

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as presented in the UK Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at exploring the image of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as presented in the UK curriculum at various levels of study. Firstly, the programme specifications and guidelines of religious education in the key stages are discussed in the British education system. Then, a greater and more scrupulous attention was paid to two popular textbooks generally taught at secondary schools. A rather thorough and comprehensive analysis revealed serious shortcomings in these texts. One written by a non-Muslim writer is heavily influenced by biased views of orientalists. The other compiled by a Muslim convert presents a naïve, simplistic, yet sympathetic view on the life and character of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Finally, this paper suggests that the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) should be presented on the basis of a scholarly endeavour carried out by learned scholars with appropriate expertise and impartiality.

Introduction

At the outset it has to be mentioned that curriculum development in the UK is not centralised and several professional examination bodies including Edexcel, AQA, and QCR are involved in developing curriculum at various levels of education. Each of these examination bodies publishes appropriate textbooks for schools and manages examinations accordingly. Therefore, to talk about curriculum in the UK in fact we need to discuss various textbooks published by more than one publisher on the same subject. In general educators are provided with some guidelines as to the preparation and presentation of the course concerned. In fact, educators are not required to strictly follow and teach certain textbooks recommended by the education authorities. Instead, this is left to the discretion of educators and they are given a

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choice to prepare appropriate learning materials in line with guidelines provided.

In addition, it has to be noted that the subject “Religious Education“ (RE) is offered at primary and secondary levels and usually students learn about main religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism and some others. The life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is covered as part of a unit allocated to Islam in the subject of religious education.

In this paper, the content of the relevant sections of the course recommendations concerning the representation of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) throughout the key stages will be analysed. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) responsible for regulating, developing and modernizing the curriculum advised the educators that the scheme is not statutory and they can use it according to their discretion. They may follow the whole scheme or individual units; however, this can be taken as a template of the general UK Religious Education specifications.

Key Stages 1 & 2 (Primary School)

At Key Stage 1 and 2, during Year 4, the Unit: “Why is Muhammad [PBUH] important to Muslims?” is presented. The unit is split into the following sections:

1. Muhammad [PBUH]: the night that changed his life
2. The revelation of the Qur’án to Muhammad [PBUH]
3. Stories about Muhammad [PBUH]
4. How do Muslims try to follow the example of Muhammad [PBUH]?

(DfES3, 2007)

In the first section about “the Night of Power” (laylat ul-Qadr), the event is presented as an important night that has had a significant effect on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) personally and on Muslims in general. The educator is encouraged to allow the students to reflect on and contemplate the spiritual dimension of the event. The historical context within world history and the significance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a significant world leader is introduced.

The next section focuses on the reverence of the Qur’án and the respect it is accorded in a Muslim home; Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is not focused on in this section. A more person-centred approach is taken to the topic. The third section approaches the importance and significance of hadith and how Muslims learn from traditions about the Prophet (PBUH). In the last section, the Prophet (PBUH) is represented as an exemplary role model for Muslims, the qualities of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and exploring the qualities specific to a religious leader.

In the Unit, “How do Muslims express their belief through practices?” the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is presented in the Shahadah as the Prophet of Islam and that this is a declaration of the faith. He is then not mentioned on the sections

about zakat and Hajj but is reintroduced when addressing belief in angels, relating the revelation via Angel Gabriel (AS). The Prophet (PBUH) is presented as an important and holy being.

Throughout the syllabus, the Prophet (PBUH) does not generally feature in relation to the practical aspects of the faith, and is represented as a Messenger of the faith to the people.

In Year 6, The Prophet (PBUH) once again is introduced when discussing the significance of sacred texts, and significantly he is consequently represented as the carrier of the Holy Book, the Qur'án. When considering the importance of the Qur'án, the following hadith is reported: 'The Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] said, 'a person in whose heart there is no knowledge of the Qur'an is like a ruined house.'

Key Stage¹ (Secondary School)

During Key Stage 3, in Year 7, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) can be addressed as one of the religious figures, and likened to Jesus (AS), Moses and the like. During Year 8, when exploring the significance of beliefs, a personal, exploratory approach is suggested, and the Prophet (PBUH) does not significantly feature in this part of the specification, however incorporation of this is dependant on the knowledge and experience of the individual educator; religious education teachers are of all religions and a small proportion are Muslim, however some are well-versed in traditions.

