

BOOK REVIEW

MUSLIM SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY: FAITH SCHOOLING IN AN ISLAMOPHOBIC BRITAIN?

Breen, D. (2018). *Muslim Schools, Communities and Critical Race Theory: Faith Schooling in an Islamophobic Britain?* Palgrave Macmillan.¹

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The ability of governments to present cases where Muslim schools have successfully secured state funding serves as a smokescreen to obscure the difficulties and challenges faced by Muslim communities looking to enter into partnerships with the state through denominational Islamic schooling. (p. 171)

Muslim Schools, Communities and Critical Race Theory, by Damian Breen, is full of necessary insight into how the British state's relationship with Muslim communities was manipulated by New Labour and subsequent governments. Framing this analysis in the context of Critical Race theory (henceforth CRT) helps to bring these issues to light for those who are interested in British Islam and in race more generally. The necessity that these issues are appreciated if the experience of British Islam is to be understood is fortunate, as the allegiance to CRT is labored through the first chapters. However, while this aspect of the book is labored, it is a useful contribution in the context of recent attempts by politicians from the Conservative party of the UK to denounce CRT. Breen wasn't to know it when his book was published in 2018, but his somewhat tortured elaboration of the importance of CRT over many

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pages shines a light on the absurdity of its recent denunciation in the UK Parliament (Nelson, 2020) and the British press (Fox et al., 2020). While the first two chapters are hard work—not least as those familiar with CRT will wonder why there is a need for such tangential detail for a book that is essentially an empirical study—it must be recognized that the world would be a better place if anyone mislead by the recent posturing of Conservative politicians against CRT, was to read *Muslim Schools, Communities and Critical Race Theory*.

Emerging into chapter 3, Breen finds his stride as he seeks to problematize “race” and the racialization of British Muslims, before engaging with the now infamous Prevent Strategy—one of the elements of the British governments counter-terrorism strategy—and the Fundamental British Values (FBV) that are promoted by Prevent. While this is a valuable exploration of Prevent and FBV, those seeking further explanation of FBV ought to also engage with Crawford (2017). We are then taken on an expansive tour of how trends in educational policy that were set in motion by New Labour have impacted Muslim schools, summarized by,

New Labour appears to be progressive, able to commend themselves on offering the first state-funded Muslim schools, whilst ensuring that the criteria for doing so effectively prevents widespread enfranchisement for British Muslims. (p. 49)

Breen then enters into a theorization of the “passivity” of the “uber-neoliberal foundations which underpin free schools” as a political act. This provides valuable understanding of how the apparent offer of state funding for Muslim schools has in fact restricted their autonomy. The suffocation of the education system by neoliberal reforms has been extensively discussed elsewhere, but Breen’s exploration of this impact on British Muslims is a very valuable contribution.

It is a relief to find Breen discussing his positionality as “a white Irish British-born male” researcher in chapter 4. However, given his explicit focus on Muslims, it might have made for a more comfortable read had this been discussed earlier. To have done so might also have strengthened the author’s voice, something that is often lost in Breen’s commitment to the third person voice of “the researcher.” Slipping into the first person for the final section of chapter 4 immediately humanizes Breen and draws one into what he seeks to achieve. He continues in the first person in the fifth chapter as the book takes off—one just hopes that the reader gets beyond the dense earlier chapters to this point.

The fine-grained detail of the schools being studied is a welcome break from the all too often sensationalist terms that Islamic faith schools are often presented in. As such, in chapter 6, Breen begins to present the counter narrative, as is his stated aim for the book as a whole. This is most effective when the teachers and parents of his study speak directly through quotes from his interviews with them. When they speak, we can see the shared “love for Allah and creation” (p. 110) that is allowed to flourish when Muslim schools are supported.

Through allowing the different stakeholders in the schools that he studies to speak, Breen demonstrates one of his earlier stated aims by showing that “diversity was manifested within each school and also from school to school” (p. 135)

Evidently, enfranchising British Muslims through denominational Islamic schooling is not a process that can be effectively achieved if strategies for state provision either assume that such schools are catering to homogeneous “needs,” or fail to recognise the complexity and diversity of needs. (Ibid.)

As the stakeholders continued to speak, Breen uses their voices to invigorate statistics on low educational attainment for British Bangladeshi and Pakistani children. However, as this is based on census data from 2011 and on other studies from 2009, we may not be seeing the full or current picture. As the next census is being filled in by households across the UK, had Breen engaged with studies of educational success in Muslim-populated areas of Tower Hamlets (in London) and Birmingham since 2011, he may have seen that some of these trends have been reversed in some areas (Tower Hamlets, 2013). This would have been a welcome addition as it might have also pointed toward a positive vision of what policies might lead to success for British Muslim education.

Grounded in the experiences of those who work in and use Muslim schools, Breen’s observations do present the positive counter narrative that he sets out to portray.

From a CRT perspective, the all-important political voices of Muslims become displaced from mainstream public political spaces as a result of the conflating of legitimate democratic dissent with religiosity. In short, perspectives embodying dissent from those who are easily identified as Muslim become

dismissed as simply being informed by too much religious influence. (p. 177)

In sum, Breen's valuable book rewards the patient reader.

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