Countering Intolerance against Muslims through Education

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Summary

1. These notes were prepared for the launch of *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslims* in November 2012. The guidelines are jointly published by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and Unesco. They are available in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. The English version can be accessed at http://www.osce.org/odihr/84495.

2. The notes begin (paragraph 4) by recalling six recurring stereotypes in public discourse about Muslims and Islam. They continue by listing six alternative views and by referring to the impact of globalisation (paragraphs 6–8) and various other exacerbating factors (paragraph 9). They then consider the role of education – how countering intolerance against Muslims fits with broader social and educational concerns, for example human rights education and learning to live together (paragraphs 10–11), and various practicalities in schools and classrooms (paragraphs 12–13). They conclude by stressing the importance and value of internationally agreed guidance for educators (paragraphs 14–15).

3. An appendix contains the text of a brief article written a few days after the launch in Paris on 5 November.

Six recurring stereotypes

4. The *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslims* refer to six recurring stereotypes in public discourse about Muslims. These constitute the default position, so to speak, in non-Muslim worldviews – they are the common sense or grand narrative that is widely assumed unless a conscious effort is made to question and replace it. They are summarised below.

> *1. All the same*
> Muslims are seen as all being much the same as each other, regardless of their nationality, social class and political outlook, and regardless of whether they are observant in their religious beliefs and practice.
>
> *2. All are motivated by religion*
> It is thought that the single most important thing about Muslims, in all circumstances, is their religious faith. So if someone of Muslim background engages in violence, for example, it is assumed this is because their religion advocates violence.
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> *3. Totally 'other'*
> Muslims are seen as totally different – they are seen as having few if any interests, needs or values in common with people who do not have a Muslim background. A consequence is that they are not seen as possessing insights or wisdom from which people with different religious or cultural backgrounds may learn and benefit.
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> *4. Culturally and morally inferior*
> Muslims are seen as culturally and morally inferior and prone to being irrational and violent, intolerant in their treatment of women, contemptuous towards world views different from their own, and hostile and resentful towards 'the West' for no good reason.

> ### 5. Threat
> Muslims are seen as a security threat. Globally, they are engaged in a clash of civilizations. Within countries where they make up a minority they are an 'enemy within' in tacit or open sympathy with international terrorism, and are a threat to western culture, traditions and law, for they are bent on the 'Islamization' of western countries.
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> ### 6. Co-operation is impossible
> As a consequence of the previous five perceptions, it is claimed there is no possibility of active partnership between Muslims and people with other religious or cultural backgrounds, working as equals on tasks that require dialogue, joint reflection and patient negotiation.

5. The default position outlined above needs to be challenged and – even more importantly – replaced by an alternative narrative. The *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslims* point out (page 27) that educational responses to the stereotypes listed above need to show and explain that:

- there is and always has been much diversity within Islam and much internal debate and deliberation

- people of Muslim background have a range of different attitudes towards religious belief and practice, as do people born into other traditions

- Muslims and people from other religious or cultural backgrounds share a common humanity and therefore have a great deal in common

- people belonging to differing religious or cultural communities, including Muslims, Christians, Jews and others, can and do have positive impacts on each other, and frequently work and live together in close co-operation and partnership

- Islamic cultures and civilizations have made substantial contributions over the centuries to science and technology, architecture and the arts, and law, ethics and philosophy

- all over the world – locally and nationally, and in international and global contexts – Muslims and others can and must live and work in cooperation with each other to deal with shared problems.

Globalisation

6. It is essential to bear in mind that anxiety connected with Muslims and Islam is frequently combined with other, unrelated fears and anxieties, for it has its roots not only in ignorance, misinformation, media distortions and political scaremongering about Islam but also in misunderstandings about 'western' cultural and national identity and history. Education about 'us-and-them', that is to say, must be about 'us' as well as about 'them'. There is much more to challenging intolerance against Muslims than simply providing information about Muslims!

7. The combination of hostility towards Islam with other hostilities and anxieties was vividly seen in Norway in summer 2011. Anders Behring Breivik hated and feared, he said, Islam and Muslims. At the same time he hated non-Muslim political leaders who, in his view, had failed to stand up for what he considered to be historic European values, and who on the contrary had encouraged multiculturalism and political correctness, and what he called cultural marxism.

8. Anxieties about the competence and reliability of non-Muslim leaders and authority figures, and about the increasing diversity of the modern world ('multiculturalism')

and the declining influence of national governments in a multipolar world ('globalisation', 'declinism'), have their origins in widespread social and economic change, not primarily or essentially in Islam. The attacks in America on 9/11, for example, were a vivid reminder that the governments of nation states – even of extremely powerful nation states – are no longer able to guarantee the security of their citizens. Also, governments cannot control, to the extent they did in the past, economic, financial, cultural and ecological borders. The resulting insecurities lead to scapegoating and moral panics, with Muslims and other minorities being convenient enemies and targets, though they are not – absolutely they are not – the principal causes.

