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# Traditional and Modern Muslim Education at the Core and Periphery: Enduring Challenge

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## Abstract

This chapter provides a general theory of the salient concerns affecting Muslims in education across the globe today, from Muslims in Muslim majority countries to Muslims as minority citizens. From concerns around resource investment in educational infrastructure to anxieties over curricula and pedagogy, matters affecting Muslims in education differ the world over, where Muslims in education can often conjure up more uncertainties than positives. The experience affects not only young children at the nucleus of the attention but also parents, teachers, education managers, as well as wider society. In rationalizing the political and sociological milieu in different societies, it emerges that the themes of religion, ethnicity, and gender are as significant as ideology, culture, and policy, but that they are set within the context of secularization, desecularization, sacralization and the re-sacralization of Islam in the public sphere. In order to generate a philosophical, spiritual, and intellectual evaluation of Muslim education across the world, this chapter synthesizes the apprehensions that are internal and external, local and global, and which affect all Muslims, minorities and majorities.

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## Keywords

Muslims • Education • Localization • Globalization • Modernity

## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Education, Knowledge, and Power across the Muslim World .....	3
Muslim Education at the Core and at the Periphery .....	5
Discerning Questions and Concluding Thoughts .....	7
References .....	10

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## Introduction

In the world today, a focus on Muslims in the East or in the West is never far away. Ever since the events of 9/11 in the United States, the bombings in London in 2005, the Cartoons Affair of 2006, and the Islamic State attacks on France and Germany in 2016, to name the most prominent, associations between fundamentalism, extremism, and violence with Islam and Muslims are swiftly constructed. At the same time, the problems of Islamophobia are especially rife among Muslims in the West, with poorer and marginalized groups most likely to experience the brunt of anti-Muslim violence and oppression (McGinty et al. 2013). In one of the most momentous ages of our human history, as global power bases shift, particularly given the rise of the East, namely, China and India, and with the role of ICT enabling individuals and communities never before imagined, the educational needs, aspirations, and expectations of around 25 million Muslim minorities in the European Union and around 1.6 billion Muslims across the world remain crucial to grasp. Yet, the events of 9/11 signaled a negative renaissance, where fundamental Muslim cultural values are endlessly brought into question. The awkward supposition here is that these values originate in education systems in the various regions of certain so-called *Islamic fundamentalist* countries (Griffin 2006). This notion is unwieldy in many senses as it assumes that education is created in a vacuum. From there, it is then idealized. Rather, education in Muslim lands, and for Muslim minorities, is highly contentious and often intensely exigent. It is largely to do with resources and capacity as much as it is with ideology, theology, and culture (Abbas 2011).

In the situation of Muslim minorities in the West, systems of multiculturalism often tend to operationalize notions of tolerance and secularity through the popularization of a form of *multi-culture* that racializes the civilized, modern, or backward in the construction of national identities (Haque 2010). As Haw (2010, p. 360) states in a study on the intergenerational changes experienced by British Muslims in education, there are “significant question for debates around issues of multiculturalism: when did diversity and difference become conflated with the difficult and dangerous?” There is also the real phenomenon of Islamophobia (Sayyid and Vakil 2011), which prescribes limits on how societies ought to display respect toward differences contained within them by focusing on cultural boundaries while deemphasizing structural disadvantage and racism (Joppke 2009). In this, education is a major tool for change, but the principal message from findings suggests that the education practitioner is struggling with problems that do not seem to abate. Meanwhile, the world is being divided further as it rearranges itself in the face of new global hegemonies rising from the East, competing for a stake at the high table, and as the wearied post-war powers make last-ditch efforts to retain their privileges. However, in local area communities, east and west, north and south, rural or urban, Muslim minority or Muslim majority, young children are being educated in schools that under-prepare them for their lives ahead. Existing research highlights the continuing importance of Muslim identity politics, for minorities and majorities, and how the nature of the various education systems in which they find themselves are all vital considerations. The independence, resource levels, modes of assessment,

as well as the nations and states, in which different educational structures are localized, remain further important factors (Abbas 2008). In the final analysis, the wider world watches anxiously as it waits to witness how modernization, secularization, integration and benign (or malignant) multiculturalism can lead to prosperous and peaceful outcomes, and how relations between Muslims and non-Muslims can be systematically improved. It is imperative to comprehend more fully the nature and extent of these challenges so that better insights can help inform the praxis.

