
A need to know: Islamic history and the school curriculum

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A need to know:

Islamic history and the school curriculum

In this article, Nicolas Kinloch questions some of the principal justifications often advanced for teaching Islamic history in schools. In particular, he wants to move us beyond our concern with current events in the Middle East. He suggests that there are dangers in looking at Islamic history if it is merely refracted through the experience of the last few years. Accepting that the study of Islamic civilisation does indeed pose some major theoretical challenges and difficulties, he is nonetheless optimistic that these can be met.

December 1990: the Gulf War was about to begin. In a café just below Cairo's magnificent Citadel, I remarked to my Egyptian companions, no doubt somewhat ingratiatingly, that I had always rather admired Salah ad-din. 'Salah ad-din?' they echoed incredulously. 'But...he was a Kurd.'¹

I do not recall this incident in order to suggest that Egyptians are racist, or to indicate that Islamic history has any more pitfalls than other sorts, since I believe neither of these things. It does help illustrate that there may perhaps be a variety of Islamic histories, rather than some monolithic 'Islamic history'; if so, this may be one of the things to bear in mind when we try to teach it.

Why should we want to teach Islamic history? How will our students benefit from learning about it? What special opportunities and challenges can we expect to confront? These are the key points I hope to address in this article.

One Day in September

The July 2005 suicide attacks in London might seem to suggest the importance of placing Islamic history on the school curriculum. Certainly, the events of 11 September 2001 raised many important questions for students and teachers.² It is possible that some understanding of Islamic history would have helped students challenge the more unpleasant manifestations of Islamophobia that were unleashed, then and later. For example, in January 2004 the television presenter and newspaper columnist Robert Kilroy-Silk wrote:

Apart from oil – which was discovered, is produced and is paid for by the west – what do they (Arabs) contribute? Can you think of anything? Anything really useful? Anything

really valuable? Something we really need, could not do without? No, nor can I.

What do they think we feel about them? That we adore them for the way they murdered more than 3,000 civilians on September 11 and then danced in the hot, dusty streets to celebrate the murders? That we admire them for being suicide bombers, limb amputators, women repressors?

Kilroy-Silk's racism was equalled only by his ignorance. For example, his article assumed throughout that 'Arab' and 'Muslim' were interchangeable terms. His belief that all Arabs and/or Muslims were Islamic fundamentalists and mass-murderers was matched by his assumption that somehow he was writing on behalf of the West: note that 'we' again. Both conclusions were ludicrously wide of the mark. Perhaps as significant was his view – probably quite widespread – that Arabs and/or Muslims need to justify their existence, and that they can best do this by providing the West with what it needs. This is the language of old-fashioned imperialism. The Muslim Council of Britain commented:

Mr Kilroy -Silk should have been spending a little less time in front of the cameras and a bit more time swotting up on his history.

Muslim achievements in textiles, carpets, metalwork, glassmaking and bookbinding can be seen across the medieval and early modern European world. The very paper on which you

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are reading this article was an innovation passed on to Europe courtesy of the Arabs. Its page numbers are to this day known as Arabic numerals. It is no exaggeration to say that the European Renaissance, and therefore most of modern science, was based to a large extent on Arab scholarship.⁴

All this was absolutely true, and needed saying. If our students knew it too, it might well mean that they never became *Sunday Express* readers in the first place. It remains of course doubtful that the readership Kilroy-Silk thought he was addressing would be convinced, precisely because the examples given were historical. Racists often, though not always, have little difficulty accepting that this or that people or culture was acceptable enough in the past. It is their presence in a contemporary context that offends them.

Problems remain. It must be uncertain whether a programme of study likely to conclude with Süleyman the Magnificent would really equip students with an understanding of the global politics of the early 21st century. Nor, equally, is it clear that a course of Islamic history emphasising the role of such individuals as Avicenna or Salah ad-din would help students understand the minds of modern suicide-bombers. And the understandable attempts – made by many schools in the days and weeks after 11 September – to give students a crash course in Middle Eastern current affairs risked presenting Islam simply as that which opposes, and is opposed by, the West. Certainly, where such attempts were made, it was right that history teachers should be asked to take the lead. But there are in fact better reasons than the events of the last four years for adding Islamic history to the curriculum.

