

Islamic Schools as Change Agents

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Islamic Schools as Change Agents

Introduction

This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Islamic schools as agents of change in American society. The author has relied on current literature on Islamic education in America as well as historical sources to make comparisons between Muslims in America, past and present, and to compare Islamic schools with other schooling endeavors in our nation's history. The author has also drawn to some degree on his own extensive experience since 1996 at four very different Islamic schools as well as his personal network of contacts with leading pioneers in Islamic education.

Muslims in America

Islamic schools are seemingly a recent phenomenon amongst Muslims in America. It is estimated currently that there are 200-600 Islamic day schools in the United States serving approximately 30,000 students, (Strauss & Wax, 2002). In each of the schools that the author has observed, the average age of the institution was approximately 10-12 years. These schools have all been established by the most recent wave of Muslims emigrating primarily from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. While institution building among this population has been impressive in the past 20 years, ranging from schools to political organizations, it is important to note that this is not the first time Islam has come to America's shores, (Safi, 1999).

There is mounting archaeological evidence to support the notion that Muslims from West Africa were already in America at the time of Columbus' arrival (Quick, 1996). Muslims from Spain may have been in America up to five centuries before Columbus, (Mroueh, 2002). It is also believed that Muslims had lived amongst and intermarried with various Native American tribes such as the Melungeons of the Appalachian region, (Kennedy, 1994).

The next wave of Muslims came to America from Africa as a result of the institution of slavery. It is believed that at least one-fifth of the African slaves brought to America were Muslims, (Shamma, 1999). Beyond the famed Kunte Kinte of Alex Haley's "Roots", more recent case studies have provided us with a scholarly glimpse into the commitment of some of these early Muslims to their religion, (Austin, 1997) and (Diouf, 1998). However, intense persecution under the peculiar brand of slavery practiced in antebellum America is most likely responsible for the disappearance of Islam amongst the descendants of these people, (Shamma).

However, it has been argued that an Islamic revival of sorts did occur amongst the descendants of slaves beginning in the early 1900s amongst black-nationalist movements that utilized Islam for empowering African-Americans in their long enduring struggle for civil rights. Islam provided a cultural link between Christianity and an African heritage that could provide African-Americans with a history upon which to build a sense of national identity. Movements such as Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple, the influence of the Ahmadiyyah sect on Marcus Garvey, and Elijah [Poole] Muhammad's Nation of Islam are not considered to be fully aligned with Islamic orthodoxy, but their contribution to the present state of Muslims in America can not be ignored, (Rashad, 1991).

Furthermore, such movements were linked to a forgotten wave of Muslim immigration that took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Among this group were those who had some influence on the black-nationalist movements above, (Rashad, 1991).

There have been documented cases of Muslims of this period establishing permanent institutions. Ross, North Dakota boasts the earliest case of Muslims gathering for a Jumu'ah

[Friday] Prayer in 1900. Maine and Connecticut had mosques in 1915. Detroit claims one of the oldest mosques built in 1922. Brooklyn, NY claims a mosque from 1926. The 1930s saw mosques in Michigan, California, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The so-called “Mother Mosque” of Cedar Rapids, Iowa grew out of a Lebanese cultural center for both Christians and Muslims dating from 1934. It now serves as an Islamic Cultural and Heritage Center, (Muhammad, 1998).

The point of delving into this history is to make note of its lasting effects, or lack thereof. The general view is that the biggest threat to this group’s religious preservation came from within. They eventually became almost completely assimilated (Wormser, 1994). As one immigrant put it:

“They began eating pork and drinking beer in order to become good Americans. Many slipped into the mainstream of American culture and gave up their Islamic way of life. They changed their names. Muhammad became Michael and Salam, Samuel. They kept their religion a secret”, (Wormser, 1994).

Scathing in his observation, Rashad (1991) points out that: “Despite the fact that some of them set up small businesses in the African-American community, when it came to religious education, they completely ignored the African-American. It is also important to note that some of them openly violated the creeds of Islam by selling alcohol, pork, and lucky charms – all in hopes of achieving the American dream of wealth.”

