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# ***Exploring the complexity: the theoretical journey of a novice researcher***

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## **Abstract**

Muslim schools in Britain are diverse in various ways but they share similar religious sources and principles. Yet, they may have different perspectives regarding their 'right measure' when balancing their goals and challenges in relation to the wider social, political, economic and educational structures. Thus, one might ask: Where are these schools heading? What would a school that is truly Islamic within a British context look like? What do parents and children in these schools expect to see and experience? Are these schools building any bridges with the wider context? Answers to these questions increase in importance when the contextual challenges and tensions, within which these schools are functioning, have the potential to frame their individual interpretations of the Islamic. Such questions have not arisen in isolation, but in the process of my personal and professional journey through various contexts and roles. As part of a mixed-methods PhD study exploring diversity in Muslim schools in Britain, this paper presents a narrative account of the theoretical journey I made via these contexts. The theoretical threads and challenges that have influenced that journey have their effect on developing the study's questions and philosophical underpinnings. And for those whose concern is the integration of Muslim children, particularly those educated in Islamic schools, this journey suggests that a reflexive stance within the curriculum may be valued as one that encourages Muslim pupils to build bridges between their faith and their context. In doing so, the article discusses the possible opportunities for finding a space for fusion between Islamic and Western scholarship.

Keywords: Islamic education, Practical wisdom, Fusion of horizons, Double hermeneutic, Theoretical journey, Islamic philosophy.

## **Introduction**

One of the interesting features of the variety of Muslim thought and culture is how one should assess different kinds of experiences and

meanings, especially in light of globalisation and a complex and ever-changing world. The backgrounds, experiences and perspectives of Muslims in Western countries are shaped by and expressed through a series of geographies. Those sites could be places of oppression such as racism, deprivation and social exclusion, but also of liberation (Phillips, 2009). In the British context, Muslim schools are growing in number, securing state funding and, therefore, developing their professional practice and gradually building their resources (Ansari, 2004; Association of Muslim Schools, 2010). However, one might ask: Where are these schools heading? What would a school that is truly Islamic within a British context look like? What do parents and children in these schools expect to see and experience? Are these schools building any bridges with the wider context? Answers to these questions increase in importance when the contextual challenges and tensions, within which these schools are functioning, have the potential to frame their individual interpretations of the Islamic. Such questions have not arisen in isolation, but in the process of my personal and professional journey via various contexts and roles.

This paper is a narrative account of the theoretical journey I made via diverse contexts and which has its influence on developing the study's questions and philosophical underpinnings. The process for selecting the theoretical framework for the study was not a linear one. Reflexivity plays a great part in such a journey and results in various questions related to the interplay of cultures and religion, institutions' birth and development, and about ways in which individuals understand their contexts and the relationship between structure and agency. Yet in order to answer some of these theoretical questions in relation to this study, there was a need to select research methods that enable the exploration of some aspects of social life and how people make sense of them. In this regard qualitative methods appeared to be the more suitable 'resources' as described by Miller (1997: 3). Moreover, the study's research questions suggested that a hermeneutic theoretical framework was required that could relate the various elements in an interlinked fashion. Before identifying the theoretical framework, however, I find it important to situate this study within its

history by reflecting on the various issues shaping such a choice and exploring the unfolding of this process.

As a result, this paper is organized into two sections. The first contains a brief narrative exploring my personal experiences and assumptions of different Muslim educational contexts that is meant to inform the theoretical discussion. In particular, the account is intended to capture, in at least a crude way, some of the insights of the context and its impact on practice. The second section of the paper reviews the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The conceptual framework presented in this second section is aimed at understanding participants' perspectives from their own frame of reference. Constructing this intellectual bridge between 'Islamic scholarship' and 'Western context' suggests that it is possible to obtain useful insights from research and experiences in the field of Islamic educational practice in Britain that can feed into research concerning Muslim children in public schools.

## **Positioning for the journey**

### **Early education: a stifling embrace**

On a personal level I was educated in Algeria, in a post-colonial secular socialist system of education, where Islamic education meant one or two hours per week of Islamic studies. My classes were of a mixed gender; wearing the *hijab*<sup>1</sup> was not allowed in the primary school, in my area. Those who chose to wear it in the secondary and college phase of their education faced many challenges. Making a conscious decision to wear the *hijab* by year 8 meant facing some of these challenges at school. For example, when she first saw me my female Maths teacher said, 'by closing your ears with this cloth you will become stupid'. In other incidents, the girls wearing the *hijab* were

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<sup>1</sup> *Hijab* has different interpretations amongst Muslim scholarship but generally refers to a woman's dress that covers everything except the hands, face and feet in long, loose and non see-through garments.

labelled as the class 'grandmothers' by some staff. As a schoolgirl wearing the *hijab* it was not strange for me to experience these prejudiced statements from time to time. However, this reflects the risky position that students might face in light of some teachers' expectations and its possible impact on their future career. For me it was not a symbol of ignorance or oppression, it was another way of praying to God and practicing my freedom. Beyond the dress code, the *hijab* in Islam has a broader meaning that includes behaviour as well (Guindi, 1999). It is the principle of modesty for both genders that also encompasses non-physical direct contact with the person that they could theoretically marry (Guindi, 1999). The PE lessons demanded many physical positions that would be regarded as not Islamically modest and it also required direct physical contact with the male tutor at times. Yet, in years 7 to 11 my PE teachers were all male. Moreover, PE lessons were performed in an open public field in a mixed gender class and the *hijab* was not tolerated as part of the PE kit. The only possible way out of all this was through medical certificates exempting students from those lessons. These were not easy to get, given that we were fit and well. This is a point to which I shall return in the final part of this section. Prayer during school time was another challenge because students were not permitted to perform them. Moreover, punishment, including corporal punishment, was expected if anyone was seen praying during the school day. All this contributed to my later university option for Islamic Studies where compulsory prayers were scheduled on the timetable. The University was mixed gender but in this environment there was more respect for my basic Islamic rituals such as prayer. Going through such experiences as a child, because of my freely-chosen Islamic dress code, raised many concerns for me regarding the type of education I had received in my own Muslim country, and about the meaning, space and scope of women's freedom and the unequal treatment of the other by the Algerian educational structure.

