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# The Challenge of Muslim Schools and Educators in American Society

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# The Challenge of Muslim Schools and Educators in American Society

*Antonio Cuciniello*

*[Review of the book: Muslim Educators in American Communities, by C.L. Glenn, Information Age Publishing, Inc., Charlotte, NC, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-64113-362-3]*

The fear of violent, anti-Western jihadism has led many to wonder if Islam itself is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. The book by Charles Glenn (Boston University), one of the outputs of the project *Case Studies in Character and Citizenship Education*, designed and launched by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, goes beyond political rhetoric and popular concern about the presence of Muslim immigrants in the US. It focuses on Muslim educators by presenting objective information from schools that such immigrants have created and supported across the US (Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, mid-Atlantic and New England areas), “to help their children to adapt to this challenging and fast-changing environment while drawing on the resources of character and conviction of the cultures from which they have come” (p. IX). The successes achieved over time, for instance, by Catholic or Jewish schools in the United States are quite well known, but the same cannot be said about the establishment of Islamic institutions (Jones, 2008; Maussen et al., 2016). Starting from this focal point, undoubtedly, this is a volume that tackles tough, but important questions about pluralism, in order to build a healthy civil society.

With a sample size of seven Islamic secondary schools, although by no means identical, it is questionable that these findings can be representative of the full spectrum of more than 300 Islamic schools in the US; consequently the results should not be over-generalized. Glenn’s study, for this reason, is not without its limitations, as confirmed by the author himself: “The nature

of our study of these seven Islamic schools does not permit any definitive answer to these questions, or allow us to reach firm conclusions on the extent of their success in forming good American citizens and men and women of personal and civic virtue. For that it would be necessary to follow their alumni into adulthood, and compare them (taking into account of a range of background factors) with adults deriving from the same immigration of Muslims who had attended public and other type of schools” (pp. 191-192). However, it is important to emphasize that all of the schools in this research serve the secondary grades whereas, in North America, the average Islamic school essentially serves the elementary grades (Nimer, 2013).

As the creation of Islamic schools in the US is quite a recent and heterogeneous phenomenon, more specifically, the volume investigates the contribution of Muslim education to American society. How Islamic schools are seeking to form character and develop moral sensibility and public virtue essential to good citizenship formation, since most Muslim immigrants have an interest in settling down and becoming fully-fledged members of the society. For that reason, Islamic schools also have the crucial task of helping students find a balance between assimilation into the host society and keeping their identity, as well as managing a tension between certain dominant features of American culture and their religious convictions. This could also explain the reason why the choice of an Islamic school is often the result of the aspiration to have a continuity of worldview between home and school, as well as skepticism towards popular American youth culture (Haddad et al., 2009).

The results presented in the volume are the outcome of two complementary studies: the first is based on seven explicitly-Islamic secondary schools, to clarify their role in the development of moral sensibility and public virtue and to investigate which aspects of education are mostly significant for citizenship formation, while the second one focuses on public charter schools established by immigrants from Turkey, concentrating on academic results.

Despite the heated popular rhetoric about the Islamic religion, culture and practices, the teachers of the Islamic secondary schools that have been studied give their students “examples of advocacy and engagement through various channels available in the school such as sport competitions with other schools in the area as well as community service mandates where they explicitly choose non-Muslim organizations as mediums of integrating their students into mainstream society” (p. 120-121). Of course, in so doing, they learn to balance adherence to the transcendent moral authority of their faith with the responsibilities and civic obligations associated with living in a democracy. This perspective clearly conflicts with the spreading concerns about the Muslim presence in the US, since, it is worth mentioning, a common ob-

jective is to foster Islamic identity while accompanying the students on their way towards successful integration (Bourget, 2019; Tayob et al., 2011).

Starting from rich qualitative data, the author documents the different advantages of attending a faith-based school. Among them, the solidarity and the feeling of unity with one's peers and the development of "psychological strength" that is "necessary to maintain their Muslim identity and lifestyle, something they could not do as the public schooling system lacked such opportunities to foster that strength, and instead continued isolating them as a minoritized group within the system" (p. 122). Indeed, student quotations highlight how the sense of belonging builds and supports self-confidence and develops a social identity around the faith. Furthermore, the role of school staff, including non-Muslims, in modeling and ensuring appropriate behavior appears to be a decisive element, even more influential than specific instruction, *as confirmed by the words of two head teachers* "we want every teacher to be a character teacher... Every class is for the character first and then the knowledge, because knowledge without character is just information"; "you carry a big responsibility, cause everything you do, the way you talk, the way you act, the way you conduct yourself, how fair are you when you're doing discipline in your class, all this is really being picked up by the students, and they're gonna try to emulate you" (p. 110). To provide the basis for active societal engagement and critical thinking, many head teachers encourage discussions on the way in which the practice of Islam should/ could affect students' future as citizens of American society.

