



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Agreed Syllabi and Un-agreed Values: Religious Education and Missed Opportunities for Fostering Social Cohesion **Farid Panjwani**

Introduction

Think of a plural society not as one in which there is Babel of conflicting languages, but rather as one in which we each have to be bilingual. There is a first and public language of citizenship which we have to learn if we are to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationship: to family and group and traditions that underlie them (Jonathan Sacks, 1991, p. 66).

A multi-cultural society demands multi-lingual capacities. Both the intense multi-cultural context in which increasing numbers of people are living today and its demand for multi-linguality are in many respects new developments. While the pluralist nature of societies, both in the past and today, is undeniable, historically, barring some exceptions, this fact was deemed undesirable. The Medieval Christian notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, distinguishing between the “proper” and “heretical”, imply this. Similarly, in the history of Muslims, while there was an acknowledgment of diverse beliefs, people generally sought the one “true” belief. In most contexts, up until recently, monism, rather than pluralism was the cherished value (Berlin, 1998).

Pluralism, a positive attitude towards diversity, becomes important in a world where there is a constant encounter with and exposure to “the others” who cannot be ignored, obliterated or assimilated. A host of developments in modern times, entailing heightened interactions among cultures, have led to political, cultural and social conditions that have made pluralism a positive value in many contexts. It exists alongside other values: some of which, such as monism, may be

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.





to by the Shi‘a Imams are accepted as genuine or authentic (Newman, 2000). Only one syllabus (Somerset) mentions the Shi‘a interpretation of the notion of Imam; the rest simply assume a Sunni understanding and use the word Imam to refer to the prayer leader of the mosque. The Shi‘as are not the only group that have additional sources of authority. The Sufis have a system of authority that is based on teacher–disciple relationship (Schimmel, 1975). Thus, in reality, the institution of authority in Muslim contexts is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon, yet it is not presented in such a manner to students of RE.

The discussion about the nature of the Qur’anic revelation is another example of the way in which Islam is presented as a monolithic faith. In almost all the books there are statements such as, “Muslims believe that Allah’s message was revealed to Muhammad, in Arabic, by the angel Jibril (Gabriel)” (Knight, 1995, p. 4). This is more a reflection of how many Muslims today think of the revelation; it is not a belief shared by all Muslims. There is a rich literature on the nature of revelation which shows that the positions on this matter vary from those who understand it to be a verbal transmission in Arabic from God through the angel to the Prophet, to those who believe revelation to be divine inspirations which travelled through the mind of the Prophet and emerged as the Qur’an (Rahman, 1966).

While the above two examples pertain to theology, the next two relate to culture. Here too we find a lack of appreciation of diversity. The architecture of the mosques around the world, for instance, is shaped by local cultural and environmental factors. Yet, except for a passing reference in one book to the fact that mosque architecture reflects local cultures (Cooper, 2004), mosques are always depicted as having a *minaret* and a dome. In fact, these two are by no means necessary features of a mosque. Around the world there are mosques that are based on local architectural traditions and artistic motifs. In my teaching, I often use a slideshow (attached) by the Pakistani based architect, Mukhtar Husain, which portrays this



not only irreconcilable across religions but also place religious beliefs in direct confrontation with scientific and historic findings. A non-literal (cognitive or non-cognitive) approach to language use in religious contexts can expose pupils to the possibility of multiple interpretations without losing respect for their own interpretation. Is this variety reflected in the presentation of Islam in schools?

Unfortunately, the syllabi and textbooks examined portray only, or mainly, a literalist understanding of various ideas associated with Muslim beliefs and practices. For instance, angels are defined as “intelligent beings who have specific tasks and duties to perform”. Apart from the unmistakable modern-day bureaucratic parallels, such literalist presentations obliterate other Sufi, Sunni, Shi’a and philosophical understandings which do not see angels as physical entities. Muslim philosophers, for example, understood angels (*malaika*, in Arabic) as spiritual beings and Sufis often associated angels with human reason (Schimmel, 1993).

