

# WHY MUSLIM EDUCATION FOUNDATION?



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## WHY MUSLIM EDUCATION FOUNDATION?

**M**uslims in Canada form a distinct community because of their faith. Like many other Muslim communities living in the West, the Canadian Muslim community has emerged through a unique historical process unknown in history until the twentieth century: never before have Muslims lived in such close proximity to non-Muslims in the West. This peculiar situation poses certain challenges as well as provides certain opportunities to Muslim communities in the West, quite distinct from those faced by those in traditional Muslim lands. These distinct challenges and opportunities arise not only out of the typical geographical, social and cultural milieu in which these new Muslim communities in the West exist, but also from *within* these communities, because of the heterogeneous nature of these communities. This situation is not only unprecedented in Muslim history; it is also a totally new phenomenon in the history of Western civilization. As far as Muslims are concerned, one of the most fascinating aspects of this situation is that in no place on this planet can one can find Muslims of all races, cultures, languages, and nationalities living in such close proximity to one another.

This wonderful representation of our human family in the West, bonded together through that gift of fraternity that Islam envisions for believers, is perhaps the most significant development in the demographic history of Muslims, ever since that first wave of expansion of the nascent state in Madinah carried the message of Islam to the steppes of Central Asia on the one hand and to the valleys of the Iberian peninsula on the other.

The extent of this heterogeneity varies of course from community to community, whether in terms of popular representation of certain traditional Muslim lands, average level of education, professional background and economic status, but, regardless of these external factors, all of these communities are made up of people who have declared the *Shahādatayn*: that there is no deity except Allah and that Muḥammad—may Allah's peace

and blessings be upon him—is the messenger of Allah. It is this declaration that unites them; it is this fundamental and simple profession of faith that binds Muslims in a bond of fraternity, making them brothers and sisters unto each other: *And the believers, the men and the women, are protectors one of the other; they command right and forbid wrong* (Q. 9:67). Through this bond they share the Book of Allah, which acts as a unique foundation, allowing them to build communities rooted and anchored in an incorruptible Divine Revelation. Thus, through the *Shahādātayn*, the Book, and the teachings of the Prophet—may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him—Muslims form communities in which each member of the community has a role to play. In addition to their personal lives, Muslims have a communal life as members of a faith-based community.

In such a religious community—inherently religious, given that it is this which draws together the individuals themselves—each person has rights and duties toward the Creator, toward family members, and toward the broader community wherein they reside. Likewise, all local Muslim communities have rights and duties toward neighbouring communities; the links in the chain extend to include all Muslims living on this planet. This global Muslim community, called the *Ummah* by the Noble Qur’ān, also has rights and duties toward each of its members, toward the larger society, and toward Allah. None of these rights or duties is man-made. They are enshrined in the *Shari‘ah* and form part of the same set of laws that govern personal conduct. The Qur’ānic model of the Muslim community includes a group of believers (who are called the *Mufliḥūn*, the prosperous) whose duty it is to *call to good, commanding right and forbidding wrong* (Q. 3:104). This conjunction of “commanding right and forbidding wrong” is repeated in seven other Qur’ānic verses (Q. 3:110, 114; 7:157; 9:71; 22:41; and 31:17).

These and similar Qur’ānic commands that govern the conduct of Muslims have given rise to the concept of two kinds of legal duties: collective obligations (*farḍ ‘alā’l-kifāyah*) and individual obligations (*farḍ ‘ayn*). For example, when a Muslim dies, it is the

collective duty of the Muslim community to conduct the funeral prayer for the deceased; if some members of the community discharge this duty, it is deemed to have been performed by all—whereas if no one offers the funeral prayer, the whole community lies at fault. On the other hand, if the entire community prayed the Fajr ṣalāh on a given day except one Muslim, that one Muslim would not have fulfilled his or her *fard* and would be held responsible for not fulfilling the obligation.

