

**State Funded Muslim Schools?  
Equality, Identity and Community  
in Multifaith Britain**

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I explore the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools in Britain, examining the arguments used for and against by the stakeholders involved. Qualitative interviews were conducted with head teachers, politicians, Muslim parents and representatives from a number of stakeholder organisations, to identify their reasons for supporting or opposing state funded Muslim schools. This research is necessary because until now the opinions of those directly involved have not been systematically researched, resulting in assumptions and generalisations about their views. Muslim schooling has become an increasingly fractious and polarised issue, and only by analysing the actual arguments used by those directly involved can we gain insight into the complexities underlying this debate. This data also allows me to explore how the issue of Muslim schooling relates to broader sociological questions about the rights, responsibilities and forms of belonging appropriate for minority communities in multicultural societies. In the findings I begin by reporting that the main arguments used in favour of state funded Muslim schools were equal rights, a better society, strengthened identity and educational benefits. I then move on to question why, given these strong favourable arguments, so few Muslim schools are currently in receipt of state funding. I ask whether this is due, at least in part, to Islamophobia. I then utilise models of political philosophy to evaluate the arguments surrounding state funded Muslim schools, and find that discourses of equality, social cohesion and identity are employed by both opponents and proponents. It is therefore possible to argue either for or against the state funding of Muslim schools from a liberal, a communitarian or a multiculturalist perspective. Finally I assess alternative solutions to the educational difficulties faced by Muslims in Britain, and conclude with my opinion about whether there should be state funded Muslim schools.

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## **Introduction**

A well known adage states that there are two subjects one should never discuss with friends: religion and politics. The fact that the state funding of Muslim schools encompasses both of these topics could perhaps explain why it has the capacity to divide otherwise like-minded people. I have come to the conclusion that it is best to avoid discussing the state funding of Muslim schools with friends, because in my experience such conversations often result in heated disagreement. It is a subject which promotes strong feelings in those on all sides of the debate. One possible explanation for this could be that the state funding of Muslim schools raises questions about what it means to live in a liberal democratic society. For example, should the rights of parents to protect the faith of their child be prioritised over the child's right to choose their own beliefs? Should a liberal society enforce a liberal viewpoint on its citizens or create the conditions where all individuals are free to choose whichever way of life they wish; even illiberal ones? By supporting minority communities in maintaining their distinct identity are we creating a divided society?

The state funding of Muslim schools has been a source of controversy and public debate ever since the first application for state funding was made by Islamia Primary School in 1983. A fifteen year struggle ensued, which finally resulted in the first two Muslim schools entering the state sector in 1998. Those who had fought to achieve that result thought that their battle was finally won. They could not have predicted that Muslim schooling was only going to get more



controversial, not less, in subsequent years. The riots in northern England in the summer of 2001 were blamed, at least in part, on segregated schooling. Schools with a majority of Muslim pupils were incorrectly labelled 'Muslim schools' in official reports, leading them to be perceived as socially divisive. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 have given rise to increased suspicion of Islam, resulting in accusations that Muslim schools are breeding grounds for the terrorists of the future. The recent bombings in London in July 2005 have led to the question being raised of whether Muslim schools have a role to play in protecting young British Muslims from extremist influences. These incidents have resulted in the issue of Muslim schooling becoming increasingly contentious.

Education is just one of many areas of social life that can prove problematic for Muslims in Britain. Despite the country's multifaith composition, a secular Christian influence permeates many public institutions, making it difficult for Muslims to abide by the sanctions of their faith and maintain their religious identity. For example, Muslims do not receive the same legal protection as other minority faith groups. Despite high profile protests such as the 1989 'Rushdie affair', blasphemy laws continue to apply only to Christianity. Furthermore, due to a legal loophole, Muslims do not currently receive the same protection from discrimination as people of Jewish or African-Caribbean origin. Muslims therefore have little defence against the Islamophobia they frequently encounter from wider British society. This public ill-feeling and lack of legal protection can make it difficult for Muslims in Britain to maintain their religious identity. Many Muslim parents see education in a Muslim school as a means of

resisting this pressure to abandon their distinctive identity and assimilate into the majority culture.

The desire of some Muslim parents to educate their children in an Islamic environment is also influenced by the difficulties their children can face in mainstream state schools. These range from practical problems such the provision of *halal* meat, to fundamental fears such as encountering prejudice from fellow pupils and teachers. These factors have played a part in the rapid increase in the number of independent Muslim schools in the UK, to over one hundred in 2001. But given that Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims are the most deprived groups in Britain, few can afford to pay the fees charged by independent Muslim schools. Consequently, there have been repeated demands for the state to include more Muslim schools within the state sector.

The minimal number of Muslim schools that have so far been awarded state funding raises questions that are pertinent to all minority communities in multicultural societies. What rights and responsibilities should minority communities have? Should minority cultures be protected from assimilation, and if so how? Should we respect all cultures equally; even illiberal ones? Does cultural diversity inevitably damage social cohesion? How do religious minorities construct and maintain their identities? These questions are of vital importance to minority and majority communities in all multicultural societies, and have received considerable academic attention.

The broader social significance of the Muslim schools debate means that it can be contextualised within several different bodies of academic literature. As

well as raising the above questions about identity, citizenship and the appropriate response to cultural diversity, it is also pertinent to debates on race and ethnicity, the sociology of religion and the sociology of education. It is of course not possible to examine all of these literatures in detail, making it necessary to specify a theoretical framework within which it will be situated. In this thesis the issue of Muslim schooling will be located within political philosophical discussions of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism. These theoretical models have conflicting ideas of the appropriate relationship between the individual, the community and the state. They offer contrasting visions of society and prioritise different social values. Liberals emphasise the rights and autonomy of the individual, communitarians are primarily concerned with social cohesion, and multiculturalists prioritise the importance of minority identities. This thesis will examine the relationship between these theoretical models and the arguments used for and against Muslim schools in an effort to shed light on the discourses through which this debate is understood.

While there has been a lot of public discussion about state funded Muslim schools in Britain, there is very little existing academic research on the issue. Previous empirical studies have focussed primarily on the difficulties faced by Muslims in mainstream schools. There has been some theoretical discussion of the arguments used by academics for and against faith schooling, but there is a notable absence of research into the arguments used by stakeholders. The lack of evidence about the opinions of those directly involved has meant that the Muslim schools debate has been conducted primarily at the level of assumption and generalisation.



This thesis therefore provides a contribution to existing knowledge by: examining the arguments used for and against Muslim schools by the main stakeholders involved in the debate; clarifying what the various parties perceive as the barriers to an increase in state funded Muslim schools; and exploring the relationship between arguments used by stakeholders and philosophical models of society. This is achieved through qualitative interviews with the key actors and bodies involved in the Muslim schools debate: parents, politicians, organisational representatives and head teachers.

Before revealing the findings of these interviews, it is first necessary to examine in more detail the social and academic context within which the issue of Muslim schooling has become problematic. In *chapter one* I therefore situate Muslim schooling within philosophical debates over how British society should respond to its multicultural composition. Previous literature has claimed that the Muslim schools debate can be reduced to a conflict between liberalism and communitarianism. I challenge that suggestion and illustrate that it is in fact possible to argue both for and against Muslim schools from liberal, communitarian and multiculturalist positions.

*Chapter two* explores the origins of the Muslim schools debate by examining the historical relationship between religion and the British education system. It then considers previous empirical research on the issue of Muslim schooling, which has centred on the difficulties faced by Muslim pupils in mainstream schools, and possible responses to those difficulties in the form of home schooling, single sex schooling and faith schooling. Some key issues which



arise in the Muslim schools debate are introduced, such as social cohesion, religious identity and girls schooling, and previous academic discussions of these topics are considered.

Having examined the social context and reviewed previous contributions to the debate, I then describe the design and conduct of my research and reveal the resulting findings. In *chapter three* I describe the data collection methods and analytical processes used in this research. The ethical issues involved are also considered in some depth, in particular the implications of the religious difference between me and my Muslim interviewees.

*Chapter four* reveals the main arguments used in favour of state funded Muslim schools: equal rights; a better society; identity, behaviours and values; and educational factors. These are explored in detail and empirical examples are provided to illustrate their widespread use by all the stakeholder groups. In choosing which school to send their children to, Muslim parents are influenced not only by these arguments but also by practical and personal matters such as the location of the school or the desire to prevent their daughters from having contact with boys. These other contributory factors are analysed in order to shed light on the variety of considerations that influence Muslim parents' decision about where to educate their children.

Despite Britain's long history of state funded faith schools, and despite Islam being the country's second largest religion, there are currently only five state funded Muslim schools in the UK. *Chapter five* questions whether this is due to Islamophobia. Five principal barriers to state funding are identified: Islamophobia,

fears of social fragmentation, secularisation, regulatory requirements and the desire for autonomy. These factors are not exclusive or separate, but rather influence one another in subtle and complex ways.

In *chapter six*, the final of the three data chapters, the arguments employed by stakeholders are examined in more depth and related to the theoretical framework introduced in chapter one. The discursive repertoire used by advocates of Muslim schools is compared with that used by opponents, and the correlation between them is discussed. These discourses are then examined in light of the philosophical models of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism, exploring the relationship between the Muslim schools debate and these conflicting visions of society.

I end this thesis by reflecting again on the capacity of the Muslim schools debate to divide otherwise like-minded people, and consider whether the findings of this research can help to explain why this might be so. I question whether there are any feasible solutions to the problem of how best to educate Muslim children in Britain, other than an increase in state funded Muslim schools. Finally, I reveal my personal position on Muslim schooling and explain the process through which I reached this conclusion. My opinion on faith schools in general and Muslim schools in particular has changed numerous times throughout the course of this research. I did not begin with a set agenda to argue either for or against the state funding of Muslim schools. Rather I formed my opinion through the process of exploring the views of others. I therefore do not explicitly state my view on Muslim schools until the conclusion of this thesis.

## **Chapter One**

### **Liberalism, Communitarianism and Multiculturalism:**

#### **Theoretical responses to the Muslim schools debate**

The aim of this chapter is to situate the Muslim schools debate within political philosophical arguments about the appropriate response to cultural diversity. In order to achieve this aim it is first necessary to examine the social processes through which this became a prominent public issue. I therefore begin by describing the migration patterns of Muslims to the UK, and discussing some of the difficulties Muslims can face in maintaining their religious identity in a non-Muslim state. Three contrasting theoretical responses to these difficulties are introduced: liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism. These models are then related to the issue of education, and in particular to the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools.

I argue that, contrary to the suggestion of some previous literature, the faith schools debate cannot be reduced to a clash between liberalism and communitarianism. It is possible to make a case both for and against Muslim schooling from either a liberal, communitarian or multiculturalist perspective. While all liberals argue for equality of opportunity, rights and responsibilities, this can be achieved either by giving Muslims their own state funded schools in line with other faiths or by educating all children equally under a common system of education. Communitarians are concerned with social cohesion, but this could be accomplished by educating all children together so they learn to interact with

children of other faiths, or by segregating children in order to give them confidence in their faith and thereby enable them to interact without fear of assimilation. Multiculturalists are all keen to maintain cultural diversity, but are divided as to whether this is best achieved by allowing religious communities to inculcate their children into their faith, or by encouraging intercultural dialogue through education in mixed faith schools. Evidently, whether one prioritises equality, social cohesion or cultural diversity, the state funding of faith schools remains a contentious issue.

Before expanding on this argument it is first necessary to account for my usage of these political philosophical models and indicate my awareness of its limitations. The use of the labels 'liberalism' 'communitarianism' and 'multiculturalism' is a heuristic device employed to illuminate the different arguments used in the Muslim schools debate. I am conscious, however, that in achieving this analytic clarity there is an inevitable loss of theoretical subtlety and complexity. These theoretical positions are not static or discrete: on the contrary, they are interconnected and fluid. Many theorists do not self-assign to one of these theoretical positions, but rather see themselves as moving between them. For example, some consider themselves 'liberal multiculturalists' or 'communitarian liberals', while others who categorise themselves as multiculturalists are often labelled communitarians. A further point of clarification is that by associating liberalism with arguments about equality, communitarianism with social cohesion and multiculturalism with cultural pluralism I am not suggesting that the theorists in question are only concerned with that specific issue. The distinctions between



these positions are subtle, and which issues they prioritise is a matter of emphasis rather than an 'either/ or' choice. My aim in simplifying and separating out these theoretical positions is to offer analytic clarity; I therefore hope to be forgiven for the unavoidable loss of subtlety that entails.

### **1.1 Muslims in Britain: a brief history of migration**

The migration process of Muslims to Britain began over 300 years ago with the recruitment of seamen from Yemen, Gujrat, Sind, Assam and Bengal to work on British merchant ships (Ansari, 2004; Runnymede Trust Report, 1997). By 1842 over 3000 seamen were visiting Britain every year ([www.fairuk.org](http://www.fairuk.org); 01/06/05). Some chose to settle here, establishing small settlements in port cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool, Glasgow and London. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 resulted in another wave of immigration as the increase in trade caused a demand for men to work in ports and on ships (Lewis, 1994; [www.bbc.co.uk/islam](http://www.bbc.co.uk/islam), 01/06/05). This slow and steady growth of the British Muslim community continued until the 1950s, when the large scale migration process began.

In 1951 the Muslim population of Britain was around 23,000. By ten years later it had grown to 82,000 and by 1971 it was approximately 369,000 (Peach, 1990). The dramatic growth in the British Muslim population in the 1950s and 1960s stemmed from the shortage of labour in Britain following the Second World War. The steel and textile industries in Yorkshire and Lancashire in particular were desperately short of workers. Employers therefore encouraged migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh in order to help alleviate this shortfall in labour

(Kalra, 2000; Runnymede Trust Report, 1997). For their part, Pakistani migrants were keen to come to the UK in search of a better material life, as they could earn up to 30 times as much in Britain as they could in Pakistan. Some intended to bring their families to Britain once they had established themselves here, while others planned to return to their families in Pakistan having saved enough money to buy some land ([www.bbc.co.uk/islam](http://www.bbc.co.uk/islam), 01/06/05). The second important contributory factor in this phase of migration was the building of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan. This displaced the populations of 250 villages, approximately 100,000 people, many of whom were Mirpuris. With their compensation money, some chose to migrate to Britain and start a new life (Ansari, 2004).

Another major wave of Muslim immigration occurred as a result of the expulsion of Asians from East Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s. The 1970s also saw the establishment of communities from Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa in the UK. Most recently, significant numbers of Muslims from Somalia, Kosovo and Bosnia have come to Britain as refugees, and there are a growing number of students from Malaysia studying in the UK (Runnymede Trust Report, 1997). There are also increasing numbers of indigenous British converts to Islam (Kose, 1999). This multifaceted and rapid process of growth of the Muslim community in Britain has resulted in Islam becoming Britain's second largest religion. The 2001 census showed that there are 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, making up 2.7% of the British population (Peach, 2005). Approximately 1 million of these originate from South Asia. Two-thirds are from Pakistan, under a third

from Bangladesh and the remainder from India. The remaining 0.6 million are from North Africa, Eastern Europe and South East Asia (Abbas, 2005).

## **1.2 Issues faced by Muslims in Britain**

### **1.2.1 Identity and citizenship**

Given these diverse national origins it is unsurprising that a number of questions have arisen about how Muslims in Britain construct and maintain their identities. In particular, do they adopt multiple or overlapping identities, or do they privilege one aspect of their identity over others? (Smith, 2002). Do 'British Muslims' affiliate themselves to the British State, to a British or European Muslim community, or to a global Ummah? (Ahmed, 1995). These questions have received considerable academic attention.

The term 'British Muslim' is argued by some to be problematic as it creates the impression that there is a homogeneous Muslim community in Britain, thereby disregarding the diverse national, linguistic, cultural and sectarian differences amongst Muslims (Siddique Seddon et al., 2003; Lewis 1994). The heterogeneity of the Muslim population is usually ignored in favour of a discourse of fear about the contradictions between Islam and the West. For example, Taylor (1994), in advocating a 'politics of recognition', claims that Muslims cannot easily integrate into a multicultural consensus because, "[f]or mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society" (Taylor, 1994, p. 62, cited in Werbner, 2000). Such

arguments perpetuate the view that there are irreconcilable differences between Western and Islamic values.

Loyalty to Islam is not, however, inconsistent with adherence to western democratic principles. On the contrary, as Werbner's (2000) research illustrates, developing a strong commitment to a local and global Muslim community and fighting for Islamic causes only serves to strengthen many Muslims' integration into wider British society and involvement in the political and civic systems of the British State (Modood, 2005). Moreover, the argument that the relationship between politics and religion within Islam means that Muslims cannot integrate into a multicultural society is inherently flawed as it fails to distinguish between Islam and Muslims. Islam, like all religions, is subject to interpretation. To argue that all Muslims hold the same beliefs all of the time underestimates the diversity within and between Muslim communities.

Fear of the supposed ideological chasm between Islam and the West has led many to question the priorities of Muslim residents in non-Muslim states. Do Muslims in Britain give their mandate to the global 'Brotherhood of Islam' or to the British State? (Ahmed, 1995). Are Muslims bound by the laws of Islam, or are they citizens of the state in which they live, bound by its laws and constitution? Which are they first: Britons or Muslims? The obvious subtext within this line of questioning is 'are British Muslims trustworthy'? It is essential that this subtext be challenged as it is at the core of many of the barriers to citizenship faced by Muslims in Britain.



Also implicit in this line of questioning is the assumption that Muslims should choose between their religious beliefs and their nationality. In asking whether Muslims place their allegiance with their faith or their nation, one is framing faith and nationality as in opposition. But, as Ramadan (1999) highlights, faith and nationality are very different in nature and are by no means mutually exclusive. 'Muslim identity', according to Ramadan, addresses the purpose of being and provides an overall conception of life and death. Nationality, in contrast, is a geographical attachment which structures the way in which one relates to his or her fellow citizens both within and outside of a territory. Faith and nationality therefore need not be viewed as contradictory (AlSayyad and Castells, 2002). We should consequently not be questioning whether Muslims in Britain place their allegiance with their State or their God, but rather exploring the nature of the relationship between the prescriptions of Islam and the reality of British citizenship (Ramadan, 1999). Do Islamic beliefs and practices allow Muslims to be full citizens of Britain? Does residence in Britain allow Muslims to maintain their level of belief and satisfy their religious practices?

### *1.2.2 Racism and Islamophobia*

This questioning of Muslim allegiance is symptomatic of an underlying suspicion of Muslims and Islam, which has over the last 20 years, become widely known as Islamophobia (Brown, 2000). The Runnymede Trust examined this growing phenomenon in some depth, and in their 1997 report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*, defined Islamophobia as fear, hatred or hostility towards Islam and

Muslims. However, this definition has been criticised for misrepresenting Islamophobia and Islam, and for overlooking the relationship between Islamophobia and other forms of racism. For example, Halliday (1999) claims that the attack is not directed at Islam as a faith but at Muslims as a people, and hence should be termed 'anti-Muslimism'. Modood (1997; 2005) argues that 'cultural racism' is a preferable term as it contextualises Islamophobia within the wider discourse of racial equality.

The classification of Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism by Modood (2005) highlights the transition that has occurred over the past two decades as racism has come to be recognised as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In the 1980s racism was widely presumed to be based entirely on skin colour. British Muslims and other South Asians were encouraged by anti-racists to identify themselves as 'black' in order to establish solidarity with other 'non-whites' (Modood, 2005). The 1990s saw the supplementation of the uni-dimensional conception of 'black' with the term 'Asian', understood in Britain to mean South Asian and defined by cultural factors such as language, religion, dress and cuisine (Modood, 2005). The early 1990s also witnessed the first widespread and overt assertion of a distinctive 'British Muslim' identity with the protests against Salman Rushdie's (1988) controversial novel 'The Satanic Verses' (Modood, 1992). This public coalescence led to increasing recognition, both by Muslims themselves and by wider British society, of the importance of religious identity to many Muslims in the UK (Lewis, 1994; Ruthven, 1990). However, identity construction is inevitably complex and fluid (Hall, 1990), with particular issues arising for

migrant communities or 'diasporas' (Ballard, 1994; van de Veer, 1995; Vertovec et al, 1990; Vertovec, 1999). The increasing importance of religious identity to some Muslims in Britain therefore does not diminish the significance of 'national', 'ethnic' or 'racial' identities (Jacobson, 1998).

This developing recognition of racial, ethnic, and religious identities was mirrored in the legislative process. Prior to the 1970s the only racial, cultural or religious group offered any legislative protection in Britain was Christianity, in particular the Church of England. This was in the form of The Offences Against The Person Act of 1861 and the Burial Laws Amendment Act of 1880, as well as the laws on blasphemy and blasphemous libel (Aldridge, forthcoming). The 1976 Race Relations Act introduced the protection of 'racial groups' on the grounds of colour or nationality (Allen, 2005). It was therefore illegal to discriminate against South Asians because of their colour or nationality, but not on religious grounds. In the 1980s the definition of 'racial group' was extended to include mono-ethnic religious groups such as Sikhs or Jews, but did not include non-ethnic or multi-ethnic religious communities such as Muslims or Buddhists (Allen, 2005). This definition of 'racial group' was also employed in legislation on 'racial hatred' and applied to the Public Order Act (1986), the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), thereby continuing the marginalisation of religious identity (Allen, 2005). The law therefore established a hierarchy of protection within religious communities in Britain. While mono-ethnic religious communities were protected from discrimination, multi-ethnic religious



communities such as Muslims had no protection unless they could prove that the discrimination they faced was racial or national.

Recent legislation has gone part of the way towards addressing this anomaly. The EU Employment Directive, which came into force from December 2003, outlaws religious discrimination in the workplace. The 2001 Anti Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill legislated against religiously motivated harassment, violence and criminal damage to property. The government has recently voiced its intention to use the Serious and Organised Crime and Police Bill to expand the definition of racial hatred to include religious groups (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/faith/crime>; 01/06/05). However, at present the loophole remains, meaning there is currently no protection for Muslims against incitement to religious hatred. Racist groups such as the British National Party have exploited this ambiguity and in recent campaigns have focussed their attention primarily on attacking Islam and Muslims (Allen, 2005).

### *1.2.3 Social inequality*

Widespread ill-feeling towards Islam and Muslims in Britain, and delay in formulating appropriate legislation to combat this ill-feeling, has led Muslims to experience difficulties in many areas of public life. One area of particular difficulty is the labour market. While it has been illegal for employers to discriminate on racial or ethnic grounds for many years, until 2003 it was legal to discriminate on the basis of religious belief. Muslims suffered particularly from this gap in the legislation: one Home Office Survey found that more than 50% of



Muslims reported frequent unfair treatment from managers and colleagues ([www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk), 01/06/05). The introduction of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations in 2003 finally legislated against such ill-treatment. Among other requirements, it compelled employers to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate religious practices at work, such as providing prayer facilities and allowing for flexible working hours so Muslims can attend the mosque on a Friday.

An associated difficulty faced by many Muslims in Britain is poverty. Research by Berthoud (1998) illustrates that Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are the poorest groups in Britain. This is contributed to by a number of factors including high unemployment among men; low levels of economic activity among women; low pay; and large family sizes. The result of these factors is that 60 per cent of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain are poor, which is four times the poverty rate found among white people (Berthoud, 1998).

Another area of public life which can prove problematic for Muslims in Britain is education. Muslim pupils can encounter numerous difficulties in attempting to abide by the sanctions of their faith in British state schools. The predominantly Christian emphasis in some RE syllabuses, compulsory sex education, the lack of *halal* meat and school uniforms have all presented difficulties for Muslim pupils and their parents. Dissatisfaction with the existing state education system resulted in requests for the state to fund separate Muslim schools. Five Muslim schools have recently been granted voluntary aided status, but this has met with considerable opposition and resulted in a public debate about

the impact of faith schooling on wider society. I will return to this debate later in this chapter. First, however, I will examine three conflicting theoretical responses to the difficulties faced by Muslims in Britain, and by other minority communities in multicultural societies.

### **1.3 Theoretical responses to these issues**

Difficulties surrounding identity, citizenship, discrimination and social inequality, are not unique to Muslims in Britain: they arise for minority communities in all multicultural societies. How society should respond to these issues raises questions for both minority and majority communities, and for the state. Should minority identities be protected from assimilation? If so, how is this to be achieved? What rights should minority communities have? Do equal rights ensure equality? Do all cultures deserve equal respect; even illiberal ones? How much diversity can society handle? These questions have been explored in some depth by political philosophers, and numerous attempts have been made at conceptualising the appropriate relationship between the individual, the cultural community and the state. Three differing responses to these questions are offered by liberalism, communitarianism, multiculturalism.

#### *1.3.1 Liberalism*

There are a number of different versions of liberalism, but essentially it can be summarised as the contention that everyone has the right to determine what kind of life they want to lead as long as their choice is 'reasonable' (Snik & de Jong,

1995). Individual autonomy and state neutrality are central to the liberal model. The state has no right to impose a cultural identity on its citizens. It should remain neutral and should not privilege one way of life over any other. As long as one citizen's choices do not undermine the free choice of others, then all should be free to adopt whatever cultural identity they choose without interference from the state (Wolff, 1996).

Another important principal of liberalism is universalism: all citizens of a state are equal and hold equal rights and responsibilities. There has, however, been considerable debate about what this means in practice: what exactly should be distributed equally, and is equal distribution sufficient to rectify existing inequalities? A key proponent of the liberal position, John Rawls, states that all primary social goods, which he defines as liberty, opportunity, income, wealth and the bases of self-respect, should be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution is to the most benefit of the least advantaged. He claims that we treat people as equals not by removing all inequalities, but only those that disadvantage someone. Inequalities that are of benefit to everyone, or at least to the less well off, need not be removed. Rawls also states the order in which social goods should be prioritised, as some social goods are more important than others and therefore cannot be sacrificed for improvements in those other goods. Equal liberties take precedence over equal opportunities, which take precedence over equal resources. Equality is at the heart of Rawls conception of justice, and is a central tenet of the liberal position (Mulhall & Swift, 1996).

But despite these universal and egalitarian aims, the liberal model has been heavily criticised as being sectarian, and biased against ways of life that do not share liberal ideals. This accusation has focussed in particular on liberalism's treatment of religious communities, as some religions do not share liberalism's emphasis on individual freedom. Some critics have argued that instead of remaining neutral towards religious groups, liberalism favours a secular approach. It has therefore been accused of placing undue emphasis on autonomy and individualism, and for failing to accommodate religious groups (Dagowitz, 2004).

### *1.3.2 Communitarianism*

Communitarianism began as a critical reaction to liberalism, and in particular to Rawls' theory of justice. Communitarians object to the atomism of liberalism, arguing against the liberal conception of people as isolated individuals. They claim that we are social beings and that our identities are bound up in the communities in which we live. Communitarian theorists, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, believe that liberal theories of justice do not sufficiently recognise the value of community. They therefore focus away from the interests of the individual and towards what is best for communities and societies. Rejecting the liberal ideal of the 'neutral state', communitarians argue for a 'politics of the common good', in which people are encouraged to adopt ways of life that benefit the common good and discouraged from behaving in ways that are to its detriment. Different ways of life are ranked according to their conformity with the community's chosen 'conception of the good', and all



community members are united in their mutual pursuit of that goal (Wolff, 1996; Kymlicka, 2002).

Liberals claim that their view of individual freedom allows us to throw off the restricting bonds of custom and conformity. Communitarians argue against this on two levels: they claim that it is not possible to throw off these 'bonds', and even if it were they reject the suggestion that this would be desirable. They state that denying the importance of the community will lead to individual alienation and the dislocation of society (Wolff, 1996). Liberals claim that communitarianism will lead to a highly repressive form of society which does not give due regard to individual freedom. But communitarians rebut this by claiming that liberals misconceive the nature of real liberty. Liberals assume that one is free when one is able to make one's own choices about how to live. Communitarians argue that in fact you do not make people free by leaving them alone, but rather by bringing them to the position where they can make rational choices about how to live.

The debate between liberalism and communitarianism has been at the centre of political philosophy for the last thirty years (Kymlicka, 2002). A theoretical impasse has been reached between the liberal focus on justice and individual rights, and communitarian concern with community attachment and membership. A desire to transcend this opposition has led to an increasing focus on the idea of citizenship, which is considered by some to be a possible source of integration between these opposing philosophical positions (Kymlicka, 2002).

### *1.3.3 Multiculturalism*

The traditional model of citizenship espoused in the work of T. H. Marshall entailed a system of rights and responsibilities common to all. This model of 'citizenship as common rights' was based not just on shared rights and responsibilities but also on a shared identity. Common rights were seen to integrate all citizens into a shared national culture and identity. This was perceived to lead in turn to national unity, integration and loyalty (Kymlicka, 2002). The supposed link between common citizenship rights, shared identity and national unity has come under attack as it has become clear that minority groups continue to feel marginalised despite possessing equal rights. A system of differentiated citizenship has been advocated in which cultural difference is valued and rights are awarded on the basis of group membership (Kymlicka, 2002; Young, 1989).

Advocates of multicultural citizenship criticise liberalism for two main reasons. First, cultural identity is not neutral. Every culture has a dominant core that maintains power. A system of fair rules and procedures therefore does not necessarily make the culture of the nation fair. Secondly, many critics claim that the notion of universalised citizenship embodied by liberalism is unsustainable in plural societies. If minority cultures are to survive in a hostile social environment they need special protection. Liberalism's emphasis on equal rights means that minority rights are likely to be swallowed up by the majority. In contrast to liberalism's emphasis on universalism and equality, multiculturalists stress the differences between citizens and the importance of individual identities. They argue that the liberal idea of citizenship as based on universal rights and responsibilities is inherently discriminatory, since treating all people equally

means that minority populations may be inadvertently disadvantaged. In order to establish a truly inclusive model of citizenship they claim that we must take group identity seriously and develop a 'politics of difference'. A differentiated model of citizenship based on group rights is argued to be the only means by which the oppression of minority cultures can be prevented.

Iris Marion Young therefore developed a typology in which she identified the 'five faces of oppression': exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (1990). Young claimed that any group that experiences one or more of these forms of oppression should be granted special group rights (1989; 1990). Will Kymlicka (1995) likewise recognised the importance of particularised identities and advocated a system of special rights. However, his main motivation was not to overcome oppression but rather to maintain social order and avoid conflict. He was therefore primarily concerned with national minorities, such as the Quebecois in Canada, who may resort to civil war. Kymlicka claimed that in order to maintain harmony in multicultural societies it is necessary to give national minorities special rights (1995).

These frameworks of minority group rights broke new ground with their recognition that if everyone is treated the same they are in fact treated unequally. However, they have nonetheless received severe criticism. These objections fall into four areas. The first centres on the basis upon which one decides who falls into which group. Within any group there is a huge diversity of subject positions and social experiences, making it very difficult to decide the basis for membership of any given group. Secondly, such a system requires us to privilege one aspect of



our identity above all others. We tend not to locate ourselves within just one social group but within multiple, potentially contradictory communities. Our possible belongings are limitless: black or white, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, religious or secular, and so on. The group rights approach requires that we decide which aspect of our identity to assert as the basis upon which to claim special rights. A third objection centres on the consequences for social relations. Granting rights according to particularised group identities could lead to further segregation between groups, resulting in a system of cultural apartheid and hostility towards minority groups because of the 'special' treatment they receive (Solomos, 2001). Finally, existing research suggests that systems of preferential rights do not appeal to some of the minority groups for whom they are intended. According to Soysal (1997; 2000) Muslim communities in Europe do not justify their particularised identity claims in terms of special or group rights, but by appropriating the dominant discourses of equality and individual autonomy. So while it is tempting to defend minority communities through the development of group rights, Kymlicka (1995) and Young's (1990) approach adopts a static view of identity and group membership, has the potential to exacerbate hostilities, and does not appeal to minority groups themselves.

One possible solution to this 'multicultural riddle' (Baumann, 1999) is a theory that respects and defends minority identities but without resorting to particularised group rights. Such an approach has been proposed by Bhikhu Parekh (2000a). Parekh is highly critical of Kymlicka's hierarchy of minority cultural rights in which only national minorities receive a full quota of rights. He also



reproaches Kymlicka for his underlying liberalising agenda, in which the rights of minorities are only respected if they subscribe to liberal values. Parekh claims that we need a theoretical framework capable of appreciating both liberal and non-liberal cultures (2000a). He offers such a framework by stating that: no culture is better than any other; every culture is internally plural and differentiated; cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are inescapable and desirable; and all political doctrines and ideologies are necessarily partial and narrow (Parekh, 2000a). These insights show an awareness of the inadequacy of liberal notions of universal rights in the face of cultural diversity, as well as a rejection of the static view of culture inherent within models of group differentiated rights. I sympathise with Parekh's position, in particular with his recognition of the flexible and dynamic nature of cultures. I would also align myself with his approach to establishing a 'multicultural consensus'.

In order to protect cultural minorities, Parekh emphasises the responsibilities of the state towards all those living under its protection. He argues that the government should openly declare Britain to be a multicultural society so as to send a positive message of Britain's desire to cherish its cultural diversity (2000b). An active state policy of multiculturalism in which Britain is conceived of as a 'community of communities' is also advocated by Tariq Modood (2005). In proposing such a public statement by the government, Modood and Parekh demonstrate their belief that commitment and belonging are reciprocal. As was discussed previously, questions have been asked over whether Muslims in Britain place their allegiance with the British state or with a global or local community of

Islam. When the laws of the British state and the laws of Islam conflict, which are Muslims in Britain bound by? The state cannot expect its citizens to feel a sense of belonging to it unless it equally cherishes them in all their diversity (Parekh, 2000a). Therefore, Muslims in Britain cannot be expected to prioritise the British state over their other allegiances unless the state equally values and respects them.

Liberals, communitarians and multiculturalists evidently agree that we must all find a way to live together regardless of our differences, but they disagree on precisely how this should be achieved. They hold conflicting views on the appropriate relationship between the individual and society, how society can cohere in the face of diversity, and what rights should be afforded to minority communities. These divergences are particularly apparent in their views on education. The liberal, communitarian and multiculturalist positions differ as to the purpose of education, and in particular the appropriate relationship between religion and the school system. But as the forthcoming discussion of the Muslim schools debate will illustrate, there are differences of opinion not only *between* but also *within* these perspectives.

#### **1.4 Education**

When the publicly funded school system was first introduced in 1870 one of its principal aims was to create knowledgeable and responsible citizens. However, what the new generation of citizens should be taught and in what environment continues to be an area of considerable debate. This debate has been particularly

prominent in recent years, following the Labour government's decision to fund more faith-based schools. As the public outcry following this announcement demonstrated, the best way to educate citizens for life in a multicultural society is still very much open to dispute (Jackson, 2003a).

