

## **REVIEW OF THE PROGRESS OF MUSLIM EDUCATION IN EUROPE**

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Many developments in the field of Muslim education have taken place in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom and Europe, in the last decade. These developments are due to the efforts and initiatives, both at the private community level and the government level. Recently, during the second half of the 2006, two very important research studies on education of the Muslim community in the United Kingdom were conducted. One of them was a research study into “Muslim Women and Higher Education: Identities, Experiences and Prospects” conducted by Dr. David Tyrer of Liverpool John Moores University and Fauzia Ahmad of the University of Bristol’s ESF. Among the findings of the research is the fact that universities will have to undergo a radical rethink in their attitudes to Muslim women, if they are to become fully inclusive and supportive of Muslim women.

The second research study was on “The Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Multicultural Britain” conducted by Professor Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi and Professor Malory Nye of the Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Dundee. One of the major findings of the two-year research is that Islamic Studies in Britain’s higher education establishments are failing to meet the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural society. The report says that there is an urgent need for a new agenda to develop Islamic Studies into the Study of Islam and Muslims to challenge both the more traditional approaches that were often faith based and excluded non-Muslims and the Orientalist approaches that often alienated Muslims.

Besides these two reports, some initiatives were taken to contribute to the development of Muslim education in the European countries. A regional meeting, organized by Rabat-based Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in cooperation with the official representatives of the Muslim Community of Austria, the Islamic Commission of Austria, was held in Vienna, Austria. The purpose of this meeting was to put forward a draft strategy for developing the teaching of the Arabic language for the Muslim community living in the West. Many educationalists, scholars and experts in this field were invited from different countries to discuss and exchange views on the strategy to be adopted.

At the parliamentary level, Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham expressed his concern for the amendment of the Education Bill at the House of Lords in July 2006 and addressed some of the issues that were raised. The British government is also thinking about the policy to be adopted regarding Muslim education in the United Kingdom.

Muslim communities and particularly the Muslim scholars are very much concerned about the education of their children. During the period under review, two important conferences were held where the education of the young Muslims were addressed. The first international conference, organized by the London-based Forum for Social Studies, was held in Toronto, Canada, in the middle of July 2006, where Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef, the former Secretary General of the Rabita al-Alam al-Islami and the present President of the World Muslim Congress, urged young people to be patient and have wisdom and vision. The another international conference, organized by JIMAS, was held at the University of Leicester, UK from the 25th to the 28th August 2006, the theme of which was "Improving the Manners of a Muslim: Making our Actions Match our Guidance." In both the conferences, the speakers spoke about vision, mission, knowledge and wisdom.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS ON MUSLIM HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Higher Education and Muslim Women**

Dr. David Tyrer of Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and Fauzia Ahmad of the University of Bristol's ESF research launched a project on Muslim women and higher education at the Institute of Education, London on 27 July 2006. The report, "Muslim Women and Higher Education: Identities, Experiences and Prospects" was based on hours of interviews (105) conducted with 93 Muslim women aged 19 to 26, and provides what should be a ground-shifting insight into the hitherto unreported realities which Muslim insiders have long known about but the mainstream has failed to sufficiently acknowledge or engage with.

Among the findings is the fact that universities will have to undergo a radical rethink in their attitudes to Muslim women if they are to become fully inclusive and provide supportive environments to Muslim women, and there is a challenge to the whole of the academic and political establishment regarding the dominant stereotypes of Muslim women.

This report highlights how Muslim women, through their participation in university, challenge dominant stereotyped assumptions prevalent in both the literature and institutions, about the lives of Muslim women and their families. It documents how their participation not only acts to de-mystify university life, but in focusing on Muslim women as academic achievers, shows how Muslim women can act as role models for other women. It also documents a number of areas of concern around careers advice and recruitment into higher education and the ways racist stereotypes of Muslim women impact on their daily lives. Previous research on South Asian families in Britain has already shown that education and the securing of academic qualifications is highly valued.

However, the relatively lower rates of participation in higher education amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in comparison to women from other South Asian backgrounds have led some commentators to conclude that 'culture', religion and patriarchal constraints (or 'purdah') play instrumental roles in restricting Muslim women's educational and economic participation. Recent research exploring these discrepancies suggests that the issues are more complex and cannot be reduced to single, mono-causal factors.

