بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Some Reflections on Principles of Islamic Education within a Western Context

Dr. Atif Imtiaz

Dr. Imtiaz has been involved in community activism since the late 1980s. He completed a thesis on Muslim identity politics in social psychology at the London School of Economics. He now works as an Equality and Diversity Manager in the Bradford and Airedale Teaching Primary Care Trust.

Imams that are arriving to serve in British mosques have been trained in the sciences of 'aqidah, fiqh and in some cases tasawwuf, this being the traditional triumvirate of the sciences of the religion. The question that we should ask is, does this training in and of itself make the Imams fit for purpose for the communities that they serve? I do not intend to provide many answers in this presentation but I do intend to ask many questions. My approach will be to briefly describe the challenges that face the Muslim community today and then to ask how training prepares Imams for these challenges. I will not be discussing the institutions that are cropping up across the country and the associated question that hangs over the infrastructure that we are preparing across the country – are our institutions ready to receive these graduates? I will leave this important aspect of this discussion to one of the later sessions

The first question to consider is the homogeneity of the British Muslim community. It is immediately obvious that the British Muslim community is heterogenous in many different ways, class and ethnicity being two important variables. One immediate example is the difference that is emerging between some Muslim communities in the North and some Muslim communities in the South. To put it simply, the Imam arriving in a mosque in Manningham in Bradford will face different challenges to the Imam serving the Richmond Muslim Association. As with the North/South discussion in general, this generalisation does not hold across the board as Altrincham Muslim Association in the North or East London Mosque in the South are strong counter examples.

In the analysis of my research on Muslim youth cultures in Bradford, I developed a typology of identity types for South Asian Muslim male youth. These types are the 'rude boys', 'extremists' and 'coconuts'. 'Rude boys' mix between three cultures: African American hip hop, Northern Pakistani and Northern Industrial. The blending of these cultures produces a hybrid identity which is all too familiar in many Northern cities. 'Extremists' are described as such by those who are less practising because they are perceived to have developed an unbalanced approach to the religion. 'Coconuts' are those who are brown on the outside but white on the inside. The terms are pejorative because identity is mutually contested. This typology was developed for South Asian male youth and I'm sure that there will be some crossover for young female Muslims.

To contrast between the 'coconut' and the 'rude boy', I would suggest that the 'coconut' faces the challenges that are associated with an assimilationist identity within a modern culture. As an individual becomes successful then he/she questions what he/she will take forward and what he/she will leave behind. The questions that seem most common here are concerning liberalism and science. That is, as an individual begins to achieve within a middle-class cultural context, then a part of that cultural integration is an interrogation of his/her beliefs. I have spoken with many such individuals who have required assistance at this point in their lives. Questions concerning liberalism relate to the notion of personal freedom, human rights and gender relations for example. Questions concerning science relate to lay perceptions of materialism and the philosophy of science itself. How does Islam explain our personal experience of freewill? Why are women not equal to men in Islam? Can individualism be a basis for law In Islam? How can religion as a body of knowledge claim to supersede science and its achievements? How many Imams are able today to answer questions like these after having received the traditional training and how many Imams can do so in a way that is intellectually satisfactory and persuasive?

'Within a Western context' – how much should the Imams know about the intellectual hinterland of the West, Europe and/or Britain. Do they need to know the difference between empiricism and rationalism? Or the difference between Hume and Kant? Or the origins of the enlightenment? And its relation to the atheist movement? Do they need to know the history of the social sciences? Or should they be trained in any of the social sciences? Sociology as the sociology of the city or the sociology of modernity? Psychology as child psychology or depth psychology? We would probably need to consider a two-pronged approach here. We should adopt an introductory level approach to certain subjects such as the sociology of the city, philosophy of science and perhaps child psychology or mental health. Practical knowledge such as recent public policy and the actual names and functions of public institutions may also be important. And we should then adopt a more detailed approach to other subjects such as depth psychology or individualism. 'Individualism' is important because it presents itself to many Imams and we need to respond through our own kind of 'individualism'. Individualism is also important because it relates to a theory of prejudice and I would suggest that a centre training Imams to act as leaders of the Muslim community should teach 'a theory of prejudice' that will enable Imams to deal with the varieties of prejudice that can be placed in their way.

To consider the 'rude boys', they are the products of inner-city nihilism and as such they experience alienation from many things including meaning and morality. These hollow men are broken by their disconnection from their Lord, their

families and their own selves. This feeling of hollowness and total isolation is a most modern and typical circumstance. I have seen young men become transformed from 'rude boys' into the newly practising and I have felt that the religion that they practise has become a mask which only very timidly covers their hollowness. In many senses one feels that they have found religion and yet they have not become religious. The Islam that these young men are being offered is the Islam of outer signs which replicates so well the cultural commodification that they exhibited as 'rude boys'. The training of imams for this particular group of people will require the development of religious leaders who can replace the hollowness with something more substantial.