### **The ship: exploring frames**

Moving to Britain shortly after my graduation with a BA in Quran and Sunnah (Prophetic traditions) sciences, I was faced with a new context



that was both familiar and different. Joining the English classes in the college was a priority to break the language isolation and it was not long before I started my teacher training courses as well. Although, it was interesting to find female only classes available, the religious and cultural diversity of people I met through those courses was the most enriching. Meeting people from other Muslim cultures raised questions around some issues considered by some to be Islamic whereas I was seeing them as purely cultural. Thus, I found myself as both an insider and outsider in between the Muslim Asian and the Western British cultures. During those early years, I became an Arabic language teacher in the mosque classes and in a weekend Arabic school for primary school children from diverse Muslim backgrounds. It was here that I started reflecting upon the challenges which these children were facing between their experiences of state school, their parents' expectations of them and the community educational provision (Halstead, 1986).

Moving from the UK to Saudi Arabia for over three years was another rich experience that raised more questions around the impact of context on how we understand others and ourselves. These experiences led me to question my pre-assumptions, and how these continuously interact with my personal past and present contexts to constitute new moments of understanding. In Saudi Arabia, I worked for some time in two schools. The first was a primary and secondary, segregated and partially independent school where all subjects were taught in English including Islamic studies. The curriculum was primarily aimed at preparing children for international examinations such as GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) but also inspected, like other Saudi public schools, on their provision for Arabic language and Islamic studies. The fees were high and parents in this school were mainly interested in good achievement in English, Maths and Science subjects. The second school was also a primary and secondary but mixed gender and completely independent following an

American curriculum and not subject to any governmental inspections. In this school Arabic and Islamic Studies were seen as inferior to other subjects and of lesser importance compared to the first school. Although my first school was segregated and sounded more 'Islamic' compared to my second mixed gender one, it was there that I came to know about 'The Spice Girls<sup>2</sup>' during students' school performances. In this school most teachers qualified in Britain, Canada or America and were highly respected by parents as more professional. They received more than double the salary of those who trained as teachers in Muslim countries. Children in both schools came from diverse cultural backgrounds, but with a majority of either Saudi or Egyptian origin. While in the first school I taught Islamic studies in English, in the second I was a Science teacher, given my triple science Baccalaureate background. My role in both was mainly within my professional subject teaching areas.

Moving back from Saudi Arabia to England, I started teaching in a Muslim school with a rich Islamic curriculum. This was an all female school with diverse Muslim parental backgrounds though mainly from the South Asian community. Based on my Islamic Studies Degree, my professional role was teaching Islamic studies to years 8 to 11 though mostly with post-sixteens due to their advanced and demanding Islamic Studies curriculum. Outside this formal role, I found myself being approached by most students as a counsellor, an Islamic scholar, a sister and at times a mother. Building trust was essential, but separating those roles was challenging. Occasionally I was approached for advice about social problems affecting their learning because of my experience as an Islamic scholar. For example, concerns about private family matters, like parents' divorcing, were among the issues which some students said they found difficult to raise in their state schools or with professional counsellors for fear of being misunderstood, judged, or receiving advice that did not match with their Islamic ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> An all-girl British pop group formed in 1994

### **Borrowing multiple coloured lenses**

While working as an Islamic studies teacher in an '*Alima* (female scholar) course programme I became increasingly aware of the prestigious social status that an '*Alima* or '*Alim* (male scholar) has within a South Asian Muslim community. This was completely new to me when I started teaching in the school. The post-sixteen students asked me whether I was an '*Alima*, it was a shock to them that I replied in the negative. My answer to their question was based on the meaning of '*Alim* within an Arab context, where it indicates a prominent and recognised scholarly person within the Islamic Studies. This would be very challenging to achieve for someone in her twenties and only at Degree level in the field. Their shock was based on their use of the word to simply mean someone who had received a rich Islamic studies curriculum during their secondary and college education and therefore had a firm base of Islamic knowledge. After a while, and through communicating our meanings and expectations of the word '*Alim*, I recognised that I am an '*Alima* according to their definition of the concept. In this regard, Gilliat-Ray (2010) maintains that the different meanings and degrees of knowledge and authority which such religious titles may hold within Muslim discourses depend on their contextual circumstances. Through this work experience I also came to appreciate the role of the *Hanafi* jurisprudence school of thought within a South Asian Muslim community.

My professional role as a teacher also led to my role as a curriculum developer and later as a Head of the Islamic Studies department. It was challenging to have to consider such areas as assessment beyond the mere recall of the subject, teaching resources, parents' expectations of me as an Islamic Studies teacher and meeting the school's goals of the '*Alima* programme. Adding to this complexity was the necessity to take into account the children's perspectives in light of 21st century British and global context. However, the role was also inspiring. Seeking to develop my teaching of Islamic studies, I

completed an MA in Islamic studies at a British University. This introduced me, as an Islamic studies teacher within a Western context, to Western Scholarship on Islam and it was also a gateway to a more critical interaction with such debates.

Throughout this journey, I could see different horizons as I moved through from being a student in an Algerian context to being a student within a Western milieu, being a teacher within a Saudi environment, and ending up being a Muslim scholar within a South Asian Muslim community. In the midst of all these diverse contexts I was constantly negotiating questions of what is 'Islamic' from what is merely 'cultural'. Deciding to wear the *hijab* in Algeria meant questioning and challenging preconceptions of how an educated Algerian woman should dress at that time. This included the perspectives of my parents. This constructed view of dress was not detached from the previous French colonisers' assimilation policy in their mission to eliminate the veil from Algerian society, as they judged this traditional women's garment to be medieval and barbaric (Aris, 2007). In the early post-colonial context of Algeria during the seventies and the early eighties the *hijab* was seen as culturally incompatible with being an educated woman. Being from within such a culture did not negate questioning an aspect of it and seeking change. However, it was sufficient within that process to refer back to religious texts from the Quranic and Prophetic traditions to articulate and defend my choices. Such personal experience embraced elements from the Algerian contextual circumstances and discourses. The religious texts formed the basis that bound the different perspectives together and acted as a platform for dialogue in areas of divergence such as dress code. It was not an agreement on perspectives but on the sacred status of those Islamic sources, that was taken as evident, and part of the shared culture. At this stage, I found that belonging to a cultural context within which assumptions, forms of language and of life are shared puts less emphasis on articulating the nature and origin of its practices because they are simply obvious (Wittgenstein, 1968). This approach, however, should not be mistaken for cultural determinism; to undergo some contextual influences and to share some underlying assumptions with others is not

necessarily deterministic. Despite the apparent 'obviousness' resulting from a shared culture, our experiences do at various times cause us to question it (Rahman, 1982). Nevertheless, moving to a non-Muslim Western culture was more demanding as it constantly requires me to understand and articulate my practices in a non-religious discourse. It was not the dress that came under challenge; it was my religious convictions as a whole.