It is this unique characteristic of the Qurʾānic message upon which the very foundation of the Muslim community is based and that allowed our ancestors to establish new faith communities in the lands to which they brought the message of Islam, that is evident in communities that exist to this day. These communities exist because Islam not only brought a spiritual and intellectual revolution of the first order, it also instituted a remarkable social revolution that transformed pre-Islamic communities in a fundamental way. This was performed in an organized and systematic manner through the development of institutions that functioned from generation to generation, and still continue to do so. Islamic institutions—such as the mosque, the *madrasah*, and the *waqf*—not only govern and regulate, but also provide leadership and direction to the life of the community. And yet, in spite of this remarkable institutional framework, there is no room in Islam for an ecclesiastical authority; all members of the community are by definition qualified to fill any role in these institutions according to their capacity, learning and abilities. Thus, in a Muslim community, each member has a role to play. It is this background that provides us the framework for understanding the needs of the Canadian Muslim community as well as answers to the question: what is to be done?

### **NEEDS OF THE CANADIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

The Muslims living in Canada together constitute the Muslim community of Canada—a marvellously diverse body. This diversity is reflected not only in the educational, economic, and social aspects of life, but also in basic needs. For example, there are

Muslims whose “Islamic need” does not extend beyond access to a place where they can pray the two ‘Īd prayers twice a year. On the other end of the spectrum, there are members of this same community who wish to make the mosque and the Islamic school the center of their lives. When this diversity of needs reflecting the diverse levels of *Īmān* is considered, phrases like the “needs of the community” become rather ambiguous. Obviously the only need of those who wish to join their brethren in faith for the two ‘Īd prayers is to have a temporary rented space where they can offer the two prayers, whereas those who have been blessed by Allah—hallowed be His Name—to carry the light of their *Īmān* as the guiding light for each and every moment of their lives would require institutions such as Islamic schools, recreation and community centers, cemeteries, libraries, resource rooms, and other places where they and their children can play and interact with other members of the Muslim community and share the joy of being part of a community rooted in faith. Admittedly, there are also Muslims who are not interested in anything at all, not even the ‘Īd prayers, and hence their “needs” are already being adequately met by the larger society. But this situation may change, for nothing is static in personal or communal lives, and one day these same Muslims who now show no interest in practicing Islam may want to join the growing community of active believers.

Since the Muslim community is made up of individuals and individuals have diverse needs, how are we to determine what minimum set of needs would fulfill our collective obligation toward Allah? As already mentioned, collective obligations are not a choice but a duty, arising from our proclamation of the *shahādah*—an obligation toward Allah which must be discharged by the whole community. The answer to this question cannot be left to our personal desires and definitions; not only would we never reach an agreement, we would most likely err. We need to find the answer in the two sources that guide each and every Muslim—the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.

Fortunately, Muslims living in Canada are heir to a tradition that has often encountered dynamic situations and that has always

been able to produce solutions. Muslims who first arrived in the Iberian Peninsula or in Samarqand faced, in many respects, a totally new situation, and applied principles they had learned in the Arabian peninsula to their new milieu in order to derive specific solutions from the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Of course, there are many differences between our situation and the situation of those who bore the message of Islam to new continents in the first century of Hijrah: unlike our ancestors, we have come to the West as immigrants, mostly seeking material and professional improvement. We live in predominantly non-Muslim societies as visible minorities or as communities in the process of assimilation.

As a result, we face a different set of challenges than those whose *raison d'être* for going to Samarqand was not the material benefit of this world. We live in societies which have numerous customs, traditions, moral codes, and modes of personal behaviour far from Islamic beliefs and teachings, yet there is little we can do to change these generally accepted “norms” of Western civilization, which are like the invisible air in the public space around us. Yet, we need to find a way to exist as Muslims and this demands a certain degree of *Ijtihād* on our part. It is clear that without finding solutions to the issues faced by us as a distinct community, we will simply cease to remain Muslim.

What is needed, therefore, is to determine those principles that define the needs, obligations, and duties of a Muslim community toward Allah and toward its individual members. These collective obligations, *farā'id* *ʿalāʾl-kifāyah*, can be divided into two broad categories: (i) those dealing with the internal needs of the community and (ii) those arising from the requirements of discharging certain duties in relation to non-Muslims among whom we live. This article is a reflection on what is to be done by the Muslim community to address one of its internal needs. It assumes that it is understood that these collective obligations are not merely a matter of choice, but a religious duty, failing which the whole community will be held responsible by the Creator on the Day whose doubtless coming is a constant reminder to us all that we must fulfill our part of the *mīthāq*, our covenant with Allah

the Most High.