There is a comprehensible difference between the ways in which Islamic education issues are deliberated in secular liberal democratic contexts in relation to Muslim minorities compared with this experience in Muslim majority countries which are democratic but also Islamic in ethos and orientation (Zia 2007). The balance between secular democratic educational systems and religious aspirations regarding theological identity is a crucial one. It permeates the entire focus of the claims in this chapter, which are that while there are obstacles at the center, namely, the heartlands of Islam. There are also complications within the peripheries of those very same centers *and* among the migrant, diasporic, and transnational Muslim communities of the East and in the West. Rather, Muslim educational experiences are problematic the world over and due to the misappropriation of the spirit of Islamic praxis and the politico-national contexts rather than the principles of education in Islam, for it is these identical philosophies that produced the Golden Age of Islam (750–1258 BCE). For a literary religion, the rates of illiteracy among Muslims across the world remain alarmingly high. Much has been misplaced, and it is argued that the core has ideologically, philosophically, and theologically seized the periphery, the reasons being less to do with religion but more to do with geopolitical machinations that have artificially strengthened the center.

This analysis provides an overview of the many educational challenges facing Muslims across the world, as minority or majority citizens. First, there is a synopsis of the political and ideological framework of Muslims in education. Second, there is a summary of aspects of the Middle Eastern experience and an evaluation of Muslim minority discussions in the West. The conclusions provide a concentration on the major topics and the prospects going forward.

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## Education, Knowledge, and Power across the Muslim World

The concept of *‘ilm* (knowledge) is a central tenant of the faith and one that remains foremost in Islamic education. It is an Islamic duty for all Muslims, men and women, to pursue education “from cradle to the grave” and even if it means going as “far as China”: two prophetic sayings that are consistently emphasized. There are more than 800 references to the idea of *‘ilm* in the Qur’ān. Indeed, the word Qur’ān comes from the Arabic root word “read.” Historically, Islamic education relied upon the Qur’ān as the single most authoritative source of knowledge. In the early phases of Islamic history, respected and committed Muslims attended educational institutions termed the *kuttābs* – an Islamic elementary school often amalgamated to a mosque where young men were instructed in the Qur’ān. These *kuttāb* served an essential function

in the community, as they were the only way in which young men could acquire an education that was free to all. These institutions purported to serve the basis of an Islamic education system that remains in many Muslim countries to this day. These schools are analogous to the idea of *madrasahs*, which have entered widespread recognition in the context of the post-1990 struggle against the Ṭālibān (Sunnī Islamist students of Afghan heritage) in Afghanistan (Jones 2007; Spink 2005). In these *kuttābs* and *madrasahs*, corporal punishment is a recognized part of teaching and learning. Students memorize rudimentary passages of the Qurʾān and then graduate to a more focused approach to the entire book. Memorization is a central component of learning and scholarship in these educational institutions, past and present. While the *kuttāb* evolved during the ʿAbbāsīd period to become sites where science, logic, philosophy, and mathematics (Abdeljaouad 2006) could be learned, towards the end of the Golden Age *madrasahs* were often used for political purposes, as a way in which to systematize against the Crusaders and due to internal Shīʿah and Sunnī struggles for power and authority (Rahman 1982).

During the twelfth century, Islam came to Europe and Asia. Across the central and eastern hemisphere of the globe, the religion of Islam was a dominant force until the colonial era led to the subjugation of many in these regions. From the beginning of the decline in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries until the colonial era in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, cultural obduracy weakened the Muslims (El-Sanabary 1992). The Ottomans ruled great swathes of Muslim lands until the nineteenth century, but they also founded secular schools from 1875 to 1920. Subsequently, Europeans supplanted Ottoman rule in the Muslim world. These colonials interfered with indigenous Muslim education, forcing traditional Muslims into retreat, while late nineteenth century modernist-reformers such as Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Syed Ahmad Khan were limited in number and constrained in reality. During the twentieth century, these countries gained independence and became nation-states, often with close relations to the older powers that were once conquerors. Tensions between traditionalist and reformist modes of Islamic education have remained ever since. During the 1970s and 1980s, resurgence of Islamic political activism in opposition to secularization within certain Middle Eastern and Asian states smoldered into enduring violence and conflict (Tamuri 2007; Wattana 1996; Weiss 2005). In this time of political disorder and chaos, many Muslim conservatives started to seek the Islamification. This is the process of bringing the method of Islam into every aspect of the lived experience of all individual and group political, social, cultural, religious and economic subjects of society and its institutions, especially education, while secular Muslims favor democratization and secularization. Since the end of the Cold War, Muslim nations have experienced various degrees of Islamification, while Western capitalism has become the global dominant economic, political, and cultural order.

