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Merry, Michael S. (2007) *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan

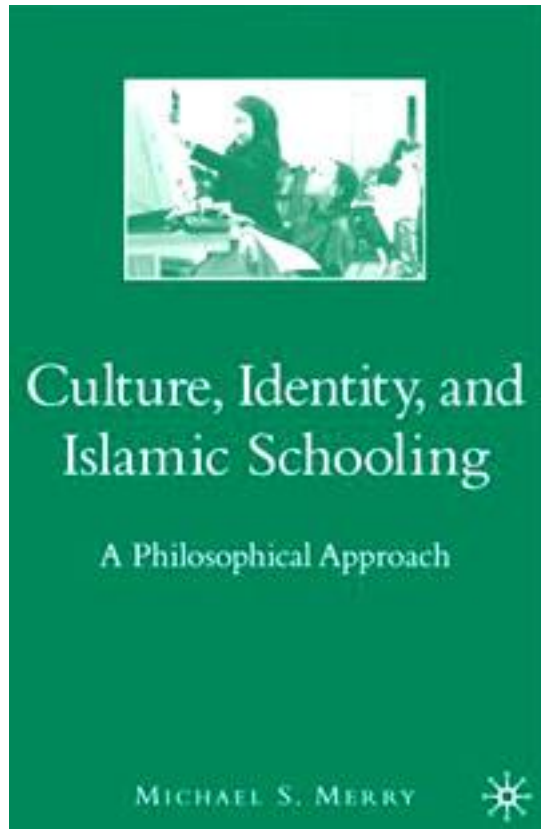
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In the current political climate of the “war on terror”, and its attendant anxieties revolving around a perceived battle between the “West and the rest,” Islam as a socio-political force has become major pre-occupation within Western liberal democracies. Perhaps with the exception of the mosque, the presence and perceived influence of Islamic or Muslim-oriented schools has emerged as the chief rallying point for these concerns. Controversies regarding the opening of the Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn, as well as reports of vandalism at the Toledo Islamic Academy serve as recent illustrations. Within this highly charged context, Michael S. Merry’s *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach* is a timely and important book, providing a thorough account of the fundamental cultural and political forces at play regarding the presence and operation of Islamic schools within secular liberal environments, and an intriguing rationale for the civic value as well as state support of religious schooling.

Merry organizes his book into seven chapters. In the Introduction, he provides a lucid overview of the philosophical landscape within which any serious discussion regarding the function of religious schools within liberal democracies must be situated. Here Merry focuses particular attention on the ideals of a liberal education, the accommodation and facilitation of pluralism (read as a “condition” rather than an ideology), and the forces at play regarding the liberal vs. culturalist divide. Pertaining to the latter, most important is the capability of fostering reasonableness, autonomy, and tolerance. Drawing from his previous international research, Merry next provides a comparative examination of the politics of Islamic schooling within the contexts of Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States, demonstrating that above and beyond all others, state funding and oversight is the main factor distinguishing American Islamic schools from Islamic schools in the two other countries. Following this, Merry provides a description of the primary philosophical aims and objectives of Islamic education, focusing particularly on fundamental tenets, epistemological commitments, and related school practices. Having set the stage for his philosophical inquiry, Merry then provides a description and argument for cultural coherence as a relevant and sound pedagogical approach, particularly for pre-adolescent children, and couples this with a defense for religious schooling as a way to protect children from the perceived threats of an overly materialistic society hallmarked by a plethora of competing value orientations. In the concluding chapters, Merry presents an argument for the state funding and oversight of Islamic schools, asserting that such support is in congruence with the democratic ideal of equal opportunity and provides a powerful accountability mechanism for ensuring that what goes on within religious schools is in concert with fostering fundamental civic values.