Descriptions of the notion of the hereafter in Muslim contexts are another example of the literalist approach. A physical notion of heaven and hell is predominant in syllabi and textbooks. This, of course, is not the only way in which the descriptions of the hereafter were understood in Muslim history. In his *Risalat al-Ghufran* (Epistle of Salvation), Abu Alaa al-Maari (d. 1057), the famous Syrian poet, in fact makes fun of those who understand heaven and hell in a physical sense, taking the relevant Qur’anic verses literally. In only one textbook is the possibility of a symbolic understanding mentioned: “All the descriptions of the after-life, including such things as youth, beauty, dress, food, and so on are intended to be understood symbolically since in eternal life the faithful are not subjected to physical limitations at all” (Maqsood, 1995, p. 43). Similarly, descriptions of *Mi’raj*, the event marking the ascent of Prophet Muhammad from Makkah Jerusalem and then to heaven, are also presented as a physical occurrence. Again, Maqsood is the only writer who at least acknowledges the possibility of a symbolic interpretation: she notes that the event of The Night of Ascent “was a miraculous journey, it is not clear whether the event was supposed to have really happened physically, or was a vision” (p. 14). Muslims, in fact, have understood the event in many different ways. For instance, *Mi’raj* has been seen as a symbol of the highest spiritual experience attainable not only by the Prophet but by others as well (Schimmel, 1993).

The literalist approach is so prevalent in textbooks on Islam that one author claims that “Muslims feel little need for symbols in their religion” (Egan, 2002, p. 16). In the teacher’s guide, the author first writes that, “The use of signs and symbols plays an important role in the everyday lives of most people. This is especially true of most religious people.” He then goes on to say that, “Islam as a religion has little need of symbols. This is because Muslims are happy to fulfil their duty by submitting themselves to the will of Allah and trusting him alone.” While many Muslims today may agree with this statement, the historical fact is that symbolic approaches have always been an important part of Muslim understanding. Some Sufis have gone so far as to claim that the entire universe is nothing but a symbol pointing to the “really real”, that is, Allah. Even rituals were



He said, “No.” I said to him, “When you went to pray at the station of Abraham, Did you surrender your inner self to God, in truth, faith and utter certitude?”
He said, “No.”

...

Then I said, “In that case, my friend, you have made no hajj, You have not become a dweller in the station of self-effacement, You have merely gone to Makkah, seen it, and come back.” (quoted in Hunsberger, 2000)

Historical/humanist versus Absolutist Approach

Religions are not fixed and static entities: “One of the important insights that have emerged from the study of religion as a historical and cultural reality is the realisation that religions change; they are not timeless, eternal essences” (Ernst, 2003, p. 50). The meanings religious people give to their practices, values, norms and institutions are the result of the creative and dialectic relationship between them and their environment. The increasing activities in areas such as inter-faith dialogues are clear indicators that, as always, religions are on the move. Do we find this historically informed approach to religious ideas, institutions, and practices in the textbooks and syllabi?

The picture, sadly, is unimpressive. Many of the examples given above are pertinent here. I will thus provide one more example. Almost all the syllabi and books discuss “Islamic” law. The Arabic term used for it is *Shariah*. This is unhistorical. The *Shariah* refers to an attitude towards life based on ethical ideals. The appropriate term for law in historical Muslim contexts is *fiqh*. Nevertheless, what is today called *Shariah* evolved over several centuries. While the Qur’an and the model of the Prophet provided the main sources of law, for the Sunni Muslims at least, local practices, common sense and public good all had their share in its evolution (Rahman, 1966). This historical process is hardly present in textbooks, resulting in an essentialised notion of law. In modern period, the question of the status of *Shariah* has been passionately debated. Yet, only Maqsood (1995) refers to the different contemporary positions of reformers, traditionalists and radicals on the relevance of *Shariah* today. But, neither she nor any other writer discusses the historical evolution of law in Muslim contexts. If students are unfamiliar with the historical nature of *Shariah* and the contemporary debates concerning its significance, they cannot be blamed for thinking that its teachings are eternal, leading to difficulties in reconciling tradition with the demands of the ever-changing human condition.