With more questions regarding issues of interpretation, the influence of context on our understanding, and our rootedness in the diverse backgrounds from which we have arrived, my later teaching practice became more of an attempt to explore these questions with students and by reading the Islamic scholarly heritage in light of its past and our present. During this entire journey my position on philosophy was that it was no more than abstract discussions that had nothing to do with practice. Furthermore, during my earlier years of this journey, I had considered philosophy to be just the other side of the same coin as atheism and the route towards it. My previous depiction of philosophy was not without links to its past discourses within Muslim scholarship going back to the times of al-Farabi (Alpharabius, died 950), ibn-Sina (Avicenna, died 1037), al-Ghazali (also spelled al-Gazel or Ghazzali, died 1111) and Ibn-Taymiyyah (died 1328).

This personal and professional educational journey has raised the question of what light does knowledge about human contexts shed on our understanding and application of texts. Furthermore, what does the diverse cultural background of the Prophet's periods in Mecca and Medina, for instance, teach Muslims today about how they should deal with their own diversity and their wider societies? Such questions are essential and lie at the core of any discussion related to Islamic educational aims. Also, and more significantly for social inquiry, this experience suggests the need to open the debate among Muslim educationalists, both practitioners and scholars, about the aims of

Islamic education within the present context beyond the layer of dress code, prayer times, and memorisation of the Islamic sources of the Quran and Hadith (Prophetic traditions). It is at this juncture that self-reflection on religion, culture and language formed the basis for the context out of which my PhD questions emerged.

### **The theoretical foundation**

Through the shocks of 9/11 in the USA, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and 7/7 London bombings, preceded by the Algerian turmoil in the 1990s, I could see the problem of the interpretation of texts and its links to socio-political and economic contexts. From this point I decided to follow Gadamer's (1989) contributions to the philosophy of hermeneutics. Reading Gadamer's philosophy of understanding was both familiar and strange. Merely applying his views to interpreting Islamic religious texts such as the Quran would be no more than an attempt at forcing thought about Islam into a preconceived Western philosophical mould. Therefore, it was necessary to select a philosophical framework appropriate for understanding Muslim participants' perceptions in my PhD study, yet capable of taking notice of their contextual influences for the meaning they were making. Separating Gadamer's notion of liberating texts from the interpretation of the Islamic religious sources, I have found Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding to be more serious in taking the truth-claims of the other. This critical reading has guided for some time my attempts at making sense of the diverse interpretations, not only for religious texts but to our everyday interactions with texts, media and people. Such interpretations stem from a prior conception of or stand on the matter at hand. The request to re-examine personal prejudices meant deconstructing previous knowledge about things and seeing them with diverse lenses.

I was specifically attracted to Gadamer's (1989) 'practical wisdom-phronesis-' and 'fusion of horizons' concepts. This seemed at the time to have the potential to explain participants' perceptions on culture and religion. The questions I asked at the beginning of the study about Islamic education in 21st century Western British context and the

diversity of Muslim perceptions about it have led me to examine concepts of dialogue, meaning, and understanding within Gadamer's writings. However, it might be stating the obvious to note that the well-established Muslim view is of divine authorship for the Quran and the primacy and authority of the author's intention in conveying meaning, a view that is consistently and explicitly expressed in al-Ghazali's writings:

It is not allowable to apply the Word of God Most High except to what God Most high intended, but the saying of a poet is allowable to apply to other things besides what the poet meant...it is incumbent to reverence the Word of God and to guard it from danger (1902: 744).

In contrast, and influenced by his social justice activism in the South African apartheid context, Farid Esack (1997) views the way to pluralism, which he believes to be basic to the Quran's teaching, as being through the liberation of the Quranic texts. Following this line of reasoning, Esack notes that

all readings of any text are necessarily contextual. If the word of God is at all interested in being heard and actualized, as all Muslims would insist, then the Qur'an has to be contextual. (1997: 255)

Yet, this type of hermeneutical response remains strange to the deep-rooted view of Quranic text and that of the Prophet's teachings within the Muslim community at large. Alternatively, al-Ghazali called for the spirit of free rational enquiry (*ijtihad*). Beyond the literal reading of Quran and Sunnah texts, al-Ghazali was attempting to find ways that required the integration of the human and social contexts when implementing legal rulings and yet remaining faithful to the objectives of scriptural sources. This gave birth to the 'school of objectives' that was further developed, especially by the work of ash-Shatibi (died 1388) (Ramadan, 2009: 63). On the one hand, being faithful to the sources and following the example of the Prophet and the Companions meant being strict and uncompromising in the fields of belief and

worship (*al-'aqidah wal-'ibadat*). On the other, the 'school of objectives' approach also opened up space for incorporating knowledge of the texts and the contexts. This in turn contributes to better understanding of people's interests, and the interpretative scope scholars could enjoy (Ramadan, 2009).

Regardless of these divergent positions regarding texts and their degree of openness to interpretation, Gadamer's (1989) concepts of 'practical wisdom' and 'fusion of horizons' still have potential for the exploration of participants' perceptions of Islamic education, their expectations and their experiences within their Western British environment. Thus, a hermeneutical theoretical framework based on the concept of 'practical wisdom' guided my data collection phase. However, after a number of interviews and after becoming more immersed in the data, more questions started appearing regarding change, agency and structure. The next two parts of this section will discuss Gadamer's concepts of 'practical wisdom' and 'fusion of horizons' in relation to my PhD study.