The majority of women interviewed for both the projects came from what was described as 'working class' backgrounds where both parents had received school level education in their country of origin or came from predominantly rural backgrounds. A few, however, spoke of extended families in the UK and their country of origin where several relatives possessed degree level qualifications and where female relatives, in particular, were in professional employment. For many women and their families, higher education held both personal and social significance regardless of social class or parental background.

Respondents in this study from areas of high Asian concentration where schools and further education (FE) colleges were poorly resourced, also spoke of little encouragement and preparation for higher education. This, coupled with student's lack of awareness of educational opportunities, contributed to an environment within some schools and colleges suffering from under-achievement.

Students from schools in deprived areas spoke of their experiences of university in terms of 'difficult transitions' and described how they felt unprepared by their schools for the independent study required at degree level. They also felt a 'lack of support' from some university lecturers who did not appreciate how their socioeconomic circumstances impacted on their experience of higher education.

Examples cited were lecturers who would not take the time to explain poor assignment results adequately. The gendered and racialised nature of Muslim women's pre-university experiences are therefore linked to routes taken into higher education. These are significant in influencing how Muslim women experience higher education and their expectations of university. They are also likely to influence the choices students perceive as available to them in terms of subjects studied and universities attended.

It is significant to note that care responsibilities, marriage and the presence of young children did not prevent Muslim women from taking up degree courses. This reiterates the need for educational and career professionals to re-evaluate misconceptions about Muslim women, marriage and motherhood that suggest that married Muslim women's movements are restricted by husbands and in-laws. It also points to a need to recognise diverse needs and to look towards ways of improving university facilities and provisions to better assist and encourage students with caring responsibilities from all backgrounds to take up higher education opportunities.

The research found that Muslim women spoke of their parents as often sharing in their educational and career aspirations. Women cited several reasons for entering higher education; these ranged from personal interest, career aspirations, financial stability, personal independence, and greater respect and choices when thinking about marriage.

One of the report's key findings is supported by other research on Muslim women where educational aspirations were shared by parents who promoted a 'family expectation' to achieve academically: As several other studies have highlighted, parents were keen to see their children achieve in high prestige professions such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy or law. Earlier research work has previously highlighted the significant and encouraging role many South Asian Muslim women attributed to their fathers in their higher education aspirations. The LJMU study also found a large proportion of Muslim women citing their fathers as key sources of motivation and encouragement. The nature of encouragement from parents is indicative of the high symbolic and practical value many had for higher education,

which contrasts with a number of stereotyped notions about Muslim families. Several women cited a number of female family members as role models when thinking about educational and personal success. For instance Razia, who identified her Army Colonel aunt in Pakistan as a key female role model, spoke of a complex mixture of expectation, support, motivation and pressure from her family to do certain things.

Other role models frequently cited were sisters or female relatives who had graduated and were in professional employment, and teachers and lecturers. Peer groups and localities were also found to be influential. Schools and colleges in areas which were described as 'relatively impoverished' were less likely to prepare young people for higher education entry. In areas such as Bradford and Manchester where a number of respondents received their schooling, many women highlighted how little support they received from their schools or FE colleges with their degree aspirations and how few students considered university as a viable option.

During the research interviews, students were asked whether they thought marriage would impinge on their employment choices and prospects. The majority responded by stressing their right to choose whether to work or not after marriage.

Shagufta's attitude to formal employment echoes several other women's in this study and earlier studies on South Asian women and employment. In the following extract, Shagufta stresses her primary desire to exercise her right *not to work* and to use her education instead for the benefit of her future family, citing the economic independence of the Prophet's wife as an example:

I think personally, I'd rather do the housewife thing because it's very rewarding actually raising children and teaching them about Islam. For me I think that would be the best thing, but if need be financially, if we needed a 2nd income then yeah I'd work, I wouldn't have a problem with that. I mean if you look at, you know how I was mentioning earlier on the role models and why our role models can't be Muslim, if you look at Khadija, the wife of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), she was a business woman, so there's nothing wrong with me being married and working. It's just a stereotype that people have that once you're married you're automatically a housewife, that's it, you're bound by that. (Shagufta, 20, Islamic Studies student, Pakistani)

In Shagufta's case, she refused to let the stereotypical representation of her as a Muslim woman define her identity and life choices.

