

Islamic Education in the United States: An Overview of Issues, Problems and Possible Approaches

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This article, which I intend to be one of a series, will provide analysis of major issues and problems arising out of attempts to implement Islamic educational alternatives to American public schooling. The discussion begins by offering a brief overview of the current dilemma—a triumvirate of historical, theoretical and practical enigmas—confronting Muslim schoolmen. A primary question that is common to Muslim-American school planners is scrutinized through a sub-set analysis focussing on some relevant and critical concerns to Muslim educators. From this starting point, future installments in this series will look at practical cases that are representative of contemporary efforts in alternative Muslim school planning, design and implementation.

Where We are

Conservative estimates of the number of Muslims in North America use one million as an approximate figure, two-thirds of whom reside in or near the major urban areas of the United States.¹ Within this multi-ethnic population—800,000 being immigrants, the remainder a rapidly growing number of indigenous converts—there is a strong cultural commonality and identity: It is Islam. Islam is a comprehensive code of life that is expressed in the cultural, economic and social organization of

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¹These figures are projected estimates of data collected by Abbas Ali Khan, *An Estimate of the Muslim Population of the World*, Takoma Park, Maryland: Muslim Students Association of the U.S. and Canada, 1969, p. 5. See also, James Khalil's article in *Newsweek*, July 1960, p. 59. Notably, the above figures from both Mr. Ali Khan and Mr. Khalil are more than a decade old; moreover, neither of these sources has made a concentrated, visible effort to tally the large numbers of indigenous Muslims in the nation's Urban Center, i.e., New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington, Ft. Wayne or Los Angeles, to cite a few.

its followers. The tenacity with which Muslims tend to cling to their Islamic culture in the face of adverse cultural influences is reflected in its survival, even revival, under colonialism. This steadfast adherence to Islam is, likewise, a tendency of the faithful in America.

Education has a vital connection with the maintenance of culture and it is natural that Muslim schoolmen should concern themselves with the role of education in perpetuating Islamic culture in this country. Issues that have surfaced in response to this concern pose a serious challenge to those relatively few Muslim schoolmen charged with the responsibility to resolve them. It seems certain that the creative input of Muslim planners and administrators, provided they are given the proper tools to ply their crafts, will dramatically influence the future status of Islam in America.

Some Historical Issues

Western literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally depicts Muslims in a demeaning manner that reflects religious and Euro-centric tendencies of the time. Islam was often cast as an heretical religious doctrine with a dangerously aggressive posture with respect to Christianity. Muslims were represented as lesser categories of men, a poor and destitute colored species who were contrasted with the supposedly superior attributes of the colonial powers.

Beginning in the 1930's, and continuing until the early 1960's, the reactionary activities of black nationalists in the United States, posing as Muslim cults, served to further distort the reality of Islam while creating an embarrassing and often threatening dilemma for authentic practitioners of the Islamic faith. Over the last decade orthodox Muslims in America—both immigrants and native converts to the faith—have grown in number. Improved communications between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans have done much to correct biased, stereotypic images of Muslim people. Recent events in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and other Muslim nations whose interests are tied to those of the United States have increased public awareness of the issues and people in these areas. While in some respects this attention has increased understanding, media coverage has also reinforced traditional bias.² As an overall result, however, the growing Muslim consciousness in this country is now viewed more respectfully by non-Muslim observers. At the same time, the difficult work of establishing Islam continues in scattered communities around the nation; Muslim institutional development has begun in American and education is the vital link in the developing network.

²Edward Said, "Hiding Islam", *Harpers*, January 1981, pp. 25-32.

Theory

Many of the goals of public schooling, together with certain assumptions about curriculum, conflict with the goals, principles and cultural values common to traditional Muslim communities. The conflict builds commensurate to the degree that individuals in Muslim communities insist on adherence to orthodox practices in their daily lives. For example, omitting Arabic—the language of the Holy Qur'an and Islamic ritual prayer—from the public school syllabus is not particularly disturbing to the Muslim inclined to an assimilationist view of himself and family. Yet, for the Muslim who values his culture and elects to struggle to maintain it, such an omission, should it occur in a school where Muslims attend in significant numbers could be viewed as culturally vindictive. From the latter perspective the absence of prayer in school, the decidedly Western interpretation of history and the social studies, the highly competitive and materialistic school subculture, and the overall orientation of the public school goals and activities around a protean Judeo-Christian standard are, in combination, a challenge and an effort to long established Islamic educational ideas.

Muslim schoolmen realize the importance of marshalling the development of full-time, alternative educational facilities which work to achieve educational, social and cultural goals that are valuable to Muslims. Islamic school theory rests on concepts that allow for individual achievement within defined cultural limits. The assumption is that the sum of all possible acquired skills, knowledge and resources are valuable only to the degree they enhance the communities' ability to serve God. This point of view suggests the inevitability of educational planning approaches more closely aligned to communal and spiritual goals, and similarly, the ordering of planning criteria in like fashion. Such institutions have the potential to positively affect the development of Muslim children—and Islam—in this country. To meet this long perceived need, particularly if a truly Islamic school program is a conscious goal, Muslim school planners are inextricably bound to follow the precepts and criteria established by Islamic Law. This unique integration of religious jurisprudence with institutional development required the formulation of an equally unique set of planning imperatives. The particulars of these imperatives as well as the documentation and analysis of attendant school issues which stem from the attempt to create them are bedrock concerns in planning for Muslim educational autonomy.

