TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST TO MUSLIM STUDENTS: A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

It can be argued on *a priori* grounds that teaching the Holocaust might be especially difficult in schools with a largely Muslim catchment area. Problems are likely to arise partly from the on-going conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and partly from what is, on balance, an unflattering portrayal of Jews in the Koran. The impact of these factors on students learning about the Holocaust is unknown but clearly gives cause for concern. To assess the seriousness of the concern, a small-scale investigation involving 15 secondary school teachers was recently undertaken in Britain. This article provides the background to the investigation and addresses its main findings and conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

There are several reasons for thinking that in Britain, as elsewhere, predominantly Muslim schools will experience particular difficulties when teaching about the Holocaust (see, for example, Friedman, 2004; Miller, 2004). In the first instance, there appears to be a widespread awareness within Britain's Muslim population of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Muslim students, whose sympathies, one assumes, lie overwhelmingly with the Palestinians, may be reluctant to learn about Jewish suffering when the injustice (as they see it) that befell their co-religionists is effectively ignored both by Israel and by much of the international community. This reluctance to come to terms with Jewish suffering under the Nazis is arguably reinforced by media coverage of the conflict that is not only constant but which inflames passions by portraying Israel as a brutal occupier of Palestinian land, an occupier that will not hesitate, for example, to use disproportionate force when it deems it necessary. That said, an unwillingness on the part of Muslim students to learn about the Holocaust is likely to reflect more than just anger at the current situation, for it is frequently asserted and not only by Muslims, that the Holocaust is actually the cause of the conflict (e.g. Freedland 2003) and that it provides Israel, in Zygmunt Bauman's (1989) words, with the 'certificate of its political legitimacy.' This oversimplification, not to say fundamental misconception, has led some Muslim politicians and Islamic extremists to seek to delegitimise Israel by denying the Holocaust. It was thus no surprise when in December 2005 President Ahmadinejad of Iran referred to the attempted annihilation of European Jewry as a 'myth.' In Arab countries too, denial is widespread (Fisk, 1996). While its impact on Britain's Muslim population is unknown, the importance of Iran on the world stage ensures that the incendiary rhetoric of its leader will be aired internationally. Moreover, as the report of the British All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism (2006:27) pointed out, anti-Semitic sentiments generated in the Middle East can easily 'be imported into Britain via satellite television, the internet and the Arabic press.' It is therefore unlikely that outlandish views will be held only by an extremist minority. Indeed, the Parliamentary Inquiry claimed that the views of radical Islamists are currently 'entering mainstream discourse.' For these reasons Holocaust denial may well be one of the problems that teachers in predominantly Muslim schools have to contend with.

Politics aside, there is another reason why Muslim students might not be eager to learn about the Holocaust and it relates to the role that religion plays in determining the attitudes of Muslims towards Jews. Specifically, it has been suggested that while there are some favourable comments about Jews in the Koran, overall they are depicted in a negative light. They are, for example, deemed guilty of "falsehood" (Sura 3:71) and "distortion" (Sura 4:46); assumed to have been cursed by Allah, as well as by David and Jesus (Sura 2:61/58, Sura 5:78/82) and further assumed to have been transformed into apes and pigs because of the contempt that Allah felt for them (Sura 5:60/65, 2:65 and 7:166). Despite these blatant calumnies, there has been much debate over the extent to which the Koran can fairly be accused of anti-Semitism, not just because the sacred text, as already stated, contains positive references to Jews, but also because it can be argued that the hostile comments do not refer to *all* Jews but only to those who have transgressed in some way. The fact remains, however, that the Koran is open to an anti-Semitic interpretation and younger members of the Muslim community might have been exposed to this point of view either at home or in the mosque.

In light of the above, there has to be a degree of concern over the way the Holocaust is taught in schools with a largely Muslim catchment area. In order to discover whether this concern is justified, the following small-scale study was undertaken in 2007.

