

**PARTICULARISM AND MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION:  
Muslims Experience in the United States**

by

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An elementary school Muslim girl responded to her mother with the phrase, "BUT MOM, ALL MY FRIENDS DO THAT! WHY CAN'T I?" questioning the need to be different every time the mother said "No" to an activity the girl wanted to join neighborhood boys and girls in doing. The mother often contradicted herself and allowed her daughter to play because she was not able to explain the rationale for being different. The mother's spontaneous "No" response comes from the fact that in her home Islamic culture,<sup>1</sup> children's activities are not usually separate from those of the family. Also, children rarely played in sexually heterogeneous groups where she was raised (the Indian subcontinent). Under the daughter's persistence, the mother gave permission, rationalizing to herself that a bicycle ride or video game with the neighborhood children would not affect the "Islamic" identity and values of her daughter. The mother rarely interacted with the parents of her daughter's playmates. She hardly knew who the playmates were or who supervised the play. Her understanding of these neighbors' values and worldview came only from what she saw manifested in their external behavior and in the norms of the society at large. The mother had contacts mainly with other mothers from her country of origin.

When the young girl reached puberty, her father, who rarely participated in decision making concerning his daughter's upbringing, told the young girl that she was to dress differently, she was no longer to have unnecessary conversations with boys, and she could no longer join in free play with her friends. The girl resisted her father's orders, and the mother supported her discreetly against the father's wishes. The mother thought that the father was being harsh and that there was no need to set such strict rules to ensure that the girl would develop the "Islamic" manners and the understanding of the "Islamic" religion as she, the mother, had been practicing it.

When the girl became a high school student, she took swimming as one of the sport activities required in the physical education course. She did not realize that close contact with the opposite sex, particularly in immodest clothes (a bathing suit in the presence of the opposite sex), violates a basic precept of the Islamic principle of modesty.

## **TRADITIONAL VALUES AND PLURALISTIC EDUCATION**

The above vignette represents an educational problem and a contradiction in the process of perpetuating pluralistic values. It is a problem that many pluralistic societies and immigrant and indigenous groups in these societies do not recognize until they see that the next generation has taken a different course of action from their own and that of their parents. Very few parents realize that by the time a child asks "Why be different?" or "Why can't I?" his or her identity has already been formed within the peer group's worldview and way of life. And very few educators, sociologists, and anthropologists are aware of the subtlety in the process of the "melting pot," despite claims that it has never been the intention of the mainstream culture and even when the different immigrant and indigenous groups attempt to combat it. The girl in the above vignette is in effect questioning her mother's values, not understanding why her mother is particularly different in her way of dressing from other mothers in the neighborhood nor why she herself has to be different from other children.

It is true that the act of playing with a mixed-gender group of children poses no direct harm to the value system of a Muslim girl or boy. It is also true that the milieu of those playmates is saturated with the values of the secular Western worldview that explicitly emphasizes the separation of religion from other aspects of life. This observable Western hegemony is what I call the Western ecological system or the Western worldview within which our children in the United States are governed and their identities shaped. Despite the fact that the constitution and the law of the land are based on the Judo-Christian value system, this paper deals mainly with the pedagogical aspect of Islamic particularism in the assumed secularity of the American pluralistic society.

It is true that if the father in the above vignette, for example, had not imposed certain rules when the girl was a certain age, she would not have realized that she has cultural roots and values different from her peers. Although the father's intervention lacked the proper pedagogical strategies to achieve the desired outcome (i.e., for the girl to develop an "Islamic" identity), the girl would not have been able to find rationales for her own action as well as that of her father without this intervention. In addition, when the parents knew that she was taking swimming as a physical education course and asked her to drop the course, she refused their request. She resisted her parents' request mainly because she could not understand the specific rationale behind it, given the Western milieu that she acquired from the environment, and could not justify it before her peers. The parents had never explained or oriented the girl toward their particular values and way of life in her early childhood. They merely assumed that she will pick up these values by emulating her parents' restricted behavior and contacts with non-Muslims. The girl questioned her mother's and her family's relationship with others because she did not realize that she belonged to a culture nor to a social order that differed from the "mainstream" and from those

of her peers. If she had not been asked to change her behavior, all other indicators--with the exception of some rituals--in her family's behavior told her that she was part of the dominant society's milieu.