Every dimension of Muslim educational planning, development and implementation must acknowledge and hold fast to the fundamental principles of Islam contained in the *Shari'ah*, or Islamic Law. These principles are, after all, the basic elements of Islam. The depth and scope of these principles may vary in relevance and compatibility to traditional western school notions. However, it is in the practice of the

mandatory behaviors which result from Muslim belief that the dichotomy between Muslim and American assumptions about learning and achievement is clearly manifest. Muslims struggle to adjust Islamic values to western cultural patterns in the name of co-existence. But the compromise of belief and behavior with dominant cultural themes can mark the first step along the road to assimilation. The orthodox Muslim community seeks to counter this process. The method of intervention is the disciplined application of the *Shari'ah* within the context of an educational alternative to public schools.

Ironically, although the influence of public schooling is seen as an increasingly dysfunctional element in Muslim society, efforts to introduce an Islamic alternative have hardly corrected the situation. Muslim educators are a small group of professional neophytes who find themselves faced with the ominous task of constructing the foundations of a Muslim school system in a country that has no clear Islamic heritage. It is very difficult for these fledgling institutions to adhere to the *Shari'ah* and at the same time be versatile enough to adapt to the consistent demands of new knowledge and social functions which are basic to a continually evolving American ethos. Because no educational precedents exist, efforts to nurture purely Islamic value references within this secular society have had limited, sometime disastrous results.

The Current Practice

A variety of approaches aimed at augmenting the public school experience have been tried by many Muslim communities in this country. It now seems obvious that weekend schools, Qur'anic schools, correspondence courses or other measures and methods of supplementary education will not accomplish the combined levels of academic proficiency and cultural stability that Muslims seek for their progeny. Exigencies of American society will ultimately demand that Muslims attain excellence in the modern disciplines—including science and technology—as well as in traditionally Islamic branches of knowledge and practice. Additionally, it is apparent that the planning, design and implementation of full-time Muslim schools will require the creation of reliable technical literature to support the skills and commitment of competent educators. It is our premise that in order to achieve a successful educational synthesis of the type hinted at by the various models already in use, a clearly defined planning methodology is needed. This methodology, essentially a conceptual framework of ordered planning imperatives, is derived from an analysis of central issues, problems and approaches that Muslim schoolmen should consider in developing Muslim schools. The development of a structured method of educational planning in the Islamic ambience is a prerequisite for serious attempts to finally establish a Muslim system of education in this country.

The Focus

Although the causative factors of what amounts to an Islamic revival in our time are quite complex, the basic goals of the movement are clear: Muslims intend to practice Islam in America, and to establish an Islamic society which is served by institutions that function under the pale of Islam. Educational systems occupy a critical position in any viable society. Close examination of both current and past trends in American Muslim communities show the disruptive impact of public schooling on Islamic culture. Research designed to initiate an educational alternative for Muslim communities is vital and long over-due.

A primary question for Muslim school planners, is as follows: What are the issues, problems and approaches to developing school projects that a Muslim school planner should consider or be aware of in developing Muslim schools in the United States? To address this question it is appropriate to investigate the following set of sub-questions:

- A. What is the historical context of the educational issues confronting Muslim school planners in the United States?
- B. What are the theoretical issues—derived from the nature of Islamic Law and its implications for the schooling process—that apply in establishing a Muslim school in the United States?
- C. What practical issues have surfaced as a result of past and current attempts to establish successful Muslim schools?
- D. What are the central problems and constraints that apply and should be considered prior to Muslim school planning?
- E. What does this suggest as to what alternative styles, remedies and approaches might be most appropriate?

Any serious response to these questions ought to begin by identifying, through the analysis of data clarifying the historical, theoretical and practical issues operant in select Muslim communities, a number of related planning approaches and imperatives that are appropriate in developing successful school projects. At present, the absence of a useful set of pedagogical and planning principles, applicable from program conception to maturity, explains the wide variance which current efforts display with respect to determining specific means and ends. Too often, the only common thread which joins together and characterizes many ostensibly Islamic enterprises is the fact that the participants are Muslims. Properly, even the most tentative application of traditional Islamic principles has the effect of discouraging a radical departure from what may be called acceptable Muslim school practice. But a pedagogical basis for continued planning and development is conspicuously absent. As a result, many Muslim school projects are autonomous mutants that either function or fail in a vacuum without the

benefit of coordinated research into the complexities of developing Muslim systems of education in this country.

There are very few studies available in the area of domestic school planning in the Islamic context. There is no widely circulated, qualitative reference work of any direct use to native born Muslims entering into the planning and management of Islamically-based educational ventures. As a result, many Muslim school efforts rely on the sum of accrued experiences of the people involved. Unfortunately, subjective observations may not consistently reflect objective reality. In such cases faulty assumptions and conclusions are carried over to new projects with predictably harmful consequences.

Forthcoming articles in this series will address the current need for studious inquiry into Muslim school planning and, in turn, investigate the positive aspects and the constraints inherent in existing models. The documentation of common planning foibles and suggested remedies should weigh heavily against the continued duplication of error in the design and development of future projects.