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## **Including the religious viewpoints and experiences of Muslim students in an environment that is both plural and secular**

### **1. Background**

Concern and controversy about the education of young English Muslims has been a continuing narrative in the educational world and a recurring media story for the last twenty years and more. There was a flurry of interest in late 1980s and the 1990s when it was being debated whether or not an act should be passed permitting state-maintained Muslim schools organised along the same lines as existing Church schools and Jewish schools. The particular needs of Muslim children, and the perceived inadequacies in the handling of these needs in the state-maintained sector, were advanced in support of such schools (Sarwar, 1991; Akhtar 1993). Fears of the segregation of society along religious lines were expressed in opposition. The largest teachers' union in England, the National Union of Teachers, has consistently held this position in relation to faith affiliated schools generally. The case for Muslim schools was finally won when in 1997 under a newly elected Labour government, a number of Muslim schools joined the maintained sector, but the Muslim question in the English education system did not go away. Ten years later, only 1,770 Muslim school children in England attended maintained Muslim schools out of an estimated population of 376,340 Muslim children (DCSF, 2007). The vast majority still attend schools without a faith foundation (community schools) and it is known that a sizeable number attend church schools, though the numbers of Muslim children that do have not been recorded<sup>1</sup>. Spokespersons from the Muslim community still express their concern that the needs of their children are not being fully met within non-Muslim schools and have taken initiatives to influence schools and education authorities to do so (Muslim Educational Trust website). Sometimes, particularly at a local, individual school level, these have been couched as

demands occasionally (though infrequently) accompanied by the withdrawal of children from particular educational and school activities such as visits to places of worship, parties, musical performances, and some school trips<sup>2</sup>. Other initiatives have taken the form of guidance and adopted a tone of co-operation, supporting the schools as they seek to understand and respond to their Muslim pupils' religion. Particularly significant here is the information and guidance for schools produced in 2007 by the Muslim Council of Britain,<sup>3</sup> *Towards Greater Understanding: Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils in State Schools*.

Another reason for the persistence of the Muslim education question is a concern that has greater priority for education professionals than observance of religious practices, the serious underachievement of children and young people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi heritage, and, more recently, of Somali and Turkish heritage groups. In 2004 the Office for National Statistics reported that 33% of British Muslims of working age had no qualifications, the highest proportion of any religious group in the country. They also had the highest rates of unemployment and poorest health. These figures combined with the low academic achievement of Muslim pupils are naturally of particular concern to those Muslim communities directly affected who appear to be caught in a cycle of economic and educational disadvantage. They are also of grave concern to educational professionals and government agencies. A number of official reports and guidance have been produced to investigate the issues further and seek strategies for improvement (DfES, 2007; Ofsted, 2004; Richardson & Wood 2004). The recognition and celebration of Muslim students' religion and culture is frequently advanced as a strategy to engage them in school life and learning by making them feel they belong and are valued (Coles, 2004; Muslim Council of Britain, 2007).

The climate of the times has kept Muslim young people in the forefront of public consciousness through the early years of this century with urban riots involving Muslim (and other) youths in cities in northern England in 2001, the impact of 9/11, the subsequent wars and vociferous opposition to these and an increase in terrorist activity, including the London bomb attacks of July 2005 perpetrated by ‘home-grown’ Muslims. Muslim boys in particular have become ‘hot topics’ of social and educational debate. Louise Archer’s study is one of several that reports how young Muslim males are becoming identified with global terrorism, fundamentalism and urban unrest, and Muslim schoolboys with underachievement and problematic classroom behaviour (Archer, 2003, pp. 1-2). Philip Lewis’s book on young British Muslims highlights how localised the problems of Muslim youth are within Britain. Low educational achievement and social alienation are more of a concern among young Muslims in Birmingham, Bradford and Burnley than in Muslim communities in other English towns and cities (Lewis, 2008).

A theme running through commentaries on the instances of urban unrest mentioned above, and investigated in reports sponsored by the Home Office (2001a; 2001b), was the segregation of communities in these northern towns, frequently encapsulated in the neat phrase ‘parallel lives’. Minority communities have tended to gravitate towards particular districts within English towns and cities and in these areas the local school population might be 80% or more of one ethnic and religious group with little contact with young people of other cultures. This segregation of many Muslim communities from the indigenous white population, related concerns about the radicalisation of British Muslim youth and a rise in Islamophobia<sup>4</sup> among other sectors of the population, have informed debates about education in a plural society and given added urgency to the education for citizenship agenda. This on the one hand promotes respect for the variety of community cultures and their inclusion

