

MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE WEST

Towards
a New Education Strategy

Khurram Murad

The Islamic Foundation

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What future awaits the Muslim youth in Britain, or, for that matter in any similar predominantly non-Muslim secular society? This crucial question haunts every sensitive and concerned Muslim mind. We are desperately looking for an answer, for a proper, viable strategy, an education strategy as we put it, to ensure that our children grow up and remain Muslims. This is a desideratum of the utmost urgency and importance. For the future of the Muslim youth is but the other name of the future of the Ummah here, of our families, traditions, and institutions, of the numerous mosques that have come to dot the landscape today, some of them built at huge costs.

Making the Future

To begin with, let us discard the word 'awaits'. It smacks of passivity and fatalism. There is no room in Islam for being passive receivers of the future that lies stored in destiny, which will be doled out to us irrespective of what we earn for ourselves: God changes not those who do not change themselves. Nor is there any place for the unfolding of a future propelled by blind, material forces: God, the All-knowing and All-wise is the Lord of day and night, of history, as He is of the worlds. Each one gets what it believes and works for. This law is clearly and repeatedly stated by Him: that you reap only what you sow and God does not obliterate, or brighten, the future of any people except because of what they do to themselves.

It is amazing how prone we are to forget this very simple message which has very profound implications. Perhaps, because we do not like those implications, we do not want to give up our lazy and quiet lives, we do not want to assume responsibility for our own lives.

This, let us make no mistake about it, is not to ascribe any absolute powers, independent of God, to humans. We can always choose what we want our 'tomorrow' to be. We must plan and strive for it. But, of course, all the while we must remain conscious of our utter dependence upon Him whose writ runs supreme in time and space. Also, we must never forget when we plan our 'tomorrows': 'if God wills'.

No future, therefore, awaits anyone; only that future can be ours, God willing, that we dream of, and then strive to make come true.

Educational Problems

The key to the future is education. Not in the narrow sense of schools, curriculums, syllabuses, but education in the wider sense of changing hearts, minds and lives, and imbuing them with ideals and norms which will direct and focus their aspirations and strivings. Muslims should not normally need any instruction on the importance of education as the key to their future, or on its wider concept.

For them, the importance of education lies primarily in the centrality that Islam accords it in the scheme of the Prophetic mission: the Prophet, blessings and peace be on him, 'conveys to you His messages, he purifies and develops you, he teaches you the Law and Wisdom, he teaches you what you knew not' (al-Baqarah 2: 151). At the core of Islamic ideals and values lie reading (*iqra'*), writing (*qalam*), educating ('*allama* and *ta'lim*), knowledge (*ilm*) and the Book (*al-kitāb*). All this creates the responsibility and generates the urge to learn to live as Muslims.

Nearer home, presently, is the Muslims' anxiety and anguish about what harm secular education might do to their

children. That, at the moment, defines almost the full gamut of their understanding of what their educational problems are.

First, and most important, is the conflict between the school environment and the beliefs and values of Islam. Children, therefore, become estranged from faith in God, the Prophet as the ideal, and the Islamic code of life, especially that relating to sex and family. Teachers, curriculum, text books and administrators, all contribute to this process. Second, children are not allowed or enabled to follow Islamic teachings in such matters of everyday life as diet, dress, Prayers, Fasting and co-education. Third, they receive no Islamic education. By this we do not usually mean Islamic education in its real comprehensive sense, but that they learn nothing about Islam, not even to read the Qur'ān.

We often talk of Islamic education. It is important here to distinguish it from teaching of Islam, for we often confuse the two. Imparting complete knowledge in an Islamic framework and developing persons who strive to live in surrender to God is Islamic education. It is something more comprehensive than mere religious instruction in the faith and practices of Islam.

For example, what mosques in Britain are doing is to provide some instruction in Islam. Similar is the case of educational systems, even Islamic universities and colleges, in the Muslim world, albeit on a higher scale.

While education is the key to our future, the future is inextricably linked with what our dreams are about ourselves; it will be defined by those dreams. This may sound too poetical, but only good dreams have the power to generate long-range, fruitful strategies.

