



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## **Educating Youth about Muslim Cultures and Societies: Issues and Approaches**

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

In the modern period, education has formed a core part of the social development programmes of the Ismaili *Imamat*. The first schools built by Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah in India and East Africa in the early part of the 20th century marked the beginnings of an expanding commitment to education within the Ismaili Muslim community and beyond. Over the past five decades, and in light of the conditions in de-colonised states, His Highness the Aga Khan IV has transformed and broadened these educational initiatives into an international humanitarian endeavour that reaches out to hundreds of communities across the world. He has responded to the need for universal and continuing education in developing regions of the world by investing in a wide array of educational institutions, programmes and projects, from universities and training colleges to academies, primary schools and preschool centres.

One area which has been of special concern to His Highness the Aga Khan is education related to Islam. In recent years, His Highness has expressed the need for educational programmes on Islam and Muslim societies that can help to bridge the rift between the West and the Muslim world:

“What we are now witnessing is a clash of ignorance, an ignorance that is mutual, longstanding, and to which the West and the Islamic world have been blind for decades at their great peril. For a number of years I have voiced my concern that the faith of a billion people is not part of the general education process in the West – ignored by school and college curricula in history, the sciences, philosophy and geography. An important goal of responsible education should be to ring fence the theologising of the image of the Muslim world by treating Muslims as it treats Christians and Jews, by going beyond a focus on theology to considering civil society, politics, and economics of particular countries and peoples at various points in their history. This will reveal the fundamental diversity and pluralism of Muslim peoples, cultures, histories, philosophies and legal systems ... Repositioning theology with respect to the normal forces of human society will help develop the understanding that Muslims too live in the real world and have to contend with the same issues of life – of poverty, hunger, tragedy and civil conflict – as all others in the developing world.”<sup>i</sup>

In the West, an educationally sound approach to the teaching of Islam and Muslim societies at the primary and secondary levels has not been fully realised. It has been impeded by an inadequate coverage of the subject in the curriculum, the lack of high quality instructional materials, and the poor training received by teachers. Where taught, Islam is usually approached

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in terms of doctrines or rituals, without adequate attention to the historical, social, and cultural aspects that are integral to the interpretations and observances of Islam in Muslim societies.<sup>ii</sup> In many Western countries, it is common to treat Islam as a world religion in a multi-faith programme of teaching. While the best of these practices help students to gain insights into what is common and particular to Islam and other faiths, limited teaching and resources often present Islam in a skeletal form.<sup>iii</sup>

In Muslim countries, the teaching of Islam varies in terms of its aims, depending on whether it is approached theoretically, from a nationalistic perspective, or on a denominational basis.<sup>iv</sup> In state and private schools, Islam may be covered as one or more subjects under a variety of headings such as ‘Islamiyat’, Islamic education, or religious instruction.<sup>v</sup> In these subjects, students are normally taught parts of the Holy Qur’an, *hadith*, and *akhlaq* (ethics), together with topics from Muslim history. In state-regulated and private madrasas, the curriculum consists of traditional religious sciences, such as *tafsir* (exegesis of the Holy Qur’an), *hadith*, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *usul al-din* (principles of religion), and *akhlaq*. Some of the ‘reformed’ madrasas include non-religious subjects such as science, mathematics, economics and languages in their syllabi.<sup>vi</sup>

As in the West, the teaching of Islam in Muslim countries often suffers from the lack of good quality instructional materials and resources, and properly trained teachers. Of additional concern has been the increasing influence exerted by Islamist movements on the teaching of Islam in public and communal domains.<sup>vii</sup> As part of the attempt to check extremist tendencies, Muslim governments have begun to revise their textbooks on Islam to ensure that they do not contain expressions of intolerance towards people of other traditions. Recent events have also sparked off the regulation of madrasas in some Muslim countries, but without fundamental changes to the educational system as a whole.<sup>viii</sup>

The general state of education in Muslim contexts requires significant improvement if Muslim societies are to advance, an aspect which has been of long-standing concern to His Highness the Aga Khan:

“One of the challenges that has concerned me over many years, and which I have discussed with leading Muslim thinkers, is how education for Muslims can reclaim the inherent strengths that, at the height of their civilisations, equipped Muslim societies to excel in diverse areas of human endeavour. Clearly the intellectual development of the *umma*, is, and should remain, a central goal to be pursued with urgency if we wish the Muslim world to regain its rightful place in world civilisation.”<sup>ix</sup>

The extent of the present problem demands responsive interventions that initiate the new generation of Muslims and society at large into the spiritual, ethical and humanistic principles of Islam. Such interventions can draw inspiration from the founding vision of Islam which makes the pursuit of wisdom an obligatory duty for all Muslim men, women and children. The Qur’an invites Muslims to constantly strive for higher understanding by contemplating the marvels of Allah’s creation, in the cosmos at large and within their own souls, while the Prophetic tradition calls upon them to ‘seek knowledge, even unto China’. Muslims have sought to realise these ideals throughout their history, as is evident in the flourishing of diverse traditions of scholarship



and learning in Muslim civilisations and societies. In the classical period of Islam, Muslim education excelled through the rise of new institutions of learning, the innovative advancing of frontiers of knowledge, and the fostering of talent and genius through state patronage. With the dawn of the modern age, the revitalising of Muslim education assumed fresh significance, beginning with the engagements of early reformists such as Muhammad Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan who committed themselves to regenerating education in their societies.

