

***Canadian Islamic Schools: Unraveling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity***

By Jasmin Zine

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A Book Review by

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In *Canadian Islamic Schools: Unraveling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity*, Jasmin Zine contributes to the growing debate on faith-based schooling in Canada. Based on her doctoral work at the University of Toronto, Zine provides a critical examination of Islamic schooling in diasporic contexts and how they, as institutions of “Islamic knowledge,” contribute to, develop and foster Islamic identity. The study further examines “the Islamicization of knowledge” and pays particular attention to the politics of teaching and learning in the Islamic school system. This book is a timely contribution to debates surrounding Muslim youth, religious education, and the politics of identity construction in a post-9/11 climate of fear, hostility and securitization.

Zine’s ethnographic work is informed by her placement within the research study as both a parent of Islamic schooled children and active community member. Recognizing her own position of power as a researcher, Zine admits to the difficulties of interrogating the internal dynamics of power and authority that exist within her ethnographic findings. Drawing from the corpus of literature, debates and dialogues on Islamic education, Zine suggests the use of a discursive framework developing out of four main foundations. These are based largely around a critical faith-centered epistemology, informed by an anti-colonial discursive schema, integrative antiracism, and “a Foucauldian framework for analyzing discourse, power and subjectivity” (48). Zine explains that rather than using existing theories to explain her data, she develops an emergent theory that better situates her research findings.

The book is divided into two sections with a conclusion. Chapters One to Three are dense theoretical accounts of the debates and discussions surrounding Islamic and, more broadly, religious education. More specifically, Chapter Three is dedicated to questions of methodology and further addresses the framework with which she analyzes her findings (explained in Chapter Two). The study includes a close examination of four Islamic schools located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which she renames after Islamic months of the year in order to protect confidentiality. They are identified as the Al Safar, Al Rajab, Al Shawwal and Al Shaban schools. While each of the research sites hold similar policies (for example, with respect to dress and conduct), Zine identifies the variances within each specific demographic in socio-economic, cultural and linguistic terms. The latter chapters (Four to Eight) present the body of her

ethnographic findings, structured in the form of open discussions with students, with the researcher's analysis woven throughout the chapters. Issues specifically addressed include the role of Islamic schools in diasporic contexts, the construction of gendered identities and the practical implications of the Islamicization of knowledge in Islamic schools. Her ethnographic findings are described throughout the book; however these findings are most condensed in the reported interviews with school administration officials who contribute directly to the Islamicization of knowledge.

Zine highlights "gendered Islamophobia" as contextualized in larger debates of the *hijab* or veiling. She defines this as "specific forms of discrimination leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform specific individuals and systemic forms of oppression" (154). For most of her respondents, Islamic dress was the most salient feature of the discrimination they experienced. In her analysis of gendered identities and relations, Zine identifies the limitations of using a post-structuralist feminist framework, further suggesting that a faith-centered perspective would allow for a better grasp of the issues surrounding gender, race, and religion.

Zine's work is strengthened by a multi-theoretical framework approach to her analysis. Whereas previous debates and discussions on religious education may not provide adequate attention to the complexities of religion itself, Zine's approach reinvigorates those questions relating to the role of Islam in schooling. Answering pertinent ethnographic questions that would lead to a further need for inquiry, Zine's text is an essential component when exploring the significance of religiously-based schooling in a secular state context.

While her work makes a significant contribution to the existing literature, there are other avenues of investigation that it provokes. In a future edition of this research, it would be fruitful to reexamine the impact on students, teachers and volunteers of Islamic schools that operate in accordance with "a business standard" versus those schools that operate as a community initiative, complete with governing bodies, parent councils and accountable administrations. Secondly, the question of authority and accountability is an area requiring further exploration. Zine specifies that some of the schools had teachers who were unqualified to teach since they did not possess Ontario Teaching Certificates. This observation raises questions regarding how the teachers and administrators taught students according to curricula that were approved by the GTA's various boards of education.

In many ways, Zine's research provides a critical discursive framework that can be used to interrogate further pertinent issues surrounding Islamic education in Canada and abroad. A proposed secondary study contributing to this research would be an examination of Islamic school graduates. Due to the intended scope of the initial study, it is uncertain what percentage of these graduates actually continue to post-secondary education; therefore, I would suggest an additional survey. Such a survey would investigate what became of those individuals who shifted from a site of Islamicized knowledge to a liberal-secular education or other vocations. In light of more recent events in the GTA surrounding the securitization of Muslim youth, further research into Islamic schools would provide an interesting point of comparison between pre- and post-9/11 Islamic educational institutions and how they continue to contribute to the formation of Muslim youth identity. Building upon Zine's contribution, further research could analyze the impact on the changing socio-political climate in these institutions.

Her critical examination with Islamic schooling in this context is both engaged and timely. Her findings also contribute to other modes of inquiry in religious studies. This inquiry may include identifying the tensions inherent to a religiously-based civil society actor operating

in accordance with the perimeters determined by the liberal state. The book also sheds light on an area of critical pedagogy that specifically relates to institutionalized forms of religion and religiosity. This research is useful in both an academic setting, as aforementioned in the context of studying religious education, and in the public policy domain to further initiatives in the area of Islamic schooling. Within her analysis, Zine draws the conclusion that Islamic schools make the “sociological and ideological contributions” of providing both social and spiritual alternatives to secular schooling. Their roles also include “protecting” students from detrimental influences, rehabilitating students who have strayed from an appropriate course of behavior, and contributing to a “reproduction of Islamic identity and lifestyle” (95).

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### **About the Reviewer**

Asma Bala is a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Religious Studies. She is currently researching the intersection of religion with human rights in the context of Islam and Canadian civil-society organizations. Her research examines the overall contribution of these institutions to civil society as both “Canadian” and “Islamic” organizations that operate in a secular state system. Her research aims to shed light on the universality and inclusiveness of these institutions.

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