Abdul Munim (2002) is also critical: “The first Muslims came here about 100 years ago and established mosques, but one can hardly find a trace of them now. Their mosques lie deserted and unattended, for they did not provide an Islamic environment for their descendants, who eventually entered the American melting pot”.

The most recent wave of Muslim migration to the U.S. began in the 1960s and peaked during the 1970s & 80s. Many of these were students from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Although they benefited from the wealth and freedom in America, the timing of their entry into the U.S. coincided with an Islamic resurgence that made it difficult for many of these Muslims to relate or interact in a lifestyle that was in their view, exceedingly permissive and sinful. This limited their interaction with non-Muslim Americans and led to the establishment of Islamic organizations such as the MSA [Muslim Student Association] and later ISNA [Islamic Society of North America], (Safi, 1999).

It is out of this generation that our current milieu of Islamic organizations, schools, political advocacy groups, and other social services and business enterprises that cater to the needs of Muslims have blossomed. Some have argued that America has presented a unique opportunity for Islam to revive after being choked for so long under the grasp of neo-colonialist regimes overseas. In America, Muslims have been able to experience the value of asserting their political rights. America also brought about the need for cultural reform amongst immigrants who came together from a variety of backgrounds. Even the Islamic centers that have characterized the American mosque epitomize the realization of a return to an ideal from the Prophet Muhammad’s time. According to Safi (1999), “It was in America that the comprehensive role of the mosque...was restored”.

On the surface it would appear that Muslims have founded the beginnings of a viable Islamic community in North America. However, while the latest wave of immigrants has seemingly transcended the barriers of their predecessors, there still remains the threat of assimilation to the same degree to which other ethnic and religious groups have succumbed in the nation’s history. Will Muslims in America use their freedom to idealize Islam as a distinct way of life, or will they become predominately American in lifestyle relegating their religion to its culturally appropriate time and place?

Abdul Munim (2002) answers: “Today the situation is most alarming. Muslim thinkers opine that most young Muslims have lost Islam and its values to a dangerous degree. In fact, many of them hardly know the basics of Allah’s Oneness and Muhammad’s Prophethood.”

He also disagrees with Safi’s estimation of the American Islamic center as a realization of the ideal. Instead he says, “A mosque cannot protect the children’s faith, because it is no longer an educational and training institution... Today there are hundreds of mosques in this country, but there is no united platform to evolve and pursue common goals... If we do not prepare the ground, the Muslim community will lose its roots. Our mosques, Islamic centers, and foundations, which have cost so much effort and money to establish, will go to waste. History is full of such examples”, (Abdul Munim, 2002).

Yet Safi (1999) also admits that there are serious shortcomings. Perhaps one of the most alarming is the division of Muslim communities. In smaller communities, one can still observe another of the ideals that the American experience has provided for Muslims in terms of ethnic diversity. Ethnic clubs do unite immigrants of common heritage outside of the Islamic center. However, such race-based associations provide a seedbed for division as the population grows. In more advanced locales Safi observes, “ethnic commonalities triumphed over Islamic bonds as the basis for communities”. As the number of mosques and Muslim neighborhoods grow, it is impossible to ignore that such areas reflect more of an ethnic identity than a religious one that transcends race. Further division occurs due to a generation gap between immigrants and American born children, (Safi).

Both of these issues were common to America’s previous waves of settlers. In the author’s view, this indicates that Muslim communities are currently following a trend favoring assimilation toward an American lifestyle rather than implementing Islam as a way of life. This can be explored further by examining Islamic schools and their mission statements.

Do they seek to establish a future of Islam as a lifestyle in America? Or are they more reminiscent of the attempts of previous immigrant groups to preserve their cultural heritage and to protect their children from the hidden dangers of a foreign society? Do they offer an educational experience that can be uniquely characterized as “Islamic”?