During year 9, more philosophical questions are addressed. The Prophet (PBUH) generally features at the beginning of the specification, as a historically significant figure, important to Muslims, and the Messenger of Islam. The importance of hadith to Muslims is acknowledged, however the use and integration of them is dependant on resources and the knowledge of the educator. Study of the Prophet (PBUH)'s life is limited to his well-known qualities and characteristics, making him an eligible candidate to be a Prophet and trusted leader. Acknowledgement is given to the significance of his life to Muslims; however his teachings are not explored in detail in the syllabus albeit from a historical perspective. The depth of this may be left up to discretion of the educator.

Key Stage² (Secondary School, GCSE)

At this level, the primary boards of examination are Edexcel and AQA, the specifications of which will be explored.

1 _ Department for Education and Skills (DfES)

2_ S. M. H. Tabataba' i , al-mizan, vol. 20, p. 329 (in Arabic).

The section on Islam in the Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies specifications are split into four sections very much centred on Muslim lifestyle. The sections are: beliefs and values; community and tradition; worship and celebration and living the Muslim life. It can be derived that a key aim of the qualification is to gain an understanding of Muslim life, especially of Muslims in Britain and there is no great focus on the impact of the Prophet as a key current figure. Again, the focus appears to be people-centred.

The AQA specification B, also relevant to faiths other than Christianity, is entitled 'World and philosophical perspectives on religious issues', explores thematic issues such as arguing the existence of God and issues pertaining to morality. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is not mentioned in the specification in particular, however, again, educators who teach about Islam as a chosen religion may incorporate teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) at their will.

The AQA specification C entitled 'World religions' studies each major religion within the sections: 'Beliefs and sources of authority', 'Practice and organisation' and 'The relevance and application of Islam' (e.g. halal food). The Prophet (PBUH) features specifically in this part of the specification in the section of 'Beliefs and sources of authority'. The issues highlighted to be addressed are: 'The last of the prophets and his call' and 'The hijrah: Muslim communities in Madinah (Medina), Makkah (Mecca)' (AQA, 2007). This is the first reference to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the final prophet. Besides, the revelation of the Qur'an and the hijrah are focused on with respect to their significance as prominent events in the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Key Stage 5: GCE (A2/AS level)

At Key Stage 5, according to the Edexcel specification the Prophet (PBUH) is studied within the section of 'Key issues in the study of Islam' and the topics to be addressed are: 'The life and work of Muhammad in its historical, religious and social context; his significance for Muslims.' (Edexcel, 2005). This is the sole specific reference to the Prophet (PBUH) in the specification.

The AQA GCE specification includes a module allowing students to be introduced to a major world religion. Within this, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is introduced in the section entitled 'Foundations and development of Islam'. The issues to be addressed are: 'Muhammad's career in Makkah (Mecca), through the hijra, and in Madinah (Medina), with reference to the pre-Islamic context (jahiliyyah)' and 'the significance of his life and teachings' (AQA, 2007). A similar approach is taken here, however the importance of the life of the Prophet (PBUH) and his teachings is directed as a focal point in this specification.

An investigation of two popular texts at secondary level

Two key texts are used to teach Islam in secondary schools in the UK. There are other texts that are used in subsidiary; however the following texts are very popular compared to others and therefore, they are focused on in this paper:

Islam - (A Studentís Approach to World Religions) by Victor W. Watton (1999) and Islam ñ (Examining Religions) by Ruqaiyyah W. Maqsood (1995).

Wattonís (1999) approach to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the curriculum. Watton is an orientalist and his voice bears a resemblance to such writers. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is represented as a historically significant but not necessarily an auspicious and holy leader. The social, political, economic and religious context is presented, and Prophet Muhammadís revelation is suggested to be an invention borne of the various viewpoints around him at the time, and borne of his situation.

In general, when teaching religious education in a secular education system, religious figures are often presented as normal but inspiring individuals who had some kind of advantage, and were influential in their teachings. Islam is one of the six major religions that are taught about in the UK, including Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

A likeness can be drawn to other key figures presented such as Jesus (AS), Moses (AS), Buddha, Sikh Gurus, and Krishna. Their admirable characteristics are presented, and their ability to preach and bring followers to their philosophy is emphasised, as any other religious leader. Their principles are explained, and the impact of their teachings with respect to the changes in the lives of the followers is discussed.