So far, the most we are attempting to achieve is that our young are not de-Islamized by state schools, nor grow up ignorant of Islam. This, obviously, we want to make happen despite conditions which are pulling us in an entirely opposite direction. For, the secular, un-Islamic society in which we find ourselves cannot be wished away, nor can its schools,

which Muslim children must attend in the absence of any feasible alternative.

Is such a strategy possible, operable? I would say yes. *And much more.* But *only* if we are prepared to look far beyond these limited, defensive goals and set our sights on fulfilling the kind of dream, that, as Muslims, we must have. Also, if we contemplate solutions beyond the prevalent institutional arrangements, to which our minds seem, unfortunately, to have become stuck.

Goal and Strategy

So, what should we dream of? Obviously, we are not prepared to be assimilated and become 'lost'. Otherwise we would not be looking for an education strategy. Should, then, we accept to live as a grudgingly accepted minority sub-culture, always under siege, always struggling to retain the little niche it has been allowed to carve out for itself? That perhaps is the destiny to which most of us seem resigned.

But, I have little doubt in my mind what our dream should be: to bring to the society that we live in the peace (*islām*) and justice (*qist*) which we believe lie only in surrendering (*Islam*) to the One God and in following His prophets.

There is no need to be apologetic or timid about it. At the same time this does not mean embarking on a proselytizing mission or going on the war path. Rather, as full members of a society which claims to be democratic and in whose future we have an equal stake, it is a duty that we owe to our fellow citizens, to ourselves, to our Creator. And it is their right upon us too. With our neighbours, our society, we must share, through our good works and good words, with conviction and self-assurance, but with humility and compassion, the rich treasure of the Divine guidance we have been given.

Our education strategy for the youth should therefore aim to make that dream come true. Put simply: while they know

Islam, they also know how to understand their world in its light; while they live by Islam, they are also equipped to invite their fellow human beings to live in surrender to their Creator.

Only then will not only our children but all children be safe. As Muslims, we have no alternative but to tread this path. Firstly, inviting others to submit to the Creator is an integral part of the very process and objective of being good Muslims ourselves. And is not being good Muslims what we wish our children to aspire to? They must therefore learn that they cannot become so unless they invite others to join them. Secondly, unless the most we desire and plan for becomes that much, even the little we are attempting to achieve now may elude us.

Defensive Strategy?

Why? Mainly because a tiny cultural island in a vast alien sea, constantly under siege by high and mighty waves, can hardly hope to escape intrusion and encroachment through mere defensive attitudes and measures. Especially today the odds are so heavily stacked against such survival as never before. Through institutions like omnipotent state, omnipresent media, compulsory school system, all-pervasive social services, the tentacles of the dominant culture reach every hearth and home, every heart and mind.

Defensive goals, above all, create timid spirits – hardly capable of overcoming the power, onslaught and grip of ruling cultures. Also, they dictate only such measures which can fit in the prevailing system. Essential though they are in an ongoing struggle, their usefulness is limited.

To sum up: even growing up and remaining Muslims with an 'Islamic' identity, being accepted as a minority, would be impossible unless we give our youth the goal of making the society Muslim. Primarily, because such is the nature of Islam. But also, because merely imparting the knowledge of Islam would never be enough. We need a potent counter-culture.

Only the inner resources of a spirit which can enter the *cultural encounter* with self-assurance, with the conviction that it has something to *give* and not merely *take*, and with a sense of mission to change society, can create such a counter-culture, an alternative society within the existing society. Perhaps we may not succeed in changing the society, though even that goal is not beyond reach, but survive we certainly shall. For, as soon as we succeed in making our education imbue our children with this ideal then a dramatic reversal will take place in their psychology, indeed in their whole personality make-up. Far from being at the 'receiving' end of the cultural transfer line, they would be transposed to its 'giving' end. Only that will reverse the presently dreaded unfolding of history.

To create a culture within a culture, a milieu within a milieu: that must therefore be the primary, long-range part of our strategy. However, no less important is the short-range part: protecting every inch of our cultural territory, inching our way forward within the system as far as we can. A culture like Islam needs this two-pronged drive.

Short-range Strategy

Consider first the latter.

One, the evening and weekend schools, mostly in mosques: they took up the challenge of providing education on Islam at a time when Muslims had no other answer to this problem. To recognize their immense contribution and continuing role is of the utmost importance. But more needs to be done.

