**Teachers’ Perceptions of Islamic Religious Education in Arab-Israeli High Schools**

**Introduction**

This study explores Muslim teachers’ perceptions of Islamic education in Arab and secondary schools in Israel, of their own roles as Islamic educators, and of the aims of Islamic religious education in general. White (2009) emphasizes the need to do more research in order to illuminate how teachers’ religious identities impacts their views of schooling and their pedagogies. Another study has found that teachers’ religious orientations influence their conceptions of citizenship education and their methods of teaching for democracy and national identity (Saada, 2013). In other words, teachers’ religious orientations may influence their motivation to teach, their way of structuring their disciplines, their responsibilities towards their students, and their conceptualization of the purposes of education (White, 2010).

Very little is known about religious education in Arab schools in Israel. To date, most studies of Arab education have criticized civic and historical education from a critical multicultural perspective (Abu-Saad, 2006; Abu-Asba, 2001; Agbaria, 2010; Al-Haj, 1995; Makkawi, 2002; Pinson, 2007). Few studies have examined Islamic religious education in Arab schools (Agbaria, 2012; Mahajna & Kfir, 2013). According to Mahajna and Kfir (2013), religious education is a marginalized subject in the schools curriculum as students usually study one elective unit of Islamic studies (one hour per week starting from tenth until twelfth grade) compared to 3-5 units in other compulsory subjects. However, the situation has changed since 2014. In order to graduate, all Muslim students are now required to pass a matriculation (*Bagrut*) exam on Islamic religious education. For this purpose, a new curriculum has been developed. .

Agbaria (2012) finds that teaching Islam in Arab schools does not meet the needs of the Arab minority in Israel in terms of developing Muslim students’ sense of collective community or their national (Palestinian) identity (Agbaria, 2012). This, Agbaria argues, serves the state’s agenda in controlling and marginalizing Arab citizens through education for conformity, compliance, and discipline. Agbaria’s work is important but limited to analyzing the official or explicit curriculum in Arab schools whereas the current study examines the taught or perceived curriculum (Goodlad, Klein, & Tye, 1979; Joseph, 2000). The taught curriculum, according to Joseph (2000) is “what individual teachers focus upon and choose to emphasize” and often these choices “represent teachers’ knowledge, beliefs about how subjects should be taught, assumptions about students’ needs, and interests in certain subjects” (p. 5). In addition, Agbaria’s findings discuss the “what” of the curriculum and do not explore teachers' perceptions of how their practices serve their instructional goals. In other words, it does not focus on the role of teachers as possible social agents and intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) who may transform the curriculum based on their prior knowledge, their students’ needs, and their personal ideologies. The current study aims to overcome the limitations of these studies by exploring the insider perspective on Islamic religious education as perceived and articulated by the teachers themselves. Before explaining the research procedures, we will explain in the next section the meanings of religious education from an Islamic perspective.

**Conceptualizing Islamic Religious Education**

According to Islamic theory of education, the purpose of education is to nurture the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical faculties of the child (Attas, 1979). Also, the teachings of the Quran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (his sayings and deeds) constitute the primary sources of education in Islam (Halstead, 1995). Thus, succeeding in this life and the hereafter requires following the Quran and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Cook & Malkāwī, 2010).

Scholars generally agree on three major purposes of Islamic education (Cook & Malkāwī, 2010; Halstead, 1995, 2004; Waghid & Smeyers, 2014; Waghid, 2011). These are *tarbiyya*, which means to grow and to rear the spiritual and ethical elements in students’ lives in accordance with the commands of God; *ta`lim* which means to learn and receive knowledge transferred by teachers through instruction and teaching; and *ta`dib* which is the inculcating of good virtues and sound behaviors in Muslim students (Cook & Malkāwī, 2010).

Khan (1987) explains that *tarbiyya, ta`dib,* and *ta`lim* deal with the spiritual, moral, and intellectual components of Islamic education, respectively.The spiritual aspect of Islamic religious education aims to develop students’ desires and capacities to seek wisdom and justice as they are clarified in the Quran(Halstead, 1995). It means worshiping God through obeying His instructions and doing good deeds. It encourages Muslims to make the connection between their lives on earth and eternal life after death.