### **Practical wisdom**

Although the Quran is the book that Muslims believe to be the Word of God, it is not the sole source of Islamic thought. The Prophet Muhammad's life is seen as the practical interpretation of the Quran. His move from Mecca to Medina exposed the early Muslim community to a diverse and more complex socio-political context than that found in Mecca (Ramadan, 2008; Salahi, 2002). Although the Prophet preserved Islamic principles and fundamental practices, his relationship with the surrounding cultures, religions, local customs and social practices of Medina was different from how it had been in Mecca. This reflects the Prophet's consideration to the different realities through time and space. In many traditions of the Prophet the cultural diversity of the Medina context is mentioned and considered either explicitly or implicitly (Salahi, 2002). This has given rise to the consideration of common good (*masalih an-nas*) and customs (*'urf*) when using analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) and, more broadly, the implementing of legal preference (*istihsan*) by later Muslim religious scholars (Ramadan,



2009). In doing so, there is always a need to understand those customs, analyse Islamic principles and find 'the right measure' in application (Gadamer, 1989; Ramadan, 2009). In the midst of such processes are the attempts of Muslim schools to create an institutional space for themselves within their British context and meet its demands and challenges. Islamic and liberal educational aims do diverge, but finding a space for agreement between the two is not impossible.

In their paths to becoming devout British Muslim citizens, children need not only to develop a body of theoretical knowledge about Islam, but also place this knowledge into practice in their everyday activities and ethical decisions. If that is the principle aim towards which Muslim schools in Britain are working, as announced by the Association of Muslim Schools (2010), then there will be a need for students to gain a sophisticated understanding not only of their Islamic ethical codes but also of their application in context. Teachers' conduct in these schools, especially Islamic studies teachers, is perceived as particularly crucial in the translation of their subjects into practice. In this regard the teacher is seen by the Director of Karimia Institute (Hussain, n.d.: 1), for instance, as '... a role model who make the content of the National Curriculum relevant to a Muslim child by contextualising it and Islamising it'. Thus, during that process of translation into practice of what is considered to be Islamic, teachers are acting as thinkers, interpreters and inquirers in their own right.

However, challenges arising from cultivating Islamic schools within a Western context are not yet viewed as a philosophical field where the relation between theory and practice can be further explored. Theoretically these schools are dedicated to promoting Islamic values, but achieving this goal in school life requires a practical interpretation of issues which are evolving day-by-day in order to arrive at the 'right measure' of 'the Islamic'. The diverse views on this practical translation may be expressed through silence, anger, setting up a new

school or otherwise, but up to now it had not made its way through into the critical theoretical discussions, because practitioners cannot easily translate their problems into that discourse.

In an attempt to capture the hermeneutical process between theory and application and to seek a more adequate understanding of Islamic education, I have borrowed Gadamer's (1989, 2007) philosophy of practice, especially regarding his interpretation of Aristotle's practical wisdom. Drawing on Aristotle, Gadamer employs the ancient Greek distinctions between technical knowledge (*techne*) and ethical knowledge:

...so practical philosophy is determined by the line drawn between the practical knowledge of the person who chooses freely and the acquired skill of the expert that Aristotle names *techne*. Practical philosophy, then has to do not with the learnable crafts and skills, however essential this dimension of human ability too is for the communal life of humanity. Rather it has to do with what is each individual's due as a citizen and what constitutes his *arete* or excellence. Hence, practical philosophy needs to raise to the level of reflective awareness the distinctively human trait of having *prohairesis* [the activity of making choices] (Gadamer, 2007: 231).

Here the concept of 'practical wisdom' plays an important role. Seeking wisdom from whatever source is an Islamic Prophetic teaching which, I would argue, demands critical reflexive dialogue with the other. Rejecting that other as a whole would undermine any possibility of finding any wisdom except from within the Muslim heritage and would contradict the historical journey of Muslim civilisation. But while this relationship to the other needs to be open, one must also realise that wisdom does not come with passive imitation. In this regard Gadamer (1989: 360) notes, 'the claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance'. Thus for Gadamer (1989), in order to engage in an authentic dialogue that has the potential to produce understanding, one needs to be open to the other. This openness, however, 'does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open' (Gadamer, 1989: 361). Moreover, this openness 'does not mean that

we do blindly what the other desires' (Gadamer, 1989: 361). Easy imitations or exclusion would only work as barriers to that fusion of horizons and, therefore, prevent seeing the wisdom presented in the other's sayings. This demands critical reflexive dialogical understanding, not only between Muslims and their Western contexts, but also between the diverse groups of Muslims and the implications this understanding might have for the development of Islamic educational aims and curriculum resources in the contemporary British milieu. Such a process involves knowledge, critical reflection and a balance between preservation and change. From this perspective reflexivity on oneself and the context becomes an essential part in coming to that 'right measure' (Gadamer, 2007: 115).

By contributing to the topic of 'Islamic education and its contexts', I was aiming to explore Muslims' various meanings, experiences and inspirations for 'Islamic education' within their British context and the role of individuals, as agents, in the diverse provision of such education. Focusing intently upon the meanings and experiences of participants towards Islamic schooling and its context, I am plunged into a diverse array of stories, narratives and concepts. So, Gadamer's (1989, 2007) concept of 'practical wisdom' appeared a useful tool for analysing these perspectives and ways in which Islamic theoretical knowledge translates, or is expected to translate, into school practice.

### **Fusion of horizons**

#### **Human experience as openness**

Before undertaking any study analysis, it is important to come to a clear definition of the term 'fusion of horizons' itself. When presenting his view of the interpretation process, Gadamer (1989) discusses 'horizon' as a way to conceptualise understanding. Each person has their own horizon of understanding, which is formed as a result of past and present horizons that have been fused to form that new moment of understanding. As a result, Gadamer (1989) describes a horizon as the

outcome of all that can be understood or thought about by an individual at a specific time in history and in a particular context. He (1989: 306) further notes the importance of avoiding 'the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations' where 'the otherness of the past can be foregrounded from it'. Since for Gadamer (1989: 306) all our prejudices have to be continually tested, especially in encountering the past and in the understanding of our rooted traditions, 'the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed'.