The meeting of the Muslim women students' needs should not be reduced merely to providing prayer rooms or halal food, although these are very important provisions. Not all Muslim women practise their faith in the same ways or to the same extent; whereas to one person access to a prayer facility may be particularly important, this may not be a concern to another person who may choose to pray elsewhere or, indeed, not pray at all. The most important factor to take into account when meeting the needs of Muslim women students is that there is no singular way of understanding or categorising Muslim women students and their needs. Muslim women students should be understood based on the needs that they express rather than being assumed to have the same range of needs as other Muslim women. Some areas worth considering are described below.

Residential field trips can pose certain issues around the organisation of accommodation and fieldtrip team activities (single- or mixed-sex), availability of food, access to facilities for prayer and ablution (*wuḍū*), and even in some cases whether or not a *maḥram* or ‘chaperone’ can attend with a Muslim woman student. Universities have a responsibility to sensitively identify the needs of all students in advance. Wider practices through which disability needs are established can be adapted to ensure that particular religious needs are also identified and met.

Student accommodation may also raise a range of provision issues and needs including whether individual students may prefer, for religious reasons, single- or mixed-sex flats, staircases, or halls, and whether halal food is available in catered halls. Needs such as these may well vary from individual to individual but can also vary according to the time of year. For example, it was suggested during fieldwork that *Ramaḍān* can present additional responsibilities for some students who may have extra domestic responsibilities such as cooking throughout the month. Students may also be required to break their fast at a specified point in the day and in many cases say a short prayer at the same time. They might therefore legitimately request that lecturers permit them some flexibility to ensure that they are able to meet these responsibilities. Major religious festivals also pose their own challenges; for example, students should be permitted to rearrange assessments scheduled to clash with *Eid* and to miss lectures falling on these dates. Best practice in meeting diverse needs such as these would involve the development of policies on religious and cultural diversity to delineate the particular needs and responsibilities of students and the university, and clarifying the stages through which particular provisions can be claimed.

### **The Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Multicultural Britain**

A new report called, “Time for Change: Report on the Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Universities and Colleges in Multicultural Britain” was launched recently in the Dinsdale Young Room of Central Hall, Westminster, London. The report was prepared by Professor Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi and Professor Malory Nye from the Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Dundee, who are two of the UK’s leading experts in the study of Islam and Muslims.

One of the major findings of the two-year research report published in 2006 is, “Islamic Studies in Britain’s higher education establishments are failing to meet the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural society.” The report has examined 55 higher education departments and centres currently offering courses in the study of Islam and Muslims, looking to see if they are “relevant to contemporary multicultural British society.”

In this connection, it may be mentioned that Arabic and Islamic studies were established in the UK 250 years ago. The earliest Chairs of Arabic were established in Oxford in 1640 and Cambridge in 1660 respectively.

The authors pose two questions: Is it right to say that Islamic Studies can only be pursued by Muslims? And does Islamic Studies require a Muslim institution? The report’s answer to these is a very definite “no”. The report says there is an urgent need for a new agenda to develop Islamic Studies into the Study of Islam and Muslims to challenge both the more traditional approaches that were often faith based and excluded non-Muslims and the Orientalist approaches that often alienated Muslims.

There are over 1.5 million members of the Muslim community living in the UK. They are the largest and one of the most misunderstood non-Christian groups.

In recent weeks Home Secretary John Reid has warned parents of young Muslims to watch out for creeping fundamentalism and the Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw caused controversy by saying he would prefer Muslim women not to cover their faces (*niqāb*).

The report said, “With a population of over 1.5 million British Muslims now living in multicultural UK they are the largest non-Christian grouping; and yet the last report related to Islamic Studies was commissioned by the Government over 40 years ago.” In this connection, it may be mentioned that the three major reports commissioned in the past were: The Reay Committee in 1909, The Scarborough Committee in 1947 and The Hayter Committee in 1961.

The main focus of their document is to examine the study of Islam and Muslims in Britain and map out how this field needs to be developed. Turning to the performance of current departments and centres in the UK providing programmes in Arabic and Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies and Religious Studies it argues that the current crisis is not caused by lack of funding, instead it says there are a number of clear problems including the following:

- Departments not focusing on the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural Britain, instead concentrating on out of date and irrelevant issues.
- Some departments choosing local imams and religious leaders as lecturers for “political correctness”.
- Evidence of some departments failing to replace experts in Islamic Studies.
- Lack of clarity on where and how the subject should be taught.
- Many Muslim institutions focusing on their own political links and agenda to serve their own needs and not those of multicultural Britain.