The three theoretical positions outlined above hold different views on what the aim of the education system should be and the role that religious communities should play within that. A liberal approach to education would not impose a specific cultural or religious identity on its pupils, but rather allow them to adopt whatever identity they chose. It would claim to treat all cultures and faiths equally, not privileging one belief system over any other. A communitarian system of education would aim to support and strengthen British society. Rather than focusing on the interests of the individual, or of a particular cultural community, it would prioritise the cohesion of wider society. A multiculturalist approach to education would emphasise the importance of individual and group identities. It would aim to encourage intercultural dialogue and protect cultural minorities from assimilation into the majority culture. But as well as this inevitable conflict *between* these theoretical positions, there are also differences of opinion *within* them. This is particularly apparent in the debate over the state funding of faith schools.

Several philosophers of education have suggested that these theoretical models are in direct opposition over the question of faith schooling (Burtonwood, 1998, 2002; Snik and De Jong, 1995). They claim that liberals are opposed to the state funding of faith schools, while communitarians and multiculturalists (which



are conflated in this literature) are in favour of them. Some flexibility is introduced into this dichotomy with the attempts of 'diversity liberals' to reconcile individual autonomy with group rights (Spinner-Halev, 1999; Williams, 1998), but these are rejected as unsuccessful and ultimately the opposition between these models is upheld (Burtonwood, 2003a). I will challenge the suggestion that the faith schools debate can be reduced to a direct opposition between liberalism and communitarianism. I will contend that it is possible to argue both for and against Muslim schools from a liberal, communitarian or multiculturalist perspective.

Before doing so, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the relationship between communitarianism and multiculturalism. Philosophy of education literature on the faith schools debate conflates communitarianism with multiculturalism. Theorists such as Parekh who consider themselves advocates of multicultural citizenship are labelled communitarians and their defence of faith schools is regarded as a communitarian response to the liberal opposition (Burtonwood, 2002). I think it important to separate out these overlapping yet undoubtedly different perspectives. Communitarian arguments are here understood as those which relate to the impact of faith schools on the cohesion of society, whereas multiculturalist arguments are those which focus on minority identity and group rights. Both examine the impact of faith schools on social networks, but while multiculturalist arguments focus on individual faith communities, communitarian arguments question the impact on wider British society.

The following table illustrates the arguments used for and against the state funding of faith schools by each of the theoretical perspectives.



	<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Communitarianism</b>	<b>Multiculturalism</b>
<b>Arguments against faith schools</b>	Autonomy liberalism	Damages social cohesion	Education for citizenship
<b>Arguments for faith schools</b>	Diversity liberalism	A force for unity	Minority rights

Liberal opponents of faith schools claim that by educating their children in faith schools religious communities are infringing on their children's individual autonomy. Liberal proponents argue that a liberal society should support a diverse range of communities and therefore allow faith communities, even illiberal ones, to educate their children as they wish. Communitarians against faith schools claim that they damage social cohesion and cause the fragmentation of society, whereas other communitarians reject this, arguing that faith schools in fact promote unity by given children confidence in their particular identity. Multiculturalist advocates of faith schooling argue that it upholds the rights of minority faith groups by giving them the same rights as majority faith communities. However, other multiculturalists oppose faith schooling on the grounds that it prohibits dialogue between cultures and does not prepare pupils for life in a multicultural society. These arguments will now be discussed in turn.

#### *1.4.1 Liberal arguments against Muslim schools: autonomy liberalism*

While liberals tend to agree on the basic principles of individual autonomy, state neutrality and egalitarianism, they disagree about the extent to which these values should be imposed on illiberal groups. An important division within liberalism is whether groups that do not hold liberal values should be tolerated in the spirit of

diversity and equality or have liberal values imposed on them in order to protect the autonomy of their members. This division is reflected in the debate over faith schools.

Traditional 'autonomy liberals' object to faith schooling on the grounds that it undermines the autonomy of the child. They claim that faith communities, and in some cases even parents, do not have the right to determine the beliefs of their children (Levinson, 1999; Parker-Jenkins, 2005). Rather they should educate their children as objectively as possible and respect their freedom to determine their own 'conception of the good life' (Snik and de Jong, 1995). One such theorist is Michael Hand who argues that faith schools are indoctrinatory as they pass on religious beliefs that are not known to be true. By imparting potentially inaccurate information as if it were fact, he claims that faith schools are infringing on the autonomy of the child (Hand, 2003; 2004; Siegal, 2003).

Another traditional liberal whose primary concern is the rights and freedoms of the individual is Brian Barry. In his 2001 critique of multiculturalism Barry restates the importance of individual autonomy and 'difference-blind' egalitarian principles. He claims that individual rights have fallen prey to the multiculturalist concern with identity, culture and the politics of difference. According to Barry liberal principles should not be compromised. We should have an egalitarian system of laws which treat all individuals equally, and groups should be prohibited from restricting the rights of the individual in the interests of community solidarity (Barry, 2001; Burtonwood, 2002).

Autonomy liberals such as Barry and Hand therefore reject faith based schools on the grounds that they prioritise group identity over the autonomy of the child. Rather than being indoctrinated into a particular religion, they argue that children from religious communities should be encouraged to step back from their community's belief system and subject it to critical analysis. Such a view conflicts entirely with the view of education held by some traditional religious communities, who perceive the role of education as the transfer of knowledge and the inculcation of children into the faith (Halstead, 1995).

#### *1.4.2 Liberal arguments for Muslim schools: diversity liberalism*

Not all liberal educators see faith schooling as incompatible with liberal educational aims. 'Diversity liberals' regard liberalism as being about support for a society which incorporates a wide variety of different lifestyles. Rather than prioritising individual autonomy they privilege the toleration of a diverse range of cultural communities (Galston, 1995). They urge greater tolerance towards cultural communities, even where such groups threaten the individual rights of their own members. Diversity liberals state that parents and communities should be entitled to teach their children as they wish, including in ways that are non-liberal. But their support for illiberal communities is often made conditional on community members enjoying a 'meaningful right of exit'. The problems arise in what precisely is meant by an education that makes a right of exit meaningful. Galston details a series of conditions such as knowledge of alternative ways of life, the capacity to evaluate alternatives, freedom from coercion and the ability to



participate in another way of life. However, critics claim that it is very difficult to see how these conditions can be met without reintroducing education for autonomy (Burtonwood, 2003b).

Like Galston, other diversity liberals have made certain conditions prerequisites for their support of faith schools, in an attempt to reconcile their concern for individual autonomy with the rights of parents and communities. Snik and De Jong (1995) and Levinson (1999) have called for faith schooling to be restricted to primary years, while secondary years focus on individual autonomy. This is based on the grounds that individual autonomy is best achieved once children have been initiated into the cultural community (Burtonwood, 2002). Spinner-Halev (1999) makes his support for faith schooling conditional on their pupils splitting their school day in order that they spend some time in an institutional setting with children from other communities (1999; 2000, cited in Burtonwood, 2002). Williams (1998) argues that separate faith schools should only be funded on the condition that they are 'moderate'. He divides faith schools into 'moderate' and 'strong' versions, and only offers his support to moderate schools which he perceives as compatible with liberal educational aims.

Burtonwood argues that these diversity liberal defences of 'moderate' religious schooling miss the point, which is that many religious schools do not want to be moderate (2002; 2003b). He claims that liberals should not characterise faith schools as compatible with liberal values, because while some may be, others most certainly are not. Many traditional religious communities would not value the moderate versions of faith schooling that diversity liberals claim as the basis for



reconciliation. For example, many Muslim parents do not send their children to Muslim schools in order to facilitate their children's ability to make free choices about their belief. In fact quite the opposite: they do so in order to instil in them the truth of Islam. Drawing on the work of Isaiah Berlin, Burtonwood states that faith schools present a dilemma between incompatible values. Choices have to be made, and whichever strategy is chosen there will be both gains and losses. These choices 'cannot be avoided by making conditions that undermine the very qualities that traditional religious communities seek in their religious schools' (Burtonwood, 2003b, p. 423).

In an attempt to overcome Burtonwood's criticism of these attempts at reconciliation, Dagowitz (2004) introduces into the debate the difference between comprehensive and political liberalism. Comprehensive liberalism traditionally perceives autonomy as involving individual choice. This type of autonomy is rejected by Rawls (1999) because it assumes a conception of life based on individual autonomy and choice, and therefore excludes doctrines that do not support these values. Political liberalism states that the liberal notion that people are free and equal need not assume that they have the ability to choose freely (Dagowitz, 2004). Dagowitz uses the distinction between comprehensive and political liberalism to claim that denominational schools which inhibit a child's freedom to choose their religion are still compatible with liberal values. As the freedom to choose is not necessarily a liberal value, faith schools do not need to serve as a context for individual choice in order to be compatible with liberal educational aims (Dagowitz, 2004). According to Dagowitz, 'strong' religious

schools, which are incompatible with comprehensive liberalism's emphasis on individual choice, can therefore be accommodated under political liberalism. As this ongoing debate illustrates, attempts to incorporate faith schooling into a liberal educational system is a source of some contention within philosophy of education literature, and at present remains unresolved (Pring, 2005; Snik and de Jong, 2005).

#### *1.4.3 Communitarian arguments against Muslim schools: the damage to social cohesion*

It has been widely argued, in both media and academic spheres, that faith schools are socially divisive and will damage social cohesion. Following the terrorist attacks in America and the riots in northern England in 2001, public concern about an increase in faith schools focussed increasingly on their impact on social cohesion. Secularists vehemently argued that faith schools unavoidably fuel friction between religious and ethnic groups. For example, scientist Peter Atkins wrote in *The Independent* that:

No single type of school founded on religion, be it Church, Temple, Synagogue, Mosque or Voodoo tent, can contribute to the unification of society, even though it purports to instruct its members in toleration. Religions, being fundamentally irrational, are fundamentally intolerant of each other, and schools set up on the shoulders of religions inevitably propagate that intolerance in future generations (Atkins, 2001, p. 7, cited in Short, 2002)

It was not only anti-religious voices that expressed concern about the social consequences of faith schooling. Rabbi Jonathon Romain wrote in *The Times* following the riots in the north of England that 'If Muslim, Christian, Jewish and

other children do not mix – and nor do their families – they become ignorant of each other, then suspicious, fearful and hostile’ (Romain, 2001, cited in Short, 2001). Similar concerns have been voiced by academics. For example, Judge (2001) opposes an increase in faith schools on a number of grounds, one of which is that he believes they will lead to ‘an unwelcome fragmentation of society’ (p. 465). He fears that single faith schools will ‘institutionalise segregation’, and that ‘children will be brought up ignorant of and hostile to other religions’ (p. 473). These media and academic arguments all centre on the fear that an increase in faith schooling will fragment society and damage social cohesion. By focussing on the impact that faith schooling will have on wider society they demonstrate the communitarian rhetoric underlying their arguments.

#### *1.4.4 Communitarian arguments for Muslim schools: a force for unity*

There are two stages to the communitarian argument in favour of Muslim schools: first to reject the above suggestion that Muslim schools damage social cohesion, and secondly to assert that they are in fact a force for unity. Halstead and McLaughlin (2005) set out to achieve the first step in this process by unpacking the charge that faith schools are socially divisive. They identify two meanings of the term divisive in relation to faith schooling: that faith schools separate one group of children from the rest of society, and that they have negative or harmful social consequences. In the first sense of the term, meaning to separate or categorise, they accept that faith schools are by their very nature ‘divisive’. But they oppose the suggestion that faith schools are divisive in the second sense: that



they have a negative impact on wider society. Short (2002) similarly rejects the argument that faith schools necessarily undermine social cohesion. Pointing to the long history of Anglican, Catholic and Jewish schooling in England, he argues that there is no evidence to suggest that pupils attending faith schools are any more prone than those at non-faith schools to develop feelings of animosity towards adherents of other faiths and no faith. He rejects the 'contact hypothesis' which suggests that mixing with children of different religious and ethnic backgrounds is an effective antidote to racism. Short claims that the best way to improve inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations is through an 'anti-racist curriculum', which can be implemented as effectively in a faith school as in a non-denominational one (2000, p. 570).

The second element to the communitarian argument in favour of faith schools is to suggest that they are in fact a force for unity. Short (2002) claims that faith schools improve social cohesion because they enable their pupils to develop confidence in their religious identity, which allows them to interact with wider society without fear of assimilation. Wright (2003) supports this claim, arguing that the maintenance of a distinct religious identity is of great importance to many minority faith communities. They will therefore only seek to establish relationships with those outside their boundaries when they cease to feel that their identity is under threat. Wright cites the central role played by state funded faith schools in the integration of Jewish and Roman Catholic communities, enabling them to feel secure in their group identity and interact without fear of assimilation. He therefore concludes that in order to maintain social cohesion the state should



fund more minority faith schools. By claiming that faith schools are in fact a force for unity, Wright (2003) and Short (2002) are employing a communitarian discourse in order to defend the state funding of faith schools.

#### *1.4.5 Multiculturalist arguments for faith schools: minority rights*

In attempting to make liberalism suitable for life in multicultural societies, some liberals advocate a distinction between the public and the private spheres. For example, John Rawls (1993) introduced the concept of political liberalism which operates only in the public sphere allowing people to live according to non-liberal principles in their private lives. Advocates of a multiculturalist approach such as Tariq Modood (2005) and Bhikhu Parekh (2000a) reject this division between the public and private spheres because it asks members of non-liberal cultures to live their public lives on terms which can conflict with their personal beliefs (Burtonwood, 2002). They defend the right of faith communities to practice and maintain their faith in public, opposing the liberal conception of religious belief as 'private'.

Conceiving of religious belief as a public matter, Parekh (2000a) and Modood (2005) support the rights of faith communities to educate their children according to their religious beliefs, and to have this paid for by the state. Parekh argues that faith schools have a number of benefits. For example, they 'instil a distinct set of moral and cultural sensibilities, increase the available range of educational options, add to the variety of collective life by producing citizens with different characters and perspectives on life, respect the wishes of parents, prevent

the state from acquiring a monopoly of education and exercising total control over its content, and so on' (p. 333). Parekh therefore argues that faith communities, including non-liberal ones, should be entitled to state funding to educate their children in accordance with their beliefs. 'If some families or religious communities wish to initiate their children into their respective traditions by setting up schools of their own, they should be allowed to do so and even perhaps publicly funded' (Parekh, 2000a, p. 333).

#### *1.4.6 Multiculturalist arguments against faith schools: education for citizenship*

Not all theorists of multicultural citizenship are in favour of faith schooling. Opponents argue that dialogue between different cultures and faiths is of paramount importance if we are to create a society which cherishes its diversity. Consequently they claim that children of different faiths must be educated together in order that such dialogue can occur freely. One such theorist is Will Kymlicka, who sees the central purpose of education as being to prepare the new generation for their responsibilities as citizens (1999). His view on faith schools is therefore based primarily on the standard of citizenship education they offer. Kymlicka argues that teaching children to be good citizens is not just about teaching them a series of facts about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. It requires 'cultivating the habit of civility, and the capacity for public reasonableness, in our interaction with others' (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 88). Kymlicka claims that separate religious schools cannot provide an adequate education in either civility or public

reasonableness because pupils do not have the opportunity to be around those of different cultural backgrounds and religions from their own.

It is not enough simply to tell students that the majority of people in the world do not share their religion. So long as one is surrounded by people who share one's faith, one may still succumb to the temptation to think that everyone who rejects one's religion is somehow illogical or depraved. To learn public reasonableness, students must come to know and understand people who are reasonable and decent and humane, but who do not share their religion (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 89).

Kymlicka therefore claims that an adequate citizenship education can only be gained in a multicultural and multifaith classroom.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

It is evidently possible to argue both for and against the state funding of Muslim schools from a liberal, communitarian or multicultural perspective. Liberals against faith schools argue that they infringe on the child's individual autonomy and freedom to choose their own conception of good. Other liberals argue, however, that faith communities should be able to educate their children as they wish, as long as certain conditions are met. Communitarians disagree about the impact that faith schooling has on social cohesion: some argue that segregation leads to social fragmentation while others claim it allows children to develop confidence in their identity and hence interact better with wider society. Multicultural proponents of faith schooling argue that minority religious groups must be granted state funding for their schools in order to bring them in line with majority faith groups. But other multiculturalists argue that segregating religious communities fails to prepare children for life in a multicultural society.



It is important to reiterate that these models are not static or separate. Theorists often perceive themselves as occupying the middle ground between these positions, and there is significant overlap between some of the arguments they employ. For example, diversity liberal attempts to incorporate cultural pluralism within the bounds of liberalism have a lot in common with multiculturalist arguments about community rights. Similarly communitarian arguments that faith schooling allows minority faith children to develop confidence in their individual identities and hence improves social cohesion, shares the multiculturalist concern for minority identity. Nonetheless, while there is overlap between these theoretical perspectives, there are subtle differences between them. They ultimately differ as to which issues should be given precedence. Liberalism prioritises equality and autonomy, communitarianism is primarily concerned with social cohesion, and multiculturalism emphasises the importance of minority group rights and cultural identity.

A principal aim of my research is to examine if and how these arguments are employed by the stakeholders involved in the Muslim schools debate. While there has been academic consideration of the philosophical arguments used for and against the state funding of faith schools (e.g.: Burtonwood, 2002; Pring, 2005), there is a notable absence of empirical research into the arguments used by the parties directly involved. In the forthcoming research this omission is rectified through the examination of the discourses employed by the stakeholders involved in the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools.



## Chapter Two

### The Education of Muslims in Britain

While there is no existing research into the arguments used by stakeholders for and against Muslim schools, there has been a considerable amount of empirical work on the educational difficulties faced by Muslim children in Britain. It is my aim in this chapter to review this literature and situate my research within it. Before doing so, however, it is first necessary to summarise the historical relationship between religion and the British state in education, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. I then go on to examine existing research on the education of Muslim children, which falls into two categories: problems experienced by Muslims in Britain's mainstream schools, and reactions to those problems. Literature in the first category addresses issues such as the provision of food that abides by Islamic requirements, problems posed by the school uniform, the content of RE and collective worship, and teachers' perceptions of Muslim pupils. The second area of research focuses on responses to these difficulties, which includes the establishment of separate Muslim schools. As the previous chapter illustrated, there is an ongoing debate between those in favour of and those opposed to faith schools in general or Muslim schools in particular. This has centred on a number of key issues including social cohesion, equality, identity, academic standards, gender issues and the unlikely alliances that have been formed by those involved in the debate. These subjects will be discussed in order to clarify the issues involved and introduce the lines along which the Muslim schools debate is fought.

## **2.1 The history of faith schooling in Britain**

The relationship between religion and the state has been instrumental in the development of education in England. It is important therefore to examine the history of this relationship in order to understand the debate over the incorporation of Muslim schools into the state sector.

### *2.1.1 Pre-1944*

Up until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century education was provided mainly by the Church of England, with little or no involvement from the state. The motivations of the Church in providing education were twofold: on one hand they wished to educate all the nations' children whatever their faith, and on the other hand they wanted to nurture Christian pupils' faith and their affiliation to their local Anglican parish community (Chadwick, 2001). Those parents who did not want their children educated in a Church of England school could pay for a secular education at a private school. Or alternatively they could attempt to enrol them in one of the few charity schools founded by organisations such as the British and Foreign Schools Society established in 1810 and the National Schools of 1811 (Chadwick, 2001).

There was no state provision for education until the Forster Education Act of 1870. This Act led to the establishment of board schools in areas where there was insufficient elementary education provided by the Church. These board schools were non-religious, as the Act stated that in schools 'established by means of local rates, no catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any denomination shall be taught'. (1870 Act, paraphrased in Hurt (1979) and cited in Parker-Jenkins (2005)). By 1874, over 5,000 new

schools had been founded and by 1891 free elementary education was available to all.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Church of England schools were in severe financial difficulties as they struggled to educate half the nation's children with inadequate resources. This led to the Balfour Education Act of 1902, which marked the beginning of the state's financial involvement in faith schooling (Gates, 2005). The state began to support church schools with local rate-aid, and paid teachers' salaries out of the public purse. This was met with widespread protests by those who were unhappy at the prospect of local rates being used to pay for denominational schools. Their objections focussed particularly on Roman Catholic schools, with the slogan of 'Rome on the Rates'. Some Nonconformists even chose to go to prison rather than pay their rates (Chadwick, 2001). The 'dual system' of religious and non-religious schools both funded by the state that was introduced by the 1902 Education Act remains unchanged to this day.

### *2.1.2 1944 Education Act*

The 1944 Education Act introduced two important changes for faith schooling. Firstly the provision of state funding for faith schools was extended to include religions other than Christianity. The Act made it possible for any religious group to seek to establish their own school and acquire voluntary aided status, at least in theory (Miller, 2001). Secondly, the Act also introduced the distinction between voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools, which vary according to level of government control and proportion of state funding. Voluntary controlled schools are subject to a higher level of government



control and greater financial support than voluntary aided schools. In voluntary controlled schools the government puts in a larger proportion of funding and therefore the local education authority (LEA) retains control over the employment of school staff and admission arrangements. In voluntary aided schools the church contributes towards the capital costs of the school, therefore the school governing body (on which there are church representatives) controls the employment of staff and decides admission procedures.

Voluntary aided status tends to be more appealing to faith groups as it allows them to retain greater control over the school and hence instil a stronger religious ethos. But at the time when this distinction was first introduced many Church of England dioceses could not afford to meet the costs of voluntary aided status. The majority of Anglican schools therefore became voluntary controlled. Roman Catholic schools, however, tended to adopt voluntary aided status, as for them retaining control over staffing and the curriculum was of paramount importance since their main aim was to induct children into the faith (Chadwick, 2001). This distinction between voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools continues to stand today.

### *2.1.3 Post-1944*

Britain's education provision remained largely unchanged from the 1944 Education Act until the Conservative election victory in 1979. Margaret Thatcher disliked what she saw as the socialist ideology of the LEAs, and set out to reduce their influence. Schools were given greater autonomy and were encouraged to create a 'free market' based on the principles of standards and parental choice. They could admit as many pupils as they wished, rather than



being restricted by LEA allocated targets, and were given control over their own budgets. They were even able to 'opt out' of LEA control and draw their funding entirely from central government in accordance with the newly introduced grant maintained status (Chadwick, 2001).

Between 1986 and 2002 there were 16 education acts, all of which continued to develop the partnership between church and state, making only small reforms and changes (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). The School Standards and Framework Act of 1988 is noteworthy because it created four categories of school in the state system which remain relatively unchanged to this day: (1) community schools (formerly county schools); (2) foundation schools (formerly grant maintained schools); (3) voluntary aided schools; (4) voluntary controlled schools. The differences between these four types of school are complex, but in terms of their religious ethos a few important distinctions can be noted. Community schools must use the locally agreed syllabus for religious education (RE) and must not be of a religious character. Schools within the other three categories may be 'faith schools' in accordance with the school's trust deed or the traditional practice of the school. In practice, most voluntary aided and voluntary controlled and some foundation schools have a religious character. All schools with a religious character can have distinctive collective worship, but only voluntary aided schools can have 'denominational' RE. Voluntary controlled and foundation schools must use the locally agreed syllabus for RE, unless the parents of a child have specifically requested 'denominational' RE, in which case the school must make special provision (Jackson, 2003; Walford, 2000).

#### *2.1.4 The current situation of faith schooling*

The Labour government are strongly in favour of faith schools, and since they came to office in 1997 they have introduced a number of policies that encourage their growth. In 1999, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, told the Anglican Diocesan Directors of Education in England and Wales that Church schools had an ethos he wished could be bottled in order to be released into other schools. In 2001 the Church of England commissioned a review of its education provision chaired by Lord Dearing. This resulted in the report 'The Way Ahead', in which it was recommended that the Church should seek to establish an additional 100 secondary schools (adding to its current 204) over the next 8 years (Brown, 2003). As well as increasing the number of Church of England schools, they have also attempted to extend the range of faith schools to include other minority faith schools (Jackson, 2003). There are currently 6,384 faith-based primary schools and 589 faith-based secondary schools in the state sector. Of those 4,716 are Church of England, 2,110 Roman Catholic, 27 Methodist, 32 Jewish, five Muslim, two Sikh, one Greek Orthodox and one Seventh-day Adventist (DfES, 2003). As well as the five Muslim schools in the state sector there are over 100 independent Muslim schools, which between them educate approximately 1% of the total population of 300,000 to 500,000 Muslim pupils in Britain (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005).

#### *2.1.5 Muslim schools*

The first state funded Muslim school was Islamia Primary School in Brent, which achieved voluntary aided status in 1998. Prior to this several Muslim schools applied for state funding but none were successful. Islamia Primary

School's struggle for state funding spanned fifteen years. They first sent a letter of enquiry in 1983, followed by a formal application in 1986, which was rejected in 1990. The Secretary of State was forced to reconsider his ruling following a judicial review of the case, but the application was rejected again in 1993. The reason given was that there were surplus places at other schools in the local area, but campaigners claimed that this did not seem to apply to other (non-Muslim) faith schools in the area that applied for funding at the same time (Parker-Jenkins, 2002). Islamia reapplied for state funding in 1995, and waited 3 years for a response which eventually resulted in their being awarded grant-maintained status in January 1998 (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). While Islamia Primary School's fifteen year campaign was particularly prolonged, other Muslim schools have also had difficult and lengthy transitions from independent to voluntary aided status. For example, Feversham College in Bradford first applied in 1994, but was not awarded state funding until 2000 (McLoughlin, 1998).

A number of the key figures involved in Islamia School's campaign for state funding were British converts to Islam. The School was founded by one of the country's most famous Muslim converts: Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens. The School's head teacher is also a Western convert to Islam, as is the Director of the Association of Muslim Schools. These were critical figures in Islamia School's struggle for state funding, and continue to be involved in the ongoing campaign for more voluntary aided Muslim schools in Britain. One possible explanation for the central role played by converts relates to their perception of their rights as British citizens. Unlike the immigrant Muslim community, these British converts to Islam were accustomed to the state



providing financial support for Church of England, Catholic and Jewish schools. They may therefore have perceived free faith-based education as their 'right' as equal British citizens, in a way that the burgeoning immigrant Muslim community did not. An alternative explanation for the prominent role played by converts in the state funding campaign could be their command of the English language and knowledge of British legislative processes. These advantages may have made them more able and willing than the immigrant Muslim community to embark on the complex application process. Whatever the explanation, British converts to Islam have played and continue to play a central role in the campaign for the state funding of Muslim schools.

There have been independent Muslim schools in Britain since 1979 (Dooley, 1991). There are now over 100, although this number can only be estimated as independent Muslim schools open and close frequently due to financial insecurity. The majority charge very low fees, often less than a third of the fees levied by most other independent schools. Independent Muslim schools tend not to be housed in purpose built accommodation but rather operate in homes, offices, above mosques and in disused school buildings. They therefore often have limited facilities, and cannot afford to pay the salaries demanded by fully trained staff so employ less well qualified teachers (Walford, 1995). These factors mean that those independent schools that wish to enter the state sector often struggle to meet the strict standards of facilities and staffing that are required.

There is great diversity amongst Muslim schools in Britain. For instance, they vary in pupil numbers from approximately 5 to 1800 (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). They also differ in terms of the curriculum they teach: all



state funded and some independent Muslim schools follow the national curriculum, while a small number of independent schools teach an entirely Islamic curriculum. These tend to be Islamic seminaries or *dar ul uloom*, which are training their pupils to be Islamic scholars. Parker-Jenkins et al. (2005) claim that a distinction can be drawn between 'Muslim schools' and 'schools for Muslims'. They state that while the intention of 'Muslim schools' is to 'develop an entire ethos consistent with religious values' (p. 40), 'schools for Muslims' are characterised by a shared religious identity but do not develop a fully Islamic curriculum or ethos. Parker Jenkins et al. claim that this latter type of school aspires to being more like the former type, but is prohibited by staffing and financial difficulties.

I would argue that this distinction overlooks the diverse aims held by Muslim schools in Britain. Not all are aspiring to develop 'an entirely Islamic ethos' which influences all aspects of the curriculum. Some schools do not intend Islamic teachings to permeate all areas of the curriculum, but rather aim to cater for the practical needs of their pupils in terms of prayer, food, language and Islamic studies alongside the teaching of secular subjects. Similarly, some literature uses the term 'Islamic school' to refer to schools with a strongly Islamic ethos, as opposed to the less religious 'Muslim school'. I would again argue that such a distinction is arbitrary and disregards the broad spectrum of Muslim schools in Britain.

## **2.2 Problems faced by Muslims in mainstream state schools**

In the last 25 years over one hundred independent Muslim schools have been established in Britain. This is due, at least in part, to the difficulties faced by

Muslim children in mainstream community schools. These difficulties can be divided into four areas: facilities and provision; prejudice; identity; and philosophy.

### *2.2.1 Facilities and Provision*

The majority of research into the education of Muslim children in Britain has examined the facilities and provision for Muslims in community schools. This includes concerns regarding i) the curriculum, ii) collective worship, prayer facilities and festivals, iii) washing and changing facilities, iv) dress and v) *halal* meat.

#### **i) Curriculum**

Unsurprisingly, an area of particular concern for Muslims in mainstream state schools is the teaching of religion (Halstead, 1992). The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) requires that RE syllabuses in mainstream community schools 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Britain' (DfES, 1989, section 8 (3)). Not all Muslims object to these requirements: some welcome the teaching of Christianity, seeing themselves as in partnership with Christians in the fight against secularism. Many, however, do object to the content of RE, and their objections can be divided into two conflicting perspectives. Some have argued that a predominantly Christian approach to RE disregards the multifaith nature of modern Britain. They claim that the underlying implication of the Act is that Christianity is superior to other faiths, and argue instead for a more multifaith

syllabus that reflects the religiously diverse composition of contemporary Britain (Ipgrave, 1990; Hewer, 2001; Wardekker and Miedema, 2001). In contrast, other Muslims have argued that multifaith RE is essentially a negative aim as it shows all religions as equally valid viewpoints, thereby undermining the importance and centrality of their belief system. For example, in 1990 all of the major inner London Muslim groups issued a joint statement condemning the relativistic and secular assumptions of the new syllabus (Nielson, 1989).

Other areas of the curriculum that have posed specific problems for Muslims include the teaching of evolutionary theory as fact within science lessons, the euro-centric nature of the history syllabus, the mixing of sexes for PE, and the teaching of another European language instead of mother-tongue languages (Hewer, 2001). Sex education has also been an area of concern for Muslim parents, as many sex education classes contravene Islamic codes of morality and, unlike RE lessons, parents do not have the statutory right to withdraw their children if they wish (Halstead, 1997).

## ii) Collective worship, prayers and festivals

The 1988 ERA requires that each school must hold a daily act of collective worship which must be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' (DfES, 1989, section 7 (1)). This requirement applies to all mainstream state schools, even those where the vast majority of pupils are non-Christians. As with religious education, Muslim parents are allowed to withdraw their pupils from collective worship if they wish. Few take advantage of this potential exemption, however, as many parents are not aware that their child can be excused, or do not wish to isolate them by excluding them from a communal



school activity. Furthermore, if parents wish their child to have an alternative Muslim act of collective worship then the Muslim community must meet the expense.

The vast majority of community schools fail to provide facilities for Muslim pupils to conduct their lunchtime prayers. Research conducted by Woodward (1993) showed that many Muslim parents were baffled as to why the school could not meet such a simple requirement. This research also indicated that some Muslim pupils felt it was unjust that schools closed for two weeks or more for Christian festivals but not at all for Muslim festivals, even though their school was 90% Muslim (Woodward, 1993).

### iii) Washing and changing facilities

Woodward's (1993) research with Muslim parents showed that communal showers and changing facilities were also a source of concern. Many Muslim parents did not wish their children to have to change for sports lessons in communal changing areas, as public nudity contravenes the Islamic code of conduct. Some parents also felt strongly that a jug containing water should be provided in the school toilets for pupils who preferred an oriental approach to cleansing themselves. Parents were disturbed that their children were moving away from these traditional customs of personal hygiene, seeing it as yet another step away from their Islamic roots (Woodward, 1993).

### iv) Dress

Dress has been, and continues to be, a difficult issue for some Muslims in community schools. Schools and LEAs were initially reluctant to allow

Muslim girls to wear headscarves. The excuses used ranged from that it contravened school uniform, to it being a health and safety hazard. While the majority of schools now allow girls to wear headscarves as long as they are close fitting and match the school colours, there is still widespread opposition to girls wearing the full length *jilbab* or Islamic dress. There was a recent court case in which a Luton girl had been excluded from school for two years because she was not allowed to wear the *jilbab*, which she saw as the only appropriate form of dress for Muslim women. Appeal Court judges eventually ruled that the girl's human rights had been contravened by the school, forcing them to change their school uniform policy and allow the *jilbab* to be worn. Clothing requirements for sports lessons have also been problematic for some Muslim pupils, particularly in swimming lessons where many older Muslim girls wish to swim fully clothed (Haw, 1994; Molokotos Liederman, 2000).

#### v) *Halal* food

The lack of *halal* meat at school dinners has also posed problems for Muslim pupils (Hampton, 1992). While some LEAs and schools have begun to fulfil this requirement, no step has been made by the government for provision at a national level. Muslims are therefore at the mercy of head teachers and LEAs (Mabud, 1992).

### 2.2.2 *Prejudice and discrimination*

Research indicates that some Muslim pupils in community schools experience discrimination and racism both from teachers and from their fellow pupils.

Basit (1997) explored Muslim girls' experiences of schooling and highlighted

the stereotypical assumptions made by some teachers about the lives of Muslim girls. Many teachers were found to hold the clichéd view of South Asian Muslim children as 'trapped between two cultures' which, Basit argues, is misleading. Teachers also tend to perceive Muslim girls as having low self-esteem and assume that their parents have lower expectations of them (Basit, 1997; Abbas, 2002). In turn many Asian girls feel that less is expected of them by teachers because of their ethnic origin (Archer, 2002; Abbas, 2004). Shain (2000) discovered that Asian girls use numerous strategies to resist being stereotyped by their teachers. A Home Office Research Study on religious discrimination in 2001 concluded that both institutional and personal discrimination is rife in schools, and teachers are amongst the worst perpetrators of religious discrimination ([www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk), 25/03/05).

As well as experiencing prejudice from teachers, Muslim pupils also suffer bullying from their fellow pupils. Woodward (1993) found that Muslim pupils in mainstream schools can be bullied both by white pupils and by other ethnic and religious minorities. Elsea and Mukhtar (2000) likewise found that the bullying of Indian and Pakistani Muslim children was just as likely to be by other Asian children of a different ethnic group as it was to be by white children. The bullying was likely to centre on some religious or cultural difference such as caste, dress or language.

The relationship between racism in schools and the under-achievement of ethnic minority pupils is hotly contested (Pilkington, 1999). Some are sceptical of the evidence for racism in schools, believing instead that it is badly behaved pupils, many of whom are from ethnic minorities, who receive poor grades (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996). Others argue that racism is a



significant factor in the under-achievement of some ethnic minority groups (Gilborn, 1990; Wright, 1987). While we should be wary of perceiving racial discrimination as the only factor accounting for ethnic differences in educational achievement, it is hard to believe that the racist assumptions of teachers and racist bullying by fellow pupils do not impact negatively on the educational performance of Muslim pupils (Pilkington, 1999).