METHODOLOGY

The sample comprised fifteen history teachers, six male and nine female. They were selected at random from publicly funded secondary schools with a predominantly Muslim student body. The schools were all located in south-east England and were predominantly Muslim in the sense that either the majority of students were Muslim or, where this was not the case, Muslims constituted the largest single ethno-religious group within the school. Two of the teachers were of South Asian descent; the rest were white. Each of them participated in a semi-structured interview consisting of 12 questions the first of which was 'How old are the students to whom you teach the Holocaust? The remaining questions were categorised under the following headings: (1) Basic information relating to the school's commitment to Holocaust education (2) Attitudes towards the value of Holocaust education (3) Factors influencing the approach to teaching about the Holocaust within each school and (4) The impact of anti-Semitism on students' willingness to learn about it.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Teachers showed no reluctance to engage with the Holocaust. On the contrary, the average length of time allocated to it in Year 9 (where it was taught in every school to students aged 13 to 15) was considerably longer than in two comparable studies conducted in Britain in the 1990s in which Muslim pupils were not the primary focus (Short, 1995; Brown and Davies, 1998). Further evidence that schools in the study took the Holocaust seriously can be seen in the willingness of teachers in curricular areas other than History to include it in their syllabus even though they were under no legal obligation to do so. It was taught most often in Religious Education and Citizenship, less often in English. In only four schools was it taught exclusively as History.

In Britain, January 27th is nationally recognised as Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD). Arguably, a school's response to this commemorative event will reflect its commitment to Holocaust education more generally. Some of the schools in the study did nothing to mark HMD, but the majority (two-thirds of the total) either held an assembly, placed posters around the school or attempted something more ambitious.

In respect of teachers' attitudes towards Holocaust education, those who commented saw its value in much the same way as their counterparts in schools with very different catchment areas. A handful of teachers, however, alluded to the opportunity the subject offers to engage with and, if necessary, challenge their pupils' perceptions of Jews. In the words of one teacher:

> [Studying the Holocaust helps develop] an understanding of hate, of how it could happen in this area in particular; how lack of tolerance can get out of hand and be manipulated …. Also the conversations that arise as a result of teaching [the Holocaust] are about the Palestinian question and the prejudices and misinformation that some of the kids have received. We can address and tackle some of the specific anti-Jewish racism…

Just over half the sample said that working in a largely Muslim environment had influenced their approach to teaching the Holocaust. As illustrated in the following statements, some were keen to ensure that students saw the Holocaust as relevant to their own lives.

> I make a point of highlighting tabloid newspaper headlines related to Islamophobia to make [the Holocaust] more personal for those students.
>
> It's made us search for resources like the school version of *Schindler's List* where Spielberg introduces the Holocaust and mentions Bosnia.

Others appeared to believe that misconceptions about Jews and the on-going conflict in the Middle East were likely to affect adversely their students' ability to understand the Holocaust. Cognisant of the power of existing knowledge to

distort the acquisition of new information, these teachers structured their lessons accordingly. Thus:

> Obviously, you can't help putting emphasis on the conflict that goes on between Muslims and Jews and so you do refer back to that probably more frequently than if it was a more Christian or more mixed group of students.
>
> I am very conscious [of the need] to hammer home the distinction between being Jewish and the perception of Israel in the Middle East.

At the time of the study the Muslim Council of Britain was opposed to participating in Holocaust Memorial Day. It was thought necessary to probe the teachers' awareness of this decision because they might be tempted to devote more or less time to the Holocaust depending on whether they wanted to counter the negativity or go along with it. In the event, just seven teachers were conscious of the Council having consistently opposed HMD but in only one case did this consciousness have implications for teaching. A male respondent said, 'It makes us more committed to ensuring that the [students] leave here knowing something about [the Holocaust].'

Certain facts relating to the Holocaust are particularly pertinent for Muslim students in the sense that they highlight the role that Muslims played both as persecutors and as rescuers of Jews. These roles were largely overlooked by teachers because of their unfamiliarity with the history. None was aware of the protection offered by Muslims to their Jewish neighbours either in Europe or in North Africa and only a couple knew of the formation of a Muslim SS unit in the Balkans in 1943. Neither mentioned it to their students.