According to Professor El-Awaisi, “I want to stress that our report only looks at one aspect—the role of education, particularly higher education, to address issues surrounding the study of Islam and Muslims by people of all backgrounds in multicultural Britain.”

The report states that “there are some deeply embedded issues within our society regarding Islam and Muslims, of stereotyping, hostility, Islamophobia and misunderstanding...There needs to be appreciation that Muslims are no longer ‘others’—they are part of the fabric of British society.”

It goes on to say, “It is also clear most British non-Muslims do not ‘get’ Islam, and they do not understand what makes Muslims ‘tick.’ Many British communities, including British Muslims, have failed to understand each other and have failed to engage effectively in multicultural Britain. There is mutual incomprehension and this can only be addressed by education.”

The report, “Time for Change” claims that current education structures are “letting down” Muslims who were born and brought up in Britain and it states, “The most favoured option so far of Muslim schools and colleges set up and run by Muslims for Muslims for educating Islamically is NOT the answer to these difficult questions. The agenda needs to be much more challenging than that for all involved.”

The authors of the report argue, “Multiculturalism is not about separatism, ghettoisation or balkanization, it is instead recognition of diversity, the need for common ground, mutual respect and cultural engagement. Professor El-Awaisi’s “call

for a new agenda is timely and necessary to prevent the misguided and narrow interpretation of Islam which is the source of so many problems in our multicultural society. It is only through multicultural education we can work to eliminate extremism and fundamentalism.”

The report’s authors also state that they recognize that not everyone will agree with their recommendations but they hope it will act as a catalyst for debate. To widen the debate, they are organizing a national symposium to discuss issues raised in the report to be held in Dundee early this year. They argue that in today’s multicultural Britain, the field of study must be open to bring together people of all backgrounds, something they have been doing for the past five years at Al-Maktoum Institute in Dundee.

The report identifies the key issues of multiculturalism, globalization, colonialism and Muslims in the West and how these must set the agenda to meet new challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accordingly, it argues that Britain needs to set up a new agenda for the study of Islam and Muslims among its higher educational establishments. “Time for Change” concludes with a series of recommendations for action, including:

- Priority should be given to producing the next generation of young British nationals (of all backgrounds) as scholars in the study of Islam and Muslims.
- There is a need to have a focus on the Study of Islam as a religion. In particular, the core Muslim sources and approaches should be studied academically within the context of multicultural higher education institutions.
- There should be a separate RAE panel in the field of the Study of Islam and Muslims. Islamic Studies should be separated from Theology and Religious Studies and Middle Eastern Studies and be established in its own right as the Study of Islam and Muslims.
- This report urges scholars in the field of the Study of Islam and Muslims to establish a new professional cross-cultural academic body for the field. This new professional body may be called, for example, the British Association for the Study of Islam and Muslims (BASIM).
- Muslim institutions should focus on training British Muslim imams and Muslim religious leaders who understand how to live in multicultural Britain.
- Some Muslim institutions should be encouraged to integrate more actively into the British higher education system, particularly on issues of quality assurance and multicultural engagement with the wider society.
- As a matter of urgency the Government should commission a study on Muslim institutions, i.e. schools, colleges and institutions, and their place in the development of Islam and Muslims as an integral part of multicultural British society.
- Priority should be given to provide training for the next generation of British nationals (of all backgrounds) to take up posts at British universities.

Professor Nye concluded, “All those who participate in the development of this area of higher education have the responsibility to respond to the new realities

of contemporary multicultural Britain. We must ensure the integration of all aspects of society within these debates and also recognize the need to make the understanding of Islam and Muslims a mainstream part of the curriculum.”

### **Preparing Strategy to Teach Arabic to Muslims in the West**

A regional meeting, organized by Rabat-based Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in cooperation with the official representatives of the Muslim Community of Austria, the Islamic Commission of Austria, was held recently in Vienna, Austria. The purpose of this meeting was to put forward a draft strategy for developing the teaching of the Arabic language for the Muslim community living in the West. Many educationalists, scholars and experts in this field were invited from different countries to discuss and exchange views on the strategy to be adopted.