within the school as a way of challenging racism and stereotypes, and on the other is increasingly concerned to develop among all the nation's children a sense of a shared British identity. To give added enforcement to the requirements to educate for citizenship, the Education and Inspection Act 2006 (c.40) placed a duty on school governing bodies to promote community cohesion within their schools and on school inspectors to report their progress in doing this. Increasingly, however, another agenda linked to community cohesion, but with a particular concern with combating extremism and terrorism in society, has entered thinking about the education of Muslim children. As part of a Preventing Violent Extremism action plan launched by the government in 2007, a school toolkit has been produced to help teachers identify and support 'pupils who may be vulnerable to violent extremism' (DCSF, 2008). In 2009 a significant government grant was awarded to the Religious Education Council to design and implement a programme training teachers to combat such tendencies and promote harmonious relations. Responses to these government initiatives are mixed. Some Muslims feel strongly that this trend, by targeting the Muslim community, is damaging rather than improving community relations. Such views were voiced in a recent paper produced by An-Nisa Society, a Muslim women's organisation (Khan, 2009).

In spite of attempts to develop schools as places of inter communal harmony and goodwill, there have been a few highly publicised instances of a hardening of attitudes around the accommodation of Islamic practice. Although the British tradition of multiculturalism means the wearing of religious symbols in English schools has not in the past generated the heated debates experienced in some European states, the last couple of years have seen controversies, court cases and a good deal of media attention about, and public interest in, the wearing of the Islamic *niqāb* and *jilbāb* in school by a teaching assistant and pupil respectively.

An increase in publicly funded schools of a religious character (popularly known as ‘faith schools’) in the Blair years under the ‘academies’ scheme<sup>5</sup>, and the government endorsement of the principle (not always possible to apply in practice) that parents should have the right to send their children to a ‘faith school’, have generated further discussion on the place of religion in schools that do not have a religious character. Two very different approaches have been proposed, neither from Muslim perspectives. David Hargreaves as an influential voice in Tony Blair’s 1997 government policies, being Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority at the time, recommended the expansion of ‘faith schools’ within the state system. Religious schools with their own distinct ethos would be the place where largely homogeneous faith communities could transmit a shared religious and moral culture while in the remaining ‘secular’ schools religious education would be replaced by the ‘public language of citizenship’ (Jackson, 2003). Effectively he was suggesting a clear demarcation between the religious and the secular in English education. This would constitute a departure from the historical position whereby religion has a place within all state-maintained schools through compulsory religious education (RE) of an inclusive and open nature, and through daily acts of ‘collective worship’.

In March 2008, at the annual conference of the country’s major teacher union, the National Union of Teachers, an alternative model was offered that caught the attention of the media (Frean, 2008; Curtis, 2008; Pato, 2008). The NUT general secretary, Steve Sinnott, suggested that state school managers help reduce the demand for ‘divisive faith schools’, to which the union is strongly opposed, by providing opportunities within the school for pupils of faith to engage in worship and instruction led and carried out by religious leaders (imams, rabbis, priests) in their own faith tradition. This suggestion accords with the views of some Muslim

organisations (for example the position paper produced by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in 2004, 5.5.8), and there are similar arrangements for worship in a small minority of schools. However, the model is in general contrary to the English tradition of unaffiliated, non-denominational and multi faith RE. The suggestion was vigorously opposed by the Association of School and College leaders,<sup>6</sup> on account of head teachers' fears of extremist influences in their schools. Neither of these proposals led to corresponding changes in the schools but they are part of a rethinking of the present relationship between maintained schools and religious faith.

The question of 'faith schools', evidence of underachievement and social inequality, the influence of global events, concerns for community cohesion and homeland security have all contributed to keeping the education of Muslim children on the agenda. All are controversial issues with a variety of interests involved. They have also been approached with a variety of perspectives, positions and emphases. Reading through the Muslim literature (and literature advancing the Muslim case<sup>7</sup>), over the last thirty years, it appears that the emphasis varies between a focus on practical cultural and religious needs such as prayer facilities, dress codes, dietary requirements, the use of musical instruments, the intermingling of girls and boys (Sarwar, 1991; Akhtar, 1993; Muslim Council of Britain, 2007), and a more theologically grounded perspective that stresses the centrality of God to Islamic conceptions of the nature of knowledge, the development of the person, and goals of education (Halstead, 1986; Ashraf & Hirst, 1994; Coles, 2004). Maurice Irfan Coles, a Muslim convert and specialist in the education of Muslim children, is in the latter camp, and writes of the need to 'seek and empathise with a greater understanding that goes beyond the daily practices and rules of Islam to an awareness of the centrality of the love and remembrance of God in Islam'

(Coles, 2004, p.124). Both cultural and theological perspectives were initially developed during the Muslim schools debate at the end of the last century.