The use of the concept 'horizon' in Gadamer's (1989) presentation of the understanding process is grounded in his ontological perception of humans' existence and their 'openness' to learning through experience and reflection. This fundamental open relationship between humans and their environment would result in what Gadamer (1989: 306) metaphorically conceptualises as a 'fusion of horizons'. In this regard, Carr (1996: 34) defines Gadamer's concept of 'horizon' as 'a subjective realm of awareness that borders on two distinct but related fronts: the historical and the linguistic'. Moreover, Gadamer states that:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth (1989: 301).

For Gadamer, then, expanding the borders of one's vision from what is nearby would enable a broader view, yet 'to have a horizon' implies 'relative significance to everything within this horizon' (1989: 301). So, mutual understanding remains possible because the horizon, as a context of meaning, is not fixed and can incorporate another horizon (Gadamer, 1989). Thus, Gadamer's (1989) concept of 'fusion of horizons' for the understanding process, in some aspects, provides a powerful model of communicative practice which has the potential to serve as an adequate framework of analysis for my study's questions and the themes I want to pursue. Nevertheless, there remain some

difficulties in his views when applied to this study, which need to be discussed.

### **The function of reflection**

Gadamer (1989: 361) is quite right to argue that 'to be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible', a view that is considered by Habermas (1986) as a denial of the power of reflection. In his attempt to empower critical reflection capacities against traditional dogmatisms, Habermas (1986) proposes the combination of hermeneutics with ideological critique. This critique, Habermas (1986: 272) claims, would help uncover the inner and outer social forces that are expressed through language and therefore expose the 'deception with language as such'. Crucial to Habermas's political theory, taking Kant as his point of departure, are dialogue and rational argumentation where 'only "public" reasons count, hence reasons that have the power to convince also beyond the boundaries of a particular religious community' [quotes in original] (2008: 245). For Habermas (1986) Gadamer's interpretation model becomes uncritical and restricted within language and cultural traditions.

In his response, Gadamer (1986) argues that Habermas's interpretation of tradition and reason as being in opposition fails to overcome Enlightenment presuppositions and prejudice in favour of science and reason. Moreover, Gadamer's (1986: 287) contention is that Habermas's critical reflection and rationality has no independence from the historical tradition and 'is in itself a linguistic act of reflection'. The concept of reflection, which Gadamer puts into question and considers 'encumbered with dogmatism' and 'a misinterpretation of reflection', can be summed up in his phrase:

The real question is whether one sees the function of reflection as bringing something to awareness in order to confront what is in fact accepted with other possibilities- so that one can either throw it out or reject the other possibilities and accept what the tradition de facto is

presenting- or whether bringing something to awareness always dissolves what one has previously accepted [emphasis in original] (1986: 291).

The part of the debate relevant to this study's theoretical framework is Habermas's insistence on the critique of ideology. Various studies have followed Habermas's model by analysing the thought of some leading figures in Islamist movements such as Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Sayed Qutb, Ayatollah Khomeini and others (Zaidi, 2007). This is Zaidi's (2007) key contention as he has rightly pinpointed the tendency within Western academia towards ideological critique of the 'Muslim other' instead of dialogical understanding where self-understanding of Muslims is largely explicitly rejected. In this context, Zaidi (2007) argues that Habermas's (2008) requirement of mutual accountability between interlocutors, when placed into work, fails to adequately understand the other without jumping to accountability. This is where I find some subtle but crucial differences between Habermas' and Gadamer's views of the character and preconditions required for dialogic rationality. However, for all their differences, they agree on their attempts to expose prejudgments and prejudices.

At this point, I will return to Gadamer's encounter with Habermas to show how understanding the other is central for him and for my own narrative. Gadamer states that 'openness to the Other [...] involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so' (1989: 355). In this regard, Gadamer (1989) certainly provides a more inclusive alternative since he clearly focuses on the importance of taking the other seriously with consideration to one's traditional influence. Yet he tends to imprison current responses within that traditional influence in a rather pre-deterministic model. With the view of effective history, Gadamer (1989) denies any degree of objectivity to historical knowledge, because every interpretation of any event in the past is influenced by its present horizon.

In contrast to this 'Gadamerian' pre-deterministic view of the impact of tradition on the present responses is Rahman's (1982) belief that

values are necessarily involved in the present response that is determined rather than predetermined by the present situation. This present situation is constitutive not only of the 'effective history' part but also of the self-aware activity that constitutes an important part of it. All conscious responses to the past, according to Rahman (1982: 10), involve what he terms 'the objective ascertaining' moment of that past, which Gadamer does not accept, and the response itself. In distinguishing and separating those two moments, and in contrast to Gadamer's rejection of the 'objective ascertaining' type, Rahman (1982) rightly argues its possibility given the requisite evidence availability. Referring to Augustine and Luther as critics of their own dogmatic tradition with rather a rational questioning method in examining its inner consistency, Rahman (1982: 11) argues for the need to replace the 'historical' distance or space with a 'rational space' in mediating between past and present. In doing so, Rahman (1982) appreciates the historical consciousness' presence but only as a secondary phenomenon. Regarding traditional influence, Rahman's vision seems to have an intermediary position, between Gadamer's and Habermas's points of view. In this respect, Rahman (1982) stresses the importance of the influence of tradition on our present responses but rejects its pre-deterministic effect. In doing so, Rahman calls for questioning of our self-awareness of these historical influences. In his account:

...the process of questioning and changing a tradition –in the interest of preserving or restoring its normative quality in the case of its normative elements- can continue indefinitely and [...] there is no fixed or privileged point at which the predetermining effective history is immune from such questioning and then being consciously confirmed or consciously changed (1982: 11).

In taking this stance, actors are seen as partly conscious and able to make a change whether towards preservation or otherwise. It is with the backdrop of such a view that Gadamer's (1989) 'fusion of horizons' concept is borrowed and used in the study.

