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EDITORIAL: Muslims, schooling and the limits of religious identity

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Recent decades have witnessed what could be called a ‘religious turn’—a renewed focus on religion across all areas of life, including politics, academia, and education (Bachmann-Medick, 2016). Akin to what is called the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy—which brought attention to the constitutive and mediating role of language in the social construction of reality—the concept of ‘religious turn’ reflects a recognition of the role of religion in shaping discourses, social change, and practices in a variety of cultural contexts. This term has become more closely associated with Islam than with any other religion, and can be traced back to the 1980s and certainly the 1990s, following events such as the Iranian Revolution and the Rushdie Affair, and, more recently, the attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the London bombings of July 2005. Although intellectual and cultural shifts regarding religion were taking place before this time, these events had widespread implications for education and research agendas. One such implication has been the increased interest in adolescent Muslims as research subjects, leading subsequently to numerous studies about Muslims, schools, and religious identity internationally (Moulin, 2012). Another implication, particularly following the London bombings of July 2005, was the development of educational programmes and policies aimed at Muslim youth and intended to combat extremism.

The articles in this Special Issue identify the privileging of religious identity as one key assumption underpinning academic, media, legal, and popular discourse about Muslims in recent decades. The term ‘identity’ is used in several different scientific paradigms and invoking it risks obscurity of meaning, and even cliché, yet, broadly, it provides a way of understanding the impact of cultural and political change upon how young people think about themselves, and the processes by which schooling sustains such meanings. It has thus become a common framework for scholars working in the fields of religion and in education, and for studies of Muslim children and youth in particular. This in itself represents one facet of the religious turn, because previously, identity was used in the cultural studies tradition, most notably by Stuart Hall, as an explanatory concept for understanding issues of race (Hall, 1996). By using religious identity to interpret and classify the diverse group of people who are now increasingly called ‘Muslims’, religion supplants the prior categorisations of ethnicity, race, or nationality. This trend, it has been argued, does not just concern how Muslims are classified, but is part of a process of ‘religification’ taking place in the self-understanding and self-definition of Muslims themselves related to the increased likelihood of others to confer that religious identity upon them (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Panjwani, 2013). For example, in regard to Pakistani-American youth, Ghaffar-Kucher observed:

‘Not only do peers and school personnel view these youth through a religious lens, the youth (and their families) define themselves more through a religious identity than through a racial, national, or ethnic one. Ascription and co-option of a religious identity, trumps other forms of categorization, such as race and ethnicity.’ (p. 3)

As a dialogic process of proclamation and recognition, religification has a complex relationship with schooling and education. Because schools are the institutions where many children first formally participate in society, they are important sites where Muslims may first experience being recognised as Muslims, either by teachers or their classmates. Furthermore, as schools often formally educate non-Muslims about Islam, curricula are also an important source of information where ‘Muslimness’ may be represented. It is of note that historically in Britain as migration began to influence the school system, educationists started to reflect upon its impact in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and schoolorganisation. One outcome was that the social category of ‘Muslims’ and the curricular concept of ‘Islam’ came to be formulated, with religious education as its vehicle. On the one hand, these were positive developments which put religious education in Britain as a leading system in terms of dealing with the plurality of religions. On the other hand, they contributed to the reification of Islam, and the religification of Muslims. This is because with some exceptions, the only place where students learn about Muslims in the school curriculum is in religious education. By its very nature, the subject matter constructs identity along religious lines, and with not much in the school curriculum to balance this portrayal, very likely leaves students with an impression that being a Muslim is primarily a matter of following religious obligations and believing in certain doctrines. Such a portrayal of Muslims carries the danger of reinforcing the binary of Muslim religious versus British secular. It is not surprising then that research has indicated that many British pupils see Muslims as fundamentally different from themselves (Revell, 2009). It is for these reasons that the contributions to this Special Issue give considerable import to the ongoing controversies surrounding Islam and education, including the ‘radicalisation’ of British-born young men to commit acts of violence and the associated moral panics in media surrounding these tropes.

Identity cannot be easily separated from systems of representation and interpretation, and in particular, here, those systems that prevail in schooling, education policy, and educational research. This Special Issue therefore seeks to consider the educational implications of the ‘religious turn’ through a variety of illuminating examples and detailed case studies of Muslims and schooling, and calls for a reconsideration of the notion of religious identity in order to rehabilitate a more complex understanding of the multiple and intersectional nature of identities of Muslims. Contributors explore the limits of religious identity, including where it may continue to be relevant and appropriate, but also how educators, researchers, and others may trap ‘Muslims’ in their own conceptual nets of conferral and representation.