Research also indicates that there are disproportionately small numbers of Muslim teachers and governors working in non-Muslim schools. Iftikhar Ahmed of the London School of Islamics claims that there is an acute shortage of Muslim teachers in mainstream community schools, which he states is due to institutional racism in the British education system ([www.parents.org.uk](http://www.parents.org.uk), 21/03/05). The shortage of ethnic minority teachers in senior and management positions in schools is so acute that it has resulted in a specific scheme by the National College of School Leadership and the NUT to encourage more ethnic minority teachers into leadership roles (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 21/03/05). Mabud's (1992) research demonstrates that minority faith communities are very rarely represented proportionately on the governing bodies of schools. In schools where there are 90% South Asian pupils it is unlikely that there will be the same proportion of South Asian governors. This is interpreted by some as evidence that there is prejudice at work in the management and administration as well as the education of schools.

Various initiatives have been suggested to tackle discrimination and inequality in the education system, the most prominent of which are 'multicultural' and 'anti-racist' education. These conflicting policies originated in the 1970s and 1980s in response to growing concern about the poor

academic performance of ethnic minority pupils. Multicultural education aims to inform the indigenous population about the customs and traditions of minority ethnic communities. In doing so it hopes to prevent misunderstandings between cultural groups, which can lead to racism or unequal opportunities. It also aims to facilitate minority ethnic children's identification and engagement with the learning process, in the hope of raising their educational attainment. Multicultural education has been criticised for reducing black and minority ethnic cultures to their artefacts, traditions and customs, and reproducing those through stereotypes, such as equating steel bands with West Indian culture and saris and samosas with Indian culture ([www.qca.org.uk/301\\_2515.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/301_2515.html), 22/03/05; Troyna, 1993).

In contrast, anti-racist education focuses primarily on countering institutional racism. Rather than stemming from the ignorance of the majority population, anti-racist educators perceive inequality as originating from the discriminatory practices of institutions. They therefore perceive the role of education as being to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to dismantle the racist practices of institutions ([www.qca.org.uk/301\\_2515.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/301_2515.html), 22/03/05). Patterns of achievement in education are understood by anti-racist educators as being divided along racial lines, with 'black' children underperforming compared with 'white' children. The failure of anti-racist educational theory to integrate the experiences of South Asian pupils was highlighted by the 1985 Swann Report. The report showed that while African-Caribbean children were achieving much lower results than white children, Asians and whites were getting similar results (Modood, 2001). This led South Asians to publicly reject the anti-racist label 'black' as being inappropriate

(Modood, 1994). They felt that the term failed to take account of the 'cultural racism' which they experienced in trying to maintain their distinctive religions, languages and customs and pass these on to their children. Multicultural education's recognition of the significance of culture made it more appealing to South Asians than antiracist policy. The suggestion that 'Asians' were achieving similar academic results to whites was challenged by Modood et al. (1997), who found that Indians, especially East African Asians, were getting better results than whites, while Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were achieving very poorly – even worse than African-Caribbeans. The differential achievement of ethnic minority pupils further highlighted the inadequacy of the black-white dualism and undermined the suggestion of anti-racist educators that ethnic minority underachievement was caused primarily by colour-racism.

The divide between multicultural and anti-racist education has only recently begun to be bridged, through the emergence of 'critical multiculturalism' (May, 1999). This conciliatory approach aims to address the limitations of multicultural and anti-racist strategies by recognising that there are different forms of racism in society, which both multicultural and anti-racist policies can contribute to tackling (Modood, 2001; [www.qca.org.uk/301\\_2515.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/301_2515.html), 22/03/05). The critical multiculturalist strategy has lessened the animosity between multicultural and anti-racist proponents, but how best to end ethnic inequality and discrimination in the education system remains a contentious issue.

### *2.2.3 Identity*



Religious identity is of primary importance to Muslims in Britain (Modood et al. 1997). While British Muslims are clearly not a homogeneous group, 'a collective Muslim identity transcends the regional and sectarian differences when living in a non-Muslim country which is their adopted homeland' (Basit, 1997, pp 437). It is widely feared that this identity will be diluted and the Muslim community will be assimilated into the majority culture. These fears influence Muslim parents and community leaders' decisions about where to educate their children. They worry that by being taught a non-Islamic curriculum by non-Muslim teachers in a class with non-Muslim pupils, Muslim children will in time lose their Islamic identity and become embroiled in things that are 'un-Islamic'. As Bleher put it, 'You send them to school and they come back as enemies who despise you and regard you as a hindrance to ambitions their friends and teachers have put into their heads' (Bleher, 1996, p. 63). However, this fear is not upheld by existing research. Woodward (1993) found that most Muslim pupils in mainstream community schools felt confident in their loyalty to Islam and felt no fear about its importance in their lives diminishing (unlike their parents). Most of the pupils he interviewed saw themselves first and foremost as Muslim, above their allegiance to any nation state, and felt loyal to and proud of their Islamic heritage (Woodward, 1993).

#### *2.2.4 Philosophy of education*

There are significant differences between the British and Islamic educational philosophies. It is important to be aware, however, that there is enormous diversity amongst Muslim schools and by no means all have embraced a traditionally Islamic philosophy of education. Many Muslim schools,

particularly those receiving or applying for state funding, teach the national curriculum in its entirety. The only difference between these schools and mainstream community schools is the addition of Islamic and Qur'anic studies and the satisfaction of practical requirements such as prayer times and Muslim school holidays. But there are a small number of independent Muslim schools that follow an entirely Islamic philosophy of education, which conflicts with the British education system (Hewer, 2001; Meijer, 1999).

Despite the Christian origins of education in Britain, the national curriculum followed in all state schools is based predominantly on a secular system. This secular system is presented as neutral, when in fact it is based on and promotes a certain philosophy of life, as do all belief systems. It advances the values of rationality, reason and critical thinking. This worldview permeates every aspect of the curriculum in British state schools (Mabud, 1992). Likewise, Islamic values are said to permeate every aspect of study in some independent Muslim schools. In such schools 'Islam' is not taught as a discreet subject such as 'religious education', but rather the whole system of education is based on Islamic teachings. For example, Islamic teachings have a definitive position on the creation of the universe, and while other viewpoints may be studied they will not be given the status of a valid alternative but rather as deviating from the truth (Hewer, 2001).

A further difference between the British and Islamic systems of education concerns their respective views on knowledge and the role of the teacher. British state schools tend to adopt a child-centred approach to education where pupils are free to form their own views. This contrasts with the practices in some more traditional Muslim schools. From a strictly Islamic

perspective such freedom of interpretation contradicts the teaching of Islam; something that is defined in the Qur'an is not open for discussion or alternative interpretation as the ultimate truth of the Qur'an is given and immutable (Hewer, 2001). This undoubtedly conflicts with the relativistic message of the national curriculum (Halstead, 1992; Meijer, 1999). This impacts directly on the role of the teacher in Muslim schools. In some more traditional Muslim schools the teacher is expected to exemplify in their life the content of that which is being taught. Unlike in British community schools, the teacher is not seen as a 'neutral communicator' but rather as an embodiment of the message being conveyed (Hewer, 2001).

Traditional Islamic and British education systems also differ in their overriding aims. An Islamic approach to education is holistic, aiming to develop every aspect of the child (Haw, 1994). The focus is on moral and religious advancement as well as academic standards of attainment (Bleher, 1996). This approach to education stems from the teachings of Islam. Central to an Islamic way of life is the role of Muhammad as an example for daily life. Everything in the way Muhammad lived his life is a source of guidance for the actions of Muslims (Hewer, 2001). The practical example of the Prophet Muhammad provides Muslims with a complete system for the development of the whole person, physically, spiritually, morally and intellectually. The ultimate aim of this holistic approach is to ensure that every action is about the worship of God (Mabud, 1992). This is encapsulated by Ashraf who states that the aim of Islamic education 'lies in the realisation of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large'



(Ashraf, 1985, p. 4, cited in Haw, 1994, p. 65). This clearly contrasts with the overriding aims, values and ethos of the British school system.

### **2.3 Responses to these difficulties**

The differences between the British and Islamic philosophies of education, and the difficulties faced by Muslim pupils in mainstream community schools, have led some Muslim parents to consider alternative forms of education for their children. The most common solutions found are single sex schooling, faith schooling and home schooling.

Some Muslim parents are concerned about the apparently lax sexual mores of British society. This can lead them to seek out single sex education, particularly for their daughters of secondary school age. However, there are a small and diminishing number of girls' schools in Britain, as a trend towards co-education has resulted in many being amalgamated or closed down in recent years. Haw (1994) states that when an LEA shuts down a single sex school, Muslim parents often respond by opening a separate Muslim school rather than send their girls to a mixed sex school. This was evident in Oxford where the closure of a girls' school resulted in the establishment of an independent Muslim school and an unsuccessful attempt to secure voluntary aided status (Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee, 2004).

The desire for single sex education is one factor behind some Muslim parents' decision to send their child to a Roman Catholic or Church of England school. A considerable number of Christian voluntary aided schools are single sex, which makes them very appealing to Muslim parents. This can result in the situation evident in some northern towns where there are Roman Catholic

and Church of England schools with an almost entirely Muslim pupil population. Another reason why these schools are appealing to Muslim parents is due to the fact that they offer an environment where religion is respected. While such parents might prefer to send their child to a Muslim school, in the absence of such an option they feel that a school of a different faith is preferable to a school of no faith (Haw, 1994).

Lacking what they consider to be a suitable alternative to mainstream community schools, some Muslim parents have turned to home schooling. Parents have a legal right to educate their child at home if they so wish. Approximately 100,000 children in the UK are home schooled, and this number is growing rapidly ([www.home-education.org.uk](http://www.home-education.org.uk), 21/03/05). Parents who home school can teach their child in any language they wish and do not have to follow the national curriculum. This option is taken up by some Muslim parents who do not feel that their child's needs are being adequately met in mainstream schools ([www.islamichomeeducation.co.uk](http://www.islamichomeeducation.co.uk), 21/03/05). Interestingly, home schooling networks are often the original starting point for independent Muslim schools. This was apparently the case with the first Muslim school to receive state funding: Islamia primary school in Brent.

## **2.4 Muslim schools**

Independent and state funded Muslim schools are another popular alternative to mainstream state education. In this section I will examine the existing literature on Muslim schools, discussing the issues they raise for both the Muslim community and for wider British society. There is a considerable body of philosophy of education literature which examines the arguments used by

academics for and against the state funding of faith schools, as was discussed in the previous chapter. However, there is a notable lack of empirical research into the arguments used by the stakeholders directly involved in the debate. This shortage of evidence means that the current political and public debate on Muslim schools has been conducted primarily at the level of prejudice and generalisation (Grace, 2003; Parker-Jenkins, 2005).

Despite the minimal amount of previous empirical research in the field, it is nonetheless possible to identify some issues which arise repeatedly in popular and academic discussions of Muslim schools. Some of these relate specifically to Muslim schools while others are pertinent to all faith schools regardless of denomination. The issues of social cohesion, equality and identity, were introduced in the previous chapter in the course of discussions of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism. It is nonetheless useful to consider them again in more detail as they have a significant impact on the Muslim schools debate. The appropriate form of education for Muslim girls and the standard of education offered by Muslim schools are also discussed, as are the diverse opinions and unlikely alliances that emerge in this debate.

#### *2.4.1 Social cohesion*

Concerns about the impact of faith schooling on social cohesion should in theory apply equally to schools of all faiths. In practice, however, that is not the case. A MORI poll conducted for the Times Educational Supplement (2001) reported that 21 percent of respondents opposed the expansion of faith based schools, but this number increased to 43 per cent when asked the same question with reference to Muslim, Sikh and Greek Orthodox schools (cited in



Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). Muslim schools are evidently regarded differently from Church of England, Catholic or Jewish schools. The reason why Muslim schools are considered more controversial than schools of other faiths may well be because Muslims are a 'visible minority' (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). The 'racially' distinctive nature of the Muslim community raises public concerns that Muslim schools will ingrain social divisions along racial lines, and thereby contradict the popular rhetoric of fostering multiculturalism. It is questionable whether Muslim schools would provoke such criticism if their pupils were predominantly white, which signals that the issue of race and ethnicity is at the heart of this debate (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005).

As the discussion of social cohesion in the previous chapter illustrated, the impact of faith schools on the unity of wider society is used to argue both for and against faith schooling. Opponents such as Judge (2001) argue that faith schooling will 'institutionalise segregation. Children will be brought up ignorant of or hostile to other religions. And this could be a breeding ground for the rioters, or terrorists, of the future' (pp 473). Short (2003) rejects this on the grounds that faith schools are not necessarily divisive. Having contact with children of other ethnicities and religions does not necessarily eliminate prejudice, as is illustrated by the fact that many mixed schools have a high degree of racism and prejudice amongst pupils. Mixed schools therefore do not guarantee social cohesion, and single faith schools do not necessarily encourage social division.

Hewer (2001) agrees with Short that, contrary to popular assumption, the introduction of more Muslim schools could serve to militate against the segregation of Muslim pupils. Just as Church of England schools seek to

educate the local community irrespective of the faith of the students, so may it be possible for Muslim schools to do the same. Were enough Muslim schools to receive state funding they would then have a surplus of places, which would allow non-Muslim pupils to be admitted and educated alongside Muslims. The demand for places in the existing state funded Muslim schools is so high that it is currently impossible for non-Muslims to be admitted. But if there were more state funded Muslim schools then in time they could become as popular with non-Muslim parents as other faith schools are with Muslim parents (Hewer, 2001). Harry Brighouse (2005) likewise advocates the opening up of faith schools to pupils of other beliefs, but he suggests an alternative way of achieving this outcome. He argues that all schools, religious and secular, should be prohibited from selecting their pupils. By making all schools open to all pupils, he hopes that minority faith schools will have more religiously diverse student populations (Brighouse, 2005). The outcome of both these suggestions would be that Muslim schools would include pupils of other faiths and no faith, just as many Church of England schools do currently.

There is often an implicit assumption within arguments against Muslim schools that they are in practice very different from Church of England schools. It is generally supposed that Muslim schools take their religious aims much more seriously, and set out to promote fundamentalism and indoctrinate their pupils (Haw, 1994). These assumptions are based on the inaccurate yet widely held perception of Muslims as extremists and fanatics. Such prejudices have a subtle yet considerable impact on the Muslim schools debate.

#### *2.4.2 Identity*

Identity is an issue that arises repeatedly in discussions of Muslim schools. This is due to the widespread perception within the Muslim community that their children's identity is under threat in non-faith community schools, as was indicated in the earlier discussion of the difficulties faced by Muslims in mainstream education. Such concerns stem from the perception of education, not as a site for the impartial transfer of neutral knowledge, but rather as an agent of socialisation. Parker-Jenkins et al. (2005) state that 'culture' consists of norms, values and rules that are learned through socialisation, and can be expressed through routine behaviours and symbolic representation. One way in which these values are derived and replicated is through education. The school curriculum can therefore be used as a vehicle to transmit cultural heritage, and with that religious identity. Many Muslims in Britain are keen to maintain their cultural heritage and religious identity in the face of what is perceived as external pressure to assimilate. The establishment of Muslim schools is therefore seen as a tool in the process of cultural preservation (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005).

Hewitt (1996) claims that Muslim parents' central aim in sending their children to a Muslim school is to ensure that their children are confident in their religious identity, 'unlike their frequently religiously confused counterparts educated in the state system' (Hewitt, 1996, p. 74). Such a view is supported by Kucukcan's (1998) research with the Turkish Muslim community in North London. He concludes that parents are very concerned that their religious and cultural values be transmitted to the younger generation. So much so that some families send their children to Turkey every summer to stay in boarding schools or with relatives in the hope that this will teach them about



their religious and cultural heritage. The community established a Muslim school in a local mosque in an attempt to end this practice of sending children back to Turkey by providing a Turkish Muslim education in Britain (Kucukcan, 1998). As this research illustrates, mainstream non-faith state schools are perceived by some Muslims in Britain as incompatible with an Islamic way of life and as preventing their children from retaining or developing their distinctive identity. Separate Muslim schools are thought to enable the protection and nurturing of an Islamic identity and are therefore considered crucial to the Muslim community's survival in the UK (Haw, 1994).

### *2.4.3 Equality*

Those opposed to the extension of state funding to Muslim schools often claim that Christian and Jewish schools stem from specific historical circumstances. One such person is Judge (2001) who argues that the existing faith schools should not be relieved of their religious status, but public funding should not be extended to any other faiths or to any more Christian or Jewish schools. Such a position leads to the question being raised of whether, if no faith schools existed already, they would now be developed. If we were to develop an education system from scratch, would we give state funding to faith schools? Hewer (2001) engages with this question, but concludes that, while interesting, such speculation is irrelevant, as it is extremely unlikely that the relationship between church, state and education in Britain is going to change in the foreseeable future. It is difficult to justify a situation whereby a multicultural and multifaith society gives state funding to Christian schools but not to

Muslim schools. Therefore the only equitable solution is to extend state funding to minority faith schools.

Arguments about equal rights can also be used against separate faith schools, as is demonstrated by Mason (2003; 2005). She claims that giving state funding to more faith-based schools will lead to a diversion of resources away from community schools, thereby undermining the rights of non-religious pupils. She argues instead for 'plural community schools' in which 'the entitlements and rights of all, religious and non-religious, are recognised and respected' (Mason, 2003, p. 117).

#### *2.4.4 Girls*

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the issue of gender can be a major impetus behind the establishment of separate Muslim schools (Haw, 1998). Many Muslim parents are unhappy about their daughters being educated in a mixed sex environment after reaching puberty. They therefore seek out alternatives to the mainstream mixed sex state school. As well as state funded and independent Muslim schools, other single sex options include a diminishing number of state funded non-faith girls schools, state funded Roman Catholic and Church of England girls schools, independent girls schools, and home schooling. Muslim schools are the preferred option of many Muslim parents as they not only provide the necessary gender segregation, but also offer an Islamic ethos.

Some independent Muslim schools have, however, received severe criticism for the messages they convey to their pupils about the role of women in society. They are argued to reflect a tradition that sees women as inferior

and consequently gives them substandard education (Haw, 1994). They are also accused of reducing the opportunities available to Muslim girls. Such criticism comes from within as well as outside of the Muslim community. For example, when the Muslim Parents Association proposed to take over five schools in Bradford as Muslim voluntary-aided schools, both the Asian Youth Movement and the Council of Mosques in Bradford opposed the plans. The Women Against Fundamentalism group has also strongly condemned religious schools, claiming that 'all religious schools have a deeply conformist idea of the role of women. They will deny girls the opportunities which they are just beginning to seize' (Women Against Fundamentalism, 1991, p. 1, cited in Haw, 1994, p. 69). The issue of gender can therefore be both an impetus behind the establishment of Muslim schools and an argument used to oppose them.

#### *2.4.5 Standard of education*

The standard of education offered within faith schools in general has received considerable academic attention. It is widely accepted that faith schools tend to get better academic results than non-faith schools, although the reasons for this are contested (Jeynes, 2002; Schagen and Schagen, 2005). No research has focussed specifically on the educational outcomes of Muslim schools, but anecdotal evidence indicates that Muslim pupils do better in Muslim schools than in mainstream community schools (Ahmed, 2002). This is therefore used as an argument for Muslim schools by those in their favour. For example, Hewer (2001) states that the Muslim community in Britain is disadvantaged because of its minority status, and obtaining academic qualifications is one way that an underprivileged community can improve its position. Pupils attending



Muslim schools tend to achieve better academic qualifications than those in ordinary state schools, and therefore the government should fund Muslim schools in order to facilitate the Muslim community's route out of disadvantage (Hewer, 2001).

Concerns have also been raised, however, that the education provided in some independent Muslim schools is academically substandard. Despite being subject to regular inspections and regulatory constraints, a small minority of independent Muslim schools continue to provide an inadequate standard of education. Kucakcan's (1998) study of an independent Muslim school in a mosque in London found that the teachers were not qualified and the facilities were insufficient. The school therefore closed after just one year. This is a common occurrence for small Muslim schools as they often struggle to afford the facilities and staff required to reach expected academic standards. This is by no means applicable to all Muslim schools, however, as is illustrated by the fact that Feversham College in Bradford topped the 'value added' table in January 2005, showing that its pupils improve more academically during their time at the school than at any other school in the country (www.timesonline.co.uk, 21/03/05).

#### *2.4.6 Diverse opinions and surprising alliances*

Contrary to popular assumption, Muslim schools are not advocated by the whole Muslim community. While some Muslim parents believe that an Islamic educational environment is preferable, others want their children's needs to be adequately catered for in mainstream state schools. Similarly, not all Muslim schools want to become state funded. Some head teachers of independent

Muslim schools fear that state funding will result in an increase in government regulation and control, which will lead to a loss of autonomy. They therefore choose to remain dependent on school fees and donations from benefactors (Walford, 2001).

As well as generating diverse opinions, the Muslim schools debate also creates some surprising alliances. This is evident in the Dewsbury case of 1987, where support for parents' right to choose their child's school came from otherwise opposing groups. Twenty-two white parents refused to send their children to the school selected for them by Kirklees LEA. They wanted their children to attend a predominantly white school rather than the 80% Asian school chosen for them. They claimed that their objection was a matter of culture, not race. These parents were supported by two otherwise conflicting groups: the Parents Alliance for Choice in Education (PACE), who favour mono-cultural education as a way of protecting the cultural identity of white children, and the Bradford Muslim Parents Association, who felt that the Dewsbury parents were asking for the same consideration of their culture as Muslim parents had been seeking for theirs for so long. After a year of legal action, Kirklees LEA backed down and the children were admitted to their parents' preferred school (Haw, 1994).

A further aspect of diversity which impacts on Muslim schooling concerns the sectarian divisions within the Muslim community. Kucukcan (1998) examined the reasons for the failure of an independent Turkish Muslim school established in a mosque in North London, and found that the factional nature of the Turkish Muslim community was a significant factor. The divisions within the Turkish Muslim population of that area meant that there

were several mosques and prayer halls in very close proximity to one another in North London, each with its own members. This religious factionalism isolated the school from other Turkish Muslim denominations, thereby preventing it from receiving widespread support. Kucukcan (1998) concludes that if Muslims in Britain are to achieve sound educational structures then this fragmented, sectarian approach needs to be replaced by a more open, less denominational one.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Muslim children in Britain now number over half a million, the vast majority of whom are educated in mainstream state schools. Muslim children can experience numerous difficulties in mainstream education, ranging from practical problems such as negotiating the school dress code, to fundamental fears such as experiencing prejudice or losing their religious identity. These difficulties resulted in the development of independent Muslim schools and eventually led to demands for state funding. Large scale terrorist attacks in the USA and London, together with local religious tensions such as the riots in northern England in the summer of 2001, have led the question of Muslim schooling to become increasingly contentious. Some key issues to emerge in this debate are social cohesion, identity, equality, the protection of Muslim girls, academic standards and the diversity of communities. While there has been a considerable amount of academic discussion of these issues, previous writing in this area has been made up of philosophical debate and opinion pieces that argue either for or against the state funding of Muslim schools. There has not been any empirical research into the arguments used by the



stakeholder actors and bodies directly involved. My research therefore provides an original contribution to the existing knowledge on this subject by analysing the opinions held and arguments used by both protagonists and opponents.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design and Practice**

This chapter describes and defends the research aims, data collection methods and analytical processes employed in this research. I begin by outlining the aims of the study, before going on to discuss the choice of research participants, reflecting in particular on the sample selection process. I then explain the choice of research methods and justify their appropriateness. The ethical issues that arose in the course of this research are confronted, focussing primarily the biographical differences between myself and my interviewees. This necessitates an in-depth discussion of the notions of insiders and outsiders in ‘cross-cultural’ research, particularly in relation to religious difference. Finally I describe the process of analysis, defending the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn from the data.

#### **3.1 Research aims**

The many actors and bodies involved in the Muslim schools debate hold diverse and often conflicting opinions. However, previous research in this area has not allowed all voices to be heard with equal strength, focussing primarily on the views of a small number of vocal individuals. My research addresses this shortfall by providing a detailed analysis of all stakeholder interests in the state funding of Muslim schools.

The research has three main aims:

- To examine the arguments used for and against the state funding of Muslim schools by the stakeholders involved in the debate.
- To clarify what the various parties perceive as the barriers to the state funding of more Muslim schools.
- To explore the relationship between arguments used in the Muslim schools debate and philosophical models of society.

### **3.2 Choice of research participants**

In order to achieve these aims interviews were conducted with the various actors and bodies involved in the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools. Four broad categories of stakeholders were identified: politicians; head teachers; organisational representatives; and Muslim parents. A total of 36 interviews were conducted with the following individuals and groups:

#### *Politicians*

Conservative (1)

Labour (1)

Liberal Democrat (1)

British National Party (1)

#### *Organisational representatives*

Representatives from Muslim organisations (both educational and general) (7)

Church of England representatives (1)



**Representatives of secular/ humanist organisations (2)**

*Head teachers*

**Head teachers at state funded Muslim schools (4)**

**Head teachers at independent Muslim schools (4)**

**Head teachers at Church of England Schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils (1)**

**Head teachers at non-faith state schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils (2)**

*Parents*

**Parents who send their children to state funded Muslim schools (4)**

**Parents who send their children to independent Muslim schools (4)**

**Parents who send their children to Church of England Schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils (1)**

**Parents who send their children to non-faith state schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils (2)**

A key strength of this research is its breadth, in that it explores the opinions of all the main stakeholder groups involved in the Muslim schools debate.

However, the inevitable time and resource constraints of a PhD meant that in order to achieve this breadth it was only possible to speak to a small number of members of each stakeholder group. It is also inevitable that not all constituents of every

stakeholder groups agree with one another. While representatives from official bodies such as the Church of England or a particular political party may voice the official stance of their organisation and therefore provide a view that is representative of the opinion held by the organisation as a whole, this is not true of less formal groups. For example, Muslim parents whose children attend the same school will differ in their reasons for sending their child to that school. The variance of opinion within stakeholder groups and the relatively small number of interviewees from each group raises questions about the generalisability of this research.

Some social researchers claim that generalisability is not an issue in qualitative research, perceiving qualitative studies as purely descriptive. For example, Stake (1994, cited in Silverman, 2000) claims that the ‘intrinsic case study’ is interesting ‘in all its peculiarity and ordinariness’ and therefore argues that it is not necessary to generalise beyond a single case. This sentiment is not, however, shared by all qualitative researchers. Mason claims that qualitative researchers should not be satisfied with producing accounts which are particular to the empirical example they have studied. Instead they should aim to produce explanations which have wider resonance and are in some way generalisable (Mason, 1996). These contrasting opinions on generalisability in qualitative research both have their merits, and are not mutually exclusive: this research adopts a combination of these two perspectives. This project focuses on the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools in the UK. It is not intending to be generalisable to other national contexts or to other types of faith school, so in that

sense it is an 'intrinsic case study'. However, it can be considered generalisable in the sense that the accounts offered by the interviewees can be extrapolated to other stakeholders. While those within a single stakeholder group may hold diverse views, the range of arguments used by the interviewees are argued to be representative of the broad scope of opinions held by those involved in the debate.

The ability to extrapolate from the views of the interviewees was achieved through the use of a 'purposive' sampling strategy (Silverman, 2000). This process is defined by Mason as 'selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position... and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing' (1996, p. 93, cited in Silverman, 2000). The account being developed in this research is an investigation into the arguments used by stakeholders on all sides of the Muslim schools debate. Interviewees were therefore selected because, in their role as parent, head teacher, politician or organisational representative, they were relevant to my research questions and contributed to the overall aims of the research. The purposive selection of participants therefore justifies the claim that this research canvasses the broad range of opinions held and arguments used in the Muslim schools debate, and in that limited sense it can be considered generalisable.

Another important benefit of purposive sampling is that it can continue to be applied throughout the course of the research, rather than being restricted to the research design stage. It offers the flexibility to make additions to the research sample during the data collection process if, for example, new factors emerge that you wish to explore (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Silverman, 2000). This



flexibility was very useful in my research, as interviewees often recommended other organisations or individuals for interview that they considered relevant or useful. The use of a purposive sampling strategy therefore not only justified the selection of interviewees because of their relevance to the research aims, but also offered the freedom to select participants throughout the research process.

In describing and defending my choice of participants it is important to consider Halstead's (1992) claim that there is little to be gained from canvassing the opinions of a randomly selected sample of Muslim parents. He states that many first generation Muslims in Britain are not in possession of sufficient information about the British education system to formulate informed opinions, or in possession of sufficient vocabulary to express them. In attempting to develop an understanding of the depth and range of opinions held by Muslims in Britain, Halstead therefore recommends exploring the views of the more educated minority of Muslim 'community leaders'. He claims that many less educated first generation Muslim parents happily accept the opinions of the more educated minority. The reason for this he argues to be twofold: firstly there is a traditional respect for authority in Islam, and secondly much less emphasis is placed on the free expression of opinion on religious matters under Islam than is common in the West (Halstead, 1992). Therefore, Halstead claims that research which seeks to acquire an understanding of the diversity of opinion held by Muslims in Britain should look specifically at the views of Muslim 'community leaders', educated Muslim parents and organisations that seek to represent the interests of Muslims (Halstead, 1992).

I would argue that Halstead's claims overlook the diversity within the group 'Muslim parents' and underestimate the ability of less educated Muslim parents to engage with the British education system. Many Muslim parents are highly educated and are more than capable of understanding and engaging with the British education system, and those who are less educated are often still very keen to be involved in their child's education. For example I interviewed several such mothers who worked in their child's school on a voluntary basis, helping with lunchtime or playground duty. Halstead's assertions also overlook the multiple and varied nature of the factors which influence any person's opinions. While 'community leaders' may well be influential, so too are television programmes, newspaper articles, the opinions of friends and relatives, and numerous other factors.

Furthermore, the term 'community leader' requires consideration: who exactly are the leaders of the Muslim community in Britain? 'British Muslims' are extremely diverse, differing along linguistic, national, and sectarian lines. There is therefore not one individual or group of individuals who can be said to lead 'the community' on a national basis. Figures of authority within localised Muslim communities include educated professionals, Muslim scholars, imams and numerous other respected individuals. In order to examine the diverse range of views on schooling held by Muslims in the UK, I therefore interviewed not just figures of authority but all of the Muslim stakeholders involved. These included Muslim parents, head teachers, and representatives of numerous Muslim organisations. While it is not possible to guarantee that the responses I received

from these interviewees are representative of the views of all Muslims in Britain, I would argue that these purposively selected individuals' testimonies provide a broad overview of the majority of opinions held and arguments used by the Muslim stakeholders in the debate.

A range of strategies was used to identify interviewees, which differed between stakeholder groups. Muslim organisations were primarily identified using the internet. I entered key terms into search engines and followed leads to find out information about organisations working in the field of Muslim schooling. Personal recommendation also played an important part in the identification of organisational representatives, as interviewees often informed me of other individuals or groups I should speak to. Another source of information about relevant organisations was a document called the Muslim Directory, which lists all of the Muslim businesses, charities, organisations and services in Britain.

The Muslim Directory was also useful in the identification of head teachers of independent and state funded Muslim schools, as it lists the contact details of all Muslim schools in the UK. Head teachers of community schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils were identified by telephoning the LEA of a city that has a large number of Muslim residents, and asking them for the names of schools in the area that have predominantly Muslim pupils. The Church of England school with a predominantly Muslim pupil population was identified through a newspaper article in which the head teacher had been quoted commenting on the almost entirely Muslim composition of her pupil body. I then used the internet to find the contact details of the school, and subsequently wrote a letter to the head teacher.



Muslim parents were almost all contacted via the head teachers who I interviewed. The only exception was one father who ran the Muslim Parents Association (MPA). I contacted the MPA hoping that it might be a way to access a large number of Muslim parents, but in fact it only resulted in one interview with the founder of the organisation. All other parents interviewed were contacted through school head teachers, by asking them at the end of their interviews whether it would be possible to speak to some parents who send their children to the school. Their reactions to this request varied enormously. One head teacher immediately took me outside to the playground and introduced me to parents as they picked their children up from school. Another got out a list of parents and gave me several telephone numbers of people he thought would be happy to participate. However, these immediate responses were the exception to the rule: the majority of head teachers said that they would ask some of the parents for permission to pass on their contact details and then get back to me. Most did not call me back, which left me in a difficult position: I did not want to hassle them when they had already been kind enough to be interviewed, but at the same time they were my only means of accessing Muslim parents. For this reason the recruitment of parents was the most difficult part of the access arrangement process.

Another negative aspect of recruiting parents via head teachers was that it gave head teachers control over which parents I spoke to. They would often put me in contact with parents that they knew personally, either as friends or through their involvement in the running of the school, such as members of the Parent

Teacher Association. They also tended to recommend parents who spoke good English. This signals a bias in my sample towards well educated parents with a high standard of English who took an active interest in their child's education. While this bias is of course unfortunate, it was unavoidable as the only feasible way of recruiting parents to the research was via school head teachers. Furthermore, there were some exceptions to this bias: for example, parents who sent their children to mainstream state schools were met through an adult women's English language class which was held weekly at a school. Therefore, in contrast to the majority of parents, these mothers spoke minimal English and, as they had only recently arrived in the UK, had limited knowledge of the British education system.

Having identified interviewees through the means outlined above, they were then contacted by letter, in which I briefly summarised the aims of the research, requested their participation and informed them of what taking part would involve. In with the letter I put an information sheet in which I described the study in more detail. Approximately a week after sending the letter I would telephone potential interviewees to ask if they had received the information and whether they wished to participate. If they agreed we would then arrange a convenient time and venue for the interview to take place.

In this discussion of the recruitment process it is also worth briefly mentioning the people who I had intended to interview but who, for various reasons, did not participate in the research. I had hoped to interview a representative from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The Chief

Inspector David Bell's recent comments that Muslim schools are failing to teach children about other cultures and faiths had a significant impact on the Muslim schools debate. His senior position and strong opinions on Muslim schooling made him the ideal person to speak to within the organisation. I therefore wrote him a letter outlining my research and requesting his participation, but unfortunately he declined due to his busy schedule.

Another intended interviewee who did not end up participating, despite sustained effort on my part, was Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens. As with all the other interviewees, I initially sent him a letter describing my research and requesting his participation. When I telephoned a week later his secretary said he was happy to be interviewed, but that he was rather busy at present so to call in a few weeks. When I called again I was told to phone back in a few more weeks, and so on. This pattern continued for several months, during which time I tried various strategies to encourage his participation such as sending him a summary of the questions he would be asked, and shortening the proposed length of the interview to 30 minutes. His secretary eventually gave me a date and time for the interview to take place and I travelled to Yusuf Islam's office in London, only to find he had forgotten all about it and was away filming a documentary. His secretary was apologetic and assured me Yusuf did still want to take part in the research so I continued trying to arrange an interview, but after a few more months of fruitless effort I eventually had to concede defeat.