With the former perspective the demands are specifically Islamic, but much of the language used, particularly in the debates of the 1990s, is the language of cultural identity occasionally peppered with the forceful language of anti-racism. In presenting the case for the establishment of Muslim schools, Ghulam Sarwar of the Muslim Educational Trust, claimed that ‘Muslims face discrimination from all quarters’ (Sarwar, 1994, p.30), argued that Muslims should not be expected to ‘assimilate and lose our identity’ (p. 30) and wrote of the danger of ‘jeopardising the community’s religious identity’ (p. 30). Shabbir Akhtar of the Islamia Schools Trust wrote of ‘distinct educational needs directly related to their faith and cultural heritage’ (Akhtar, 1993, p. 1). He warns of a ‘frustrated and alienated community’ currently powerless to influence legislation on issues (such as education) important to Muslims (p. 1), and of the ‘disintegration of Muslim identity among the youth’ (p. 3). He urges his readers not to accept any educational policy that ‘leads to a dilution of our Muslim identity’ (p. 6). He finds evidence of ‘racially motivated harassment’ directed at Muslim pupils (p. 8) and sees the influence of far right bigotry in the passing of the 1988 Education Act and in the resistance to Muslim schools. While the language and thinking in this literature tends to be community-bound and oriented, that of the theologically grounded writers is more universal in its scope. Syed Ali Ashraf of the Cambridge Islamic Academy writes of ‘philosophical frameworks’ (Ashraf, 1994, p. xiv), asserts ‘the presence of something more than ordinary reason as the main source of cognition’ (p. 216), and presents a dichotomy between ‘a sceptical relativism or pluralism in religious matters’ and a spiritual perspective that sees not merely ‘further in a horizontal direction’ but also in ‘the vertical direction’ (p. 217).<sup>8</sup>

Both the community-oriented and the theological perspectives call for the inclusion of Muslim students' religion in their school life and learning, though the responses they require from the schools are different. In the second part of this paper I will show how the community-oriented perspective with its focus on cultural identity has dominated English school strategies, but will argue that the theological perspective, too, should be taken seriously by schools in the development of an epistemology-based approach to inclusion. In the discussion of both approaches the important issue of Muslim pupil achievement has its place.

## **2. Approaches to the Inclusion of Pupil Religion in School**

### ***2.1 Identity-based inclusion***

Most English schools work with what I shall term an identity-based model of inclusion. Its justification is as follows. It is important for pupils to participate fully in school and learning if they are to achieve well in the system and so go on to play a full part as confident and valuable members of society. If they perceive a conflict between their school and religious identities they might feel alienated, their self-esteem could suffer, and they may underachieve or disengage from learning altogether. Such arguments were used by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, 2007) as its rationale for producing its detailed manual of guidance for schools in meeting the religious needs of their Muslim students:

Muslim pupils' faith and cultural heritage should be affirmed and developed positively within schools to contribute to promoting the value and importance of education and to overcoming barriers to learning and achievement. (p. 14)

Recognition and inclusion of the faith identity and religious needs of Muslim pupils can contribute positively to their personal development and school life. Failure to recognise and affirm, or even worse the creation of situations involving conflicts of belief or conscience, are likely to have an alienating effect where pupils may feel they are not valued and may give rise to inappropriate assumptions that in order to progress in society they will have to compromise or give up aspects of who they are, and their religious beliefs and values. (p. 18)

Within an identity-based approach to inclusion there are two stances: *permissive* inclusion and *affirmative* inclusion.

a) *Permissive inclusion* entails allowing pupils to manifest their religious identity within schools, or at least not setting up boundaries to that manifestation.<sup>9</sup> For schools with Muslim students this includes providing opportunities and spaces for Muslim prayer, allowing students to attend the local mosque for Friday prayer, making arrangements that enable pupils to observe the Ramadan fast, allowing students to have time off school for religious festivals such as Eid, adapting the school uniform policy so Muslim girls are able to wear trousers or *shalwar kameez* and *hijab*. Although recent reports from Muslim bodies have drawn attention to instances of ignorance or lack of sensitivity to Muslim students' needs,<sup>10</sup> allowances for religious observance have long been standard practice in many schools with Muslim pupils, often supported by advice from local authorities. Birmingham City Council is one of a number of local authorities who have tried to address the needs of Muslim children within a multicultural perspective (Coles, 2008, p. 16). As long ago as 1988 the authority combined with representatives from the Muslim Liaison Committee to produce a set of *Guidelines on Meeting the Cultural Needs of Muslims* (revised in 1999) which focused on

cultural issues such as dress and dietary needs and offered advice on questions of collective worship, prayer facilities, halal meat and sex education.