Some of us have put together a project called Clement's Gate in Bradford and we are working with Shaykh Saad al Attas on developing a way of providing guidance to the community that is most relevant. We felt here that the work of Imam al-Ghazali remains important and relevant to our concerns, especially the Ihya 'Ulum ad Din, and we have conducted two series of lectures on the books of the Ihya: the first on the book of 'Patience and gratitude' and the second on the book 'The condemnation of anger, rancour and envy'. We have at present been doing this as straight translations and they have been very well-received. A course that trains Imams on the Ihya and how to teach it within a Western context may be a useful addition to the curriculum here. It could be regarded as a response to the problem of 'hollowness' that I mentioned earlier.

These two examples show that the training that is required for Imams has to be specific to the communities that they serve. In the health service we ask for services to be culturally competent for the communities that they serve. The official term is social

marketing. So, for example, a diabetes service that offered dietary advice to South Asians without considering the ways in which their diet is different would be regarded as culturally incompetent. In a similar fashion, at present we are asking Imams to arrive in communities without knowing their most pressing concerns. A successful lawyer in the City who is finding it difficult to respond to questions on liberalism and the law will require a very different approach to an unemployed youngster who can barely articulate his aspiration and is taking cocaine. Both of them may be distant from their religion, but their experiences of being distant are very different.

Let me move on to the third example and that is of the 'extremist'. The challenge that remains here for Imams in Britain – and it is probably one of the greatest challenges – is to manage the potential dual risk of ghettoisation and assimilation; as we know, in some cities and towns these could happen simultaneously. Extremism is one outcome of this process and it is the result of a total incomprehension of how to integrate into wider society without losing one's integrity. I would suggest here that the role of the Imam is crucial. In one sense this is about cultural engagement but in another sense it is also about political engagement because the political question is one question that we will always have to answer because of what 'Muslim-ness' itself can do to rupture Western self-confidence and because of the socio-economic conditions of a large part of our community. This political engagement requires a knowledge of British political history at national and local level and in terms of sentiment and party politics. For example, in order to provide some leadership to a community in a city run by the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, it is important to know the difference between being a Liberal and a libertarian. And if ghettoisation is a communal defensive mechanism, then the question will be how

to lead the community out of ghettoisation without risking assimilation at a later date.

But this is also about cultural integration and I found this to be one of the most important ways of sedimenting Muslim identity within a Western experience. That is, those who are familiar in one way or another with poetry or literature, whether this is Wordsworth or Dickens, seem to me to be better able to understand the nuances and subtleties of polite conversation that lies at the heart of the British character. I would call here for some form of religious leadership in this area which will help generate a language of integration that we need so much.

Cambridge Muslim College on its website has the following aphorism: 'Four things support the world: the learning of the wise, the justice of the great, the prayers of the good, and the valor of the brave'. This aphorism describes the functions of the ideal Imam as I would see him: as the *Wali* – the prayers of the good; the *Faqih* – the learning of the wise; and the *Amir* – the justice of the great and the valor of the brave. Whether this is practically achievable may perhaps be more dependent on the personalities themselves than any training programme. I leave this question for you to consider but it would be an ideal situation if each of our great cities had several Imams who combined these characteristics within their expansive souls.

There are other types that I could have mentioned. I can think here of converts, asylum seekers, children from mixed race couples, and the newly practicing (as I call them). I hope that the examples that I have mentioned have made the case for a form of training that is robust yet relevant.

Before I conclude, I would like to highlight one more point about the training of Imams and concerning their role as advisors on parenting and family life. This is a very dynamic area at present and there seems to

be much crossover with the previous issues on identity. We have a developing discourse around gender which is impacting on society as a whole while young Muslims are integrating authentic (or what are presented as authentic) religious teachings on family life with their cultural norms – South Asian and British. Many are managing this successfully but I hope that I am not exaggerating when I suggest that many are also finding this very difficult. The Imam seems to be the first port of call and they have to respond to families in crisis by providing the right answers at the right moment. Training that covers family dynamics would be very useful here. I would not wish to suggest a model to be incorporated into the programme but the contribution of what depth psychology could offer here may be worthwhile investigating. For example, abusive husbands repeat the patterns of abuse that they may have experienced at home from their fathers. Husbands may find it very difficult to emotionally engage with their families because of a lack of emotional development in their own childhood. Wives may project blame on to their husbands for experiences that they may have had previously in their lives. Imams are turned to and faced with these situations and many offer advice without any training in family psychology. It may be worth considering using the role of the Imam as a signpost in these situations. Should the Imam act as a family counselor in these situations or should the Imam pass on the couple to a family counselor? This is also for us to consider and could also apply to areas of concern such as mental health and substance misuse.

How we train Imams will depend upon the priority that is given to the various functions that I have described above and the role that we would expect of our Imams in delivering these functions either as signposts or as the persons charged with the responsibility of service itself. In summary, I would suggest

that the traditional teaching methods in *'aqidah* and *fiqh* specifically are important as foundational necessities of Islamic learning, however, as the examples that I have mentioned have shown, there are many aspects to the Western cultural experience which will require further training on the specificities of the communities that these Imams will serve in order to make them the best that they can be.✺