The problem is both that of a girl who lost her parents' culture and of parents who did not know how to adjust to the society at large without completely assimilating in its culture, despite their relatively social isolation.<sup>2</sup> Lacking this awareness, the parents also failed to transmit their ideological and cultural values to their daughter because they could not integrate their values within the new context and away from the social customs of their original country. The problem is also that of a society that claims to believe in pluralism but assumes that every new member of the society will shed his or her cultural roots and replace them by the "forged new American culture,"<sup>3</sup> whatever that may mean.

The girl's resistance gradually developed into rejection of her cultural roots and identity, and she came into constant conflict with her family. Consequently, despite her high academic achievement, her entire educational progress came to a halt when she dropped out of school. Who is responsible for such a case? Before addressing this question, the second part of the vignette is in order.

In the same community where the girl went to school, other Muslim families, realizing that the school's swimming requirement would pose a problem for their high school-aged children, decided to speak with the high school principal to reach an alternative solution. The school district, located in a small university town, had changed its policy concerning physical education courses to comply with the spirit of the Fourteenth Amendment and now mandated coeducation in all physical education programs. This policy was adopted without an open hearing or consultation with parents and community members. It created a difficult situation for Muslim families and students, in particular. The Muslim community, at the suggestion of one of its members who later acted as the liaison between the community and the school, initiated a discussion with school officials to reach a satisfactory solution. The discussion resulted in separate-sex after-school swimming sessions with the teacher being the same sex as the students. Most of the Muslim children and their families felt comfortable with this special arrangement, and all agreed to attend the after-school sessions, except the girl who had conflict with her parents.

The entire vignette represents a paradox within liberal education, as well as a different approach to laying the groundwork for designing and implementing curricula for secular pluralistic society that may also satisfy cultural particularism without the teaching of a specific culture. It is a paradox for the young girl who, by rejecting the authority of her family and their value system, not only lost her identity but also lost a consistent source of guidance. It is a paradox for a family that failed to understand the new environment and to pass its culture to its offspring in an

integrated manner.<sup>4</sup> It is also a paradox for the society at large that gives little, if any, attention to the way education contributes to identity transformation. This society seems to respond only superficially to issues of pluralism without attempting to understand them in depth. The vignette points out a contradiction in educational policies that claim equality but do not treat all segments of the population equally. Finally, the vignette shows how a Muslim community that wanted to maintain its cultural values in an integrative way and in cooperation with the society at large was able to find a temporary solution to a specific problem, and yet failed to prevent a young member from dropping out of school because of poor communication among its ethnic and national sub-groups within the pluralistic society's worldview.

### **PARADIGMS AND MEANINGS OF PLURALISM**

Paradigms about pluralistic multicultural education represent arguments either for<sup>5</sup> or against,<sup>6</sup> but rarely is there an in-depth analysis of the political and moral assumptions of education that bear on the issue of multiculturalism in our pluralistic society. I contend that the present paradigms about multicultural education lack clear understanding of different frames of reference and different meanings of liberal democratic society within which each cultural group of the "pluralistic, liberal democracy" operates. The rest of this paper, therefore, explores meanings of pluralistic and particularistic pedagogy in the course of arguing for the above contention.

