Historical Dissenting Christian Academies and Contemporary Muslim Educational Institutions: Contexts, Comparisons, Resonances and Contrasts

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Institutions: Contexts, Comparisons, Resonances and Contrasts

By Paul Weller

Abstract

This article aims to bring into comparative resonance and contrast, aspects of the of the "Dissenting Academies" of 17th-19th centuries of English history and aspects of the contemporary experience of Muslim educational institutions in the UK. The paper emerges out of thinking and reflection around the intersection between three principal sources, namely: relevant research and publications relating to historical dissenting Christian Academies; relevant research relating to contemporary Muslim educational institutions; personal positioning within a religious tradition related to the historical Dissenting Christian traditions; and professional experience as an external examiner working with contemporary Muslim (and other religious-based) educational institutions, as an external panellist on panels to validate some of the awards at such institutions and, as University manager exploring possible collaborative partnerships with such. On the basis of bringing these sources and perspectives together, the paper then seeks to undertake a comparison between contexts of historical Dissenting Academies and contemporary Muslim institutions out of which critically to explore and discuss what might be learned from the resonances and contrasts identified.

Key words: Dissenting Academies

                      Muslim educational institutions

                      Higher Education

                      English history

                      Contemporary UK society

Research on Muslims and Higher Education in the Contemporary UK

In the first instance, this article comes out of engagement with research published in the report and associated Policy Brief from Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor's and Alison Scott-Baumann's (2003a and 2003b) Economic and Social Research Council "Follow-on Project" on *Collaborative Partnerships Between Universities and Muslim Institutions: Dismantling The Roadblocks Higher Education for British Islam.* That research looked especially at the issues and opportunities involved in current and possible future collaborative arrangements between institutions of Muslim foundation and ethos, and universities and other institutions within the wider public higher education sector. As a "follow on" project, it built on three other prior pieces of research out of which, for the purpose of this paper, is highlighted the report by Mukadam and Scott-Baumann et al (2010) on *The Training and Development of Muslim Faith Leaders: Current Practice and Future Possibilities*. This was based on a questionnaire survey of twenty-eight Muslim institutions from across Shi'a and Sunni traditions, including the Barelwi and Deobandi movements within the Sunni tradition, with interviews also having been undertaken in twelve of these institutions.

As listed in appendix A of the report, at the time that research was undertaken there were fifty-four Muslim institutions providing initial faith leadership training. This included thirty-eight institutions which the authors of the report grouped together as stating that not only do they teach the national curriculum core subjects as a minimum (and often much more) but also among the Sunni institutions a traditional form of *dars-e-nizami* syllabus or its Shi'a equivalent. As noted by the authors of the report these, *"prepare students to take faith leadership roles, if they wish, in later life."* (Mukadam and Scott-Baumann et al, 2010, p. 38) All of these institutions were registered with the Department for Education, inspected by Ofsted and taught the core subjects of the National Curriculum for the eleven to sixteen age range. (p. 72). The report's authors also grouped together another list of fifteen institutions, in

relation to which they stated that they "cater for the post-18 age-range," and a number of which had collaborative links with more established and publically-funded institutions of higher education. (p. 73). Finally, the authors noted that, in addition to these institutions, there were additionally many informal and unregistered institutions which were not researched as a part of the review.

In relation to this overall emerging pattern of provision, in the Policy Brief from their ESRC follow-on project, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013b) point out that: *"Our research demonstrates how important it is to develop collaborative partnerships between UK universities and Muslim institutions in Britain and thereby provide a richer higher education sector and greater higher education opportunities for all British citizens."* (p. 6).

Relevant but Often Hidden History of the Dissenting Academies in England

The second of the sources for this paper is that of the often forgotten history, but which this paper wants to argue is still of contemporary relevance, of the so-called Dissenting Academies in seventeenth to nineteenth century England. These historic Academies were established to facilitate the education of marginalised Christian religious minorities from within (initially) the Independent/Congregationalist and Presbyterian traditions in the wake of the ejection from the Church of England of Christian clergy who, following the Restoration of the Monarchy under Charles II, would not accept to sign up to uniformity in matters of religious belief and practice as the price ticket for demonstrating their civil and political trustworthiness.

They were joined by Academies catering to Quakers and Unitarians, and in due course, also to those from the Baptist, Methodist and other Evangelical Christian traditions. One the main rationales for these Academies was to help inform the development of an "educated ministry" among those Christian traditions whose leaders were excluded from achieving

either enrolment in and/or qualifications from universities in England and who therefore had otherwise to travel to Scotland or continental Europe to complete their higher education. Such Academies therefore helped to ensure that the future religious leadership of the Dissenting Christian traditions could be developed in a way that gave their students access to the then norms of higher learning but also in a way that was informed by the distinctiveness and ethos of their own religious traditions. But while generally having ministerial students at their heart, they usually also included a broader body of Dissenting students who wanted, through higher study and learning, to prepare for careers in the law, in commerce and in the sciences.