*Tarbiyya,* for the purpose of this study, cares more about the *Ibadat* (God’s worship) than *muamalat* (social obligations) (Zia, 2007). It is concerned with teaching Muslim students the tenets of their faith and the five pillars[[1]](#footnote-1) of Islam. It challenges discourses and practices of materialism, consumerism, and rationalism in modern life (Hussain, 2004; Merry, 2006) by connecting Muslim believers to a transcendental power that provides answers to their existential questions and shows them the meaning of prayer, forgiveness, and salvation. *Tarbiyya* aims to help Muslims achieve inner peace by “developing and refining elements of love, kindness, compassion, and selflessness” (Cook & Malkāwī, 2010, p. xxviii). In addition, *tarbiyya* emphasizes the belief in and fear of one God (Allah) who is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent.

,*Ta‘dib* encourages Muslim students to be familiar with the moral teachings of Islam and its ethical code which relies on the Quran, the *ahadith* (prophetic traditions) and the *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Educating students to become good Muslims means to follow the divine law, the teachings of the prophet, and the contributions of authoritative Muslim scholars (*ulema*) (Zia, 2007). Students study within the *ta`dib*  framework how to distinguish ‘right’ from ‘wrong’ behaviors and how to apply the recommended Islamic manners in everyday life. It is worth noting that Islam has several moral teachings on topics such as marriage and divorce, sexual relationships, economics, and catering to the poor. . Thus,  *ta’dib* focuses on the *muamalat* or the Muslim duties towards fellow humans, society, and the environment (Niyozov & Memon, 2011). Also, it addresses the civic responsibilities of Muslims towards believers of other religions, non-believers, and members of different cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, political and ethnic groups. Halstead (1995) explains that the divine law in Islam “integrates political, social, and economic life as well as individual life into a single religious worldview” (p.29).

Finally,  *ta`lim* is related to the work of teachers and how they transmit Islamic religious content and theory of knowledge (Halstead, 1995) in their classrooms. In Islam, according to Halstead (1995), “the teachers were accountable to the community not only for transmitting knowledge and for developing their students’ potential as rational beings, but also for initiating them into the moral, religious, and spiritual values which their community cherished” (p. 31). Although rote learning, memorization, and frontal teaching are very common in the Islamic world (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Sahin, 2013), some philosophers of Islam, such as Ibn Khaldun, reject these methods of teaching and recommend nurturing skills of reasoning and critical thinking (Halstead, 1995).

Furthermore, over the last decade, there has been a growing critique of rigid and monolithic interpretations of Islamic ideals and a move towards adapting Islamic teachings to the values of modern and democratic life (Kunzman, 1998; Ramadan, 2004; Safi, 2003; Saada & Gross, 2017; Selcuk, 2012; Tan, 2011; Wilkinson, 2013; Waghid & Smeyers, 2014). Selcuk (2012), for instance, argues that “theology must be suitable to improve individual intellect and appropriate for the democratization process of society” (p. 224). She adds that the *sharia* must be understood from a historical perspective, thereby allowing Muslims to contextualize Islamic teachings based on their needs and the progress of their societies. In addition, Selcuk (2012) and Wilkinson (2013) question the blind imitation of previous Muslim scholars, the literal interpretation of the Quran, and the uncritical acceptance of the Islamic cultural heritage. By the same token, Waghid (2011), and Waghid and Smeyers (2014) recommend adapting the concepts of *tarbiyya, ta`dib,* and *ta`lim* to fit the demands of cosmopolitan and democratic citizenship, of living in modern and pluralistic societies, and of upholding the ideals of truth and justice. The following conceptual model (figure 1) summarizes the different positions on Islamic religious education mentioned above.