Pluralism or multiculturalism in the context of this paper means to value traditions and cultures other than those of the "mainstream" culture and to incorporate these traditions in the educational system by maintaining the following five principles:

1. Pluralism cannot be satisfied by situational ethics or by accepting the notion that everything is as good as everything else. It requires a consistent dialogue among all groups involved. It cannot be attained by simply adding social customs and strands to the curriculum. Nor by the teachers' attempt to create tolerance among students or avoid the discussions of specific value systems. Multiculturalism does not aim to avoid cultural conflict or dismiss charges of bias in opportunity. In the second part of the vignette above concerning the swimming class, if a dialogue had not been initiated and the liaison person had not explained to the principal and to the physical education department head why mixed swimming is against the religious and cultural principles of Islam, the result would have been different. In the course of the negotiations, for example, one of the physical education teachers suggested exempting Muslim students from swimming. The problem with that solution is that the Muslim students would feel deprived of the privilege of learning a skill that the school district considered as an important objective in the physical education curriculum. Hence the equity of instruction would have been questioned and protests or litigations could have resulted. Yet, without following up the matter beyond this

temporary solution, neither the Muslim community nor the policy-makers would reach a better understanding and, hence, a true pluralistic and inclusive solutions.

2. Pluralism is the right of each individual to have an equal voice and participation in the making of social policies and equal access to meaningful learning. The practice of these rights facilitates respect and appreciation among the particular cultural groups in a pluralistic democracy. For example, the Muslim community's liaison member built her argument against exemption on the principle of the Fourteenth Amendment, that the society is responsible for providing equal access to learning in a pluralistic setting. In addition, because the right of free religious belief and practice is protected by the First Amendment, the Muslim community could have claimed that the application of the Fourteenth Amendment obscured their equal opportunity to instruction and deprived them of their First Amendment right and the right to equal voice and participation in social policy making. Instead, by applying the Islamic principle that the welfare of the group takes precedent over that of the individual, the Muslim community, by extending the principles to the welfare of the entire school community, reached an agreement with the school district for the alternative solution given that the number of Muslim children was too small to warrant a regular school session. Teacher's role in such a situation is to communicate to the rest of the students the meaning and the implications of this Islamic principle and how it can be translated in different cultural settings regardless of its particular origin. This may expose other similar principles in the students' diverse cultures and bring closeness instead of alienation to the Muslim students.

3. Multicultural education is the continuous struggle to seek understanding and agreement among the particular groups within the pluralistic society. The Muslim community, in the above case, accomplished the desired solution because one of its members understood the constitutional structure of the society and philosophical foundations of its educational system, and explicitly stated the Muslim community own value system and principle of modesty within these parameters. Instead of demanding revision of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Muslims asked for an equal voice and participation in devising educational and instructional strategies to accommodate the principles embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment to their specific needs. Teachers and administrators may capitalize on this piece of action and invite other parent communities to share their related, or not so related, concerns in the same manner.

4. Critical pedagogy is the only means within a pluralistic society through which particular groups may protect themselves from being assimilated or from becoming, consciously or unconsciously, collaborators in the destruction of their own culture. Each group should be able to make its own decision to practice alternative, separate ways of life. In the above vignette, had the Muslim community not made a special effort to reinterpret the principle of modesty in the new context and to reach a consensus concerning the practice of their belief system, they would have

lost in the negotiation over the physical education issue and would have been ignored as an element in the school district, and their culture would have been lost through total assimilation. Also, had the liaison member not used constructive criticism, the community might have chosen a different means of communication that might not have been as satisfactory to the school district nor to most of the community members. This process does not mean a compromise of some parents' belief system. That is because the understanding and the preservation of the principle of modesty itself is at stake here and not the manner in which it is interpreted or applied. Thus, some of these parents may had to change their perception of how to practice this particular principle, or Islam in general, in the new context, but it does not imply changing their value system or compromising their particularity. Finally, had the Physical Education Department head and the principal not given enough time to listen and to dialogue, the Muslim community could have filed a complaint for First Amendment statues and the relationship between the school district and the community would have deteriorated. Whatever the end result might have been, neither understanding nor incorporation of the particular culture would have been achieved.