For many years, there were only three volumes that have summarised the emergence and development of the Dissenting Academies. The first of these was Irene Parker's (1914) *Dissenting Academies in England: Their Rise and Progress and Place Among the Educational Systems of the Country*; Herbert McLachlan's (1931) *English Education Under the Test Acts: Being the History of the Nonconformist Academies*, 1662-1820; and J. W. Ashley Smith's (1954) *The Birth of Modern Education: The Contribution of the Dissenting Academies, 1660-1800*. However, the "Dissenting Academies Project,"[1] set up in 2006 as a collaboration between the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies and the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History have brought together much work in this field which is now being taken forward by a The Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English. Central among the outputs of this project has been the development of the project's searchable electronic *Database and Encyclopedia, 1660-1860*,[2] which was created by Inga Jones and Simon Dixon under the direction of Isabel Rivers and David Wykes. Along with a set of at-a-glance details, this database also provides a brief history of each Academy, together with available details of their students and tutors, and a list of relevant archival sources. This means that is now possible much more straightforwardly than in the past to access a great

1   See http://www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/research/the-dissenting-academies-project/
2   See http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/

deal of information about these historic educational initiatives. Through that, and as now in this paper, it is possible to consider their potential relevance to contemporary Muslim educational initiatives of the kind that the previously mentioned research by Cheruvallil-Contractor, Scott-Baumann and others has been concerned with.

Professional Practice as an Academic in the Study of Religion (and Beyond)

The paper is also informed by the author's professional practice as an academic in the study of religion and while working in various leadership roles at the University of Derby. In his scholarly role, he has acted in various external capacities in relation to higher education provision in institutions with a religious foundation, including as an external panellist in relation to the validations of the Bachelor of Theology offered by the what was at the time called the Evangelical Theological College of Wales, based in Bridgend and which, in that period, was validated by the University of Glamorgan;[3] in relation to the Bachelor and Master of Arts with named pathways in Islamic Studies; in Islamicjerusalem Studies; in Multiculturalism; and in Muslims, Globalisation and the West, of the Al-Maktoum College[4] in Dundee and which, at that time, was validated by the University of Aberdeen;[5] and in relation to validation of the Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Studies at the Markfield Institute for Higher Education, in Leicester, which at the time was validated by the University of Gloucester;[6] as well as of the MA Interreligious Relations, at St. Philip's Centre, in Leicester, which was validated by de Montfort University.[7] In addition to such validation experience, the author has also acted as external examiner for the MA in Inter-Faith Dialogue of Heythop

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3   The validation took place in 2009. The institution was founded in 1936 as the Barry School of
     Evangelism (1936–1950) and was also known Barry Bible College. It was then successively known as
     South Wales Bible College (1950–1985), Evangelical Theological College of Wales in 1985-2007;
     Wales Evangelical School of Theology (2007-16), while from 2016 onwards it has become the Union
     School of Theology.
4   See https://www.almcollege.org.uk/
5   This validation also took place in 2009.
6   The validation took place in 2012.
7   The validation took place in 2009.

College[8] in the University of London; the MA in Contextual Theology of the Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church, Unitarian and Open College federation of the Luther King House Educational Trust,[9] as validated by the University of Manchester; and the MA in Islam and the West of the Islamic College,[10] London, as validated by Middlesex University.

Finally, the author also has a range of experience relating to collaboration between higher education and institutions and initiatives offering provision from beyond the higher education system itself other than those with a specifically religious foundation or ethos. This included, for a number of years, having my having held managerial responsibility at the University of Derby for a number of years in the late 1990s and early 2000s for a range of professional practice related Masters' and Professional Doctorate awards in Psychodynamic and Humanistic Psychotherapies that were provided through collaborative arrangements between the University of Derby and a number of public and private sector psychotherapy bodies in the UK and Scandinavia. This paper will later on return briefly to this experience, because the question of collaborative relations between the wider system of higher education and educational bodies with Muslim and/or other religious foundations and/or a continuing religious ethos, although it might well have *distinctive* features, should not be considered on its own, as if it involved a uniquely different set of considerations than those in relation to other areas of life and professional provision.

In concluding this section it should be noted that one of the author's current employing institutions, and where he first read for an undergraduate degree in Theology in the 1970s, is Regent's Park College,[11] which is now a Permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford. This traces its own foundation back at least as far as one of the Dissenting Academies

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8   See http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/
9   See http://lutherkinghouse.org.uk/
10   See https://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/
11   See https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/

(Briggs, 2011), namely, the so-called Stepney Academy,[12] founded in London in 1810, initially to meet the need for training ministers of the Baptist Christian tradition. And, again, in its conclusion, this paper will return to this institution, its history (Clarke and Fiddes, 2017), its current work and its motto.

