MULTICULTURALISM AND FUNDING FOR ONTARIO'S ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of Islamic schools in Ontario in integrating the Muslim community into the civic and economic life of Canada. While many liberal commentators see these independent religious schools as a danger to multiculturalism and a common civic life, David Seljak argues that such judgments are grounded more in ideological constructs than empirical evidence. Seljak suggests that, while these schools operate as a fortress that protects Muslim students from the dominant society, they also act as a bridge, allowing those students to negotiate a relationship to secular Canadian society.

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Since the 1980s, immigrant communities in Ontario reframed the debate around religious education from one of moral duty to multicultural education (Davies 2001) and now to one of fundamental human rights. The latest shift was a result of the November 1999 ruling of the United Nations Human Rights Commission that Canada supported state-sponsored religious discrimination because it funds only Roman Catholic separate schools along side of public schools (Bayefsky 2000). Now arguing for equal rights, as well as for the benefits of real multicultural education, immigrant communities – along side of various non-Roman Catholic Christian groups – have pressured policy-makers to rethink their reluctance to fund religiously-based independent schools. The Ontario government has refused to extend funding to independent religious schools and the Supreme Court of Canada has allowed this discriminatory policy to stand.[1] Consequently, Muslims in Ontario are forced to choose between the religiously neutral public schools or private schooling.[2]

However, for many Muslim Canadians, so-called "neutral" public schools pose a problem. Many immigrants, for example, experience public schools as means of assimilation. If immigrant communities cannot "hold on to their young", they will not survive the dissipation of their tradition as the second generation is socialized into the host country's culture and social structures. Immigrant groups, along with more established religio-ethnic communities, often argue that schooling must reflect and encourage their cultural values – values that are, as often as not, religious in character. In this paper, I hope to introduce the current debate around multicultural education and private religiously based schools, using the work of an interesting Canadian scholar, Jasmin Zine. I hope to illustrate how religiously-based independent schools help integrate certain ethno-religious groups into Canadian society, acting sometimes as a "fortress" that protects group identity and solidarity but, just as frequently, as a "bridge" that connects members of the community to the broader Canadian population (Bramadat 2000).[3] These schools help Muslim immigrants and refugees integrate into Canadian society as well as to create counter-cultural communities that challenge the values of the dominant Canadian society. In this way, they help to create the conditions, I will argue, of a healthy multiculturalism.

As the controversy surrounding the decision by France to ban the presence of religious symbols in public schools – a law clearly aimed at the wearing of the *hijab* by young Muslim women – demonstrates, education remains a flashpoint in debates on multiculturalism. In Ontario, as in France and elsewhere, debates on religion in school quickly expand into questions about fundamental values regarding rights and freedoms of individuals, families, and communities, the common good, state power, the nature of democracy, pluralism, and multiculturalism, as well as the very definition of rationality and freedom. They raise questions of tolerance and its limits as well as the viability of the dominant strategy of most Western nations in the face of religious diversity, that is, the secularization of political culture and public institutions (such as schools) in order to avoid religious compulsion or favoritism.

For Muslim students, integration into the secularized public school system is fraught with difficulties.[4] Jasmin Zine has documented various acts of discrimination, misunderstanding, and injustice experienced by Muslim students in Toronto's public schools. Sometimes the discrimination is open. In one instance, an administrator prohibited the creation of a Muslim group at a school – despite the fact that there were several Christian clubs already operating. More frequently, the discrimination is more subtle. Young Muslim women who choose to wear the *hijab* report that their teachers often assume they must be uneducated, or that their families oppose their education. Other Muslim students report that their teachers have

lower expectations of them and consequently channel them into the lower non-academic streams. At an even deeper level, there are the Western and Christian assumptions and values that form the basis of the curriculum and moral culture of the school. Finally, and perhaps most decisively, there exist informal sanctions imposed on young Muslims by other students. Muslims who refuse to conform to youth-culture norms regarding dress, sexuality, pop culture, and alcohol and drug consumption are frequently ostracized (Zine 1997, 2000, 2001). In sum, concludes Zine, the dominant public school culture that assumes secularity as normal "minoritizes" Muslim students. Alienated by the culture of their schools, Muslim students may drop out, or as Dei et al. prefer to say, these minoritized students are "pushed" out by a school culture that refuses to recognize them (Dei et al. 2000:9-10).

