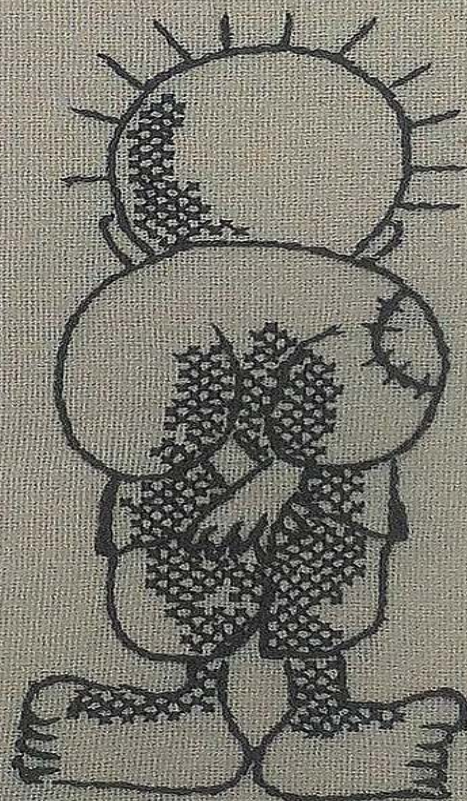


# The Middle East in London

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October - November 2014  
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**THIS ISSUE:** Youth • The Arab uprisings, the economy and the labour market • The GCC employment policy dilemmas • Beyond the saga of the 'Trojan horse' • Salafism and young women in London • Bombed into (temporary) silence • Singing playgrounds of the Middle East • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London

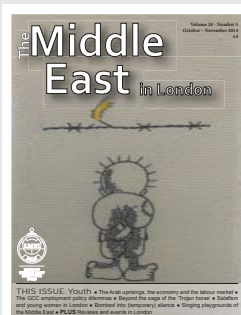


Image of the Palestinian refugee boy, Handala, the famous signature of Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who was assassinated in 1987. Embroidered for the Palestinian History Tapestry Project ([www.pht2012.wordpress.com](http://www.pht2012.wordpress.com))

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# The Middle East in London

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**Farid Panjwani** stresses the need to rethink how Islam is taught in secular educational contexts

# Beyond the saga of the 'Trojan horse': some reflections on teaching about Islam in schools

The juxtaposition of Islam, schools and extremism grabbed headlines in summer 2014 as stakeholders wrestled with the so-called Trojan horse affair in several Birmingham schools. The allegation about a systematic attempt to infiltrate and Islamicise secular schools agitated many, alienated others and left pedagogical and social scars on the political and communal psyche. Now that several reports on this issue are out, we are in a better position to move forward, restore trust and implement the required changes. The reports by Ofsted, Birmingham City Council and the Department for Education show that the reform of the school governance process needs to be a central element of the changes. Balancing concerns about community cohesion and carrying out oversight of schools also requires attention. Another important task will be to take account of the legitimate concerns of parents and the local community about the education of their children.

An area that has received insufficient attention in the above mentioned reports and other public discourse, and which raises the broader question of religion in education, is the analysis of syllabuses and textbooks used to teach about religions. This question is pertinent for teaching about all religions, but I will here focus only on Islam.

Schools are among the most important sites teaching about Islam and, for many students (Muslims and non-Muslims), the only places to gain a systematic and scholarly introduction to this important religion. Though textbooks are important in all subjects, their importance is heightened in the case of teaching about Islam. This is partly because many teachers of Islam in schools have limited knowledge of the subject and partly because of the sensitivities involved. It is important, therefore, that teaching materials are routinely explored and evaluated.

The few studies that have carried out such analyses show that the curriculum about

Islam needs significant changes (Thobani, 2010; Revell, 2009; Panjwani, 2005). Among the shortcomings identified are: the lack of historicity in discussing norms, institutions and practice – for instance, the *sharia* is rarely discussed through a historical lens; neglect of intra-Muslim diversity, particularly the doctrinal diversity among Muslims; and the oversimplified presentation of the role and appropriation of foundational Islamic texts such as the Qur'an.

Limited space obliges me to focus on just one of the shortcomings – religiofication of the cultures of Muslims. Religiofication, as originally used by Eric Hoffer in his book *The True Believer*, means a process of turning practical everyday matters into Holy causes. I am using the term to refer to a tendency in textbooks about Islam to define Muslim cultures primarily in religious terms. Surveying the syllabuses and textbooks on Islam one gets the impression that Islam dominates the lives of its followers, providing them with identities, practices, moral sense and values. Being a Muslim thus can only mean being a religious person whose entire life, from rituals to politics, is shaped by Islam.

