

## A review of Muslim schools in the Western Cape: a philosophical interlude

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The two international conferences on Islamic education which were held in Cape Town in September 1996 and June 1997 undoubtedly highlight the educational concerns of some Muslims in the Western Cape. A closer look at the rationales of the Islamic education conferences organised by Islamia College and the Islamic Unity Convention (IUC) respectively, suggests that change and transformation through action have been considered significant steps towards reshaping the Islamic education agenda of Muslims in South Africa.

Over 50 delegates from the United Kingdom, Malaysia, United States of America, Jordan, Egypt, India, Mauritius, Uganda and Botswana, as well as 80 South African delegates (notoriously absent were some prominent South African academics) attended the "sixth international" Islamic education conference organised by Islamia College. According to its organisers, the theme of this six-day conference, "from vision into action", would eventually produce "approved blueprints for 12 core school subjects for primary and secondary schools".

At the IUC conference, papers were delivered by Mahmoud Ayyub (USA), Wan Mohd Nur Wan Daud (Malaysia), Ali Afruz (Iran), Yaqub Zaki (Scotland), Alauddin Gharavi (Iran), and Habibul Haq Nadvi, Salman Nadvi, Yusef Waghid, Suleiman Dangor, Salie Abrahams and Ivan Abrahams, all of South Africa.

This review does not focus on whether the educational outcomes of these conferences will impact significantly on the practices and roles of Muslims in the Western Cape. Instead, it identifies five Islamic education "schools" and analyses the guiding principle or rationale which underpins their practices. Secondly, it attempts to show that this rationale is not always in keeping with the conceptual scheme of Islamic education. Finally, it demonstrates how this rationale manifested itself in the institutional practices of Muslims, giving rise to perpetual problems in Islamic education.

The rationale of Islamic education schools

Excluding mosques (masjid), Islamic education can be located in five areas: home-based schools (madaris), mosque-based madaris, state-subsidised Muslim schools, Muslim private schools and adult classes.

Home-based schools

Home-based schools continue to be the most popular in the Western Cape. In almost every area where Muslims find themselves, home-based madaris are controlled by the khalifah (teacher). The teacher has not always been trained effectively in Islamic education content or teaching methods, and mostly relies on information acquired from seminars, the dars (normally lectures at mosques), the khutbah (sermon) and the media, particularly the radio.

Rote learning is emphasised at these schools and pupils are required to memorise various invocations (dus), short chapters from the Qur'an, Prophetic sayings (Hadth), as well as basic concepts of Tauhd (Unity of God's existence), ablution, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. In fact, pupils' progress is assessed in terms of their prowess in recalling what they have memorised, as well as their ability to recite the Qur'an in a melodious style, that is, with *laghwa*. The khalifahs depend mostly on the meagre contributions made by the pupils. Usually these schools are not affiliated to an overarching body of madaris and most khalifahs enjoy an unchallenged and unchallenging authority.

Mosque-based schools

At the mosque-based madaris, which pupils mostly attend between three and six o'clock in the afternoon, pupils receive instruction in selected subjects, including Islamic history, ethics (Ahlq), jurisprudence (Fiqh), Tauhd, Qur'anic reading and Arabic. Some of the teachers at these schools have received minimal training in Islamic education. Noteworthy, however, is the involvement of several qualified teachers (who also happen to occupy full-time jobs at public schools). In addition to the curriculum which they study, pupils write at least two examinations during the year so that their progress may be assessed.

The lack of a common curriculum at these mosque-based madaris is not necessarily a concern, since diversity finds space within the conceptual scheme of Islamic education. However, the lack of a common core curriculum at these schools opens up the possibility for relativism in Islamic education in terms of which "anything goes". Moreover, the irrelevance of certain of the content of Islamic education, such as dated Fiqh issues, and the unwillingness of most madaris to establish effective inter-institutional co-operation, continue to pose serious challenges to the growth of Islamic education in the Muslim community.