A larger group of interviewees who I had originally intended to speak to but who did not end up participating in the research were school teachers. This



was a pragmatic decision on my part, based on the increasing size of my sample. As the data collection process progressed my proposed number of interviewees steadily rose, due primarily to the identification of more relevant Muslim organisations. If I had persisted with my original plan to speak to teachers as well as head teachers it would have taken my overall number of interviews up to an unacceptably high number considering the resource and time constraints of the project. I also felt that the information I would receive from teachers would be unlikely to differ greatly from that received from head teachers. I therefore made the decision not to include teachers in my sample.

### **3.3 Choice of research methods**

The research methods chosen for use in this study were determined by the aims of the research. In order to produce a detailed analysis of stakeholder interests in the state funding of Muslim schools it was necessary to examine the opinions of the various actors and bodies in considerable depth. It was therefore concluded that a qualitative research strategy would be most appropriate. The particular qualitative method used in this research was semi-structured interviews. A key advantage of this style of interview is that it offers the researcher the flexibility to alter the interview guide as necessary, following up interesting responses and modifying one's line of enquiry as appropriate (Robson, 2002). This flexibility was essential to the design of this research, as the questions needed to vary both between and within stakeholder groups. Four different interview schedules were developed, one for each stakeholder group. The order and wording of questions was then modified

according to what felt appropriate in each interview situation. I expanded on questions which the interviewee appeared not to understand, and left out questions which did not seem appropriate.

Previous research on Muslim schooling also informed my decision that a flexible interview format would be appropriate, by suggesting that there is considerable diversity amongst British Muslims' knowledge of the education system. For example, Joly (1984) stated that 40% of Muslim parents she surveyed did not know that RE was part of the school curriculum. My experience of conducting interviews with Muslims justified this decision, as I found there to be substantial variation in their understanding of British schooling. While some were able to have in depth discussions about the philosophical underpinnings of the British education system, others were not aware that state funded Muslim schools existed. The freedom to adjust the interview schedule according to the knowledge and ability of individual interviewees was therefore crucial to this research.

There are, however, some downsides of using interviews as a research method. Firstly, they are very time-consuming: the process of accessing, arranging, conducting, transcribing and analysing an interview can extend over several months. This therefore limits the number of interviews that it is possible to conduct. A second potential problem with semi-structured interviews is their lack of standardisation. This raises concerns about the reliability of the methods used and the validity of the conclusions drawn from the interview data. These issues will be discussed in some depth later in this chapter, as I reflect on the impact I

may have had on the responses I received from interviewees, and how those responses were interpreted.

### **3.4 Conduct of fieldwork**

Four different interview schedules were developed, which corresponded with the four stakeholder groups: politicians, organisational representatives, head teachers and Muslim parents. Some questions were put to all respondents regardless of stakeholder group, while others were asked only to one group of interviewees. The wording and ordering of these questions was modified to suit each interviewee, as was discussed above.

#### *Generic questions*

- Their opinions on faith schools generally. What do they believe to be the benefits of faith schools? Can they foresee any problems with segregating children according to faith? Do they believe that faith schools will contribute to or damage social stability?
- Their thoughts on the state support of faith schools. Should the funding of faith schools be the responsibility of the state or the religious community? Are they in favour of the proposed increase in the number of state maintained faith schools?
- Their opinions on Muslim schooling. What do they think is the best environment in which to educate Muslim children in Britain (mainstream community schools, state funded Muslim schools, independent Muslim



schools, home schooling etc)? What do they think are the benefits of Muslim schools? What are the downsides?

- Their views on the treatment received by Muslims in Britain. Do they think that the needs of Muslims are adequately met in Britain? What rights and responsibilities should Muslims in Britain have?

As well as being asked these general questions, interviewees were also asked a series of questions specific to their stakeholder group.

#### *Group specific questions*

- Organisational representatives were asked about the objectives and workings of their organisation: How long have they been established? What are their aims? Have they formed alliances with any other organisations?
- Politicians were asked about how their party went about devising their policy on faith schools: Who did they consult? How long did the policy making process take? Was there a general consensus within the party about the policy?
- Head teachers were asked questions specific to their type of school. For example, Muslim state schools were asked about the process of applying for state funding, independent Muslim schools were asked whether they would like to become state funded, and non-Muslim schools were asked how they set about meeting the needs of their Muslim pupils.

- Parents were asked about the reasons behind their choice of school. What factors most influenced their decision about which school to send their child to? Who was involved in making that decision?

As well as asking direct questions, another tool employed to elicit responses from interviewees was informal vignettes. Finch defined vignettes as 'short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond' (1987, p. 105). My use of vignettes was extremely informal and did not take the form of actual stories but rather the articulation of a polemic position, often attributed to the media. For example, I might say 'the media often suggest that an increase in Muslim schools will lead to the segregation of communities and cause riots. What do you think about that?' By giving a concrete example of an extreme viewpoint, interviewees were encouraged to articulate their opposition to or agreement with that position. By stating that it was 'the media' that made these claims I disassociated myself with the ideas, so as not to position myself in opposition to the interviewee. This proved to be a very useful tool in encouraging interviewees to express their views.

Almost as important as the content of the interview is the context in which it takes place (May, 1997). In order to elicit open and honest responses it is essential that research participants feel as at ease as possible. My interviews were therefore mostly conducted in the interviewee's home or place of work: an environment in which they were likely to be comfortable and relaxed because they were on 'their own territory'. Two interviews were conducted outside the home

and workplace for the convenience of the interviewees in question: one was conducted in the sociology department at the University of Nottingham, and one at the London Central Mosque in Regent's Park.

All but one of the interviewees agreed to be tape recorded, but their responses to the experience varied greatly. While some appeared not to be at all bothered by it, others were obviously very conscious of the tape recorder, as was demonstrated by their repeated glances at it and their tendency to lean towards it when they spoke. I tried to put these interviewees at ease by assuring them the tape recorder would pick up what they were saying with no difficulty, and by not putting the machine too close to them in order to make it as inconspicuous as possible. All the tape recorded interviews were fully transcribed soon after the interview. This had the benefit of enabling me to remember the content of the interview, which helped when deciphering any passages that were difficult to hear. With the one interviewee who did not wish to be recorded I took comprehensive notes both during and immediately after the interview.

The majority of the interviews lasted approximately one hour, although the shortest took only half an hour and the longest was over an hour and a half. Those which were less than one hour tended to be with organisational representatives and politicians, who were extremely busy and were unable to give me any more of their time. The interviews that lasted over an hour were mostly with Muslim parents, many of whom were keen to continue chatting after the formal part of the interview was over. Once I had turned off the tape recorder the conversation often turned to their experiences of entering the UK or stories about their family. Some



also wanted to ask questions about me, which ranged from why I was interested in Muslim schooling to why I was not yet married. I felt it important that the interview encounter was not an entirely one way process, and therefore decided it would be inappropriate to close down the conversation and leave immediately after I had got what I wanted. I therefore often stayed to chat with these interviewees for a while after the tape recorder had been turned off which, while not directly beneficial to my research, was often a very enjoyable experience.

I sometimes experienced difficulties in ensuring that the interviewees understood the position and status of the research. It was often assumed that I either was a journalist or that I worked for the government. When I explained that I was from a university and was doing a PhD this was often met with confused expressions as some interviewees did not know what a PhD was and did not comprehend the concept of 'university research'. At the end of one interview with a parent in Oldham it became apparent that she thought I was from the government, even though I had explained my position. She asked me whether I would speak to the government and tell them to set up a state funded Muslim school in Oldham. I explained once again that I am a student at university and admitted that, while I would try to publish my research findings in due course, they were unlikely to have a direct influence on government policy. On hearing this she looked disappointed, as though she may have been querying the value of my research. This interviewee's lack of understanding about the status of the research, despite my best efforts to explain it, raises ethical questions about the grounds on which she entered into the research process.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

Two other ethical issues that arose in the course of this research were maintaining the anonymity of the participants and protecting the confidentiality of their responses. Every effort was made to achieve these goals: participants' names were not used on any documents resulting from the research, all recordings and transcripts were kept securely, and codes were used on all records to protect the identity of the interviewees. However, despite taking these measures I was aware that it may still be possible for participants' identities to be discovered. This stemmed from the fact that, as there are so few members in some of the stakeholder groups, participants may be able to recognise themselves or others within their stakeholder group. For example, at the time of conducting this research there were only four head teachers of state funded Muslim schools in Britain, all of whom participated in this research. Therefore these individuals may be able to recognize themselves, and possibly identify others, from the data extracts. I discussed this possibility with all individuals involved, giving them ample opportunity to withdraw if they so wished.

### **3.6 Interviewer effects and reflexivity**

It is generally accepted that who is conducting a piece of research has an effect on the data that is collected. The characteristics of the researcher can impact upon all stages of the research process, including access to interviewees, the responses received, and how those responses are interpreted. One way in which the impact of

the researcher can be managed and potential areas of bias can be identified is through the use of reflexivity. Ahern claims that through 'reflexive bracketing' the researcher can put aside their personal feelings and preconceptions about their research subject (1999). She identifies a number of ways in which the researcher can incorporate reflexivity into every stage of the research process. These include the questioning of taken for granted assumptions associated with age, gender, socio-economic status etc; considering where the power lies on the research project and where you belong in that power hierarchy; recognition of any feelings which may indicate a lack of neutrality; and reflection during the analysis and writing up of data.

In the following section I will reflect in some depth on how I as a white, not formally religious, female researcher in my late twenties may have impacted on the findings of my research. I will focus in particular on my interviews with Muslim interviewees, questioning the notion of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and challenging the common assumption that 'outsider' research is inherently inferior to 'insider' research. First, however, I will briefly consider the complex nature of the power dynamics present in my interviews with the various stakeholder groups.

Inevitably, the balance of power between me and my interviewees varied according to who I was speaking to. When conducting interviews with 'elite interviewees' such as politicians, organisational representatives and head teachers I often felt that I was the less powerful party within the interaction (Puwar, 1997). This could be due to a number of factors, such as: professional status - they were obviously very busy people and I felt they were 'doing me a favour' by agreeing to



be interviewed; gender - the politicians and organisational representatives interviewed were almost all male; and age - they were all significantly older than me. In contrast, in my interviews with Muslim parents I tended to feel like the more powerful figure in the interaction. Again there are a number of possible explanations for this. Many parents were visibly nervous about being interviewed as this was a new experience for them, whereas I had conducted interviews before so had an idea of what to expect, putting me in a more knowledgeable position. A further factor could have been my status as a PhD student which, while being junior in professional academic terms, was considered impressive by some less educated interviewees. Our respective class positions may have also contributed to my feeling of powerfulness in some interviews with working class Muslim parents (Coole, 1996). However, as Rhodes (1994) points out, the power relationships between the researcher and the researched are never unidirectional. I was dependent on parents' participation in the research process, which afforded them considerable power. Furthermore the interview was conducted in their homes, so they were on 'their own territory'. Nonetheless, despite my best efforts to the contrary, the power relations at work within these interviews are likely to have affected the responses I received.

A further element of difference between me and many of my interviewees was our respective religious beliefs. Over two thirds of my interviewees were Muslim, while I am not formally religious. The influence that this may have had on the responses I received requires careful consideration. It has been widely argued that 'cross-cultural' or 'outsider' research is inferior to 'insider' research

(Shah, 2004). These claims are based on problems that can arise in cross-cultural research, such as:

#### *Prejudice and stereotype*

Preconceptions and stereotypes about people from different cultures are common. Researchers are not immune to such misconceptions, and these can have a significant impact on the interview process (Bridges, 2001; Johnson and Castelli, 2002).

#### *Cultural awareness*

In the absence of a shared system of meaning an interviewer may assume that the interviewee is using a similar frame of reference to their own (Shah, 2004).

Assumptions of similarities can result in the interviewer accidentally offending the interviewee or making a cultural faux pas.

#### *Anxiety*

Cross-cultural research can lead both participants to experience a high level of anxiety at the prospect of dealing with the 'unknown'. There can be a general feeling of 'walking on ice' which can be stressful and hamper understanding (Shah, 2004).

#### *Differing responses*

The interviewee may feel they have to respond differently to questions from a so-called 'outsider' than they would to an 'insider', using different arguments and justifications for their views.

### *Misunderstanding*

Cultural difference can lead the researcher to misunderstand or misinterpret the interviewee. This is obviously a particular risk when there is a language barrier, as even if one or both participants have a reasonable command of the other's language, it can be difficult to communicate the finer details of one's opinions in a second language, which can lead to misinterpretation. Even where interviewee and researcher share a common language, misunderstanding can still arise due to a lack of shared culture (Johnson and Castelli, 2002). Misinterpretation of non-verbal signals can result in the researcher making incorrect interpretations of actions or body language (Shah, 2004). Misunderstanding and error are obviously possible in every interview situation, but it is alleged that the risk is increased when there are substantial cultural differences between the researcher and the interviewee. These factors are argued by some to negatively influence the outcome of research.

During the course of my data collection I had several experiences which, on the surface, support these claims. I will now cite some anecdotes from my interviews with Muslims in order to illustrate these difficulties, before going on to question whether this really does undermine the value of my research.



### *3.6.1 Preconceptions and stereotypes: my misconceptions of a Muslim school*

The first Muslim school I ever visited was Islamia School in Brent. I was due to interview the head teacher, but when I arrived outside the imposing school building the place looked deserted. All the lights were off, the playground was empty and the big metal gate was padlocked shut. I rang the intercom buzzer on the gate, but received no reply. I looked around for an alternative entrance but there was none. As the appointed time of my interview came and went I became increasingly anxious, and had been repeatedly ringing the buzzer for several minutes when a voice finally sounded from the intercom. The headmaster's secretary apologetically informed me that the reason for the school's apparent desertion was that it was prayer time and everyone had been in the prayer room. By this stage I was really rather nervous about the interview, and as I waited at the gate to be collected by the secretary I realised that my nervousness stemmed from the fact that I was harbouring some preconceptions about what a Muslim school would be like. I expected the atmosphere to be unfamiliar, reverent and perhaps a little severe. However, as soon as I went through the door I realised my expectations were entirely incorrect. Instead I saw girls giggling in corridors, colourful wall displays, and a group of disgruntled boys being told off for messing around in class: all completely normal sights that could be seen in any primary school in the country. The atmosphere was lively and happy, and was a million miles away from the studious, disciplinarian environment I had imagined. So, the suggestion that 'outsider' researchers might hold preconceptions and stereotypes

about other cultures may be right. I did have a preconceived idea of what a Muslim school was going to be like, which was unfounded and, as it turned out, incorrect.

### *3.6.2 Cultural awareness: shaking hands with Muslim men*

I had conducted over 20 interviews, many of which had been with Muslim men, by the time I went to meet with the head teacher of a private Muslim secondary school in London. I was shown up to his office by his secretary, and as I went in I introduced myself and held out my hand. He backed away, and informed me that he could not shake hands with me because 'I was a woman who he could marry'. I felt very embarrassed to have offended him, and apologised, asking him to explain further why he could not shake my hand. He stated that no Muslim man should have any physical contact with a woman who he was not either related to or married to. I of course began going back in my mind over my previous interviews with Muslim men. I tried to remember whether I had shaken their hands and wondered whether those who had shaken my hand had not shared this interviewee's views on physical contact, or whether they did not refuse my gesture for fear of offending me. This cultural faux pas obviously did not start the interview on a very good footing, and could be seen to confirm the suggestion of those opposed to inter-cultural research that outsider interviewers may unintentionally offend their interviewees.

### *3.6.3 Fitting in or faking it? Wearing a headscarf*

When I embarked on this research project I was uncertain about whether or not I should wear a headscarf when interviewing Muslims, and in particular when entering Muslim schools. I consulted a female Muslim teacher who I met at a conference about this and she assured me that there was no need for me to wear a headscarf when interviewing Muslims or going into Muslim schools; just be sure to wear modest clothing. I had therefore not worn a headscarf, until I arranged to meet with a representative of the Muslim Council of Britain. She suggested we meet at the London Central Mosque in Regents Park, and informed me that I would have to wear a headscarf in order to enter the mosque.

On the day of the interview I put the headscarf on in a nearby café, and on my way to the mosque I went to a shop to buy some batteries for my dictaphone. In the shop the young male shopkeeper spoke to me in what I assume was Arabic, and when I did not respond he looked confused and, pointing to my headscarf, asked me if I was a Muslim. I said I was not and left the shop in a hurry, feeling embarrassed. I felt like I had been caught out, like I was faking it. This experience could be seen to support the suggestion that ‘outsider’ researchers may find the research experience anxiety inducing and feel as though they are ‘walking on ice’.

#### *3.6.4 Differing responses received by insiders and outsiders*

A further claim made by those opposed to intercultural research is that ‘insiders’ may receive different responses to ‘outsiders’. When conducting my research there were a small number of instances in which I did feel that my not being a Muslim directly impacted on the responses I received. The most obvious example of this



was from an interview with a representative of a Muslim organisation. We were discussing the headscarf ban in France and he was justifying Muslim girls wearing the headscarf through the use of arguments about free choice, democracy and rights. When he had finished he paused, before saying that if I was a Muslim he would not use these liberal arguments but would rather state that the Qur'an dictates Muslim women must cover their head, as for a Muslim the word of the Qur'an is enough of a justification. Those who oppose cross-cultural research would see this as an example of my getting a different response because of my non-Muslim 'outsider' status. An alternative explanation could be that he used liberal arguments because we were talking about the state, and how to encourage the state to treat Muslims better, therefore in that context Qur'anic arguments could be said to be inappropriate. It is also worth noting that the Qur'an does not in fact state that women must cover their head, but rather that they should dress modestly. Nevertheless, the interviewee clearly felt that the fact that I am not a Muslim directly affected the response he gave me.

From these examples it would appear that my not being a Muslim could have affected both the interview process and the data I received. I had preconceptions about what a Muslim school might be like, I made at least one cultural faux pas, I felt embarrassed and anxious at points during the research process, and I was informed by one interviewee that he was giving me different responses to those he would give a Muslim researcher. However, despite these experiences I would argue that my research is of equal value to that of a Muslim researcher. The fact that I may have received different responses to a Muslim

researcher does not mean that I should not do the research, but rather that it is vital that I am reflexive about the impact I had on the responses I received. By being conscious of my impact on the research and making that explicit, my voice can be heard alongside a multiplicity of other voices, all of whom differ in age, ethnic background, religion, physical ability, sexuality and class. This will now be explored in more depth, illustrating the substantial problems with opposition to cross cultural research.

A key problem with ideas of insiders and outsiders is that they essentialise categories, overlooking the enormous differences within as well as between groups. I will illustrate this point with an example from my research experiences. I interviewed several politicians about their views on Muslim schools, including a representative of the British National Party. I met the BNP representative outside the sociology department building at the University of Nottingham, and we walked together through the department to the interview room. We walked past a poster advertising the University of Nottingham which pictured a black man's arm holding a folder. He stopped in his tracks and pointing at this poster said loudly 'God, those blacks get everywhere don't they'. Some people were walking past us in the corridor at the time, and I felt very embarrassed and concerned that people might think I shared his racist views. I ushered him down the corridor and into the office as quickly as possible. It was an excruciatingly difficult interview in which I felt very uncomfortable and offended by his constant and overt racism.

There is clearly an enormous chasm between my views and those of this BNP representative. However, we are both non-religious, white and of British

origin – we are ostensibly from the same ‘culture’. Opponents of cross-cultural research may therefore argue that I am better suited to interview this man from the BNP than I am to interview, say, a South Asian Muslim woman. Personally I find this suggestion ridiculous, and the implication that I have more in common with a racist than a Muslim could actually be quite offensive. We need to move away from these crude dichotomies of similarities and differences and should instead be examining the commonalities and differences inherent in any researcher/participant relationship (Haw, 1996). Researchers differ from the people they are researching in a variety of ways: age, caste, ethnicity, religious belief, physical ability, personality, sexuality and class to name but a few. A similarity in one of these spheres does not make an insider, just as a difference in one of these spheres does not necessarily make an outsider. The researcher is always both an insider and an outsider in every research setting.

There are also potential problems with being an ‘insider’ researcher. Firstly, the interviewee may not tell some information to insider researchers because they might make assumptions about the researcher’s prior knowledge. They may take for granted that the researcher is aware of certain information and therefore offer less detail (Anand, 1979). A second problem of insider research is that the researcher may neglect to ask some questions, believing the answer to be too insignificant or obvious. Nearness can ‘blunt criticality’ and can blind the researcher to familiar and taken for granted phenomena (Haw, 1998). Thirdly, respondents may choose not to share their thoughts and feelings with a person who poses the possibility of being judgemental due to a shared knowledge of value



systems. They may feel more comfortable unburdening sensitive information to a complete stranger who would then disappear with the information (Bangun, 1991).

I certainly felt when conducting my research that the fact that I am a non-Muslim was sometimes an advantage. Many of my Muslim interviewees, particularly the parents, assumed that I had absolutely no knowledge about Islam and were keen to explain the basics of Islam and Muslim practices to me. This had the advantage of empowering some of the more shy interviewees and enabling them to be in a position of authority. A further benefit of outsider status is that it can allay interviewee's fears of being judged. Many of my questions to Muslim parents centred on their reasons for choosing to send their child to a certain school and the relative importance they placed on academic and religious education. If a Muslim researcher had asked these questions there may have been a fear on the part of the interviewee that if they did not emphasise the religious element of education they would be judged as being a 'bad Muslim'. While this was never explicitly stated I sometimes sensed this in the responses of my interviewees. One interviewee said that while she sent her child to a Muslim school the primary reason for this was not because of its religious ethos but rather that it gets good academic results. The tone of her voice and the embarrassed smile on her face led me to think that she felt this was somehow a 'naughty' or 'rebellious' attitude.

Another problem with objections to cross cultural research is that they could potentially marginalise minority researchers (Rhodes, 1994). If researchers should only interview groups of which they are an 'insider' this would result in minority researchers being extremely limited in the research they can conduct.

Constraining researchers to exploring the familiar will lead to minority researchers being severely disadvantaged in the research world. Such a system would also require the classification of people into categories, forcing people to identify themselves as either insiders or outsiders of a series of groups. Furthermore, it would require decisions to be made about precisely where the boundaries of groups lie, and whether those on the margins of groups fall inside or outside. Matters of identity are ambiguous and constantly in flux, and the categories themselves are imprecise, making such decisions extremely problematic. A further question to arise would be how many criteria of similarity do researcher and interviewee have to have in common in order for them to be considered matched? Can a black disabled woman only be interviewed by a black disabled female researcher, or will any black woman do, or any woman? Such a system appears to me to be fairly untenable.

Underlying many of the criticisms of cross-cultural interviewing is the assumption that some accounts are more 'accurate' or 'reliable' than others. I would argue that the responses given by an interviewee should not be judged as either accurate or distorted representations of reality (Gudmundsdottir, 1996). Rather they should be perceived as context specific and equally valid accounts (Rhodes, 1994). While I would want to avoid the extremes of relativism, it is incorrect to assume that one type of account is intrinsically superior to another. I may well have received different responses if I was Muslim, or if I was male, or black, or disabled, but that does not invalidate the version which I received. Each account is interesting and meaningful in its own right.

To conclude this discussion of interviewer effects, it is evident from the stories I told of my research experiences that I did experience difficulties in the course of my research, some of which resulted from the cross-cultural nature of the project. However, I would argue that differences between researcher and respondent are inevitable. My interviewees varied not only in their religious belief but also in their national origin, language, gender, age, physical ability and sexuality. Therefore any researcher, Muslim or non-Muslim, would have differed from some of the interviewees in one or more of these respects, and therefore may well have experienced equal, although different, difficulties in conducting this research. The only feasible solution, therefore, is to be as open and honest about these differences as possible, and explore them at every stage of the research process from access to analysis.

I will now go on to describe the process of data analysis, justifying the methods used and defending the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn.

### **3.7 Making sense of the data**

Having completed my interviews I began to think seriously about how to make sense of all the data I had accumulated. I had a very large body of data (36 transcripts, each between 10 and 20 pages long), and I initially felt quite daunted by the task of trying to find the thread that ran through the data and held it all together. But, taking one step at a time, I began by coding the data into themes. To facilitate this process I used NVivo, a computer aided qualitative analysis package.



While there are some drawbacks to using this software, such as the time it takes to load information into the package, I believe that the benefits outweigh the costs. The advantages of computer-aided analysis include increased ease of data management as the information is on the computer as opposed to on paper, and the ease with which the data can be interrogated. It also forces the researcher to keep a log of the analytic procedures undertaken, which helps to ensure that categories are used consistently (Fielding and Lee, 1998). By helping to slow down the analytical process, it makes certain that the patterns reported actually occur throughout the data rather than just in selected examples, ensuring the reliability of the analysis.

The analytical process was time consuming and involved many separate, but related, tasks. This procedure is rarely described in detail, but I think it necessary to do so in order demonstrate the systematic process through which the data went in order for the findings to emerge.

- All of the interviews were transcribed in full and the resulting data was transported into NVivo.
- I read through the first transcript and identified themes or 'codes' within the data. Some of these codes were broad, such as 'identity', while others were more specific such as 'school uniform'.
- Electronic folders were created within NVivo for each of these codes, and the relevant data extracts were transported into these folders.
- Subsequent transcripts then underwent the same process. Data was added into the established codes or, where data did not fit into the existing

categories, new codes were created. As I worked through the transcripts I discovered that a) I had an increasing number of codes, and b) some codes had a lot more data in than others.

- Therefore, after coding approximately ten transcripts I read through the contents of each code and began a two tiered process of expansion and compression:
  - Checking that every data extract within a single code was saying roughly the same thing, and where necessary creating sub-codes or entirely new codes to accommodate variation.
  - Checking to see if there was any overlap between codes and whether they could be compressed together in order to minimise the total number of codes.

This dual process was ongoing as I coded the remaining transcripts.

The systematic nature of this process also helps to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the data accurately represent the social phenomena under investigation, or in other words that the research is 'valid' (Hammersley, 1990; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Silverman (1993) states the importance of qualitative researchers illustrating that their findings are based on all of their data, not just a few well selected examples which support their argument. According to Bryman (1988) 'There is a tendency towards an anecdotal approach to the use of data in relation to conclusions or explanations in qualitative research' (p. 77). He claims that the use of 'snippets from unstructured interviews' as evidence to

support an analytic argument leaves a feeling of 'disquiet' as the representativeness of these fragments is often left unchallenged (1988, p. 77). In order to avoid such uneasiness about the validity of qualitative research it is essential that the data is analysed critically, and the process undertaken is systematic and open to scrutiny.

A combination of analytical approaches was used to ensure the validity of my data. The primary method used was what Silverman (2000) terms 'the constant comparative method', in which the researcher repeatedly attempts to test out a provisional hypothesis with the use of new cases. As well as analysing entirely new cases, this analytic method can be applied to a single case by inspecting and comparing all of the data extracts that arise. This process follows the stages described above, whereby analysis is conducted on a small segment of the overall body of data, and a set of categories is generated. Further data is then analysed in light of these categories, and the body of data is steadily expanded. This analytical process was combined with 'comprehensive data treatment', whereby the entire body of data is incorporated into the analysis (Mehan, 1979). By ensuring that any generalisations being made about the data apply to every extract of data collected, smaller data sets can be considered just as valid as their quantitative counter-parts (Silverman, 2000). The use of 'comprehensive' and 'constant comparative' methods of data analysis ensured that my data was subjected to a rigorous and systematic inspection. I can therefore confidently assert that the claims made about the data in the forthcoming chapters accurately represent the social phenomena under investigation: namely the arguments used in the Muslim schools debate.



One of the things I found most difficult in the analytical process was accepting that I could not incorporate all of the data into the thesis. As well as having a great deal of data relating to my research questions, I also had a large body of other data which did not relate to my research but was nonetheless very interesting. This centred in particular on Muslim interviewee's personal experiences of racism and Islamophobia, and their stories of migration and acclimatising to life in Britain. I felt uncomfortable discarding this data because these were sensitive topics about which my interviewees had spoken passionately. Furthermore this was extremely interesting data and it seemed a waste not to report it. However, I reached the conclusion that for the purposes of this thesis that data must be put to one side as it was important to focus on addressing the research questions set. While the researcher can be guided by the interviewee's opinions about what issues are important, it is ultimately the researcher's responsibility to shape both the process and the product of the research.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The primary objective of this research was to speak to the main stakeholders involved in the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools. This was achieved through the purposive selection of relevant actors and bodies, who were interviewed using a semi structured format. I was conscious of the influence that I as a researcher may have had on the responses I received, in particular the impact of the religious difference between me and my Muslim interviewees. These responses were systematically analysed in order to achieve a valid and reliable

account of the opinions held by those involved in the Muslim schools debate. These findings are detailed in the following three data chapters, which map directly onto the research aims outlined previously: (1) to examine the arguments used for and against Muslim schools by the stakeholders involved; (2) to clarify what they see as the barriers to more state funded Muslim schools; and (3) to explore how these opinions relate to theoretical models of what kind of society we want.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Arguments for the State Funding of Muslim Schools**

In this chapter I examine the arguments used in favour of Muslim schools. These can be divided into four categories: equal rights; a better society; identity, behaviours and values; and education. While some of these arguments focus specifically on state funded Muslim schools, others defend Muslim schools, or even faith schools, in general. Closely associated with these arguments in favour of Muslim schools are the often practical and personal factors that influence parents' decisions about where to educate their children. These are examined in order to illustrate that while there are four principal arguments used in favour of Muslim schools by members of all stakeholder groups, other more pragmatic considerations also influence many parents' choice of school for their child.

#### **4.1 Equal rights**

The most commonly used argument in favour of the state funding of Muslim schools centres around equal rights. This states that Muslims have as much right to state funded schools as other faith groups, and are currently being denied their rights by the disproportionately small number of state funded Muslim schools in Britain. The discourse of equal rights was most commonly framed in two ways: comparisons with other faiths and payment of taxes.



#### **4.1.1 Comparisons with other faiths**

Arguments about equal rights are often based on comparisons with other faiths.

For example, if Christian, Catholic and Jewish schools receive state funding then it is discriminatory to deny Muslims the same right. The following quote from a representative of a Muslim organisation is a typical example of how the equal rights argument is supported by comparisons with other faiths:

All that I'm saying is that if the Muslim community fulfils all of the criteria then it's a question of justice and equality [...]. Muslims should be given exactly the same privileges [as other faith groups].

[Representative of a Muslim organisation]

This quote focuses on the rights of Muslims in Britain as a community, which the interviewee claims are not being met to the same extent as those of other faith groups.

A subtle distinction can be drawn between the above focus on the rights of Muslims in Britain as a community and the rights of individual parents to free choice regarding their child's schooling. This next quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim school illustrates the claim that Muslim parents are being denied their rights as citizens as they are not receiving the same choices offered to parents of other faiths.

...it's a case of equal rights, equal opportunities. I think a state that claims that all its citizens are equal should reflect that in providing equal access to parents. [...] There are many Muslims who would prefer their children to be sent to an Islamic school, voluntary aided, just as there are many in the Christian and the Jewish communities who exercise that choice and that right.

[Head teacher of an independent Muslim school]

Comparisons with the treatment received by other faith groups and concerns that Muslim parents are being denied the free choice available to parents of other faiths both centre on the argument that Muslims are not receiving equal treatment and are hence having their rights as citizens denied.

The argument that in comparison with other faiths Muslims are being denied their rights, both as a community and individually, was used repeatedly. It was employed by members of all of the stakeholder groups: Muslim parents; head teachers of Muslim and non-Muslim schools; representatives of religious and non-religious organisations, and politicians. It was even mentioned by those opposed to faith schools in general, as is illustrated in this quote from a representative of a secular humanist organisation.

...given that the government is encouraging more Christian schools [...] then Muslims have as much right to new schools as the Church of England does. From a perspective of [...] citizen fairness that must be right. But of course I'm saying they shouldn't be doing that. [...] They shouldn't be encouraging any religious schools.

The widespread use of this argument could possibly be due to the fact that the discourse of equal rights is very persuasive. It is difficult to defend the opposing suggestion that Muslims in Britain should have fewer rights, either individually or as a community, than other faith groups. This is particularly so in the context of recent advances in the socio-legal recognition of religion, in which Islam has been the leading protagonist. Stakeholders' motivations for using certain discourses are examined further in chapter six.

#### **4.1.2 Payment of taxes**

In order to defend the equal rights argument for the state funding of Muslim schools, some interviewees mentioned the payment of taxes. They stated that, as Muslims pay the same taxes as other British citizens, they should receive the same benefits, including free faith-based education. This is evident in the following quote from a Muslim parent whose child attends a Muslim state school.

I don't think anybody is better than anybody else. I think we're all equal. I don't think they should be denied rights, you know like if there are schools for certain faiths then there should be schools for all faiths [...]. So I think if parents want that choice [...] the government should provide that choice, because we are all equally paying taxes.

While all stakeholder groups made comparisons with other faiths, arguments about the payment of taxes were only employed by Muslim parents. They evidently felt it necessary to defend their calls for equal rights by stressing that they have also equal responsibilities, for example in the payment of taxes.

#### **4.2 Muslim schools do not damage social cohesion**

One of the most commonly used arguments *against* the state funding of faith schools in general and Muslim schools in particular is that they are socially divisive, fragmenting society and damaging social cohesion (see chapter five). Interviewees arguing *in favour* of Muslim schools were keen to defend themselves against this argument. They did this through making the following claims: Muslim schools create good citizens and a better society; Muslim schools are multicultural; Muslim schools prepare children for life in a multicultural society; Muslim schools



are in a prime position to challenge extremism; confidence in their Islamic identity will lead children to integrate more effectively; Islamic teachings require Muslims to integrate; and finally, pupils from Muslim schools do integrate into wider British society. These will be examined in turn and illustrated using empirical examples.

#### *4.2.1 Muslim schools create good citizens and a better society*

In order to counter the claim that Muslim schools are socially divisive, many interviewees argued that Muslim schools create ‘good citizens’ and a ‘better society’. These phrases were used by head teachers of Muslim schools, representatives of Muslim organisations, and Muslim parents. They were keen to highlight the value of Muslim schools to society at large rather than to individual pupils or the Muslim community. The following example is from a parent whose child attends an independent Muslim school.

I feel in our school, the Islamic school, we are teaching kids to be better people and values and respecting other people and making a better society. So we are contributing to a better society.

The social value of Muslim schools is used to defend the state funding of Muslim schools in the following quote from the head teacher of a state funded Muslim school, in response to the question ‘why do you think the state should fund Muslim schools?’