*Schools are among the most important sites teaching about Islam and, for many students, the only place to gain a systematic and scholarly introduction to this important religion*

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Islam and towards teaching about people who hold  
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Muslim cultures become primarily or exclusively cultures defined by religion. As Jonker and Thobani (2009) have noted, this portrayal of Muslims as primarily religious beings has a long pedigree in European educational history and serves to portray Islam as Europe's other. If Europe is secular, Muslim cultures are religious. Religiofication functions as the perpetrator of an unhelpful alterity.

It is important here to note that there are indeed many Muslims who would agree with religiofication of themselves and their cultures. The point, however, is that Muslim societies are not populated only, or even mostly, by such Muslims. Rather, Muslim cultures, like most cultures in our times, are a mix of religious and secular attitudes, approaches, orientations, desires and trends. Muslims too live in what Martin Marty calls 'our Religio-Secular world'. Secularity, in terms of separating religion from many aspects of social life is highly visible in politics, media, social relations and education in Muslim societies. Religiofication of Muslim people and their cultures is thus a serious misrepresentation and harmful to mutual understanding across people from different cultures.

Why is it that the curriculum does not bring out the contemporary realities of Muslims? This is partly because of the manner in which the subject is ontologically shaped in the school curriculum. The aim is to study a religion, Islam, in this case. Once we seek to study Islam, we are easily led to think in terms of an essentialised trans-historical object which needs to be presented to the students. We must consider a move away from trying to teach Islam and towards teaching about people who hold this religion and cultures of which it is a part. It is through this historical and anthropological engagement that the complex religio-secular characteristics of cultures of Muslims would become apparent.

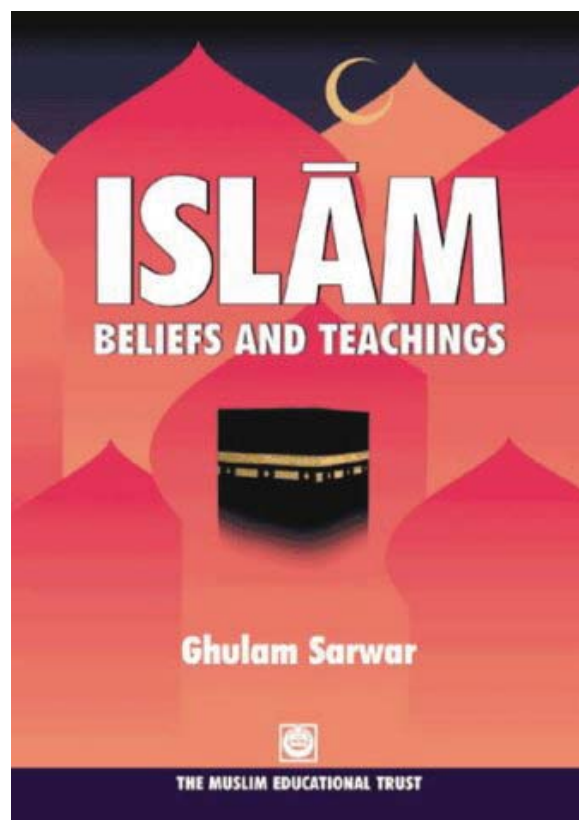
Pedagogically, literature is one of the best means of bringing out the religio-secular nature of cultures of Muslims. Both rooted in and transcending social realities, literature can take the reader into the inner lives of the characters, giving insights into the consciousness of a people. As Nussbaum (1997) notes, literature can create 'a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will

enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us' (85). In works of writers and poets such as Taufiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Orhan Pamuk, Qurat al-Ayn Haider, Simin Daneshvar, Adonis, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Saadat Hasan Manto, Mahmoud Darwish and many others, students can find the complex intersection of the secular and the religious in public and private lives. Further, given the political context in many Muslim majority societies, literature is often a vehicle of social analysis and critique. Many symbols and narratives challenging manipulation, exclusion and invisibility as well as displaying yearning for freedom, justice and equality, are to be found in literature from Muslim societies. Engaging with the writings from Muslim societies can help students realise the universality of human sufferings, aspirations and the quest for justice, challenging

the unhelpful alterity that the current representation of Muslims creates.

The Trojan horse affair has caused rifts and alienation. It has damaged trust. But if the healing process is done well, we may look back at it as a turning point in the better teaching of Muslim cultures in schools.

*Farid Panjwani is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Education, University of London. His latest publication – entitled 'Faith schools and the religious other: The case of Muslim schools' – can be found in The International Handbook on Learning, Teaching and Leading in Faith-Based Schools (Springer, 2014)*



One of the textbooks commonly  
used for teaching about Islam