As the Islamic world was in the ascendancy, Europe was in a dark, inward-looking abyss. Intellectual leadership flourished in the Muslim world, with significant development to the physical and social sciences, arts and philosophy, and science and technology. Muslims took what was known of the world and began to dissect it further. This process included reviewing existing knowledge from the

ancient Egyptians, Persians, Chinese, Indians, and, most notably, the Greeks. The notion of *ijtihad* (individual judgement) was central to this success, but over time, the ‘*ulamā*’ (dominant religious and learned class) began to presume an authority over all knowledge, suffocating Islam of the oxygen it once thrived on. Muslim leaders began to look inwards while Christian Western Europe became stronger and more powerful (Sardar and Malick 1990). In the colonial era, in places such as present-day Egypt or Pakistan, the emphasis on secularism had an extensive impact on Muslim majorities. Many found it incompatible and even contradictory to Islam. It ultimately led to major differences between religious and secular modes of educational development, with little to bring the two worlds together. Since the colonial era, Muslims in Muslim lands have simply been unable to contend with the rational, objective, and scientific paradigms of the Western secular educational model. In certain postcolonial Muslim majority contexts, specific ethno-sectarian Muslim groups are resistant to engaging with the “other,” internally and externally. For example, in India (Sikand 2005) and Pakistan (Nelson 2006), the Deobandi tradition dominates, and it has a particular function in reinforcing a traditionalist Islam that places loyalty to the religion before that of nation. In some countries, the Deobandis are active in politics, for example, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, namely, through the *Jamā’at-i Islāmī*, although in Indonesia the experience of Muslim women in education is attained within a depoliticized milieu (Srimulyani 2007). The branch of Islamism that is inspired by a dominant doctrinal approach followed and promoted by what is now Saudi Arabia, and originated by the eighteenth scholar Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, remains the most ubiquitous due the centralization of the Saudi regime and the financial power that rests behind it.

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## Muslim Education at the Core and at the Periphery

In the current period, Muslims in the Middle East are increasingly discovering the importance of education for social and economic mobility in order to build character, self-confidence, self-esteem, to raise awareness of the “other”, and to determine the range of skills and competencies that will establish individuals and communities for life. This is the context of the global market place for jobs that is now increasingly the norm in many parts of the world, certainly intra-regionally if not always inter-regionally. However, many Middle Eastern countries face a critical set of questions about their future, given their regional and cultural significance (Herrera and Torres 2006). Class divisions, gender, curriculum content, professionalism of teachers and managers, and the wider social setting in which pupils, parents, and teachers find themselves remain as weighty now as they have always done. Power, politics, and ideology and how they impact on the schooling and educational process is juxtaposed with the reality of how poverty and disadvantage bite hard when state-enforced education apparatus encourages a more utopian world-view that is not at all the lived experience of pupils, parents, or teachers. There remains a distinct need to democratize education in the Middle East, to encourage wider participation and engagement, and to provide a fair, open-ended, liberalized system of education that

accesses the urban dwellers as well all as villagers in equal numbers. Education ought to be a goal for all, in what are rapidly changing societies, and given all the internal and external contestations facing individuals and groups.

It is noteworthy to observe how education is seen in Iran, where, for some, education is regarded as a system of social control (Mehran 2003). The Shah used it to instill loyalty to the state and his autocracy, while Khomeini used it to further Islamicize Iran after 1979. The extent to which education is as a political project in Iran is well documented (Arjmand 2004). Turkey is also a notable case study. With a population of over 70 million people and a skilled, pliable, and youthful workforce, Turkey is generally keen to embrace the EU project. There are, however, many who voice disquiet at the thought of a significant Muslim country entering what is essentially regarded as a “club of first world Christian powers.” Nevertheless, it is in Turkey where there is perhaps the first real indication that Islam is coming to terms with globalization and modernity; and where religiosity and community activism go hand-in-hand. Some of these actions, even so, create consternation within Turkey, where the view that most women can choose to wear the veil is seen to be an unacceptable form of conservatism as Turkey makes considerable efforts to be seen to be embracing secular Europeanism. What is interesting is the extent to which Turkish Muslim minorities in Western Europe have adopted aspects of the Said Nursî-inspired philosophy, helping to shape a pro-integration approach to their lives as ethno-religious minorities (Agai 2006). In parts of the lower Gulf, some countries are not quite able to take advantage of postcolonial opportunities, particularly in cases where there is an additional need to rely on aid and resources from neighboring states, for example Kuwait (Davidson 2008). While there is significant expansion to the provision of education in this region, there remain quality issues.