What are the aims and objectives of this meeting? Why was this meeting organised? These are natural questions which will come up in the minds of many people. The ISESCO and other experts of the Islamic Commission of Austria think that the Muslim community needs to devote more attention to education and cultural activities in the West. They think that the Muslim communities have different challenges in the field of education. One of these challenges is, of course, the teaching of the Arabic language. We know that Arabic as a language is the key to the understanding of the Qur’ān and the Islamic civilization and culture.

Dr. Ahmed al-Dubayan, the Director General of the Islamic Cultural Centre, London, one of the participants at this regional meeting at Vienna said, “We believe that language itself is something like an identity. When we talk about identity, language is very important. We do not want that Muslims neglect the Arabic language. That will take them away from their Holy Book and from their religion. We still think that the interest of the Muslim communities in the Arabic language is still very high. But the parents, schools, mosques, Muslim centres and organizations are really in need of new strategies and methodologies to teach this language in the West. When we talk about the teaching of the Arabic language, we find this lack of strategy in the Muslim communities. Once this strategy is adopted, it will take care of other things.”

The topic of the paper read out by Dr. al-Dubayan at the meeting was “Teaching the Arabic language in London as experienced by the Islamic Cultural Centre.” Dr. Al-Dubayan spoke about his experience of teaching the Arabic language and the weekend schools. He mentioned some of the difficulties he faced and pointed out some of the needs for teaching the Arabic language in the West. While mentioning about the difficulties, Dr. al-Dubayan referred to, for example, lack of qualified teachers.

Dr. al-Dubayan wrote in his paper, “If we have some qualified teachers to teach the Arabic language to the Arabs, we do not have qualified Arabic language teachers to teach Arabic as a foreign language. They are very few. We have problems of materials, books, etc. There are many books written by many scholars, teachers and many organizations in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Morocco and Syria” ... in spite of all these efforts ... we lack materials. For example, we don’t have dictionary designed for the young students; we don’t have storybooks or we don’t have books to teach Arabic as a foreign language specially designed for non-Arab students. There is not enough supporting material for teaching Arabic as a foreign language for children in the West. We need more.” He acknowledged the efforts made

by the Makkah-based Rabita al-Alam al-Islami, the Islamic University in Medina and Ummul Qura University in Makkah for the teaching of the Arabic language.

Dr. al-Dubayan also talked in his paper about the varieties of interest among the students: "Not all of them have same interest in learning the Arabic language. Some of them would like to learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'ān only ... other Arab communities would like their children to use Arabic as a communication language besides mastering the language as the language of the Qur'ān. Different methodology for teaching the Arabic language should be adopted to satisfy different interests."

The educationalists and experts of the Arabic language worked on the preparation of a draft strategy which was discussed by the participants. The Islamic Cultural Centre is going to host a second meeting in London to discuss the strategy further. This strategy, once adopted, will be given to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in order to be implemented in other places of the world.

## **FAITH SCHOOLS**

### **Lord Ahmed on Islamic School at the House of Lords**

Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham expressed his concern for the amendment of the Education Bill at the House of Lords last month and addressed some of the issues that were raised. "Until about six years ago, less than 25 per cent of Muslim children in state-run schools achieved five GCSEs at grades A to C when the national average was about 48 per cent. I congratulate the Government on the standard being raised to 38 percent, but it is still not good enough to meet the national average. I know that approximately 135 voluntary Muslim schools have raised the standard of education for Muslim children. The pass rate in those schools is about 55 or 60 per cent on average but there are six state-funded schools that are achieving highly: 100 per cent in the case of Islamia; Al-Hijrah is achieving 86 per cent; and the girls Islamic school in Bradford is competing with Eton, Harrow and some of the best British schools," said Lord Ahmed in the House of Lords.

The noble Baroness, Lady Massey, talked about the problems in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley: "I live in the north and visit all those towns regularly and I know that not a single student from the Islamic or faith schools was involved in the disturbances. Yes, we have segregation and yes, we do have a division within the communities. There are some state-run schools with 98 per cent pupils from one ethnic group. I have gone to Rochdale and Bradford. I have been to Oldham. We can go to Brixton or east London: there are schools with 98 per cent of children from ethnic minorities or even some with 99 per cent. It is not the religious divide that is dividing the communities, but there are other divides that also need to be addressed."