In response to this sense of alienation, a number of Muslims have created independent schools.[5] There are currently 36 Islamic schools registered with the Ontario Ministry of Education, offering both primary and secondary education.[6] While these schools are required to register with the Ministry, they need not follow its curriculum nor hire qualified teachers. Unlike a number of provinces, Ontario provides no funding to private schools whether religiously based or not. Consequently, parents, teachers, and various Muslim communities bear the cost of supporting them. Even so, the number of Islamic schools in the province continues to grow. The first school opened in the 1980s and by 1999, there were 25 such schools (Scrivener 2001). Although there are between 4,000 to 6,000 students in these schools in Ontario, there are many parents still waiting to find available placements for their children. Some schools have Àwaiting lists as long as 650 names; others have parents who register their children at birth (Zine 2004: 15). When asked about why they endure the expense and risk of sending their children to Islamic schools, most parents answer that they want their children to grow up in the Muslim faith. Equally important is the desire to protect their children from a secular popular culture that stresses liberal sexual attitudes, consumption of drugs and alcohol, and unruly behaviour (Scrivner 2001).

Many worry about the "fracturing" effect of these private schools. Public schools, they argue, should be a place where immigrant children of all income levels, faiths, and cultures learn together (Ontario Public School Boards' Association 2001). Indeed, even some Muslims oppose the existence of independent Islamic schools, arguing that they threaten to ghettoize and segregate the community (Jafri and Fatah 2003:A17). Such positions are also taken by liberal theorists and policy-makers who worry that children in independent religious schools will be socialized into illiberal values and will not experience the benefits of interacting with a multi-religious and multicultural student body (see Spinner-Havel 2000 for example). However, an increasing number of thinkers question the neutrality of secular public schools and argue that refusing to recognize religious difference or even acknowledge religion in the curriculum or school culture serves to marginalize and alienate large sectors of the population (Sweet 2002).

However, an ideological commitment to so-called "neutral" education ignores the reality of the integrative function of religiously based schools. Indeed, the debate occurs so frequently on the ideological level that people often ignore empirical reality. Opponents of funding to private religiously based schools overlook the fact that Ontario's publicly funded Roman Catholic school system – guaranteed by the Canadian constitution – has not created a segregated Catholic population. Moreover, they also have no way of knowing what actually occurs in religiously based schools – especially Islamic schools – because the research has not been done. This is why Zine's research is so important.

Zine's work shows that such critics take a one-sided view of Islamic schools and similar institutions. While ethnic and religious institutions can operate as a "fortress", that is, a religio-cultural ghetto that protects group identity and solidarity, they can (and often do) function as a "bridge" for group members to the wider society (Bramadat 2000). This latter function is most often ignored by commentators as well as scholars who too often study these groups and institutions in terms of what they protect people from instead of what they empower people to do. Islamic schools certainly protect Muslims from the pressures of assimilation, Zine reports, and they certainly empower them to create and sustain unique cultural identities. However, they also allow Muslims to interact with other Canadians on the basis of equality and mutuality. In many of these schools integration into Canadian society is a foundational goal. As Nisar Sheraly, principal of As-Sadiq Islamic School in Thornhill, said of Muslim students: "We'd like them to grow up as proud Muslims who also can say, 'We are Canadian.'" (Scrivener 2001). The project of integration, or of bridge function, is evident in conscious attempts to integrate students into Canadian civic society and into the market economy. Islamic schools in Ontario are not separatist.