Historical and Contemporary Comparisons

In bringing together reflection on the historic Dissenting Academies and contemporary Muslim initiatives in higher education, this paper is not claiming that one can draw a straight line between how things were with different religious and social actors and contexts and how they are now. This is not least because, as the novelist Lesley Poles Hartley (1953) put it: *"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."* However, as with many such bon mots, Hartley's dictum does not, perhaps, tell the whole story, and so one should also be mindful of the dictum of another, and perhaps more well-known novelist, namely William Faulkner (1951), who claimed that: *"The past is never dead. It's not even past."*

Therefore, perhaps rather more prosaically, as the present author (Weller, 2009) has argued in other previously published work that invokes historical examples in relation to contemporary issues: *"an awareness of the historical ways in which discrimination and disadvantage on the grounds of religion operated, was challenged and partially overcome during the 19th century can provide a 'pre-figuration' that may help to illuminate understanding of these issues as we confront them today."* (p. 185). This is because it might be that, while the social and religious actors of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and today might well have significant differences, at least some of the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion on the part of the powerful could still have some similarities as also some of the

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12   This (Particular) Baptist Academy should be distinguished from another Academy of the same name, supported by the King's Head Society and which existed from 1740-44 and was succeeded by the Plaisterer's Hall Academy (1744-1754). The Baptist Stepney Academy emerged out of previous work by the Baptist Education Society, established in 1752, followed by another in 1804, both of which were originally established to provide an education for Baptist ministers.

responses on the part of the marginalized in seeking to overcome their marginalization. From within the "Dissenting Academies Project", work is currently ongoing towards the production of new, multi-authored work that should become a modern standard - Rivers and Burden (forthcoming) - to be published by Cambridge University Press under the title of *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860.* The planned four parts[13] of this book can, perhaps, offer a broad structural framework not only for considering the Dissenting Academies, but also comparisons, resonances and contrasts between these and contemporary Muslim initiatives in higher education in the UK.

Contexts for Dissenting Academies and Muslim Educational Initiatives

The first part of the *History of the Dissenting Academies* will focus on addressing "The Development of the Dissenting Academies." In relation to these, as well as in relation to the development of Muslim Colleges and other similar institutions, both for an understanding them in their own right, and also in considering what cross-learning might take place, it is crucially important to understand the integral relationship between these initiatives and their respective social, religious, historical, economic and political contexts.

The context for the earliest Dissenting Academies was, as has already been noted, a political settlement around the Restoration of the Monarchy that was founded on an episcopalian Church of England and 1662 *Act of Uniformity* that gave effect to this. That Act required all those in holy orders - every minister, teacher, lecturer or university Fellow - to choose between submission to Anglican authority or the loss of their livelihoods. Before St Bartholomew's Day (24 August) 1662, they had to declare their "unfeigned assent and consent" to everything in the newly revised *Book of Common Prayer*.

In relation to the further development of the context for the Dissenting Academies, the proposed structure of the forthcoming *History of the Dissenting Academies in the British*

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13   See https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sed/religionandliterature/dissenting-academies/history-1660-1880/

Isles, 1660-1860, sets these contexts out according to the periods from the Restoration of 1688 to the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688; from the 1688 Revolution to the end of Queen Anne's reign in 1714; from George I in 1714 to the French Revolution in 1789; from the French Revolution in 1790 to political reform in 1832; and from Political reform in 1832 to reform of the universities in 1860.

Irene Parker's (1914) book on *Dissenting Academies* divided the Academies into three groups, each reflecting differing historical periods. These included twenty-two Academies that were established between 1662 and 1690, all of which we led by ejected ministers in a way similar to what later became grammar schools, although often more thoroughly done. The second group was of thirty-four Academies which flourished from 1690 to 1750 and had generally grown to a more ambitious scale than their predecessors, with more teachers and better financial support and which, in terms of their curricula approach, Parker described as "classical." They were also less personalised, being established, supported, and to at least some extent supervised by more centralised organisational forms. Finally, Parker contrasted these with Academies of the third, 1690-1750 group, which thrived and survived into and/or beyond 1800, and which she described as "classical-modern."

The Academies varied substantially in form, with many of the early examples being basically an educational opportunity offered by an individual private tutor, perhaps with accompanying lodgings, through to much larger institutions supported by a number of tutors. Sometimes they closed, relocated and or merged with one another to create successor bodies more or less in continuity with the original Academies. On the other side of the extension of wider opportunities for entry into, and graduation from, higher education that began to emerge towards the second quarter and into the third quarter of the nineteenth century, some continued essentially as theological and/or ministerial training Colleges, while Bristol Baptist

College[14] is a rare example of an original Academy founded in the early 1800s and continuing today as a Baptist theological College offering a BA and MA validated by Durham, with research degree provision under Aberdeen University.

