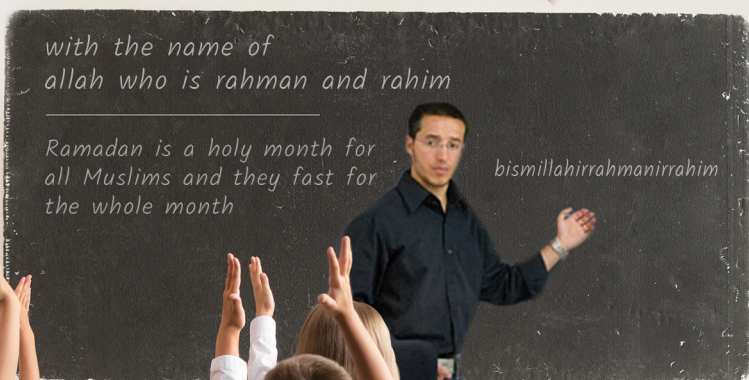


Understanding Islamic Religious Education in Britain

Dr. Islam Uddin



*with the name of
allah who is rahman and rahim*

*Ramadan is a holy month for
all Muslims and they fast for
the whole month*

bismillahirrahmanirrahim

UNDERSTANDING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

TIGA Turkish Institute for Global and Area Research

PRESS TIGA

Editorial Board

Assoc. Prof. Gökhan BOZBAŞ

Asst. Prof. Şeyma AKIN

Author

Asst. Prof. Islam UDDIN

Design

Salih BÜYÜKYANGÖZ

e-ISBN 978-605-74596-3-3

Yaka Mah. Yeni Meram Cad. Hasım Halife Sok. No: 11/B

Meram / Konya/ Turkey

May, 2021

** All rights of this piece are reserved to Turkish Institute for Global and Area Studies. No part of this piece may be scanned, uploaded, reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without written permission from the author.*

** All responsibility of the information and comments contained in this piece belong to the author.*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- 2 Non Commercial 4.0 International License.



CONTENTS

Abstract.....	1
Keywords.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Muslims in Britain.....	2
Education in Britain.....	3
Islamic Education in Britain.....	4
Islamic Schools.....	5
Islamic Education and Islamophobia.....	7
Islamic Education and Looking Forward.....	8
Conclusion.....	10

Understanding Islamic Religious Education in Britain

By Dr Islam Uddin

School of Law

Middlesex University

i.uddin@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

There have been Muslims in Britain since the 1800s. The 1970s onwards saw the reunification of families with migrant workers in the UK. There are approximately three million Muslims living in Britain today. Islamic religious education emerged out of necessity for the Muslim community. The early Islamic schools were closely linked to the mosque networks, currently, there are over 2,000 supplementary Islamic schools and 187 full-time Islamic schools, of which 27 are state-funded. Some argue that the state should not fund faith-based schools, whilst others contend religious education is part of religious freedom. This paper examines the topic of Islamic religious education in Britain, providing a sociological overview of the subject matter. It explores the need for Islamic education amongst the British Muslim community and the role the state plays in facilitating religious education, in a climate of Islamophobia; and other challenges facing the future of Islamic religious education.

Keywords

Islamic religious education Britain Islamophobia

Introduction

This paper explores Islamic education in Britain and provides a sociological overview of the subject matter. There are nearly three million Muslims living in Britain, and the topic of Islamic religious education (IRE) has been a point of discussion within the last few decades, with the emergence of supplementary and full-time Islamic schools. There are many faiths practised in the UK, and the government accommodates religious schools that fit within its criteria for state-funded assistance. Some argue that faith is a personal choice and the state should not be enlisted in promoting different faiths in schools or providing government resources and funding for faith-based schools. Others contend religious education is part of religious freedom and should be practised and manifested in daily life. However, in recent years, IRE has come under much scrutiny, in particular with claims of harbouring extremist religious teachings within its curriculums, thus leading to Muslim institutes being investigated over such claims. In response,

the Muslim community asks those who make such claims to substantiate their position with evidence, or else to retract such statements which are damaging for the British Muslim community. With the number of Muslims predicted to grow in Britain in the coming decades, the debates around IRE will no doubt continue.