At school level, policies on religious practices have often been arrived at through consultation with parents and community representatives some of whom may serve on school governing bodies (Haw, 1998, p.66). In the foreword to their guidance for schools, members of the Muslim Council of Britain recognised that ‘many of our schools have a cherished tradition of fostering an inclusive ethos which values and addresses the differences and needs of the communities they serve’ (MCB, 2007, p. 7). Muslim girls in English state primary and secondary schools are commonly seen wearing headscarves, for example; in many secondary schools it is a recognised, though optional part of their school uniform. There have, however, been the recent couple of highly publicised court cases referred to earlier where a pupil and a teaching assistant in different schools were refused the right to wear fuller Islamic dress. In both cases the courts ruled in favour of the school’s right to make the decision for pupil or employee.

The link between achievement and accommodation at school of Muslim pupils’ religious identity and practices has already been made. It is certainly the case that those schools that afford most recognition of the Islam of their students, the Muslim schools, have a better record of Muslim pupil attainment than most schools outside the faith sector, though there may be other factors involved. Although more research in this area is needed, a local study among high achieving Pakistani-heritage boys in ‘non-faith’ schools in the north of England (Choudry, 2004) indicates that allowing the practice and manifestation of their religion in school can have the desired positive effect on achievement. On interview the boys felt that freedom to express their Muslim identity in school in a positive way was of paramount

importance in enabling them to be successful academically. They appreciated the fact that they were 'given the opportunity to be Muslims' through prayer arrangements and links with the local mosque. Positive recognition of their Muslim identity provided the context in which they could apply Islamic self-discipline and a high view of the pursuit of knowledge to their school education (Richardson & Wood, p. 40).

*b) Affirmative inclusion* involves a proactive move by schools to recognise the religion of their pupils in school events and the curriculum. All schools are expected to include recognition of the nation's and local community's cultural diversity, including religious diversity, in their school life and in the academic curriculum. Their success in achieving this cultural inclusion is assessed by the official system of school inspection (Ofsted). Recognition of different religious festivals is incorporated into the school calendar and observed, in primary schools in particular, through celebrations, parties, plays and activity days. By law English schools are required to set aside some time each school day for an act of collective worship, commonly known as an 'assembly'. A research review commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills into Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum found that assemblies were used to deliver and reinforce positive diversity messages (Maylor & Read, 2007, p. 71). In the report an example is given of one such assembly programme where pupils were treated to a mixture of faith celebrations, civil rights history and biographies of famous people. Within one term the whole school gathered together to hear about and celebrate themes, people and festivals as varied as Yom Kippur, World Food Day, the crowning of Haile Selassie, Gandhi, Freddie Mercury, Diwali, the abolition of slavery, Ramadan, Christmas traditions around the world, Human Rights Day and the anniversary of the publication of 'Origin of the Species'. The programme was deemed to be appropriate to

the population of this East Midlands primary school with its one-third white British, Asian and African Caribbean demography.

English schools are required by the National Curriculum to use curriculum subjects and not just assemblies to promote awareness of diversity and to recognise the culture (including the religious culture) of their pupils. To varying degrees across the country pupils' religious culture has been introduced into a multicultural curriculum so that classes with Muslim students might, for example, consider past and present achievements of Islamic writers, artists, mathematicians and scientists, models of high achievement for young Muslims to aspire to. National and local reports and guidance on the achievement of minority ethnic students, including predominantly Muslim minorities (DfES, 2003; Ofsted, 2004), consistently stress the importance to motivation and achievement, of students seeing their own cultures reflected in the curriculum. An example from one secondary school with a high proportion of Bangladeshi pupils illustrates how this can be done. An audit investigated how each subject addressed cultural diversity and Bangladeshi heritage. RE and PSHE<sup>11</sup> provided opportunities to discuss family and community life, issues of racism and stereotyping; in mathematics there was work on Islamic patterns and on the contributions of Muslim scholars to the discipline; the geography curriculum included a study unit on Bangladesh, history included a study of the movement of Bangladeshi families into the local area and in English a study of language change provided opportunities for pupils to read and speak in Bengali and Sylheti (Ofsted, 2004). RE had the most prominent role to play in including pupils' religious culture in the curriculum; students could take Islamic studies as a component of public examination courses. Links between the recognition of religious identity and achievement have been discerned in the examination results of Muslim students in the city of Bradford where they attain noticeably high grades relative to other subjects in religious education, the

subject where their religious identity is most salient and most fully acknowledged (Miller, 2006).

## ***2.2 Issues with identity-based inclusion***

An identity-based approach to religious inclusion is not without problems, however. One of the difficulties is that the school ends up defining the religious culture of the students both within the *permissive* stance where school authorities decide what shall or shall not be permitted (*hijab* is permitted but not wearing the *niqab*) and in the *affirmative* stance where schools select which aspects of a religion they are happy to promote. In attempts to represent a full range of diversity, schools sometimes end up offering their pupils the kind of eclectic mix of cultural references found in the example of an assembly timetable referred to above, and some students have complained that school teaching about particular faiths presented ‘ideal types’ that did not match their own or their families’ religious practices (Maylor & Read, 2007).