The hegemony of the Church of England in relation to university education in England meant that it was only just over a century and a half ago that universities in England first provided opportunities for other than Anglican Christians when, in 1826, the University of London was founded as the first English university to admit students regardless of their religion, although without being able to award degrees until a decade later. In Oxford and Cambridge, it was only with the *Oxford University Act* in 1854 that religious tests were abolished for matriculation in the Bachelor of Arts (while retaining them for higher degrees), followed by the *Cambridge University Act*, 1856 which removed that University's tests from graduating students. And indeed, it was only in 1871 that the *University Tests Act* abolished the use of religious tests for all degrees except Divinity, and for appointments to all official university posts except Professorships of Divinity.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of the new "civic" universities, such as Birmingham and of Manchester, which were founded on the basis of a "secular" ethos, albeit understood in the context of time not so much as an ideological secularism, but more as not being exclusive of staff or students on the basis of their religion or belief. Nevertheless, while the idea of faith-based institutions is nowhere near as prominent in the UK as in the USA, there remain a significant number of institutions, which continue to reference a faith-based foundation, and expecting this to be reflected to varying degrees in their policy and practice, including in relation to employment matters. Thus, not much more than fifty years ago in the predecessor College of the author's own current institution of the University of Derby – namely, the Bishop Lonsdale College of Higher

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14   See https://www.bristol-baptist.ac.uk/

Education - it was expected that (especially senior) staff should have an active connection with the Christian faith and that both staff and students should attend college chapel on designated occasions. (Hey, 1989).

At the other end of the spectrum, the ethos of many of the Robbins' era 'new universities' of the 1960s, as well as of the polytechnics under local authority control that later became the post-1992 'new universities', was very strongly 'secular'. Indeed, from some religiously informed perspectives at least some of these were not only 'secular' in the sense of not privileging one or any religious tradition but were also perceived to be more ideologically 'secularist'. Thus, in the *Going Public* report on chaplaincy and higher education published by the ecumenical Christian National Standing Advisory Committee of Polytechnic Chaplains (1985) it was argued that *"The Church has no right of access, formal or informal, indeed in most cases it is perceived at best as irrelevant to and at worst as pernicious in the institutional ethos of the public sector"* (p. 6).

Another important change is that right through until and beyond this author's own time as an undergraduate student in the 1970s, from being an opportunity for a small number of elite, higher education has now becoming a part of the expectations, and for many of these also the experience, of going on for almost half the UK population of the relevant age cohort. Higher Education is now generally seen as serving both individual aims (enhancing employability and underpinning self-actualisation) and broader socio-economic and policy aims. Along with this massive expansion of student numbers has also come an enormous and still growing diversity of providers. These range from the ancient, collegiate universities (such as Oxford, Cambridge and Durham); through civic universities of late nineteenth and early twentieth century foundation (such as the universities of London and of Manchester); through universities created in the 1960s (such as Kent and Lancaster); to the former polytechnics that became universities in early 1990s (such as Nottingham Trent and Sheffield Hallam

universities). It also includes former Church of England Colleges of Higher Education, many of which are now universities, such as the Universities of Winchester, Chester and York St. John, and the Roman Catholic foundation, Newman University. It includes Further Education colleges that deliver higher education; the private University of Buckingham; and, more recently, a new generation of corporate providers of specific fields of higher education such as the University/College of Law and BPP International, which is focused on business and the professions.

In terms of scholarly attention, in general, in the UK, at least until recently, as compared with, say, the USA, the issue of religion or belief in higher education has received relatively little attention. (Marriot, Hooley and Weller, 2011). But in more recent times, this began to change with a network of UK based scholars who have been researching at this interface including Weller and Hooley in relation to religion and belief, equality and diversity; Guest et al (2013) in relation to Christianity and Higher Education; and Scott-Baumann et al (2020) in relation to Islam and Higher Education. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Muslims have not been excluded from the opportunities afforded by higher education institutions on the basis of law, as was the case for nineteenth century Free Church Christians. However, in society more generally, and including in the broad sphere of education, there is evidence that Muslims experienced significant discrimination and inequality. This includes the broad field of education, including the specific sphere of higher education. (Weller, Hooley and Moore, 2011).

The findings of a 2010-11 Equality Challenge Unit research project on the experience of staff and students in relation to religion or belief suggested that 'the overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they feel valued by their institution and that they had not experienced harassment or discrimination" and that at least the formal reporting of instances within HEIs seemed to be relatively infrequent. (Weller, Hooley and Moore, 2011, p. 10). At

the same time, within the survey of this project some religion or belief groups were reporting a higher proportion of incidents of discrimination or harassment (Muslim, Jewish and Hindu staff; Jewish, Muslim and Sikh students) than others. In particular, this research identified a number of areas of concern around which issues of equality, discrimination, accommodation of, and poor relations between, groups were typically organised. These included dietary issues, the place of alcohol, accommodation of religion and belief practice, and the place of religion in aspects of institutional life.

Against both this broader societal and more specifically focused higher education context, Muslims have been active in developing institutions that aspire to provide greater opportunities for their young people which, like the Dissenting Academies, are intended to be informed by the distinctiveness and ethos of their own religious traditions. As with the Dissenting Academies, these Muslim educational initiatives and have been of varying character and size. Out of those institutions reported on in the previously mentioned Muslim Faith Leaders' report, four were founded before 1990; seventeen in the 1990s and nine since 2000. (p.39),[15] while in relation to size one was reported as having over four hundred students; four as having had between three and four hundred; nine as between two and three hundred; fourteen between one and two hundred; and nine having fewer than one hundred.[16]

Networked Wider Connections of Dissenting Academies and Muslim Educational Initiatives

The second part of forthcoming *History of the Dissenting Academies* will be entitled "The Academies and the Protestant World". Although in many ways a specifically English phenomenon, the historic English Dissenting Academies were not isolated from the wider world beyond England, having an important networked engagement with a wider Protestantism and Protestant educational institutions beyond the British Isles (including with the Scottish universities).