Figure 1

This conceptual model provides teachers and practitioners of education a framework to cultivate the spiritual, moral, and intellectual faculties of their students. In other words, teachers of Islamic education may provide their students with the learning experiences that highlight different levels of *tarbiyya, ta`dib,* and *ta`lim.*

Following the work of Waghid (2011), teachers could be divided into either critical or conservative groups based on whether they allow their students to 1) question religious ideas and concepts; 2) reconsider the contributions of religious authorities and scholars; 3) reflect upon their faith and develop their own religious identities; and 4) rethink the relationship between Islam, democracy, and modernity. Teachers who are more conservative represent the fundamental or the minimalist and *salafi[[2]](#footnote-2)* attitude in Islamic education. They prefer teaching the “what” and “how” of Islam (Waghid, 2011). By contrast, teachers who are more critical represent the maximalist, progressive, liberal, and reformist outlook which engages students with the “why” of Islamic instructions.

**Research Questions and Qualitative Method**

The current study explores the Islamic religious education teachers’ perceptions of the purposes and significance of Islamic religious education in their schools. It aims to answer the following questions:

* How do Islamic education teachers in Arab high schools in Israel perceive the purposes and significance of Islamic religious education?
* Where do Arab teachers locate themselves and their teaching within the continuum of the salafi/liberal Islamic education?
* What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions the teachers want to educate their students and why are these important?
* What do Arab teachers do in order to achieve their goals of Islamic religious education?

These questions are addressed in the study by means of a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry is the most appropriate method to use since these questions focus on the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of the teachers and how they interpret their roles and their own perceptions of Islamic religious education. According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), the use of a qualitative paradigm assumes that participants’ experiences cannot be fragmented into single variables as they are influenced by “multiple factors and conditions, all of which interact, with feedback and feedforward, to shape one another” (p. 242).

The specific approach to be used for this study is the multiple case method because “case studies strive to portray ‘what it is like’ to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and thick description of participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for a situation” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 254). Case studies draw upon in-depth exploration of the causes and motivations behind participants’ beliefs and actions in their natural setting. Also, the case study methodology focuses on contemporary and real-life events, and answers questions of how and why the research participants think, interpret, or conceptualize the phenomenon under inquiry (Yin, 2009). The case study methodology focuses more on the explanatory power of doing the study than the predictive component. It helps us recognize “the complexity and embeddedness of social truths” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 256) as well as the similarities and differences among the viewpoints held by the research participants. In explaining the logic of multiple case study research, Yin (2009) clarifies that:

Each individual case study consists of a “whole” study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for the case; each case’s conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases. Both the individual cases and the multiple-case results can and should be the focus of the summary report. (p. 56)

Each teacher selected in this study is considered one case to be analyzed as one unit. The multiple case method enables detailed description of the experiences and attitudes of informants in order to identify or discover important categories or patterns of meaning across their responses, their perceptions of Islamic religious education, and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they wish to transfer to their students.

**Research Setting and Participants**

Arabs in Israel constitute a national, religious, and cultural minority (20.9% of the total population) which encompasses Muslims (81.3%), Christians (8.8%), and Druze (9.9%) (Rudnitzky, 2014). Arab citizens have their own schools and enjoy some level of cultural and religious autonomy (Abu- Asba, 2001; Maoz, 2007). Arab students learn in Arabic and their schools are run by Arab teachers and principals who are hired and supervised by the Israeli-Jewish Ministry of Education. However, Arab schools are not faith-based schools. They follow the core curriculum of the Ministry of Education, which guides the teaching of basic subjects such as math, language, and sciences as well as a religious education.

In this inquiry, five teachers are selected (3 males and 2 females) based on snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012) and literal replication (Yin, 2009, p. 54). The snowball sampling is “a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman, 2012, p. 424). Literal replication means that cases or units of analysis are chosen with the expectation that they share predictable and similar results (Yin, 2009). On this basis, we chose Arab teachers who teach Islamic religious education at the high school level and who agree to participate voluntarily in our study. For convenience considerations, we chose teachers who teach in eight different schools located at the center and north of Israel. The following table (figure 2) summarizes the background of the teachers selected. Pseudonyms are used for ethical considerations.