Decisions about the observance and representation of pupils’ religion and culture are not easy to make. With a *permissive* stance towards religious practices it can be difficult for school staff to judge the legitimacy of demands made on the basis of religion. What requests are reasonable and truly linked to religious obligation and what are personal preferences or cultural practices, and is this a valid distinction to make? How should a primary teacher respond, for example, if a Muslim parent tells her that his religion does not permit his daughter to sit next to a boy in class? Should a school agree to suspend their swimming programme during the Ramadan fast in case the children swallow any water by mistake?

By adopting an *affirmative* stance schools are responding to frequent requests from parents and students in reports and surveys that they would like to see their own culture more fully represented in the curriculum (DfES, 2003; Ofsted, 2004), but a recent review of education for diversity in England has raised the importance of getting a balance between recognition of distinct community identities and the promotion of a collective identity that includes all in the national narrative (Maylor & Read, 2007). The review found few students had experienced lessons where they talked about British people as a whole or about things that people in Britain share. As one said ‘we don’t learn about different people in Britain, we just learn about different cultures’ (p. 7). The AMSS position paper (2004) also raises the question of the distortion of the curriculum by an approach ‘based on the educational equivalent of proportional representation for the various cultural groups’:

We feel that a better strategy is to promote in schools the best education in each given field. If in some areas the material happens to derive from one particular cultural, ethnic, racial or religious group, so be it. (p. 14)

These arguments are part of the current questioning of the principles and practices of the uncritical multiculturalism that has dominated educational discourse and practice in relation to the cultural diversity of society and of so many school communities. Stephen May’s book *Critical Multiculturalism: Rethinking Multicultural and Antiracist Education* (1999) offered broad international perspectives on this debate. At a more local level and relating specifically to Muslims, a 2007 report by Mirza, Senthilkumaran and Ja’far, *Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism*, claims that multiculturalism has served to divide people along ethnic, religious and cultural lines at the expense of a shared national

identity and in the process has given greater prominence to Islamist groups (Mirza et al., 2007).

Another problem is that a limited understanding of faith as little more than a marker of group identity, can lead to an oversimplified view of religions as bounded cultural groupings. Insufficient attention is given to internal diversity, to the permeability of faith boundaries or to the individual, developmental journey of faith of each child. The structural initiatives that accommodate particular practices and customs are fairly easy for the school to effect, but, as Kaye Haw argues in her study of Muslim girls, their implementation can lead to a reification of culturally held stereotypes that do not allow for complexity and change (Haw, 1998, p. 67). Returning ten years later to interview the young women who had been students in her earlier study, Haw found among them a commitment to their religion but a resistance to being associated not only with constructions of Islam in the media but also with constructions by their community and parents. Does the emphasis on details of religious and cultural practice, by reinforcing a particular model of Islam in school, in any way limit the freedom of young people to explore the boundaries of their religion and its application to their lives? In particular are the spiritual and relational aspects of the young people's religion being ignored? Are schools supporting or hindering the personal development of young people, such as the South Asian female students in Tahir Abbas's research, who are beginning to identify strongly with their religion but seeking to discover a 'proper' and a 'beautiful' Islam rather than the apparently outmoded religious and cultural practices of their parents (Abbas, 2004, pp.138-139, p. 103)<sup>12</sup>, and should schools be doing either? In her study of the education of Muslim pupils in the 1990s, Marie Parker-Jenkins noted a difference between the approaches of Muslim school head teachers and state school head teachers. While the former spoke of the importance of faith and prayer, the latter saw provision for their pupils' religion

in terms of addressing the specific, practical needs of Muslim students. These correspond to the theological and cultural perspectives on inclusion identified earlier in this paper. Identity-based approaches focus on the cultural.

In the next section I shall argue for a form of inclusion that moves beyond making Muslim pupils feel affirmed or comfortable and allows them to contribute their religious perspectives to their own and others' learning. A directness of communication is needed that is not found in the identity-based approaches where the language used about religion is secondary and indirect. Identity-based approaches justify the accommodation of aspects of Muslim pupils' religion in school in terms of the self-esteem and self-confidence of the believer, rather than of any intrinsic value in that which they believe. Because Islam is so much a part of their pupils' identity, the school affords it recognition so they do not feel marginalized or disaffected. There is a danger here of pathologising pupil religion, even as it is being affirmed, so that it becomes as a special need for which strategies have to be found to ensure it does not hinder learning.

### ***2.3 Pupils' religious viewpoints***

In 2006 the Department for Education and Skills' regular report on the educational achievement and experience of ethnic minority students for the first time approached the question of their personal religious viewpoints by asking an ethnically mixed sample of 15,450 young people about the significance of religion in their lives (DfES 2006). Of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students (groups that could safely be said to be largely Muslim) 85% claimed that religion was 'very important'. Quotes from young Muslims in other, qualitative, research studies give some indication of what that 'very important' religion might mean.