Education in America

The history of education in America is important to note during any consideration of the impact of Islamic schools. Among the main purposes of American education are to maintain an educated citizenry for the proper functioning of democracy, and to assimilate immigrants into the American mainstream through language and culture. As Perkinson (1991) writes, “For over 200 years the Americans have looked to their schools... to solve their social, economic, and political problems... first to preserve civilization, then to prepare for the unexpected, and finally to guarantee good government”.

Puritan education provided the first schools in America, intended primarily to thwart Satan’s efforts “to keep men from knowledge of the scriptures”, (Spring, 1986). Despite the strength and influence of Puritans on early New England, it is worth noting that there are no Puritan communities surviving in America today. Not even their divine purposes were enough to preserve them from assimilation.

Apprenticeships were also widespread vehicles for teaching trades in early America, thereby preparing the youth for their economic future. However, due to labor shortages Benjamin Franklin, among others, pushed for the establishment of new schools that would provide a general education preparing the youth for the unexpected nature of future possibilities in America, (Perkinson, 1991).

Public schools actually began to take hold in the early 1800s and have been viewed in a variety of contexts. Some consider their political aims. Jefferson's intent was to "rake the best geniuses from the rubbish" in order to create a new elite built on merit and talent, whereas Jacksonian Democracy brought about a shift toward eliminating privilege and elitism and viewed schools as a social institution that operated as the great equalizer, (Perkinson, 1991).

Horace Mann's efforts in Massachusetts are generally viewed as the beginnings of the modern public education system. It is necessary to note his view of the school as a social institution necessary for human reform and his own shift from law to education due to his realization that "Men are cast-iron, but children are wax", (Spring, 1986).

Religion being the basis for moral education at the time, it was considered an essential part of schooling. Mann was also moving toward a non-denominational basis for teaching Christian morals in the school. He did not want public schools to be condemned as antireligious or secular, but he also did not want to destroy the objective of bringing all of America's youth together to learn a common heritage. He attempted to overcome the sharp religious rivalries with his position that "If a certain system, called Christianity were contained in...the Bible, then wherever the Bible might go, there the system of Christianity must be", (Spring, 1986).

He went on to list the basic moral doctrines of Christianity as piety, justice, love of country, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity, moderation, and temperance. Thus, he believed that by using the Bible in public schools, such general Christian values could be inculcated so as to satisfy the need for religious moral instruction in school without allowing sectarian differences to destroy its unity. Of the alternatives to his plan was to allow the majority of people within a school community to determine the religion for their school, but Mann believed that the resulting heat of religious rivalry as each denomination fought to have their own doctrines included would completely destroy the public school, (Spring, 1986).

One may wonder at how non-denominational religious instruction could have ever been achieved in light of the sharp religious divides between people in America during the 1830s. There is no better example of this than with the Catholics who felt excluded from the public school and found it necessary to establish and maintain their own schools regardless of the barriers and resulting personal expense such schools required. As public schools gained support and were increasingly funded through tax dollars, the notion of "double taxation" became a common complaint among Catholics who were required to support public schools with their tax dollars while maintaining Catholic schools with their personal money in order to provide an education for their own children. There were several issues at stake with regard to Catholics in the public school. For one, many Catholics were immigrants from Ireland and Germany and were not welcomed in the first place by nativists. There was also a general level of anti-Catholic sentiment in the Protestant community, which was dominant in American society, and thus the same mainstream that comprised the public school. In fact, Catholics charged that anti-Catholic statements could be found in the textbooks and even in the attitudes of the instructors and the culture of the schools. Further, bringing the common book of Christianity into school as a basis for non-denominational instruction is not as easy as it sounds considering the fact that Catholics in particular have their own version of the Bible that varies significantly from the King James Version, (Spring, 1986).

The justification of Catholic complaints about public schools were clearly illustrated when William Seward, elected governor of New York in 1838, proposed in 1840 that Catholic schools should become part of the state school system while retaining their private charters and religious affiliation. His concern was especially with Irish-Catholic immigrants who were not attending public schools because of their anti-Catholic atmosphere and would be destined to

become illiterates and public burdens for lack of a mainstream education. He argued that it was necessary for the state to provide moral and religious instruction to all children by supporting schools with public funds that would be administered by Catholic officials. Seward's proposal gained support from Catholics who presented a historically significant petition that enumerated their grievances. The response to his proposal ranged from political debate, party realignment, and in some cases riots, church burnings, and even death. The controversy was not limited to New York alone, but spread to Pennsylvania and Maryland among other states, (Spring, 1986).

