share some central educational ideals. Can nurturing values of critical openness be a shared educational goal for both Muslim education and 'secular' RE?

I have argued elsewhere (Sahin 2010a) that *secularity*, unlike the narrower and more ideological concept of *secularism*, can be interpreted as a crucial inclusive principle informing modern democratic political order and should not be seen as inherently in conflict with or a threat to religion. I have further suggested that an Islamic socio-political theology, based on the Islamic social principles such as *maslaha* (common good) encourages a *critically faithful* Muslim presence, which entails active engagement within the framework of secular democratic politics that is committed to preserving human dignity, and upholding values of socio-economic justice and the common good (*op. cit.*).

I am aware that increasingly the phenomenon of secular *extremism* has also become prevalent. Often secular policy makers and educationalists, who not

only lack religious literacy but also fail to appreciate the importance of faith to many communities, do not take seriously the positive role of faith in community cohesion and conflict resolution. A recent example of such a naïve secular educational position is discernible in the work of L. Davies (2008) who attempts to analyze the nature of extremism and offer what she claims to be a pedagogic model to educate against extremism. As a typical secular educationalist she automatically equates concepts like critical and openness with Western modernity while implicitly equating unquestioning submission and absolutism with being religious. Such secularist perspectives appear to show no appreciation that main stream RE can play a significant role in building competence in combating extremism by contributing to pupils' critical openness and encouraging ideological self-criticism. It is unfortunate to note that in such a secularist approach the so called counter terror educational strategy in schools can easily be reduced to a check list/tool kit level of simplicity (*op.cit.*).

When, as a Muslim researcher and educator, I began to listen to the life stories of British Muslim youth in the late 1990s, I began to realize the limits of a teacher/ text-centred and transmission-orientated Islamic education taking place in the mosques, madrasas and faith based Muslim schools. The life-world of these young people was informed by a multiplicity of cultures: at home they were socialized into traditional Islamic values interpreted within parental cultural backgrounds and at the school they were exposed to a wider secular culture. Gradually I became interested in understanding how they managed the presence of cultural multiplicity around them and how they developed their sense of loyalty and the sense of who they are in the face of demands made by different authorities in their lives.

The literature on minority youth studies I reviewed was largely confined to visible marks of identity such as race, ethnicity and language. The possibility of religiosity as an important factor in the lives of 'Asian children and young people' was rarely given consideration. The literature indicated presence of 'hybrid, hyphenated' identities particularly among black people and pointed to the curious phenomenon of 'living between two cultures'. However, the specific role of faith appeared to have been grossly underestimated or overlooked. The overall anticipation in this literature was that as the new generations got a better education and better jobs they would move up the social ladder and gradually become secularized or assimilated into the norms of wider society. There were clear signs of secular bias within the social

science research community as well as in the discourse of educational and social policy makers. It is regrettable to observe that more recent empirical research on diverse Muslim societies still shows signs of this secular shortcoming in properly acknowledging and adequately attending to the faith dynamic within these communities (Sahin 2010b).

However, the transnational identities observed among migrant Muslim communities contained a strong faith presence that was linked with political developments in the Middle East and Indian sub-continent. This reality of being part of the world-wide Muslim community, *Umma*, had a tremendous impact on the identity formation of Muslim youth. A cursory look at the larger scene would have made clear that faith had been emerging as a dominant factor in their lives. However, the real question for me was how and in what direction faith was taking most of these young people. I became interested in exploring the construction of their religious subjectivity where loyalty to authority and the desire for autonomy are negotiated.

I used a psycho-social identity research model that is based on a semi-structured interview schedule to explore religious identity. It was developed out of the theoretical insights of Erik Erikson (1968) and the empirical research of developmental psychologist James Marcia on identity status (1993). The model assumes that identity gets constructed within a commitment/exploration continuum. As such there are several possible identity resolutions or modes: a *diffused* mode where neither commitment nor exploration is present; a *foreclosed* mode where there is a strong commitment that is not informed by the exploration process; an *achieved* mode which is observed when commitment has undergone a process of exploration and finally, if there is a strong exploration but no real commitment, the identity mode is classified as *exploratory*. The model is not fixed – while an individual's personality could exhibit several aspects of these modes, regression and progression on the continuum are also possibilities. As such the identity is studied through a 'post-foundational phenomenological framework' (Sahin, 2005).