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15   In the case of the others, the date of founding could not be ascertained at the time of this review.
16   In the case of one institution the size could not be ascertained.

The Dissenting Academies reflected considerable religious diversity. The Presbyterians placed a particular emphasis on an educated ordained ministry and they were among the main patrons of the Dissenting Academies. In line with the internal trajectory among the Presbyterians of England, some of these in time became Unitarian academies. Among the Independents/Congregationalists, the wealthier congregations, especially in the towns, had always sought an educated minister trained at one of the eighteenth-century Academies. And the exponential growth in such congregations in tandem with the Industrial Revolution led to the setting up of many more academies. Among the Baptists, although training had been available at Bristol since the early eighteenth century for students intended for the Baptist ministry, only in the nineteenth century did the Baptists make a major effort to establish Academies for this purpose.

Among the Methodists, the education of the preachers had been Wesley's personal and itinerant concern, after which it became the responsibility of the Methodist Conference. At the same time, in parallel with some growing demands for a system of formal training, there were also anxieties about the potentially damaging effect it could have in the context of a tradition that greatly valued the experiential. It was therefore not until the 1830s that the first Wesleyan Methodist institution for training ministers was established, with other Methodist denominations only developing training colleges later in that century. Similar concerns were found among non-aligned Evangelicals where, for example, the Countess of Huntingdon's academy emphasised the Bible and preaching rather than the systematic study of doctrine.

Similarly, the contemporary Muslim institutions have a varied pattern of relationships beyond the UK. And just as the Dissenting Academies these reflected the differing traditions and movements within Protestant Christianity, so also the contemporary Muslim educational institutions of the UK reflect differences of broad Muslim tradition and more specific Muslim movements in the wider "Muslim world".

Curricula in Dissenting Academies and Muslim Educational Initiatives

The third section of the *History of the Dissenting Academies* is entitled "Curricula". I have already earlier noted that while the Dissenting Academies had a particular focus on the education of religious leaders that, they were not exclusive in that regard, with the majority also including students studying for other professions, including law, science, and commerce. This can also be seen in the proposed book chapters within this section which underline the range of disciplinary foci to be found in the Academies. These disciplines included Theology; Biblical studies; History; Preaching and practical divinity; Logic; Metaphysics, pneumatology, and philosophy of mind; Moral philosophy; Government and law; Natural philosophy; Natural history and chemistry; Mathematics; Classical languages and literature; Rhetoric and belles lettres; Modern languages; and Pedagogical methods.

In the contemporary UK, the majority of the secondary-type Muslim institutions in Britain are known as *darul ulooms* and, as previously noted, as in such schools throughout the South Asian sub-continent, the religious curriculum is based on a syllabus known as *dars-e-nizami*, which derives its name from Mullah Nizamuddin (1678–1747), a distinguished scholar based in Lucknow, India. Originally it was a course of nine years duration, to be undertaken between the ages of twelve and twenty-one, and it led to a degree-level qualification. Graduates of the course usually pursued careers as *imams* or Islamic scholars, or else as senior government administrators and officials. The course was based on a set of selected texts that reflected rationalist traditions developed in Iran. It became the dominant system of Indian Islamic education from the eighteenth century onwards. As Mukadam and Scott-Baumann et al (2011) put it, *"It was seen as having the capacity to preserve Islam at the same time as selectively adopting social, cultural and technological changes from the West. Its proponents saw it as reformist in relation to Islam in South Asia more generally, and as oppositional in relation to colonialism."* (p. 41)

Mukadam and Alison Scott-Baumann et al (2011) also note that most *darul-ulooms* in the UK, as also in South Asia, have modified their original syllabus cutting back on content considered superfluous to students in contemporary society and/or making it more manageable in view of the educational demands placed on students of compulsory school age. In the UK the language of instruction is nowadays more often English rather than the Urdu which replaced the original Farsi. A student who completes the full *dars-inizami* syllabus is awarded the certificate known as the *Sanad* and is recognised within British Sunni communities as an *alim* in the case of young men or an *alimah* in the case of young women. (p. 41).[17]

This approach to what is known within the community as the "Islamic sciences", takes place in *madrassas*, *darul ulooms, jamias* and *hawzas*. It is, by and large, the pious study of the faithful believer and is often perceived as lacking in criticality and as being inadequate in current contexts. However, what the critics of such courses fail to understand is the rich history of the development of such curricula and the depth of theological expertise that graduates from such courses achieve. Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013a), however, note what seems to have been a fairly widespread concern, shared also among Muslims themselves, that *"Curricula in Muslim institutions often do not prepare young Muslims for life in the secular world and there is a need to incorporate aspects of secular Western curricula"* (p. 11).