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As part of my wider research project on religion and education in Canada, in 2003 Jasmin Zine gave me a tour of the Islamic Academy in 2003 in Scarborough, Ontario.[7] The school offers Islamic and academic education to boys and girls from Junior Kindergarten to high school. Typical of many Ontario Islamic schools, the Islamic Academy offers both the government-approved curriculum as well as Islamic education, which includes courses in the Arabic-language, *Sunnah* understanding, memorization and study of the Qur'an, *Islamiyyat*,(Islamic studies), *Hadith* memorization, and instruction in *Da'wah* (spreading the word of Islam). One option for students is *hifz* classes, in which students spend three years (Monday to Friday 8 am to 4 pm)

memorizing and reciting the Qur'an. The culture, as well as the curriculum, of the school is clearly Islamic. The food in the cafeteria is *halal* and the school day allows for prayer. Girls must wear the *hijab* and many of the boys may wear "Islamic hats".[8] The manual for parents and students stresses that the school is a "safe place" where the group identity of students can be preserved, encouraged, and given room to blossom and where the students will be protected from a number of social ills inherent in a liberal secular society. One prominent section of the manual is called "Saving Our Children" and states that, while the Qur'an demands that parents save their children from hellfire, there are no easy answers to how to do this in "in this world of teenage pregnancies, homelessness, alcohol, drugs, lawlessness, and an ever-widening generation and cultural gap between parents and children".

However, equally prominent throughout the literature is the emphasis on academic excellence and integration into Canadian society. These objectives are listed in the section of the manual entitled, "Our Goals", which include:

- To provide an Islamic and academic education (a necessary combination for intellectual and moral development) in an Islamic environment, for both brothers and sisters
- To encourage the development of each student's Islamic identity and manners, so that they may become a role model in Canadian society

The school's website and manual boast that its students have successfully moved from the Islamic Academy into prestigious universities and colleges. The Islamic Academy is especially proud of its computer facilities. Having recently moved into a campus formerly occupied by a business college that trained people in computer software use and design, the school is equipped with hundreds of computers (almost one per child) and has integrated them into the curriculum. It is clear that the Islamic Academy wants its students to move seamlessly into the mainstream of Canadian economic and civic life – while maintaining their Islamic identity and solidarity.

This is not to deny that there may be real problems with Islamic schools or that there is not tension between them and Canadian society. Although they are a minority, some Islamic groups have become authoritarian, anti-egalitarian, and violent. Other groups are sexist. However, these failings do not disqualify the legitimacy of Islamic schools *per se*. Zine suggests a critical approach to the question. Zine agrees that Islamic schools will inevitably clash with the dominant liberal culture of Canadian society. This may not always be a bad thing. Often Islamic schools serve communities that challenge the hegemonic discourse of a European culture that defines itself as superior, rational, and universally valid. Like other indigenous knowledge, Islamic culture challenges Western discourses about what is true, beautiful, and good (Zine 1997). If multiculturalism is to be anything more than a program of polite assimilation, Canadians have to encourage the creation of centres of learning that would produce a culture critical of existing values and practices. That is the political role of Islamic and all minority group schools.

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At other times, it may be the Islamic schools that have to learn from Canadian culture. Of course, it is the issue of gender that is often at the centre of resistance to Islamic schools, and Zine is clearly uncomfortable with conservative Islam's attitude to women. However, she argues, while Islamic schools certainly do socialize children into specific gender roles, many of the preconceptions of outsiders are rooted more in "gendered Islamophobia" than any real knowledge of what goes on in the schools themselves. In some schools at least, Zine has found gender equity in curriculum and academic expectations and achievements (2004: 362-63). Still, she does not deny that more work needs to be done to ensure gender equity in Islamic schools and to challenge the authoritarian and puritanical school culture that places an inordinate emphasis on policing girls (310-315). However, Zine does object to the use of the argument to deny Muslims the right to educate their children in their own tradition.

Many of the barriers to Islamic schools' integrating their students into Canadian society may stem more from a lack of resources than any particular Muslim practice or value system. Zine reports that Islamic schools that serve poor immigrant and refugee communities are so strapped for resources that students do not have books (2004: 364-379); teachers are often poorly paid and lack accreditation. While some schools are professionally administered and well-funded, others are husband and wife operations that lack the very necessities of modern schools, such as textbooks, a library, a gymnasium, or internet connection. In particular, the schools that serve low-income immigrants and refugees (for example, the Somalian community) cannot raise tuition. The government's refusal to fund independent religious schools is destined to reinforce the economic marginalization of these groups.