### **Dialogue and final vocabularies**

Like post-structuralists, Gadamer (1989, 2007) considers human reality to be essentially linguistic and, therefore, rejecting any metaphysical foundations as a source of human knowledge and social reality. Religious communities implicitly claim the pre-linguistic regarding their religious truth claims which human language is incapable of adequately expressing. This view is explicitly expressed by an influential figure in Islamic hermeneutics al-Ghazali:

...the measure of the poetry and its being in accord with natural qualities; and it is because of its being in accord with natural qualities that human beings have the power of composing poetry. But the composing of the Quran lies outside of the paths and the track of speech, and, on account of that, it is a miracle which does not enter into the power of human beings because of its not being in accord with their nature (1902: 747).

So, can dialogue go beyond the expressed final vocabularies that are not to be compromised upon and may not find their way through that shared fusion of horizons? It is here where Zaidi (2007: 428) rightly criticises Gadamer for his undervaluation of silence as a legitimate option on certain issues that go beyond 'final vocabularies'.

### **The power relation in communication**

Gadamer (1989) appears to underestimate the influence of the power relation in communication. While he (1989) demonstrates a clear awareness of its importance in dialogue, no apparent conclusion is drawn in relation to the conditions of dialogue. According to Gadamer (1989), the desire to dominate penetrates all human relations. Referring back to Nietzsche, Gadamer confirms that 'even a slave still has a will to power that turns against his master' (1989: 359). Consequently, in his discussion of what he terms the I-Thou relation, Gadamer (1989) highlights various forms of silencing the other during a conversation. For example, he (1989) notes that claiming to know and understand the other in advance is a way of robbing the other's claims of legitimacy. It is a mutual relationship and failing to take it as such, for Gadamer (1989), means destroying its moral bond. On Gadamer's (1989) I-Thou relation in dialogue, the three most



important conditions are reciprocity, respect, and openness (Vasterling, 2003). Important as these may be, Vasterling (2003: 171) has rightly appealed for a recognition of 'the other as equal' to be 'the first and most important condition of dialogue'. In seeking to involve those marginalised, Vasterling (2003) believes that missing such recognition would restrict the dialogical scope to those considering themselves equals. Hence, it means the exclusion of all those regarded as having an inferior status including gender, religious and cultural aspects. This is directly related and relevant to this study of the Muslim school population, the complex diverse backgrounds it holds and its relations within the same religious group and with the wider society, given its diverse economic and socio-political context.

Muslim schools, like other schools, are racially, culturally, economically and historically diverse. They do share the same religious sources and principles but they may have different perspectives regarding their 'right measure' when balancing their religious demands with the wider social, economic and educational structures in their British context. In the midst of such diversity there will be a need for understanding in order to distinguish the religious aspects from the accumulated cultural practices. This may help in making decisions of what can be adopted from that which is not compatible, what can be taught at school as 'Islamic' from that which has to be introduced as cultural.

### **Twists and turns of the course**

If Muslims believe that the Quran encourages them to seek wisdom and appreciate rationality, criticality, thinking, reflection, understanding, dialogue and seeking evidence (Al-Aqqad, 1986; Al-Qaradawi, 2010; Averroes, 1997), then there will be a need for interaction with that which is different. Wisdom in non-Muslim intellectual heritage is not to be found without critical interaction and understanding not only with the heritage of the other, but also with their own. This demands a critical reflexive dialogue within Muslim discourses as well as with wider

discussions. In this respect, it is worth going back to such interactions between East and West, between philosophy and theology in Averroes's biography and writings. While Averroes is more known in the West as a philosopher, commentator on Aristotle and a medical writer (Averroes, 1974; Baffioni, 2004; Everson, 2007), in Islamic studies discourses he is primarily presented as a jurist. Averroes is a great figure particularly in the Sunni school of Malikite jurisprudence but not restricted to it (Hallaq, 2009). Moreover, Averroes (1996) book *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid* (the Distinguished Jurist's Primer) is an important source for any Islamic Studies graduate in the field of comparative jurisprudence. To illustrate, it is helpful here to briefly contrast Averroes with al-Ghazali and consider part of their input to this discussion.

It is the theological and philosophical competency that enabled both Averroes and al-Ghazali to contribute to debates related to religion and rationalisation regarding interpretation and jurisprudence. Refuting the accusations levelled at al-Ghazali as an enemy of philosophy, John Inglis believes that 'al-Ghazali should more accurately be called a champion of the philosophical method'(2003: 52). Regardless of Averroes and al-Ghazali's disagreement on some philosophical propositions which al-Ghazali rejected, both figures employed philosophical concepts where they thought it appropriate. Furthermore, it is also believed that al-Ghazali played a predominant role in Averroes's attitude towards studying philosophy (Inglis, 2003). The main issues of divergence, however, were regarding the status of reason vis-à-vis revelation, the conceptualisation between religious and philosophical terms and the application of ta'wil (interpretation) on the Quranic texts where Averroes was more liberal compared to al-Ghazali (Al-Ghazzali, 1902; Ghazzali, 1999, 2000; Inglis, 2003). In an attempt to harmonise Greek philosophy and Islam, Averroes (1997) argued for different levels of truth. For Averroes (1997) religious truth is presented to the public in a simplified language through religious texts, while philosophy can discuss the same truth but at a deeper layer. Moreover, Averroes (1997) argues for the need to use philosophical

debates in presenting religious truths as, according to him, not all people accept religious texts as truth.

On the other hand, in his book 'The Incoherence of Philosophers', al-Ghazali (2000) rejects metaphysics as a genuine way to arrive at true knowledge because it involves using our senses and limited intellectual powers to investigate a field that is different in nature and beyond comprehension. While rejecting metaphysics, al-Ghazali accepts logic as a thinking tool and tries to use it in other theological debates. Al-Ghazali's (2000) and Averroes's (1987) books 'The Incoherence of Philosophers' and 'The Incoherence of the Incoherence' respectively are just examples of this interaction. Thus, philosophy was the most controversial subject amongst Muslim educationalists. Although al-Ghazali (2000) did not reject it altogether, as he learned it himself, he considered most of it as paving the road to scepticism and atheism. Averroes (1997), as a religious judge, could find a hermeneutical exit to the philosophers' literal metaphysical expressions that contradict the Islamic principles. This was done in response to al-Ghazali's (2000) accusations levelled at them. Such an example presents the fundamental disagreement between al-Ghazali and Averroes' perspectives on the relationship between reason and revelation.