Figure 2

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Two in-depth interviews for 1.5 hours were conducted with each participant in his or her classroom at the end of the school day. These are semi-structured interviews with open-ended and follow up questions. The use of open-ended questions has the advantage of revealing “what is in the interviewees’ mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewees’ mind” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 57). The follow up questions are based on the dynamics of the interview, the participants’ responses, and the guidelines of our inquiry. All the interviews will be recorded and transcribed later for further analysis. The interviews included questions such as:

* What are the purposes of religious education in your opinion?
* What makes you believe what you believe about the goals of Islamic religious education?
* What is the knowledge you want your students to gain while studying in your classroom? Why?
* What are the skills you want your students to develop while studying in your classroom? Why?
* What are the dispositions/virtues you want your students to acquire while studying in your classroom?
* What are the difficulties that you face in achieving your goals of Islamic education?
* How do you appreciate the new curriculum of Islamic religious education? Does it meet your expectations? Why? Or why not?

Moreover, the materials used by informants in their classrooms were collected and analyzed, including handouts, assignment papers, exams, and the like. The analysis of these documents reveals how the teachers articulate or translate their religious and personal identities into a pedagogical framework. Drawing upon multiple sources of data achieves methodological triangulation, which reinforces the trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) of the findings. In other words, the convergence of data through using independent measures of the same phenomenon increases confidence in the “truth” of the research results. Respondents were also asked to give their validation (member check) of the accuracy and intentionality of the interview transcripts.

Data analysis followed the three stages of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006). The first step of analysis is based on an open and preliminary coding through which I read each interview transcript line by line in order to delineate units of general meaning in each interview. At the end of the open coding, the codes were reviewed to check for similarities and differences in order to figure out repeated patterns of meaning and categories. Categories “refer to such components as the conditions, causes, and consequences of a process—actions that let the researcher know if, when, how, and why, something happens” (Saldana, 2009, p. 159). In the second step, I did an axial analysis to build a logical chain of evidence, note causality, make inferences, and clarify the relationships between categories and subcategories. The purpose of the axial coding is to “strategically reassemble data that were split or fractured during the initial coding process (Saldana, 2009, p. 159). Here, the theoretical concepts described in the literature review, such as *tarbiyya* and *ta`dib,* were employed in order to describe the relationships among the categories in a theoretical and meaningful way. In the third step, I did a selective coding to clarify the key concepts and main themes of the study and subsume the main clusters of meaning into general and theoretical coherence. After writing the themes and their appropriate quotations, I compared/contrasted the results to the data once again in order to eliminate disconfirming evidence and to validate my analysis**.**

**Findings**

Interestingly, all teachers in this study report that they are satisfied with their jobs and with making Islamic religious education a compulsory subject in Arab schools. They believe that this has increased the status of the religious education in the schools and in the eyes of their students. Teachers also report that they teach a total of three classes (distributed in the tenth and eleventh grades) and complain about the limited time and the extensive material that they have to cover for the matriculation exam. One teacher (T5) explains that students enjoy learning about Islam because they feel they do not know enough about their religion and because Islam is practical and relevant to everyday life. T4 expresses his concern that not passing the final exam of the obligatory Islamic education may do harm because students may think that Islam limits their success and their social mobility. As a result, he says, “I want them to think that they are rewarded not only by grades but also in the hereafter."

Teachers also agree that a teacher should function as a role model for his/her students and be knowledgeable about Islam so that he/she can answer the students’ questions. However, our analysis reveals that most teachers apply non-liberal and non-critical Islamic religious education. The following themes depict the teachers’ attitudes and patterns of thinking.

***A’ql* (rational thinking) vs. *Naql* (transmitted knowledge) in Islamic Character Education**

In Islam, as mentioned in the conceptual model earlier, there is a debate over the place of *a’ql* (mind or reasoning) in understanding the *naql* (Islamic texts, transmitted exegesis, and materials from earlier commentators on how to understand the teachings of the Quran and the *Sunnah*[[3]](#footnote-3)). The teachers in this study highlight the importance of *naql* in teaching the morals of Islam. Some of these morals can be considered universal while others are specific to the Islamic religion. Regardless of the type of moral, teachers insist on role modeling as a key feature in their pedagogy. For instance, one teacher (T3) states, “When I teach them that smoking cigarettes is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam, a student may ask, ‘but how can you explain that another *sheikh* (religious scholar) is smoking?’.” Therefore, teachers feel that they have to model what they are teaching in their own lives.