## THE INTERNAL NEEDS OF THE CANADIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY

The principles that can be used to identify a set of genuine internal needs of the Canadian Muslim community emerge from the Qurʾān and have been recognized in Islamic jurisprudence for centuries. They have been formulated by *fuqāhāʾ* in precise terms. The underlying purpose of these principles is to help establish an environment conducive to a constant movement toward Allah the Most High. This anchoring focuses our attention to a specific goal and provides a clear understanding of the ultimate goal: building a community based on *taqwāʾ*. Often mistranslated as “fear of God”, this Qurʾānic term represents the dynamic relationship of the individual with Allah, the Most High and Exalted; it governs—like a hidden fountain within our hearts—all our deeds and actions, desires and aspirations. Anything that increases *taqwāʾ* leads us to the Most Merciful; those deeds, actions and activities that reduce *taqwāʾ* lead us away from Him, may He be Glorified.

Thus simplified, the believer attains a new understanding of the question of the needs of the community. We must now understand it in terms of knowing what brings us closer to Allah, the Majestic and the Merciful. The answer, of course, lies in following His Book and the example of His Noble Messenger, may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him, but what is needed is an institutional framework that can allow individual members of the community to benefit from these two sources in order to enhance their *taqwāʾ*.

What does this mean, in concrete terms? After all, the Muslim community of Canada is not an abstract idea; it is made up of men, women, and children who need houses, schools, jobs, places to worship, ways to travel, and numerous other requirements.

Fortunately, the Book of Allah the Most High and the example set forth by His Noble Messenger suffice us to formulate, in concrete terms, a plan of action that would help this community to create the ambience for living in the shade of the Glorious Qurʾān.

The example of the Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, tells us that the most efficient way to address congruent needs is to tackle them together with available resources. For example, when the Mosque in Madinah was under construction, a group of Companions—may Allah be pleased with them all—was already laying the foundation of the first Islamic *madrassah*; in other words, the Prophet—may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him—did not wait for the mud walls to be built before institutionalizing the *madrassah*. We know too from more than one early source that one form of ransom for the prisoners of the Battle of Badr was for them to teach Muslim children how to read and write.

This extraordinary emphasis on acquiring knowledge, reflected in numerous verses of the Qur'ān and *ahādīth* of the Prophet—may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him—is, no doubt, one of the major needs of the Canadian Muslim community. Now, a quick reflection is enough to understand that this need cannot be met simply by erecting a building; it requires textbooks and teachers who are themselves thoroughly immersed in the Islamic worldview and who are able to transfer the vision of Islam to the next generation. These are not mutually exclusive needs; one cannot be fulfilled without the other. One has to have the physical infrastructure to impart education and one has to have human and material resources. Likewise, there are specific community obligations toward the elderly, toward those with terminal illnesses, and those who require palliative care. This makes it obvious that the question about the internal needs of the Canadian Muslim community should be addressed from a perspective that is not limited to one project nor to one aspect. However, these infrastructural needs and religious obligations can be viewed more concretely if we construe them in reference to various segments of the community.

### **EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

For a Muslim, learning is a life-long process. Learning also comes with a responsibility of teaching others what one has learned.

There is, perhaps, nothing more pressing for the Muslim communities living in the West than to effectively discharge their obligations toward fulfilling the educational needs of the community.

The educational needs of the Muslim community can be divided into two major categories: educational needs of children and those of adults.

Every Muslim parent knows that children living in the West have been deprived of the spiritual, moral, cultural, and institutional ambience that through history has nurtured the young in their tender years in traditional Muslim lands; even today, and given a rapid erosion of values, the moral code that has become the acceptable norm of the West is not sanctioned by traditional societies where individual cases of transgression are looked upon as sins. The absence of this moral shield is, however, merely one of many aspects of deprivation that Muslim children face in the West; there are other, more subtle but equally important, deprivations—even the sound of the *Ādhān*, that refreshing reorientation toward the Creator which permeates the Muslim space and resonates five times a day, is absent in the West. Then there is the elaborate infrastructure that has evolved over centuries and that helps children to mature with an Islamic worldview. There are numerous aspects of this informal learning, but just one example would suffice: the mosque on a particular corner of a busy intersection in Damascus not only provides a place where one goes to perform *ṣalāh*, it also serves as a *madrassah* for neighbourhood children, a resting place for the merchant from out of town, and a place where one can hear the Qurʾān recited aloud. This effusion of Divine Grace and this presence of the Word of Allah the Most High in the very air one breathes has a transformative effect on those who breathe this air; all of this is absent in the West.