Because we are doing their job. Because we are educating the British citizens, and developing the confidence in them so they can be better

**citizens, valued citizens, contributing citizens, participating citizens, stronger citizens. That's why they should support them.**

**As well as creating a better society by producing 'good citizens', a small number of interviewees claimed that Muslim schools lead to a better society through the promotion of diversity. By providing state funding for Muslim schools, Britain is catering for the diverse needs of different communities and thereby encouraging the religious and ethnic diversity of British society. This was mentioned particularly by the head teacher of a state funded Muslim school.**

**So the first benefit is that, for the societies, is that it is actually meeting the diverse needs of the many communities that live in relative harmony in British society. So it's number one, recognising and catering for diversity.**

**Whether by creating good citizens or promoting diversity, many interviewees agreed that Muslim schooling leads to 'a better society'.**

#### ***4.2.2 Muslim schools are multicultural***

**Muslims in Britain are often erroneously perceived as a homogenous group originating from the Indian Subcontinent, or more specifically from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Muslim schools are consequently assumed to be composed predominantly of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children. While in some areas of the country (particularly in some northern towns) this may be true, in many Muslim schools the pupil population is extremely culturally diverse. This diversity was mentioned by head teachers in order to reject the suggestion that Muslim schools lead to segregation between ethnic groups. The following quote illustrates one**

head teacher's frustration at these suggestions, and rejection of the alternative of 'bussing kids around'.

In our school we've got kids from Somalia, we've got kids from Europe, we've got kids from the Middle East, we've got kids from South Africa, we've got kids from Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh... we are a multiracial school. We just happen to be linked together by the faith of Islam. There are Muslim schools which are in the majority monocultural. But so are many state schools. [...] Most schools in this country are a hundred percent white. What are you going to do, start bussing kids around? It's crazy, crazy.  
[Head teacher of independent Muslim school].

Contrary to popular assumption, the cultural diversity of Muslim schools was also an important issue for parents. Several Muslim parents mentioned that they were keen for their children to mix with Muslims from other countries, as is illustrated in the following quote from a parent whose child attends a Muslim school.

I didn't want my kids to just stick to Pakistani society, but with Islamic school they get to meet all sorts of Muslims. It's important as well.

#### *4.2.3 Muslim schools prepare children for life in a multicultural society*

Head teachers of both private and independent Muslim schools and non-Muslim schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils were keen to convey that they teach children respect for other faiths and prepare their pupils for life in a multicultural society. In doing so they rejected claims that Muslim schools are socially divisive. The head teacher of an independent Muslim school said:

And we bring the children up in ways so that they can live in this multinational, multiracial community they are in. We teach them to be



tolerant towards everything, everyone, have a respect for everyone whether Muslim or non-Muslim [...] and teaching the children so that they will be prepared in the future to work in such a multinational, multiracial situation. [Head teacher of independent Muslim school]

In order to achieve this awareness of other faiths and preparation for life in a multicultural society, many schools develop links with local schools of other faith or no faith. However, one head teacher of a state funded Muslim school was keen to point out that developing links with other schools is not always straightforward. She stated that while she tries to involve her pupils in various out of school activities, this is sometimes met with opposition, which she felt was due to lack of knowledge about and understanding of Islam and Muslims. Referring to the female pupils at her school, she says:

[...T]hey're part of the local networks, they're part of the local community, they take part in everything that happens, you know, whether it's a football competition amongst the local primary schools, or a netball competition, or whether it's a debating opportunity in citizenship at the Council House, we are very active. But we have to work very hard. It is difficult to take part. We actually have to work very hard, and it takes a long time to break down barriers, because people worry about what's going to happen, you know. It's not knowing. [...G]irls walking around with a scarf on wanting to play football, they think 'oh this is alien'.

#### *4.2.4 Muslim schools are in a prime position to challenge extremism*

A further counter to the claim that Muslim schools damage social cohesion is the argument that they are in a prime position to challenge extremism. This was put forward by a parent who both worked at and sent his children to a state funded Muslim school. He suggested that it is easier to hold extremist or narrow-minded views in a non-Muslim school because 'you feel that the society around you is somehow not of you and [...] you've got this siege mentality'. Furthermore, he

argued that because the teachers at non-faith state schools are predominantly non-Muslims it is more difficult for them to challenge the views of extremists as they are likely to either be ignored or be accused of being Islamophobic. In a state funded Muslim school, however, 'all the teachers there [...] have been through teacher training and so on, so they are very open minded liberal moderate people, but they're Muslims'. This enables them to challenge the narrow minded views of some pupils and parents, in a way that is not possible for non-Muslim teachers in a non-faith state school. Therefore Muslim schools are argued to be in a much better position to challenge Islamic extremism than non-faith state schools. This is articulated in the following quote:

I mean the teachers [in non-faith state schools] are wonderful, they're [...] very PC, they try to accommodate Muslims and so on, but they can't challenge any of the narrow minded views. So you get a child there who will continue and the parents will continue with their idea that this is evil and that is bad and [...]. Whereas in [a state funded Muslim school] we actually openly challenge that so we say no, this is not Islam, this is extremism. [...] We are able to say 'no, Islam doesn't say that, and this is what Islam says, it says yes you can integrate, you can get on with other people, you can be a Muslim, you can be proud of who you are, but at the same time you can get on with other religions'. I think actually a [state funded Muslim school][...] has much more power to actually help children integrate and help change the perception, and really build, if you like, a British Muslim identity.  
[Parent whose children attend a state funded Muslim school].

This interviewee challenges the suggestion that Muslim schools damage society by segregating and isolating Muslims. He claims that in fact the opposite is true: Muslim schools serve to promote integration and foster a British Muslim identity through their unique ability to challenge extremism. While this argument is not

widely used, it is nonetheless a powerful rebuttal to the suggestion that Muslim schools damage social cohesion.

#### *4.2.5 A strong sense of Islamic identity leads to greater integration*

The argument that Muslim schools give children a strong sense of Islamic identity will be discussed in detail shortly. It is the intention here to simply highlight that this argument can be used to counter the suggestion that Muslim schools damage social cohesion, through the claim that a strong sense of identity leads to greater integration with wider British society. This is evident in the following quote from a head teacher of a private Muslim school.

And that's the criticism which many people put to us. By keeping your children separate, keeping them away they won't be able to cope when they go into wider world. Well we find the opposite is true. That they can more than cope, they are very confident in themselves, they have a lot of self respect, and if you've got self respect then it's a lot easier to respect others.

Being educated alongside other Muslims gives children confidence in their particularised identity, which enables them to interact more effectively with wider British society. But as only a very small percentage of the Muslim children in Britain are currently educated in Muslim schools, it is vital that further investigation is conducted into why non-Muslim schooling is failing to give Muslim pupils confidence in their religious identity.



#### ***4.2.6 Islamic teachings say that Muslims must integrate***

The claim that Muslim schools can lead Muslims to become segregated from wider society was rejected by some interviewees on the grounds that such isolation contravenes what they perceive to be the teachings of Islam. The Qur'an is interpreted by some as stating that Muslims must not segregate themselves, but rather live together with people of all faiths as 'a happy family' as one Muslim parent put it.

Islam says live and let live. In the time of the prophet there's Christians, Jews, everybody lives in the same city. [...] It's there in Islamic teaching. Islam says live together, be a happy family, no matter what religion or what colour you are.

Clearly this interpretation of Islamic teachings is not universally accepted.

Nonetheless, by constructing self-segregation as 'un-Islamic', these interviewees support their argument that Muslim schools are not socially divisive.

#### ***4.2.7 Pupils from Muslim schools do integrate***

The claim that attending a Muslim school inhibits children's integration into wider society was rejected by many interviewees, particularly Muslim parents and head teachers. Head teachers of Muslim schools stated that the pupils who leave their schools go on to work in all spheres of public life, and do not isolate themselves from wider society.

Our pupils who have been through our GCSEs, they have reached the universities, [...] they are pharmacists, they are computer graphics engineers who are working now. [...] There is no defect, there is no

isolation, they are taking part, they are applying everywhere and they are studying everywhere. There is no isolation.  
[Head teacher of a state funded Muslim school]

Parents were equally keen to draw on evidence from their own lives to reject suggestions that Muslim schooling leads to isolation. This is illustrated in the following quote from a parent whose child attended a private Muslim school.

My daughter's just gone into the outside world to go to university and she has no problems there, she's met people from all over the world, she's mixing very well with them, she socialises with them. [...] Because we want to encourage this, we want our children to go out into every job, not just become anything to do with just Islam. [...] It's a big wide world. We have to be a part of it. We live in it, and we have to integrate in that big wide world.

Several interviewees suggested that independent research should be conducted with Muslim children after they leave Muslim schools in order to demonstrate that pupils do integrate into wider society, ending the speculation that Muslim schooling leads to segregated communities.

To sum up, those in favour of Muslim schools, particularly parents and head teachers, used a wide range of arguments to defend themselves against the suggestion that Muslim schools are socially divisive. They claimed that Muslim schools create good citizens and a better society, are multicultural, prepare children for life in a multicultural society, are in a prime position to challenge extremism, and give children confidence in their Islamic identity. They also argued that Islamic teachings require Muslims to integrate and that evidence

suggests pupils from Muslim schools do integrate into wider society. These claims were all used to counter the popular argument that Muslim schools damage social cohesion.

### **4.3 Identity, behaviour and values**

The third category of argument used to defend Muslim schools is that of identity, behaviour and values. The concept of identity is widely used in the debate over Muslim schools. It is employed by all of the stakeholder groups and is conceptualised in a variety of different ways. Therefore, as well as examining how identity is used as an argument in favour of Muslim schools, this discussion will also explore the ways in which identity is understood by stakeholders. Pupil behaviour, morality and values were also mentioned, particularly by Muslim parents, many of whom saw improvements in these areas as a principal benefit of Muslim schools.

The concepts of identity and behaviour are closely connected in the debate over Muslim schools. For example, the phrase 'Islamic identity' was frequently used in discussing Muslim schooling, particularly by Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representatives. But when asked what they meant by this phrase interviewees often gave vague responses in which they referred to good behaviour, values and morality. As they were sometimes used interchangeably, the concepts of identity and behaviour are difficult to untangle. But in order to understand stakeholders' constructions of identity and good behaviour, and the reasons why they advocate Muslim schools, it is necessary to examine these



concepts separately. This discussion will therefore first explore the use of the concept of identity, examining the suggestion that non-faith schools damage Muslim children's identity and that Muslim schools benefit identity. It will then explore stakeholders' views on the impact of Muslim and non-Muslim schooling on behaviour, morality and values.

#### *4.3.1 Non-faith state schools can damage Muslim children's identity*

The argument that attending a non-faith state school can damage a Muslim child's sense of identity was used to justify sending them to Muslim schools. The aspects of attendance at a non-faith school that interviewees saw as most detrimental to a Muslim child's identity were: i) the curriculum, ii) Islamophobia, iii) conflict between home and schools, and iv) 'not fitting in'.

##### **i) Curriculum**

Several interviewees expressed concerns about the content of the curriculum in non-faith state schools, fearing that it may have a negative effect on a Muslim child's identity. The three most problematic aspects of the curriculum were considered to be the 'un-Islamic' content of curriculum, the Eurocentric bias in the curriculum as a whole, and the underlying philosophical message conveyed.

The 'un-Islamic' content of the curriculum in non-faith state schools was a source of concern for some Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representatives. Sex education lessons and the teaching of Darwinism as fact were

specifically mentioned, as is evident in the following quote from a representative of a Muslim organisation:

Children spend about 7 or 8 hours at school, and they're taught all the wrong things. By wrong things I mean they are against the religion. They teaching about Darwinist theory, they are teaching about this family planning, sex and other things. And they hardly ever tell them... about Darwinist theory, children think this is a fact, this is proven fact. This is not a proven fact. [...] So our children are actually confused about the issues all together. So when they come back after school it's a very hard job to clear those cobwebs in their minds.

The Eurocentric bias in the national curriculum was another aspect of attending a non-faith state school that was mentioned as having a negative impact on a Muslim child's confidence and their sense of identity. The forthcoming quote illustrates this concern:

The other thing of course is that the national curriculum [...] is very Eurocentric. I think this has to change, to take into account the contribution other cultures and civilisations made to our civilisation. This way, and I think this is the objection which Afro-Caribbeans also, African educationalists make, is that when the child goes to school he or she feels intimidated, as if they have contributed nothing to this world civilisation. [...] The young person there in those schools had no confidence, but because of that in these faith schools this young person will be told of the contribution their faith, their culture, their civilisation has made to the wider civilisation. They are not simply useless people.  
[Representative of a Muslim organisation]

A further aspect of the curriculum in non-faith state schools which was claimed to have a negative affect on a Muslim child's identity was the overall philosophical ethos. The supposedly neutral ethos of the curriculum was claimed by some to promote a philosophical position which contravenes the teachings of Islam. The following quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim

school illustrates his objection to the supposed neutrality of freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

[...]...there is a big assumption that the state school is a neutral vehicle for transferring knowledge. But when one studies it deeper I think that this is actually very far from the truth. School reinforces certain concepts, values, traditions from the wider society. So if school kids... John, Mohammed, as long as you're happy, this is what they're taught, [...] everything you want to do is fine as long as you're happy. So the kid grows up with the concept that whatever you want to be, the bottom line is does it give me happiness, if it does then you do it. [...] So what we see is that school is not a neutral place, and teachers have their own values and their own ideas, all of this comes over.

## ii) Islamophobia

Muslim pupils in non-faith state schools can be subject to Islamophobia from other pupils, and at times even from staff. This was a widely held concern, mentioned by interviewees from all of the stakeholder groups. The following quote is from a mother whose son attends a mainstream state school and had experienced Islamophobia from both pupils and teachers.

My son had a few comments from the teachers at school as well. And he's quite strong and adamant in what he believes, and the teacher would be putting him down, you know, 'you're not supposed to believe that and you're not supposed to say this'. He just carried on, he's got a mouth on him, you know what I mean? 'This is what I believe...' Not that he believed in any of the terrorists or anything like that, it's just the religion itself, that's what people were picking on. [...] They said it's wrong, and he will say 'you can't tell me that my religion is wrong', he says 'anyway we don't believe in killing'. Because they said 'your religion is all about killing'.

Experiencing Islamophobia from both pupils and teachers in mainstream state schools can impact negatively on a Muslim child's sense of identity. This



concern contributed to many parent's decision to send their child to a Muslim school. Several stated that they believed their child was less likely to experience Islamophobia in a Muslim school than they were in a state school where there are few Muslim or non-white pupils. They therefore chose to send their child to a Muslim school in order to protect them from discrimination. This quote from a parent whose child attends an independent Muslim school illustrates the influence of Islamophobia on her decisions about her son's schooling.

I mean my youngest child when he was little he went to the state school he used to wear little hats. [...] Every day the boys in the playground would take his hat and put it on the roof, and the annoying thing was that I would get a complaint from the school that the caretaker had to keep on getting up. I said 'look you've got to respect the fact that he is wearing that, [...] you have got to educate other children not to keep throwing it on the top, not to keep telling me not to make him wear it, that's not fair'. And because on a Friday he would wear a longer cloak all the boys would say you're wearing a dress, you're wearing a dress, and because he is only pre school age he could not understand or express himself, so he would come home really upset.

### iii) Conflict between home and school

Several interviewees claimed that when a Muslim child attends a non-faith school they can experience a sense of conflict between home and school. Various explanations were offered for this conflict. The head teacher of a state funded Muslim school claimed that it stems from the overly simplistic presentation of minority faiths in RE lessons:

If you were to represent British culture in the way that Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist culture was represented in RE lessons then it would consist of you sort of getting fish and chips and pinstripe suits and bowler hats, baked beans, some handkerchiefs, do you know what I mean? [...] So there are some dangers inherent there, there is the possibility that children will grow

up being very mixed up. They have one way of being at home and another way of being at school and that can cause problems.

An alternative explanation for this conflict between home and school was offered by a Muslim parent. She stated that, as Islam is a complete way of life, Muslim children must be taught to incorporate Islamic manners and behaviours into all aspects of their daily lives. This obviously does not occur in non-faith state schools, where pupils of all faiths and no faith are taught the same manners and behaviours. She therefore feared that this could create conflict between home and school.

Things like when we teach them eating manners and things like that, [...] I would say eat with your right hand, say 'bismillah' which means in the name of Allah, I as a parent would do that and that would be reinforced if they went to an Islamic school from a young age. In an Islamic school, when they are eating a meal the teacher would say 'can we all say our prayers together', 'can you make sure that you go and wash your hands and that you're all eating with the right hand'. [B]ecause what I believe is Islam is not just a religion where you open up a book and just pray. Islam is a complete way of life and it is how you bring it into them. It is very very simple things, it was not major issues [...] it was just minor issues of making them practicing Muslims [...] from a very young age, that's what it was.

[Muslim parent whose child attends an independent Islamic school].

The suggestion made by these interviewees that in a non-faith school Muslims will experience a conflict between home and school implies that for non-Muslim pupils there is no such conflict. This assumes that non-Muslim pupils are taught the same manners, behaviours and values at home as they are at school. While for some this may be true, it is by no means universal. Such assumptions are based on a romantic notion of community in which all members endorse the same



behaviours and values. It relies on an idealised vision of a home-school isomorphism, which does not reflect the reality of many pupil's experience.

iv) 'Not fitting in'

The experience of feeling like an outsider or not fitting in can have a negative impact on a Muslim child's sense of identity. This is more likely to be encountered by Muslim pupils when attending a non-Muslim school where there are not many other Muslim children. One interviewee gave a moving account of his identity struggles as a child, which influenced his decision to send his child to a Muslim school.

I went to a state school here in London, in Finchley. One of the things that I felt very strongly about was identity. And I felt I had a real identity crisis all throughout my childhood and all throughout my teens. I didn't really know who I was and where I was and I kind of went a bit off the rails [...]. At one time I thought well I'm, I'm English, I'm not Muslim I'm English, and I wanted to be as much English as I could, more English than the English, and I wanted to kind of pretend I had nothing else. And then I [...] swung the other way, I am Muslim and my dad is from Egypt although I've only been to Egypt a couple of times but I tried to, you know... But then I realised eventually that I am actually a bit of both. I am English, I've got the English identity, I've got my English part of me, but I've also got my Arab part, my Egyptian part, my Muslim part. It took me a long time to sort that out, and I feel that part of the reason was because I didn't have anyone around me, I didn't have anyone that I could identify with, I didn't have any guidance on the matter, I was kind of alone and I was kind of, I was the only one, there was just me. [...] I just didn't want that for my children, I wanted my children to feel a strong sense of identity, that they belonged, that they were Muslim and they could be proud to be Muslim and there were other Muslims in this country and they felt happy about that, but at the same time, you know, I wanted them to have a good education and feel that this is their country and feel proud of their country as well.



Attending a non-faith state school was perceived by many interviewees as potentially damaging to a Muslim child's sense of identity. Problems with the curriculum, racism and Islamophobia, conflict between home and school, and 'not fitting in' were mentioned as being of particular concern. Given that the vast majority of Muslim children attend non-Muslim schools, it is vital that these issues are addressed and that Muslim children are able to attend non-faith state schools without fearing that it will damage their sense of identity.

#### *4.3.2 Muslim schooling benefits identity*

The suggestion that attending a non-faith school can damage a Muslim child's sense of identity overlaps with the assertion that Muslim schooling can benefit identity. This was one of the principal arguments used in favour of Muslim schools, and was mentioned by head teachers, parents, representatives of religious organisations and politicians.

The term 'identity' is used to mean numerous different things within these discussions. Identity was conflated with (i) knowledge of Islam, (ii) confidence and self esteem, (iii) morality and values and (iv) religious practice. British Muslim identity was conceptualised as (v) a compromise between Islamic and British identities, and as (vi) requiring protection, both from Islamic extremism and 'the west'. These constructions of identity will be discussed in turn, and illustrated using empirical examples.

##### **i) Knowledge of Islam**

Some interviewees associated Islamic identity with knowledge of Islam. They therefore saw a principle benefit of attendance at a Muslim school being the large amount of teaching about Islam that pupils receive. They claimed that by attending a Muslim school pupils would improve their knowledge of Islam and consequently develop a stronger Islamic identity. The underlying fear behind these suggestions was that a lack of knowledge about Islam may result in the child not retaining their faith, as is evident in the following quote from the representative of a Muslim organisation.

[F]or the parents, it is important for them that their children is getting religious education for longer. Which is very necessary. Because if you look at those other boy's schools, boys who go to those schools, ask them about their religion, 'I don't know, I don't know'. So, what they will be in their practical lives? Will they be Muslim, will they be Christian, will they be Jews, or nothing? Most of them will be nothing.

## ii) Confidence and self-esteem

It was suggested by many Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representative that attending a Muslim school gives children confidence in their distinctive identity, which improves their self-esteem and thereby facilitates their interaction with wider society. This is evident in the following quote, where the head teacher of an independent Muslim school claims that pupils attending Muslim schools are more confident in their identity as British Muslims, which allows them to interact better with wider society.

If you analyse the girls or the boys who come from separate school, they'll find that because they feel so comfortable with their own self esteem, their own identity at Muslim schools, they tend to better interact with other people. They integrate successfully simply because they've got the

confidence in themselves as British Muslims. Independent Muslim schools provide that solid base to say 'You're Muslim, you're a British Muslim. There's no need for you to be frightened of who you are', and they become much more stronger in themselves. And as a result when they go out to the outside world they feel much more comfortable, much more confident.

### iii) Islamic identity as morals and values

The responses of some interviewees indicated that they saw the concept of an Islamic identity as being interwoven with 'good' morals and values, as was indicated at the beginning of this section. This was particularly true of Muslim parents whose children attended Muslim schools. When asked to expand on why they thought attending a Muslim school benefits a child's identity, several stated that Muslim schools instil good values and morals. Some interviewees drew a clear opposition between a moral Islamic identity versus an immoral secular western identity. This is evident in the following quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim school, who states that parents send their children to Muslim schools in order to protect their children's values and morals, or in other words their 'Islamic identity'.

**Interviewer:** That identity that you say Muslims are concerned about keeping safe in children, what is that identity?

**Head teacher:** In their eyes they see the Muslim identity as somebody who believes in Allah, who lives or tries to live their life to the best of their ability according to the Sunnah of the prophet, peace be upon him. They have within that identity some values, moral values and other areas, cultural values I suppose, in there as well. And that's what they see as identity. When they see the most secularised people, for example they see the dress code of the average British child, it sends a warning signal, its not dressed according to the Sharia. When they see the drinking, it's not according to Sharia. So all these factors build a particular picture, a particular identity in the minds of Muslims, a range of Muslims. And they see the Muslim identity as distinctly different from the one that they see upon the street or on the television and all that. And that is in the way of



**... dressing, in the way of belief, in the way of values, in the way of respect, so it's identity that has many facets which are deeply embedded in the Qur'an or the Sunnah.**

**[Head teacher of independent Muslim school]**

#### **iv) Identity as a series of practices**

**Islamic identity was thought of by some interviewees as a series of practices or actions. This was particularly prevalent with parents who sent their children to Muslim schools. Several claimed that attending a Muslim school gave their child a stronger sense of their Islamic identity. When asked what they meant by 'Islamic identity' they responded that at a Muslim school the child could perform their daily activities in accordance with Islamic doctrine, and this would serve to strengthen or preserve their religious identity. This is illustrated by the following quote from a Muslim mother whose child attends an independent Muslim school.**

**Islam is a way of life, everything you do from the minute you wake up to the minute you go to bed, there's a way of doing it. From how you drink your water, how you get out of bed, how you come out of the bathroom, there's a way of doing it. And that's what is practiced in this school as compared to a normal school [...]. And they can practice that all day long here, [...] it becomes second nature to them. Not that anything stops them doing it in a non-Islamic school, but it's taught to them so it becomes a part of them.**

#### **v) Compromise between Muslim identity and British identity**

**Some interviewees suggested that attending a state funded Muslim school enabled children to develop a compromise between their Islamic and their British identities. The implication was that a non-faith state school cultivates a British identity, an independent Muslim school instils an Islamic identity, and a state**

funded Muslim school promotes a British Muslim identity. As one parent put it, state funded Muslim schools give pupils 'the best of both worlds'.

The following quote is from a Muslim parent who teaches in a state funded Muslim school and whose children attended that school at primary level but have now moved up to the fee paying secondary school. He strongly advocated the state funding of more Muslim schools, believing that this facilitated the development a British Muslim identity.

But I do think that more Muslim schools would actually create if you like a stronger identity of British Muslims, Muslims who live in the modern world, live in the real world who are happy to integrate into this society, feel proud of being British and also feel proud of being Muslim. [...] [My children] are absolutely well adjusted happy children who are happy about who they are and are also happy about being British [...]. You know, he supports England, he supports Tottenham Hotspur and in many ways you wouldn't recognise him from a non-Muslim child, but he has his faith as well.

vi) Identity needs to be protected, both from 'Islamic extremism' and from 'the west'

Several interviewees perceived Muslim children's identity as requiring protection, and used this to argue in favour of Muslim schools. While some feared the negative influences of 'western society', others focussed on the threat posed by 'Islamic extremism'. Both forms of protection were argued to be offered by state funded Muslim schooling.

The threat posed by 'western society' to Muslim children's identity was mentioned by parents, head teachers and representatives of Muslim organisations. The preservation and protection of their religious identity was seen as being an

important aspect of sending children to a Muslim school. This is evident in the following quotes from a representative of a Muslim organisation:

**Interviewer:** So what do you think are the benefits of educating Muslim children in Islamic schools?

**Interviewee:** I mean there's one principal benefit which is that it protects their identity, it moulds their identity on Islam, that's the benefit I think.

Many references to the need to protect children's identity from 'western society' were unspecific about what exactly children needed protection against. However, in the following quote the interviewee is specifically concerned about a 'tide of secular values'.

We see nothing to stop this tide of secular values becoming more into the fore. It scares us to be quite frank with you. And these are the ways that we try to safeguard ourselves, having Islamic schools etcetera.  
[Head teacher of an independent Muslim school]

The suggestion here is that this 'tide of secular values' poses a threat to Muslims, and Muslim schooling somehow offers protection against this.

The threat posed by 'the west' to Muslim children's identity was mentioned particularly, although not exclusively, in relation to girls. Parents expressed concern that their daughters would have close contact with boys, which was considered by some to be un-Islamic. This is illustrated in the following quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim school, who talked at length about his struggle to convince parents to allow their daughters to go on to mixed colleges and universities after leaving school.

[...] In a sense they are afraid that if they allow their girls to go on into mixed education schools or colleges that they'll lose their own identity,



become embroiled in things which are not Islamic [...] Because of the way the parents have been brought up they feel that the girls should not really be educated in schools because they'll be lost to western society and so forth.

[Head teacher of an independent Muslim school]

As well as offering protection from 'the west', some interviewees claimed that state funded Muslim schools protected children from Islamic extremism. They claimed that without the confidence and strength of identity that a state funded Muslim school can instil, Muslim pupils may be vulnerable to fundamentalist groups. This was mentioned by a head teacher of a state funded Muslim school, who stated that he aimed to give children confidence in their identity, which prevented them from having 'identity crises' later in life.

We're creating a culture, a British Islamic culture, and creating a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence in the children so that they will be able to participate fully and positively in the world outside. [...] Without that self confidence our experience and observations and analysis is that they are very prey to a sort of identity crisis, [...] and then they possibly seek out some sort of strong, perhaps fundamentalist or extremist position which gives them a strong sense of identity. So, that's not Islam, and we, it's not that we're trying to prevent it, it's not the objective of the school but it's just something that's come to mind as we've gone along.

[Head teacher of a state funded Muslim school].

The above arguments all advocate Muslim schools in order to protect the identity of Muslim children. One interviewee, however, argued in favour of separate Muslim schools in order to protect what he called 'white kids'. A representative of the British National Party claimed that educating Muslims in separate schools served to protect non-Muslim children from having to 'put up with having Muslim children in their classrooms'.

Well, Muslims, not Asians, Muslims. They're the ones that seem to be causing all the damn trouble in this country; they're the majority aren't they? Make them separate. [...] Do our white kids want their education interfering by having education for Muslims within their own lessons? I don't think that they do.

He went on to claim that Muslims in Britain pose a terrorist threat and for this reason should be isolated from wider society. He therefore advocated Muslim schooling in order to protect non-Muslims, both from having to share their classrooms with Muslim children and from terrorism. These arguments are clearly Islamophobic, as they are based on fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims. This is the sole example of an Islamophobic argument being used to argue *in favour* of the state funding of Muslim schools. There are, however, numerous examples of Islamophobic arguments *against* Muslim schools, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

#### 4.3.3 *Behaviours and values*

Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representatives claimed that children's morals and behaviours are affected positively by attending a Muslim school, and negatively by attending a non-faith state school. This was used as an argument in favour of Muslim schooling.

Non-faith state schools were accused of failing to teach children values and manners, resulting in bad behaviour in children. One interviewee in particular blamed this on rules apparently restricting teachers to discussing only academic matters.

The problem with the mixed-faith mainstream is [...] if you talk to maths teachers they say 'no I'm not going to say anything about religion', 'I'm not going to say anything about morals or discipline'. Teachers are not supposed to teach children these things as well, discipline, morals. All the teachers they say this. Even my daughter, she is a teacher at a Leicester school. And she's not very happy to say anything about morals or other things, except the subject. She's a maths teacher anyway, and I ask her, 'what's wrong with telling them speak the truth and don't lie and don't backbite, these are simple little things'. She says 'oh we are not allowed'.  
[Representative of a Muslim organisation]

Several Muslim parents blamed the supposedly poor behaviour of pupils from non-faith schools on the prioritisation of academic subjects over the teaching of behaviour and values. The following quote is from a Muslim mother whose child attends a non-faith state school, who expressed concern about the lack of teaching about values and behaviours in many state schools.

Because in state schools they don't teach values. They are only focussing on education, education. So the kids get to college and do A' levels. So what? Child should have respect.

As well as highlighting the poor behaviours transmitted by non-faith state schools, many interviewees discussed the good behaviour instilled by Muslim schools. One parent whose child attends a Muslim state school was keen to point out how clean and tidy Muslim schools are compared with many non-faith state schools.

Everything is clean. If you go to other schools you find litter in the yard, go to the toilets and there is all this writing, graffiti, broken things, and government fund them, you know.



Another Muslim parent highlighted the lack of swearing, drug taking and underage drinking that goes on in Muslim schools compared with some non-faith state schools.

I mean if you go to the Islamic school you're not going to get people swearing every single minute, you are not going to get people taking drugs, or people going to a shop and saying I'm eighteen, a pint of beer.

These interviewees were keen to stress the comparatively 'good' behaviour and morals transmitted by Muslim schools.

One point of particular interest that emerged from these discussions was the implication in the statements of some Muslim interviewees that Islam has a monopoly on morality. Two interviewees in particular, labelled good behaviour and morals as 'Islamic', while the rest of British society was perceived as ill mannered and immoral. When explicitly asked whether he perceived Islam as having 'a monopoly on morality' one interviewee confirmed that he did, citing the bad behaviour he had seen from non-Muslim youths as evidence. The implications for Muslim schooling of this perception are illustrated in the following quote, where the interviewee refers to 'Islamic manners and behaviours' but then proceeds to list behaviours and characteristics which parents of all faiths and none would want to instil in their children.

Well, Islamic schooling is to bring the children up in an Islamic environment, and equip the children with Islamic manner and behaviour. Islamic manner and behaviour tells the children to be kind to the neighbours, to encourage them not to mess around, not to throw your banana skin in the street, or smoke cigarettes [...].  
[Head teacher of independent Muslim school]

The framing of generically good behaviours and morals as 'Islamic' is again evident in the forthcoming quote from a representative of a Muslim organisation. He uses the concept of the 'Islamic personality' to sum up the attitudes that he believes should be instilled by a Muslim schools, and then goes on to illustrate this with the example of not putting one's parents in an old people's home.

[...T]he role of an Islamic school is to complement the role of a parent in educating children, so they should be seeking to nurture the Islamic personality first and foremost. What that means essentially is a person's thoughts, his inclinations, that these are in line with Islam. [...] That sounds quite theoretical. To give it a practical slant [...], this would mean that a Muslim would not put his parents in an old people's home because he would understand that his obligation is to look after his parents irrespective of his job and the amount of wealth he wants to achieve.

While this view is of course not shared by everyone in Britain, it is not only Muslims who reject the use of old people's homes. Evidently there is some confusion about what behaviours and values can be considered 'Islamic', and what can be deemed evidence of an 'Islamic personality'.

Issues surrounding behaviour were central to many arguments in favour of Muslim schools. Non-faith state schools were accused of failing to teach children values and manners, resulting in bad behaviour. In contrast, Muslim schools were argued to instil good behaviours and morals, which some interviewees verified by mentioning the lack of swearing, graffiti and underage drinking in Muslim schools. A small number of interviewees went further, claiming that Islam has a monopoly on morality, and presenting non-Muslims as badly behaved and devoid of values. They labelled generically good behaviours as 'Islamic behaviours' and described them as elements of the 'Islamic personality'. However, the vast

majority of interviewees did not take the argument to these extremes. Most simply voiced concern about the poor behaviour found in some non-faith schools and used this as an argument in favour of Muslim schools.

#### **4.4 Education**

The fourth type of argument used in favour of the state funding of Muslim schools centres on the style and standard of education that they offer. This argument was used by members of all of the stakeholder groups, and can be divided into four sub-categories: academic factors; improved resources; a holistic approach; and state control.

##### *4.4.1 Academic factors*

The underachievement of Muslim children in mainstream state schools and the comparatively high academic standards in faith schools was an important factor in the Muslim community's decision to establish their own schools, in many parents' desires to send their children to Muslim schools, and in policy makers' decision to fund them.

The influence of academic factors in the decision to establish Muslim schools is illustrated in the following quote from a representative of a Muslim organisation that took a central role in the establishment of the first Muslim school in Britain. He states that the low achievement of Muslim children in state schools was a principal motivation behind the establishment of separate Muslim schools.



Most of our children are leaving school without any qualifications and low pay. [...] Since state schools have been failing Muslim children, ways must be found to raise the overall standard of Muslim children. [...] Islamic school will help individual Muslim child to raise his/her standard of education and go for higher education and research to serve humanity.

Many parents mentioned the good academic results achieved by many Muslim schools as being an influential factor in their decision to send their children to a Muslim school. This is illustrated in the following quote from a Muslim mother whose daughter attended a state funded Muslim primary school. In the absence of a state funded Muslim secondary school in their area she was in the process of deciding which secondary school to send her daughter to, and stated that academic factors were her primary concern.

Interviewer: So in deciding which secondary school to send her to, is the academic worth of the school, is that the most important thing to you?

Mother: Yeah, I think it would be yeah, because it's in the long run really isn't it. We could provide her with the rest at home, she'd had a good foundation at [name of Muslim primary school], so the rest of the input would be from home, but if she would achieve better and be pushed more in a high academic achieving school we'd send her there. She would be nurtured more probably there.

Interviewer: And that's more important to you than the Islamic ethos?