Praying to God is important in my life because it has made me who I am and guided me on the right path (Muslim Pakistani boy aged 15)

I think believing in religion gives you faith, you look up to something, you wake up with a different reason. (Muslim Pakistani girl aged 15)

Religion and Allah are very important in my life. I like to keep them in my heart. (Muslim Pakistani boy aged 15)<sup>13</sup>

I feel that without Allah's help and guidance I would not have achieved so much' (Bangladeshi girl aged 17 in Abbas 2004 p102)

Religion and belief in God provide these students with reasons, direction and possibilities. What they say conforms to Habermas' description of true belief as not only a doctrine and believed content, but as 'a source of energy that the person who has faith taps performatively and this nurtures his or her entire life' (Habermas, 2006, p. 8). An education system (such as the English system) that claims to focus on the 'whole child' and that requires teachers and managers to organise the school and the curriculum around the diverse needs and also the knowledge bases, aptitudes and aspirations of the pupils, cannot ignore the power of religion in the lives of so many. Its recognition needs to be part of the so-called 'personalised learning' agenda currently being promoted through colleges and schools.

As people who have faith, Muslim students can be viewed not just as members of a bounded cultural community, but also as participants in a wider group of young people for whom

religion is important. Discussion of the relation of Muslim students' faith to their education might, then, have something to learn from recent research into the religion of black students.<sup>14</sup> Cheron Byfield's recent study acknowledges the positive effect of black pupils' religion on their educational achievement (Byfield, 2008). She describes how the students' interconnectedness with God has provided them with a sense of direction and enabled them to remain focussed in the face of a variety of pressures. Byfield uses her findings to promote a new understanding of the term 'religious capital'<sup>15</sup> in relation to her subjects that is distinct from social and cultural capital, and that, because of its derivation from a spiritual connection to God, is, uniquely among types of capital, disassociated from economic capital. This last factor is significant not just for black students, but also for the large numbers of Muslim students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Byfield's study speaks of the potential of religion to enhance the students' experience of education and their achievement. For institutions concerned about underachievement, the question is how to tap this energy, direction and focus for the development of school learning; for those with an interest in the development of the whole child, it is how the school might be a place where these key elements of individual students' self-understanding and outward motivation are not excluded but are given room for exploration and discovery. With Muslim students in particular this involves working to counter some of the suspicions of school education generated in their community by the debates about the education of Muslims described in the first part of this paper.

#### ***2.4 Epistemology-based inclusion***

Working as both teacher and researcher with Muslim children, and listening to their talk, has made me aware of the young people's meaning making as both experiential (their own sense of a direct relationship with God) and theological (their interpretation of God's activity in the

world). The kind of language that children and young people feel empowered to use within the school is crucial as that language is an insight into, and a vehicle of, their meaning making. It reveals how they conceptualise the world and is key to the second type of religious inclusion I wish to advance, the epistemological.

A class of 10-year-old Muslim children were asked to write down in a limited period of time how they thought the world began. The following are some of their responses:

It was all just black. Then there was a big explosion and it made clouds of dust and the dust all joined together to make planets and stars. The planets started to go round the stars. The sun is our star and the world is one of the planets...

Allah said 'Be' and the world began. He took some clay of different colours and he used it to make the first person who was the prophet Adam. Adam is the ancestor of everybody.

First there was nothing. It was all black. Then God made the world and the sun and the moon and the stars. God made humans.

The world was made from space. The first animals were dinosaurs. After a long time all the dinosaurs died and God made Adam and then he made Hawa. They were the first people and they had children and their children had children and so on<sup>16</sup>.

In answers such as these the teacher is presented with different forms of knowledge, scientific and religious. Her decision of how to use that knowledge will be based on what she judges to be legitimate knowledge for the lesson in question.

This question of what constitutes legitimate knowledge is one that underpins the work of science educationalist Derek Hodson. Some of his observations and thinking about science and technology education translate well to consideration of the place of young people's religious perspectives in their learning. Hodson notes, from his experience as a science teacher, the ability of some students to tolerate seeming inconsistencies in their knowledge (Hodson, 1999, p. 218). There are parallels here with the ability of the Muslim children quoted above to move to and fro between religious and scientific perspectives on the beginning of the world (see the combination of dinosaurs and Adam and Eve). He also reports how sometimes even some of the brightest students seem resistant to the assimilation of new ideas (p. 223). Such experiences illustrate weaknesses in the constructivist theories of education current in Britain where the dominant principle of learning starts from what the children already know and gives them opportunities to test their views, to reassess, modify or where necessary change them. According to this principle new learning happens when previously held ideas are found to be wanting or wrong; thus a hierarchy is set up, the new having a higher status than the old. The implications of this for the religious beliefs children bring to school do not need spelling out. When applied to religion such a theory of learning would seem to lead towards epistemological conflict and distrust.