In addition, the majority of teachers frequently use examples from the life of Prophet Muhammad in order to show the mercy, kindness, and beauty of Islam. These examples are closely related to universal values, such as showing mercy, , being tolerant, treating others the way one would like to be treated, and alleviating all kinds of human suffering. One teacher (T3) shares examples of how the Prophet treated his wives and his children in a merciful and respectful manner. She also highlights the values of honoring parents, upholding kinship and family ties, acting with integrity, showing kindness towards neighbors, and being gracious in every interaction with others. .

The use of role-modeling in education for good virtues can be described as traditional character education, non-critical *ta`dib*, and conservative moralism (Gutmann, 1987) because it emphasizes the learning of socially-accepted values through direct instruction and the use of sanctions and awards. For example, The same teacher refers to God and other spiritual elements in order to inspire students to do good deeds and avoid bad ones. She explains, “If a person did a good deed, it will be written in his record by the angels, and if he did a bad deed, they (the angels) will be waiting for him to stop or regret before they write it down …even if you decide to steal something and you change your mind, you will be awarded for this.” Another teacher (T5) requests that his students memorize some verses of the Quran and the *hadith* so that they remember and internalize good values, such as honesty and justice.

In another situation, three teachers (T3 and T1 and T4) draw a connection between personal piety and morality. One teacher asks, “Does it make sense for a person to make *wudu* (a type of [ritual purification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual_purification) by washing parts of the body) to pray afterwards and continue doing bad stuff like *namima* (tattle) and *Istigabah* (gossip)”? T4 condemns teachers who teach Islam and do not apply its principles to their lives. For example, “How does it make sense that a teacher says that a female should wear the Islamic lawful dress while she does not do so herself”?

Yet, the transmission of “a bag of virtues” (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg 1989) in character education is criticized for not developing the students’ reflective capacities, their moral reasoning, and their political efficacy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Lockwood (2001) argues, for example, that character education in schools should “address the reality of value controversy and not be limited by the view that value questions invariably have clear right answers… a view that is unrealistic, simplistic, and stifling of moral growth” (p. 60).

The use of *a`ql* (rational thinking) is more common in explaining some of the moral prohibitions and metaphysical issues in Islam. For instance, one teacher (T3) explains to her students that drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam because it impairs one’s judgment. Another teacher (T2) explains why eating pork is forbidden in Islam in this way: “Pork is full of germs and bacteria, so when you eat it, you cannot get rid of them…there are many studies confirming that … it is similar to eating a dead lamb which is forbidden for the same reason…God prevents us from eating what does harm to our bodies, health and souls.” In another situation, a student posed a question about “why drugs are *haram* in Islam when this is not explicitly written in the Quran.” The teacher (T3) explained, “That’s true, but we have *qiyas*[[4]](#footnote-4) in the Islamic *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and since drugs affect people as much as alcohol, then it is forbidden by Muslim religion scholars.” In a similar context, I asked a teacher (T2) about what happens if he/she does not have evidence to rely on from the Quran, the Sunnah or the *ijma* (a consensus of the Muslim scholars). The teacher answered, “Then we do not use the *qiyas*… I have to transfer evidence-based knowledge to my students… in fact, I have to follow the curriculum and what the curriculum says.”

In explaining the prohibition of *zena* (sexual relationship before and outside of marriage), the teacher reasons, “But why do we have to give up the value of living in a stable family… where is the beauty of relatives and friends gathering on the day of marriage… unlike people in the West who celebrate Mother’s Day and Woman’s Day, we do appreciate the value of family.” Another teacher (T5) warns students of the possible skin diseases transmitted as a result of intercourse with “people you do not know very well.” He also cautions that smoking cigarettes, science confirms, may lead to a stroke, erectile dysfunction, and arteriosclerosis. The same teacher explains the dangers of watching porn as follows: "Watching porn causes a temporary pleasure, but doing so frequently leads to addiction…what is better to be addicted or to enjoy the real thing at the right time?”