Lord Ahmed said, "For instance, I have been to the annual awards at the Islamic school Karamia in Nottingham where they have linked with the local schools, where the local school children, the headmasters and the councillors come to the school and the children also go to the state-run school. There are many who have established relationships with their local schools. They have twinned with local schools or they have some sort of links with local schools where they try to mix the children. The message that we want to send is to make sure that children who come

out of the schools become good citizens. They know about their citizenship responsibilities and I know that is taught in Islamic schools.”

Lord Ahmed also said, “We need to make sure that there is a higher standard of achievement. I am telling your Lordships that the standard of education in Islamic schools has risen. There is no evidence that any of the fanatics, terrorists or extremists are coming out of them. I go to many schools to give out certificates and I know that the best students are coming out of them and going to universities, and that is where they interact and integrate with the wider community and they are at ease with it because that is what they are taught.”

Lord Ahmed also argued, “When we talk about parental choice, raising standards and responsibilities within the communities, I know as a Muslim that for 18 years the Muslim community was trying to obtain state funding for Muslim schools. We did not obtain it until there was a Labour Government. Thank God that the Labour Government gave state funding because the Muslim community was feeling as though it contained second-class citizens for 18 years because we have Christian schools, Jewish schools, Sikh and Hindu schools; there is no reason why Muslims cannot have schools that are responsible, that raise standards and that make our children good citizens.”

Lord Ahmed concluded his speech on the Education and Inspections Bill at the House of Lords on 18 July 2006 with the following words: “I am sure that we need to take initiatives to try to integrate our children more at local level, but we have to do it in state-run schools first or in parallel with them because we have those divisions in state-run schools too. I hope that the Committee will resist this amendment.”

Lord Baker of Dorking, while supporting the points made by Lord Ahmed, said, “The ethnic communities and the other religions in our country—not only the Muslims but also the Hindus, Sikhs, the Greek Orthodox and the Jews—have always felt that they should have some share, as it were, which my amendment would still provide.”

### **Ruth Kelly on Faith School and Muslim Response**

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, launched a “Commission on Integration and Cohesion” in August, 2006. Ruth Kelly’s call to close Islamic schools that promote “isolationism and extremism” has been condemned by members of the Muslim community, according to *The Muslim Weekly*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2006.

Qaasim Afzal, chairman of the Muslim Educational Council, said, “Muslim faith schools follow a strict curriculum and are strongly vetted. ‘I’m not aware of a single school that comes under the description, ‘isolationist’ or ‘extremist’. The Muslim Education Council works closely with local authorities to make sure faith schools are up to scratch and teaching is well integrated.” Children learn Key Stages 1 to 4 in a friendly, academic environment ... Muslim parents send their children to these schools simply so their children can enjoy all the privileges that those in Jewish or Catholic schools do.”

From Bolton, Komal Adris, head of the Northern team for the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, said: “We’ve had a faith school in Bolton for a long time, and I don’t think we’ve had a problem. ‘I think faith schools are just becoming a new scapegoat, because outside the school there’s a whole community which pupils are

engaging in. The government risks creating isolation themselves by singling out Muslim faith schools.”

Although Ms Kelly said Muslim communities needed help to combat radicalism, she emphasised that Muslims were entitled to the same rights as Anglicans, Catholics, Hindus and Jewish groups, all of which had faith schools.

Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain highlighted that over 50% of Jewish schoolchildren in the UK attended Jewish faith schools while only 3% of Muslim schoolchildren attended Muslim faith schools, though the numbers were increasing. He said that answers to the question of whether such schools helped to integrate faith groups into the wider society and equip them with the necessary social skills for living in a multi-faith society were “legitimate questions and ones that deserve exploration”.

However, he added: “In relation to the tensions we have seen in recent years, the government’s continuing ass-like stubbornness in refusing to acknowledge the relationship between our foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and the increase in the terror threat we are now facing continues to bewilder,” reported in *The Weekly*.

There are currently five Islamic faith schools in the city of Manchester, plus two in Bolton and one in Bury.

Ian Fenn, headteacher of Burnage High School, said he was confused by Ruth Kelly’s remarks. “My experience is that Islamic faith schools are not ‘isolationist’ at all and I can’t imagine the type of place she describes. Muslim faith schools of course put a much greater emphasis on an Islamic curriculum, but they are inspected by Ofsted and Her Majesty’s Inspectors, and ones that don’t come up to scratch are shut down.”

