

## **New Directions in Islamic Education: Pedagogy and Identity Formation**

*Abdullah Sahin*

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Abdullah Sahin's *New Directions in Islamic Education* offers an original conceptualization of the role of Islamic education in enriching the identity formation of young British Muslims. Existing education literature centered on Muslims is often categorized in one of two ways: (1) texts that offer classical, prophetic depictions of pursuits towards religious knowledge (Al-Attas 1979; Ashraf & Hirst 1994; Abbas 2011); or (2) texts that offer modern representations of the lived experiences of Muslims in western contexts (Abdalla, Chown, & Abdullah 2018; Khan & Siddiqui 2017; Haddad, Senzai, & Smith 2009). This dichotomy typically leaves educators unable to draw their own connections between education traditions of the past and contemporary demands for increasing the religiosity of Muslim students today. Although each on their own offers relevance to a greater understanding of the Muslim community, *New Directions in Islamic Education* juxta-

poses contemporary experiences of British youth with classical pedagogical methods of religious education to demonstrate the urgent need for “new directions” in Islamic education, all toward the challenges of educating Muslim youth in minoritized, western contexts. Sahin writes that his text “proposes a critical and dialogical model of Islamic pedagogy that works at multiple levels, both for basic Islamic education and the training of faith leaders; this pedagogy should account for the rapidly changing life-world of Muslim young people” (16). As the title suggests, Sahin offers educators (and parents) new solutions drawn from models of Islamic education to influence identity formation among British Muslim youth.

British Muslim youth identity emerges from the influences of a young person’s family, culture, schooling, and the larger society. Part I of *New Directions* begins with a detailed presentation of the context in which youth experience their life-worlds. Sahin presents a review of the literature that explores both religiosity and Muslim identity. Recognizing that published studies centered on schools’ attempts to promote faith identity of Muslim youth is limited in scope, he works to produce an interdisciplinary review of the literature including ethnography, anthropology, and religious studies. Where other Muslim scholars exclusively emphasize the writing of other Muslims, Sahin is comfortable drawing upon the findings of researchers without “in group” knowledge of the Muslim community when they can contribute to his larger assertions of identity formation within marginalized communities. Although this offers a more complete review of the religious and psychological literature, it also includes findings in the area of countering violent extremism as a meaningful influence on the life-worlds of British Muslims (Juergensmeyer 2001; Napoleoni 2003; Stein 2010). Readers seeking a narrow focus on the role of schools in the formation of Muslim identities will quickly realize that this section widens the discourse of meaningful influencers on today’s British youth.

Sahin’s primary contribution to the field is his empirical study of British Muslim religious identities and life experiences. Evoking postmodern phenomenology, he explored participants’ religious life-worlds and their religious subjectivity through both large scale questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. By asking young people to describe their lived identities as British Muslims, he is able to collect qualitative data to narrate their experiences. In an effort to substantiate his methodology, Sahin includes an extensive review of the theoretical and methodological literature used to frame his research. His reliance on Western scholarship to inform his research solidifies a place for this work in the body of knowledge with-

in academia. But there are Islamic epistemologies which are absent from Sahin's scholarship that could communicate Islamic conceptualizations of knowledge (Al-Attas 1979) and ways of knowing and pursuing knowledge (al Zeera 2001), for instance as exemplified in the work of the preeminent philosopher Imam al-Ghazali. Although Sahin captured narratives of his participants' emerging Muslim identities using phenomenological methods, the inclusion of Islamic epistemologies could expand the manner through which he makes meaning of those formative experiences.

Sahin's Muslim Subjectivity Interview Schedule advances an empirical tool to interrogate faith and identity among British Muslim youth. Through a review of religious and psychological investigative tools, he derives four theoretical concepts to comprehensively represent both religious subjectivities and life-worlds: belief systems, worship, social regulations [of individual behavior], and morality. Together these sections inform how an individual interprets the influences on their faith identity. Consistent with the prior section centering western scholarship to inform his epistemological foundations, Chapter 3 uses western academic literature in developing theoretical concepts. And, when Muslim thought is incorporated, it tends to be classical contributions to religious concepts rather than contemporary Muslim scholars' conceptualizations of the Islamization of Knowledge (e.g., al-Faruqi, Qutb, and al-Attas) (Niyozov & Memon 2011). Sahin further addresses a possible Muslim orthodox concern for the potential blasphemy of interrogating faith and self by assuring the reader that the Quran confirms that these are both psycho-social constructs which can be legitimately investigated.

The Muslim Subjectivity Interview Schedule proposed here produced significant data that British Muslim youth are struggling to maintain faith identities in the current secular climate. After a detailed description of the participants included in the study, Sahin presents findings using the subjectivity schedule to make sense of young people's religious identity development. He concludes, "They complained that the traditional Islamic education received at home and at the supplementary mosque schools was inadequate to help them respond Islamically to the rapid changes and challenges of secular multicultural polity" (103). The results confirm an earlier assertion for a "new direction" in Islamic education to successfully meet the contemporary needs of Muslim youth in our socio-cultural climate.