The lack of a historical approach in textbooks leads to the oversight of an important contribution that RE could make to combating stereotypes and strangeness associated with “the other” by “throwing into relief the interconnections, the socio-cultural exchanges, and the mutual influence” across the cultures spawned by the Muslim, Jewish and Christian people (Kaul-Seidman *et al.*, 2003). One well known example of such exchanges, though hardly mentioned in school books, is the intellectual traffic from Greece to Baghdad and Cordoba, and from there to Toledo (Fakhry, 1997). Such exchanges show that in their own traditions, people were grappling ultimately with human concerns. Diversity of images of afterlife across religions, underpinned by shared existential concerns is another example of the universalistic dimension underlying particular religious traditions (MacGregor, 1992).

While there is no dearth of humanistic trends in the histories of Muslims, they are hard to find in the textbooks. In this regard, a significant omission, conspicuous given the much emphasised



notion of spiritual development in RE (QCA, 2000; Thatcher, 1999), is the discussion of mysticism or Sufism, as it is called in Mus



Politicisation of RE Content

RE is currently taught in all schools in England and Wales. In the last century, the two most important pieces of legislation concerning RE were promulgated in 1944 and 1988. The first one paved the way for transforming RE in community schools (and some Church schools) both in terms of approach and content (Cush, 1998). In the second of these Acts, overt Christian aims “gave way to more general aims that stressed the importance of religion as a factor in understanding culture or in helping young people to find their own meaning in life” (Barnes and Kay, 2002). The move in fact was an acknowledgement of important socio-religious trends that were taking place in the broader context of changes since 1945: the large scale arrival of immigrants, recasting British society into a multi-religious mould; the decline in religious practice, particularly church attendance (Kay, 1997); and new findings within educational psychology that challenged the traditional approach to RE (Goldman, 1965). Today, while most schools of religious character are allowed to have a confessional approach to RE, community schools are legally required to offer non-confessional RE.

However, the trend has not been without complications. The community schools, while required to provide a non-confessional religious education, are also obliged by law to have “collective worship” or “school prayers” that is confessional in nature. Further, RE is not part of the National Curriculum and its curriculum is developed in a manner different from that of other subjects. The syllabus is arrived at by taking account of the religious views of the local population (DFE, 1994). Under the 1988 educational legislation, each local educational authority is required to



sound historical approach would take full account of the beliefs and practices of communities. However, it would do this throughout the history of the tradition.

As part of the case study above, it was mentioned that a strand of ethical thought exists within Muslim history that saw ethics as objective in character and discernable through human reason without the aid of revelation. This strand, as noted above, was represented by the *Mu'tazila* as well as several Muslim philosophers. Today, however, neither the *Mu'tazila* nor the philosophers are part of the general Muslim consciousness and one has to approach scholarly works on Islam to learn about them (Fakhry, 1997; Sharif, 1963-66). It is thus not likely that a syllabus designed through the consensus of religious communities will reflect such points of view. This is where "the particular skills and understanding that religious studies can bring to religious education have not been fully explored or developed in the context of the school curriculum", leaving it vulnerable to powerful criticism (Baumfield, 2004). Though this paper has focused on the teaching of Islam, similar questions about the content of RE are being raised about other religions as well (Doble, 2005).

What has been the dominant response of the RE professionals to this politicisation of content? Many appear to have adjusted to it and have consequently focused more on pedagogy of RE than the content. Furthermore, the RE content, given that it is based on the community's self-perception, which often sees openness to other religious traditions as fraught with dangers, seeks to highlight the unique and distinctive within each tradition. This has contributed to RE's stress on diversity and difference, often at the cost of under-stressing the commonalities. However, as noted above, social cohesion in a plural society needs simultaneous recognition of differences and commonalities. Thus, both these responses - excessive focus of pedagogy and diversity - need to be reconsidered.