This paper discusses several key themes related to IRE, it starts by presenting a history of Muslim migration to Britain and the establishment of diasporic communities and the assimilation of Muslims into British society. Next, the paper examines the British education system and provides an overview of the legal requirements of education in the UK. The paper then discusses Islamic education in Britain and explores the different methods by which IRE is provided to the Muslim community, and examines a fulltime Islamic school and its curriculum. The latter part of the paper explores Islamic education and Islamophobia, highlighting some high profile cases that have caused controversy in recent years. The paper concludes by looking towards the future of IRE in Britain and suggests areas of improvement.

Muslims in Britain

The Muslim community in Britain has a well-established history, with Muslims migrants arriving since the 1800s. The period during the 1970s saw many Muslim families join migrant workers who had previously arrived in Britain seeking employment.¹ According to the last census in 2011, the Muslim population in Britain is 2.7 million, making Islam the second-largest religion in the UK. The majority of British Muslims originate from South Asia: Pakistan, Bangladesh and



(1) Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: The History of Muslims in Britain, 1800 to the Present* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2004).

India; and there are large Muslim communities in cities like London, Birmingham, Leicester, Bradford, and Manchester.

The migrant community strived to maintain elements of family life from their country of origin, giving them a distinct ethnoreligious identity.² The multicultural policies adopted by the government from the 1970s-1990s allowed ethnic minorities with different cultural and religious beliefs to coexist within the wider society.³ British Muslims today participate at every level of British society, from politics, law, education, banking, health and social care, media, and journalism, fulfilling civic duties, whilst the vast network of mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslims organisations are reflective of their religious identity.

Education in Britain

In the UK, education is compulsory between the ages of 5-18, a child at the age of 16 may leave school to pursue a vocational path or continue further education until 18. The Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for children's services and education in England. The responsibility for education in the other countries of the UK is devolved to their respective education systems. In 2020, there were 24,360 schools in England primary and secondary schools.⁴ The vast majority 89% of these schools were state-funded which included voluntary aided schools – government-funded religious schools; free schools – funded by the government but not run by a local authority; and academies – funded by government and run by a trust. Non-state-funded or independent schools accounted for 9.5% of schools in England. According to the Education Act 1944 section 36, it is the parent's responsibility to ensure their child receives fulltime education at school or otherwise. Another option is homeschooling, however, the state does not fund this type of education.

The National Curriculum (NC) is a set of subjects and standards taught at all local authority maintained schools.⁵ Private schools do not have to teach the NC, similarly, academies do not have to teach NC but must teach English, maths, science and religious education. The table below (see fig.1) shows the NC subjects taught split over four key stages during primary and secondary school ages. Religious education is taught during all the stages, and sex and relationship educations (RSE) is taught from key stage 3 onwards. Islamic religious education (IRE) is not subject taught as part of the NC during any of its key stages.

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is responsible for inspecting and regulating services that provide education to children, this includes all state-

(2) Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

(3) Amir Ali, *South Asian Islam and British Multiculturalism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).li

(4) Gov.UK, "Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics," 2021, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

(5) "National Curriculum," 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>

funded schools.⁶ The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) are responsible for inspecting Independent schools in agreement with the DfE.⁷ For homeschooling, there is no requirement to follow the NC, formal lessons or school hours.

Islamic Education in Britain

Islamic education is linked to the notion of passing on the heritage of Islamic knowledge through its primary sources the Quran and the Sunnah. The concept is embedded in nurturing religious beliefs in an individual aimed at developing personalities within the community grounded in the virtues of Islam. The majority of Muslim children attended comprehensive state-funded schools, where IRE is not part of the NC, thus, how is IRE taught in Britain?

Islamic education in the UK is taught via the following three methods: supplementary schools, full-time Islamic schools and homeschooling. There are approximately 2,000 supplementary Islamic schools often referred to as madrasahs or maktabas in the UK, which run evening and weekend classes, some established as mosque schools since the 1960s. The primary aim of these madrasahs is to teach the reading and memorisation of the Quran with basic Arabic and Islamic studies. The Association of Muslim Supplementary Schools (AMSS) support madrasahs by providing tools and strategies for teaching and nurturing.⁸ Their sample Islamic policy state that the aim and objectives of madrasahs be to teach tawhid (the oneness of God) and the Sunnah, to practice real Islam by differentiating from traditions and culture, to produce individuals who become daees (propagators of Islam) with a sense of belonging to the



(6) "Ofsted," 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>

(7) ISI, "About Isi," 2021, <https://www.isi.net/about/>

(8) AMSS, "The Association of Muslim Supplementary Schools," 2021, <https://amss.org.uk/>

ummah (Islamic nations) and be British citizens; the setting should be Islamic with prayers.