Given the lack of 'mainstream' recognition that such courses receive, students do not have the employment and further education opportunities that university students have. At the same time, research commissioned by the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and undertaken by the then known as Higher Education Academy (HEA)18, provides a comprehensive and useful analysis of Islamic Studies courses in a

17   Different terms are used in Shi'a Islam.
18   Now known as Advance HE.

selection of countries including the UK, but found *"little association between the undertaking of Islamic Studies at degree level, and the pursuit of a qualification for religious leadership or religious knowledge."* (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann, 2013a, p. 5).

Looking at this issue again from both ends of this spectrum is what has fed into the growth of interest in forming the kinds of collaborative validation and delivery arrangements with wider sectoral universities that might help to bridge such a gap. Indeed, as Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013a) argue relative to the Islamic Sciences courses, *"We believe that this is a lost resource for Britain"*, in the light of which they *"therefore postulate the need for increased collaborative partnerships between universities and Muslim institutions that allow for cross-fertilisation of expertise, skills, pedagogies and knowledge between the two."* (p. 13). The potential for addressing this "lost resource" was taken up by the Universities and Muslim Seminaries Project (UMSEP) which was commissioned in 2019 by the UK Government's Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government as a community-led, Muslim-faith capacity-building project to address the need for: *"accreditation of Darul Ulooms (Muslim seminaries) and external validation of their programmes"*, *"understanding the career trajectories of Darul Uloom graduates, and exploring good practice"*; and *"understanding emerging leadership models in the British Muslim community."* (Scott-Baumann et al, 2019, p. 1). In its report, among other things, as a practical way forward on which to build, it made the recommendation to, *"Develop accreditation partnerships between three seminaries and three universities"* (UMSEP, 2021, p. 7).

Social and Economic Arrangements in Dissenting Academies and Muslim Initiatives

The fourth part of the book on *The Dissenting Academies* is on "The Structures and Patterns of Dissenting Education" which discussed the social and economic arrangements that

undergirded the provision and development of the Dissenting Academies. In relation to the Academies, Reid (2010) argued that the Dissenting Academies experienced at least three of four institutional life stages, each of which had its own unique challenges. He argued that all Academies went through the first two of these stages: namely, those of "foundation" and "maintenance". With regard to whether or not an academy experienced the additional stages of "transition" and "dissolution" depended on factors such as *"the financial strength of an Academy and the reliability of its principal supporters."* (p. 299). Often the support that was provided came from a particular Dissenting constituency of churches, with such support having implications in terms of governance of the Academies. Thus, Reid pointed out that: *"Academies that wanted to remain non-denominational, however, had to raise money through fund-raising campaigns and incentives designed to involve patrons in academy operations."* (p. 302).

In relation to Muslim educational initiatives, interestingly, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann's report (2013a) does not really address the question of the financial arrangements that undergird a number of the Muslim educational initiatives that they discuss, either as a matter in its own right or in connection with the governance structures of these initiatives. Had they have done so, the question of sources of funding from outside of the UK and the implications of this for the governance of the institutions concerned would have come into focus. However, with regard to the overall relationship between Muslim educational initiatives and the Higher Education sector, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013a) do highlight what they argue is *"importance that policy makers from within the government prioritise support, including financial support to develop and sustain such partnerships."*

Some Considerations for Further Future Consideration

Reflecting on the Dissenting Academies in the conclusion of her book, Eileen Parker (1914) argued that: *"At first, merely an expedient of the moment, they, later, became a definite and necessary part of the educational machinery of their day. Differing from all other centres of learning - unique both in aim and accomplishment - they constitute a separate educational system - an educational system, moreover, which deserves no mean place among the various systems of this country."* (p. 124).

Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, it could credibly be argued that England's framework for the relationships between religion(s), state and society had, in many ways, become quite facilitative of the religious freedom and participation of a quite diverse (albeit at the time still predominantly Christian and Jewish) range of religious minorities. At the same time, this does not mean that one should uncritically accept a national narrative that (misleadingly) suggests a smooth evolutionary process was at work in which these rights to freedom and participation were generously extended to other than Anglican Christians. Thus, for example, attempts to open Oxford and Cambridge to dissenters with the *University Admission Bill* (1834) were initially defeated by supporters of the Church of England seeking to maintain its privileges in the two universities, and it required an engaged religious, educational, social and political struggle to overcome them. Therefore, as argued by the legal academic, St. John Robilliard (1984), the developments that occurred in nineteenth century England could more accurately be characterised as: *"The early story of the struggle for religious liberty is one of sects establishing an identity of their own, with their members being freed from the obligation of supporting a faith they did not hold. From the struggle for existence we pass to the struggle for equality."* (p. ix)

Therefore, the extension of freedoms, the removal of inequalities and the extension of opportunities for religious minorities (and, of course, for non-believers too) should really be seen as having come about as much in response to 'bottom up' organised activity on the part

of those who were affected by such issues as to the legal changes eventually enacted by Parliament. This involved the development of worked alternatives to address more immediate needs, such as the development of the Academies, alongside campaigning for wider change as to political policies and Parliamentary Acts that ultimately gave effect to these changes.