Differences in this scholarly orientation between two influential Muslim scholars like al-Ghazali and Averroes who both combined Greek and Muslim scholarship cannot be arbitrarily dismissed. Although they represent what Gadamer (1989) conceptualised as 'different horizons', they share a similar Muslim history, sources and scholarship. The difference in their contexts regarding time, space, socio-political background and their personal journeys to Greek philosophy and Muslim scholarship all contributed to their interaction. Nevertheless, such historical influences were not deterministic for either of them. After a journey of scepticism, Al-Ghazali (Ghazali, 1964; Ghazzali, 1999; Nofal, 2000) chose mysticism but shifted his horizon to

appreciate Greek logic as essential in Muslim scholarship and education. Conversely Averroes (1997) appreciated the compatibility between philosophical debates and his faith. In doing so, Averroes (1997) believed in the need to express such faith in a non-religious discourse to allow interaction with the other.

Averroes' thoughts resemble those of Habermas on the communication between religious and secular views in the public sphere. In present secular Western societies demands are placed on members of religious backgrounds to translate their views into a secular language. However, Habermas (2006) considers the psychological and cognitive burden that this may cause to religious members of the community. Consequently he calls for a cooperative process between the religious and secular members of society. In such communicative process Habermas believes that the latter group members also

...must open their minds to the possible truth content of these presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments (2006: 11).

Habermas (2006: 10) suggests that in such a process those without religion may actually recognise 'moral intuitions' which they themselves hold and that are viewed from a different perspective.

The tension between Muslim and Greek thought was mainly in subjective issues of religious metaphysical convictions. While this area is difficult to fuse, silence can be the space where more consideration is needed in Gadamer's process of understanding. Reflexive exercise, therefore, is not a strange practice in the Islamic theoretical heritage. Using reflexive dialogue as a way to develop conceptual frameworks to guide practice was part of the Muslim past in researching both the natural world and jurisprudence (Averroes, 1996; Khadduri, 1984; Ramadan, 2009).

The evolution of medieval inter-disciplinary Muslim scholarship is greatly intertwined with its focus on reflexive dialogue with the other. Averroes could find his shared horizon within both theologians' and

philosophers' discourses and was an authority in both (Averroes, 1997; Hallaq, 2009; Inglis, 2003). As challenging as this might be, it reflects the need to see the truth of the other as an insider, which would allow its expression in a language that can better serve understanding. Thus, if Islamic education within Britain is to be effective to the diverse Muslim backgrounds it holds and the diversity within its context, it will have to be constructed in ways that acknowledge such variety in Muslim perspectives and cultural backgrounds (i.e., alternative horizons). Moreover, it will also be crucial for it to engage with its larger milieu without being assimilated into the already established structures or fragmented into some isolated organisations.

### **The double hermeneutic**

As manifested in the al-Ghazali and Averroes examples provided in the preceding text, the way Muslim scholarship interacted with Greek heritage is multifaceted. Moreover, the historical exemplar provided illustrated the rationale for such engagement. The discipline of Islamic education in Britain is in its infancy and demands taking into consideration the diversity of Muslims' backgrounds, the variety of experiences, and the responses of Muslim individuals and organisations in the face of the complex contextual challenges. During the study's data collection a theme of change in practice and understanding appeared, which different participants expressed, that demands the need to make a better understanding of it. This has led to thinking deeply about the structure and agency debate, how they are linked and what the process is. It was the response of individual people to their new environment and structures and specifically their struggle between preserving tradition and adopting the new through a process of change that sparked my intellectual curiosity. Yet to understand social change one must understand structure and agency. The final point I address here, therefore, is the relationship between structure and agency.

During that phase, I was initially attracted to the critical realism view of structure and agency where human action is regarded as both enabled and constrained by social structures, but this action in turn reproduces or transforms those structures (Bhaskar, 1979). In this regard Bhaskar (1979) argues for the stratification of reality allowing diverse methodologies to be adopted depending on the nature of the matter being investigated. In distinguishing epistemology from ontology Bhaskar (1979) believes that reality is not dependent on observation because some variables might be at work but not realised. Separating 'mechanisms', 'events' and 'experiences' on the one hand and 'real', 'actual' and 'empirical' domains on the other, Bhaskar (1979) argues that not everything that is real can be experienced. While experiences are embraced by the three domains, all events fall under the actual, but not necessarily to be experienced, and mechanisms are real but cannot be experienced either. It is clear that such a position has the potential to find a space for theological intellectual debates about the existence of God and creation which Bhaskar (2000) further explored. Nevertheless, it is the relation between agency and structure that influenced my interest in both Margaret Archer (1996, 2000) and Anthony Giddens's theories (1984) that are both linked to Bhaskar's writings in different ways (Wight, 2009). Pleasants (2002) is one of the harsh critics of these perspectives. Based on their similarities and shared ground, Pleasants (2002) raises many questions regarding what he considers to be the incoherence of Bhaskar's, Giddens' and Habermas' theories.

On the other hand, Archer's (1996) thesis on culture and agency considers structural and cultural domains as substantively different and relatively autonomous with an exchange relationship in relation to resources and legitimacy. Following this line of argument, Archer (1996, 2000) perceives individuals as rational actors pursuing material interests. Failing to appreciate this differentiation and autonomy, for Archer, would lead to collapsing the two into each other which, on the other hand, would not allow understanding of social life 'as the interplay between interests and ideas' (1996: xi). In this respect, Archer (1996), believes that Giddens' theory does not give enough

examination to the relative autonomy of culture from both structure and agency. Given that it is relatively true that Muslim parents migrating to Britain are faced with structures new to them, in dealing with structure as a pre-existence to individual actions, Archer's proposal was initially appealing to this study. However, as most of those comers are from the British colonial territories where there was a long interaction with their colonies, their own educational structures have been shaped by the present British structures in different ways and therefore are no longer completely autonomous from them. Thus, it is only the new geography, socio-political milieu and time-space of interaction with those same individuals and structures that are different.