Michael S. Merry

In depicting an Islamic philosophy of education, Merry presents an overview of an “ideal type”, synthesized from the writings of Muslim scholars, rather than a description of actual school practices. He takes great care to note that there exists a rift between such Islamic educational ideals and the actual aspirations of Islamic school administrators. Merry asserts that overcoming this disjuncture and achieving a greater sense of self-identity and definition is one of the major challenges that Islamic schools in Western societies face at this time. With regard to the aims and objectives of an (idealized) Islamic philosophy of education, it would be fair to say that God, and the complete submission to the will of God, provides the nexus around which all curricula, both explicit and hidden, revolve. Specifically, this entails acceptance of the revelation (*Wahi*) of God to humanity through the angel Gabriel (Jibrail) and to the last of the prophets, Muhammad. It is in fact this acceptance and the submission to the will of God that defines what it means to be a Muslim. Educational processes revolving around this fundamental tenet are meant to form an all-encompassing project. Hence, unlike public schooling within liberal secular contexts, there exists no distinction between the sacred and the profane within an Islamic education. Rather, the stress is toward realizing an overall purpose and unity in the universe, and developing a personality in harmony with nature and an understanding of its laws. Additional educational objectives include preparing and training students to; work towards the economic and material growth of society, develop a sense of social responsibility for the efficient use of resources, encourage competition in good things to promote excellence and achievement, and foster a strong belief in justice and equality.

As Merry writes, it is critical to understand that an Islamic education is *not* seen as being in conflict with one’s general civic responsibilities. Within Islamic philosophy, society is one’s community or nation (specifically, *ummah*, or community of believers), and Islamic schoolteachers encourage an active rather than passive engagement in the democratic process, notwithstanding the fact that the ultimate motive is toward living one’s faith (*da’wa*). Further, according to Merry, most Islamic educators in the West are focused on developing a philosophy of education that incorporates rather than shuns liberal democratic values. Reflecting the above mentioned rift between educational ideals and actual practices, such educators are guided more by the on-the-ground needs of operating in a foreign and some cases hostile environment rather than an ideology articulated by intellectuals from the Muslim world. Yet it is equally critical to understand that Muslims in the West are not united with respect to the acceptance of Western cultural and political norms. Here Merry writes of Muslims falling into two basic camps; those inclined to accommodate Western norms, and those disinclined to accommodate Western norms. While Merry asserts that most teachers and administrators in Islamic schools in the West do not appear to adopt this dichotomy, he also writes that all “but the most secular of Muslims” *do* share a feeling that Western society is suffering from a profound moral void. In this respect, as Merry notes, the motive to provide a moral grounding for transcending this void is not unlike aspirations espoused by Evangelical Protestant as well as conservative Catholic and Jewish schools. Merry writes of educating for cultural coherence as one framework providing such moral grounding.

The essential idea behind the cultural coherence framework is as follows: in the free flowing market place of ideas characteristic of advanced secular liberal societies, one needs grounding within a particular moral and cultural framework in order to make wise choices and to live a good life. Children, particularly at the younger ages, are vulnerable to an impoverished sense of self, and thus in need of a sound moral and sentimental education that provides value continuity with their cultural background. To ensure this, children need to be educated in environments that advance cultural or religious values consonant with those of their parents and their communities. Drawing from the above, it is evident that education for cultural coherence revolves around fostering a “coherent self” inextricably tied to one’s inherited cultural identity. From a critical perspective, this characterization of cultural coherence may come across as overly simplistic, particularly when one takes into consideration the fallibility of any model advancing a notion of a pristine culture unalterable by exterior or foreign elements. Merry acknowledges this, stating that

coherence may (ironically) involve degrees of cognitive dissonance, as one's cultural identity in reality may well be comprised of multiple and at times conflicting influences.

Measuring the functionality of education for cultural coherence within liberal democratic societies involves addressing the manner and degree to which it addresses core liberal demands of education for an engaged and effective citizenry. Chief among these are the capacities to foster reasonableness, autonomy, and tolerance. Within the liberal tradition Merry associates reasonableness with a disposition to endorse principles and policies specifying basic democratic rights and liberties, and to be fair, sensible, and proportionate in the exercise of rationality, while he associates autonomy with the capacity to freely form and pursue a conception of the good life, and concomitantly, the capacity to adopt a critical distance from one's inherited values, commitments, and beliefs. Finally, Merry writes that a liberal conception of tolerance specifically points toward the capacity to tolerate views other than those borrowed from one's parents, and asserts that this type of tolerance can be fostered by exposure to and engagement with difference.