Catholics became even more resolute about establishing their own schools as America progressed into the late 1800s and public schools increasingly turned toward secular philosophy. Despite the trend toward secularism, Catholics continued to view public schools as "Protestant Schools" into the 20th century, (Spring, 1986).

In fact, consider the case of Cork Hill Cathedral in Davenport, Iowa, which in 1859 was determined to establish a Catholic school. They cited the First Provincial Council of St. Louis's joint letter from the Bishops in attendance to show the Catholic obligation to build schools: "We feel it one of our sacred duties... Whatever sacrifice the discharge of this duty may impose on pastors and people should be willingly made... We desire to see attached to every church, schools under the direction of the pastors", (Greer, 1956).

Catholic schools today are perhaps the most widespread alternative school system to public schools in the United States. But to what degree Catholic schools offer a true educational alternative to public schools is a matter for further discussion. While Catholic schools apparently served a dire need throughout the 1800s and even much of the 1900s, the author questions whether at the turn of the 21st century, Catholic schools have at last been more influenced by the society at large than vice-versa.

To answer this question I would refer to what has been identified as a general trend in American religion toward a "public church" that includes Protestants, Catholics, Evangelicals, as well as Jews. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s led to reforms that signified a shift in the Catholic Church from internal concerns regarding its own members, many of whom were immigrants, to cooperation and participation in American society including civil rights and nuclear warfare. While many Catholics seem to hold the view that Vatican II was a positive step toward making the Catholic Church more practicable and in-tune with modern American life, it has been argued that it also invigorated the major Protestant denominations as well, (Bellah et al., 1996).

The parallel being drawn in this paper between this social trend and the question of Catholic education is that in public schools Protestants had assimilated and used the King James Bible as a basis for common moral ground. Catholics resisted for a significant period of time due to their lack of agreement on scripture as well as the anti-Catholic bigotry present in public schools. The shift toward secularism has allowed Mann's non-denominational approach to transcend these limitations. By the 1960s, America accepted a Catholic President, and the Catholic Church's new positions allowed and brought about interfaith cooperation in social issues that have also transcended religious differences. Churches do remain distinct, but the general message and purposes of religious institutions seem to have shifted in a common direction from moral absolutes and salvation toward providing individuals with spiritual therapy and providing social services to society, (Bellah et al., 1996).

I would contend that this shift can also be seen in Catholic schools themselves. They do continue to offer courses in religious instruction grounded in the Catechism. But as these courses have become optional and marginalized while the core curriculum is taught from a secular perspective, what significant alternative do Catholic schools really offer?

The purpose of this paper is not to scrutinize the Catholic schools. But attention has been given to them here due to what I would consider parallels between Catholic and Islamic schools. Muslims have objected to public schools on both the grounds that motivated Catholics to establish a separate school system. Firstly, on philosophical grounds, it can be argued that Islamic education is not compatible with secularism since the “revealed knowledge” found in the Qur’an and Hadeeth literature supersedes scientific knowledge. Secondly, anti-Muslim rhetoric and bigotry has also been identified in the public schools and their texts. It must be noted that the lines drawn between Muslims and secular Americans have not been as pronounced as those between 19th century Catholics and Protestants, though recent events affecting our nation have made anti-Muslim rhetoric more of an issue since 9-11-2001. More significantly though, is the question of whether or not the result will be the same. Will Islamic schools offer any significant alternative to public education in the long haul?