Archer's work receives little published critical discussion and against that silence King (1999) presented his critique of her morphogenetic social theory. The main shortcoming of Archer's approach, in King's view (1999), is the generalisation of her opponents' positions that carries the risk of their misrepresentation. Furthermore, King strongly rejects Archer's claim of the autonomy of structure from individual actions describing it as a mere conversion of 'the temporal priority of other people's actions into the ontological priority and autonomy of structure' (1999: 10). This, King (1999) rightly argues, is due to her ontologisation of time where the individual actions of people in the past are suddenly presented as structural and irreducible to those individuals once they become history.

These diverse perspectives over structure and agency, Giddens (1984) argues, are not merely epistemological but are further ontological. In doing so, he (Giddens, 1984) attempts to find a way in between the structure and agency division, by combining philosophical hermeneutics and critical realism, resulting in a controversial theory of structuration. Archer (1996) rejects Giddens' perspective; she asserts that his view confuses the epistemological and ontological issues. In Giddens' (1984)

attempt to bridge the concepts related to meaning, action and subjectivity to the notions of structure and constraints, he (Giddens, 1984) argues that human social activities are of a recursive nature. This aspect of structuration offers the study a way to examine actors' verbal expressions about their social conditions within which they are taking their actions and the expressed reasons for such actions. It is the examination of their discursively available knowledge. There are several reasons for being initially attracted to Giddens' thought regarding structure and agency, specifically his idea of the 'double hermeneutic'.

Firstly, Giddens' (1984) emphasis on the knowledgeability of social actors which partly constitutes social practices. Actors are seen by Giddens as purposive agents who have the competence to explain most of what they do, if asked. Moreover, actors are continuously and routinely monitoring their activities within the social and physical contexts in which their actions are occurring. Thus, agents' actions are not separated from the influences of the body's mediations with the social and physical surrounding world, including the contextuality of time-space, where intentionality is a process along with the continuous flow of conduct (Giddens, 1984). This continuous and routine flow of intentional actions would have some unintended consequences which also feed back 'to be the unacknowledged conditions of further acts' (Giddens, 1984: 8). In this regard Giddens (1984) differentiates between the intentional acts and the unintentional consequences. So, although human agents, in structuration theory, will have intentions for their routine flow of actions, they may not be aware or pleased with the consequences of those acts. The essential outcome of agents' acts needs to be separated from their individual intentions for the fragmented individual actions because this end result is neither intended nor desired by any of them (Giddens, 1984).

Secondly, taking hermeneutics as a starting-point, Giddens (1984) accentuates human knowledgeability and its involvement in action. For him (1984), however, 'reflexivity' goes beyond the 'self-consciousness' to have more of a monitored character that contributes to the



reproduction of social practices. This 'reflexivity' of action that is continuously and routinely monitoring its involvement and deciding on the actions that occur as a 'durée' is seen as a process rather than a state (Giddens, 1984). Thus, social practices in the structuration theory contain ontology of time-space; the reflexive monitoring, rationalisation and motivation of action that are seen as embedded sets of processes in the acting self. The social sciences' theories and findings about society are also fed back into social actors' consciousness of their conditions and can be used to alter their future course of action.

It is this interpretative interplay between social scientific knowledge and human activities that Giddens (1984: 284) terms 'double hermeneutic'. Thus for Giddens (1984) structure and agency are a duality where, although divided, the lines of division remain fuzzy. Given this dialectical relationship, social scientists would not be able to control variables and test any innovative theories. According to Giddens (1984) this is partly due to the dynamic nature of the social life where appealing theories, hypotheses or research findings may be taken up in social life and, in some degree, become a part of the very social reality. Thus, at the time of testing, the social reality would have already changed constituting within it those same theories about it. So the difficulties inherent in controlling variables combined with the complexity of the dual feed-in process would not allow for replicating any previous observations. In his concept of the 'double hermeneutic', Giddens (1993) incorporates Gadamer's ontological view of understanding but it is Gadamer's complete elimination of the writer's intentions that Giddens criticises and he rightly states that:

There is a difference between attempting to understand what an author meant by what she or he wrote and how the text was received among contemporaries to whom it was addressed, on the one hand, and understanding the significance of the text to our own present-day circumstances, on the other (1993: 70).

This approach places Muslim schools within a socio-political context that includes a variety of contributors beyond the persons who initiated them. In appreciating the power of individual actors and yet not underestimating the structural constraints, incorporating the 'double hermeneutic' concept seems to offer a philosophical framework within which the discourses in Muslim schools can be explored. Furthermore, as my study aims to uncover and bring to visibility the diverse Muslim marginalised voices encountered in everyday educational practice, this concept is seen as useful in better understanding change and the relationship between educational structures and individual actors within Muslim schools.

### **Reflections and conclusions**

Through making this intellectual journey - during which I have passed through the Algerian conflict, have been challenged by living in a Western environment, have faced life close to the holiest Muslim city, have been tested by different Muslim cultures, and lastly have been questioned by Western scholarship - I have been led to realise the same meanings in different layers and colours. The crucial importance of fully understanding the context before issuing any religious verdicts and the link of context to text was one of the issues that strongly emerged through this journey. This is not a call to liberate Quranic texts but rather to appreciate the influence of contexts on religious scholars' inspections of cases based on their personal experiences. Thus, a scholar from a European context who has never left Europe or closely mixed with people from a Saudi Arabian context, for instance, will not be suitable for providing help in many practical religious issues and vice versa. This journey through the diverse contexts serves as a standpoint for a process of critical reflection on the similarities and differences in terms both of the personal religious sphere and the professional arena. Building bridges between my Islamic scholarship and Western educational backgrounds and finding my way through without giving up to the easiest option or safer zone was both challenging and stimulating. Reaching this point in critical reading has been long, confusing at times and even a challenging process. It is this struggle and the diverse scholarship backgrounds, contexts and

professional practice, I suspect, that helps me to connect the past with the present and see what Haw (2009) has conceptualised as the 'changing same'. Finding a shared horizon between the Islamic and Western scholarship and experience without collapsing one of them into the other is challenging, yet still possible. And for those whose concern is the integration of Muslim children, particularly those educated in Islamic schools, this journey suggests that a reflexive stance within the curriculum may be valued as one that encourages Muslim pupils to build bridges between their faith and their context. Such an approach may help children build their confidence as both faithful Muslims and as fully integrated British citizens.

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