Turning to the impact of anti-Semitism on students' willingness to learn about the Holocaust, the data show, contrary to expectation, that they tended to respond very favourably. Students were variously described as 'really interested', 'very receptive' and as 'reacting with horror (and) repugnance.' There was no objection of any kind from parents and roughly half the sample reported no anti-Semitism at all when discussing the subject with students despite the fact that in a couple of schools negative stereotyping of Jews was thought to be rife. One teacher was recorded as saying: '[There's been no] denial or any form of anti-Semitism even though I think anti-Semitism is quite prevalent in this school. I've had resistance to teaching Judaism in [Religious Education] but not when teaching the Holocaust.' According to another:

> Because of the television they watch at home etc, the Bangladeshi pupils get exposed to quite a lot of information about the Middle East, about Palestine especially, so there's quite a lot of anti-Jewish sentiment that is expressed but not usually when we're teaching the Holocaust. When learning about the Holocaust they do realise that it's racism and they've been taught since they were very little that racism is wrong.

For two of the teachers, however, their students' attitude towards Jews posed a major problem and, in the words of one of them, the Holocaust had, at one stage, proved 'a hugely difficult topic to teach.' The problem appears to have been the preaching that went on in local mosques that many of the boys attended.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confounded the main prediction in that the majority of teachers had no difficulty broaching the Holocaust with their Muslim students. On the contrary, the students generally responded very well and in some cases enthusiastically, notwithstanding the allegedly anti-Semitic culture that prevailed in two schools and which is likely to have been present in others, though maybe to a lesser degree. It would appear from this paradoxical situation that such anti-Semitism as there is in the schools stems from and is restricted to the Middle East conflict and should, perhaps, more accurately be described as anti-Zionism. In other words, whilst there may well be ill-will on the part of many of the students towards Israel, there is little towards Jews qua Jews and thus no serious opposition to learning about the Holocaust. Circumstantial evidence in support of this contention is to be found in press reports that surface from time to time about Jews and Muslims co-operating on a range of issues including, most recently, the need to combat Holocaust denial in the Arab world. (See, for example, Lehrer, 2009; Rocker, 2009). Clearly, situations can arise that make it very difficult for predominantly Muslim schools to teach about the Holocaust, but if the study is at all representative, it would seem that situations of this kind are far from the norm.

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The majority of schools were genuinely committed to Holocaust education as evidenced by the amount of time they devoted to it in history lessons and in other subject areas and by their involvement in Holocaust Memorial Day. That said, there are grounds for thinking that the pedagogy in some schools was not as effective as it might have been. Specifically, only a few teachers took advantage of the opportunity the Holocaust affords to probe their students' beliefs about Jews, an essential preliminary undertaking if students are to be left in no doubt as to the abhorrent nature of Nazism. For this lesson to be learnt the murdered Jews of Europe have to be seen as entirely innocent of the charges laid against them and thus in no way deserving of their fate. However, if students subscribe to pejorative stereotypes of Jews and these stereotypes are left unchallenged, Nazi persecution becomes understandable and quite possibly acceptable, a 'lesson' wholly at variance with the aims of Holocaust education.

Another respect in which the teaching could have been improved relates to the failure to discuss the role of Muslims during the Holocaust. Providing information about those who rescued Jews is important because of the likely impact of such knowledge on anti-Semitic students who are inclined to think of Muslims as implacably hostile to Jews. These students may well come to reflect on their prejudice and even abandon it in order to make sense of the rescue. Alerting students to the formation of an SS division in Bosnia is, of course, likely to have the opposite effect, but they should nonetheless be made aware of the fact partly in the interests of historical truth, but also because students should know that the Muslim population of Europe was not at the time (as it is not now) a monolithic entity in terms of its attitude towards Jews. In addition, all students should know that collaborators were to be found across Europe and came from a variety of religious and other backgrounds.

Finally, it was noted that approximately half the sample was unfamiliar with the long-standing opposition of the Muslim Council of Britain to Holocaust Memorial Day. The Council has recently ended its boycott and thus the issue itself is no longer important. All the same, the lack of familiarity is worrying because it suggests that some teachers in schools with a substantial Muslim presence do not keep themselves abreast of developments in the wider Muslim community that may be relevant to teaching the Holocaust (and possibly other topics) in such schools.

In conclusion, it is tempting to argue on the basis of this study that any concern as to how the Holocaust is taught in predominantly Muslim schools is largely unwarranted. The study, however, was small-scale and highly localised and had it been conducted in another part of Britain, or in another part of the world, the results might have been very different.

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