

British Civics Class Asks, What Would Muhammad Do?

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Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

Idris Watts, teaching at a mosque in Bradford, applies the words of the Koran to questions of daily life and citizenship in Britain.

By [JANE PERLEZ](#)
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BRADFORD, England — At the Jamia Mosque on Victor Street in this racially and religiously tense town, Idris Watts, a teacher and convert to Islam, tackled a seemingly mundane subject with a dozen teenage boys: why it is better to have a job than to be unemployed.

“The prophet said you should learn a trade,” Mr. Watts told the students arrayed in a semicircle before him. “What do you think he means by that?”

“If you get a trade it’s good because then you can pass it on,” said Safran Mahmood, 15.

“You feel better when you’re standing on your own feet,” offered Ossama Hussain, 14.

The back and forth represented something new in [Britain’s](#) mosques: a government-financed effort to teach basic citizenship issues in a special curriculum intended to reach students who might be vulnerable to Islamic extremism.

In the long haul, the British government hopes that such civics classes, which use the Koran to answer questions about daily life, will replace the often tedious and sometimes hard-core religious lessons taught in many mosques across the land. Often, these lessons emphasize rote learning of the Koran and are taught by imams who were born in Pakistan and speak little English and have little contact with British society.

Written by a Bradford teacher, Sajid Hussain, 34, who holds a degree from Oxford, the new curriculum is being taught in some religious classes here in a city that is increasingly segregated between South Asians and whites. The pilot effort in Bradford has the backing and the financing from the Labor government as part of a hearts-and-minds campaign that it hopes will eventually spread to other cities and help better integrate the country’s mainstream Muslims into British culture. Approximately two million Muslims, mostly of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, live in Britain.

Since four British Muslim suicide bombers attacked the London transit system in July 2005 and two other major terrorist plots were uncovered last year that British Muslim men were suspected of planning, British officials have been struggling with how to isolate

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the extremist Muslim minority from the moderate majority.

The new prime minister, [Gordon Brown](#), said at his first news conference last month that he wanted to demonstrate the “importance we attach to nonviolence” and “the importance we attach to the dignity of each individual,” and in the process make unpalatable the “extreme message of those who practice violence and would maim and murder citizens on British soil.”

“The question for us is, how we can separate those extremists from the moderate mainstream majority?” he said.

One of the virtues of the curriculum in Bradford in applying Mr. Brown’s vision, according to his aides, is that it is taught by forward-leaning imams and is based on matching messages from the Koran to everyday life in Britain. The Labor government has been particularly concerned because, in part through its involvement in the Iraq war, it lacks credibility with many British Muslims.

An estimated 100,000 school-age Muslim children attend religious classes held at mosques in Britain daily, generally after regular school hours, said Jane Houghton, a spokeswoman for the Department of Communities and Local Government. “The impact this teaching could have is quite considerable,” she said.

But as much as the government likes the curriculum, it has faced opposition from some Muslims.

Why, asked Nuzhat Ali, the women’s coordinator of the Islamic Society of Britain in Bradford, should Muslim children be singled out for civics lessons?

“One of our primary concerns is: why the Muslim community again?” Mrs. Ali said. “Extremism is a problem in all communities, especially among the British National Party,” she said, referring to a right-wing party that has articulated white supremacist views. “The issue of terror and extremism needs to be addressed across the board rather than saying: ‘Here, Muslims, go into your corner and have your curriculum.’”

Some of the specifics of the curriculum met with disapproval, too.

In lesson plans provided to imams by Mr. Hussain, the teachers were asked to pose questions to their students based on recent events in Britain.

In one example, the students were to be asked what they would do if a friend bought a large quantity of fertilizer and announced he planned to build a bomb out of it. The question was based on the evidence in a recent trial in London in which five Muslim men were found guilty of buying fertilizer, storing it and planning to use it for a terrorist attack.

Another question involved a character, “Ahmad,” whose friends were hatching a plot to attack a supermarket in retaliation for the war in Iraq. “Is it right for Ahmad to harm innocent Britons just because their government invaded a Muslim country?” was the proposed question in one of Mr. Hussain’s lesson plans.

After a heated meeting with the critics in Bradford, Mr. Hussain, who said he had submitted the curriculum to a vetting panel of half a dozen Muslim scholars, agreed to remove the examples from the curriculum. “They were perhaps a little too frontal,” he said.

But the important point, Mr. Hussain said, was to show Muslim students that their religion provided some answers to issues they confronted every day.

“They understand that it’s wrong to go out and commit suicide bombings,” Mr. Hussain said. “But some got really confused when you put jihad next to it. Jihad has got a sacred context, so things that were unacceptable became acceptable. We had to dig down to defuse the misconception.”

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Then there was the problem of dress. The syllabus asks whether British Muslims should try to wear Islamic dress at work when there is a code for formal suits. And what about the hijab that some Muslim women wear to cover their hair, or the niqab, which covers the face, except for the eyes?

“Some of the scholars said if you’re teaching, not being able to see the teacher’s face is not good,” Mr. Hussain said. “So we could tell the youngsters our faith tells us not to alienate ourselves, and that there is a lot of diversity of opinion.”

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