The second method is fulltime primary and secondary Islamic schools, of which there are currently 187 listed on the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMS-UK).⁹ Among this list twelve are voluntary-aided and fifteen are free schools, meaning in total there are twenty-seven full-time state-funded Islamic schools, the first being Islamia Primary school in 1988. There are many reasons suggested as to why Muslim parents choose fulltime Islamic education for their children such as desiring an Islamic environment with segregation of the genders, specialist training in the Islamic sciences to produce potential religious leaders, impart knowledge of Islamic civilizations, and focus on addressing low attainment of Muslim academic achievements when attending state schools.¹⁰

The third method is homeschooling, which according to the Islamic homeschooling advisory service (IHSAN) is increasing in popularity as a legal option for education, for the following reasons based on a survey of parents who expressed dissatisfaction with the moral teaching of the state schooling system, negativity towards Muslim children, bullying and the state schools not meeting the needs of the children.¹¹ Other reports suggest that the standard of education and the implementation of Prevent, the government's anti-extremism strategy were reasons for homeschooling Muslim children.

Islamic Schools

Full-time Islamic schools in Britain emerged out of darura (necessity) and maslaha (public interest) of the Muslim community. Of the 187 Islamic schools on the AMS-UK list, only 27 are state-funded, meaning the vast majority are private and independent fee-charging schools. So how do these Islamic schools differ from comprehensive state schools? Taking the London Islamic school, a secondary boy's school, as an example, the following can be seen.

The website of the London Islamic School (LIS) proudly displays their Ofsted rating of good and awards from the Mayor of London and AMS-UK as well as others.¹² The LIS mission statement states their aim to produce ulama (Islamic scholars), huffaz (Quran memorisers), professionals and daees (callers to Islam) as balanced British citizens that promote peace, harmony and tolerance. There is an emphasis on producing individuals conducive to British society, however, the education is limited to primarily potential religious leadership. The LIS ethos

(9) AMS, "The Association of Muslim Schools UK," 2021, <https://ams-uk.org/>

(10) Nasar Meer, "Muslim Schools in Britain: Challenging Mobilisations or Logical Developments?," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 27, no. 1 (2007).

(11) Fzeelah El-Sawah, "Home Education and the Muslim Community," <http://www.home-education.org.uk/articles/article-he-muslim-community.pdf>

(12) LIS, "London Islamic School," 2021, <http://www.londonislamicschool.org/>



is focused on teaching moral, spiritual, ethical, social and cultural values, which again leads to producing balanced individuals with an Islamic personality firmly based in British society.

The LIS implement two curriculums: the national curriculum and an Islamic curriculum. The NC consists of the core subjects taught nationwide, with the chosen language being Arabic, whilst art and music are replaced by creative and aesthetic. The LIC Islamic curriculum last for the duration of the five years the students are at school. The Islamic teaching in the first three years is similar for all students with options available in the fourth and fifth years, depending on whether the student wishes to be an alim or hafiz. The extra subjects taught as part of the Islamic curriculum are fiqh (jurisprudence), hadith (prophetic traditions), aqeedah (theology), Quranic studies, Islamic history and Islamic etiquette. These subjects are grounded in the heritage of classical Islamic knowledge rather than critical modern thinking of the religion.

Another concern with the Islamic curriculum taught at full-time Islamic schools in the UK is the lack of accreditation upon completing certain subjects and courses. For example, a five-year course to become an alim is not recognised as an accredited course by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)¹³ and therefore not awarded any credits, which are necessary to progress onto higher education (HE) such as A- levels, or further education (FE) degrees and post-graduate courses. Hence, Independent Islamic schools during secondary school education adhere to the NC to enable students to move onto HE and FE. Similarly, to attain accredited degrees awarded in Islamic sciences in the UK, students often study in some limited British universities that offer such courses or attend institutes that provided certificates validated by British universities.