5. Out of particular cultural traditions could come new and more comprehensive truth for all, including the "mainstream" group. A pluralistic society should struggle to obtain such truth through a continuous dialogue. The dialogue that took place between the Muslim community and the school district set a precedent for other groups to express their needs. Given the small number of Muslims to warrant funding for the special swimming sessions, Muslim families agreed to have these sessions opened to non-Muslim boys and girls who also felt uneasy about coed swimming for personal, religious, and cultural reasons, and thus helped to bring to the surface values that appear contradictory. Dialogues about different community values were organized. Finally, the Muslim community's liaison member gave a public lecture on the subject, citing court cases concerning coeducational physical education practices and the arguments presented by the different contesting religious (non-Muslims) communities and explicating how it could be maintained in relation to the First Amendment without a need for a change in the law. This public presentation and discussion also produced new awareness, particularly among the women's groups who supported the coeducation policy, about the needs of women who base their emancipation values on a different belief system and worldview. This public awareness could become a rich ground for in-class debates on issues related to values and value systems without imposing a generic value system.

The implications of the above five principles obviously call for reevaluating the democratic process in relation to education both politically and socially as suggested by Giroux <sup>7</sup> and in relation to multiculturalism as discussed by Barazangi. <sup>8</sup>

## **PARTICULARISM AS A STEPPING STONE TOWARD PLURALISM**

Particularism is the practice of one's culture and the protection of particular cultural groups from ideological genocide and/or homicide. Pluralism should try to prevent this ideological genocide. Maintenance of an ideology, such as a cultural tradition, is not sought for "intergenerational dominance", or for "separatism," as claimed by some educational scholars and practitioners,<sup>9</sup> but as a prerequisite for making a reflective choice regarding cultural coherence. I do not mean to emphasize the differences between the "subgroup" and the "mainstream" group but, rather, the interaction between perceptions and practices of the democratic liberal principles--that are assumed to be operating in the pluralistic society-- based on these differences. This emphasis also shows how a belief system and a worldview serve as determinants in understanding and applying the "liberal democratic" system and in curriculum development and education within a pluralistic setting.

Particularism is a necessary transitional stage for moving into an integrated, operating multiculturalism. This is because each particular group needs to examine its frame of reference, its underlying assumptions, and its worldview so that it can recognize how it is different from and is similar to other subcultures and the mainstream culture. E. Temime wrote:

For the establishment of minorities also depends on the transmission and reproduction of a past (actual or mythical). The individual immigrant as an individual may be ignored. He is merely a foreign element of one kind or another, his presence being temporary. [That same individual cannot be ignored for long, once he or she installs] a "family environment," passing on to others the traditions and values which are its own and those of the country of origin or country [or group] of reference.<sup>10</sup>

This recognition of differences and similarities is necessary for there to be a true interest and will in "celebrating differences" and for building a meaningful philosophy of pluralistic democracy through true participation of each individual, and not only through majority vote. This individual participation is nurtured by the community's particularism. By allowing such particularity, we will be furthering the perpetuation of individuality and identity instead of individualism and egocentrism. The end result will be to further a public philosophy based on shared common ground. To the contrary, in perpetuating egocentrism, adds Temime,

the school does no more than take account of the fact of minority status. If it helps to emphasize that fact, it does not do so through the diversity of the education it offers, but insofar as it is the reflection of a community and of rejections which it sometimes helps to highlight. Its role might perhaps be to play down these rejections or get them into proportions.<sup>11</sup>

Muslim and non-Muslim, religious or secular educators, therefore, cannot satisfy particularity in education merely by preserving "minority" rights but by saving the "majority" from falling into a paradox within the democratic ideals and practices through the following principles:

1. Particularism is developing a new paradigm for understanding the particularists' discourse without labeling it as ethnocentrism and without using it for cultural rank-ordering. The high school principal in the vignette above could have used any number of excuses to ignore the Muslim community. Yet, the community's presentation of its needs helped to develop a new understanding of Muslims, Islamic culture and education,<sup>12</sup> which was self-evident and convincing enough that it would not have been easy for the principal to find excuses. The Islamic concept "to you be your way and to me mine" (Qur'an, 109: 6) clearly brings the particular character of Islamic life to surface. It sets Islamic practice apart from other practices in a coherent parallel without forcing it to be a part, neither making it peripheral in the decision-making process. Teachers may use this new information to elicit students' responses to the situation or to a similar situation. This process allows for bringing to the surface, as well, any ill feeling that might have developed among the students because of their divided stance on the issue.

2. Particularism is the responsibility of each individual within the community. Also, in the process of cultural upbringing, particularism is a prerequisite to identity formation to avoid ideological homicide and to prevent the feeling of being marginalized. The Muslim community's efforts were necessary for the adults to feel confident in their capability to transmit their culture<sup>13</sup> to their offspring and for their children to realize their responsibility to follow their own belief system and worldview. It also signaled to the younger generation their role in preserving their identity and culture within the larger society. This signaling may direct Muslim students to react constructively instead of randomly to the issue, and it gives teachers ample opportunity towards understanding the community's needs through the students. Thus, to view cultural education as a completely separate process from the rest of the educational process in the pluralistic society makes cultural education marginal.

3. Particularism avoids conceptual assimilation and hence may minimize or prevent the feeling of being inferior or oppressed. The school district in the vignette above will not be able to ignore the presence and needs of Muslim students in the future. Since the swimming issue was settled, Muslim students have been recognized and, more important, have been asked to participate in particular events and to express their views on different issues. Also, members of the Muslim community have been invited as guest speakers to different schools. This mutual respect and cooperation would not have occurred without appropriate response and efforts by both the school district and the Muslim community. Teachers may use these strategies to defuse future disputes among students' as a result of diverse expression of their values. Yet, the



question for the Muslim community remains not that of survival of Islamic culture in the Pluralistic United States, but it is a question of incumensurability of conception for the learner's needs given the general acceptance of separating religious from secular life. Thus, the future task for the Muslim community is how to reinterpret the Islamic principles to allow for this transformation in practice without losing the uniqueness of these principles nor compromising the individual identity neither dividing the community on ethnic, linguistic or national grounds .

4. Islamic particularism avoids cultural destruction and hence prevents the need for minority status and the cry for equal access. Islam is a pedagogical system, before it was solidified in the existing juristic law or the social moral and ritual traditions. It is based on the needs of communal living in a just society regardless of religious, ethnic, or geographical affiliation. Muslims in the above vignette did not need to fight for minority status because they were operating from this principle of justice for all and because they were given the opportunity to preserve their cultural values and to apply them in the search for a solution to the problem. In essence, the problem has been moved from the imperatives of the religious discourse and from the "moral model" discourse, in which the victim is blamed and viewed as responsible for its solution, into the Islamic discourse of mutual respect and consultation. This discourse allowed for different individuals and groups to come to understand the problem in its particular framework first and then extend this framework to the broader context and take an active role in solving it. Teachers can be better prepared by using similar tactics in a conflict resolution discourse. That is, instead of exclusively using the majority vote process, as the western democratic discourse calls for, teachers may also use the consensus process, as the Islamic discourse calls for in dealing with particularism within pluralism.

5. Particularism avoids individualism and egocentricism and hence prevents group conflicts and facilitates dialogues. By providing special swimming sessions and by opening enrollment to non-Muslim individuals, the school helped eliminate the feeling of alienation among Muslim students or a feeling of reverse discrimination among the student body. The special sessions were designed to provide equitable access to curriculum and hence could not have been interpreted as giving special privileges to a small group at the expense of others. Thus, by capitalizing on the Muslim community's resourcefulness, the school district created empowerment for other groups as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