The life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) presented by Watton (1999) is heavily based on orientalistís views while extracting from both ìtraditionalí, being Muslim writers, and ìWesterní writers. The two viewpoints are juxtaposed; Watton presents both viewpoints somewhat while discussing about events in the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The account is generally detailed with a critical analysis of a small selection of writers. Despite his apparently direct references from ìtraditionalí authors, however, Watton then usually presents a counterargument in the form of a ìWesterní non-Muslim viewpoint heavily influenced by orientalist including Montgomery Watt (1974).

Throughout the description of the Prophet (PBUH)ís life, he is addressed and presented as a significant leader and historical figure. It is made clear that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had conviction in his mission to spread Islam and that he employed various strategic and successful leadership strategies to achieve this. (Watton, 1999) acknowledges that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) accounted his success to Allahís Will, and quotes from the Qurían e.g. when accounting for

the Muslims' success in the Battle of Badr, he writes:

‘The result, and the way Muhammad [PBUH] had organised the battle, showed the Muslims that God was behind them, ‘It was not ye who slew them; it was God. God is He who makes feeble the plans and stratagems of unbelievers’, (Sura 8:17-18)’ (Watton, 1999, p90).

Although critical analysis of texts is employed, a predominantly Sunni viewpoint is presented with reference to companionship to the Prophet (PBUH), and Abu Bakr is cited as a key companion to the Prophet (PBUH) whereas the role of Imam Ali (AS) is mainly ignored. For example, when describing the Prophet (PBUH)'s migration (hijrah), he writes: ‘there are several stories of how Muhammad [PBUH]'s life was threatened, and how he and Abu Bakr (who accompanied him on the final escape) were only saved by God's help.’ (Watton, 1999, p85).

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is presented by Watton (1999) as a fair yet unrelenting leader in his warfare with determination to defend the people of Madinah in his early times, having gained support and followers from the people.

The initial conversion of the Medinites is presented as an advantage to the social and economic situation of the people, as they found the Prophet (PBUH)'s leadership as a solution to their problems and tribal feuds and a way of enhancing their trade. The Arabs are acknowledged as being active tradesmen and this aspect is intertwined into the whole account of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s ancestry and life. Many of his motives and those of the Muslims are wrongly attributed to gaining advantages in trade as opposed to having solely religious motives.

The account of the Prophet (PBUH) is firmly rooted in the history of the time, and lacks much religious fervour that ‘traditional’ texts would. Some key points are made, however, as Watton (1999) denotes from M. A. Shaban (1971):

‘However, it should be remembered that Muhammad (PBUH) never claimed to be introducing a new religion, he was simply bringing back Islam to the Arabs who had received it from Adam and Ibrahim, but then distorted it. Muhammad was simply removing the distortions’ (cited in Watton 1999, p95)

Of course, this is not the whole fact as the Holy Prophet (PBUH) had brought the final version of the true faith while removing the distortions made to the previous ones, namely Judaism and Christianity.

Nevertheless, Watton does present some plausible and sound points. Often, speculations are made as to the motives of the Prophet (PBUH) when making moves. Detailed referencing is not employed; albeit when presenting quotes by various authors, such speculations are presented with no distinction between the author's opinion and derivation from sources.

A discussion on sources used is ensued, and a generally negative opinion on Muslim literature is presented. The account of the Prophet (PBUH)'s life in the book does end on a very critical point in the view of Islamic historic literature, as

Watton (1999, p98) quotes from Julian Baldick, (1988):

‘We have to consider the whole nature of the Islamic historical tradition. It is late, biased and, in its portrayal of early religious developments, difficult to accept for anyone experienced in the comparison of historical and literary materials. That it should have been largely accepted for so long by orientalists is an extreme example of the results of overspecialisation in universities after the First World War.’

Although Watton’s work may seem appealing and informative to non-Muslim students, however, he could not hide his attachment to the ingrained stereotypical images of the Holy Prophet portrayed wrongly by orientalists. This would taint the view of the readers with a very derogatory consideration of information previously presented about the Holy Prophet (PBUH), making it difficult for true, unbiased and positive opinions to be formed.

Maqsood’s (1995) approach to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the curriculum
 Maqsood (1995) is a British convert who begins her book with a poignant statement; under the subheading ‘Surrender’. She states boldly and clearly that Muslims ‘believe that submission and obedience to the will of God is the only way in which a person can ever achieve real peace in the heart and mind, and in society as a whole.’ (Maqsood, 1995, p4). Her opening statement aptly sums up the essence of Islam as it would appeal to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This style is in sharp contrast to that of Watton (1999) whose voice does not resonate with a Muslim’s soul.