(13) The UK's regulated qualifications framework.

Islamic Education and Islamophobia

The history of supplementary and full-time Islamic schools in Britain date back to the 1960s, however, there is some opposition to teaching religious education in general and IRE in specific with others. The National Secular Society (NCS) argue that there should not be any faith schools as this constitutes religious discrimination, parents can have faith but not enlist the help of the state to teach their children, as it leads to producing a divisive society based on religious, ethnic, cultural and social-economic segregation.¹⁴ In contrast, it could be argued that Britain is a multicultural society that promotes religious freedom as found in Article 9 of its Human Rights Act 1988, the right to religious belief and practice.

Even so, some recent events have highlighted that some elements of British society are not tolerant of Islam and Muslims, resulting in criticism focused on Muslims and Islamic education. In 2013, a college in Birmingham, England proposed to ban students from wearing the face veil citing security as the reason.¹⁵ However, the college was forced to remove the intended ban after thousands of students protested against the proposal. There was greater controversy in 2014 when a leaked document from supposed Islamists was released to the press outlying a five-stage plot dubbed 'Trojan Horse' to infiltrate mainstream schools with fundamentalist Islamic teachings.¹⁶ Birmingham council reported this document to the DfE, leading to Ofsted investigating 21 schools – five were



(14) NCS, "No More Faith Schools," 2017, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/>

(15) Lucy Sherriff, "Muslim Students Banned from Wearing Veils, Niqabs, for 'Safety' at Birmingham Metropolitan College," *The Huffington Post UK* 2013.

(16) Jeanette Oldham, "Trojan Horse Jihadist Plot to Take over Birmingham Schools," *The Birmingham Mail* 2014.

rated as inadequate, and the dismissal of many teaching staff in the midland region. Three years later at a meeting to discuss the dismissal of the teaching staff, the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) dropped the case against them, thus exposing the fake Trojan horse plot.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2016, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) called for the government's anti-extremism strategy 'Prevent'¹⁸ to be scrapped as it caused suspicion in the classroom and confusion in the staffroom.¹⁹

Similarly, supplementary Islamic schools have not been spared scrutiny. In 2015, the then Prime Minister David Cameron warned that religious supplementary schools that teach intolerance would be investigated and shut down.²⁰ In reply, Muslim leaders voiced concerns about the Prime Minister's comments and called for him to substantiate such claims. This led the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims to define Islamophobia – as rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.²¹ Thus, these years represented a hostile period towards Muslims and the practice of Islamic education.

Islamic Education and Looking Forward

The need for Islamic education in Britain emerged out of the desire of British Muslim to fulfil a need in its community, in particular as migrant families settled in the UK as part of family reunification from the 1970s onwards. Islamic education in those early years was linked to madrasahs in mosques, with the first fulltime state-funded Islamic school coming nearly two decades later in 1988. Now there are 187 fulltime Islamic schools and over 2,000 madrasahs in the UK. Looking forward there are still some questions that require answering about Islamic religious education in Britain.

The British Muslim community is diverse with origins in the countries of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, as such there is no overarching body that speaks in unison on behalf of its members or acts as an authority whether it be nationally or internationally. The Muslim council of Britain (MCB) presents itself as the voice for the 500 Muslim organisations under its umbrella body, including mosques, schools, charitable associations and professional networks.²² However,

(17) Samira Shackle, "Trojan Horse: The Real Story Behind the Fake 'Islamic Plot' to Take over Schools," *The Guardian* 2017.

(18) Prevent is about safeguarding and supporting those vulnerable to radicalisation. It aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.

(19) Richard Adams, "Teachers Back Motion Calling for Prevent Strategy to Be Scrapped," *The Guardian* 2016.

(20) Katherine Sellgren, "David Cameron: Prime Minister Warns over Extremist Teaching," *BBC News* 2015.

(21) APPG, "All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims Definition of Islamophobia," 2018, <https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/4794543/APPG+Definition+of+Islamophobia.pdf/f747d5e0-b4e2-5ba6-b4c7-499bd102d5aa>

(22) MCB, "Muslim Council of Britain," 2021, <https://mcb.org.uk/>



with reports that there are 1,975 mosques or prayers halls in the UK,²³ we can see the MCB is not fully representative of the mosque networks, let alone the other institutes and organisations found within the British Muslim community.