Firstly, institute short and long courses to train teachers, as well as produce new ones. Teachers should be more effective and compassionate, competent to deal with the contemporary society, and equipped to educate for long-range goals as I have outlined above. New teachers should come from those going through state schools. Those who are unemployed may provide a good recruiting base. They would all need proper motivation to come forward.

Secondly, let the children *understand* the Qur'ān that they so laboriously read. Let them also come to intimate fellowship with the Prophet, peace be upon him, and with Islamic history. Nothing shapes identity and culture so sharply as does history.

Thirdly, involve children in adult community activities, even as trivial as keeping the mosques clean, calling people to the Prayers, etc.

Fourthly, a well-designed basic syllabus is a must. Presently, it may not be feasible, but efforts for its attainment should continue.

Fifthly, mobilize maximum state resources – funds, buildings – for this 'supplementary teaching'.

In all this, the *doing* part must be left to those who are already involved; well-meaning outsiders should only plant ideas.

Two, efforts to establish separate Muslim schools should be made in a more intense and systematic manner, especially for girls and at nursery level. Take, pragmatically, what is achievable; but pursue, ceaselessly, the ideal.

Three, efforts to win a place for Islamic teaching within state schools and colleges must continue. There is scope for winning more space in the school life, if the potential offered by law and society is imaginatively utilized.

Four, concerted political action should be organized to ensure that children are allowed to observe Islamic rules in matters like inter-sex mixing, dress, diet and prayers. This, I consider, is immensely more important than one or two lessons a week on teaching Islam. Information may evaporate, and does evaporate, but living by Islamic rules, day in and day out, will engrave Islamic identity indelibly on consciousness. To understand its importance look at the demonstration in Derby against the right to wear *shalwar*, and in Bradford against the right to Halal food.

All the above measures are essential. But not one of them is the final answer to our problems. None, by itself, will make our dreams come true. Each may, however, contribute

something important once it becomes part of our overall strategy.

Separate Muslim Schools

Let us look, in some detail, at one necessary objective and strategy: separate Muslim schools. Our right to have them cannot be denied, their importance and urgency can hardly be over-emphasized. But even they would neither solve all our educational problems, nor meet, on their own, our long-range ideals and needs.

What a Muslim school will be like? It will be administered by Muslims, and staffed by Muslim teachers (as far as possible), but, being government-aided, will be subject to their regulations. State curriculum will have to be followed, though Islam will be taught and Islamic rules observed. Its doors will have to be open to children of all faiths and its product will have to fit into higher education and the job market. Let us see what they can accomplish and what they cannot.

First, presently Muslim schools may not be more than an arithmetic sum of state school, *plus* Islamic subjects, *plus* some Islamic ethos within its four walls, *plus* Muslim administrators, *plus*, perhaps, some Muslim teachers. The result may not be significantly different to what is happening in a lot of Muslim countries. Or, as a recent Islamic Circle Organization report pointed out about schools so far established: 'In many cases the only difference between these Muslim schools and state schools is the name . . . some of them have included Islamic subjects in their syllabus but we still feel that the essential quality of a Muslim school is missing.'

Second, if a teacher is the most effective means to impart that essential quality, are there enough qualified *Muslims*, even for one secondary school? A Muslim school can therefore hardly avoid employing non-Muslims, teaching exactly the same curriculum as in state schools, as even some mosque-run schools are doing. Moreover, many Muslim teachers may be different from non-Muslims only in name.

Third, within the given context of the larger secular society, would a Muslim school fare any better in producing good Muslims than Christian or Jewish schools have in turning out good Christians and Jews?

I am not, presently, questioning the institution of schools as such, which we have accepted uncritically as a suitable medium for raising good Muslims. We should, however, remember that they are a social invention of the West – hardly 200 years old – perfected to perpetuate its achievements and values. Established in response to the complex and specialized contemporary economic roles, they mainly teach skills with which to earn a living; they do not teach the meaning of life. Their rituals, like certification, provide only a passage into a work-oriented world.

Fourth, the effectiveness of Muslim schools in moulding minds and characters may be limited. How much time does a child spend in school? Very little. According to S. Naimuddin (*The Monthly Azan*, Birmingham, November, 1983), 1,235 hours in a year (3.45 hours each day) – 14.1% of his total time (8,700 hours) or 25.2% of the estimated time he is awake (if he sleeps 10 hours a day, which few do).