The findings, in brief, showed that male participants reflected a predominantly *foreclosed* mode of religious subjectivity while female participants fell largely under the *exploratory* mode. There were also a significant number of young people in the *diffused* mode who were losing interest in religious issues. On the whole, while Islam was perceived as a source of inspiration, increasingly a rigid appropriation of faith was also emerging. Most of the participants raised the concern that Islam presented

to them at home and the mosque was mixed with the culture of their parents' country of origin. They wanted 'pure Islam' instated. Male participants often mentioned that they intended to take a year out to study Arabic in an Arab country. It was becoming clear that as these young people grappled with a sense of who they were, a process triggered most intensely in multicultural societies, faith was becoming an important centre of authority in their lives.

However, when closely investigated, the dominant characteristics of the religious authority acknowledged by the youth indicated a strong literal perception of Islamic sources: the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. A key source behind this literalist religiosity has been the increasing impact of Muslim transnational revivalist movements that originated in different parts of the Muslim world. Most of the young people preferred to be identified with the radical discourse of transnational Muslim movements than with the traditional religious discourse they found at their parents' home or in their local mosques. Young people needed this sense of difference, particularly when faced with the demands of a secular multicultural society, and the radical groups were meeting their needs by providing them with a sense of difference and confidence. As a result, a large intra-faith conversion was taking place, towards the *foreclosed* end of the identity continuum. This is one of the least desirable religiosity modes in a multicultural society as it indicates having a strong vulnerability to extremism.

It is significant that this work was originally undertaken well before 9/11 when policy makers were showing no serious interest in the growing Muslim question in multicultural British society. In fact multiculturalism, an inclusive policy principle, itself appeared to be perceived as an uncritical toleration of difference that simply ignored engaging with the 'sensitive' faith related issues. However, I was fortunate enough to have the support and guidance of a well respected RE specialist, Professor John M Hull, whose insight had already penetrated the heart of the educational challenge facing Muslim children in multicultural Britain. He had deep awareness of the special case of Islam, not only due to the reality of Muslim demographics, but also because of the implications that the historical power competition between *Islam* and *Christianity* has for the interfaith relations and community cohesion of modern Britain. He was anxious that Muslims, alongside other faiths, should be part of the open and critical educational dialogue facilitated by RE so that, while respecting differences, a sense of shared purpose and solidarity could also be fostered. Treating the

religious heritage of humanity as an educational resource for all could help avoid the destructive consequences of 'religionism', i.e., reifying faith into a rigid ideological structure.

The educational rationale for RE in the schools of England and Wales is not based on any particular *religious* tradition, although, of course, the subject has a Christian antecedence. However, this does not mean that it is necessarily in conflict with the religious and educational values of other faith traditions. Unlike the countries (such as France and the USA) where secular is strictly interpreted to mean confining religion to the private sphere of life, RE in the schools of England and Wales, in many ways, symbolizes a progressive way of accommodating religion within the public space of a secular democracy. It should be noted that even in France there are now calls for finding a way of facilitating the public teaching of religion (Pépin, 2009).

I do not, however, want to claim perfection for the form of RE that has evolved in the UK but rather that its strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Looked at from the perspective of minority faiths, the system, including its legislative provision, does still reflect the strong presence of Christianity. This is a natural consequence of the subject's roots being found in a tradition of Christian education and, more arguably, in recognition of the continuing influence of Christianity on the country's cultural identity. However, as expressed in *Religious Education: The Non-Statutory National Framework* (DfES/QCA 2004), notwithstanding the predominance of the study of Christianity as a consequence of the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Act, it is important that Local Authorities make sure that 'the religious education curriculum is broad and balanced'. Local Authority Agreed Syllabus Conferences have the legal responsibility for the 'the specificity of content, both in terms of the religions and beliefs studied.' (*op.cit.*, 12) As local faith communities are represented on both the Agreed Syllabus Conference and the legally required SACRE (Standing Advisory Committee for RE) the subject is both enriched and safeguarded by their active involvement. If, as a last resort, some parents are unhappy with the RE provision on faith or religious grounds they have the right to withdraw their child. The question of the RE teacher's faith is not relevant so long as she/he approaches the teaching of the subject in a professional manner and avoids being religiously confessional. That said, there are still insufficient numbers of RE teachers from minority faith communities who can offset the often simplistic representation of their faith traditions which does continue to be a concern among them.