When we ask the teachers if they bring different interpretations of the Quranic verses in the classroom, they have diverse opinions. For example, T3 says, “No…what I teach is what in the textbook, which is agreed by the majority of Muslims…there is no need to get into what the different *madahibs* (schools of thought within fiqh—Islamic jurisprudence) claim because it will confuse the students.” Other teachers are willing to deal with disputed topics but only within the legitimate interpretations raised by authorized Muslim scholars (basically the four *madahibs[[5]](#footnote-5)* in Islam). For instance, one teacher (T1) says, “I bring different interpretations of the Quran and sometimes different opinions on controversial *fiqh* matters, such as singing or listening to music, the wearing of *niqab* (the veiling of the face except the eyes), women’s traveling without a *mahram* (an unmarriageable kin with whom marriage/sexual intercourse would be considered *haram* (illegal in Islam), drawing, and making of statues… but students are not qualified to disagree with the contribution of previous scholars.” .The same teacher explains that reason should not be used to generate new metaphysical or Sharia judgments. To support this opinion, he states, “Ibn Taymiyyah (a theologian who died 1328 CE) says that the role of mind is to understand the scripture (the *naql*) and to transmit this understanding forward.” Even when a teacher (T5) encourages rationalism in order to explain why listening to music is not *haram,* he does so in order to lead students to a pre-determined answer: “I tell my students that reciting the Quran properly requires knowing music notes… listening to music leads to human relaxation… and the Prophet himself did not prevent his wife Aisha from watching a musical performance.” Another teacher (T4) says that thinking beyond the four *madahibs* in Islam or the *ijtihad* (contributions) of authorized Muslim scholars leads to conflict in the Muslim society.

T2 supports this way of thinking and prefers abiding by authorized religious scholars. She states, “I encourage my students not to accept all what they hear from *sheikhs* on the internet; they have to question these people and check if they are qualified to offer *fatwa* (an opinion on a legal matter given by a recognized authority), and they have to question their use of evidence from the legal sources of Islam.” She adds that wearing gold and silk is forbidden for Muslim men. While this is in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings, yet, no additional argument or evidence is provided to explain why. Another teacher (T4) complains that “there are some students who access websites that do not recognize Allah or believe in Him, which makes my job harder in terms of transmitting the right information to these students”.

We I? argue that this transmission and past-oriented interpretation of the Islam is incompatible with critical *ta`lim* (*tarbiyya* and *ta`dib)* or with living in the modern world. Unlike this perception of religious education, there are scholars who recommend encouraging students at the high school level to think critically about the reasonability of religious claims and to develop their own religious identities (Halstead, 2014; Thiessen, 2012). Halstead (2014) calls this "secondary values education," which means “teaching and learning to go beyond the present and particular values of the home and local community and beyond the acceptance of moral authority for its own sake” (p.77).

Education through critical *tarbiyya* and *ta`dib* becomes even more critical in light of the growing religious extremism in the Middle East and the rise of ISIS and other *jihadi* movements. One teacher (T3) reports, in support of this analysis, that she was shocked to know that a student supports ISIS:

Usually, I do not talk about ISIS because it has nothing to do with Islam, but one day I heard someone in the classroom speak in support of ISIS…I asked him why he thought so and he said because ‘there is so much injustice in life’… what is painful, though, is that you do not know how many students believe in ISIS, you know, who knows what they hear and watch on YouTube or Facebook… since then, I have been talking about ISIS in my classrooms and I refute their arguments by showing the mercy of Islam, and how Prophet Muhammad treated prisoners of war and how he released them for teaching Muslims the skills of reading and writing.

This example illustrates the epistemological limitations of the *naql* (the uncritical transmission of religious knowledge) and its inadequacy in combating religious extremism.