Thus, it becomes obvious that what is missing for our children is not just the outward, moral code, nor merely role models, but more subtle and vastly more important transforming currents that make up the ambience which helps to create and nurture an Islamic space within their growing consciousness. These subtle

dimensions of the contribution of an Islamic space in the growth of children are extremely important because they work at the cellular level, transforming the visual, auditory and other forms of sensory memory that serve as a fount of inspiration in later years. The image of an elderly man completely immersed in his worship in a mosque where five times a day the faithful have gathered for remembrance of Allah the Most High for over a millennium, inscribed in the memory of a child, is a transforming image that roots the child in subtle ways to the same vision of Islam as beheld by that old man who bows down to Allah, submitting himself completely in that corner of sanctified space of the ancient mosque where he is alone with the Alone. Likewise, the audial depository of the accumulated presence of Allah that permeates such an ancient structure works at the level of sensory transformation. These are only a few examples of what Muslim children living in the West do not generally experience.

This identification of some of the missing ingredients from the very air which our children breathe also leads us to recognize what is present. Generally, home and school make up the two primary places where Muslim children grow up. Whatever is present in these two places is bound to have an impact on the growing child and, in many ways, schools have a far more lasting impact than homes. Schooling comes as a package, with overt and covert goals and objectives. It prepares students for professions that are needed by a society, inculcates certain behavioural patterns within, and attempts to “socialize” children. These goals of general education are not always in harmony with the needs of specific communities. This is well-recognized, and this is why many faith communities have felt the need to establish their own schools upon migration to new lands. We have in Canada, for instance, an entirely separate Catholic school system, as well as many other schools and post-secondary institutions catering to the needs of specific religious, linguistic and cultural groups.

This is an area in which the Muslim communities living in the West have by far been rather slow in responding to their own needs. A vast network of mosques exists in the West and many

mosques also have weekend Islamic schools, but full-time Muslim schools are not abundant—and where they do exist, they merely teach what is taught elsewhere, because truly Islamic curricula for Muslims living in the West is simply non-existent.

What makes a school truly Islamic is integrated, holistic educational resources, trained teachers who are themselves rooted in Islam's formidable intellectual and spiritual traditions, and of course an atmosphere permeated by the remembrance of Allah. One would be hard pressed to find an Islamic school with these basic ingredients. This is really an area that needs urgent attention, if the Muslim communities living in the West are to survive as distinct communities. This is also an area that falls in the category of *farḍ 'alā'l-kifāyah*, and hence non-fulfillment carries serious consequences for the entire community.

This is not to claim that the need has not been felt until now, or reflected upon, or even attended to. It is also not to say that no effort has been made to produce educational resources. There are many individuals and organizations that have tried to create new educational material for Islamic schools. Many approaches have been suggested to produce Islamic curricula; sometimes attempts have been made to modify the existing material being used in the Muslim world for use in the West, while in others new books have been written. But the Muslim community in Canada has not been able to produce and adopt a comprehensive and standard curriculum that is distinctively Islamic, that fulfills the educational requirements of the provinces where these institutions are located, and that has been refined through a developmental assessment process. Not only are sufficient educational resources lacking, we do not even have enough committed teachers who can utilize such curricula if it *were* to come into existence. As a result, Muslim children keep on suffering—the community as a whole is losing its most important asset.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF AN ISLAMIC CURRICULA**

The fundamental principles that would govern the development of

a truly Islamic curricula demand that this be a comprehensive curricula, covering all subjects and all grade levels. This is so because merely appending Islamic studies to existing curricula would not serve the purpose: textbooks of chemistry, geology, and mathematics need to reflect the Islamic worldview as much as those of history and sociology. True, the Canadian Muslim communities of each province will need to modify this basic curriculum to meet the local standards and requirements of the province, but there is sufficient ground to assume that at least a foundational country-wide curriculum can be developed that would serve the needs of all Muslims living in Canada and that would require only slight modifications to meet the different provincial standards.