Councillor Rosa Kay, Bolton Council’s executive member for schools, said: “I think faith schools have come a long way. Many make places available for pupils of other faiths, so there is a level of integration. I think understanding begins in schools, and I certainly wouldn’t want to eliminate any faith schools ... I just think it is important to encourage children to understand each other’s religions. In Bolton we have the Interfaith Council, which works with schools to promote that understanding.”

#### **ISLAMIC SCHOLARS AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES**

##### **Dr. Nasseef urges young people to be patient and have wisdom and vision**

Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef, the former Secretary General of the Rabita al-Alam al-Islami and the present President of the World Muslim Congress said at a *da‘wah* conference organized by the Forum for Social Studies in Toronto, Canada, on Saturday, 15 July, 2006, “I request our young people to be patient, to have wisdom and vision. We are suffering, because of our bad deeds. Nobody can help us to go back to the straight path or to improve our situation, to uplift our communities without hard work and seeking the solution from our religion and competing with other nations and other communities for the best way of developing this world and eliminating its ailments and bringing prosperity, peace, justice, understanding and co-existence and cooperation and all those things which we are losing today.”

“Try to understand that what is going on and what is happening today is the natural law of Allah the Almighty. Allah says that whenever we are abiding his laws and living with His commandments we flourish, prosper and advance. And whenever we do not follow His commandments we suffer. Suffering today is just natural. I do not want to go into details,” said Dr. Nasseef and added, “Our lives are not Islamic, neither on governmental level, nor on international level, family level.”

Today we can see the effects of globalization. The Western culture and social habits have been dominating all over. Speaking about the effects of globalization, Dr. Nasseef said, “It has had bad effects as well as very positive effects. It has positive effects on development in science and technology. But its negative side is that we are accepting other laws except Allah’s laws. We are accepting habits which are against our religion; we are not behaving according to our Sharī‘ah and so on.”

Dr. Nasseef drew attention to the fact that Allah the Almighty said that deterioration and bad effects are happening in all spheres of our life from environment to personal because of the bad behaviour or lack of adherence of people to their religion. He also said, “Allah the Almighty will test them. The test is very hard and many people are failing. Very few people are patient, have *hikmah* and wisdom to understand and analyze the situation and to work hard ... At the time of hardship and difficulty, we need this kind of patience and wisdom to work hard, to adopt, accept and cope with everybody who is able to do and contribute something. This is what we lack today.”

Referring to the reaction to the caricature of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), Dr. Nasseef said, “Wise people were silent. Young people were agitated and they went to the other extreme. They destroyed building, threw stones at the embassies. This is totally un-Islamic. There is no way to explain it as Islamic. Islam does not accept any violence, any revolution without wisdom, does not accept any revenge.”

Dr. Nasseef asked Muslims to take lessons from the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him). “He was very badly treated. He was humiliated, subjected to sufferings and persecution but he was very patient and he taught his companions to be patient, to be hardworking and so on. This is the lesson which we should learn. We should not take example of revolutionary attitude of the West or the East,” Dr. Nasseef advised and added, “We have to develop our own system of wisdom, patience and long-term planning and strategy.”

He invited young people “to use their talents. Allah has given them a lot of talents and capabilities. They have to develop and improve them; they have to make use of them. Don’t use our intelligence for bad work. But we have to do it for good. I always give the example to my students about the Internet. The Internet is full of good things and bad things, but our young people unfortunately go to the chatting, to sex films and to other things which do not help them to increase their knowledge about Allah the Almighty and His commandments, while there are plenty of things positive in all fields of knowledge, science and technology and one can develop himself and his capabilities and learn something new and contribute something new.”

Speaking about Muslim contributions in the fields of science and technology, Dr. Nasseef said, “There is no contribution from any Muslim in the field of science and technology today except very little, which is not acceptable.” Dr. Nasseef invited “young leaders, young generation, young boys and girls to be more wise, to seek knowledge from the authentic resources, from the *Kitāb* and Sunnah, from the ulema

who are really wise and really knowledgeable” and reminded them of the contributions of our forefathers, saying, “Take the examples of ulema, our forefathers, they contributed tremendously in the field of science and technology, and knowledge in general; because they were patient, they took pride in their *dīn*, in their Islam. They did not think that our Islam is the cause of our backwardness, which some people unfortunately think. Our forefathers thought and believed totally that Islam is the source of energy, vision, intelligent thinking and contributing something to all fields of knowledge, science and technology.”