Exacerbating factors

9. The targeting of Muslims within western societies as convenient enemies is exacerbated by factors such as the following:

   o the legacy of history, since for many centuries Muslim and other cultures have been engaged in military conflict with each other, and relationships and mutual perceptions have been deeply affected by colonialism and neocolonialism, and by resistance and struggle

   o the desire to justify patterns of inequality in modern western societies which work to the disadvantage of, amongst others, Muslim communities and neighbourhoods

   o the desire to maintain and defend fossil fuel supplies in the Middle East, and to justify the military invasions of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, and to motivate western troops and security services to mistreat, torture and kill

   o the desire to stand by and support the state of Israel, particularly its current leadership in its dealings with Palestine

   o the desire to sell newspapers, and therefore to excite and orchestrate *frissons* of fear, and spread and respond to moral panic, reassuring readers that threats to identity, status and normality are understood and can be dealt with

   o the desire to gain votes in local and national elections, and to diminish the attractiveness of political opponents

   o widespread scepticism towards religious beliefs and institutions – all religion, not just Islam – mixed with resentment and perhaps even envy towards those who claim religious certainty.

Connection with human rights education and *vivre ensemble*

10. Where does countering intolerance against Muslims fit into existing school curricula, and how does it relate to the concerns of international organisations such as Unesco – concerns which have been conceptualised over the decades with phrases such as education for international understanding, human rights education, tolerance education, peace education, education for sustainable development, intercultural education, and global education? Such concerns were valuably summarised by UNESCO in the 1990s as 'learning to live together' – learning for *vivre ensemble*. Such learning was seen as one of four pillars for all education throughout the world. The other three pillars were summarised as learning to know, learning to do and learning to be**.** (*Learning: the treasure within*, report to Unesco of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, 1996.)

11. Learning for *vivre ensemble* takes place within the official taught curriculum in subjects such as history, civics and social studies, and through the study of literature and the other arts. Also it takes place in the ways a school is organised and run, and in how each individual classroom is organised and run. It is concerned with relationships and behaviour in everyday personal life, and also in

local, national and international affairs. There are many ways in which intolerance against Muslims can be included, both directly and incidentally, within the wider context of learning to live together,

Practicalities

12. Practicalities vary from school to school, and from country to country. Also, of course, they vary according to pupils' ages, and according to whether or not they are themselves of Muslim background. But in general terms, in all schools and in all countries, and with all pupils whatever their age and faith background, they are likely to include the following:

    o media literacy – critical thinking and open-mindedness are vital in relation to the media, including not only the press, radio and television but also advertising, computer games, websites and blogs

    o real or simulated involvement in advocacy – including lobbying and campaigning and writing to newspapers and websites, and to elected representatives at local, national and international levels

    o the use of theatre, drama, puppets and role-play, visual imagery of many kinds, and music, fiction and poetry

    o visits and exchanges, oral history and interviewing projects, and correspondence with young people in other countries or regions

    o the provision of safe spaces within which pupils feel able to think aloud and express tentative ideas on topics that are sensitive or controversial

    o attention to the voices, stories and experiences of those who are most directly affected and disadvantaged by intolerance

    o recognition and affirmation of Muslim identities, values and concerns within western societies

    o whole-school approaches, including policies and procedures for dealing with incidents of racist and religious bullying and abuse.

13. The *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslim* contain many illustrations of these points.

The significance of international guidelines

14. To summarise, challenging Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hostility through education involves two main tasks, both for Muslims and for non-Muslims:

    o challenging the dominant western narrative about Islam in its various facets (paragraph 4 above) and replacing it (paragraph 5)

    o helping children and young people to cope and live with anxieties whose sources have nothing inherently to do with Islam or Muslims (paragraphs 6–9).

15. These tasks are extremely sensitive, complex and difficult, and teachers need and welcome guidance, as for example the *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslims,* published jointly by the Council of Europe, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and UNESCO. The fact that this guidance reflects good practice in a wide range of countries gives it substantial authority, such that teachers can readily use it with professional confidence.

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Remember, remember, this month of November

(This article appeared on the Left Central blog, 10 November 2012, at
http://leftcentral.org.uk/2012/11/10/remember-remember-this-month-of-november/)

From UNESCO to London

On the evening of Monday 5 November I returned to London from an international conference in Paris. As the plane made its descent towards Heathrow, the city landscape beneath me was alive with the sparkle of fireworks.