One corollary of the growing importance of religion to policy makers and academics that preceded the turn of the millennium was the inclusion of items of religious identification on the UK census. This has provided insights into how British society is religiously stratified. According to the census data, in 2011 there were 2.72 million Muslims in the United Kingdom, making up 4.8% of the population. Analysed as a religious group, Muslims fall behind the national average on a number of socio-economic variables. For example, 5.1% of Muslims are homeless, i.e. living in hostels or temporary shelters, as against 2.2% in the overall population. Over 45% of Muslims live in the 10% most deprived local authority districts in England. This figure is up by over 12% from the 2001 census. Muslims make up 13% of the prison population (Ali, 2015).

Though religion is continually relevant, caution must be exercised when using it as the only or predominant category for analysis. Given that religious identity intersects with class, ethnicity, and gender, the above figures, important though they are, conceal as much as they reveal. They neglect other identity markers such as ethnicity and their associations with patterns of inequality and social practices. For instance, almost 70% of Muslims in the UK are South Asian, and the majority of them come from a few rural or semi-rural areas in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Their cultural traditions, transnational connections, and internal social arrangements such as the biradari (clan) system, play a significant role in their social and political lives and their relations with wider British society.

The emergence of Muslim faith schools (or schools with religious character, as they are officially called) in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, was deeply shaped by particular gender politics and cultural practices, not shared by all Muslims. As a result, we see that the demand for Muslim schools was by no means a universal demand among Muslims, though over time it has gained wider appeal, including among those groups that may not share the traditional cultural assumptions. Similarly, when housing is analysed along ethnic lines, we learn that ‘owner-occupation is most common amongst households led by people who are Indian, White or Pakistani (67%, 66% and 60% of households respectively)’ (Barton, 2017, p. 14), numbers that give a more nuanced picture of the housing situation. Finally, including national and cultural identities in the analysis of the academic achievement shows that the performance of Muslim students varies significantly by ethnicities, some doing as well as, or even better than, the majority white students. Thus we get a more complex reading of student outcomes than is provided by data on the performance of ‘Muslim’ children (SMF, 2016).

The use of ‘Muslim’ as a primary identity marker rather than race, ethnicity, or nationality is something that has taken place over the last three decades. Though the majority of Muslims migrated to Britain in the post-World War II era, the Muslim presence in Britain can be traced back to at least the 17th century. For much of this history, preceding generations ‘did not publicly act under the label “Muslim” and were not even necessarily perceived as such by the wider society’ (Ansari, 2004, p. 24). The change in identity marker took place over decades and in time, and, as Modood and Ahmad note, Muslim ‘has emerged as the most prominent and charged communal category’ (2007, p. 187). Several factors and trends came together to make this happen. These include: shared social and religious concerns among people from many different national backgrounds (for example, the concern about procuring halal food); the failure to develop alternative national or cultural identities due to political episodes such as the partition of South Asia which came to be viewed along Hindu–Muslim lines; media portrayals of homogenised Muslim populations; and the alienation felt by some of the second and third generation as they often did not feel fully accepted as fellow citizens in terms of state policies and attitudes of some sections of the wider society. Government policies, both in their more multicultural phases as well as in nationalistic phases, approached migrants as ‘communities’ with distinct religious boundaries, the Muslim community, the Hindu community, etc. The government championed particular individuals and bodies as its favoured links to the larger Muslim community, which in fact was never a single community. More recently, the community-oriented state policies are visible in anti-extremist discourse and policies, particularly in the field of education.

With ongoing and unpredictable political events, issues regarding Muslims, schooling, and identity will continue to have much relevance. The articles in this Special Issue go some way in exposing the limits of religious identity to guide policy, praxis, and research, while recognising that for many Muslims, religion is a primary source of values and meaning. The concepts of identity and religification allow for an exploration of the relationships between social, political, and educational contexts and self-understandings. The articles included in this Special Issue show the importance of both dimensions of this dialectic: the representation of Muslim identities in schools and educational discourses (demonstrated in the articles by Berglund, Bowie, Gholami, and Wesselhoeft in this issue) and how conferred identities may be recognised or resisted by young people (as shown by Berglund, Francis & McKenna, and by Moulin-Stożek & Schirr). In these analyses we see evidence of a repeated theme of religified representations of Muslims reflected back at young people which then impact on their self-understanding and self-representation. These problems indicate the limits of religious identity when reified in educational praxis (as shown by Bowie, Panjwani, and Thobani in this issue), but also serve to show the continued potential of identity as a hermeneutical tool that unpacks the complexity of the interaction between stigmatised minorities and the wider social and political climate. As Charles Taylor, who precipitated the religious turn in political philosophy, observed in his classic text on identity politics: ‘misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being’ (1994, p. 25).

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