Similar experience was reported by Michael Reiss, former director of education at the Royal Society, who caused a furore in September 2008 by arguing in a public address that, should questions of creationism and intelligent design be raised by pupils in science lessons, then it

would be appropriate for the science teacher to discuss them rather than to dismiss them out of hand.

My experience after having to teach biology for 20 years is if one simply gives the impression that such children [those who believe in creationism or in intelligent design] are wrong, then they are not likely to learn much about the science (Smith & Henderson, 2008)

A recent qualitative research study with 100 English teenagers (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008) provided some evidence of the way in which, as students get older, the application of the methods of school science to religion can lead to a polarisation of views. Some of the young people (none of them Muslim) rejected the idea of God on the basis that there was no evidence of his existence, that no one had ever seen him. A smaller number rejected some aspects of school science on the basis that it contradicted religious truths.

When you get older you either believe in [religion] a lot more or you believe in it a lot less because you get taught about science and evolution and stuff like that so that'll move you away from God created the world. (boy age 14)

We should learn about CREATION not the BIG BANG!!! (girl age 14)

Though many believers do not find a problem with reconciling Big Bang theories and belief in creation by God, the application in school of a limited, experimental and evidence-based approaches to the validation of knowledge can cause a clash between worldviews that can lead to a distrust of religious knowledge on the one hand or, on the other, a distrust of the

learning received in schools and the kind of resistance to new ideas Hodson noted among some of the brighter science students<sup>17</sup>.

In the world of higher education similar issues emerge. A recent survey of Islamic Studies courses (Siddiqui, 2007), notes a separation between empirically-based, objective studies of Islamic traditions in the established universities, and a more religious, faith-focused approach for Muslim students in Islamic centres, in what are described as ‘two parallel universes’ (p. 36). In his report Ataulah Siddiqui makes a strong case for an inclusion that goes beyond the communal and social.

In a pluralist society like England it is imperative that we recognise the ‘otherness’ of the other. This means recognising others’ self definition and the way they approach various subjects and disciplines. Plurality should exist not only at social and communal levels but also at an intellectual and academic level. (Siddiqui, 2007, p. 36)

Muslim higher education students interviewed for this study did not argue for a replacement of ‘secular’ (historical and political) aspects of learning but that these should be incorporated alongside theological aspects (p. 59).

A school that is epistemologically inclusive is aware of the potential for tension between different conceptualisations of the world and makes allowance for different forms of knowledge to sit side by side within the delivery of the curriculum. Students should engage in the construction and acquisition of the factual and conceptual base needed to advance within the different school disciplines. At a pragmatic level they need too to learn to select forms of knowledge appropriate for assessment exercises, but an epistemology-based approach to

inclusion does not confuse the accumulation of facts with truth. Instead students are invited to bring other conceptualisations of the world into the classroom and share experiential and theological (as also philosophical and political) perspectives on the subjects of their learning and to learn to distinguish between them. Reiss saw the inclusion of discussions on creation and intelligent design as ways of explaining, through contrast, the scientific method while treating the pupils' contributions 'not as a misconception but as a worldview'. Religious students should be able to feel confident that, for example, their ideas about the existence of a guiding transcendent power behind the creation of the universe or the movement of human history will be taken seriously and not dismissed as relics of a by-gone age.

For Muslim students versed in the teaching of their own religion, the idea of different forms of knowledge should not pose too great a difficulty. There is already a distinction between 'revealed' and 'acquired' knowledge, revealed knowledge being the part of that absolute knowledge that is of God that he has revealed to his prophets for the benefit of humankind and acquired knowledge being that of the social, natural and applied sciences (Coles, 2008, p. 30). Nor should the different forms of knowledge come into conflict as applied knowledge should be placed within the understanding of revealed knowledge. Thus at an independent Muslim primary school<sup>18</sup> in East London, where I carried out research in 2009, the school's vegetable garden not only enabled pupils to understand where their food comes from and to learn about the growth of plant life but is a place where 'they will also learn about the patterns of nature Allah has created and how He sustains and provides for us through it'.

Some might find the explicitly religious framing of other areas of learning uncomfortable. In many western countries Christians have grown accustomed to treating personal religion as something that is private and not aired in the school context. But Islam and Muslims are

known for not relegating religion to the private sphere, a fact that one non-Muslim teacher,<sup>19</sup> teaching a predominantly Muslim student population in a ‘non-faith’ mainstream girls secondary school, uses to justify a discursive approach in her RE lessons whereby her students share their religious perspectives on the world.