#### State-subsidised Muslim schools

State-subsidised Muslim schools follow the curriculum prescribed by the Western Cape Education Department which makes provision for the teaching of Islamic studies and Arabic. However, Arabic is not profoundly studied as a subject at these schools and Islamic studies tends to be incorporated in the curriculum as a non-examination subject. The fact that Islamic Studies is not holistically incorporated into the curriculum suggests that the non-bifurcationist view, which does not regard Islamic knowledge and other school subjects as mutually exclusive, remains distant from curriculum development at these schools.

#### Muslim private schools

Muslim private schools have been established in the areas of Rylands, Mitchells Plain, Surrey Estate, Wetton and Parkwood with the aim of implementing the Islamisation agenda which gained momentum at the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Makkah in 1977. Most teachers at these schools have received training at South African institutions, with a strong minority, mostly in senior positions, having obtained an Islamic grounding at traditional Islamic institutions in the Middle East, North Africa and the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. These schools are mostly funded by Muslim business people, international investors and local communities. The curricula followed at these schools have strong "traditional" overtones.

#### Adult classes

Adult classes, usually conducted at mosques, offer refresher or elementary courses to adults in Qur'anic reading, Arabic, marriage, inheritance, fasting and pilgrimage (Haj). Included in this "school" of Islamic education are the numerous tasawwuf (S(f) thikr jam'at (congregations) who render invocations and litanies to advance their spiritual growth.

Usually these groups unquestioningly submit themselves to the authoritative role of the spiritual leader or guide (murshid), whom they consider to be an intercessor between God and themselves. To my mind, this unquestioning submission to the authority of the murshid on the part of congregants, some of whom are khalifahs in home-based schools, has profound implications for the nature of Islamic education in the home-based schools. The possibility exists that the lack of challenging and questioning evident at these schools can be traced back to the type of khalifah involvement in common tasawwuf practices.

What, then, is the rationale which underpins Islamic education at these "schools"? I would argue that all five "schools" of Islamic education are characterised by a degree of rigidity. Islamic education practices such as an emphasis on rote learning, ineffective teacher training, irrelevant content, bifurcation of knowledge, perceived superiority of "traditional sciences", passive learning and a lack of collegiality are all rooted in rigidity.

What is wrong with rigidity? Rigidity emphasizes the importance of only one absolute mode of thought which allows no space for creativity and flexibility. It leads to stultified thinking and the discouragement of negotiation and dialogue.

#### The conceptual scheme of Islamic education

Informed by the primary sources of Islamic education, the Qur'an and Hadth, Muslim scholars at the end of the third century identified several key concepts which ought to guide and shape Islamic education. These concepts, rich and sophisticated with nuance, include: *ibd* (creativity), *adab* ("proper place of things"), *shr* (collegiality), *ijtihad* (intellectual exertion), *hikmah* (wisdom), *haqq* (truth), *adl* (justice), *ilm* (knowledge), *tadabbur* (reflection) and *imn* (faith in fulfilling one's social responsibility).

In my view, these vital concepts are too often not accorded their central place in Islamic education practices. It is a lack of creativity that results in the inclusion in curricula of irrelevant aspects of Fiqh, thus stifling flexibility and innovation. It is the absence of adab from Islamic education practices that results in the bifurcation of knowledge into "traditional sciences" and "natural sciences", as if the "traditional sciences" were not scientific, and the "natural sciences" did not include the Divine element.

Moreover, the fact that teachers and institutions can operate outside the parameters of shr, evident from the lack of inter-institutional collaboration, accentuates the lack of leadership with sufficient resolve to reshape the Islamic education realm in the Western Cape.

#### Conclusion

It is my contention that the rationale of rigidity which seems to underlie many Islamic education practices in the Western Cape has to be modified. It is not enough to develop new textbooks, curricula and teaching methods, or to use the media to address weaknesses in current Islamic education provision.

I do not ignore the efforts of the Islamic College of South Africa (ICOSA) and Dar al-Arqam to produce personnel qualified for Islamic education provision. However, in order to address the conceptual confusion surrounding Islamic education provision, we need to focus our attention on establishing an institution of higher education with the capacity and resources to produce an Islamic education agenda which draws on the concepts of creativity, relevance and collegial responsibility. Only then will we produce the personnel who can tackle the current weaknesses in Muslim "schools".

#### Endnotes

1. I use "schools" as referring to modes of thought at various institutions.