RE's Emphasis on Pedagogy and Diversity

Proponents of RE as a contributor to social cohesion have argued that it does so through several means. Firstly, by helping pupils develop skills to analyse situations and to engage in open-minded discussions, RE fosters attitudes that are necessary for negotiations in a pluralist society. Secondly, by exposing students to more than one religion, RE facilitates mutual understanding and promotes respect and tolerance. Thirdly, RE provides opportunities to reflect upon existential questions and limit-situations that concern all human beings and are claimed to be at the foundations of religions.

It is to be noted that these arguments are pedagogical in nature. In fact, pedagogy rather than content appears to be the centre of attention in the recent discourse on RE. The stance of Baumfield (2003) that the "key issue is not so much *what* we should teach as *how* we should teach RE" is typical in this regard (p. 174).

An analysis of several issues of the *British Journal of Religious Education* (BJRE), a leading RE



- Policy and administration
- Classroom experiences
- Denominational RE
- Content of RE in schools
- Others (Analysis of BJRE, relationship between RE and Religious Studies)

It was found that about a third of the articles were on theory, whether curricular or pedagogical. Next in number were the articles concerning models and methods pertaining to research on RE. There were only eight articles that were concerned in any substantial manner with the content of RE in schools. For example, Homan (2000) deals with the use of artefacts in RE classrooms. Similarly, Bauser and Poole (2002) explore the presentation of the relationship between science and religion in the RE curriculum.

Perhaps one of the reasons RE teaching remains much weaker than in other humanities subjects (Ofsted, 2003) has to do with the fact that the pedagogy and content of RE have different philosophical underpinnings; the former seeking to promote openness towards diversity and the latter trying to satisfy religious communities.



note that they are apparently very different to oneself. However, no two individuals are the same. What enables some interactions to become friendships while others remain at lesser levels of interaction? Without ruling out the complexities involved, it is proposed that close relations are marked not only by the differences but also by a sense, even an inarticulate one, of the commonalities. It is this deeper unity that allows for a comfortable co-existence with differences at other levels. The line between difference as a source of strength and as a source of conflict is very thin. Fruitful co-existence needs an appreciation that beneath the differences, there are commonalities.

Historically, belief systems, language, blood relations, colour or ideology have provided this sense of deeper ‘metaphysical’ unity across divisions. Today, while they continue to be important unifying bonds, increasingly, and rightly, they are being deemed as insufficient, and in some contexts detrimental. But, this only underlines the existence of and the need for human universals. To some, the notion of human rights provides such deeper unity. Others have sought to ground it in ‘modularity of mind’ (Fodor, 1983). Still others are not certain that we can find such a bond. Within the context of religious diversity, people have advocated a stress on spirituality rather than religiosity as a possible way forward. Perhaps we are living in a transitional phase where older bonds are not sufficient and new bonds have not yet emerged fully, but are needed. Thus, even though there may be some truth in the fashionable position that today we do not have common values, there are some procedural values on which many people agree and which have the potential to lead to the creation of a much needed set of common substantial values in due course. Although some may disagree, there is a strong case for the view that the celebration of difference should not be seen as an end in itself for RE. To appreciate difference, it must be transcended by a sense of deeper unity across cultures– a sense of human universals.

Conclusion

While the legal move from an essentially Christian instruction to a multi-religious education is nothing short of a paradigm shift, there is a need to make another shift. It is to adopt the educational spirit in the practice of RE as well, especially with regard to its content.

Increasingly, educators are noting the inherent tension implicit within the very phrase ‘religious education’ and are switching to alternative conceptions such as ‘religion in education’ and ‘education about religion’. While this semantic shift is underway, it is argued that only when the actual content of RE reflects this change may the underlying tensions be overcome. As shown above, as far as the teaching of Islam is concerned, the content of RE is such that it leaves out much that ought to be part of ‘education about religion’ and includes much that should not be.

RE professionals must fight for an educational approach to the content of RE and must themselves give more attention to it.

An educationally sound content will highlight the internal diversity, dialogue and change within a religion. Thus, students would find that the languages they already belong to have deep links with the public language they need to learn. Such an approach will also bring out the symbolic and humanistic trends within religions, which can help them in both respecting as well as transcending differences across religions. The approach, in short, brings us back to Berlin’s point, namely that of human beings having both common as well as different values because of which we can relate to people across cultures and societies.