I have argued in the past that the debate around public funding for independent religious schools in Canada should remain open (Seljak 2005). Ontario should not automatically follow the U.S. model that prohibits any state funding for "religion" – at least not before we know what actually goes on in independent religious schools. The decision should be based on empirical evidence not ideological commitment. After all, France – which many Canadians rightfully criticized for its recent law against religious symbols in the classroom – provides full funding for Islamic schools as long as they teach the state curriculum and hire qualified teachers. Other Canadian provinces – such as Alberta, Quebec, and British

Columbia – fund private schools, including religious schools at 50 to 60 per cent of the rate they provide for public schools. The fragmentation and ghettoization predicted by liberal commentators has failed to materialize.

On the other hand, should these schools by abandoned by mainstream society, they could indeed become the instruments of socio-economic ghettoization and religio-cultural fragmentation that many fear. Including them in the educational mainstream of Canadian life may help Muslim immigrants and refugees to integrate into Canadian economic and civic life. Such inclusion would hopefully create nodes of resistance to the hegemonic culture of the Canadian mainstream, nodes that may provide the counter-cultural ideas, values, traditions, and practices (such as those concerned with self-discipline, communitarianism, and social justice) that will enrich our future. In combination with a rigorous program of making our public schools more sensitive to religion as an important social factor (both by including it in the curriculum and by developing policies to recognize and respect religious diversity in schools), funding independent Islamic schools could also signal to Muslim Canadians that Canada welcomes their unique contribution to our diverse ethno-religious community. Because religiously based independent schools serve both as fortress and bridge for many Canadian Muslims, they may be uniquely placed to contribute to the give and take that is the central feature of a truly multicultural society.

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Notes

[1] The Supreme Court has upheld the practice, ruling that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) specifically states that it cannot be used to challenge the provisions of the British North America Act that defined the structure of Canadian society. Article 93 of the BNA Act (1867) guaranteed public funding for Roman Catholic schools in Ontario. Consequently, the Court decided that the "freedom of religion and conscience" clause neither forced the government to provide funding for religiously based independent schools nor to revoke the privileges of the Roman Catholic community. On the courts and the question of religion and education in Canada, see Khan 1999.

[2] "Private schooling" ranges from home schooling to Ministry-registered Islamic schools that teach the provincial curriculum in addition to Islamic education.

[3] Bramadat (2000) discusses the fortress-bridge function of a conservative Christian group on a secular Canadian campus. Like many Muslim communities, the main tension for conservative Christians seems to be over values and lifestyle issues (especially alcohol consumption and permissive sexual mores) and not ideas and beliefs. Bramadat writes: "In short, the members of this group (and perhaps other evangelicals) are able to maintain their religious identities in a secular environment because they sustain and employ an elaborate psychosocial construct that enables them to manage, transform, and sometimes diminish the otherness they experience when they confront non-Christian worldviews, values and individuals." (146) This describes almost perfectly the role of Muslim Student Associations and Islamic schools described by Zine (1997, 2004).

[4] Ontario's public school system was defined by non-denominational Protestant Christianity until the 1960s. Only after several court challenges based on the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms was the system purged of all formal Christian practices and content.

[5] For example, many of the students that Jasmin Zine interviewed felt that they would like to send their children to public schools to avoid the racism, low expectations, and struggles they faced in the public system (Zine 2004:182).

[6] All but one of these schools is from the Sunni tradition, the other being a Shia school (Zine 2004:15). To find a list of Islamic schools in Ontario, see www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/privsch/.

[7] In order to preserve confidentiality, the name of the school has been changed and all identifying markers suppressed.

[8] Indeed the school manual forbids the wearing of all hats except "Islamic hats". One school administrator I spoke with said that she was well aware of the fact that these hats are features of ethnicity rather than religion, but all the same, parents were very enthusiastic about the fact that their children could attend school wearing hats popular in their country of origin. It is interesting to note the way in which religion and ethnicity are blended in the minds of parents who send their children to these schools.