First, it deserves study in its own right. It is also part – a very important part – of our global history. As a recent study of history in American schools put it:

We mislead students if we fail to make clear that European history is not the history of humankind. Moreover, European history alone will not give children the expansive knowledge base and conceptual architecture they need to understand the increasingly global issues of their day. It is not that children must study 'other cultures' besides the West, but that they should be able to situate the study of any historical problem in its proper context, a setting that for many of the most important questions is the world as a whole.⁵

These are not the only reasons. Elements of Islamic history can well be used to throw light on the study of medicine, astronomy, chemistry, physics, mathematics, modern languages and classical civilisations. It might therefore seem perfectly reasonable to insist that virtually every teacher in every school teaches at least some elements of Islamic history. But this – perhaps fortunately – is unlikely to be feasible.

Islam in the curriculum

There have been several attempts in recent years to encourage teachers to cover the history of Islam. In 1990, the Final Report of the History Working Group proposed Islamic History as an optional Study Unit at Key Stage 3.⁶ Like much else produced at that time, it was dense with both 'essential' and 'exemplary' information, including details of the pepper trade between Timor and Beira. Students were to be introduced to a number of concepts; it was perhaps significant that *jihad* was mentioned before law, cultural diversity or technology. The proposal contained so much content that it was hard to see how more than a fraction of it could have been covered, even if a whole academic year had been devoted to it.⁷ Apart from content overload, there was also a lack of readily available resources: notes on implementing the new curriculum concluded, unhelpfully:

We recognise that there will be very significant resource implications in terms of textbooks... Teachers have however made an impressive contribution in the past to... the production of resources.⁸

Those who wished to teach Islamic history, in other words, were going to have to resource it all themselves. Unsurprisingly, few schools opted to do so.

In 2000, QCA [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority] published its Key Stage 3 Schemes of Work. Unit 6 [Year 7] was *What were the achievements of the Islamic states 600–1600?* This enquiry-based approach has met with widespread approval. It remains uncertain, nonetheless, how many teachers have decided to change to it as a result. Evidence from the Muslim Council of Britain suggests that even schools with a substantial number of Muslim students have not done so.⁹

Challenges

Teaching any form of history usually presents teachers with significant challenges and problems; Islamic history is no exception. None is insoluble.

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Language is one obvious concern. Relatively few history teachers in Britain speak or write Arabic. Acquaintance with other major languages of the Islamic world – Turkish, Farsi, Urdu, Hausa and Malay, to name just a few – is still less common. In consequence, teachers are likely to be heavily dependent on translated sources. This is a problem associated with the teaching of any culture not based on the English language. Probably few teachers of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union speak German or Russian. But linguistic incapacity causes particular problems for the study of Islamic culture, since there is a very strong emphasis on Arabic as the word of God. In addition, relatively few works by Muslim historians are translated into Western languages, and thus few Westerners have much idea of current trends in Islamic historiography. Any AS Level student might be expected to be familiar with terms such as ‘conservative’ or ‘revisionist’. If they were studying early modern England, we would expect them to know something about differing interpretations of, say, the Tudor ‘revolution in government’. But how many students – or teachers – could speak confidently of normative or acculturationist traditions in Islamic historiography, or of the difference between Ash’arite and Mu’tazilite conceptions of free will?

Another significant problem with Islamic history is that to a Western student it can look worthy but dull. Indeed, the more concerned a teacher may be to emphasise those elements of Islamic history which might be described as linked to Citizenship, the less attractive it might appear. In an era when history departments resort to local studies on Jack the Ripper, and Nazi Germany can be studied repeatedly at almost every level, students might be forgiven for wondering just why they should be excited about the history of Islam. This problem, if it really is a problem, is relatively easy to overcome: Islamic history contains plenty of ‘hooks’ which may be used to draw students in. Teachers will need as ever to be judicious in their selection of enquiries, and a fine example appears towards the end of this article.

One final potential difficulty exists. Not all Muslims are happy with the idea of Islamic history being taught by non-Muslims, and more particularly by Westerners. As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad puts it:

For the committed Muslim, neither the flow of history itself nor the study and interpretation of it can be considered apart from the realm of the sacred and the workings of the divine.¹⁰

This does not mean, of course, that Muslim scholars are unwilling or unable to use all the techniques of ‘scientific’ scholarship, but does indicate there may

exist fundamental differences about the purpose of teaching history. According to Akbar S Ahmed:

For Muslims what happened in the past is important, since they live in the present with an acute awareness of their history. The Muslim association with their past is explained through religion.... Many Muslims believe that there is a strong argument for interpreting Muslim history differently from Western history.¹¹

History teachers in British schools may consider themselves to be purveyors of historical truth: they may well consider their motives to be self-evidently benign. It would be worth their considering that many Muslims, though not all, might disagree with them. Edward Said has pointed out, notably in his classic study *Orientalism*, that Western interest in, and knowledge of, Islam has frequently been anything but benign or disinterested.¹² In a later work he argues:

We can say tentatively that knowledge of another culture is possible, and it is important to add, desirable, if two conditions are fulfilled – which, incidentally, are precisely the two conditions that today’s Middle Eastern or Islamic studies by and large do not fulfil. One, the student must feel that he or she is answerable to and in uncoercive contact with the culture and the people being studied. Most of what the West knew about the non-Western world it knew in the framework of colonialism; the European scholar therefore approached his subject from a general position of dominance, and what he said about this subject was said with little reference to what anyone but European scholars had said. Knowledge of Islam and Islamic peoples has generally proceeded not only from dominance and confrontation but also from cultural antipathy. Today Islam is defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam.

The second condition complements and fulfils the first. Knowledge of the social world is at bottom interpretation.... The interpretation of texts, which is what the knowledge of other

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cultures is principally based on, neither takes place in a clinically secure laboratory nor pretends to objective results....Every interpreter is a reader, and there is no such thing as a neutral or value-free reader.¹³

Does this mean – as a GCSE examination question might put it – that Westerners cannot teach Islamic history? No. Even Said is prepared to make exceptions and admit that there are Westerners capable of fulfilling the conditions he imposes: Clifford Geertz, for one. And, despite appearances, it was never true that Said spoke for all Muslims, or claimed to do so. Nor has Said's view itself been exempt from criticism from within the Islamic community:

The heat and fury Edward Said generated by arguing that the West can know Islam only in a demeaning and exploitative manner has obscured a central question raised by him: can the West ever hope to understand, objectively and sympathetically, the other, that is, foreign cultures, alien peoples? Clearly...this is possible, pace Said...he has led us into an intellectual cul-de-sac. Said has left us at the end of the trail with what he set out to denounce: stereotypes, images devoid of substance. Orientalism is now an empty cliché.¹⁴

Western teachers ought to feel confident that they can undertake the teaching of Islamic history; they need only bring to it the same respect that they would bring to any form of historical enquiry, and a willingness to obtain guidance, where necessary, from Muslim authorities as well as Western ones. They need confidence in themselves as teachers; they have the expertise to help their students make sense of this aspect of the past.

Resources and Enquiries

Fortunately, it is no longer the case that teachers of Islamic history are expected to create all their own resources – although the arrival of the Internet has made this much more practicable than it was in 1990. In addition, new books, with new methods of enquiry, are helping to make the task more manageable, and to help teachers and students focus on what should properly be called learning outcomes. One forthcoming book, for example, suggests ways in which students can be helped to approach key individuals and events from Islamic history. See an example on the next three pages, from the Ottoman empire.¹⁵

The unit above has several obvious strengths: its clarity, its emphasis on the Ottomans themselves – almost all accounts of the events of 1453 are from a Byzantine perspective – and the cleverness with which key points, such as the excellence of Ottoman military technology and generalship, are embedded in the narrative. Michael Riley, the unit's author, has discussed some of the thinking that went into this unit. In particular, he has emphasised the need for careful selection of content and sources. For example, the capture of Constantinople in 1453 was followed by widespread looting, rape and murder for three days, as was customary in cities taken by storm: the same fate befell Jerusalem when it was taken by Crusaders in 1099.¹⁶ But Riley chose not to include any specific reference to these events. Asked whether this might represent some form of censorship, his answer was clear. A focus on atrocities would be likely to obscure the unit's real objectives. It was not that Riley did not wish students to know that Ottoman soldiers could be guilty of appalling behaviour: but this needed to be placed in a wider context. Careful selection is not the same thing as censorship: the unit, after all, draws attention to the thorns, as well as the rose.

To conclude: Islamic history deserves rather more coverage than it tends to receive within the secondary curriculum. The various objections to it seem rather unconvincing. But neither should it be introduced simply as a reaction to current events as they unfold upon our television screens. Teachers need knowledge, sympathy and originality to make the most of the abundant opportunities that Islamic history – or histories – can offer our students. Perhaps above all, they need the self-confidence to undertake the task.

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Figure 1: An extract from an enquiry about Islamic history, suitable for Key Stage 3.

The Rose and its Thorns

What made the Ottoman Sultans so powerful?

This is a portrait of the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed II (see Figure 2). In 1480, when the portrait was painted, Mehmed II had ruled the mighty Ottoman Empire for nearly 30 years. He was one of the most powerful rulers in the world.

You can see that the artist has shown Mehmed II sitting cross-legged, smelling a rose and holding a handkerchief. On his head, Mehmed wears the turban, a symbol of Ottoman power. Mehmed was a cultured man. He loved poetry, art and beautiful gardens. The Sultan was also very clever. Look how the artist has tried to show Mehmed deep in thought.