RE has well established pedagogies (Grimmitt, 2000) that avoid religious confessionalism and aim to achieve its main attainment targets; learning about and learning from religion. The initially dominating phenomenological method in RE that is perceived to be centred upon providing factual descriptions has attracted criticism. There is no space to discuss this here except to point out that there have been many developments within the field of phenomenology and in its application in social science including education and RE. Even the writings of Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, carefully read, reflect a move away from studying the way consciousness directs and represents objects so that knowledge is founded on secure grounds to the exploration of human experience (the life-world) in its historical/temporal conditions and inter-subjective character. Thus, in a phenomenologically grounded pedagogy, description incorporates a strong moral awareness while attempting to grasp personal/collective interpretations that are articulated in the believer's life world.

RE in the UK, despite the criticisms, remains a well established interdisciplinary field that has created a learning/teaching platform which enables religion and faith to be studied in a way which is appropriate within a plural society in which belief is diverse. Questions about whether RE relativises and domesticates the religious traditions, imposing an alien and secularist structure upon them will no doubt continue to be raised. However none of the criticisms or objections is persuasive enough to declare the model so flawed as to be unacceptable or unusable. They certainly do not constitute justification for opting for the confessional model whereby students are segregated into separate classrooms according to their faith affiliation. More subtle demands for a 'neo-confessional' approach to RE are also unconvincing and unrealistic. When it comes to building capacity and so called resilience against religious extremism RE's role, together with citizenship education, is crucial. This constructive role of RE is yet to be fully invested in and effectively utilized and some continue to have moral and professional misgivings about whether RE should play this role. (i.e. reactions to the government-supported programme 'REsilience' are mixed.) But without a readiness on the part of all faith communities to explore together the common ground upon which reasoned faith and understanding can be encouraged through RE, a crucial community resource for peace, reconciliation and cooperation will be neglected, possibly even lost.

The reminder of the chapter, by exploring the core of educational theology in Islam, aims to demonstrate that the broad educational rationale underpinning RE does not necessarily contradict Muslim educational self understanding and stresses the need for close cooperation between Muslim educators and the wider RE practitioners.

THE CRITICAL/DIALOGICAL ROOTS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION

The phrase "Islamic education" is a modern expression. With the establishment of nation states in the Muslim world at the turn of the nineteenth century, Western style secular education was also imported. This has inevitably led to the emergence of a dichotomy between secular education and the traditional forms of education as the systems have produced different and mainly conflicting mind sets. Islamic education in the wider political discourse of late nineteenth-twentieth century revivalist, transnational Muslim movements has come to be used as a faith-based (Islamic) educational model alternative to the Western secular conception of education that is centred round the humanist ideals of Western modernity. In this sense, Islamic education though including religious education is not limited by it. Islamic education is used as an overarching title containing all teaching and learning activities that takes place within the family, mosque and the school. In short it is perceived to be a total educational system that is an alternative to the Western educational model.

Today's general perception of Islamic education within the European Muslim diaspora including Britain overwhelmingly reflects this ideological motive which strongly emphasizes a categorical difference between Muslim and secular conceptions of education. It is not surprising to observe that the authority of tradition is used to legitimize this fundamentally reactionary definition. This modern and ideological construct (Islamic education) is often read into the tradition.⁽¹⁾ Thus because modern Western education is perceived to be materialistic Islamic education is largely defined appositionally as an overwhelmingly esoteric, spiritual framework in which the educational process is mostly identified with the term *ta'dib*, a set of coercive moral practices (Nasr, 1989; Al Attas, 1980).

The empirical findings of my work with British Muslim youth (Sahin, 2005) indicate that there is an urgent need to rethink the theory and practice of Islamic education in Britain. Under current circumstances, while extremism and rigid faith construction have become a significant threat to

Muslim young people, most of the Islamic education provision is still preoccupied with transmission and forging the identity of young people in an authoritarian fashion. It appears that the study of Islam carried out in contemporary Muslim educational settings is unable to develop an intelligent mature faith among Muslim youth. As such it is important to reconsider how education is imagined within the Islamic self-understanding. An obvious place to start reconsidering the meaning of *being Islamically educated* is in the Qur'an and the Prophetic model (*Sunna*). Listening to the experience of young Muslims is also an integral part of this reconsideration.