Mother: Yeah because sooner or later they have to go out in to the wide world. So they have to go college, they have to go to university, they have to go into a work place.

The importance of academic standards to parents was supported by head teachers of Muslim schools, who stressed the influence of exam results on parents' decisions about where to educate their children. Several head teachers said that they felt that the academic standards of the school was more important to many

parents than the Islamic ethos. This is evident in the following quote from the head teacher of a state funded Muslim school.

A lot of parents who send their children to school here send them here not necessarily because it's an Islamic school but because the children, [...] they do very well academically [...].

Faith schools consistently achieve better academic results than non-faith schools. In 2001 the government stated that it intended to fund more faith schools, and David Blunkett said he wished he knew the secret of church schools' success, so that he could bottle it for use in all schools. The importance of the academic results achieved by faith schools was evident in interviews with politicians about their views on state funded Muslim schools. All of the politicians interviewed used arguments about academic standards to advocate Muslim schools. As one MP put it 'we're not overly concerned with denominational labelling of schools but the quality of education that it provides'. The high academic standards of many Muslim schools were evidently an important factor in the Muslim community's decision to establish Muslim schools, parents' decision to send their children to them, and politicians' decision to give them state funding.

#### *4.4.2 Improved resources*

The resources and facilities in private Muslim schools are often of a lower standard than those in state funded schools due to their limited funds. Schools are often able to improve their facilities by becoming state funded. This was used as an argument for the state funding of Muslim schools, particularly by Muslim

parents. The following quote is from a Muslim mother whose daughter's school is in the process of applying for state funding. She argues in favour of state funding due to the likely improvements in resources and facilities that will occur as a result.

Interviewer: [The school your daughter attends] is currently making the decision to apply for state funding. What are your thoughts on that?

Muslim mother: I think it can only improve it if it does. There are some things that we have done without and I feel that the kids could do with, like regarding their PE, my daughter loves it but they haven't got much facilities here, they're really limited. And science, she absolutely loves science, and maybe I'm thinking that because I'm thinking about her future, she wants to go into forensic science, so I think that if they had a bigger lab she would be able to experiment more, and they haven't got it [...].

The likely improvements to resources and facilities as a result of state funding were also mentioned by organisational representatives and head teachers. This was seen by many interviewees as a key benefit of, and argument for, the state funding of Muslim schools.

#### *4.4.3 A holistic approach*

A third educational argument used to advocate Muslim schools is the holistic nature of the education that they provide. Muslim children who attend ordinary state schools often also attend a supplementary school, or 'madrassah', where they learn to read the Qur'an in Arabic and are taught Islamic behaviours and practices. Many Muslim parents and head teachers argued that educating children in Muslim schools negates the need for children to attend a madrassah after school. This was widely seen as a positive thing for a number of reasons. Muslim parents often felt



that attending a madrassah after the end of the school day was very tiring for children and that this could be avoided by their attending a Muslim school, as is evident in the following quote from a Muslim mother.

[...] I send him to a mosque in the evening. But that's like too much for him. Coming home from school, getting about an hour's rest, and then going to the mosque, he's there for two hours, it's too much for a little child, you know. [...] And if there was something, you know, included with all the other classes, an Islamic, an hour or so that would be nice. Because it's too much for them. [...] I'd love him to go to an Islamic school.

Interviewer: What would you like about that?

Muslim mother: He'd have Islamic lessons. That's mainly my reason. I'd like him to have, you know, like Arabic classes. Because if he did go to an Islamic school they would have Arabic classes, Islamic classes, and he could go to all his classes in school time and then he'd have the evenings to himself.

This view was supported by some head teachers of Muslim schools, who stated that a key element of the appeal of their school to parents was that the children received their Islamic and Qur'anic education during school hours. The following quote is from a head teacher of a state funded Muslim school, who believed that many parents sent their children there because it negated the need for supplementary schooling.

A lot of parents who send their children to school here send them here not necessarily because it's an Islamic school but because [...] the curriculum is delivered in such a way that they don't actually have to go to a supplementary school in the evening, so they've got a better social life at home. [...] No one has ever said to me that I want to send my child here because it's an Islamic school; they send their children here because it gives children the whole curriculum as parents would wish. Because Qur'anic education is regarded as important.

This head teacher went on to assert that if Qur'anic classes were provided either within the school timetable or immediately after school in ordinary non-faith state schools then there would be no need for separate Muslim schools.

The argument that Muslim schools offer a holistic approach to education by enabling Islamic and Qur'anic studies to be taught alongside academic subjects was connected by some interviewees to the view of Islam as a complete way of life. Because religion should permeate all aspects of a Muslim's daily life, it is therefore considered inappropriate to separate the religious and the academic aspects of education. The following quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim school demonstrates his strong preference for a holistic approach to Muslim schooling.

[Muslim] schools are being established because more and more Muslims are beginning to see that an Islamic education is a complete education. You don't exclude the faith of the child; you don't exclude Islam from the educational equation. [...] The state system doesn't allow faith to come into science, faith to come into the humanities, and I don't understand how that can be. [...] I believe by having kids in an environment where their Islam is not just their faith to be treated half an hour a week, but that Islam is a living, relevant fact of life, is going to provide them with more of a rounded personality and an understanding of where they are, who they are, why they are and what's happening in the world today. I really do think that by excluding faith the children are suffering. And from an Islamic point of view this wholeness... it's a cliché but Islam is a complete way of life, and yet in education we exclude it. Why? So for us religious education is education. Full stop. It's not *part* of education it *is* education, and we bring the whole shooting match together. That's what we try to do.  
[Head teacher of an independent Muslim school]

The holistic nature of education is important to many Muslim parents and head teachers, both on the practical grounds of negating the need for supplementary

schooling, and philosophical reasons of bringing Islam into every sphere of education.

#### *4.4.4 State funding results in state control*

State funded Muslim schools are required to adhere to a strict system of regulation and control. For example, they must follow the national curriculum, all teachers must be qualified and they must be subject to regular inspections. The resulting loss of autonomy can make many Muslim schools reluctant to enter the state sector, making it a common argument *against* state funding (see chapter five). This loss of autonomy is, however, sometimes also used as an argument *in favour* of the state funding of Muslim schools, as was evident in interviews with several politicians. The following quote demonstrates that increased state control is seen by some politicians as an advantage of state funding, and is hence used as an argument in its favour.

I think being open to regulation is an advantage that I would see of [Muslim] schools being part of the state system rather than being independent of the state system.  
[Politician]

The suggestion that giving control of Muslim schools over to the state would be a positive outcome of awarding them funding reveals implicit suspicion of what goes on in Muslim schools. It is unlikely that a similar comment would be made regarding independent Church of England schools, as there is not the same mistrust about the content and standard of the teaching in Church of England schools as there is about Muslim schools.



So far in this chapter, four categories of argument in favour of Muslim schools have been identified: equal rights; a better society; identity, behaviours and values; and educational factors. These arguments are used by members of all stakeholder groups (head teachers, organisational representatives, politicians and parents) to justify their advocacy of state funded Muslim schools. Some Muslim parents mentioned these arguments as influential in their choice of school, in particular the academic standards of the school and its impact on their child's identity and behaviour. However, in choosing their child's school many parents are not led by their personal views on faith schooling, but by more pragmatic considerations. Parents' fears for their daughters well being, the location of the school, desire for a faith based education, lack of knowledge about Muslim schools, and school fees were mentioned by many parents as being highly influential in their school choices. The impact of these more practical factors will now be examined in turn.

## **4.5 Parents' reasons for choice of school**

### **4.5.1 *Girls' schools***

In discussing their choice of school for their daughters, several Muslim parents stated that girls need protecting, and cited this as an influential factor in their school selection. For many, this was manifested in terms of preferring that their daughters attend single sex schools in order to avoid them having contact with boys. A group of Muslim mothers who were interviewed at an all girls' non-faith state school said that they do not worry about their sons in the same way as they

worry about their daughters. Their concerns stemmed from their fear of their daughters becoming pregnant outside of marriage.

**Interviewer:** So why do you choose to send your child to this school?

**Woman A:** Well one thing is it's separate, it's only girls school.

[...]

**Woman B:** We do not worry for boys. People worry for girls. We don't allow the girls to go to the man. [...] My own feeling for girl is worry because it's not good if someone like rape or someone like making a baby not married. With my people it is no sleeping with man until after marriage. Not before marriage. But in this country they say this is free country, and Muslim girls go the wrong way. That's why mums worry.

Many education authorities in Britain are currently phasing out single sex state schools, often amalgamating local boys and girls schools. Several Muslim parents mentioned their displeasure at this policy. Muslim schools tend to be mixed sex at primary school but segregated at secondary level. The phasing out of single sex secondary schools poses difficulties for Muslim parents who do not want their daughters to attend a mixed sex school but cannot afford to send them to independent single sex Muslim schools.

The desire of many Muslim parents to protect their daughters was also mentioned by some head teachers of Muslim schools, who cited this as a key reason for establishing a Muslim school. The following quote is from the head teacher of a Muslim secondary school, which he set up in order to avoid parents sending their daughters back to their countries of origin until they no longer have to go to school.

After the primary they [parents] never [...] wanted to send their daughters to the school because they never approved of mix swimming, mixed PE, mixed classes. So this started to bring the kind of attitude of 'okay I will

send my daughter to the Yeman or to Pakistan or in Egypt', so when she will be 16+ there is no compulsory education she can come then and live here as a British citizen. But to me this was very very dangerous. Because it means that the girls are uneducated British citizens. [...] But if the things they were looking for, those requirements were to be provided then they will not do that. [...] So we started Muslim schools because we were concerned about the future of Britain, the future of the British society. [Head teacher of a state funded Muslim school].

While many parents respond to the desire to protect their daughters by educating them in a single sex or a Muslim school that is not always the case. Some parents felt that they were more able to protect their daughters by sending them to the local school in order to avoid them having to travel on public transport. This is evident in the following quote from a Muslim father whose daughters attend the local non-faith state school while his son attends a Muslim sixth form college.

I would like my daughters to do their A' levels at the school they're at. That way we can drop them off at school. So from that point of view, whereas I feel perfectly happy with my son taking the bus there [to the Muslim sixth form college], and it's not any safer or more dangerous than my daughters doing, I'd just like to keep them under my wing for a bit longer.

So while for many Muslim parents the desire to protect their daughters leads them to send them to a single sex or Muslim school, that response is not unanimous. Others, like the father quoted above, protect their daughters by sending them to the local school to avoid them using public transport. This is a prime example of how practical considerations are central to parents' decision-making process.



#### *4.5.2 Locality and family history*

Several parents cited the convenience of the location as the key factor in their choice of school. This was verified by head teachers, who stated that the locality was the central concern for many parents. The following quote is from the head teacher of a Church of England school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils.

I personally think that parents in urban areas choose the nearest school, and they don't actually generally tend to look into whether it's a Church school.

Another influential factor that is closely associated with the locality of the school is the family history of attendance at that school. Several parents said that the fact that they or members of their family had been to the local school was an important factor in their choice to send their child there. This is evident in the following quote from a Muslim mother whose child attends the local Church of England primary school.

Muslim mother: I went to St Stephen's as well.

Interviewer: Oh did you?

Muslim mother: Yeah, my brother, I think he's 32, he went to St Stephen's, we all went to St Stephen's you see. And my younger sisters, their kids are at St Stephen's and they went to St Stephen's. It's like a family thing, you know? We've all been to that school, and our kids are going there now.

Interviewer: Right. So why did you decide to send your children there? What were the factors involved?

Muslim mother: I think the main one was because we all went there. It's close by, we knew all the teachers, most of the teachers are still there that we had, and it's a lovely school. That's mainly why.

This view was supported by several head teachers, particularly in inner city areas, who stated that family history was a highly influential factor in many

parents' choice of school. The head teacher of an inner city Church of England school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils stated:

I have an awful lot of children whose families have come to the school, whose mums and dads came to the school or whose aunts and uncles came to the school.

The convenience of going to a local school and the assurance offered by a family history of attendance evidently influenced some parents' choices about where to educate their children.

#### *4.5.3 'There's faith. It's not ours but at least there's faith'*

The head teacher of a Church of England school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils stated that the Christian ethos of the school was considered as a benefit by some Muslim parents. She stated that while many parents sent their children there simply because it was the local school, some saw the Church of England ethos as positive as it meant that faith in general was respected in the school. In the quote that entitles this section, this head teacher was speculating that some Muslim parents appreciate their being faith in the school, even if it is not their own. She went on to say that:

Parents seem to... they either have the attitude that this is the local school so it doesn't matter and they don't think about it, or we have a group who like the idea that it's a school where children are encouraged to say a prayer, and where we're not frightened to talk about God as a creator and not just as somebody at the outside who doesn't really matter very much. And [...] I think they're quite pleased that they've got a head who believes, and isn't sneering of their beliefs.

While some Muslim parents whose children attend Church of England schools obviously do see the schools religious ethos as a positive thing, others stated that it was completely irrelevant and was not a factor in their choice of school. Evidently parents' choice of school can be influenced by a variety of different factors based on their individual priorities and experiences.

#### *4.5.4 Lack of knowledge about Muslim schools*

Some Muslim parents, particularly those in lower socio economic groups and with a poorer standard of English, lacked knowledge about Muslim schools. This ranged from not knowing what is taught in Muslim schools to not knowing that state funded Muslim schools exist. In a city where there are currently two state funded Muslim schools, all three of the Muslim mothers interviewed were unaware that these schools had become state funded. They therefore had not considered sending their children there as they assumed they would not be able to afford the fees.

Another Muslim mother interviewed was unsure of whether the curriculum in a Muslim school would include academic as well as religious subjects. This is evident in the following quote:

Well, if he went to an Islamic school, I mean I'm not sure if they'd have maths, science, and everything else, or would they have? I'm not sure. I don't know much about Islamic schools.

At the end of the interview she said



[...] I mean you've made me think now. The questions you've asked me, they've never really crossed my mind. I know there is Islamic schools, but far away.

Evidently these interviewees had never given much thought to sending their child to a Muslim school. They had chosen their schools on the basis of practical concerns such as location and cost, and all said they were happy with the schools their children attended.

#### *4.5.5 School fees*

A final factor affecting Muslim parents' decisions about whether to send their child to a Muslim school is the financial implications. The vast majority of Muslim schools are fee paying. While many independent Muslim schools charge comparatively low fees in order to accommodate parents on lower incomes, most Muslim parents still cannot afford to pay. Several parents interviewed said that if they could afford to send their children to Muslim schools then they would do so. This was discussed in depth by the head teacher of a small independent Muslim school in London, who stated that many Muslim parents make substantial sacrifices in order to be able to afford to send their children to a Muslim school, because they do not like the other schooling options available to them.

Muslim parents who are conscientious about their responsibilities towards their children, they are having to make these kinds of decisions. [...] I mean, we've got parents who are in council houses. [...] they know that they have no other option. For whatever reason they can't home school them, and they are having to send them to an Islamic school and they're having to pay. [...] those are parents who are really making the ends meet, you know, nothing in the house, just about enough to eat. But they are having to do it. They really can't do anything else. [...] But this sacrifice is

juggled for the sake of Allah. And these are just some of the sacrifices that Muslims feel they have to undertake. [...] There's just no options. The only options are [...] private schools, Christian schools, things like that, and they're realising that isn't really appropriate for their children in the long run.

While some Muslim parents can make sacrifices in order to accommodate the cost of school fees, for others this is simply not feasible. The cost of the fees at independent Muslim schools, while lower than many non-Muslim private schools, is prohibitively high for the majority of Muslim parents. This therefore affects their decision as to whether to send their child to a Muslim school because, unless they live close to one of the few state funded Muslim schools, many do not have the option to send their child to a Muslim school.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the four main arguments used by stakeholders in favour of Muslim schools: equal rights; a better society; identity, behaviours and values; and educational factors. The various forms which these arguments can take have been discussed, and illustrated using empirical examples. As well as drawing on these arguments, Muslim parents also mentioned a series of other considerations when describing the factors which influenced their choice of school. These practical factors, such as the location of the school and the fees they charge, were explored in order to shed light on Muslim parents' reasons for choosing a certain school for their child.

An important finding to emerge from this analysis is that representatives of each of the stakeholder groups employed all of the main arguments in favour of

Muslim schools. Parents, head teachers, organisational representatives and politicians drew on arguments about equal rights, a better society, identity behaviours and values, and education to explain their support of Muslim schools. Not every member of each of these groups used all of the arguments. As was indicated above, some Muslim parents did not mention these arguments, instead stating that their choice of school was influenced by practical factors. Nonetheless, interviewees from all four stakeholder groups drew on all four of the concepts detailed above in order to defend the state funding of Muslim schools.

The use of the same concept should not be taken to indicate agreement between stakeholders about their reason for advocating more state funded Muslim schools. On the contrary, how and why a certain concept is used varies considerably both between and within stakeholder groups. Some arguments that mention the same general concept (such as identity) and want the same outcome (such as the state funding of Muslim schools) in fact directly contradict one another. For example, the suggestion of a head teacher that Muslim schools protect their pupils' Islamic identity from corruption by western secular society obviously conflicts with the argument of a far right politician that Muslim schools should be encouraged in order to protect the identity of 'white kids'. So while these interviewees both employ the concept of identity to support their argument, they clearly differ in their reasons for advocating Muslim schools.

Possible explanations for the widespread use of these concepts and the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from this finding are considered in Chapter Six. First, however, it is necessary to question why, given the strong



arguments in favour of Muslim schooling, there remains such a minimal number of state funded Muslim schools in the UK.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Barriers to the State Funding of Muslim Schools**

Britain has a long history of state funded faith schools, and Islam is the country's second largest religion. But despite this there are currently only a handful of state funded Muslim schools in Britain. This chapter investigates the reasons for this shortfall, and in particular whether it is due to Islamophobia. By examining the barriers to state funded Muslim schools rather than simply the arguments used against them it is possible to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the issues involved. The principal arguments used to oppose the state funding of Muslim schools are considered, but so too are the factors which discourage Muslim schools from applying for state funding and the practical barriers that stand in the way. This provides a balanced account of the situation, and highlights that contrary to popular assumption not all Muslims want state funding for Muslim schools.

In the face of increasing hostility towards Islam and Muslims it is all too easy to assume that the minimal number of state funded Muslim schools in Britain is due entirely to Islamophobia, as was suggested by many Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representatives. This chapter contests this suggestion, arguing that while Islamophobia does inhibit the state funding of Muslim schools it is not the only factor involved. Five factors are identified as contributing to the minimal number of Muslim schools funded by the state: Islamophobia, fears of social fragmentation, secularisation, regulatory requirements, and the desire for autonomy. These factors are examined in turn and evidence is provided to illustrate how each inhibits an increase in state

funded Muslim schools. The relationship between these factors is then explored to demonstrate their interdependence and complexity.

### **5.1 Why are there not more state funded Muslim schools?**

Politicians, Muslim parents, head teachers, and representatives of religious organisations were asked what they perceive to be the explanation for the minimal number of state funded Muslim schools in the UK. Most politicians either blamed the relatively recent growth of the British Muslim community or claimed that there are insufficient numbers of Muslims in many geographical areas to warrant establishing a Muslim school. This latter explanation, while frequently cited, is inherently flawed, as most applications for state funded Muslim schools are not asking that entirely new schools be established, but rather that existing independent Muslim schools be allowed to enter the state sector. Independent Muslim schools applying for state funding are by and large established schools that not only have sufficient pupil numbers but often also have long waiting lists.

In contrast, Muslim parents, head teachers and organisational representatives often argued that the minimal number of Muslim schools in the state sector is largely due to ignorance, misunderstanding or fear of Islam resulting in discrimination against Muslims. Such views and their consequences are commonly termed Islamophobia. Interestingly, however, only one interviewee used the word Islamophobia to articulate these concerns. The remainder talked about the popular misconception of Muslims as extremists and the mistreatment of Islam in comparison with other faiths. The



sole example of use of the word Islamophobia came from the head teacher of a Muslim secondary school:

Post September 11<sup>th</sup> I don't think Muslim schools will be able to get funding anymore. There is so much Islamophobia now. I am guessing the government wouldn't dare do it [fund a Muslim school] again.

### *5.1.1 Muslims as extremists*

Many interviewees claimed that there are not more state funded Muslim schools because of the popular misconception of Muslims as religious fanatics and potential terrorists. As one head teacher of a Muslim school whose application for state funding was repeatedly refused put it, 'I think they really thought we were going to set up bomb making classes'. This view was supported by a representative of the Church of England who said:

...I'm afraid there's a suspicion that Islam at its most robust leads to suicide bombing and things of that kind. And there's a sort of fear in the mentality of many people in England that Muslim schools are actually not about dogmatic strength but about extremism, leading to exclusivism and indeed violence.

Several head teachers of Muslim schools claimed that Muslim schools are perceived as being in practice very different from other faith schools. They are assumed to be more devoutly religious and intent on indoctrinating their pupils than other church schools, with some people even assuming that Muslim schools teach in a foreign language. The head teacher of a state funded Muslim school spoke of how she had invited a member of the City Council to give out certificates at a school presentation day. The councillor said she would like to come but she was not sure how she would interact. It was therefore suggested

that she visit the school before hand to 'get a feel for the place' so that she felt more comfortable on the day.

And she said 'yes I think I would like to do that', so we invited her and she looked around and she said gasped and said 'you've got all your displays in English!'. And I said 'yes', and she said 'but don't you teach in Urdu?' and I said 'no', and I had a laugh with her about that. I've had so much problems trying to deliver the national curriculum in English never mind trying to deliver the thing in Urdu! So, you know, I think a lot of it is not knowing what Muslim schools are about. And when you don't know something I think it can be quite scary.

This lack of understanding and consequent fear of Muslim schools was argued to be a key reason for the state's reluctance to award them funding.

The popular misconception of Muslims as religious fanatics and extremists was often blamed on the media. Negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims in newspapers and on television were argued to influence the public perception of Muslim schools, making it more difficult to get funding.

Interviewer: Why do you think that it is so difficult for Muslim schools to get state funding?

Head teacher: I think there are a number of reasons. I think that if I were to put the most powerful reasons I would say it's the media in the way it tends to portray Islam and the Muslim communities. I don't know why they are consistently doing that and not making an effort to make a distinction between the vast majority of the Muslim community that seeks to lead normal lives, you know, working and trying to make ends meet and educating our young, and the very few extremists, who are I suppose hell bent on violence, inflicting violence both on non-Muslims and indeed Muslims.

As this quote illustrates, the perception of Muslims as extremists and the consequent suspicion of Muslim schools were argued to act as a barrier to the funding of Muslim schools.

### *5.1.2 Comparisons with other faiths*

To support their claim that Islamophobia lies behind the limited number of state funded Muslim schools, several interviewees drew a comparison with the number of state funded schools of other faiths. They argued that the relatively large number of Christian and Jewish schools compared with the minimal number of Muslim schools was evidence of Islamophobia.

And if you compare this against other religions, like Christianity or Judaism, they have got schools that get government aid; there are a lot of them. So maybe some sort of prejudice is going on, and they don't help us as they help others. So we have given up. We are trying to manage on our own.

(Representative of a Muslim organisation)

This chapter will challenge the suggestion made by these interviewees that the lack of state funded Muslim schools is due *entirely* to Islamophobia. While Islamophobia does inhibit an increase in state funded Muslim schools, it is by no means the only factor involved.

## **5.2 Defining and operationalising Islamophobia**

If we are to determine the influence of Islamophobia on the Muslim schools debate it is first necessary to define and operationalise the concept. The term Islamophobia was first coined in the late 1980s (Brown, 2000). Despite its expanding usage in public, media and academic discourse over the past decade, there remains disagreement about what Islamophobia actually is. One definition, given by the Runnymede Trust Report, 'Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All', is an 'unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from



mainstream political and social affairs' (p.4, 1997). But this definition has proved controversial and has received considerable criticism.

As Aldridge (forthcoming) points out, to speak of a phobia may be misleading as it suggests something beyond the control of the individuals afflicted with it; for example, arachnophobes are seen as innocent victims of an irrational fear not as perpetrators of evil. Furthermore, people suffering from a phobia do not tend to attack or persecute the source of their fear, but rather avoid or flee from it. The term Islamophobia is therefore seen by some as being inappropriate, and possible alternatives have been suggested. Halliday (1999) claims that Islamophobia conceptualises Islam as undifferentiated and static, detracting from the cultural diversity within and between Muslim communities and from the dynamic nature of the faith. Islamophobia also misrepresents the target of attack, which is not Islam as a faith but Muslims as a people. Halliday therefore proposes the alternative term 'anti-Muslimism'. Modood (1997; 2005) also rejects the term Islamophobia, arguing that 'cultural racism' is a preferable descriptor as it situates Islamophobia within the discourse of racial equality, preventing it from being marginalised as simply a religious issue. Cultural racism also has the benefit of encompassing discrimination based on cultural signifiers, such as certain styles of dress, which are not associated with Islam but are common to many Muslims in the UK.

While I agree with Modood that the term cultural racism is perhaps a more accurate descriptor, Islamophobia has the distinct advantage that it is in increasingly common usage, not least by Muslims themselves (Aldridge, forthcoming). For the purposes of this research, the label used to refer to prejudice against Islam and Muslims is not as important as identifying its

various manifestations. If Islamophobia it is to be recognised in its more subtle, insidious forms then it is first necessary to develop a series of indicators through which it can be identified. This has been achieved by the Runnymede Trust Report (1997), which created a practicable typology for the identification of Islamophobia. My decision to use the label Islamophobia is therefore based on the increasingly widespread acceptance of the term and on its successful operationalisation by the Runnymede Trust.

The Report identifies eight categories of closed views of Islam and Muslims: (1) Islam is seen as undifferentiated, monolithic and static. (2) Islam is perceived as 'other', and totally separate and different from the non-Muslim world. (3) Islam is considered to be inferior to the West and is viewed as primitive, irrational and oppressive. (4) Islam is viewed as a violent, aggressive, threatening enemy. (5) Islam is seen as a political ideology that Muslims manipulate to gain military or political advantage. (6) Muslim criticisms of the West are rejected out of hand. (7) Hostility towards and discrimination against Islam and Muslims is defended. (8) Anti-Muslim discourse is seen as natural and normal. This typology of 'closed' views is expansive enough to include the diverse forms Islamophobia can take, whilst remaining succinct and practicable. It will therefore be used to identify instances of Islamophobia perpetrated by stakeholders in the Muslim schools debate.

The Report contrasts closed views of Islam and Muslims with open views, based on appreciation and respect of Islam but which can also include legitimate disagreement with and criticism of Islam and Muslims (1997, p.4). This open/closed dichotomy serves to make the distinction between on one

hand legitimate criticism of Islam and Muslims, and on the other hand Islamophobia. The Report recognises that it is not intrinsically prejudiced or 'Islamophobic' to disagree with or criticise Muslim beliefs and practices. For example, it is not necessarily Islamophobic to disagree with Muslims about points of religious belief and practice or to criticise Muslim states that violate their subjects' human rights (1997, p.4).

While the Report does draw this distinction between legitimate criticism of Islam and Islamophobia, I would argue that it fails to recognise the complexity of this division. Legitimate criticism of Islam can easily be mistaken for Islamophobia, and conversely Islamophobia can be disguised as legitimate criticism of Islam. Defenders of free speech have argued that the label Islamophobia is being used to close down debate and limit legitimate criticism of Islam. Equally, anti-racists have claimed that criticism of human rights violations by Muslim countries or terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of Islam are used to disguise or excuse Islamophobia. It is therefore necessary to develop a means of identifying Islamophobia in its more subtle, covert forms. To this end what appears to be legitimate criticism of Islam or Muslims within the Muslim schools debate will be carefully examined to see whether it has been (i) extended to all Muslims, or (ii) used to justify discrimination against Muslims or Islam. This means of differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate criticism will be used alongside the Runnymede typology to determine whether Islamophobia inhibits an increase in state funded Muslim schools.

### **5.3 Factors inhibiting the state funding of Muslim schools**



### *5.3.1 Islamophobia*

In expressing their opposition to Muslim schools, some respondents voiced negative or stereotypical views of Islam and Muslims. However, none of the arguments used by respondents to oppose Muslim schools were explicitly Islamophobic. Rather than using blatantly Islamophobic arguments, for example that Muslim schools might create extremists, they employed implicitly Islamophobic arguments, which could easily be mistaken for legitimate disagreement with or criticism of Islam and Muslims. These arguments fell into three categories: power being held by extremist Muslims leaders; the role of women in Islam; and Muslim schools as a threat to social cohesion. These arguments will be examined in turn, providing empirical examples, linking these examples to the Runnymede Trust typology of Islamophobia outlined above, and explaining why they are instances of Islamophobia and not legitimate criticism.

#### **i) Power held by extremist Muslim leaders**

One respondent from a secular/ humanist organisation voiced serious concern about the level of power wielded by Muslim leaders. He claimed that the Muslim leaders who would be likely to run Muslim schools have a 'hyper-authoritarian agenda', and would force less religious parents and children to attend a Muslim school against their wishes.

... I'm sure it's the kind of hard liners who generally speaking who get their hands on these kinds of organisations, who want to press for the school because it will consolidate their own power base within the community. 'You've got to come to my school, you've got to pray', all this kind of thing. [...] So these poor kids who are gonna be just pulled into that and they're gonna get browbeaten. And you come across

examples of where kids are actually physically punished [...] for not being able to rote learn the Qur'an.

(Representative of a secular/ humanist organisation)

While it can of course be legitimate to question the power held by some Muslim leaders, I would argue that in this instance such questioning is Islamophobic because it is used to justify discrimination against Muslims by denying them their own state funded schools. This quote includes a number of indicators of 'closed' views of Islam and Muslims. The respondent describes Muslim leaders as 'hard liners', which suggests that Islam is seen as aggressive and threatening, in line with the fourth closed view identified by the Runnymede typology. The quote also suggests that Muslim leaders would use their control of Muslim schools to further their own ends, which portrays Muslim leaders as manipulative and insincere, in accordance with the Runnymede typology's fifth type of closed view.

## ii) The role of women in Islam

The role of women in Islam was used by two respondents to justify their opposition to Muslim schools. Both claimed that Muslim schools treat boys better than they treat girls.

So, really, and the other objection that I have, and we're still off the record, is the, I don't feel comfortable about the treatment of girls versus boys. ... [T]he culture of women being, having a very uneven power relative to men and having their movements restricted and all that kind of thing that goes with a lot of the packages with a lot of these religions, is something that I think that they will find very much more difficult to resist if they are effectively pushed into a minority ethnic religious school.

(Representative of a secular/ humanist organisation)

The respondent does not directly mention Muslim schools or Islam, instead referring to 'a lot of these religions' and 'minority ethnic religious schools'. It is therefore questionable whether this is evidence of Islamophobia or is in fact prejudice against all minority faiths. Such an opinion would in practice, however, result in the denial of state funding to Muslim schools. Interestingly, the respondent is obviously aware of the sensitive nature of his comments because he specifically requests that it be 'off the record' (which was agreed meant that it not be attributable to him).

The head teacher of a state funded Church of England school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils claimed that the opportunities available to girls would be restricted in a Muslim school.

I think [in a Muslim school] there might be an assumption that there are some things that girls don't do. Whereas because of our western values and general attitude the girls can do anything.

It is obviously not necessarily Islamophobic to express concern about the treatment of women in some Muslim countries or communities. On the contrary, it is important that such questions be raised, which they frequently are both within and outside of Muslim communities. It is Islamophobic, however, to portray Islam as inherently oppressive, patriarchal and inferior to the West, as is evident in the above quote. The respondent overlooks the diversity within and between Muslim communities, extending her concern about the treatment of girls to all Muslim schools. This concern is then used to justify denying Muslims the educational provision offered to other faiths. To relate this to the Runnymede typology, Islam is portrayed as sexist, oppressive and inferior to



other religions and to the West, in line with the third form of Islamophobia identified by the Report.

### **iii) Muslim schools as a threat to social cohesion**

One of the most common arguments used against an increase in faith-based schooling is that it will fragment society and threaten social cohesion.

Although this argument will be examined in depth shortly, it also needs to be briefly addressed in this section on Islamophobia because it has been particularly prominent in discussions of Muslim schools. To claim that Muslim schools pose a threat to social cohesion but not to extend that concern to other faith schools is implicitly Islamophobic. The potential negative consequences of a child interacting only with children who share their beliefs remain the same regardless of the faith of that child. It would be equally socially divisive for an Anglican child never to meet children of another faith as it would be for a Muslim child.

#### ***5.3.2 Social cohesion***

While the argument that Muslim schools are socially divisive can be a form of Islamophobia, that is not always the case. There can also be legitimate concern about the social consequences of faith schools in general, or minority faith or Muslim schools in particular. Such concerns have been voiced by secular/humanist groups, politicians and Muslim parents, and are articulated in three main ways: the claim that Muslim schools fail to prepare their pupils for life in a multicultural society; the suggestion that religiously segregated schools are

also racially segregated schools; and the fear that an increase in faith schools will perpetuate the isolation of minority faith communities.

**i) Preparation for life in a multicultural society**

Some interviewees, mainly secular/ humanist groups but also some Muslim parents, questioned whether education in a Muslim school prepares children for life in a multicultural society. The following quote is from an interview with a Muslim father whose children attend an ordinary community school.

**‘... I don’t think people should be cut off from each other. That’s where segregation starts. [...] I mean I wouldn’t send my daughters to a Muslim school. I don’t have any issues with people who do that. I don’t mean just Muslim schools, I mean any religious school. If you live in a multicultural society then everything should be multicultural.’**

In some areas of Britain, particularly in northern towns and cities, there are Church of England and non-faith community schools that contain only Muslim pupils. Furthermore, the pupil population can be entirely from a particular country, or even a particular region. Conversely some Muslim schools, particularly in London, have pupils of many different nationalities, languages, ethnicities and cultures, brought together only by their belief in Islam. For example, in 2003 Islamia Primary School in Brent contained pupils of 23 different nationalities. It is therefore wrong to assume that Muslim schools are monocultural while non-faith community schools are multicultural. The religious affiliation of a school does not directly affect the ethnic or cultural composition of its pupil population. Some non-faith community schools are monocultural while some Muslim schools are culturally diverse.

Consequently the argument that Muslim schools fail to prepare pupils for life in a multicultural society is unfounded.

ii) Religious segregation means racial segregation

Representatives of secular/ humanist organisations expressed concern that religiously segregated schools are effectively racially segregated schools, which they consider socially divisive. This is evident in the following quote:

Well I suppose the theory is that a child, particularly a child growing up in certain, you know, geographical areas could live, go to school from five to eighteen and never move out of their ghetto basically. Never meet people of different faiths, possibly never meet people or be friendly with people who are of a different race, you know, that's, it's the racial divisiveness and separatism that worries us about these new schools.