When writing about a belief system, it is implicit that there are both believers and unbelievers in that system, however it would be preferable to present the belief system to the young audience in a positive, credible and respectful light, as opposed to being overly critical as Watton mainly is. A primary aim of religious education in the UK is to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and respect in a pluralistic society. Maqsood, in this spirit, writes to tackle Islamophobia, in the first page, clearly aiming to dispel myths about Muslims and Islam. She writes from the perspective of a British Muslim, addressing the British school audience.

While presenting interesting and historically significant anecdotes, telling the story of the Prophet (PBUH) in his early life, Maqsood (1995) also presents relevant hadith and verses from the Qur’an to clarify the text. She presents the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in a personal and sympathetic manner. Although Maqsood (1995) acknowledges these traits, she emphasises the eligibility of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to be chosen by Allah to carry the message of Islam. She, on the other hand, writes: ‘the Prophet was not a theologian, or a learned man. He did not have a set of rules or theories about God. He was simply a very devout person to whom God had chosen to make Himself known’ (Maqsood, 1995, p10). Of course, this very naïve, simplistic, and inadequate statement made by Maqsood about the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is definitely unacceptable by Muslims who strongly believe

that the Prophet (PBUH) is the most learned and knowledgeable person in the whole world.

Maqsood (1995) relates Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s experiences when preaching in Makkah; she outlines the message and sums up the reaction both negative and positive. The Prophet (PBUH) is presented as a true Messenger of God and his opposition described. Maqsood (1995) then goes on to describe the night journey (mi'raj) and its significance. Maqsood (1995, p16) presents a more balanced approach, on the role of Imam Ali (AS) while reporting the migration of the Prophet to Madina. The Prophet (PBUH)'s efforts to establish the Islamic society in Madinah are then described. As the leader of Madina, he is portrayed as a just ruler, living a simple life, basing his rules on Islamic law. Maqsood's (1995) representation of the Prophet (PBUH) is very positive. For example, she points out that the Prophet's words, actions, and way of life reveal him as a good man of gentleness, kindness, humility, good humour, and excellent common sense, who had great love for all people, especially for his family. Lastly, Maqsood (1995) discusses the major battles fought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a historical manner, emphasising the Prophet (PBUH)'s necessity to fight.

Conclusion

The specifications of the relevant professional examination bodies suggest a balanced and positive view of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He is portrayed as a historically significant religious leader who has had a substantial impact on the world. A historical approach is taken when introducing the life of the Prophet. His teachings are recognised as a key source for Muslims; however, they are not greatly explored in content. Textual representations of the Prophet (PBUH) vary according to the author as in the two texts analysed. Maqsood's (1995) text was more positive than Watton's (1999), perhaps significantly, as Maqsood (1995) was a Muslim convert, however Watton (1999) was a non-Muslim. It can be concluded that the religious studies specifications in the UK present a positive but sometimes superficial representation of the Prophet, and that texts writing about the life of the Prophet (PBUH) can be biased according to the author's personal outlook or lack of an in-depth knowledge.

In fact, these popular textbooks are of major shortcomings. One is written by Watton reflecting clear attachment to the orientalist's views on Islam in general and the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in particular. For example, while reporting the very initial stages of revelation, Watton in line with many orientalist including Watt (1974) suggests that the Prophet found himself in a perplexing situation as he was not certain about his mission until Waraqah Ibn Nawfil, a relative of his wife had assured him. This story has been dismissed by Muslim scholars including Allamah Tabataba'i in al-mizan, his commentary on the Qur'an and was considered

as a fake event which is in sharp contrast with Islamic teachings. On the other hand, Maqsood, a convert to Islam due to her lack of in-depth knowledge about Islam in general and Shi'a in particular failed to adequately present the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Her approach to the life of the Holy Prophet is naïve, simplistic, though positive and sympathetic.

It is a pity that despite the availability of several well-known Muslim scholars with relevant expertise and outstanding publications such a great job was given to either a Muslim convert or a biased non-Muslim writer. Therefore, textbooks in question fail to accurately introduce the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) due to the lack of either impartiality or authenticity. Consequently, Muslim students may lose their confidence in the officially recommended texts and look for something valid and authentic to rely on.

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