Islamic Schools

It is surprising to find out that Islamic schools are actually not quite as recent of a phenomenon as they seem. The general ignorance of this fact points in itself to the problem of failing to learn from past mistakes. As with the famous line of George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Possibly the first Islamic school in America can be attributed to the efforts of Shaikh Daud Faisal in Brooklyn New York. Beginning in 1928 and officially incorporated 1948 as the Islamic Mission of America, Faisal had the endorsement of Muslim authorities in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia. He claimed a Moroccan father but was considered African-American. Most of his work was with African American converts, calling them to the Sunni creed of Islam. He was apparently successful at first, purchasing a large estate in East Fishkill, New York and converting it to an expansive Muslim community replete with an Islamic school. However, there is no trace of this community today, said to have been lost due to inadequate finances, (Rashad, 1991) and (Nyang, 1999).

From the 1930s to the present, Clara Muhammad schools provide the first Islamic school system in the United States. These schools were initially established through the black-nationalist Nation of Islam (NOI). However, when the organization passed on to the leadership of Elijah Muhammad’s son, Warith Deen Muhammad, it was converted to Sunni orthodoxy, (Shamma, 1999). A clear distinction was made between the new direction of Warith Deen Muhammad’s leadership and the old creed of the NOI when Farrakhan emerged within a few years to revive the black-nationalist movement, (Rashad, 1991). However, despite this merge with orthodoxy, Warith Deen Muhammad’s community has yet to realize full amalgamation with the Sunni mainstream, (Wormser, 1994).

This is important because not only does this community provide us with a noteworthy example of an Islamic school system in America, but it also represents a Muslim community that has remained racially distinct from its other Muslim brethren. In fact, even the motives for the establishment of Clara Muhammad schools give cause for reflection: namely problems with sex and violence in impoverished public schools along with curriculum concerns, (Shamma, 1999). Both of these issues parallel the early Catholic schools in that the ethnic population is poor and underserved by the government, and both groups perceive the curriculum of the public schools to be hostile and potentially damaging to the identity of their children.

In fact, the goals for establishing Islamic schools are not much different: Firstly, to promulgate the teachings of the religion and secondly to safeguard the students from such evils of society as drugs, racism, and premarital sex, (Suliman, 1997). Obviously, our mission is not so

unique, and is in fact, reminiscent of immigrant groups that have come in the past, from the first Puritans to Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and others, (Strauss & Wax, 2002). It is even less unique in light of the fact that the new Islamic schools are developing independently of but parallel to the Clara Muhammad schools that purportedly have the same mission. If the explanation for this is due to the belief that the Clara Muhammad schools have not completely separated themselves from their black-nationalist origins, then the new Islamic schools have a responsibility to remain pure in their religious aims. The question then, is whether or not the race charge can be substantiated against these new schools.

This question will most likely be answered in due time. Indigenous American Muslims who are not aligned with black-nationalism and simply consider themselves mainstream Muslims based on the ideals of the Qur'an and the Sunnah will no doubt feel out of place in institutions that cater mainly to the immigrant population. The ethnic divisions that have characterized Islamic centers and Muslim neighborhoods will inevitably roll over into schools as well. The author observed in one case where families had a choice between two schools, the African-American population overwhelmingly attended the same school, leveling claims that the other school was for Arabs. Interestingly, primarily immigrants controlled both of these schools and there were still complaints of poor representation in decision-making. The majority of White-American Muslims at present are females who have intermarried with Arabs, so little can be generalized about this population. Turning our attention to divergence between Arab and Indo-Pakistani groups, the author has observed that in locales with large enough populations, these groups have separated into ethnic communities with their own mosques, schools, and businesses.

The particularly sad thing about this trend is that Americans who are not drawn to Islam through marriage, are beckoned by its idealism. Malcolm X's racial transformation during Hajj provides a common point of entry for many Americans, (Wormser, 1994). The blunt disparity between American idealism and the aspirations of some of their immigrant counterparts necessitates understanding. Many Americans convert (or revert) to Islam in order to escape what they perceive to be America's social ills and injustices. Immigrants who have put their dreams in America's promise of opportunity obviously hold a different perspective and sometimes, contradictory aims.

