

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JASMIN ZINE, *Canadian Islamic Schools: Unravelling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, viii + 328 p., index.

Situated within broad debates about multiculturalism, identity politics and minority rights, the research of Jasmin Zine offers critical insights into the role and function of Islamic schools in Canada. Identifying herself as a stakeholder, the author assures readers that she “did not set out to uncritically valorize these schools but rather to interrogate their social and pedagogical processes” (75). As such, Zine seems to have a heightened sense of the politics of research and remains reflexive, engaging with her own positionality, cognizant that her study has the potential to stir up controversy within the Muslim community and may perpetuate stereotypes outside it (75). In a nutshell, this ethnographic study of four Islamic schools in Ontario explores the friction between the ideal and the reality of Islamic schools and, by extension, a multicultural Canada.

In order to develop a textured and nuanced analysis, Zine uses multiple discursive frameworks for critical enquiry, weaving together familiar threads from anticolonial, antiracist, and Foucauldian scholarship. The positioning of these lenses seems largely due to the influence of George Dei, her academic mentor, well-known for his work on minority schooling in Canada. In addition, Zine introduces and lays out the seven principles of what she calls a “critical faith-centred epistemology.” This perspective is foundational to the book’s arguments. While the academy has traditionally situated religion and spirituality as subjects of inquiry, the author proposes crafting them as an analytic lens. In the same way that Indigenous knowledges have challenged the “artificial split between mind and body” (57), Zine’s critical faith-centred approach draws attention to the false bifurcation of rationality and spirituality. Knowledge, she argues, cannot be invalidated simply because it is non-secular. In this way, *Canadian Islamic Schools* attempts to reposition hegemonic knowledges by arguing that “[s]ecular humanism is no less doctrinaire or dogmatic than religious-based ideologies and should be viewed as an ideological position rather than an unbiased or value-free set of assumptions” (11). Without getting lost in a discussion of epistemological relativism, such a position provides a critique of the hegemonic nature of Western knowledges while attempting to broaden the spaces for legitimate knowledge production.

Zine begins by crafting a critique of public education in an effort to demonstrate the need for Islamic schools. Foundational to this are the students’ experiences of racism, Islamophobia and alienation. Zine ties these local narratives into the broader geopolitical discourses popularly conceptualized as “the clash of civilizations” (115). The author argues that Islamic schools, in contrast to public

schools, provide a space which affirms Islamic identity and reduces racial discrimination. Zine politicizes Islamic schools, describing them as a site for “resisting assimilation” and promoting the social reproduction of Islamic identity (13). Pedagogy, she argues, at times “involved politicizing spirituality and Islamic identity within a framework of social and environmental justice” (247). This fostering of Islamic identity also alleviates the fears expressed by some parents that public schools will “de-Islamize” Muslim children through exposure to drinking, drugs, premarital relations, and school violence. Zine suggests that Islamic schools are able to “resocialize and rehabilitate wayward youth” who have been influenced by peer pressure while at public schools (15). Students, teachers and administrators describe a variety of these “success stories” attributed to the emphasis on spiritual development and academic excellence along with smaller class size and more personalized attention.

Exploring the pedagogical role of Islamic schools, the author details how curriculum and educational praxis are remade to be epistemologically and ontologically grounded in Islam while satisfying the Ministry of Education’s expectations. This *Islamization of knowledge*, as Zine refers to it, goes beyond the superficial addition of Arabic classes or Qur’anic material to the mainstream curriculum. Rather, it involves developing an integrated faith-centred program of study that reflects Islamic values, beliefs and practices. Further, the central project of Islamic-based education is the decolonization of knowledge. Anticolonial strategies include, for example, recognizing and celebrating the legacy of Muslim scholars, contributions which are often muted or silenced in a Eurocentric curriculum. Contrary to critics who argue that separate religious schooling is a form of intellectual and religious apartheid, Zine finds that teachers provide students with “broad discursive knowledge” while developing an Islamic “filter” with which to interpret the world (241). The author extends these ideas of epistemological pluralism further by arguing that the Islamization of knowledge from the critical faith-centred perspective involves, ideally at least, “re-examining many taken-for-granted aspects of the Islamic tradition, based on new scholarly perspectives” thereby “rejecting rigid dogmatism and opening spaces for contestation and debate” (246). This reflexivity, however, is not practiced uniformly across subjects, classrooms, or schools. The book notes, for example, how religious dogmatism seeps into art classes where figurative drawings are considered un-Islamic by some, or in female competitive sports where concerns over modesty limit the participation of girls. Therefore, Zine argues that the Islamization of knowledge must not only work towards the decolonization of knowledge, but must also address any patriarchal and authoritarian tendencies in contemporary Islamic thought.

While acknowledging their strengths and highlighting their potential, Zine is at times critical of the Islamic schools she visits. Since Islamic schools are not funded by the government (unlike many Christian schools), many of the shortcomings are attributed to a lack of resources: having inadequate libraries, computer labs, recreational space or support staff for students with special needs, for example. In addition, there is no umbrella organization which might help coordinate the integrative strategies of Islamic-centred pedagogy and as a result there are many inconsistencies between classrooms and schools as the burden to develop curriculum falls on individual teachers. Zine advocates structural reform that would create a central governing body, and develop a more inclusive and

democratic process of governance. Beyond the lack of infrastructure, Zine raises valid concerns about the potential “ghettoization” of Muslim students. Indeed, she notes how Islamic schools are implicated in constructing the us-them rhetoric that can be found in many of the narratives of students. Rather than creating divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims, Zine suggests ways Islamic schools can prepare students for life in Canadian society, rather than isolate them from it.

In short, this book contributes to broader debates within Canada and to specific current debates in Ontario regarding Afrocentric schools and public-funded religious schools. *Canadian Islamic Schools* will be a valuable resource for a wide range of disciplines, including education, sociology, anthropology; and religious, Canadian, immigration and diaspora studies.

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