Networks such as the AMS-UK and AMSS provide guidelines and resources for fulltime and supplementary Islamic schools respectively, however, they do not provide a comprehensive Islamic curriculum. So who decides what constitutes an Islamic curriculum in Britain? Currently, the Islamic schools and madrasahs decide the curriculum, often replicating models of classical interpretations of Islamic education. For example, the Darul Uloom follow the Darse Nizami curriculum originating from the 18th-century Indian subcontinent and is the most widely offered course by British Muslim institutes. Others argue that if Islamic education is limited to replicating a certain identity linked to a determined dress code, moral values and cultural identity, where is the scope for reflection, personal agency

(23) Mehmood Naqshbandi, "Uk Mosque Statistics,"(2016).

and faith development.²⁴ Britain with its diverse Muslim community is free of foreign political influences to dictate a single chosen path for its Islamic education. Looking introspectively the Muslim community has scope to explore what defines Islamic education especially as there are second and third-generation migrant Muslims who now have a greater sense of belonging to Britain than the first generation of migrants with links to their countries of origin.

What role could the state play with regards to IRE in Britain? Currently, the state funds faith schools that fulfil its criteria for the status of voluntary-aided or free schools. However, with only 27 out of 187 fulltime Islamic schools receiving state funding, some argue that the state should play a greater role, especially as Muslims citizens pay taxes that contributes to the education system.²⁵ Furthermore, the governments Prevent strategy is creating suspicions towards the Muslim community and the 'them and us' scenario, and this is perpetuated by the negative media portrayal of Muslims who pursue their beliefs and practices including Islamic education. Thus, the state needs to ensure its citizens practising multicultural values and exerting their religious freedom are treated fairly without prejudice or discrimination.

Conclusion

In examining Islamic religious education in Britain this paper highlights several themes relating to the subject matter. Firstly, the majority of the Muslim students in Britain attend state-funded comprehensive schools which follow the national curriculum. IRE for most Muslim families is an extracurricular activity with students attending evening or weekend Islamic supplementary schools. The number of full-time Islamic schools has risen over the years but they still reflect a minority viewpoint of how British Muslims educate their children during the schooling years.

Secondly, there is no singular definition of what constitutes IRE in Britain. The Muslim community in the UK is diverse with the diaspora having a connection to many Muslim countries around the world. Thus, IRE is reflective of the communities often holding onto models replicated from their countries of origins or a notion to revert to classical interpretations of Islamic education.

Thirdly, whilst the state can accommodate Islamic schools within its system as voluntary aided or free schools, frequently the media attention and government policies have treated IRE and the Muslim community with suspicion; and even after negative concerns towards IRE have been proven to be unfounded, the public perception of IRE remains damaged.

(24) A. Sahin, *New Directions in Islamic Education: Pedagogy & Identity Formation* (Kube, 2013).

(25) P. Hopkins, *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities: Race, Place and Identities* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Finally, even with a long-standing history of Muslims in Britain dating back to the 1800s, the formation of IRE in Britain is linked to the migration from the 1970s onwards. With the passing time, the number of Muslims in Britain are growing as is the generational gaps. There is scope provide Islamic religious education that is suited for the current and future generations, one reflecting the changing world that Muslims live in, with multiple identities and multiple senses of belonging.

Appendix

Subject	Key Stage 1 (age 5–7)	Key Stage 2 (age 7–11)	Key Stage 3 (age 11–14)	Key Stage 4 (age 14–16)
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Art & Design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design & Technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages ^[a]		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical Education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1 National Curriculum subjects

Biography



Dr Islam Uddin has completed his PhD in Law from Middlesex University, UK. His research was on the topic of Muslim marriage and divorce in Britain. He also has a Masters in Islamic Studies from Middlesex University and has completed his Alim course.

He is an Imam and a lecturer at a private Islamic institute in London. He teaches classical and contemporary Islamic studies. Previously he has presented papers discussing traditional and modern understandings of religious texts, multiculturalism and universal human rights.