In Chapter 5, Sahin presents qualitative vignettes of select participants to describe findings using a psychological framework that indicates the associations between commitment and exploration in one's religious identity.

The framework establishes four psychological categories of religious identity and Sahin uses one participant case to help describe how each illustrates a larger phenomenon of British Muslim youth identity development. The first is named “diffused”, where a young man is disconnected from his parents’ religious identity because he felt it was losing significance in his life. The second case discusses a young man who displays a high commitment to his faith but he doesn’t explore his religious understandings on his own, leading to potential extremist influences that rely upon blind-faith following of religious authority. The third case represents youth who have a strong interest in *exploring* their faith as they explore other identities in a multicultural society, but display a low level of *practicing* their faith because it is but one aspect of their multiple identities. And the last case represents a young person with a high commitment to faith and a strong sense of the value of exploring and achieving this identity. After the first case, Sahin wrote, “These findings indicate that if Islamic education could be attentive to the psychosocial difficulties and complexities involved with a diffused mode of religious subjectivity, then it could facilitate a mature Islamic belonging among those Muslim young people for whom Islam was losing its significance” (128). By the end of the section, Sahin asserts that the failure of Islamic education to meaningfully respond to Muslim youth’s pursuit of religious identity in a secular context will render Islamic schools, curriculum, and teaching methods futile.

The third and final section of *New Directions* begins with a presentation of prophetic pedagogies understood through the Quran as a relevant solution to today’s Islamic education crises. Sahin begins by describing the concept of Islamic education as a modern expression that “distinguishes itself from secular education, thus propelling an ‘Islamization’ of knowledge” that “failed to synthesize secular knowledge within a wider Islamic value framework” (177). Sahin suggests that the Quran inspired prophetic pedagogy because it successfully demonstrated “direct attendance to his personal experience and a clear pedagogic attempt to guide the Prophet to reflect on his life experiences” (183). By taking the prophet’s psycho-spiritual needs into account to structure the learning process, we come to recognize that Islamic education must also incorporate the individual’s personal experiences as a foundation for successful learning. Sahin reminds the reader that the Quran promotes critical reasoning because it is written in a way that “invites them to think for themselves, to develop their personal responsibility in life by drawing their attention to the creation of nature and their existence” (197). More importantly, he asserts it is not a theological

reference but a vibrant text embodying a “purpose of which is to teach and persuade humans to adopt the path of righteousness” (206). This chapter offers a comprehensive description of religious sources used to teach religious identity, suggesting that this is but one tool to meaningfully advance the effectiveness of Islamic education to increase youths’ religious subjectivity.

*New Directions* includes two additional chapters that describe tangential aspects. The first of these presents the findings of the Muslim Subjectivity Schedule when applied to Kuwaiti youth in a Muslim-majority context. In this setting, the youths’ religiosity is “shaped by families, peer groups, religious movements, and the wider religious and cultural institutions of traditional society” (159). But, like in Britain, the findings show that Islamic education often produces young people with a foreclosed mindset who are not individually motivated to explore or practice their faith; rather they communicate a commitment that is rooted in their cultural perspective. A different chapter shares Sahin’s experiences teaching these concepts in higher education courses through an M.Ed. program in Islamic education. He found that teachers received their own Islamic education through traditional paths and were often not prepared to critically engage with religious sources nor encourage students to appreciate the role of critical inquiry in our faith. He incorporates western educational philosophers like Freire, Dewey, and Bloom to communicate the relevance of inquiry-based instruction in generating compelling change. And, he notes that the application of Quranic pedagogies inspires inquiry-based learning because the entire Book confronts indoctrination and authoritarian practices of instruction.

*New Directions in Islamic Education* guides the reader on a journey to first recognize the identity struggles impacting the lives of British Muslim youth and then determine the extent to which Islamic education in its current form provides youth with the tools to successfully develop their Muslim identities. Sahin’s construction of a Muslim Subjectivity Interview Schedule offers the strongest contribution to the literature because it offers an empirical tool to measure youth’s emerging religious identities. The findings from this study suggest that contemporary methods of Islamic education in western contexts effectively fail to contribute to British Muslim youth’s identity development. Sahin asserts that there is an urgent need for “new directions” to prioritize psycho-spiritual concepts embedded in the secular realities of western contexts, if we are to raise among us a new generation of Muslims who identify and express their Muslim identity in their daily life experiences. This must be the purpose of Islamic education. As

such, *New Directions in Islamic Education* is a welcome contribution to the ongoing discourse within the Muslim education community.

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Amaarah DeCuir  
Professorial Lecturer  
School of Education  
American University