At the same time, as a common challenge for many faith-based institutions, Islamic schools also need to help students develop a sense of rootedness within an ever-changing culture. In fact, many of the students interviewed opt for an Islam adapted to American norms, expressing their sense of belonging to a new, multi-ethnic Muslim American generation (Alvarez Veinguer et al., 2004; Nahid, 2013; Muna, 2018).

On the other hand, the emphasis on Islamic principles, as the main aim of Islamic faith-based schools, could lead academic considerations to a secondary concern compared to religious formation. Actually, Glenn explains how these schools are striking a balance. Since Islamic schools provide their students with a rootedness in faith, one might wonder if this relevance on the development of religious virtue, along with character building, is compatible with civic virtue. A teacher's quote about the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorists' attacks illustrates why some prefer a multicultural public education to a faith-based private education: "I remember, one of my friends, she was Caucasian, she wasn't Muslim, she came up to me and was like, "Yeah a bunch of my family members were talking about Muslims," and I said, "No, Muslims are not like that, and I knew that because I knew you." (p. 120). Hence, the question is: can private Islamic schools contribute toward or inhibit efforts

to strengthen and stabilize American democracy and avoid students becoming isolated and close-minded? The author gives three responses to these matters.

Firstly, by arguing that Muslim students may feel alienated in public schools, in which they are in the minority, especially if the other students treat them with hostility, Glenn deconstructs the myth of the common school that, rather than facing with the sudden and complex challenge of *educating students from a variety* of linguistic, religious, social and economic backgrounds, is frequently stratified by *ethnic groups* and income. Indeed, Glenn writes that “the great majority of young men and women seeking to join ISIS in Syria have received a public school education” (p. 185).

Then, the author explains that the Islamic schools investigated in his study develop good citizens by transmitting to them “a sense of rootedness in Islam while developing in them a sense of responsibility to the wider society of non-Muslims” (p. 129). Hence, Muslim students learn serving the community and this experience allows them to engage with *other (non-Muslim) youth*: “One very concrete way in which the schools we visited were seeking to promote positive engagement with American life was through encouraging their students to have relationships with non-Muslim peers” (p. 158). All these are seen, at the same time, as efforts for promoting the culture of encounter, respect for differences and collaboration that include, for instance, sports competitions with other schools: “if world leaders could follow the example of these kids, where a Muslim and a Christian school can play together in a safe environment, the world would be a better place” (160). In fact, as far as the school curriculum is concerned, the civic responsibilities taught in Islamic schools include, in addition to public service, political engagement and personal issues, such as making friends. Moreover, students are taught they can be involved in political processes and make positive changes in the society where they live.

Finally, starting from the fact that the American pluralistic society is built on respect for the diversity of each individual within his/her beliefs and perspectives, the author underlines that public policy should promote a pluralistic educational system in support of schools that explicitly preserve cultural distinctiveness and accommodate immigrants instead of absorbing or assimilating them into American culture.

As far as the positive aspects of this study are concerned, it can be said that Glenn focuses on the good that Islamic schools included in the study do with respect to integrating Muslims, by promoting civic engagement, and highlights their potential to make positive contributions to American society. Indeed, part of their mission is to differentiate between Islam’s cultural norms and its transcultural requirements, in order to bring to the surface the compatibility between being a good Muslim and a good American citizen.

Throughout the book, students reiterate that attending an Islamic school allows them to become better citizens because of the civic responsibility their religion endorses (Zani, 2005; Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Bocca-Aldaqr, 2018). Accordingly the Islamic schools profiled in this study contribute toward both teaching the Muslim children to celebrate their faith and respecting their American citizenship, policymakers are not required to make a choice between promoting religious tolerance, through faith-based *schools*, or promoting assimilation of immigrants, through the public school system.

On the contrary, among the critical aspects, the author should have devoted more space to investigating negative aspects of Islamic schools brought up by students themselves. For example, some of the students interviewed describe their experience as quite sheltered, by perceiving the school as a “bubble”. Consequently, they worry about whether or not they would be prepared to leave this bubble to participate in modern life. A teacher, from Sunlight Academy, declares that students have the “opportunity to break out of it in reintegrating them into the real world through the classes they take with non-Muslim college students in the local university”. At the same time, another teacher views “the school as a shelter from negative influences and practices such as drugs and alcohol abuse”. But, she also thinks that “too much sheltering in terms of these issues was ineffective and that students should be offered the knowledge and the choice of their own lifestyle” (p. 121).

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