Dr. Nasseef urged young people to feel confident and advised them to “take lessons from the Prophet and the companions and even today there are people of wisdom and people of long vision and thinking. This is what we have to encourage our young people to do.”

“This is the time when we have to remind ourselves, activate our belief. We have to strengthen our *īmān* (faith) because belief in Allah the Almighty, His Prophets, His Angels and His Books and Hereafter and so on needs to be rejuvenated every time; as it is weakened and tarnished with the luxury of life and so on,” said Dr. Nasseef and advised, “One has to keep always cleaning and strengthening it [*īmān*], of course, through ‘*ibādah*, kinds of compulsory and voluntary *ṣalāh*, *qiyām*, *zakāh* and good character and good behaviour towards others. Try to understand what’s going on, and what is happening today is the natural law of Allah the Almighty. Allah the Almighty says whenever we abide by his laws and live with His commandments we flourish, prosper and advance. And whenever we lack that we suffer. Suffering today is just natural.”

### **Improving the manners of a Muslim: Making our actions match our Guidance**

The three-day JIMAS International *da’wah* Conference 2006 was held at the University of Leicester, UK from the 25th to the 28th August 2006. The theme of the conference was “Improving the Manners of a Muslim: Making our Actions match our Guidance.” Renowned international Muslim scholars came from all over the world, such as Dr. Sohaib Hasan from London, Jaafar Idris from USA, Salim al-Amry, Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick from South Africa, Shabir Ally from Canada, Hamza Yusuf from USA and Ziauddin Khan.

Speaking on “Beware! We are on His Majesty’s Service,” Dr. Mamdouh N. Mohamed, Coordinator/Professorial Lecturer of Arabic Language Program, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University, USA, reminded Muslims, “Whether we are at ease or passing through trial, tribulations and difficulties, we should have two things: vision and mission all the time. We will get these two things from the Holy Qur’ān and the Traditions of our Prophet (peace be upon him).” Speaking about the mission, Professor Muhammad said, mission was referred to in the Holy Qur’ān, i.e. ‘*ibādah*, worship. Allah said in the Qur’ān, “I have not created jinn and human beings except for one purpose to worship Me.”

Dr. Mohamed focused on some concepts that should not be shaken off from our lives regardless of trials, tests and tribulations we may be going through. One of the concepts is the concept that human beings are part of the human family, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Allah stressed this by addressing mankind in the Qur’ān. He said, “O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and We made you into different tribes and nations in order that you know each other. However, the best of you in the Eyes of Allah the Almighty is the one who is pious and more fearful of

Allah.” Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also elaborated this and said, “All of you are from Adam and Adam is created from dust.”

Dr. Mohamed elaborated different concepts. First of all, he said that Prophet (peace be upon him) did not live in isolation. He then talked about the concept of peace. The word ‘Muslim’ is derived from *aslama* which means submission, purity and peace. So the people who carry the name of peace and do their best to spread peace should represent this religion. He said, “People see the mismatch of our behaviour and the *da‘wah* that we give them. Again there is a reminder of the Prophet (peace be upon him). In the Makkan period, the Prophet (peace be upon him) sent Muslims to Abyssinia and commanded them to live peacefully abiding by the law of the land. This is something which needs to be really cultivated in our hearts ... The Prophet said, ‘Spread peace amongst the people; spread peace in the world.’ So we are witnesses ourselves. We need to fulfil this mission on the earth.”

Dr. Mohamed explained the concept of justice, citing verses from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. He also stressed the importance of remaining steadfast in the face of trials and tribulations in the fleeting life of this world. The concept of the hereafter (*ākhirah*) should be always kept in view, so our primary responsibility will be to save ourselves and our family from the blazing fire of Hell. We should increase our knowledge about the religion of Islam at a time when life is becoming increasingly complex day by day. Dr. Mohamad also emphasized the need for cooperation with both Muslims and non-Muslims in good deeds, as we have been enjoined by the Qur’ān to invite others to good deeds and prohibit bad deeds.