Students need both, instruction and education in religion, but it is imperative to delineate the respective roles of families and communities and those of schools and other public spaces. While students should acquire “second languages ... in the context of families and communities” schools should be a place where they learn the first language of public and civic discourse. In fact, as far as community schools are concerned, it is suggested that the term ‘religious education’ be abandoned and replaced with ‘education about religions’.

References

- Abou el-Fadl, K. (2001). *Conference of the Books: the Search for Beauty in Islam*. (Lanham, University Press of America).
- Barber, B. (1995). *Jihad vs McWorld*. (New York, Ballantine Press).
- Barnes, and Kay, W. (2002). *Religious Education in England and Wales: Innovations and Reflections*. (Leicester, RTSF).
- Baumfield, V. (2003). Democratic RE: Preparing young people for citizenship, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 25(3), 173-184.
- Baumfield, V. (2004). Editorial: The place of religious education in the school curriculum, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 26(2), 115-117.
- Bauser, J. and Poole, M. (2002). Science-and-religion in the agreed syllabuses –an investigation and some suggestions, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 25(1), 18-32.
- Bell, D. (2005). *A Speech Made to the Hansard Society* (London, Ofsted). <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubs.displayfile&id=3821&type=pdf> (Accessed 6 May 2005).
- Berlin, I. (1998). My intellectual path, *New York Review of Books*, 45(8), (14 May).
- Bowker, J. (1996). World religions: The boundaries of belief and unbelief. In B.Gates (Ed.) *Freedom and Authority in Religions and Religious Education* (London, Cassell).
- Brown, D. (1991). *Human Universals*. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press).
- Connolly, W. (1999). *Why I am not a Secularist*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).
- Cooling, T. (1997). *Teaching Religion: Fifty Years of Religious Education in England and Wales*. (Exeter, University of Exeter Press).
- Cooper, A. (2004). *The Facts about Islam*. (London, Hodder Wayland).
- Cush, D. (1998). The relationship between Religious Studies, Religious Education And Theology: Big brother, little sister and the clerical uncle? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(3), 137-145.
- Dennett, S. (1988). *A Case for Christian Education*. (Bradford, Harvestime).



Stoughton).

Kay, W. (1997). Belief in God in Great Britain 1945-1996: Moving the Scenery Behind Classroom RE, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 20(1), 28-41.

Kaul-Seidman, L., Nielsen, J. and Vinzent, M. (2003). *European Identity and Cultural Pluralism: Judaism, Christianity and Islam in European Curricula* (Bad Homburg, Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung).

Kensington and Chelsea. (1999). *The Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*. (London, Kensington and Chelsea).

Knight, K. (1995). *Islam*. (Hove, Wayland).

Lewisham County. (2001). *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education: Learning through Faiths*. (London, Lewisham Education).

London Borough of Hackney. (2000). *Living Religions: the Religious Education agreed Syllabus*. (Hackney, Education Committee).

MacGregor, G. (1992). *Images of Afterlife: Beliefs from Antiquity to Modern Times*. (New York, Paragon House).

Maqsood, W. (1995). *Islam*. (Oxford, Heinemann).

Newman, A. (2000). *The Formative Making of Twelver Shi'ism: Hadith as Discourse between Qum and Baghdad*. (Richmond, Surrey, Curzon).

Ofsted (2003). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools*. (London, The Stationery Office).

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2000). *Religious Education: Non-Statutory Guidelines on RE*. (London, QCA).

Rahman, F. (1966). *Islam*. (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson).

Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Runnymede Trust (2000). *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain – The Parekh Report*. (London, Profile Books).

Sacks, J. (1991). *Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*. (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson).

Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina).

Schimmel, A. (1993).



Journal of Islamic Studies, 16(1), 35-61.

Sharif, M.M. (1963-66). *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz).

Somerset (2004). *Awareness, Mystery and Value: North Somerset Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*.