The 'cloud-grass theory of education' in Islam

The Arabic word *tarbiya* is the most often used concept to express the educational process in Muslim culture. *Talim/tadris* (teaching), *ta'dib* (moral disciplining), *talqin* (instructing) are also used to describe different aspects of the educational process. The word *tarbiya* in Arabic is directly linked with two interrelated verbs *rabba/rababa* (to cater for and be in control of one's upbringing, to guide, reform and administer) and *rabaa*, to increase and nurture, (Ibn Manzur, 1989). As such *tarbiya* includes all processes that are active in one's upbringing, e.g. physical/spiritual nourishment, care and guidance. A close etymological analysis of *tarbiya* related words will reveal what can be called the 'cloud-grass theory of education' in Islam: Nature itself has the capacity to educate e.g. clouds, by bringing down water necessary for the growth of vegetation, possess an educational function; hence they are called *rabab*. Incidentally *educare*, the Latin origin of the English word education in its etymology also has the meanings of springing up to existence, nurture and to lead.

Al-Rabb, one of the names that God chooses to describe himself in the Qur'an comes from the root *rabba*. *Al-Rabb* conventionally translated as 'the Lord' carries the original etymological meanings of looking after, caring for and leading. As such in his classical Qur'an dictionary al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d.502/1108) observes that *al-Rabb* is directly linked with *tarbiya* (education) which he defines as 'the gradual, stage by stage developmental process informing an organism's growth until the complete actualization of its potentials'.

The authority of the Lord (*Al-Rabb*) rests on being able to provide physical, spiritual sustenance and guidance that are essential to facilitate the personal development of individuals and communities. Thus the

Qur'an declares that the Lord is worthy of worship precisely because He not only created humanity but constantly attends to, listens to, nurtures and guides them. As such God expects that humanity will be grateful to Him in recognizing 'His favours unto them' and express this gratitude by worshipping Him alone (*ubudiyya*). God is not in competition with humanity or desires to exercise His power arbitrarily but owns His creation by being mindful of their needs in the hope that they may develop mature self-awareness. Above all humanity is entrusted with the stewardship of the earth (*khalifa/khalaif*, 35:39; 38:26)⁽²⁾ Thus, in the Qur'an the fundamental mode of communication between God and humanity is essentially articulated in an educational framework which is technically expressed by the theological concepts of *rububiyya* and *ubudiyya* in Muslim tradition. The opening chapter of the Qur'an declares God to be the educator *par excellence*—*rabb al-alamin* (the educator of all worlds). However like in any genuine educational process, as distinct from indoctrination or mere training, there is a mutual balance and respect between the authority of the educator and the autonomy of the learner. Facilitating a growth process by looking after, nurturing and guiding those who are to be educated is central to the meaning of *tarbiya*. Based on this it can be easily deduced that an important feature of Islamic education is that it should facilitate growth by guiding and attending to the needs of the learner in the hope of bringing about a balanced, faithful personality. As such, according to the Qur'an, possessing knowledge is not sufficient to be called a genuine educator (9:31, 3:79, 62:5-6).

Divine curriculum in the service of humanity: the Qur'an and purpose of education

Considered educationally the Qur'an, therefore, becomes God's curriculum to educate humanity in His knowledge and wisdom (3:48; 12:3-7). As such, apart from recognizing God as educator, the Qur'an exhibits several educational qualities. The Qur'an introduces itself as a guide (2:185) and aims to assist people to realize their humanity in all aspects of life. The initial appeal is to human reasoning capacity thus we observe that frequently the Qur'anic passages end with a thought provoking statement such as "Don't you reflect" etc. (3:190 – 191; 10:5; 29:20; 39:28; 89:5).

Without taking the dynamic characteristics of the Qur'anic revelation seriously, its cohesive vision cannot be grasped. A piecemeal reading of the Qur'an can easily reveal textually justifiable accounts that are totally in

contradiction to its wider vision. Most of the discussions on human freedom/responsibility vis-à-vis God's power and majesty in the Qur'an by the classical Muslim scholars reflect such a one-dimensional hermeneutic strategy (Rahman 1989; van Ess 1972; Watt 1948). The content, composition and delivery strategy of revelation (*wahy*) in Islam has an explicit educative purpose to engage the listener (reader) and to bring about a transformation in him/her. Thus most of the Qur'an was revealed as short passages in response to a felt concern, difficulty or a disputation experienced by the Prophet and the early Muslim community in order to provide guidance for them. As Gwynne's interesting study (2004) aptly discovers, 'the Qur'an does not present its content as self-evidently significant but frames it in patterns of discussion to demonstrate how that material engages the hearer'.