In further reflecting on this, it might be noted that one of the remarkable things about the Dissenting and Free Church tradition – especially in its Baptist manifestation - is that it advocated what it did not only out of self-interest, but on the basis of principle which was that of the theologically rooted principle of equality of religion or belief for all. As Timothy Larsen (1999) in his *Friends of Religious Equality: Non-Conformist Politics in Mid Nineteenth Century England* put it, even though the practical options for this did not really often arise in the nineteenth century or before: *"The most radical and consistent Nonconformists did not shrink from admitting that their principles could rightly be applied to all citizens, even if they happened to be Hindus, Moslems, Mormons or atheists."* (p. 135).

Because of this, one practical consequence of the initiatives and struggles of Free Church Christians in the nineteenth century was precisely that in their slipstream, so to speak, opportunity was also opened up for Roman Catholic Christians (who, like contemporary Muslims had been even more severely marginalised on the basis of suspicion of belonging to an international religious community and of owing allegiance to a foreign power), Jews and others. In the same way, it could be that just as Muslims ultimately campaigned successfully for the introduction of law in England, Wales and Scotland to address discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief – not for Muslims alone, but in principle for people of any religion or belief - so Muslim work and campaigning at the many possible interfaces between religion or belief and higher education could also open up possibilities more broadly, within which Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and others might then also be able to build. Indeed, as Cheruvallil and Scott-Baumann (2013a) put it: *"Recognition that the need for confessional*

religious education is not a Muslim issue alone, but that as Britain and Europe becomes more plural all faith groups will need religious leaders who are trained in European contexts. In this regard, there is urgent need for dialogue across all European faiths so that more recent religious groups (in the context of European history) may learn from the experiences of those that are more established." (p. 12)

If the picture painted by St. John Robilliard provides an at least conceivably illuminating meta-narrative for understanding the nature of the basic trajectory taken by Dissenting and Free Church Christians in nineteenth century England, then it may also be that some lessons from that history could, with benefit, also be applied to experience of Muslims (and indeed also to all those of other than Christian religious minorities) in late twentieth and early twenty-first century UK. Within this, the kind of controversies that can and have emerged around the appropriateness or otherwise of extending recognition to Muslim educational institutions can become ones that, in the title of a book chapter by Nye and Weller (2012, pp. 34-54) might, in their conduct at the shifting boundaries between public and private provision, and role of religious communities and groups in relation to both, come to be seen as offering a "lens on change".

Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013a) point out that *"There is a strong precedent for successful and long-standing partnerships and validation that exists for Christian and to a lesser extent Jewish religious training provision in Britain, particularly around Church ministry training and Christian confessional theology as validated by British Universities. It is vital that both Muslim institutions and University examine such links and learn from this precedence."* (p. 11). In connection with this, they also note a *"Lack of contact between the university sector and Muslim colleges, causing ignorance and prejudices on both sides"* and that one of the "roadblocks" identified in their research is that of *"Little contact exists between UK universities and Muslim institutions: whereas two years ago there*

were four such formal links, now there are two, and one of those is terminating in 2015." (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann, 2013a, p. 10).

In relation to the current roadblocks to a more collaborative future Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann (2013a) also reported that *"The delegates at the research events did not feel that any of these roadblocks were insurmountable and proposed ways to dismantle each roadblock which are detailed in the report. Indeed they stated that as both British Muslim communities and pluralist discourses matured, organic changes in educational systems were inevitable"* (p. 3). If that is indeed so, then Muslim institutions might themselves be able to fulfil a similar role as to that which Irene Parker (1914) further concluded in relation to the Dissenting Academies, namely that *"The academical system of education was shortlived - a 'distributary' which, a little further down the course, returned to the main river. But the 'distributary' accomplished much, not only fertilising the land through which it passed, but after its return purifying the main stream and quickening its sluggish flow."* (p. 124).

If the emergent Muslim institutions can also achieve something of this, then they might even be able to help contribute to the possibility of a future in which it could, on the other side of modernity, once again become possible to conceive of approaches to what might then truly be called a "higher" form of education with which might also be possible the healing of at least some of the dichotomies that have developed between knowledge as technical learning and knowledge as ethical development; in the relationship between culture, religious inheritance and personal and individual freedoms; and between knowledge as information and knowledge as wisdom. In this, there might also be scope for a new dialogue with the fifteen institutions of the Cathedrals Group which, on its website,[19] explains that *"Our origin as a Group is based on the common history of our members as church founded institutions"* and that it is *"led by a committee of the Vice Chancellors from its member universities,*

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19   See https://www.cathedralsgroup.ac.uk/

alongside representatives from the Church of England, Catholic Church and Methodist Church." Of the approach of the Group, the website explains that: *"We continue to work closely with the Church to bring a distinctive voice to debates about the role and evolution of higher education"* while in relation to "ethos", the website explains that the Group has a focus on *"Emphasising education for the 'whole person', intellectual, moral, spiritual, and experiential learning."*