(Representative of secular/ humanist organisation)

Religious schools, particularly Muslim schools, have been accused of contributing to the isolation of communities and perpetuation of social unrest. For example the Cattle Report into the 'race riots' in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in the summer of 2001 argued that they were due to the division of communities, which was blamed, at least in part, on religiously segregated schooling. It is, however, simplistic to blame religious schooling for social division. The geographical segregation of Britain's Muslim communities results from numerous factors including housing policy, immigration patterns, and minority community cohesion. If anything, 'racially' segregated schooling is a consequence of social division rather than a cause.

In addition, this argument assumes that 'racially' segregated schools are socially divisive. On the contrary, many would argue that being educated with pupils of similar ethnic and religious origins helps children to develop a sense



of confidence in their particularised identity. Furthermore, having a pupil population composed of many different ethnicities and religions does not necessarily eliminate prejudice in a school. Multicultural schools can often be sites of prejudice and conflict between pupils from different ethnic and religious groups. It would therefore be wrong to assume that culturally diverse schools guarantee social cohesion.

### iii) Isolation

The isolation of communities as a result of faith schooling was a primary concern of opponents to Muslim schools. They feared that an increase in faith schooling would segregate communities and create ghettos. The situation in Northern Ireland was sometimes cited as evidence of the potential negative consequences of faith schooling. But in contrast to the situation in Northern Ireland, most opponents were not concerned about the segregation of Christian faith communities, but rather about the consequences of minority faith schools. This is illustrated in the following quote:

...with the possibility of new groups getting their own schools is real social concerns about the effects on society of minority groups disappearing into their own little schools and isolating themselves and their children from the rest of society. I don't think, however hostile one might feel about Anglican schools, that one could ever have particularly felt that Anglicans were separating themselves from the rest of society. Whereas Muslim schools, Sikh schools, Jewish schools, I think that is a genuine worry.  
(Representative of a secular/ humanist organisation)

Concern that faith schools will isolate communities is often focussed on minority faith schools. Anglican schools are not seen to pose the same risk of isolation as Muslim schools, as was discussed previously. The implication of

the above quote is that minority faith groups pose a threat to wider society, and should be assimilated in order to minimise that risk. This sentiment is undoubtedly discriminatory, but as it refers to Muslim, Sikh and Jewish schools, it cannot be considered Islamophobic; rather it is prejudiced against all minority faith groups.

### *5.3.3 Secularisation*

Questions have also been raised about the continued appropriateness of state funded faith schools in light of what some perceive as declining religious belief and practice. Unsurprisingly this was a particular concern of secular/ humanist groups, as is illustrated in the following quotes:

And I can see that a Muslim school would be validating for their faith, but I don't think that's the job of the state, to be honest, to pass on faith, to validate people's faith positions, you know, that's the job of the family, the community.

(Representative of a secular/ humanist organisation)

So that's the... our real worry then is that we shouldn't be spending money, the state has no business doing that, we shouldn't spend this money essentially producing converts for these various religions, cos that's what its for.

(Representative of a secular/ humanist organisation)

Both respondents question whether it should be the responsibility of the state to inculcate religion into the minds of children. They argue that, in the face of declining levels of religious thinking and practice, the state should not fund proselytisation but rather leave that to parents and faith communities.

It was not only secular/humanist groups who raised this question of whose responsibility it should be to instil faith in a child. Some Muslim interviewees voiced frustration at parents who do not take responsibility for

their child's religious education. They chastised parents for assuming that because their child is attending a Muslim school they are being taught sufficiently about Islamic beliefs and practices. They claimed that the school couldn't be held entirely responsible for teaching a child about their faith; religious education has to be a partnership between home and school.

If there are certain values, religious values, they want their children to imbibe then they have to, that input has to come from them. They have to take that responsibility. So I think parents have to play a much greater role.

(Representative of Muslim organisation)

While theorists such Bryan Wilson (2001) and Steve Bruce (2002) have claimed that we are witnessing a process of secularisation, others have argued the opposite: that religion is of continuing or even increasing significance as a source of group solidarity and individual meaning (Berger, 1999). This is argued to be particularly the case for those who are disadvantaged and marginalised as a consequence of economic globalisation (Karner and Aldridge, 2004). The pledge by the British government in February 2001 to increase the number of state funded faith schools could be perceived as evidence of the increasing significance of religion in political and public life. However, it could also be interpreted as recognition by the government that, if it is to be seen to treat all its citizens equally regardless of faith, it has little choice but to fund minority faith schools. The historical relationship between the Church of England and the education system means that the government could not abolish all faith schools even if it wanted to. Consequently, if equality is to be done, and to be seen to be done, then state funding must be extended to minority faith schools.



#### *5.3.4 Regulatory requirements*

The main criteria that Muslim schools must satisfy to receive state funding are that there should be a demonstrable demand from parents, there should be no spare spaces in other schools in the vicinity, the school should have sufficient resources and staff to teach the national curriculum, and the premises should be of a required standard (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Muslim schools often fail to satisfy these criteria due to their minimal budgets and small pupil numbers.

Many independent Muslim schools charge low fees and award a considerable number of scholarships in order to accommodate pupils whose parents are on lower incomes. Consequently independent Muslim schools often have limited resources, which fail to satisfy the requirements for state funding. They are therefore in a 'catch twenty-two' situation whereby they cannot improve their resources without increased funding and they cannot increase their funding without improved resources.

Independent schools that enter the state sector receive 90% of their money from the state, with the remaining 10% being raised by the faith community. While it is a small proportion of the overall cost, this 10% can still be a large amount of money. One head teacher told me that the sum his school needed to raise towards the cost of new buildings ran into millions of pounds. Church of England schools obviously have a central body to which they can turn for financial assistance. The lack of such an authority for Muslims in the UK makes their fundraising efforts extremely difficult, forcing them to rely predominantly on individual generosity. This poses considerable difficulty for Muslim schools due to the low socio-economic status of the British Muslim

community. The disadvantaged position of many Muslims parents means that they are unable to assist schools with their fundraising efforts. Charitable donations from the Middle East used to be a frequent source of support, but a head teacher stated that these had declined dramatically following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Raising the 10% of funds required to enter the state sector is therefore extremely difficult for many Muslim schools, and can prohibit them from applying for state funding.

The criterion that there should be no spare spaces at other schools in the vicinity has been used several times to refuse state funding to Muslim schools. The reasoning behind this requirement is that if a new school is opened within the vicinity of a school with empty places then it would exacerbate falling rolls in that school. This concern was voiced by the head teacher of a non-faith state school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils, who feared that if proposals for a nearby state funded Muslim school went ahead he would lose some of his pupils and staff to that school.

There's a few other areas we'd just like cleared up, because it's going to raise issues for us, particularly with old buildings like this, because obviously being a purpose built Islamic school, I'm assuming it will have prayer facilities, it'll have washing facilities prior to prayers and everything, which we can't provide because we haven't got the room. And some of us are, not concerned, well we are concerned, but not in an anti way, but we're just thinking well, quite rightly parents will be saying 'why can't you provide those facilities', and we haven't got the space or the means of doing it. So, it just remains to be seen how it works out. And how it works out staffing wise, you know, whether it affects Muslim staff in other schools like mine, whether they think 'oh well lets go to the Islamic school now'. So there could be some knock on effects, and we'll just have to wait and see.

While the criterion that there should be no spare spaces at other local schools may at first appear to be a reasonable requirement, some claim that it has been



used as a means to discriminate against Muslim schools. The Runnymede Trust (1997) claim that the Government has provided funding for Jewish schools in areas where there are empty places, and have therefore been unfair in refusing applications from Muslim schools on these grounds. Moreover, Muslim schools tend to draw their pupils from a wide area, not from the immediate locality, therefore having a minimal impact on the schools in the neighbourhood (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

The requirement that they must have sufficient staff to teach the national curriculum also poses difficulties for some independent Muslim schools. While some do teach the national curriculum in its entirety, others leave out subjects they consider to be at odds with Islam. Furthermore, in order to keep their running costs down, many independent schools employ unqualified teachers who they can pay a lower salary. In order to be eligible for state funding all national curriculum subjects must be taught and all teachers must be qualified. These criteria can serve to discourage independent Muslim schools from applying for state funding.

A further factor deterring Muslim schools is the complex and drawn out nature of the application process. This barrier to applying for state funding was mentioned by head teachers of both independent and state funded Muslim schools. The following quote is from the head teacher of a Muslim school where it took 18 months to complete the application form.

And we started putting our proposal together, we started completing an application form around 1995, and it took us around a year to 18 months to put an application together, because we wanted to keep everybody on board. It would have been easier to just sit down and complete the application form on our own, but if you carry everybody with you then its holding meetings and cancellation of meetings and



obviously people have disagreements and agreements, and so it took us a good 18 months.

A person closely involved with Islamia Primary School's application for state funding said that the process was so much hassle that the key people involved would not go through it again.

Interviewee: I can't speak for everybody but I know that certainly one or two key people, if you catch them with their guard down they would admit they wouldn't go through it again.

Researcher: go through...?

Interviewee: The whole state funding application. That was so much hassle [...]. And the end result is not worth it educationally and religiously. It became, certainly in Islamia's case a sort of political cause célèbre, we had to go through with it, we'd gone so far, we couldn't back down.

As these quotes illustrate, the complicated and time consuming nature of the application process is likely to deter some independent Muslim schools from applying for state funding (cf. McLoughlin, 1998).

### *5.3.5 Desire for autonomy*

The loss of autonomy that can result from state funding makes some independent Muslim schools reluctant to enter the public sector. Head teachers of independent Muslim schools voiced the concern that becoming state funded would mean handing control of their school over to the government, resulting in a loss of autonomy. This apprehension is evident in the following quote from the head teacher of an independent Muslim school.

He who pays the piper calls the tune. State funding naturally comes with strings. At the moment those strings may be fairly loose, but I foresee a time when they could really tighten up and Muslim schools which have state funding may be finding themselves in a very difficult position.

Head teachers' concerns over the possible loss of autonomy resulting from state funding focussed on five key areas: the overall ethos of the school; the school curriculum; teachers' qualifications; bureaucratic constraints; and the philosophy of education offered.

#### **i) Ethos**

Head teachers of some independent Muslim schools emphasised the importance of the Muslim ethos of their school and expressed fears that entering the state sector would result in the loss of that ethos. Some also indicated that this concern was shared by other individuals involved in the running of the school, for example school governors, parents and local community leaders, whose agreement was considered necessary if the school was to apply for state funding. This is evident in the following quote from the head teacher of a Muslim school that has recently applied.

It was a very difficult decision for many reasons. One of the reasons was a fear that if we let the state take over then they will dictate the terms and whatever we had worked for for many years would disappear. What the community meant was they had a particular ethos that they would like preserved. And there was a fear that if the government takes over, because they'll be paying the money they'll control the strings. And in the process all the work will be lost.

#### **ii) Curriculum**

A source of concern for some head teachers of independent Muslim schools is the requirement that all state funded schools must follow the national curriculum. While most independent Muslim schools do abide by the national curriculum, some adapt or leave out certain areas that they consider to be at

odds with Islam, such as music, dance and physical education. As one head teacher put it:

There was concerns about music, there was concerns about PE, there was concerns about games, there were concerns about dressing code, about control, losing control [...].  
(Head teacher of an independent Muslim school)

Muslim parents also expressed concern about the consequences of state funding on the school curriculum. The timetabling demands that result from teaching the national curriculum can necessitate a reduction in the amount of time dedicated to Islamic studies. Some parents therefore felt obliged to send their children to a madrassah after school despite them attending a Muslim school during the day. The following quote from a mother whose child attends a state funded Muslim school demonstrates her dissatisfaction with the quantity of Islamic, Qur'anic and Arabic education taught at the school.

Not so much an Islamic education any longer, because they are now, because they are state funded they have to run with the government guidelines and national curriculum, so they don't devote that much time to the other aspects. Qur'an and Islamic education and Arabic, I think they only get an hour of each now. And I think before, I mean I don't know, we weren't there, my children weren't there before it was state funded but I think it had, I think that chunk of the curriculum was larger. [...] So I'm back to square one, I still have to give them, I have to send them to the mosque for Qur'an classes.

### iii) Teacher qualifications

A further disincentive to Muslim schools considering applying for state funding concerns the requirement that all teachers must be qualified. Many independent Muslim schools employ unqualified teachers, and would therefore have to replace or retrain them. This can dissuade some head teachers of



independent Muslim schools from applying for state funding, as is evident in the following quote.

That's aside from the main issue of having to have teachers whose qualifications are recognised by the state in order to teach. I've got very very good teachers who are not qualified, in the sense that they don't have a state stamp on their qualification. But they're very very good teachers and they're more than qualified to teach in a Muslim school, because they have strong faith and they have a desire to teach and pass on their knowledge to the kids. That's one area where we would obviously have to change if we went state funded. At the end of the day if we can stay independent we would prefer to stay independent, and then we don't have to dance to the government tune.  
(Head teacher of an independent Muslim school)

#### iv) Bureaucratic constraints

A further consequence of state funding is that schools must abide by the requirements of national regulatory bodies. This is another element of the loss of autonomy that makes Muslim schools reluctant to enter the state sector. This is evident in the following quote from the head teacher of a state funded Muslim school, who expressed frustration at having to abide by Ofsted's requirements regarding attendance levels.

...for example for the Ofsted we have to have a particular attendance rate. I think it's 94% or above. And if it's lower than that they take that as an indication that the school is not providing interesting and stimulating enough work that the children want to come to school every day. Well in our case we have a lot of children who are from families stemming from Pakistan and, we have 23 different nationalities, so a lot of these people want to go on extended holidays. Personally I cannot think of anything more educative than going back to your ancestral home or back to the village where your roots are and seeing cows and, because we are in the inner city, going back into the country side and seeing how the world functions in a natural way, I can't think of anything more educational than that. And yet I'm supposed to try and stop that because we have to keep our attendance rates up, so we become self-serving, and we have forgotten the original idea of setting up a school is to educate children. So, and that goes very much against the natural and dynamic principal of Islam, which is actually anti-institution.

## v) Philosophy

The contrast between the British and Islamic philosophies of education also makes some Muslim schools reluctant to enter the state sector. One head teacher in particular argued that the British state system of education was at odds with an Islamic philosophy of education. This was evident in his views on the school curriculum:

And even in academic subjects, so called secular subjects, we reject the secular/ religious divide, basically. You cannot keep the two apart, you cannot cut off what Allah has said in Qur'an away from those subjects.

Consequently he saw little point in setting up a Muslim school if it just replicated the British state system of education.

...I see looking around what we're doing is in effect replicating the state system but sticking a cap or a scarf on it. This is the state system which we claim not to like. And I find that a bit of a paradox, it's a waste of time. Unless you're going to do something different, radically different, why do it?

(Head teacher of an independent Muslim school)

This concern was shared by a representative of a Muslim educational organisation who argued that there is a fundamental divergence between the British and Islamic philosophies of education. He claimed that the British system of education aims to produce capitalist consumers, while an Islamic system of education sets out to create faithful Muslims.

I think that Muslims have to go back to what the core of education is, which is to produce a human being. And what you foresee a human being doing will dictate how you educate that young person. So if you see them [...] entering into a consumer society that is about producing and consuming, and in a sense all values are reduced to material values and to monetary values, then you'll develop an education system that



produces a young person that will fit into that vision of society. But we have a different vision of what a human being was created for, which at the root of it, in Qur'an Allah says 'surely I created you in order to worship me'.

Consequently he felt that Muslim schools should remain independent in order to retain their autonomy and avoid compromising their philosophy of education.

Fear of losing control over their schools' ethos, curriculum, staffing, regulation and philosophy clearly makes some head teachers of independent Muslim schools reluctant to apply for state funding. This finding supports Walford's (2001) suggestion, discussed in section 2.4.6, that some faith schools see the benefits of state funding as being outweighed by the inevitable decrease in autonomy.

#### **5.4 Relationships between the factors**

Islamophobia, fears of social fragmentation, secularisation, regulatory requirements and the desire for autonomy all inhibit an increase in the number of Muslim schools in the state sector. But it is important to note that these factors are not exclusive or separate. On the contrary, they are interdependent, influencing one another in subtle and complex ways. Islamophobia is central to this process, influencing several of the other factors.

As was discussed above, Islamophobia contributes to concerns about the social consequences of Muslim schools. Fear that faith schools will fragment society and damage social cohesion has been focussed predominantly on Muslim schools, indicating that this fear may be fuelled by Islamophobia. Similarly, Islamophobia may be covertly involved in the regulatory



requirements for state funding, as was suggested by head teachers of Muslim schools and the Runnymede Trust. Both claimed that the regulatory requirements for state funding are such that Muslim schools can rarely apply, and when they do their applications are frequently refused. The Runnymede Trust Report stated,

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that anti-Muslim prejudice has played a part in the rejections, since the official reasons given by the Government have seemed generally unconvincing (1997, p. 47).

While it is difficult to verify this suggestion, it is nonetheless possible that Islamophobia may influence the regulatory requirements for state funding.

It is important to note that Islamophobic arguments can be used to advocate as well as oppose the state funding of Muslim schools. This was particularly evident in an interview with a representative from a far right political organisation who claimed that children from the 'white majority' should not have to put up with having Muslim children in their classroom. Therefore, he argued, Muslims should have separate schools in order to protect 'white kids'.

Well, Muslims, not Asians, Muslims. They're the ones that seem to be causing all the damn trouble in this country, they're the majority aren't they. Make them separate. [...] Do our white kids want their education interfering by having education for Muslims within their own lessons? I don't think that they do. People don't really want to know about it. Why should a kid in this country be talking about Islam? I mean the only reason they should be is because we might well become an Islamic country, which is what the Muslims are trying to get, you know that don't you?

Islamophobic arguments can clearly be used to argue both for and against the state funding of Muslim schools. So while Islamophobia may inhibit the state

funding of Muslim schools, in some instances it could be a driving force behind them.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The five main barriers to the state funding of Muslim schools are: Islamophobia; fears of social fragmentation; secularisation; regulatory requirements; and the desire for autonomy. These factors are interdependent, influencing one another in a variety of ways. Islamophobia creates and perpetuates fears about the social consequences of Muslim schools and may also influence regulatory requirements. Islamophobic arguments can be used to advocate as well as oppose the state funding of Muslim schools. Evidently the role of Islamophobia in inhibiting an increase in state funded Muslim schools is not easy to decipher. But it is fair to conclude that while Islamophobia cannot alone explain the minimal number of state funded Muslim schools in Britain, it is nonetheless an important contributory factor.

Discussions of Islamophobia fall within wider discourses of discrimination and cultural diversity, which have been conceptualised by authors writing on justice, community and citizenship. This literature poses questions about the rights, responsibilities and forms of belonging appropriate for minority communities in multicultural societies. Theoretical responses to these questions are varied. While some argue that British culture should be kept pure by excluding or assimilating alternative cultures, others claim that all citizens are equal regardless of their cultural identity, and all should hold equal rights. Alternatively, some believe that minority groups should be given extra rights in order to compensate for their disadvantaged position, while others

recognise the transient and dynamic nature of cultures and hence encourage intercultural dialogue. The aim of the following chapter is to examine the relationship between these theoretical positions and the discourses mobilised by stakeholders in the Muslims schools debate.



## **Chapter Six**

### **Liberalism, Communitarianism and Multiculturalism:**

#### **Discourses mobilised by stakeholders in the Muslim schools debate**

In chapter one it was established that it is possible to argue both for and against Muslim schools from a liberal, communitarian and multiculturalist perspective. Chapters four and five examined the arguments used by interviewees in favour of Muslim schools and the principal barriers that prohibit state funding. These threads are now brought together to illustrate two key findings: i) those on opposing sides of the Muslim schools debate use the same concepts to support their position; ii) stakeholders, as well as theorists, employ the ideas of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism. Before providing evidence of these findings, it is first necessary to relate the arguments used by stakeholders to the concerns of political philosophers, and to question why these particular issues were raised by all of the stakeholders involved.

#### **6.1 Relating arguments for and against Muslim schools to theories of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism**

Chapter four revealed that members of all of the stakeholder groups use the same arguments in favour of Muslim schools. Muslim parents, head teachers, organisational representatives and politicians in favour of Muslim schools use all of the arguments available to them to defend their position. This assertion will now be taken a stage further to claim that some arguments are used by those on both

sides of the debate. Stakeholders on opposing sides of the Muslim schools debate refer to several of the same issues in defending their views. While there are of course some arguments that are only useful to those on one side of the debate, a number of other concepts are employed by members of all stakeholder groups. Three issues emerge as being of primary importance to both advocates and opponents: equality, social cohesion and identity. These will be referred to as 'discourses', by which I mean a set of interrelated ideas that can have multiple meanings attached to them.

The discourse of rights and equality is a principal line of argument for those on both sides of the debate. Advocates argue that Muslims have the same right to faith schools as other religious groups, while opponents claim faith schools infringe the rights of children. Similarly, the impact of Muslim schools on the cohesion of wider society is invoked by those in favour of and those opposed to Muslim schools. The discourse of identity is also raised by both advocates and opponents. Those in favour argue that they impact positively on a Muslim child's identity, whereas some of those opposed to Muslim schools claim that in a cosmopolitan society such as Britain it is inappropriate to prioritise a child's religious identity over their other identities.

These findings raise some important questions: why are interviewees not selective in their arguments but rather use all the tools available to them to defend their position? And why are these particular discourses invoked? One possible explanation for why interviewees draw on all the available arguments concerns the public nature of the Muslim schools debate. Since the first Muslim school was

funded in 1997 it has sporadically grabbed the attention of the media, and is often discussed on the television and in newspapers. The television reporting is usually quite balanced, often taking the format of one public figure in favour of Muslim schools and one against voicing their opposing arguments. The press coverage tends to be more one-sided, with either an advocate or an opponent voicing their opinion. The public nature of this debate means that the interviewees may well have heard their view articulated previously in the media, and remembered the arguments that were used to defend it. When they came to voice their views many interviewees were therefore probably aware of the available arguments and drew on them all to support their position.

It is also necessary to question why these specific discourses are mobilised. The reason that these particular issues have arisen within the Muslim schools debate varies according to the specific context; each must be viewed within its own social and historical framework. This can be illustrated using the example of social cohesion. Since the Labour government came to power in 1997/98 public attention has been focussed on the issue of whether and how society can cohere in the face of increasing diversity (Annette, 2005). Post September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 this fear has been directed predominantly at Muslims, with the question being repeatedly raised of whether British Muslims prioritise their national or their religious identity. The portrayal of Muslims as a threat to social cohesion has permeated the Muslim schools debate, with concerns being expressed that separate schools will isolate Muslims, perpetuate social divisions and even create extremists. Evidently,



the issues raised are not only pertinent to the Muslim schools debate but fall within a wider political and social context.

As was illustrated in chapter one, the issues that arise in the Muslim schools debate have occupied political philosophers for centuries. What rights should be afforded to minority communities? How much difference can society handle? What identity is appropriate for minority communities in Britain? These issues are central concerns of liberals, communitarians and multiculturalists. Liberalism is primarily concerned with equality of opportunity, rights and responsibilities, communitarianism emphasises the importance of social cohesion, and multiculturalism stresses minority group rights and cultural identity. We can therefore develop a greater understanding of the discourses mobilised by stakeholders in the Muslim schools debate by exploring them in light of these theories.

In doing so it is essential to be clear from the outset about what this chapter is *not* intending to do. The aim is not to criticise the various political theoretical models, or to choose which one is correct. It is also not suggesting that because an interviewee uses, for example, a liberal argument that they themselves are a liberal. Many of the interviewees used all of the arguments either for or against Muslim schools to support their position. The fact that an interviewee used a certain argument can therefore not be considered reflective of their political beliefs. But it can further our understanding of the discourses through which stakeholders make sense of the debate over Muslim schools.

The central tenets of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism will be briefly recapped, before providing empirical examples of their use by stakeholders on both sides of the debate.

## **6.2 Liberalism**

Three core elements of liberalism are equality, individual autonomy and state neutrality. Liberals claim that all citizens of a state should be treated equally, having equal rights and responsibilities. The rights of individuals need to be protected from the powerful state. The state should remain neutral and not privilege one way of life over any other. Everyone should be free to live their lives however they choose, as long as their choices do not impact negatively on or restrict the choices of others. These three aspects of liberalism: equal rights; individual freedom; and state neutrality, arose frequently in arguments both for and against the state funding of Muslim schools.

### *6.2.1 Equal rights*

As was discussed in detail in Chapter 4, one of the most frequently used arguments for state funding is that of equality: if Catholic, Jewish and Church of England schools are going to receive state funding then Muslim schools have a right to the same privilege. This argument employs a liberal understanding of citizenship in which all citizens are equal and should have the same rights. In the following quote a Muslim parent uses this liberal conception of citizenship to advocate the state funding of Muslim schools.

I think as a Muslim and from Islamic teaching on equality and justice it is so important, and it is for Tony Blair to understand that every citizen has the right to practice his own religion, has the right to educate his or her child [...] they should have the right to do it... justice and equality and to treat everyone equally, because I think that the bottom line is that other multi faith schools have got voluntary aided status and it is very marginal percentage that the Muslim schools have you see, so where is the equality in that?

The argument that Muslims should be given state funded schools to bring them in line with other faith groups was used by almost all of the proponents interviewed. In stark contrast, no interviewees used the opposing argument that oppressed minority groups should be given extra rights to compensate for their disadvantaged position. When asked directly about their views on such a policy, all interviewees stated that they did not want Muslims in particular, or minority faith groups in general, to receive extra rights; they simply wanted to receive the same rights as other faith groups.

There are a number of possible reasons why, despite describing the serious difficulties faced by Muslims in Britain, the Muslim interviewees felt that they should not receive extra rights. Firstly, some interpretations of Islamic teachings suggest that all citizens should be treated equally. While this is by no means universally accepted (Ye'or, 2001), some scholars such as Badawi (2005) have emphasised the rights afforded to all human beings, and in particular to 'the people of the book' (Christians and Jews), under Islamic law. They claim that in an Islamic state the rights of non-Muslims must be respected and protected in the same way as those of Muslims. Several interviewees mentioned this as a reason



why Muslims should not receive extra rights despite the ongoing difficulties they encounter in all spheres of social life.

I don't think any community should be given special rights. We are all equal, and we should be treated as equal. [...] I don't think it would help any community to be given special rights. And those, if they're Muslims and they say that Muslims should be given special rights, I am not sure on what basis they use to promote that particular view. Islam, if you look at the Qur'an it's about equality, all people, all human beings are treated equal in the eyes of Allah. And we make those choices about how we want to develop our lives and so forth. But so far as equality is concerned every human being should be treated equally and the law should reflect that as well, everybody should have equal rights, no community should be given special rights over others. I believe that very strongly.  
[Head teacher of an independent Muslim school]

Secondly, many interviewees stated that if Muslims received extra rights this would lead to an increase in ill feeling towards Muslims. They feared that if attempts were made to compensate for the discrimination Muslims face by giving them extra rights, this may be perceived by wider society as them receiving preferential treatment. This would lead to increased resentment towards Muslims, which might cause a rise in Islamophobia.

Even if we got equal rights we would be very happy. I don't want extra rights, because no one should be given extra rights. [Inaudible] Because then people will object. It would be big headlines and people would start marching. It would only be bad press for Muslims.  
[Muslim parent]

A third potential reason why interviewees were opposed to extra rights for Muslims could be due to the power and influence of the liberal conception of justice. From the manner in which many Muslim interviewees referred to the idea of extra rights for Muslims it was evident that they saw such a system as unjust.

They were keen to emphasise that they only wanted to receive the same treatment as other faiths, not to be given any extra rights or 'special favours'. For example, one interview subject claimed:

I'm not asking for any special favours, I'm not asking for any affirmative action or whatever. All that I'm saying is that if they fulfil the criteria and if there are the right number of parents and there are enough children who wish to go to a school like that then they should be allowed to have it just like the Christians have.

[Representative of a Muslim organisation]

Although their justifications varied, all of the Muslim interviewees were adamant that they did not want Muslims to receive preferential treatment. They simply wanted the same rights as everybody else. This finding supports the work of Soysal, who has examined the way in which Muslims in Europe make claims for their particularistic identities (1997; 2000). Using a range of examples such as the 'headscarf affair' in France and the 'Rushdie affair' in the UK, she argues that rather than claiming preferential treatment or group rights, Muslims in Europe invoke the notions of equality or individual rights. These discourses are embedded in the culture of the host community, and therefore add weight to their claims. My interviewees similarly rejected the notion of preferential group rights in favour of equality and individual rights, thereby framing their claims in terms which are acceptable to wider British society.

This can be further understood in the context of a theoretical trend away from equality as 'sameness' towards equality as 'difference'. Equality was previously conceived as meaning minority groups should be assimilated into the dominant culture, with the underlying expectation being that their distinct identity

would wither away. This has been replaced by a multiculturalist conception of equality as difference, where minority identities are respected and the needs of different groups catered for. However, both Soysal and my findings suggest that this theoretical recognition of difference has not been adopted by Muslims in the UK. While many accept that it is necessary to cater for the particular needs of minority groups, for example through separate faith schools, there is widespread opposition to rectifying underlying imbalances through awarding 'special rights'.

The discourse of equal rights was also invoked by those *opposed* to state funded faith schools. A representative of a secular/humanist organisation claimed that the rights of non-religious parents are infringed by having to subsidise faith schools which their children are not allowed to attend. This is illustrated in the following quote:

[...] we consider that faith based schools are discriminatory. They're almost entirely funded by public money, [...] and to have a C of E school in your neighbourhood that you as a tax payer are paying for, but won't let your child in because they're not a practising Anglican or a practising Christian seems to us to be an injustice. [...] they are discriminatory.

The liberal discourse of equal rights was evidently employed to support arguments both for and against the state funding of faith schools.

### 6.2.2 *Individual autonomy*

A second aspect of liberalism used to argue against Muslim schools concerns the freedom and autonomy of the child. It was claimed by a representative of a secular/humanist group that parents and faith communities do not have the right to



inflict their religious beliefs on to their children. Children should be free to determine their own beliefs rather than have them imposed on them in a faith school.

[...]many of the parents want to inflict their views on their, on their children. And that's why the education system and even the European human rights legislation does give effectively the power for parents to inflict their views on their children, whatever we think it's going to continue to happen, but I think, you don't, you're not born a Catholic child...

The autonomy of the individual was also mentioned by those in favour of Muslim schools, who argued for the freedom of Muslim parents to choose which school to send their child to. They claimed that Muslim parents should have the same right to freedom of choice regarding their child's schooling as is available to parents of other faiths.

So I think if parents want that choice they should be given the choice and the government should provide that choice, because we are all equally paying taxes. So if we want a different kind of school I don't think it's giving them extra, I think it's just providing them with a different thing. [Muslim organisational representative]

The argument of free choice, employed above by a Muslim interviewee, is an individualistic argument as it centres on the rights and freedoms of the individual. There is a popular assumption that individualism directly clashes with the collective rhetoric of Islam. This assumption is based on the supposed ideological clash between Islam and the West (Huntington, 1996). The notions of freedom, choice and the rights of the individual are widely conceived as Western

liberal constructs that are opposed by most Muslims. This is evident in the following quote from a representative of a secular humanist organisation:

... [I]n many ways that what we regard as being very important in, I'll call it the West, or certainly Western democracy, is that the individual is important and that the human rights are important, and that religion doesn't really come into it. That's the very opposite of what a lot of Muslims believe. They actually believe that human rights are of little consequence, and [...] some of them say that human rights are actually a western construct which they don't wish to be identified with.

The suggestion made by this interviewee, that individual and human rights are Western constructs which are incompatible with Islam, is a source of ongoing academic debate. Scholars of Islam have argued that, while these concepts are differently conceived within Islamic doctrine, they are nonetheless of primary importance (Donnan and Ahmed, 1994; Esposito and Voll, 1996). This suggestion appears to be supported by the widespread use of the concepts of freedom, choice and individual rights by my Muslim interviewees.

### *6.2.3 State neutrality*

The third element of liberalism to arise in discussions of Muslim schooling concerns the position of the state. The supposed neutrality and moral objectivity of the liberal state was discussed in depth by a Liberal Democrat politician, who claimed that this was an unrealistic goal. He argued that while the state may wish to remain agnostic, that is not possible in the debate over the state funding of faith schools. The state must decide which religious groups are eligible for state funded schools and which are not, thereby privileging some religious beliefs over others.

If it attempts to remain neutral by giving all faith communities equal access to state funding for their own schools, the state risks lending its support to groups whose ethos is not consistent with its own. These concerns are articulated in the following quote from the same politician:

But I think that the state needs certain criteria about what type of education that they are going to fund. I think that that is quite difficult because there are certain forms of Muslim education that will be found distasteful but equally that can be said about some parts of Christian education which we might find distasteful. You tend to find that the state won't take a view on that, that the state will somehow dodge it, you know they can say 'well we have no view, we have no values about how people ought to live', and I think that governments would love to be in that comfortable position of being able to say well we have a diversity of different values, that's it end of story, but you can't get out of that at the end of the day. [...] I think that the government is increasingly not, and governments in multi cultural societies find it very difficult to own a set of values, which they need to do, to own a set of criteria and at the same time to answer the question of why those values are the values that need to be adhered to by in this case any one school that might want state funding.

A further manifestation of state neutrality in the debate surrounding Muslim schools is the argument of secularisation. Representatives from secular humanist groups claimed that it is inappropriate for a supposedly neutral state to fund faith schools.

...[W]e believe that religion should be something to which the state is blind. So that's not opposing it, that's just saying it shouldn't have any special access, and people's faith or lack of it should be irrelevant to the state.

This conception of state neutrality requires further consideration. The claim that by funding faith schools the state is not remaining neutral conflates neutrality with secularity. Secularism is perceived by these interviewees as neutral and is



contrasted with the supposed partiality of religious belief. Such a conception must be challenged, as secularism is a belief system like any other. A secular approach is not necessarily any more neutral than a religious one. For example, the French education system requires that a child's individual faith be restricted to the private sphere. As has been exemplified in the recent ban on headscarves in state schools, religious children are required to leave their faith at the school gates. For these children a non-religious system of education is clearly not neutral, as it prioritises the needs of non-religious children over those of religious children.

To summarise the discussion so far, it is evident that three of the central tenets of liberalism: equality; individual autonomy; and state neutrality, were drawn on by interviewees to defend their position on the state funding of Muslim schools. Furthermore, these concepts were employed by stakeholders on both sides of the Muslim schools debate, and used to support arguments both for and against.

### **6.3 Communitarianism**

Communitarians perceive human society as a community rather than an association of individuals. They claim that by basing their theories on notions of individual rights and personal freedom, liberals neglect the extent to which individual freedom and well-being are only possible within a community. Communitarians are therefore primarily concerned with what is best for society. Rather than upholding individual autonomy, they argue that people should be encouraged to adopt ways of life that benefit the common good.