Muslim immigrants also enter America facing similar nativist prejudices to those faced by past groups such as the Irish Catholics. A 1994 study by the AMC revealed that Muslims had the highest "unfavorable" rating and the lowest "favorable" rating; 23% interviewed had a favorable impression, while 36% were negative and 41% were unsure. It is likely that this figure has been altered since the infamous 9-11-2001 attacks. But the study's findings are still important in the context of the early 1990s when many Islamic schools were in their initial stages. There are also documented case studies at the time of harassment by students and teachers along with shortcomings in the curriculum, (Wormser, 1994). All of this indicates that the same motives were present for establishing Islamic schools as for previous groups.

The generation gap between Muslim teens and their parents also follows the same trends as those of other immigrant groups. Attempts to protect children by parents are easily interpreted by their students as a culture gap rather than religious need. In some cases, expectations of conformity from parents have led to an outward compliance but inward rebellion against Islam. Muslim teens are curious about others and the things they have been sheltered from. Muslim teens exposed to American culture must also resist peer pressure to conform. Especially for girls, Islamic dress codes set them apart. Sometimes even the message from the adults is confused as

in the case of some Muslim girls who are put in Islamic schools for cultural reasons but are told by their own parents *not* to wear the hijab in public, (Wormser, 1994).

These points stress the importance of communicating the right message to students in Islamic schools. If students feel that religion is being used insincerely as a tool to ensure cultural conformity with an “old world” standard, they will be more likely to rebel. Just like the new American converts, young Muslims need to be given an opportunity to buy into the idealism of Islam. In order for this to happen, they will need to see it exhibited by their parents beyond culture.

Furthermore, this requires a calculated effort amongst the educators operating and administering Islamic schools. The goals and mission statement of the school must be clear and a systematic methodology should be put in place to achieve them. The entire school culture should be managed toward these aims from the hiring and training of staff to the academic and discipline standards set for students. Obviously parents also must be in agreement with the school’s mission in order for them to agree to bring their children. The school’s mission must be kept in the public eye and periodically measured for progress. The administration is the driving force behind determining the effectiveness of school culture, (Snowden & Gorton, 2002).

Al-Iman School in Raleigh, North Carolina offers the following mission statement on its website:

“Al-Iman School shall be guided by the Quran and Sunnah according to the methodology of the People of the Sunnah and Jamaah. The school shall, through the teaching of religious and secular courses, prepare students to:

- Succeed in this life and the Hereafter;
- Meet or exceed the goals and requirements of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and the National Educational Goals.”

The page goes on to expand upon its statement of purpose and its educational commitments, (Al-Iman School, 2002).

In the author’s estimation, this represents one example of a well-formed mission statement with a reasonable methodology. However, it exhibits some key weaknesses of the attempt to offer a truly Islamic alternative. As Shamma (1999) points out, most Islamic school curricula are a modification of an existing state curriculum. This is usually the case and reasonable so because the secular curriculum is readily available, professionally developed, enjoys parent confidence, and honestly it is what the majority of Muslim educators are most familiar with, due to their being trained in western universities and the fact that true Islamic systems were lost during colonialism, (Shamma, 1999).

Shamma (1999) identifies 5 common assumptions which usually ease any misgivings about adopting a secular curriculum in Islamic schools:

1. It is required by law;
2. Standardized testing necessitates a secular approach;
3. No major philosophical differences with Islam;
4. No conflict between secularism and the social and emotional development of the Muslim American child;
5. No conflict with the moral standards in Islam;

In all of these cases the assumptions are not necessarily valid. It is not within the scope of this paper to refute them, but particularly with regard to the last three, there are fundamental implications for Muslim schools, (Shamma, 1999).

As noted earlier, even Horace Mann feared the condemnation of running a secular school system. Secularism developed in education during a time when philosophy gradually replaced religion in schools. As subjects became departmentalized, philosophy and ethics eventually became so compartmentalized within the social sciences that such subjects were studied exclusively and no longer had an extension through the curriculum. Islam advocates an integrated approach to learning, especially with regard to values and beliefs, (Safi, 1999).