Today, the need to formulate approaches to education that are appropriate to the times has become an imperative. In the context of the prevailing situation, the endeavours of the Ismaili *Imamat* have attracted international recognition, giving rise to a growing interest in a Muslim community working with progressive paradigms of education inspired by the tradition and ethics of Islam. Among the pioneering ventures initiated by His Highness the Aga Khan in recent years are projects that seek to exemplify innovative approaches to the teaching of Islam, with a view to informing secular education generally, and also catering specifically to Ismaili Muslim religious education.

The secondary curriculum and the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) being developed by The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London form a core part of this enterprise, and stand to make a substantive contribution as revitalising strategies to the teaching of school-level Islam through the integration of normative and general Islamic perspectives on Muslim traditions and societies. The STEP initiative is also unique in having established a collaborative postgraduate programme between the IIS and the Institute of Education (University of London), offering two combined degrees to participating candidates – a Master of Arts in Education (Muslim Societies and Civilisations), and a Master of Teaching.

The IIS secondary curriculum and teacher education programmes aim to furnish an example of teaching Islam by transcending conventionally accepted subject boundaries. The goal of the Institute's secondary programme is to educate students in the spiritual, ethical and intellectual ideals of the Islamic vision. While intended in the first instance for the global Ismaili Muslim community, it is underpinned by broad philosophical and pedagogical principles. The concerted drive in the curriculum and the teacher education programme to strike a balance between the normative and the wider pluralistic content incorporates elements that will appeal to both community-based and other educators within and beyond the community.

The overarching thrust of the secondary programme is to explore Islam from both civilisational and faith perspectives so that there is an interactive reference to the contextual and the normative. This relationship mirrors the historical and present-day reality of the Shi'a Ismaili tradition in being located within the wider global milieu, and at the same time bearing its own distinctive identity.

Through this formulation, the Shi'a Ismaili reading of Islam, as an example of a specific interpretive tradition in Muslim history, is contextualised doctrinally in relation to the diversity and pluralism of other traditions in Muslim societies. Islam is not discussed and understood exclusively in theological terms but approached through an exploration of the multiple facets of human endeavour that have characterised Muslim civilisations. The content of the curriculum



covers themes which include Muslim societies and civilisations, the literary heritage, faith and practice, ethics and development, interpretations of the Qur'an, Muslims in the modern age, cultural encounters, and intellectual traditions. From a pedagogic perspective, students are invited to exercise their intellect and imagination through enquiry, discussion and debate, as well as through creative work and class presentations.

In this regard, the Institute's programme on secondary education, with its humanistic and value-based orientation, stands to complement parallel endeavours of curriculum development and teacher education in the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), such as the Islamic Cultural Studies project being undertaken by the International Academic Partnership (IAP), with its affiliations to Harvard University and Phillips Academy, Andover.

As these programmes evolve and mature, it is hoped that the total complement of curricular materials being developed by the AKDN and the IIS will service the Ismaili religious education centres, the Aga Khan Education Services (AKES) schools, and the emerging network of Aga Khan Academies. In attaining this goal, the Ismaili *Imamat* institutions will be addressing the need that currently exists in schools all over the world for sound educational resources on Islam.

In the specific context of Ismaili religious education, it is hoped that the IIS' secondary education programme will help young Ismailis to gain a broad sense of Islam as a faith and a civilisation that has given birth to a rich diversity of traditions over time, while assisting them to grasp, within the historical panorama, the specific location and significance of the Shi'a Ismaili interpretation of Islam. Through this education, they will acquire a perspective on the Ismaili *tariqah* which is grounded in a genuine understanding and intellectual appreciation of their own faith, together with respect for the beliefs of other communities, and which will equip them to assume their proper place in the emerging civil and global societies of the 21st century.

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<sup>i</sup> His Highness the Aga Khan: Speech at the Banquet Hosted in Honour of Governor Perry. Houston, USA, 23 June 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Open Society Institute (2005) *British Muslims and Education*. EUMAP- EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program.

<sup>iii</sup> The quality of teaching about Islam that prevails in European curricula is summarised in Kaul-Seidman, L., Nielsen, J.S., and Vinzent, M. (2003) *European Identity and Cultural Pluralism: Judaism, Christianity and Islam in European Curricula*. Bad Homburg v.d. Höhe: Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung.

<sup>iv</sup> Shamsavary, P., Saqeb, G. N., and Halstead, M. (1993) 'Islam: State, Religion and Education.' in W. Tulasiewicz & C.-Y. To (eds.) *World Religions and Educational Practice* (pp. 144-160). London: Cassell.

<sup>v</sup> Leirvik, O. (2004) 'Religious Education, Communal Identity and National Politics in the Muslim World.' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 3, 223-236.

<sup>vi</sup> Daun, H., & Walford, G. (eds.) (2004) *Educational Strategies among Muslims in the Context of Globalization*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

<sup>vii</sup> See for example: Roald, A. S. (1994) *Tarbiya: Education and Politics in Islamic Movements in Jordan and Malaysia*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University; Starrett, G. (1998) *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Tibi, B. (1990) *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change*. Trans. By Clare Krojzl. Oxford: Westview Press.



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- <sup>viii</sup> Coulson, A. (2004) 'Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World.' *Policy Analysis*, 511, 1–36; Nayyar, A. H., & Salim, A. (eds.) (2002) *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*. Islamabad, Pakistan: Sustainable Development Policy Institute.
- <sup>ix</sup> His Highness the Aga Khan (2003). Address at the 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony of The Institute of Ismaili Studies. London, United Kingdom, 19 October 2003.