In fact, much of the Qur'an is in the form of arguments. This shows clearly that the Qur'an recognizes the human need to reason and have explanations in order to make up their minds or to follow a particular advice. For example, central to Qur'anic rationality is its emphasis that God does not act in arbitrary ways. He has a clear pattern of behaviour (*sunnat Allah*) (17:77). Reasoning and argument are integral to the content of the Qur'an and inseparable from its structure. As such, the Qur'an, by using a rhetorical logical style, becomes a critical discourse that is not only sanctioned by divine authority but is also justified according to the authority discerned by human reasoning. S. El-Sheikh (2003) while closely exploring structures/styles of practical reasoning and dialectical critique in the Qur'an gets closer to grasping the critical pedagogy informing the Qur'anic dialogues

The Islamic perception of revelation reflects strong contextual elements: it responds to the specific needs of the first historical audience (12:2) and puts forward a gradual principle to solve their social problems (2:219). It is not the specific historical solution formulated but the wider ethical value framework guiding the solution which preserves the relevance of faith in diverse historical circumstances (13:38, 5:48).

The Qur'an recognizes the change-bound nature of human life hence, without hesitation, when necessary it abrogates parts of the revelation and replaces them with a better or more fitting one (2:106, 16:101). Most importantly, it emphasizes the developmental processes active in both the physical and psycho-spiritual aspects of human nature. Humans possess the capacity of both good and bad. Subjectivity is shaped by these forces but not limited to them – a continual growth as well as regression is a

strong possibility (95:4-6, 91:7-11). As a consequence, like human cognitive capacity ('ilm) the human capacity for faith (iman) is also developmental as it is a part of the human condition (58:11).

Within the Qur'anic worldview God is the absolute sovereign of the universe but this does not mean that He acts arbitrarily. As mentioned previously His conduct follows principles; He uses His authority authoritatively: He possesses knowledge, wisdom, acts justly and, above all, He is prepared to listen. The Qur'anic dialogues containing prophet Abraham's *methodic skepticism* (6:74-80, 2:260) while discovering monotheism and questioning the bodily resurrection in the Hereafter vividly illustrates a listening, conversing God. The relationship between God (the educator) and the learner takes a dialogical process in which both parties take seriously each other's autonomy and authority.

The case of prophet Abraham shows that being faithful does not mean a mere submission or surrender (49:14) but a critical, intelligent awareness and qualified acceptance. Last but not least the Qur'an teaches through stories.⁽³⁾ As such the Qur'an becomes an educational book to guide and inspire humanity rather than a book of instructions that should be literally perceived and applied to life.

The Qur'anic outlook described above provides solid ground to develop a progressive Islamic educational philosophy. In short, the Qur'an firmly recognizes the historical/contextual contingency informing human existence by providing a radical educational response to the gender, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of humanity. The *difference*, as such, is perceived as an opportunity and reason for engaging with the dialogic process of 'knowing one another and learning from each other (*taaruf*)' (30:19-26, 49:13) in the hope of developing a holistic perspective (*tawhid*) on life.

The character of religious and educational authority in Islam

The Prophetic model (*Sunna*) and the Companions' appropriation of it gradually led to the emergence of a living tradition centred around the Qur'an and increasingly the prophetic *Sunna* as it symbolised the practical application of the Qur'anic teachings in real life conditions.⁽⁴⁾ However there was an open attitude to both the Qur'an and *Sunna* as the caliphs, particularly Umar (d.644), radically reinterpreted the Qur'anic legal injunctions. This showed the existence of an early dynamic hermeneutics of the Muslim core sources.

Within classical Muslim heritage both progressive and literal conservative attitudes toward education can be observed.⁽⁵⁾ However the early Muslim attitude towards central authority sources, the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, indicate a strongly open educational approach. It should be noted that during the early period of Islam, perhaps due to its situation in a largely oral culture, religious authority did not lie in the written word as such but between the text and its reader/commentator. Hence the scholar, *alim* (reader/commentator) held a crucial position and is also seen as the inheritor of the prophetic role and legacy (Abbot 1957; Madigan 2001). (6)