Islamic culture is never in tension with pluralism, as it represents pluralism in its simple statement that the religion is for all and God is the Guardian of all people. Thus, it carries its particularity within its plurality by implying both the Unity and Oneness of God, and the unity of humanity, and, yet, preserving the individual responsibility within a communal mutuality. Islam is

not off limit even to those who do not believe in its message, since the belief in God is the belief in the mercy and benevolent of God for those who deny the existence of God as well, and not limited to the believers only. Its plurality is satisfied by its calling for constant acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, religious and otherwise, to achieve both interreligious dialogue and a-religious communication with the rest of humanity. Muslims, on the other hand, may be in tension with plurality unless they realize that the practice of Islam is not uniform nor limited to a particular context. This limitation may be avoided by recognizing and valuing the plurality of Islamic culture before idealizing its particularity.

## NOTES

1. Islam is viewed here as a belief system that constitutes a philosophical foundation of thought and action, incorporating religion (in the narrow sense, and as understood by the secular view). Religion has five different definitions in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1972). I will use the first definition to denote the meaning of religion in the narrow sense: "the service and adoration of God or a god as expressed in forms of worship." I will use the fifth definition to denote belief system: "an awareness or conviction of the existence of a supreme being, arousing reverence, love, gratitude, the will to obey and serve, and the like; as man only is capable of religion." This definition is closer to the meaning of the construct "belief system" and to the Arabic word (al-Din), denoting a worldview and a way of life in reference to Islam.

2. See the author's "Arab Muslim Identity Transmission: Parents and Youth" *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 11, 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 1989), PP. 65-82 for discussion of the difference between social and conceptual assimilation and accommodation.

3. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Cult of Ethnicity, Good and Bad," Time, July 8, 1991, p. 21, states: "The point of America was not to preserve old cultures but to forge a new *American* Culture." He further quotes President George Washington telling Vice-President John Adams: "By an intermixture with our people, [immigrants will] get assimilated to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become one people."

4. Integration indicates conceptual and not social process. For further explanation see the author's "Islamic Education in the United States and Canada: Conception and Practice of the Islamic Belief System," in Y.Y. Haddad (ed.) The Muslims of America. New York: Oxford University Press (1991), pp. 157-174.

5. See, for example, New York State, A Curriculum of Inclusion, Report of the Commissioner's Task Force on Minorities: Equity and Excellence; (Albany, New York, July 1989).

6. See, for example, Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Remaking New York State's History Curriculum," New York Times, August 12, 1990.

7. Henry A. Giroux, "Educational Leadership and the Crisis of Democratic Government." Educational Researcher; 21, 4 (May 1992), pp. 4-11.

8. Nimat Hafez Barazangi, " Worldview, Meaningful Learning and Pluralistic Education: The Islamic Perspective" In press .

9. Kenneth A. Strike, "The Moral Role of Schooling in a Liberal Democratic Society," in Gerald Grant (ed.), Review of Research in Education. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association (1991), pp. 413-83, discusses these views, indicating the central problem of liberalism in finding a principled way of separating a public sphere where the state may exercise authority and a private sphere where the state may not (415).

10. E. Temime, "Commentary by E. Temime" on "From 'Immigrants' to 'Minorities' by S. Abdelmalek." in Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), Multicultural Education. Paris: Organization for Economic and Co-Operation and Development (1987), p.137.

11. Ibid., p. 140.

12. Islamic education means "Islamic intellectualism, for it is the essence of Islamic higher thought that must provide real criterion for judging the success or failure of its educational system." (Fazlur Rahman, Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition; (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, No.15, 1982), p. 132.

13. Christine E. Sleeter, in the Introduction to Christine E. Sleeter (ed.) Empowerment through Multicultural Education. Albany: State University of New York Press (1991), states: "Many people discuss empowerment without ever discussing social change, what a better society would look like. . . . Many other people discuss multiculturalism, human relations, or 'at risk' populations as if oppression and collective power were irrelevant considerations or lenses of analysis" (p. 2).