The most obvious question that comes to mind at this stage relates to how an Islamic textbook of chemistry would differ from what is already available in the great bazaar. This article is not the place to outline a complete textbook—that would be done in the document dealing with the general framework for individual subject areas, *insha'Allah*—but an example may suffice. Let us take the simplest case of a unit in this textbook that deals with the structure of a water molecule. This unit forms an essential part of every high school chemistry textbook. What would be a distinctive “Islamic element” in teaching this unit? How would an Islamic school teach Muslim students about the structure of the water molecule in a manner different from that of the public school system?

First of all, let us recall that water is the most important ingredient of life and, as the Qurʾān reminds us, Allah has created everything out of water. A molecule of water has a peculiar structure in which two atoms of hydrogen are attached to one atom of oxygen at a precise angle of  $104.5^\circ$ . This is explained in all chemistry textbooks on the basis of the electronic structure of oxygen and hydrogen bonding. Experimental data is then used to show the crystal structure of water, in which the two hydrogen atoms stand out and form weak bonds with neighbouring atoms. We are then told that it is because of these weak hydrogen bonds that water molecules do not pack densely when water freezes. This

is why ice is less dense than water and hence floats. This is the core of the standard high school chemistry textbook's section on the water molecule structure. It explains or rather explains away one of the most important aspects of the structure of water molecules—that which allows underwater life to exist even when oceans freeze, the floating ice forming a protective layer for countless forms of life to exist. The standard textbook however does not situate explanations in a framework constructed on the basis of *Tawhīd*; nor does it refer to a Creator who has imparted these characteristic properties to the oxygen and hydrogen atoms. It does not inspire students to reflect on the most obvious question that comes to mind at this stage: why does the hydrogen atom, this simplest of all atoms, have this unique ability to make hydrogen bonds in the first place? It does not lead the student to reflect upon the teleological aspects of this design, and the historical context it provides on the topic does not look back to the eleventh century when two men, Ibn Sīna and Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, living hundreds of miles apart, exchanged correspondence on this very question.

All of these missing elements in the standard chemistry textbook deprive Muslim students the opportunity to slowly root their spiritual, intellectual, and emotional beings in various dimensions of Islamic tradition. This is only one example out of countless that can be produced in all branches of knowledge. The purpose of a distinctively Islamic curricula would be to incorporate all aspects of the vision of Islam into the very texts that students would use, in a manner that is subtle, elegant, reflective, and rooted in solid scholarship.

Subjects such as social studies, history, and language arts play a more direct role in forming the worldviews that children will carry for the rest of their lives. In these areas the need is so obviously pressing that one wonders why the Muslim community has not already produced comprehensive textbooks. What is being taught in the public school system in these subjects is built upon a secular worldview and the effect of this subtle secularization on the young minds, the impact of the slow imbibing of theories, ideas, and concepts rooted in a worldview from which God has been

abstracted, is simply devastating. It cannot be corrected simply through small doses of Islamic studies administered by weekend schools.

Even in the area of Islamic studies, the teaching of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth and the tradition based upon these, there is much to be changed. The weekend schools all across the country require standard textbooks, supportive resource materials, and methodologies, as well as teachers trained in using time-tested methods of imparting Islamic education. Above all, these weekend schools need an institutional framework which can ensure the continuity of curricula and teaching methodologies year after year. This framework needs to be realistic. It would recognize that the mostly volunteer staff of these schools would come from the community without necessarily having prior training in teaching Islamic studies. It would incorporate this reality into its framework and devise effective strategies for the development of a goal-oriented, highly professional curricula that can be taught by those who do not have pedagogical training. It would produce self-directed learning modules, integrated units with interactive student activities accompanied by simple instructions for teachers—curriculum material and methods of delivery that can be grasped by an adult through a weekend teacher training workshop.



Wūḍḍiṣṭān

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