But secularism has penetrated even our mission statements as illustrated by Al-Iman School above. Universal School in Bridgeview, Illinois, has as its motto: “Where Islam and Education Come Together”. Upon reflection, one teacher queried, “Are we implying that at some point the two are separate!?”

But even more serious is the state of the Islamic studies curriculum in our schools. Considering all the effort required for establishing separate schools for Muslims, it would seem that religious education would be given the highest priority. Unfortunately, the state of Islamic schools reflects otherwise. Instead it is the norm that administrators are most concerned about academics first, which are taught in a secular context, and then typically three courses concerning religion are added: Arabic, Qur’an Memorization, and Islamic studies. Curricula in these three areas have yet to be sufficiently developed. Whatever is being taught tends toward an overemphasis on rituals in Islamic studies and memorization in Quran, (Shamma, 1999).

And what then is the result? According to Shamma (1999): “At best the classes produced factually knowledgeable youth who were not committed to Islam, and at worst, the classes were turning the students away from Islam”.

In a book entitled “Little X”, Sonsyrea Tate shares her experience growing up in the Nation of Islam’s schools including the conversion to Sunni Islam and all the contradictions between the real and ideal and the conflict between being American and Muslim. Reflecting on her childhood she says,

“I’ve looked back over my life with some anger and resentment and bitterness. I blamed my parents, their parents, racist American leaders, and even God for making conditions in this country so wretched, so oppressive, so confusing that my grandparents – and hundreds of thousands through the years – felt the need to go to such extreme measures seeking salvation. Now I consider all those feelings to be simply a growing process and the restrictions and ridicule I suffered merely growing pains”, (Tate, 1997).

What is being demonstrated is only a portion of the counterproductive outcome that an education gone awry results in. To be successful, the Islamic school must be clear about its agenda and the methodology it will use to achieve its aims. Mixed messages between Islam and culture must be eliminated. Separating students from the mainstream and other sacrifices made without ever actualizing the stated goals of the institution may have severe consequences. It is agreed that a complete curriculum overhaul is needed with Islamic concepts as a starting point in every subject. Balance and integration of subject matter is needed to particularly suit the Muslim in the American context. There is an even greater need for effective teachers in Islamic schools who exemplify the subject matter. Further, the development of texts that also incorporate the Islamic model are needed in order for the curriculum to be implemented practically, (Shamma, 1999).

The South African based Islamic education research team called IBERR has proposed a worthwhile paradigm for the Islamization of curriculum. Utilizing the terminology “Fard ‘Ayn” for religious knowledge that is a requirement for every Muslim and the term “Fard Kifayyah” for sciences which require specialists, but not necessarily detailed knowledge by every individual. Within this context perhaps the priority of Islamic religious knowledge in Muslim schools could

find a more appropriate place. Once again it is worth mentioning that South Africa and Great Britain both offer Americans potential partnerships in developing Islamic schools as minorities in non-Muslim countries. American Muslims need not reinvent the wheel, (IBERR, 2000).

It should also be pointed out that IQRA International has been developing an Islamic studies curriculum for a substantial time along with texts, (Ghazi, 1999). This contribution is being utilized to a degree in many schools, but according to the opinions of Muslim educators at conferences over the past two years, curriculum development, especially in Islamic studies is still being identified as a key deficiency. The Muslim American Society Council on Islamic Schools [MASCIS] also cites curriculum and materials development for 3 of their 6 main goals, (MASCIS, 2002).

While we are inspired by the attention given to the need for curriculum development, it is still a wonder that the very purpose for which Islamic schools are supposedly being established has remained under construction as the least developed department for over 10 years and running. Certainly this reflects something about the prevailing priorities in the administration of these schools. After pondering the aforementioned data, one can reasonably draw the conclusion that Islamic schools in their present state are not unlike other attempts by immigrant or minority groups to provide a cultural haven and a shelter against society's ills. As such ills eventually do permeate the subculture and the coming generation assimilates, there will be little need to continue to pay double for Islamic schools. At best, Islamic schools will follow the Catholic schools toward providing an environment similar to public schools with the option of courses in religion.