Fifth, there are fears, not totally unfounded, that the students of these schools will be discriminated against in the job market. Or, having been educated in seclusion, they may not be equipped to do well in higher education or in society at large in later life.

But even if we put these worldly considerations aside for the time being, as we might, two aspects should not be overlooked. One, those going through these schools may not receive proper social training to enable them to interact *Islamically* with those among whom they will live and work. Two, they would miss the opportunity to make an impact on the state school students and teachers.

All the above anxieties cannot be brushed aside lightly as inconsequential.

Sixth, in their present divisive state, it would be futile to hope that Muslims can agree on having a unified syllabus or

administration. Internal differences may even hinder such schools being established. One might very well witness a Barelvi school, a Deobandi school, or a Salafi school cropping up at the same place. (Only paucity of resources may perhaps prevent such an ugly scene.)

Seventh, and finally, even if reasonably satisfactory Muslim schools can be established, the sheer physical magnitude of our need is beyond their reach. No one knows precisely how many Muslim children there are in schools – but 100,000 to 200,000, throughout the country, would not be a far off guess. Can we build all the schools needed for them? Even if we can, how long will it take to do so? Do we have that much resources and time? Or, should we be content with educating only a few, at a few places?

All this has not been said to deter from establishing Muslim schools. Still one may ask: Why should we, then, expend our energies on them? Because a viable strategy, as has been said, must use every available means, within the given constraints, and address immediate problems as well. It should therefore be multi-dimensional. As a part of such a strategy, but not by themselves alone, Muslim schools will play an important role, despite all the inherent limitations and difficulties. With care it should be possible even to overcome some of them.

They would solve certain immediate problems, especially regarding girls. Once established, they would be the base on which to build further. Experience gained in establishing them would be valuable in implementing any overall strategy. They could become the nucleus for more comprehensive institutions and for preparing much needed educational materials for use in both schools and homes. Efforts to establish separate schools will keep the concern for education alive, keep attention focused on what needs to be done, activate interest and action, and generate resources which are presently so short. At the same time, our persistence to have them may compel the state education authorities to provide for many important Muslim needs within their

system. And, hopefully, they may produce a generation which would provide the community with much needed leadership.

All the short-range measures we have enumerated above, though important, provide a narrow bridge across a widening gap. We should not pin our entire hopes on them, nor consider them to be the panacea for all our ills, nor allow them to consume a disproportionate amount of our resources. Nor should they make us oblivious to, or negligent of, the real nature of our challenge and our ultimate goal.

Long-range Strategy

Let us therefore turn to the long-range strategy which will generate a culture within a culture, through institutions within our control and within the limits of our resources. Such institutions are: home, peer group, and neighbourhood community.

Home

Home, even in the present society, plays a crucial role in personality development. By the age of five, when a child is drafted into state school, the family has already done a lot: the child has learnt most of what he has to learn; much of the culture has been transmitted. Even later, he spends 86 per cent of his time in home and neighbourhood.

When surrounded by an alien, secular and tyrannical culture, home should form the pivot and centre of the strategy to generate and sustain Islamic life. This is indicated when Allah tells the Israelites, through Moses: 'Turn your homes into Qiblah' (Yūnus 10: 87).

Peer Groups

Next come social bonds, or what are called peer groups. These often have power to influence more effectively than schools, even within schools.

So, we should plan to generate a movement which will turn every home into a Muslim school, draw every young Muslim into an Islam-oriented group life, and turn the community life into a continuing, action-based educational process.

An impossible dream? Yes, if we imagine that this can happen in the immediate future. But no, if we just make a beginning now. How to do that?

Concerned Parents

Firstly, start organizing groups of Concerned Parents, five to seven strong, around the *sole* objective of Islamic education – no more, no less. Sectarian or political differences should not be a bar to this programme, for the size is small enough to allow only like-minded persons in one group. Once the first groups are formed, the idea may catch on.

