

Policy Context of Islamic Schooling in Three Western Nations

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The educational systems in Western Europe and North America were, until recent decades, unapologetically and often markedly Christian in their content and their intentions. Now each of them faces the challenge of adapting to religious pluralism, especially as a result of massive population movements from Muslim countries.

This has varied from country to country, it is true. Public schools in France have not been 'Christian' since the party in power in the 1880s took measures to remove all religious influence from public schools and even tried to do so from private schools, insisting that the educational system promote a sort of religion of citizenship instead.

But that was an exception. The great majority of schools in Germany remained either Protestant or Catholic until the Nazis determined to accept no rival source of moral authority. Most pupils in Belgium and the Netherlands attend schools which are officially Christian, as do about one in three of the pupils in England. We could go country-by-country seeing how the Christian background of educational systems persists, even though most countries of Western Europe have become highly secularized in terms of religious practice.

The United States is another exception, and in some ways is the mirror-image of a country like England or the Netherlands, which have religious schools in largely post-religious societies. In the United States, by contrast, the society continues marked by religious belief and practice to a significant extent, while oddly-enough public schools are reluctant even to acknowledge the existence of religion in the society around them. On the other hand, there are thousands of religious private schools which receive no support at all from government – and among these are more than two hundred Islamic schools.

The presence of millions of Muslims in their midst, and not just strangers but fellow-citizens, often knowing no other homeland, has been a major challenge for the countries of Western Europe and North America. Unfortunately, the conflicts which have resulted are a familiar story which need no repeating. What is not so well known are the many accommodations, and the different forms which these have taken in different countries.

Start with the United States. There are, as noted, more than two hundred Islamic schools which provide a full academic education parallel to that in public schools. None receive public funding: in that respect, they are treated exactly like Catholic and Protestant and Jewish schools, and they are subject to the same supervision by local education authorities, a supervision which varies from state to state but is in general fairly superficial.

The best estimate is that there are about 2.35 million Muslims in the United States, which means that the great majority of their children attend ordinary public schools, while some attend Catholic or Protestant schools chosen by their parents in preference to aggressively-secular public schools. Muslim girls have a right to wear the *hijab* in public schools, and the national government intervened to protect that right in one case. A few public schools in areas with significant population have made accommodations with respect to *halal* food and prayer times,

but this is uncommon. In secondary schools with 'student activities' periods, Muslim students have the right to form a voluntary group to study the Qur'an together, but without teacher participation. If teachers participated, even voluntarily, this could give the impression of government endorsement of religion, and that is strictly prohibited by a series of court decisions. The same applies, of course, to Christian and Jewish students and teachers.

There has been very little controversy about Islamic schooling in the United States (the exception involves a school operated by the Saudi embassy, not any of the community-based schools operated by mosques or Islamic associations), and there is every reason to believe that these schools – most of which are quite small but seeking to grow – are providing a good education and preparing their pupils to fit in to American society without losing their identity as Muslims. There is no reason to believe that the hundreds of community-based Islamic schools across the country are promoting rejection of American life in general, though of course it is in the nature and purpose of faith-based schools of any religious tradition to teach pupils what aspects of the surrounding culture are inconsistent with their beliefs. Parents of the tens of thousands of pupils attending Islamic schools in the United States, like parents of the millions of pupils attending Christian and Jewish schools, are seeking a good academic education in a context that takes seriously their deepest convictions.

The situation is very different in France, where 17 percent of the pupils attend publicly-funded private schools, mostly Catholic and several hundred Jewish schools, but there are less than ten Islamic schools at latest count, none of them supported with public funds despite a Muslim population that is larger than that in the United States. Reports in the press indicate that French security services are concerned about 'clandestine' Islamic schools. In addition, there has been a controversy for the past twenty years over the extent to which Muslim students may express their faith in the public schools which almost all of them attend. This culminated, in 2004, with passage of a law forbidding Muslim girls to wear the *hijab* (or Sikh boys to wear the turban and Jewish boys to wear the yarmulke) in public schools, and the expulsion of a number of these girls for refusing to comply. There have also been many reports of conflict in public schools over elements of the curriculum, and mistrust between teachers and their pupils, as well as the pupils' families. Even if many of these reports are exaggerated, it is clear that the educational system is one of the points of difficulty in the relationship between French society and its growing Muslim minority.

The situation is different again in the Netherlands: despite political and social conflicts over the presence of a large Muslim minority, as in France, the educational system is not implicated in these conflicts in the same way. The Dutch government provides full funding to about fifty Islamic schools, which follow the same curriculum as other schools but do so on the basis of an Islamic worldview. The government has satisfied itself that the Islamic schools are not preventing the pupils enrolled from making an appropriate adjustment to life in Dutch society, and that the academic outcomes are at least equivalent to those in public schools serving pupils from similar backgrounds. The great majority of Muslim pupils, however, are in Protestant or Catholic or public schools. Girls are allowed to wear the *hijab*, and an on-line search of the archives of a Dutch national newspaper found almost no trace of controversies over that, in contrast with the results of a similar search of *Le Figaro*.