There are other points to consider in determining the effectiveness of Islamic schools such as student discipline, academic standards and performance, staff satisfaction, facilities and maintenance, and so forth. In this paper we have shown that Islamic schools have much more of a history in America than is commonly believed, and strongly resemble previous efforts at providing a sheltered education to an immigrant or minority population. We have also demonstrated that divisions along ethnic lines coupled with the failure to give due attention to the curricular content for which the schools are being established only reinforce the point. In fact, perhaps the most compelling argument is that our discussion of Islamic schools has never gone beyond the communities in which they serve. As effective change agents in society, Islamic institutions must determine what they will offer to others. How can the benefits of Islamic education be extended to others when so far, all the efforts are directed inwards toward an exclusive population in society?

What does the Future Hold?

After all of these considerations, let us throw one more interesting figure on the table. According to an estimate given by Abdessalam (2002), Islamic schools currently only serve 5% of the Muslims in America! The remaining 95% elect to send their kids to other schools. What this means is that when we evaluate the ramifications of the aforementioned, we should realize that the task of Islamic schooling has really only just begun. It is true that there is a vast amount of work to do. But the experiences gained from the beginning endeavors can be likened to a warm-up before the actual project begins. There are many valuable lessons to be learned, and much on the horizon in terms of potential vehicles for success.

First, Muslims must have confidence that the religion of Islam as a complete way of life in submission to God's peace is a worthy and achievable goal. Further, it offers benefits to the entire society, and thus our efforts in Islamic schools should be directed not just toward our own youth, but toward America's youth as well.

We also must take into account the compromises being made presently and their costs. If it is admitted that Islamic schools are falling short in achieving their religious objectives on a holistic level, does it make sense to deprive ourselves of government funding that could lead to better schools? If we take advantage of some of the new opportunities for government funding, we can creatively determine new alternatives for achieving those religious objectives within a new context.

One way we can tap into government funding is through the increasing trend toward school choice, (Amri, 2002). In some cases, even religious schools are being allowed in on voucher programs that give parents the choice to opt for a religious based education. The Supreme Court ruled in June of 2002 in *Zelman vs. Harris* that Cleveland parents can use tax dollars for private schools – even religious ones, (Zarzour, 2002). Some Muslims caution against the strings that could be attached to government money, (Ahmad, 2002), but it is equally imperative that we consider the strings that Muslims attach to their school quality by not accepting it.

Without government money, Muslims always pay twice – once through taxes, secondly through tuition. Also, as long as budgets are tied to tuition, schools are put in a position to accept problem students even if they compromise the quality of education because their tuition dollars are so desperately needed. Further, most Islamic schools cannot afford the infrastructure to better serve students with special needs. And the most exciting potential is that trained educators can put themselves in control of schools when they have access to government funds. This allows them to make educational decisions based on their professional expertise. Currently, much of the innovation in education has to be filtered through school boards comprised of non-educators.

Another idea for taking education in a new direction for Muslims is deliberately settling in one particular neighborhood, thereby constituting a majority in an existing public school. However, this idea takes much coordination and needs to develop a plan for how such a community would benefit others in society.

On the other hand charter schools also present a way in which Muslims can open a publicly funded school. Muslim educators can devise a philosophy of education that is not overtly religious but still bring the strengths of an Islamic approach.

Opening schools that are particularly geared toward segments of the non-Muslim population that provide a superior quality of learning is yet another way Muslim educators can transcend their current level of involvement in the American community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has compared the currently developing Islamic schools with similar schools in American history and has also taken into consideration the influence of past Muslim groups on American society in comparison to what our modern Muslim community currently offers. While it appears that much of our current efforts are directed inward and strongly resemble the normal adjustments of other immigrant populations to American society, it is acknowledged that there is much in the way of potential for Muslim educators to have an impact if we look into new varieties of options for school funding. It can be safely said that when considering the trade-offs between compromises that government funds necessitate and our track record thus far in such areas, it certainly does not result in much loss compared to the potential gains of enabling ourselves to provide a higher quality of education to a broader population.

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