Such self-understandings could, in turn, open up a question of how far there might not be scope for a wider coming together of institutions which, albeit from different religious tradition starting points, might also share such perspectives? Nevertheless, any such initiative is bound to fail if it is based on a nostalgic attempt to return behind modernity. Religion is no longer the "taken-for-granted" or privileged foundation of a shared framework for social reality. The contemporary reality is that, as with the nature of academic disciplines, the notion of religion or belief itself is deeply contested. And that contestation is found both among those who stand outside of religion and see it as a fundamentally problematic aspect of human experience, as well as among those who in principle affirm its important role in human life but who also, on the basis of their own understanding of their own religion, vigorously contest some of the forms that it takes. In University life, as elsewhere, it is important to note that these rights are not concerned with the *privileging* of religion. Rather, in the context of current UK equality law, policy and practice, they adhere both to religious belief and to other convictions of a settled kind, including those of a Humanistic orientation. Because of the long historical struggles against the restriction of freedom of religion and belief perpetrated by religious groups, the human rights of atheists and of humanists should be equally upheld alongside the rights of religious believers. This is also because of their commitment to truth-seeking in a way that is not to be constrained by the orthodoxies of particular traditions, whether religious or, indeed, secular. Finally, and especially in UK

public life, there is often still a predominant context in which institutions of higher education can too easily be forced into a polarity between, on the one hand, an arrogant decontextualised academicism that is disconnected from the concrete issues and choices facing societies and individuals; and on the other hand, a subservient instrumentalism to short-term economic and social policy goals and mechanisms.

A helpful framing for this might be that, in a public and participatory system, neither institutions themselves, nor the study of Religious Studies nor Theology should demand membership of a particular religious tradition, or indeed any religious tradition, in order to participate in their enterprise, just as believers should not be required to give up their beliefs or to find them treated disrespectfully by the intellectual descendents of Kierkegaard's "cultured despisers of religion". In learning how to contribute to this, religious groups and individuals and secular regimes of knowledge need to find ways from within the logic of their own traditions to avoid "totalizing" their claims. And religions, with their ultimate commitments, have to find a way of living in the "in-between" of the provisionality of their "now" and the ultimacy of the visions and truth-claims that inspire them. They have to find a way of negotiating between the absolute seriousness of an engaged religious commitment and an intellectual humility and ethical self-criticism.

In relation to what was eventually to become the author's own College, in 1810 the Baptist Education Society unanimously accepted a number of resolutions, among which was the following: "*That in conformity with the wishes of our worthy founder, an Institution be established, to be distinguished by the name of 'the Baptist Academical Institution at Stepney' for the education of pious young men, designed for the Christian ministry.*" In that resolution, one can see that it was specifically young _men_ with whom the resolution and the Academy that was built upon it would for many years be concerned.[20] But we also see a view that, in

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20   The first woman was only admitted in 1919.

the formation of Christian leaders, piety - while expected – was not of itself viewed as being sufficient. What has been the particular genius and significance of this institution is that it manages to combine a major focus on training of leaders in the Church, while also having a wider body of students who engage with Theology not only for the more instrumental purposes of ministerial formation. Indeed, both of these also take place in the context of a wider community of scholarship in which other disciplines beyond those concerned directly with the study of religion also play an important part. Furthermore, although the College is very clear about its Nonconformist Christian inspiration and offers opportunity for student and staff involvement in the liturgical life of Christian prayer and worship, it is not necessary to pass religious tests in order to become a member of the College community.[21]

It is thus an institutional example of balancing commitment and openness. Like all other models it does not get it right all the time. And one might ask the question, while the College can and does accommodate the Christian and the secular, how far it can or should really accommodate a much wider religious diversity than in the past. But in all these things, as also in relation to the overall theme of the interaction between religion and higher education, it is arguable that the motto "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good" (taken from the New Testament Letter of *I Thessalonians* 5 v.21) is instructive. In its injunction to "prove all things", the motto contains a commitment to intellectual honesty and to questioning of received wisdom or claims, however apparently religious or spiritual they may be.

At the same time, the aim of such honesty is not intellectual distinction in itself, even though many staff and alumni of the College have been distinguished scholars. Rather, the aim is of "proving all things" is to do with "the good". It is important to understand that this is not just to do with contemplating "the good". Rather, it is to do with "holding fast" to "the good" – in other words, a commitment to trying to live "the good". In this, there is a sense of

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21   Although it should be noted that there are some requirements that relate to the Principal of the College.

the importance of an intellectual life that is practically engaged with moral aspiration and issues in the development of a "wisdom" that is not about the "cleverness" of the worst aspects of the Oxford Senior Common Room, nor the dreary productivity of a vocationalist, rather than a properly vocational training, but something that is altogether more holistic within a vision that is as vocationally relevant as it is epistemologically important.

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