### *6.3.1 Social cohesion*

At the core of the communitarian position is the argument that what is best for society should be prioritised over what is best for the individual. This sentiment is evident in arguments both for and against the state funding of Muslim schools. A central line of conflict in the Muslim schools debate concerns the impact of Muslim schools on social cohesion. Those opposed to Muslim schools claim that they damage social cohesion by fragmenting society, while those in favour claim that Muslim schools impact positively on society by, among other things, preparing pupils for life in a multicultural society. The communitarian emphasis in these arguments will be illustrated with quotes from interviewees on both sides of the debate, beginning with those opposed to the state funding of Muslim schools.

The following quote is from a Liberal Democrat MP, in which he justifies the state's right to give funding to some faith schools but not others.

[...] The state has to be assured that the ethos of the school is consistent with the wider social values. [...] These are indefinable in themselves but you can imagine can you not that if some people want to set up a school whose ethos was fundamentally derisive and antagonistic towards the rest of society and unfairly so, then that is not a faith school that the state would wish to engage with on any basis.

This interviewee evidently rejects the liberal idea that the state should be 'neutral'. He justifies the state's freedom to privilege some groups over others, supporting those whose ethos is in line with the state's in order to maintain the status quo. This argument is in line with the communitarian logic that the state's role is not

one of agnosticism or neutrality but rather enforcing the best outcome for society as a whole.

Another example of a communitarian argument against Muslim schools comes from a representative of a secular/humanist organisation. He suggests that in order to ensure the integration of Muslims into wider British society we should force this process by schooling children of all faiths together. While this may not be of immediate benefit to the individuals involved, it will be the best thing for the cohesion of British society in the long run.

But you don't have a fat school, you don't have a big nose school, you don't have a black school, and I don't think you should have an Islamic school. The only way we get out of the cycle of racial and religious intolerance is to actually force the integration, and over time given the right attitude from everybody and the right help... And it's only one time that you have the school years to actually sort it. It is in the long term interest, the only way that you're going to solve the problem.

Those in favour of the state funding of Muslim schools also employ communitarian rhetoric to support their arguments. They reject claims that Muslim schools damage social cohesion by arguing that in fact the opposite is true: Muslim schools are good for society. The following quote from a Muslim parent illustrates such an argument:

I feel in our school, Islamic school, we are teaching kids to be better people and values and respecting other people and making a better society. So we are contributing to a better society.

The view that Muslim schools have a positive impact on wider society is also espoused by a head teacher of Muslim school, who claims that the desire to



improve British society was actually an important motivating factor in his decision to establish a Muslim school:

So we started Muslim schools because we were concerned about the future of Britain, the future of the British society [...].

These interviewees both claim that, contrary to popular assumption, Muslim schools have a positive impact on wider society. They thereby use communitarian discourse about the benefit for society as a whole in order to support their argument in favour of a specialised provision for a smaller subsection of society. Evidently both those in favour of and those opposed to Muslim schools use communitarian rhetoric to defend their position.

The impact of Muslim schools on the coherence of British society has been at the heart of the public debate on faith schooling. This question came to the fore again recently when David Bell, the Chief Inspector of schools singled out Muslim schools as failing to teach children about other cultures and faiths. Before schools can acquire full independent status they must satisfy Regulation 2e of The Education (Independent Schools Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, which requires schools to ‘assist pupils to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures, in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions’. David Bell stated that many Muslim schools are failing to meet this requirement. This was picked up by the press and resulted in widespread news reports that Muslim schools fail to teach children about other faiths and hence pose a threat to social cohesion. In reality, the Ofsted report on which Bell’s comments were based actually found that Evangelical Christian

**schools are less successful at teaching tolerance and respect of other faiths and cultures than Muslim schools: 36% of Muslim schools failed to reach the target compared with 42.5% of Evangelical Christian schools. But in his speech David Bell singled out Muslim schools as being a cause for concern, making no mention of Evangelical Christian schools. In doing so he perpetuated the ill founded speculation that Muslim schools pose a threat to social cohesion, and played into the hands of those who perceive Muslims in Britain as the enemy within.**

### **6.3.2 *Community rights***

**If we understand the communitarian position as being about what is best for ‘society’ or ‘community’, this then demands further exploration of what we mean by these terms. Communities exist on many different levels. Britain can be perceived as a ‘community’, as can the Muslim population of the world, a country, or a particular town or city. Muslims in Britain who migrated from a certain country or region can often perceive themselves as a community, as can a patrilineal descent group or ‘*biradari*’. Therefore to conceptualise a communitarian argument as what is best for ‘the community’, leaves the question of what ‘community’ we are referring to. The above argument about the impact of Muslim schools on ‘society’ uses this term in a broad sense, to refer to British society. But by employing a narrower understanding of the community, communitarian discourse can be used to support arguments about equal rights. As was discussed above, equal rights arguments tend to draw on a liberal discourse about the rights of the individual. However, rights and responsibilities can be assigned not only to**

individuals but also to communities. The rights based argument for Muslim schools demands equality at both individual and community levels. Individual Muslim parents have a right to have the same range of schooling choices available to them as parents of other faiths. Similarly the Muslim community in Britain have a right to have what is offered to other religious communities. Rights based arguments for Muslim schools can therefore draw on communitarian as well as liberal discourse.

Some Muslim interviewees were keen to highlight the community-based model of society espoused by Islam. In direct contrast to the liberal argument outlined in section 6.2.2, they argued that Islam rejects the Western notion of individual freedom, which they perceived as encouraging anti-social behaviour and the disintegration of communities. Islam was said to provide a solution to these social problems, by advocating accountability for one's actions, collective responsibility and working for the betterment of society. This is in line with a communitarian model of society outlined above, where individual liberty is sacrificed for the sake of the common good. This view of society is illustrated in the following quote from the head teacher of an independent Islamic school:

[...] we don't have individualism, Islam preaches the collective, instead of freedom to do what I like, Islam preaches that nobody should be without morality, we all have to obey some rules and laws, therefore it takes away the concept of freedom, you know, just to do what we like. We have to make choices, who will decide how you live, you're accountable for your actions. [Inaudible] If we actually envisage a society where such boundaries are present, we wouldn't have anti-social behaviour, we wouldn't have Friday night casualty, people injured themselves from drink or drugs, we wouldn't have kids running away from home.



There is evidently an overlap between this interviewee's conception of Islam and the communitarian vision of a society which prioritises the needs of the community over those of the individual.

#### **6.4 Multiculturalism**

The traditional model of citizenship as entailing a system of rights and responsibilities common to all has been challenged by growing recognition of the diversity and cultural pluralism of modern societies. This diversity was previously ignored in favour of a model of the 'normal' citizen, which was typically white, able bodied and male. Those who deviated from this model were excluded or assimilated. Increasingly, however, previously excluded groups are no longer willing to be marginalised, and are demanding a more inclusive understanding of citizenship which recognises their identities and respects their differences (Kymlicka, 2002). As was discussed in chapter one, some theorists responded to this by suggesting a system of group differentiated rights whereby minority groups are compensated for the oppression they face. Others perceive the solution as being through an active state policy of multiculturalism in which intercultural dialogue is encouraged and cultural diversity is celebrated rather than tolerated. However, both of these camps highlight the importance of upholding minority identities and protecting them from assimilation into the majority culture.

#### *6.4.1 Identity*

As was discussed in section 6.2.1, no interviewees advocated a system of preferential rights as they felt this would be unjust, anti-Islamic, and feared it would lead to an increase in ill feeling from wider society. While they did not support group differentiated rights, interviewees on both sides of the Muslim schools debate nonetheless drew on multiculturalist discourse by emphasising the importance of identity. Those in favour of Muslim schools discussed the importance of protecting Muslim children's particularised identity, while opponents rejected the importance of minority group identities, claiming that in a multicultural society such as Britain it is inappropriate to segregate schooling along religious lines. These contrasting implementations of multiculturalist discourse will be examined in turn and illustrated using empirical examples.

Several advocates of Muslim schools suggested that the identity of Muslims in Britain needs to be protected, on one hand from 'the West' and on the other hand from Islamic extremism. While some interviewees voiced fears that the identity of Muslim children would fall prey to assimilation into mainstream British society, others feared exploitation by fundamentalist groups. Both groups perceived Muslim schooling as offering protection against these threats (see Chapter Four). Analysing these perceived threats can offer an insight into the interviewees' differing perceptions of their group identity. By framing the identity of Muslim children as requiring protection from a particular outside force, interviewees reveal their varying group affiliations. Those who feared assimilation

defined themselves as separate from mainstream British society. They identified Muslims in Britain as a distinct group, struggling to maintain its particularised identity in the face of pressure from non-Muslim society. In contrast, those who feared Islamic extremism identified themselves as moderates. They rejected the conception of a unified Muslim community and projected fanatical Muslims as the 'other' to be feared rather than non-Muslim society. By defining their identity as separate from either the West or Islamic extremism, these interviewees are establishing themselves as having a distinct group identity. They are therefore drawing on a multiculturalist discourse of group differentiated identity politics.

Those opposed to Muslim schools also drew on multiculturalist rhetoric, even if only to reject it. They claimed that in an increasingly multicultural society such as Britain it is inappropriate to marginalise certain religious groups by educating them in separate schools. This is illustrated in the following quote from a representative of a secular/humanist group in which concerns are raised about pupils in faith schools not having contact with people of other faiths:

I think it's going to be a problem for them learning how to deal with people in the majority culture, and in other minority ethnic cultures as well, if effectively they go from an extraordinarily isolated bubble of their home and immediate family where they don't meet anyone from outside the faith to a school that's just the same.

Some interviewees criticised Muslim schooling for emphasising only the religious aspect of a child's identity, arguing that our identities are cosmopolitan and multifaceted. It was even suggested that focussing solely on the religious element of identity could lead Muslim schools to perpetuate religious extremism. In



making these objections to Muslim schools, interviewees are opposing differentiated group identity politics and the discourse of multiculturalism, utilising arguments against it to defend their position.

The above claim that too much emphasis on religious identity can lead to religious fanaticism has been the subject of a heated public debate. This has focussed in particular on Muslims in Britain. Empirical evidence shows that religion is the most important source of self-identity among people of South Asian origin in Britain, especially Muslims. While skin colour remained prominent in the self-descriptions of Caribbeans, religion was the most prominent form of self-description for South Asians (Modood, 1997). Evidence also suggests that use of the term 'Asian' as a means of self-identification is declining. The primary term of self-description for people of South Asian origin is now religious belief.

The above evidence clearly indicates that religion is having new importance to people's identities. This has been considered by some to be a source of concern, particularly in relation to Muslims in Britain. The question has been raised of what identity Muslims in Britain should have. Should their loyalty lie with their religion, their country of origin or the state in which they reside? These questions came to the fore in the climate of fear which emerged following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, and are often laden with suspicion of Muslims. No other religious community in Britain is forced to choose between their faith and their nation, and consequently to ask such questions of Muslims is mistrusting and offensive. As was discussed in section 1.2.1, a multicultural society must embrace the identities that people themselves choose, and not force people to rank their

various affiliations. That religious identity is having new importance in people's lives need not be a cause for concern. If race, class, gender and sexuality are legitimate identities, so too is religious identity. To suggest that religious identity is any less worthy of respect than other forms of self-description is inappropriate, and could be seen as a form of secular exclusivism.

As we saw in chapter four, the impact of varying forms of schooling on a Muslim child's identity was mentioned by interviewees in all of the stakeholder groups. But the concept of identity was constructed in a number of different ways.

- i) Several interviewees saw Muslim children's identity as requiring protection, but perceived this threat as stemming from two different sources. While some feared the impact of 'the West', others voiced concern about the threat of children being taken in by Islamic extremists.
- ii) Other interviewees, particularly Muslim parents, understood Muslim identity as being about knowledge of Islamic doctrine, or about demonstrating good behaviours and values. They claimed that such knowledge and behaviours were more likely to be acquired in a Muslim school.
- iii) Some questioned whether Islamic identity and western identity were in conflict or whether Muslim schooling would enable them to compromise to form a uniquely 'British Muslim' identity.
- iv) Finally, some raised concerns about whether Muslims in Britain had confidence in their Islamic identity or whether many were in fact in the midst of an identity crisis.

That identity was understood in so many different ways by my interviewees raises questions about the motivations that lie behind their

employment of this concept. It is of course not possible to establish with any certainty people's motives for using a certain argument. However, it is possible that some of the interviewees may have used the concept to further their own interests. The particular concerns they expressed and the way in which they constructed the concept of identity elucidates their underlying motivations. This will be illustrated using an example from each of the four constructions of identity described above.

*i) Identity as requiring protection*

An interview was conducted with a representative of a radical Muslim organisation which frequently presents an image of the Muslim community as under threat from 'the West'. In discussing the issue of Muslim schooling this interviewee constructed the identity of Muslim children in Britain as requiring protection from wider British society, which he thought would be best achieved through independent Muslim schools.

So we're very committed to maintaining people's Islamic identity. So to maintain people's Islamic identity means we need to identify the threats to the identity of Muslims in Britain and work to counter those. And also need to proactively build the Islamic identity. So that's kind of the general policy. The general policy is preserving the Islamic identity, which we feel is under threat, increasingly so. [...] I think we need to see more Islamic schools of the type I envisage being established. [...] I mean I'm not necessarily talking from a state level that I want to see that from the state, because I believe that the state can't provide that. [...] We think Muslims have to take this into their own hands; the destiny of their children is in their own hands, they have to seize that, they have to spend their wealth on it.



This interviewee justifies his desire to establish independent Muslim schools by presenting an image of Muslim children's identity as requiring protection from the influences of British society. By constructing Muslim identity as under threat he adds legitimacy to his concerns, and thereby serves his own interests.

*ii) Islamic identity as good behaviours, morals and knowledge of Islam.*

Muslim parents often talked about wanting to instil an Islamic identity in children, but when asked about what they meant by this phrase they tended to describe what are generally accepted as good behaviour, values and morals.

Well, Islamic schooling is to bring the children up in an Islamic environment, and equip the children with Islamic manner and behaviour. Islamic manner and behaviour tells the children to be kind to the neighbours, to encourage them not to mess around, not to throw your banana skin in the street, or you smoke cigarettes, don't smoke cigarettes because it's not going to benefit you...

By framing Islamic identity as being about generically 'good' behaviour and morals, Muslim parents justified their desires in a manner that is likely to meet with broad consensus, and thereby legitimised their desire to instil an Islamic identity in their children.

*iii) Compromise or conflict?*

The head teacher of an independent Muslim school claimed that a school like his was the only adequate environment in which to educate a Muslim child. He argued that without an Islamic education, Muslim children experience an identity conflict between home and school.

[...T]here is a big assumption that the state school is a neutral vehicle for transferring knowledge. But when one studies it deeper I think that this is actually very far from the truth. [...] So what we see is that school is not a neutral place, and teachers have their own values and their own ideas, all of this comes over. And when the kids come home, inevitably they will come with some of these ideas and some of these values. So not to have this contradiction where you teach them something at home, and then they come to the mosque where they get something else, we have a duty to teach them the same in school, Islamic values and duties.  
(Head teacher of independent Islamic school)

This interviewee claims that children can only be instilled with a truly Islamic identity in an independent Muslim school like the one he runs. By claiming that a state education can lead to identity conflicts and voicing the benefits of his own school, this interviewee is using his construction of identity to serve his own interests.

*iv) Confidence or crisis?*

The head teacher of a state funded Muslim school discussed the impact that attending his school can have on Muslim children's sense of identity. He claimed that his school gave children confidence in their identity, which prevented them from turning to fundamentalist Muslim leaders in order to achieve that confidence.

And we find that it's a really good age the primary age to instil that confidence, and it doesn't become an issue afterwards. Without that self confidence our experience and observations and analysis is that they are very prey to, later on to, identity, to a sort of identity crisis, a sort of crisis of identity, and then they possibly seek out some sort of strong, perhaps fundamentalist or extremist position which gives them a strong sense of identity.  
[Head teacher of a state funded Muslim school].

By claiming that his school prevents children from becoming extremists, this interviewee is taking advantage of the popular fear of fundamentalist Islam. He claims that his school prevents children from becoming extremists, thereby utilising the widespread fear of Islamic terrorism to further his own interests.

Interviewees tended to emphasise a particular aspect of identity. In many cases the aspect they emphasised and the construction of identity they employed served to further their cause. I am not suggesting that the interviewees were not sincere in their concern: many were genuinely worried about the impact of schooling on a child's identity. But they often justified and attempted to legitimise their concerns by employing a particular conception of identity. The use of the term identity can therefore be seen to mask underlying power dynamics, as all of the stakeholders are in one sense or other in a position of power. For example, parents exert their power by demanding good behaviour but do it in the name of instilling an Islamic identity. Similarly, head teachers use the justification of protecting children's identity to encourage more parents to enrol their children in a Muslim school. Identity can therefore be used by interviewees to strengthen their argument and enhance their position of power.

The instrumental use of identity by stakeholders in the Muslim schools debate can be better understood in light of the term's considerable popular currency. The importance of cultural, religious, and national identities as a source of meaning for people has been subject to a great deal of academic attention. Taylor (1994) stated that public recognition of identity is central to an individual's self-worth. Given the importance of identity to individuals it is logical that, as



Castells noted in *The Power of Identity* (2004), communal identities are used to build a form of collective resistance against oppression. Just as collective identities can be constructed as a means of defence, so can the *term* identity be invoked as a way of defending or adding weight to an argument. Increased recognition of the importance of identities has evidently led to the term becoming a 'buzz word' which can be used to make an argument more persuasive. In drawing on all the tools available to them to support their position, it is therefore unsurprising that stakeholders in the Muslim schools debate constructed the concept of identity in a way which reinforced their argument.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

The discourses of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism are evidently evoked not only by theorists writing on faith schools but also by stakeholders involved in the debate. Furthermore, these discourses are not consigned to one viewpoint, but rather are used to support the arguments of both advocates and opponents. An important conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that recourse to abstract political theory cannot resolve the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools. Deciding between these models of society will not end the debate, as it is possible to argue both for and against Muslim schools from any one of these conceptual positions. Equality could mean allowing Muslims their own state funded schools, or educating all children equally under a common system of education. Social cohesion could be achieved by ensuring Muslim children have contact with those of other faiths, or by educating them

separately to give them confidence in their own religious identity. Muslim children's identities could be best served by being protected from western and extremist influences within a separate school, or by being educated in mainstream schools to avoid prioritising the religious aspect of identity over all others. Evidently whether one believes society's main priority should be equality, social cohesion or the protection of distinct identities, the state funding of Muslim schools remains a contentious issue.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter I summarise the findings of this research, examine some possible alternative solutions to an increase in state funded Muslim schools, and voice my own opinion on the best way forward. In section one I review the content of this thesis and highlight its main conclusions. I also return to the suggestion made in the introduction, that the Muslim schools debate has the capacity to divide otherwise like-minded people, and consider whether this research can offer a possible explanation for this phenomenon. In the second section I examine various potential solutions to the problem of how best to educate Muslims in Britain. Drawing on a range of sources, I assess whether an increase in state funded Muslim schools is the only or the best way forward. In the final section I offer my personal opinion on Muslim schooling and describe the process by which I came to this conclusion.

#### **7.1 Summary**

*Chapter One* began by charting the migration of Muslims to Britain, and describing some of the difficulties Muslims can face in maintaining their religious identity in a non-Muslim state. Three conflicting responses to these difficulties were discussed in the form of liberalism, communitarianism and multiculturalism. It was argued that, in contrast to the suggestion of some previous philosophy of education literature, the Muslim schools debate cannot be reduced to a conflict



between liberalism and communitarianism. On the contrary, it is possible to argue both for and against Muslim schools from liberal, communitarian and multiculturalist perspectives.

The origins of the Muslim schools debate were explored in *Chapter Two*, beginning with a review of previous literature on the difficulties encountered by Muslim children in mainstream state schools. These difficulties contributed to a rapid increase in the number of independent Muslim schools, some of which have gone on to campaign for state funding. Previous literature on Muslim schools has primarily taken the form of opinion pieces or contributions to philosophical debate. It has predominantly focussed on the problems faced by Muslims in mainstream state schools, or on specific issues in faith schooling such as academic standards and social cohesion. There is a notable absence of empirical research into the arguments used for and against Muslim schools by the stakeholders involved.

This research aimed to fill this gap in the existing literature by analysing the opinions held and arguments used by both protagonists and opponents of Muslim schools. *Chapter Three* describes how this was achieved, including how interviewees were selected, approached and interviewed, and how the resulting data was transcribed and analysed. The question of insiders and outsiders in cross cultural research was explored in some depth, particularly in relation to the religious difference between me and my Muslim interviewees.

*Chapter Four* examined the main arguments used in favour of state funded Muslim schools: equal rights; a better society; identity, behaviour and values; and

educational factors. An important finding to emerge from this analysis was that interviewees from all of the stakeholder groups drew on all of these arguments in order to defend their position. It was also deduced that parents' decisions about where to educate their child were influenced not only by these arguments but also by practical and personal factors such as the location of the school and the family history of attendance. These considerations were explored in order to shed light on parents' reasons for choosing a certain school for their child.

Given these strong arguments in favour of Muslim schooling it was necessary to question why there are so few state funded Muslim schools in the UK. *Chapter Five* examined whether, as several interviewees claimed, this is due to Islamophobia. Five barriers to state funding were identified: Islamophobia; fears of social fragmentation; secularisation; regulatory requirements; and the desire for autonomy. So while Islamophobia does inhibit the state funding of Muslim schools, it is by no means the only factor involved.

*Chapter Six* brought together threads from the preceding chapters by revealing that, not only do *theorists* argue for and against Muslim state schools from liberal, communitarian and multiculturalist perspectives (as was illustrated in Chapter One), but so too do the stakeholders involved in the debate. Parents, head teachers, politicians and organisational representatives are concerned about the rights and responsibilities afforded to Muslims, how society can cohere in the face of diversity and the appropriate identity for Muslims in Britain. These primary concerns of liberals, communitarians and multiculturalists were drawn upon by both proponents and opponents of Muslim schools to support their position. The

use of these discourses by stakeholders on both sides of the debate highlights the futility of the dispute between these theoretical models for the resolution of Muslim schools debate. Whether upholding justice, maintaining social cohesion or protecting minority identities is thought to be the main imperative, the question of Muslim schooling remains unresolved.

I started this thesis by reflecting that the Muslim schools debate has the capacity to divide otherwise like-minded people. While a group of friends may share the same broad personal and political views, they might nonetheless disagree on the issue of state funded Muslim schools. This observation has been born out by the findings of this research. It is evidently possible to argue both for and against Muslim schooling from a liberal, communitarian or a multiculturalist position. Therefore, those who hold opposing personal and political views may agree on the issue of Muslim schooling, and conversely those who share an overall vision of society might have conflicting opinions on the state funding of Muslim schools.

## **7.2 Ways forward**

A number of possible solutions have been offered to the question of how best to educate Muslim children in Britain. While an increase in state funded Muslim schools is a widely advocated option, several other possible solutions have been suggested. These have been drawn from a range of sources: some were put forward by interviewees while others have been proposed in existing literature and



reports. I will now detail these alternatives and assess their likely effectiveness, before going on to offer my opinion on what is the best way forward.

In the months prior to this research being conducted there was a discussion in the media about the proposed development of a 'multifaith school' in London. This would be a faith school but not focussed towards a particular faith, in which the religious needs of pupils of all the major faiths are attended to. For example, all of the religious groups in the school would have their own daily act of collective worship, the school uniform could be adapted to suit pupils of all faiths, and school meals would be catered to satisfy the requirements of all religions. This idea proved to be popular with some of the Muslim parents I interviewed, several of whom said that they would consider sending their children to a multifaith school if one opened near them.

An alternative strategy to ensure that religious children have contact with children who do not share their beliefs is to require that faith schools accept a quota of children from outside the faith. Such an initiative was advocated by the Cattle Report into the riots in the north of England that occurred in the summer of 2001. The Report suggested that faith schools, and non-faith schools that are dominated by one ethnic or religious group, 'should offer at least 25% of places to reflect the other cultures or ethnicities within the local area' (Cattle, 2001). This recommendation was also mentioned in an interview with a governor of a state funded Muslim school. He said that they had been discussing the possibility of offering non-Muslim pupils places at the school in a governors' meeting only few days before the Cattle report was released suggesting a similar initiative. He

voiced frustration that his school had not publicly stated their intention to include non-Muslim pupils prior to the report's release, as it would now look as if they were simply responding to a government directive rather than having thought of the idea independently.

It is often erroneously assumed that all Muslim parents would like to send their children to a state funded Muslim school. In fact there is enormous diversity of opinion amongst Muslim parents about where to educate their children and why. Many saw the solution to the difficulties their children face in mainstream state schools as being to improve these schools, rather than remove their children from them. It was widely felt that this improvement should take the form of a greater focus on values, morality and behaviour. By improving non-Muslim children's values and behaviour it was assumed that Muslim children would experience less discrimination and prejudice from non-Muslim pupils in mainstream schools. It was also hoped that an increased focus on morality in mainstream schools would contribute to the creation of more socially responsible citizens, which would result in less crime and anti-social behaviour.

Another alternative to an increase in state funded Muslim schools is the establishment of more Islamic supplementary schools or madrassahs. This possible solution was suggested by several Muslim interviewees. By increasing the number of madrassahs, improving the standard of Islamic education they offer, and extending that provision to include extra tuition in academic subjects, it was hoped that Muslim pupils would develop more confidence in their Muslim identity and improve their educational performance. It was also suggested that these

improvements should be paid for by the state, as they would ultimately contribute to creating better behaved and better educated British citizens.

One representative of a hard-line Muslim organisation suggested that, rather than increasing the number of state funded Muslim schools, there should be more independent Muslim schools. He argued that Muslim schools should remain autonomous so that they do not have to follow the national curriculum and can instead teach what he termed 'ideological Islam'. He therefore believed that Muslims should take it on themselves to establish more independent schools which are free from state interference.

A less radical solution, suggested by several interviewees, was that of developing greater contact and dialogue between schools of various different faiths and no faith. While such initiatives already exist in many faith schools, some head teachers, politicians and organisational representatives felt that more should be encouraged. They saw the incorporation of interfaith dialogue into single faith schools as a solution to the widely held concern that separate schools can lead to segregation and social division. This solution was also suggested by diversity liberal theorists, as was discussed in section 1.5.2. Spinner-Halev (1999), for example, made his support of faith schools conditional on pupils having regular contact in an institutional setting with children who hold different religious beliefs to their own. It was hoped that this would lead them to develop an awareness of alternative beliefs and consequently have a 'meaningful right of exit' from their own community.



Another alternative to state funded Muslim schools suggested by interviewees was an educational voucher system. This term originated in the 1990s with the Conservative party's nursery voucher scheme, and was re-launched in 2003 as the Better Schools Passport. Under this system parents would be given vouchers which they could spend on educating their children in whichever school they wished. This was appealing to some Muslim parents because it was seen to offer them the opportunity to send their children to private Muslim schools without having to pay the fees. However, a Conservative party representative interviewed was dubious as to whether this would in fact be the case, as it remained unclear whether all schools would be eligible to enter the scheme.

In geographical areas where there are insufficient numbers of Muslim pupils to warrant a separate Muslim school, one potential alternative could be the creation of 'a school within a school'. This possibility was mentioned in an Oxford County Council report, 'Faith in Our Schools', and would involve the teaching of some subjects in single-sex or single-faith groupings. For example, boys and girls could be separated for subjects that can be problematic for Muslim children and parents, such as sex education and physical education. Alternatively, there could be a separate 'stream' or a separate building within a school where Muslim pupils are taught, either for all subjects or just for Islamic, Qur'anic and Arabic studies.

As this discussion has illustrated, a number of creative solutions have been offered to the problem of how to adequately educate Muslim children in Britain. Increasing the number of state funded Muslim schools, while being the widely preferred option, is not the only possible solution.

### **7.3 Should the state fund more Muslim schools?**

When I embarked on this research I did not have a fixed opinion on the state funding of Muslim schools in particular or faith schooling in general. In fact I remained undecided throughout the data collection phase of the research, only reaching a conclusion whilst analysing the arguments used for and against faith schools by the stakeholders involved. In determining my personal opinion as to whether there should be state funded Muslim schools in Britain, I found it useful to consider the issue as two related but distinct questions: 1) should Muslim schools be given state funding, and 2) should there be any faith schools at all? To my mind, the first question is far easier to answer than the second.

The equity based argument, that if other faith schools in Britain are funded by the state then Muslim schools should receive the same treatment, is very convincing and difficult to refute. Muslims are the second largest faith group in the UK, but there are currently only 5 state funded Muslim schools, compared with 4,716 Church of England and 2,110 Roman Catholic schools (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). Muslims have as much right to faith schools as other religious groups, and are currently having their rights as citizens denied to them by the unequal schooling provision. All of the alternative solutions indicated above, such as improving mainstream schools or establishing more madrassahs, would continue this fundamental inequality.

Opponents of faith schools might well conclude, however, that in order to make the educational provision equal we should abolish state funded religious

schools altogether. This brings us to the second question of whether there should be any faith schools at all. The problems with abolishing faith schools altogether are twofold. Firstly, it is unfeasible and can not be considered a realistic option. The established position of the Church of England and the historical involvement of the Church in the education system mean that the government could probably not abolish faith schools even if it wanted to. But aside from the fact it is not practicable, there are also strong philosophical arguments against the abolition of faith schooling. Contrary to popular assumption, a secular system of education would not be neutral or impartial. In fact quite the opposite: it would inadvertently discriminate against children of faith by forcing them to leave their personal beliefs at the school gate. For pupils from religious families, secular education could potentially create a deep division between the public and the private spheres.

Given the problematic nature of a secular education system, some opponents of faith schools have therefore suggested the development of multifaith schools. As was stated above, multifaith schools would be faith schools that did not focus on a specific faith. Like current faith schools they would cater adequately for the needs of religious pupils, yet like mainstream state schools they would allow pupils to mix with children who do not share their beliefs. What is often overlooked, however, is that in reality such schools would only be feasible in a very small number of geographical locations. Most areas of the country do not have the religious composition that would be required to establish a multifaith school. Such a system would therefore not be possible without resorting to bussing children from one area to another in order to ensure a multifaith pupil population,



which would no doubt be met with widespread opposition. So while multifaith schools may seem like a good idea in theory, they do not offer a realistic solution to the problem of how best to educate the half a million Muslim children in Britain.

Having established that abolishing faith schools altogether is not a realistic or desirable solution, I will now question the validity of arguments commonly used against their continued existence. Objections to faith schools are often based on problems that are not intrinsic to faith schools, such as that they indoctrinate their pupils and teach intolerance of other faiths. These fears are not in line with the reality of state funded faith schooling. All schools, faith based or not, should promote religious tolerance and knowledge about other religions, and strict regulatory constraints are in place to ensure that they do so. Furthermore, these concerns are often focussed towards minority faith schools. Muslim schools in particular are widely assumed to take their religious aims more seriously and be more likely to indoctrinate their pupils than other faith schools. Such concerns are implicitly Islamophobic and are, needless to say, entirely unfounded.

Another widespread objection to faith schooling is that it impacts negatively on social cohesion. This is again based on a false impression, but this time of mainstream state schools. Such schools are rarely the 'multicultural melting pots' that opponents of faith schools would have us believe. Muslim pupils can suffer numerous difficulties in mainstream state schools, ranging from the inappropriate content of the curriculum to encountering prejudice from both pupils and teachers. Discrimination from fellow pupils often leads Muslim

children to mix mainly with others who share their beliefs. The idea that mainstream schools promote social cohesion by encouraging pupils to interact with children of other faiths relies on an overly positive image of mainstream schools.

State funded Church of England and Catholic schools often admit a significant proportion of children whose parents do not subscribe to that faith. By taking pupils who are from outside the faith community these schools avoid the criticism often put to Muslim schools that they damage social cohesion by preventing pupils from interacting with children of other faiths. At the time when this research was conducted the state funded Muslim schools in Britain did not include any pupils who were not Muslim. The head teachers of several of these schools said that they would very much like to admit non-Muslim pupils, but were unable to do so because they were so over-subscribed. With such a large number of Muslim parents on their waiting list, they felt it would be inappropriate to give their limited places to non-Muslim pupils. An increase in the number of state funded Muslim schools in Britain would be likely to reduce the level of competition for a place in a Muslim school. This would enable them to admit non-Muslim pupils, thereby going some way towards alleviating fears that Muslim schools segregate children and damage social cohesion.

Following the bombings in London in July 2005 the question has been asked of how young British Muslims can be prevented from turning to extremism. I believe that state funded Muslim schools could potentially play a positive role in helping to achieve this. The reasons for this are threefold. Firstly, being

surrounded by other children who share their beliefs can prevent Muslim children from feeling separate and different from their fellow pupils, as is common in mainstream state schools. Combined with not experiencing the prejudice and discrimination frequently encountered in mainstream state schools, this can help Muslim children to feel confident in their identity as British Muslims. Secondly, state funded Muslim schools can help to prevent Islamic extremism through their unique ability to tackle radical viewpoints head-on. Teachers in Muslim schools can critically engage with parents or pupils who hold extremist views, whereas in mainstream state schools teachers often feel unable to question or challenge the views of extremists for fear of being accused of Islamophobia. Thirdly, contrary to popular assumption, some state funded Muslim schools actively promote engagement with wider British society. The head teacher of Islamia Primary School has publicly stated that his aim is to encourage the development of a British Muslim identity ([http://www.mcb.org.uk/features/features.php?ann\\_id=152](http://www.mcb.org.uk/features/features.php?ann_id=152), 03/05/06). Appreciation of this 'moderate' conception of Islam, and awareness of the possibility for what Baumann terms 'multicultural convergence', (1996; 1999) could help to prevent young Muslims being attracted to militant Islamic movements which promote a violent 'clash of civilisations' (McLoughlin, 2006). State funded Muslim schools could therefore potentially help to prevent future terrorist acts by young British Muslims.

As this discussion has demonstrated, the possible alternatives to state funded Muslim schools are either unfeasible or undesirable, and the common objections to faith schooling are unconvincing. The other suggested solutions all



fail rectify the unequal educational provision available to Muslims in comparison with other faith groups. Abolishing faith schools altogether in order to achieve this equality is not only unrealistic, but would also discriminate against religious children by forcing them to confine their beliefs to the private sphere. Multifaith schools are also not viable and do not offer a realistic solution for the education of Muslim children in Britain. Furthermore, the widely used arguments against faith schools are, in my opinion, unpersuasive. The common concern that Muslim schools indoctrinate their pupils is unfounded and is often implicitly Islamophobic. Fear that Muslim schools damage social cohesion is based on an overly positive impression of mainstream state schools, and can be overcome by including more Muslim schools in the state sector so as to enable them to accept non-Muslim pupils. State funded Muslim schools also have a positive role to play in challenging extremism, which has taken on a new importance in Britain following the tragic events of July 2005. So, returning to the question posed in the title to this section, should the state fund more Muslim schools, my personal opinion is undoubtedly yes.

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