We are very aware that religion for our students isn’t just in the personal sphere. From my perspective, religion to me is very individual, it’s not something that I choose to discuss outwardly, but for our girls it’s an outward, living, breathing thing and I think that’s why the discursive approach works because they’re immersed in it in their family homes ... a number of them go to mosque after school, in the way that they dress. There are constraints and limitations but also wonderful opportunities for them ... in the world of faith that they live in. So that’s why the discursive approach is important. I think taking religion as an objective thing you would perhaps do in another school, in this school it would never work because it’s a living, breathing entity, it’s everywhere.

An epistemology-based inclusion can be *permissive* in that it *allows* students to manifest their religion not just in what they wear and what they eat but also in what they say and what they think. It can be *affirmative* by introducing students to a variety of forms of knowledge within their learning, but it needs to entail more than both these stances. Affirmative methods are bound by teachers’ choices and perceptions and are therefore not fully inclusive. Permissive methods allow and tolerate but do not necessarily listen and engage. A truly inclusive approach requires a degree of reflexivity on the part of those (teachers and students) who do not share the religious views of some of the class members. Listening to the voices of religious pupils does not require the unseating of the existing views of the non-religious but

can involve them in considering for themselves the possibilities and implications of either accepting or rejecting these other meanings alongside existing ones. Habermas's thoughts on the communication between religious and secular views in the public sphere, can be applied to the public forum of the classroom too (Habermas, 2006). Recognising that the psychological and cognitive burden in western societies has tended to be on religious members of the community to translate their perspectives into secular language, he advocates cooperative acts of translation; religious members of the public should not be expected to bear the full burden of translating their meaning to others, but their secular neighbours 'must open their minds to the possible truth content of these presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments' (Habermas, 2006, p. 11). He writes that in the normative statements of religious perspectives, those without religion may in fact recognise 'moral intuitions' of their own (p. 10). After all, the religious perspective provides another way of viewing the universally applicable question of what it means to be human.

And, for those whose concern is academic achievement (with its significant implications for the young person's future inclusion and active participation in society) a *reflexive* stance may be valued as one that includes and encourages religious pupils to succeed. The conversations between pupil and pupil, and teacher and pupil that result from such an approach signal to the religious pupil that the school is a place where they belong, where they can with full integrity develop their own learning and contribute to the learning of others.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Muslim parents often have a positive attitude to church schools as schools with a moral and religious ethos. In Bradford city, for example, Church schools received notable support from Muslim parents during recent school reorganisation (Barker & Anderson, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> Such demands and actions have not been researched but instances are known to the author from experience working in the field.

<sup>3</sup> A leading umbrella organisation for Muslim groups in Britain.

<sup>4</sup> A term actually coined a few years before and widely known in Britain through the report by the Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia, a challenge for us all*. (1997).

<sup>5</sup> During the Blair government a number of ‘academies’ were established. These are state-funded schools established and managed by sponsors from a wide range of backgrounds including faith communities.

<sup>6</sup> Represented by John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College leaders (Polly Curtis, *The Guardian*, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Halstead has been a key spokesperson for the Muslim campaign for state-funded faith schools debate (Halstead, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Ashraf is here citing Huston Smith in *Beyond the Post Modern Mind*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights states that everyone has a right in public and private, to manifest his (or her) religion or belief, only subject to limitations as prescribed by law and in the interests of public safety, public order, health or morals, or for protection of rights and freedom of others (Evans, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> A recent article in the Guardian records previous reports from the Muslim Council of Britain and the Islamic Human Rights Commission (Butt, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> In English schools pupils are required to have classes covering Personal Social and Health Education.

<sup>12</sup> it should also be acknowledged that in his research Abbas found many Muslim students offered positive remarks on their inherited religious culture and relationship with their parents seeing their parents, Islam and values towards education as intertwined (Abbas, 2004, p.104).

<sup>13</sup> These quotes were gathered as part of the English contribution to an European Commission funded study of religion in the lives and schooling of young people across Europe: Religion in Education. A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (REDCo). For results of the English qualitative survey see Igrave & McKenna, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> 71% of the black African heritage and 39% of the African Caribbean students in the DfES 2006 report said that religion was ‘very important’ in their lives.

<sup>15</sup> Relating her analysis to Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’ Byfield contrasts her use of ‘religious capital with Iannaccone’s employment of the term, in a 1984 PhD thesis, for something more akin to a subset of social capital that does not include the sense of connectedness to God that Byfield finds among the subjects of her own study.

<sup>16</sup> This activity was part of a project I was carrying out in a primary school with a predominantly Muslim population.

<sup>17</sup> Most younger British Muslim children (up to age 13 or 14) of South Asian origin attend mosque school for around two hours every evening and so have an alternative education they can hold up in comparison to their school education.

<sup>18</sup> This school took part in a 2008/9 research project into the use of materials in the teaching of religious education in a diversity of English schools.

<sup>19</sup> This school was part of the same project.

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