Mehmed II was also a great warrior who led his armies into many battles. That is why the artist has shown him with an archer's ring on his thumb. Some people think that the rose which Mehmed is holding represents the Islamic people in his empire. His people are protected by Mehmed's powerful armies – the leaves and thorns of the rose.

Think

Why do you think that Mehmed II would have been pleased with this portrait?

The growth of the Ottoman Empire

In the early fourteenth century the Ottomans fought to expand their territory in Anatolia (modern Turkey).

In 1453 Mehmed II captured the city of Constantinople. He turned it into the capital of his empire and gave it a new name – Istanbul. Mehmed II went on to conquer more territories. No wonder he is known as Mehmed the Conqueror!

During the reign of Mehmed II's great grandson, Suleyman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire grew even more rapidly. By the time of his death, in 1566, Suleyman ruled over a huge territory which covered Turkey, North Africa, the Balkans, the Black Sea and parts of Arabia. The Ottoman Sultans were at the height of their power.

Think

Use an atlas to find out which modern day countries formed part of the Ottoman Empire in 1566.

Your Enquiry

In this enquiry your challenge is to explain what made the Ottoman Sultans so powerful. You will work as a researcher for a new three-part TV history series: 'The Power of the Ottoman Sultans'. A top presenter has been chosen for the series, but he doesn't know much history! You will need to provide the presenter with the big ideas for each programme, and suggest some scenes which can be brought to life using actors. The three programmes in the series will be: 1. The Sultan's army (see Figure 3) 2. The Sultan's palace 3. The Sultan's empire.

Figure 2: A portrait of Mehmed II, attributed to Shibli-zade Ahmed, c.1480.



Figure 3: Information to support the first programme of the TV history series task.

The Sultan's Army

The Conquest of Constantinople, 1453

By 1452, all that was left of the Byzantine Empire was the city of Constantinople. On all sides, the city was surrounded by the Ottoman Empire. It was the beginning of Mehmed II's reign, and he was determined to increase his power by conquering Constantinople.

For many years, the Christian city of Constantinople had been in decline. But an attack on the city would not be easy. Earlier attempts to defeat Constantinople had all failed. The city was well protected by huge sea and land walls. All the way from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmara, snaked three enormous walls, studded with strong towers. To prevent an attack by sea, the Byzantines had stretched a massive iron chain across the channel of the Golden Horn.

During the spring of 1453, Mehmed assembled 150,000 soldiers outside the walls of Constantinople. For months, the craftsmen of the Ottoman Empire had been making helmets, shields, javelins, swords and arrows. Mehmed had also paid for a deadly new weapon. In front of the Sultan's tents stood a 28-foot-long bronze cannon which fired stone balls weighing more than half a ton. Mehmed hoped that this monster weapon, and his other cannons, would blast through the city's walls.

By 7 April, the Ottomans had surrounded Constantinople by sea and land. The attack began. After several days, the Ottoman cannons began to shatter the city's outer walls. But the Christians were able to patch the holes with bales of straw, wood and earth. The Ottoman army could not breach the walls. At sea, the Ottomans tried to break the iron chain protecting the Golden Horn. They failed. It was clear to Mehmed that the conquest of Constantinople would not be easy. He would have to tighten his grip on the city.

Mehmed thought of a very clever plan. Instead of trying to break through the chain across the Golden Horn he decided to carry his ships around it! His engineers and soldiers made a slipway of tree-trunks and planks which they greased with sheep's fat. They placed their ships on huge sledges and dragged them over the hill. Within a few hours, eighty ships had slithered, like killer crocodiles, into the waters of the Golden Horn.

Now Mehmed could begin his final attack on Constantinople. The Sultan ordered his war banner to be unfurled. In the early hours of 29 May, Ottoman troops, with their scimitars, cannons and siege towers, began a life or death fight for the city. After hours of fierce combat, they finally found a weak point in the city's walls. A small gate had not been properly secured, and the Ottomans pushed their way through. Ottoman soldiers flooded into the city and the defenders ran to protect their families.

Later that morning, Mehmed rode into the conquered city of Constantinople. Outside the Christian cathedral of St Sophia, he dismounted from his horse, scooped up a handful of dirt, and sprinkled it over his turban, in an act of humility. He entered the cathedral and began to think how he could convert it into a mosque.

Think

Why do you think Mehmed sprinkled dirt over his turban?

In what ways does the siege of Constantinople show that Mehmed was a powerful ruler?