Schools have a distinctive role to play in the development of the intellectual, spiritual, and moral character of individuals, communities, and nations, but in the present climate, they can disengage organizational and pedagogical matters from wider societal concerns of dominant media, culture, and globalization. Muslims, for whom Western modernity is not a familiar experience, remain suspicious of the West, but at the same time do not always recognize that in the past Islam had its own challenges around modernity and coped with it rather well (for example, during the ninth century ‘Abbāsīd period). However, the problem with the Arab Muslim world is that since the defeat of Egypt by Israel, to restore the status of Egyptian Islam back to its gloried standing before 1967, Egypt sought an emphasis to return to God. The political context has shaped a more literalist interpretation of Islam. This is not just in Egypt but also across entire swathes of the Middle East (Fandy 2007).

As a case study of Muslim minority experiences, in exploring ethnic and religious identities in Britain, it appears that the nature of social relations and the perceptions of the “other” held by the dominant “other” remain crucial anxieties. While there are useful insights from social research that provide a perspective on educational process, including dynamics relating to home-school links, curriculum content, and the values placed on inherent differences among different South Asian groups (Basit 1997; Bhatti 1999; Abbas 2004), why is there still an issue among young South Asian Muslims in English schools today? After 70 years of post-war

immigration, settlement, and adoption, these communities continue to face racism, prejudice, intolerance, bigotry, and discrimination in the education system. It affects educational outcomes and issues of identity politics (Ijaz and Abbas 2010). Moreover, because of the role of wider society and its changing dynamics for an increasingly visible Muslim and South Asian minority in various British towns and cities, it must also be related to the nature of these communities themselves, and when adaptation to and incorporation into society has simply not happened. This is not to argue that social and cultural integration is the key to success per se, but rather to state that there are internal and external factors that are forcing communities apart rather than together and occasionally they work in opposite directions. Nevertheless, while there is some indication that Muslims in education in Britain wish to move to a position that emphasizes a coherence and interdependency between Muslimness and Britishness (Meer 2009), it would be far too simplistic to essentialize Muslims into a single category as there are myriad differences between and within groups in Britain (Tinker and Smart 2012) and elsewhere in Muslim diasporas across the Western and Eastern worlds (Daun and Walford 2004). There remains an opportunity to mobilize Muslims as a bottom-up political identity that contests the dominant negative paradigms, in the process expanding the reach of the concept of “Muslim” among both empowered as well as marginalized groups (Adamson 2011).

Leadership among Muslim minority groups is a serious area of discussion, and there is a genuine case made for the importance of recognizing the role of the interaction between teacher and learner as much as the process of education itself (Shah 2006). The situation is further problematical given the hindrances to career progression experienced by some Muslim male teachers in certain minority contexts (Shah and Shaikh 2010) and among Muslim young men in education struggling to reconcile their faith-based identities with their national, ethnic, or cultural allegiances (Bhatti 2011). Muslim schools, nevertheless, are especially germane in the United Kingdom, when in 1997 New Labour gave the go ahead to the state funding of Muslim schools in the face of a diverse society and government rhetoric toward multiculturalism (Parker-Jenkins 2002). These affairs are also of huge interest in the United States, with its own rich but quite different history of Islam and Muslims (Metcalf 1996; McCloud 2007). For migrant, diasporic, and transnational communities, being a Muslim minority is both charged and tested, and there are complex issues beyond the simple dividing rhetoric of Muslim and non-Muslim. There are persistent negative societal, attitudinal, and behavioral trials facing a diverse minority community of communities who are often on the receiving end of sustained destructive political and media attention (Salih 2004).

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## Discerning Questions and Concluding Thoughts

Islam has its origins in Arabia in the seventh century and from there it expanded across Asia, Africa, and Europe. A primary issue therefore is the question of education in the areas in which Islam first came to and how matters have evolved since then, or not as the case may be. It is remarkable to observe that many of the

tribulations facing Muslims in education are concentrated in precisely these regions of the Arab world and Africa (Hunwick 2004). North African Muslim countries, including Morocco (Ennaji 2005), Algeria (Heristchi 2004), Tunisia (Lee 2008), Libya (Pargeter 2006), and Egypt (Gesink 2006) all provide valuable case studies on educational experiences in postcolonial societies (Abdeljalil 2004), while Saudi Arabia (Prokop 2003), Yemen (Hafez 2008), and Iraq (Al-Khaizaran 2007) are also striking because of the wider ongoing indigenous sectarian differences and ethnopolitical tensions found there. In other African Muslim countries, such as Sudan (Breidlid 2005), Nigeria (Ikoya and Onoyase 2008), and Somalia (Abdi 1998), there are also vital concerns to address in order to generate a profile of education in the Arab world and in Africa in general. Moreover, it is also necessary to appreciate the issues affecting Muslims who are minorities in advanced liberal secular democratic nation-states, when matters of identity, culture and gender, social class, effects of educational institutions, and the wider social milieu in which these forces are played out are significant matters for research, policy, and practice. This is especially critical given that there are over 7 million Muslims in North America and over 25 million Muslims in the European Union (Alsayyad and Castells 1997).