In addressing the degree to which education for cultural coherence responds to the above demands, Merry draws largely from the writings of Shelley Burt. Burt asserts that the capacity for critical reflection can in fact be met by religious schooling, so long as particular minimum standards of educational achievement are met, a civic capacity is cultivated, and the motivation of parents is in the right direction. Further, Burt writes that education for cultural coherence is indeed likely to provide "character pluralism", or the recognition that some individuals may not find conceptualizations of the good life advanced by others as particularly attractive for themselves. (It is important to note that building such character is of course premised on condition that children are *exposed* to differing conceptualizations.) Of the core demands, the conceptualization of individual autonomy perhaps most differentiates culturalist from liberal paradigms. Yet Merry asserts that the two views are not incompatible on this account. Fundamental here is the following general assertion; that education for cultural coherence fosters a capacity to identify with a particular version of the good *from the inside*, which entails a profound personal identification with a certain way of life. To the degree that autonomy entails such a capacity (as opposed to identifying with a version of the good life via enforcement or imposition from the outside), then, states Merry, education for cultural coherence does indeed satisfy this key liberal demand.

Having provided a rationale for the continuation of religious schooling based on a model of education for cultural coherence, Merry rounds out his work with an argument for state funding and oversight of religious schools. Here "oversight" is understood as a system of accountability encompassing hiring procedures, certification requirements, and the regulation and control of school operations. Merry compares the American model, which provides virtually no state interference in private education, with the models of Belgium and the Netherlands. In both of the latter cases, state funding is either full (Netherlands) or very high (Belgium). As a result, both Belgium and the Netherlands enjoy a significantly higher degree of oversight of religious schooling.

The discrepancy is important for Merry's central argument. In Merry's view, the centrality of the state's role in funding both public *and* private education is in keeping with the democratic educational ideal of equal opportunity. Further, Merry asserts that the refusal of the state to provide funding and oversight to some schools, while doing so for others begs the question as to why it is *allowable* for parents to choose the former, particularly where such schools fail to educate children adequately or "militate against the public good" (p. 133). Finally, Merry argues that as the education of *all* children is in the public interest, the state must assume its responsibility in guaranteeing that they *all* receive a quality education. He states three main effects of a dramatically increased involvement of the state in religious schools. Firstly, in as much as the state is concerned with facilitating the capacity for autonomy and an enlightened public that meets at least minimal citizenship demands, oversight will result in the reduction of sectarian schools known for intolerant and indoctrinatory practices. Secondly, funding will allow for a greater

number of nonreligious parents to make use of religious schools. Thirdly, a more equitable state involvement across the education sector is likely to stabilize and more equally distribute educational quality in all schools, both public and religious. In making his argument for state funding and oversight, Merry takes pains to recognize the very formidable obstacles putting it into place would have to overcome, not the least of which include the sacrosanct American separation of church and state, public support (particularly, at the present time, for Islamic schools), perceived restrictions on choice (i.e.; restrictions on “opting out”), and fears of state heavy-handedness.

One of the chief strengths of this book centers on Merry’s discussion of educating for cultural coherence. Here, much of what Merry asserts reflects the fundamental importance that religion has for not only the development but also *the integration* of ethnic communities into the American mainstream. While this may appear at variance with traditional arguments regarding immigrant assimilation (for instance, that the exercise of ethnic identity undermines national unity), there is strong empirical evidence to suggest that in fact the road to successful integration *passes through* the reenactment of elements of immigrants’ culture (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). While he illustrates the benefits of an education for cultural coherence, Merry also takes care to point out its potential limitations within the liberal democratic state, most notably the danger of *servility*, and related internal cultural restrictions that may seriously undermine individual autonomy and freedom. Interestingly, the scope of Merry’s chapter on educating for cultural coherence also reveals a chief weaknesses of the book, namely that Merry does not go far enough in contextualizing his account of an Islamic education within the cultural cohesion framework he later lays out. Certainly, such an account is at the heart of this project, and perhaps indicates a direction that future related scholarship might take.

All in all, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling* is a lucidly argued and well-researched text, and promises to be appreciated by scholars and practitioners across the American cultural spectrum.

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