

# **Ethnicity, Religion, and Muslim Education in a Changing World:** Key Insights and Reflections

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## **Introduction**

Good evening, everyone, and thank you for joining us to launch this groundbreaking new book, *Ethnicity, Religion, and Muslim Education in a Changing World*.

As an editor and contributor to the volume, it's truly an honour to be here discussing the critical issues it addresses.

Tonight, I'll be focusing on key insights from Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 12, 14 and 15, which together paint a vivid picture of both the challenges and resilience of Muslims in British education.

## **Setting the Scene: Historical and Contemporary Contexts**

Let's begin with some essential context.

Chapter 1 traces the trajectory of ethnic and religious minority education in post-war Britain, with a particular lens on the Muslim experience. It underscores how processes of racialisation have persistently shaped minority lives and how religion, ethnicity and identity have become increasingly politicized in the educational sphere.

The events of 9/11 marked a turning point, ushering in an era of intensified securitization that has acutely impacted Muslims. Despite progress on some fronts, the chapter argues, structural exclusion and alienation remain daily realities for too many British Muslims – a product of complex social, educational, political, and cultural factors that demand holistic understanding.

## **Muslimness and Its Meaning in Education**

Chapter 2 dives deeper into the multifaceted concept of “Muslimness” and how it manifests as an identity marker for young people navigating school and society.

For many Muslim students and parents, faith is integral to their sense of self and their expectations from the education system. They desire schools that respect Islamic values, accommodate religious practices, and nurture their children’s Muslim identity.

However, the chapter reveals a stark gap between these aspirations and the lived reality of many Muslim pupils. Complaints abound of Eurocentric curricula that erase their heritage, prejudice from peers and staff, and institutions ill-equipped to support their spiritual needs. Bridging this divide, the authors argue, will require genuine dialogue and a commitment to inclusion from educational leaders – not further marginalization of Muslims as a “problem” to be managed.

## **Empowering Muslim Educators**

Chapter 4 shifts our gaze to the educators at the front lines of these dynamics. Through poignant life stories, we meet Muslim teachers grappling with their own intersecting identities and experiences of schooling as they strive to be change-makers for the next generation.

These narratives lay bare the racism, stereotyping, and microaggressions that Muslim educators frequently face, while also showcasing their immense resilience and passion for supporting students. Crucially, the chapter highlights the vital role of Muslim teachers in building bridges between schools and their communities, advocating for cultural responsiveness, and embodying possibility for Muslim youth. Empowering and retaining them, then, must be a key priority in creating more equitable educational spaces.

## **Listening to Muslim Student Voices**

Chapter 6 foregrounds the too-often silenced perspectives of Muslim students themselves. In their own words, these young people testify to the multiple dimensions of racism they confront in British schools – from explicit slurs and attacks to subtler exclusions built into the very curriculum and values that shape their learning.

Their incisive critiques of so-called “British values” and the Prevent strategy lay bare the alienating impact of top-down mandates that treat Muslim identity as inherently suspect. Yet, even as they name these painful experiences, these youth also speak with moving optimism about the vibrantly diverse communities they are part of and offer generous, practical visions for change.

Their ideas span the gamut from proactive anti-racism policies and inclusive curricula to opportunities for dialogue that humanize difference. At their core is a longing to be truly seen, heard, and valued in all their complexity. Heeding their wisdom would go a long way toward reimagining schools as sites of healing and belonging.

## **Confronting the Legacy of Racial Discourse**

Chapter 12 takes a step back to interrogate the very language we use to describe difference in Britain. Tracing the historical evolution of racial and ethnic terminologies, it surfaces a troubling disconnect between shifts in discourse and actual transformations in thought.

While ethnic categories gradually replaced overtly racial ones in the late 20th century, the chapter contends, this linguistic change did not necessarily uproot deep-seated racialised assumptions. Too often, ethnicity simply became a more palatable veneer for essentialised notions of identity.

Unpacking this legacy is crucial because it continues to distort and derail contemporary conversations about racism. Without a shared understanding of how race has been constructed and deployed, good-faith

dialogue remains elusive. The chapter's call for a concerted reckoning with this history and a reframing of public discourse around race literacy is thus both timely and necessary.

### **The Trojan Horse Affair: Moral Panic and Its Aftermath**

Chapters 14 and 15 offer an unflinching examination of one of the most damaging moral panics in recent British history: the Trojan Horse affair.

Chapter 14 meticulously documents how an unremarkable letter was weaponized by media and politicians to conjure the spectre of an Islamist conspiracy to subvert schools.

Despite a glaring lack of evidence, this manufactured narrative became a pretext for expanding the problematic Prevent strategy and imposing ill-defined "British values" on the education sector. Most disturbingly, even when the hoax was revealed, prominent voices across the ideological spectrum remained invested in treating it as fact – maligning the few intrepid journalists who dared to investigate the full story.

Chapter 15 drives home the human cost of this affair through the eyes of a school governor who witnessed its unfolding firsthand. In a poignant testimonial, he recounts how Park View – once a celebrated success story serving a disadvantaged community – found itself in the eye of the Trojan Horse storm. As Muslim educators were demonized and hounded out of their jobs on flimsy pretexts, the school's hard-won progress unravelled, shattering trust for a generation.

The governor's account leaves no doubt that Park View's fate was sealed by a pre-determined Ofsted inquisition designed to further a neoconservative assault on multiculturalism – not by any actual wrongdoing. The casualties, tragically but predictably, were the very Muslim children whose interests the government claimed to champion.

## **Looking Forward: The Fierce Urgency of Now**

So where do we go from here? The lessons from these chapters are at once sobering and stirring. They reveal just how entrenched Islamophobia has become in British society and how readily Muslim students' futures can still be sacrificed for political point-scoring. Confronting these uncomfortable truths is the first step toward a reckoning long overdue.

At the same time, these pages pulsate with stories of resilience, resistance and radical reimagining by Muslim youth and educators. In their critiques and hopes, they chart a path toward schools that can hold and nurture the totality of who they are – both as proud Muslims and full participants in British life. Building such educational spaces is not some lofty aspiration but an urgent necessity – and one that would enrich all students and our shared society.

What will it take? For starters, curricula that reflect Britain's multicultural past and present, taught by diverse faculty trained in cultural competence. Robust processes for preventing and addressing Islamophobia and racism in all its guises. Opportunities for open dialogue that foster genuine mutual understanding. A rejection of securitization logics that presume Muslim identity is a problem rather than an asset.

Most of all, we need a fundamental reorientation toward seeing Muslim students and educators as partners, not targets, in building a better future. Their knowledge, experiences and commitment are indispensable resources in this effort. It's time to stop talking about Muslims in education and start talking – and listening – to them.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I am reminded of a prophetic observation by James Baldwin, who once said: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

This volume forces us to face some hard truths about the state of British education for Muslims – but in so doing, it also illuminates the fierce urgency and profound possibility of change.

Realizing the vision of an educational system where every Muslim pupil can thrive, and every Muslim educator can lead will not be easy. But in the stories and insights gathered here, I see the seeds of that transformation. By learning from those most impacted, centring their voices, and summoning the collective will to dismantle structural Islamophobia, we can begin to cultivate schools worthy of all Britain's children.

To everyone who contributed to this vital book – the authors, the scholars, and above all, the Muslim students and teachers who shared their truths – thank you for your courage and wisdom.

Let us honour your stories through action and build the educational future you deserve.

Thank you.