What will these groups of Concerned Parents do? They will meet regularly, preferably every week, and discuss only one issue: what they will be doing during the next week to educate their children within the home. Their activities within homes may take various forms: reading the Qur'ān, Hadith, Sirah, Islamic literature, stories, listening to cassettes, giving talks to children, etc. After they become established, such groups may also want to spend a little time studying some of these things themselves. But they shall *not* be required to do so in the beginning.

Young Muslim Groups

Secondly, start organizing groups of young Muslims, on the sole basis of doing something practical for the Muslim

community and Islam. Educating themselves in Islam should also be part of their aims, but secondarily. What should they do? One, meet weekly – at homes, in mosques, or wherever possible. But their relationship should *not* be a once-a-week affair. They should stick together as much as possible – in coming to mosques, within schools, at playgrounds, etc. Two, become actively involved in community life through *actions* of all sorts. Three, take up Da'wah among neighbours as a primary task.

Educational Materials

Thirdly, more than one national organization should take up the task of preparing suitable educational materials – books, cassettes, videos, etc. – for out-of-school education, like daily/weekly Qur'ān, Hadith and Sirah readings; stories; group discussion materials; materials for parents to read to children at home. Preparing materials for in-school teaching is also important. But, while text books will be used in only a few schools, if and when they are established, these items may be used in thousands and thousands of homes, groups, neighbourhoods and clubs.

New Social Life

Fourthly, adults and youth should join together in creating an alternative social life based on group activities like helping the aged, needy and sick; campaigns to collect funds for community purposes like mosques; clubs; study circles; neighbourhood papers; information and aid centres; exhibitions; sports; recreation, etc.

To generate an educational movement within the community, by turning each home and each neighbourhood into a 'school' and drafting the maximum number of men and women to become 'educators', is what Islam basically wants.

The above steps will generate such a movement, which alone is the viable, enduring solution to the immediate problems, which alone can lead us to our ultimate goal.

Conclusion

So, let us continue with madrasahs, let us build Muslim schools, but let us not stop at them. We must look beyond them, move beyond them. Let us implement a strategy which will ensure that not only our young generations remain Muslim, but *all* young generations live as Muslims. And, not only the young, but we *all* become imbued with that education which was the Prophetic mission: we understand our world in the light of Islam, we live by Islam, we invite our neighbours to live in surrender to the One God. That means that the whole of community life must become living, continuing, dynamic education.

Only this can ensure an Islamic future for the youth, and therefore for the Muslim Ummah, in this country, as everywhere else.

KHURRAM MURAD is currently Director General of the Islamic Foundation. Born in 1932, he studied civil engineering at the Universities of Karachi (BE 1952) and Minnesota, USA (MS 1958), and worked as a leading consulting engineer at Karachi, Dhaka, Tehran and Riyadh. Actively involved in the Islamic movement since 1948, he was President, Islami Jamiat Talaba, Pakistan (1951-52); a member of the Central Executive, Jama'at Islami Pakistan (1963-77) and Amir of its Dhaka Branch (1963-71). His works include, in Urdu, *Inter-Personal Relations in an Islamic Movement; Islamic Renaissance and the Role of Teacher; Islamic Leadership in the Mirror of Sirah* and, in English, *Way to the Qur'an; Islamic Movement in the West: Reflections on Some Issues*, apart from a number of books for children. He is also co-editor of the *Muslim World Book Review*.

MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE WEST: TOWARDS A NEW EDUCATION STRATEGY argues for a radically new vision and approach to the problem of education of Muslim youth living within a secular culture, which would aim to create a culture within a culture. Mere defensive measures, says Khurram Murad, will fail, unless we turn the whole community life into living, dynamic education centred on the goal of bringing the message of Islam to the society in which we live. He advocates a long-term strategy in this direction, based on home, peer group, and social activities, alongside short-term defensive measures within the present system, like mosque-schools, separate Muslim schools, observance of Islamic norms within state schools, etc.

This short essay must be read by every Muslim who cares for the future of the new Muslim generations.

THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION is an educational and research organization devoted to making Islam a living reality in our age. For this purpose, it aims to improve human communication and develop a better understanding of Islam among all people of the world, Muslim and non-Muslim, so as to galvanize man to the message and ideal of One God and the unity of mankind, as brought by all the Prophets of God throughout the ages, last of whom was the Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah and peace be upon him).



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