My purpose here is not to criticize the French response to the presence of a large Muslim minority by contrasting it with the much less conflict-laden situation in the United States, nor the situation of the French educational system in relation to Islam by contrasting it with the successful accommodation in the Netherlands, but to use the three countries to illustrate the

way that history constrains and shapes policies in countries which, in other respects, are quite similar.

The American situation is one of great religious diversity and – despite secularization – continuing vitality, in which Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism have been able to fit into the religious mosaic with little controversy, and certainly infinitely less conflict than was the case in the 19th century when Catholicism became a major presence through immigration. The quiet acceptance of new religious traditions and their institutional expression in places of worship and schools has been greatly facilitated by the fact that no religious group is formally recognized by government at any level. The new mosque on Main Street stands in just the same relationship with government as the Protestant church that has been there for two hundred years, and it is likely that the imam will be invited to join the ‘Council of Churches’ where pastors and priests and rabbis meet to share their concerns . . . and probably to share lunch as well.

On the other hand, in contrast with the Netherlands, the Muslim community in an American city or suburban area is completely dependent on its own resources to pass on its faith and its traditions to its children. If the community sends those children to the local public school, it is almost certain that they will gain the impression that religion of any variety could not be very important, since it is almost never mentioned in class or in the texts that they read. Perhaps the fact that Christianity will be neglected just as much as Islam would be some comfort, but parents may well be concerned that their children will gain the impression that religion is something associated with ‘the old country’ and not relevant to life in America. Their daughters will be free to wear a *hijab* in school, but it is likely to be considered an interesting fashion statement rather than a religious one.

If, instead, those parents work with other Muslims to create a school, they will encounter little interference from any level of government, but they will take on a great financial burden with no support from the dollars they are paying in taxes to support the public schools. It is no accident that almost all the Islamic schools in the United States are at the elementary level; creating and supporting an adequate secondary school is far more expensive, and few communities have been able to do that. As a result, many mosques offer supplemental religious and cultural instruction to adolescents outside of the hours of public schooling.

The evidence is that American Islamic schools, like the Muslim community in general, are (in the words of the Pew Research Center) “decidedly American in their outlook, values and attitudes” and “believe that Muslims coming to the U.S. should try [to] adapt American customs, rather than trying to remain distinct from the wider society.”

In the Netherlands, the political compromises made a century ago between secular and Catholic and Protestant politicians resulted in constitutional protection for religious schooling, and government funds it on the same basis as it does public schools. In fact, two-thirds of Dutch children attend Catholic or Protestant schools, a much higher share than that of church-goers among the population. When Muslim parents began to ask for their own schools in the 1980s, the demand was supported by the other religious groups and, as noted, there are now about fifty schools with an Islamic character, teaching in Dutch (apart from Arabic classes) and following Dutch curriculum guidelines. As in the United States, Islamic schools in the Netherlands provide a ‘safe haven’ for the children of Muslim families as they adapt to a future in a religiously-pluralistic society.

From this perspective, it seems an unfortunate historical relic that France finds it much more

difficult than either the United States or the Netherlands to accommodate religious diversity. The struggle over many decades against the historical role of the Catholic Church as an institution with official standing (such an arrangement has been specifically forbidden in the United States for 220 years) left a legacy of militant secularism that looks upon manifestations of religious conviction and practice with extreme suspicion. This suspicion is now directed primarily against what many French policymakers perceive as the threat of Islam to undermine the unity of French society and national identity.

Nothing has been said, here, about Islamic schooling 'from the inside', or what forms it should take; only those who commit themselves to it have the expertise and the credibility to say what should occur between teachers and pupils in an Islamic school. From an outside standpoint, however, certain conclusions seem obvious. One is that Muslim parents and educators in the West should be realistic about the context of assumptions and historically-shaped habits within which they operate, and should not assume that there is a single policy model in 'the West' – much less a single social and cultural environment with which to come to terms. Western nations differ in few respects so widely as in how they think about and deal with religious beliefs and practices.

Another conclusion is that the actual results of Islamic schooling, in the Netherlands and the United States, should lay to rest any assumptions on the part of the non-Muslim majority that it is somehow a threat to social peace or national unity. Just as Catholic schooling, a century and more ago, produced good and loyal American citizens, so Islamic schooling today seems to be having the same effect. In order to make such a result more sure, it is important that Islamic educators and parents be treated with respect by society, by government, and by fellow-educators.

Of course, it is equally important that Muslim educators and Muslim parents come to see themselves as part of a larger project in which people of other faiths are allies rather than opponents. That is part of what makes Al-Qasemi Academy so exciting.