The shift of authority from the reader/commentator to the 'authoritative text' emerged during the post-formative period of Islam. Prophetic authority, originally embodied in the form of a living tradition, *Sunna*, gradually came to be seen as textual, preserved in the collections of Prophetic reports, Hadith. Despite this shift it is the *authoritative knowing and acting* at individual and communal levels that constitute the centre of religious authority and not a body of instructions or the assumed infallibility of a particular person. As such religious authority in Islam has a strong *interpretative and communal* character. This necessary hermeneutic component which is recognized by the tradition as *ijtihad*, independent thinking, has important pedagogic implications: there is an interactive process between the sacred address and the hearer/commentator whose reflections discern guidance from the message to be emulated by the society. The whole hermeneutic process remains open to scrutiny by the wider faithful community and is incomplete as God's knowledge and wisdom is unbounded (18:109) and thus requires a constant reflection which is taken to be a duty and an act of worship. Examined closely, the centre of educational authority in Islam, contrary to some appealing suggestions by Messick (1996) and Makdisi (1989) is neither really textual as such nor resides within law-centred so-called professional guilds (*madhahib*) which emerged out of the politically-manipulated organizational forms of *waqf* and *madrassa*.

The dominant epistemological framework developed within classical Muslim thought suggests such an open-ended process. Based on the guidance of the Qur'an and authentic *Sunna*, Muslim scholars managed to establish the cultural and intellectual institution of *ijtihad*, independent thinking, by making use of analogy (*qiyas*), arguments concerning public interest (*maslaha*), consultation (*shura*) and consensus (*ijma*) to help the community to lead an *Islamically meaningful* life within the conditions of a rapidly changing world.

The emergence of such a practical and, in many ways, flexible system of Islamic rationality in which the authority of faith and reason are balanced is not accidental but reflects the principles, values and practical strategies suggested by the Qur'an in resolving both individual and social problems experienced by the early Muslim community. For example, we observe that the Qur'an in matters related to public security, even within the challenging circumstances of war, invites the faithful to *think through* the issues so that the decisions are based on convincing evidence and critical reflection (4:83; 49:6). Most importantly this rational capacity of discernment (*istinbat*) is expected to be exercised by the prophet and 'those who are in charge' of the affairs of the community. Thus, in Islam the authority of the prophet, and community leadership in general, is strongly linked with knowledge acquisition and competence to reflect and discern (4:83).

The humanist aspect of the educational philosophy of Islam – despite the prevalence of later conservative forces – has never completely been lost. The *adab* literature (Rosenthal, 2007) which gradually came to contain the bulk of classical Islamic humanism and which flourished largely under the influence of Persian converts to Islam, has retained the critical educational spirit of the Qur'an. The *sufi* legacy of Islam can be seen as another response aimed at curtailing the increasingly literalist mindset that had come to dominate classical Muslim legal thought. It should be stated that legal interpretation of the core Muslim sources (the Qur'an and *Sunna*) exhibited a considerably degree of open critical attitude that is generally symbolized with the concept of *ra'y* (independent/discretionary reasoning). Thus nearly all distinct hermeneutic strategies developed within the classical Muslim intellectual genres – legal, exegetical, philosophical, theological, educational etc. – exhibit critical engagement with both the tradition as well as with the challenges of the changing contextual reality.

I hope this brief exposition of educational theology in the Qur'an demonstrates clearly the critical and dialogical aspects of education in Islam. Islamic education, like Islam itself, is not monolithic. I am convinced that there are ample reasons why both Muslim educators and RE practitioners working in a secular setting can and should engage in an open dialogue. This remains crucial in addressing the pressing issues of community cohesion that are a concern to us all.

NOTES

1. For details of the gradual historical reification process active in the traditional Muslim understanding of Islam as a 'religious system' see Smith W.C. (1991) whose work, despite the fact it was undertaken decades ago, is still exceptionally relevant to contemporary discussions on Islam.
2. In the Qur'an quotations the chapter number is indicated first.
3. For an interesting work on the story structure of the Qur'an see Dundes, A. (2003).
4. The Prophet's role as educator is a crucial aspect of Islamic Education that requires a separate study. It is suffice to stress that the pedagogic practice of the Prophet is the Qur'anic educational model put into practice thus the Prophet is a role model (33:21) for Muslims to emulate. The Qur'an is keen on stressing the human qualities of the Prophet (3:159; 68:4; 41:6) rather than presenting him with a 'charismatic authority' that is usually taught to be an important element of prophecy in Judeo-Christian tradition. See, Blenkinsopp, J. (1996) ; Weber, M. (1952) and Chilton, B. and Neusner, J. (1999).
5. For a recent survey of classical Muslim educational thought see Günther, S. (2006)
6. For an interesting study on the nature of writing, orality and authority see Carr, D.M. (2005)

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