The analysis of educational practice in Saudi Arabia is potentially hopeful regarding the latest developments to its universities. It may help to democratize the country and increase a more critical engagement with existing 'Abd al-Wahhāb and āl-Sa'ūd allegiances; however, the evidence on outcomes is far from clear (Bosbait and Wilson 2005). The study of Turkey is in the setting of approaches made toward further modernization and secularization, and, given the importance of the Turkey question for the future of the European Union (Uzer 2011). Observations in the Philippines, France (Limage 2000), and England suggest the importance of the conceptualization of multicultural societies, which develop outside the realm of education but affect them and become affected by them at the same time. Here too matters such as the consumption of alcohol are important in the configuration of Muslim minority identities and Muslim-non-Muslim relations in general (Fletcher and Spracklen 2013). In Australia, research is beginning to demonstrate the importance of Islamic faith schools for Muslims in the diaspora (Clyne 1998), although it is only able to suggest primary findings that indicate a growing desire and a sense that such schools can provide the balance between religious and secular values (Hassen 2013). Other research has demonstrated that Muslim minorities in Western schools can positively utilize Islamic faith principles to demonstrate the importance of the education of Muslim women in majority schools when minority culture may have had a major role in limiting the prospects for these very same women in earlier generations (Ijaz and Abbas 2010). Moreover, these Islamic schools can provide not just room for specific faith-based teachings but also the occasion to challenge racism in wider society (Shah 2012). There are many similar dilemmas that bring together different liberal secular democratic Western nation-states in relation to the experience of Muslim minorities in education and the challenges and opportunities they face. Most are as much a function of individuals, communities, society and the state as they are about Islam and the nature of different political and cultural norms, values, expectations, and aspirations.



To advance Islam and education on the global stage, there is a need to produce worldly citizens able to deal with the contestations and engage with the openings. The question, however, is how. It remains relentlessly pursued by various scholars and practitioners (Hatina 2006). In spite of all the encouraging rhetoric and the considerable intentions of children, parents, teachers, researchers, and practitioners, there remains a great deal to do to improve matters relating to Islam and the question of Muslims in education. The core of the Islamic world is steeped in conservatism and absolutism, and it is within the margins of these societies that the more extremist voices can be heard. In the Muslim diaspora, especially in the West, there is a tendency to align Muslim education in the direction of this very same conservatism. Within these non-Muslim majority states it is also possible to find extremist Muslim voices, some of whom can engage in violent extremism in their own countries of birth. The core-periphery duality is played out locally and globally, and the main cause is the centralization of influence among the Islamic world. Aspects of the periphery do provide opportunities for positive engagement with modernist approaches to education, within Muslim majority states and without, but these tend to be the exception not the norm. Thus, the core and the periphery are a deep worry for Muslim education across the world.

Yet, although there are internal challenges, there are external too. There is the structural nature of Islamophobia which affects the core and the periphery, and it encourages Muslims to look within Islamic scriptural reasoning as a way in which to deflect the negative attention. This has a systemic effect on Muslims across the world. The events of 9/11 were a catalyst for change, but they have placed the Muslims in a weaker position, given the global anti-Muslim hegemony that has become more pronounced in the West and in the East. Inside the Muslim world, the wider global Islamic perspective is one of a great internal struggle and conflict, which enforces the desire of people to hark back the past to look to the future, and the political ideological motivations of certain Islamic communities (*tarīqah* or *jamā'ah*) to over-run the spiritual, philosophical, and intellectual contribution and progress of a more worldly nature.

The East is merely catching up with the West. After a period of decline over the last five centuries or so, parts of the East are on their way to getting ahead. The West has run out of all new ideas, but how the West looks at the East is affected by an intellectual discourse on what is reasoned about Muslims in education and in relation to questions of Islam and Muslims in general (Ehteshami 2004). There is a form of common ethical learning (Hefner 2013) that is missing in the West because of the move toward secularist thinking. Although the East has it in abundance, it is possibly compromising it in the race toward neoliberal economic and social policy while many Muslims remain in unequal, unstable, and corruptible societies that do more to regress rather than progress communities. There remain many contestations facing Muslims across the world today.

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