The conference had been at UNESCO's headquarters and had been about addressing racisms, particularly the form of racism known as Islamophobia, in and through European and North American education systems. The fireworks across London were a sparkling reminder, anyway potentially and anyway in principle, that racisms containing a religious component have been alive and kicking in Europe for many centuries.

'Remember, remember,' we have said annually to children in Britain over the years, 'the fifth of November.' And we have added, sternly if ungrammatically, that we 'see no reason/ why gunpowder treason/ should ever be forgot.'

We have too rarely, though, remembered to tell our children that there was a strong religious element in the mutual hostility that existed between King James on the one hand and the Gunpowder Plot 'traitors' on the other. And we have not remembered to refer, even obliquely, to present-day prejudices and intolerance which similarly are imbued with a religious component, for example Islamophobia. Nor have we remembered to point to the similarities and differences between Islamophobia and colour-based racisms.

The nature of racism is not, admittedly, an obvious topic for conversation and clarification at your average bonfire night party. But certainly it needs to feature elsewhere in settings and contexts where adults and young people interact to reflect on their shared history, and on the shared history of the land – and the continent and the power-bloc ('the west') where they live. It is certainly a topic for consideration in schools, as was forcefully emphasised at the UNESCO conference on 5 November.

Islamophobia Awareness Month

November 2012 has been designated Islamophobia Awareness Month, and is being observed not only in Britain but also in several other European countries, including France. The topics being discussed at various meetings, seminars, exhibitions and rallies include academic research, public policy analysis, law and legal frameworks on equality and diversity, the media and popular culture, new media, the far right, hate crimes, religion in public life, data collection and monitoring, policing and securitisation, formal and informal education, and the respective roles of and challenges for Muslim and mainstream organisations.

And not least, there are issues to do with what we say, as parents and as educators, to the young Muslims whom we know, whether professionally or personally. The issues were poignantly introduced in a recent article published in the United States. 'Raising a child is a difficult feat,' said the author. 'Raising a brown child in America is even trickier. Raising a brown, Muslim child in America seems almost impossible.'

The author's own child, she mentions, is at present seven months old. 'I know my son's greatest problem right now,' she says, 'is whether or not a teething ring will calm his sore gums. But from a mother's perspective, his future looks gloomy. All the articles I read, the books I studied, the mothers I emulated, the advice I heard, and the Baby Center updates I subscribed to are suddenly not enough. My responsibility goes beyond the norm: I have to not only raise a healthy and happy child, but I have to do so in a hostile environment.'

Five points

We must 'remember, remember' in the meetings and conversations this month the following five points, amongst others:

1) The tasks of promoting tolerance and cohesion inside European countries are not new. People have been wrestling with them for centuries. The relatively new Muslim communities in western Europe have not created conflict but have entered it, bringing with them distinctive insights to arguments and struggles that long predated their arrival and development.

2) When religion is a component in violent conflict there are fundamental questions about human nature and society. Do human beings hate and fear each other in these circumstances because they are religious? Or are they religious because they hate and fear each other? In other words, do they really fight essentially about religion or do they fight about politics, power and resources?

3) The essential task is both political and educational. It is to help people live together – help *vivre ensemble* – without violence and without oppression in a globalised world in which ecological, cultural, financial, commercial and political boundaries and borders are in constant flux and dissolution.

4) The struggle against cultural racism, for example Islamophobia, must not marginalise the struggle against colour racism, also sometimes known as biological racism. This point is well made, albeit in highly academic and abstract terms, in a new journal launched this month, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. In the history of Europe, writes the distinguished scholar Ramon Grosfoguel, the first markers of otherness in what he calls 'the westernised christian-centric capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system' were around religious identity. Jews and Arabs were characterised as people with the wrong religion, while the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and later of Africa, were constructed as people without any religion at all. Antiracism, it follows, must deal simultaneously with cultural and colour racism.

5) The task of challenging Islamophobia through education, to return to the themes of the UNESCO conference on 5 November 2012, does not primarily require teaching about Islam. Rather, it primarily requires teaching about Islamophobia. And, more generally, about colour and cultural racism, and about the causes of these. The causes do not lie in the characteristics of the Other, and certainly not in the characteristics of the Other's religion. Rather, they lie in the culture, history and practices of ourselves. As Sivanandan famously said three decades ago, 'just to learn about other peoples' cultures is not to learn about the racism of one's own. To learn about the racism of one's own culture, on the other hand, is to approach other cultures objectively.'

On bonfire night in Britain every year, and on every other night and day, and in Islamophobia Awareness Month in Europe, and in every month and continent, there's so much to remember, remember.

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References

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