The use of *a`ql* in explaining transcendental issues is demonstrated by fewer teachers in this research. Mostly, the teachers use the intelligent design theory (Midgley, 2007) in order to prove the existence of God and His wisdom. This theory entails that “the living things in the world are so complex that they cannot have evolved by natural selection, so they must have had a designer” (p. 26). The designer is believed to be God. For instance, one teacher (T3) says, “In order to prove the existence of God, I never use a verse from the Quran at the beginning. I say look at the sky, who can hold it this way? Can you build a chair without legs? Look at the stars and how they are fixed in the sky day and night, look at your eyes and your body and see the coherence of your creation…think of the embryo in the belly of his mom and how it is protected by the uterine wall… you have two souls in one body and after nine months you get two … imagine that there is more than one God, as Hindus believe, one for rain, one for marriage, one for love, and one for light… what’s going to happen… a lot of problems and a chaos.” Another teacher (T5) explains that *wudu* (the ritual of cleaning the body towards Muslim prayer) protects the body and keeps it healthy and claims that prayer itself releases the mind of bad electrical charges which prevents headaches. The same teacher explains that the purpose of wearing the *hijab* (the headscarf) and the *jilbab* (long and loose-fit coat or [garment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garment)) is to protect women from sexual harassment. “ Sexual harassment,” he opines, “is not happening only in Muslim societies. It is happening in Christian and Jewish ones as well. In fact, all religions want to protect women against this violent behavior.”

Nevertheless, the use of logical arguments in dealing with spiritual issues is not common. One teacher (T1) says, “Even if a student holds secular or atheist ideas, he would not share these with me… you know, because of the school’s Islamic culture and community, but if he brings these issues up, I will have to engage so as not to impact other students… personally, I will never talk about these topics in my classroom.” T2 shared another incident: “Students asked me if God has already determined before we were born who was going to be a Muslim and who was going to be an infidel, then why does He judge us now?” Her response is to remind students that people can still make up their minds and be responsible for their decisions. The same teacher adds that her students also ask, “Why would God punish the Jewish people for practicing a religion that does not follow the true Torah? There are nice Jews who help us… there are Jewish doctors who save our lives, so why would God punish them”? “If I see that the discussion is going so deep,” she responds, “I say let us stop at this point since we do not have the right to debate or judge these matters”

T1’s and T2’s responses do not meet the demands of the critical *tarbiyya* becausethey silence students’ epistemic curiosity regarding legitimate metaphysical and philosophical questions. One possible implication of this finding is the need for Islamic religion teachers who are qualified to deal with alternative ideologies of morality and spirituality in a confident and sophisticated manner. Thinking beyond the Islamic system of knowledge and dealing with alternative ways of knowing and being have the potential to improve students’ cognitive, moral, and religious reasoning (Alexander, 2016b; Halstead, 2014, Saada, 2015; Tan, 2008, 2014). The following theme shows the limited and limiting understanding of diversity and multiculturalism in Islamic religious education.

**Difference as *Fitnah* and the Missing Voice of Intellectual/Religious Pluralism**

The missing point in teachers’ responses is the civic purpose of religious education (Feinberg, 2006; Saada & Gross, 2017; Selcuk, 2012; Thiessen, 2012) and its possible contribution to living in a democratic and multicultural society. The teachers, for instance, do not see any need to learn about other sects or traditions in Islam or to learn about the worldviews of religious or non-religious people. One teacher (T1) mentions that he rejects the celebration of Christmas by Muslims and condemns this behavior in front of his students. Also, he does not believe in teaching about other religions because “in the past one scholar said neither a Muslim is going to become a Christian nor a Christian is going to become a Muslim… so why teach them about other religions… this is not necessary.” In addition, the same teacher rejects the idea of inter-religious dialogue because he believes that there is a deep contradiction between religions at the creed level. The Quran says, he argues, “People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: That we shall serve none but Allah and shall associate none with Him in His Divinity and that some of us will not take others as lords other than Allah” (3:64).

Another teacher (T3) says that she teaches about other religions only in response to students’ questions. She says, “Muslims are the only people who believe in Christianity and in Judaism whereas Jews believe in Moses and not in Jesus or Muhammad, and Christians believe in Moses and not in Prophet Muhammad… we believe in both… even the ‘true’ and old holy books of Christians and Jews maintain that Muhammad is the last prophet.” She continues, “Even logically, it does not make sense to believe in Jesus as a god and as a son at the same time.” She argues that the main purpose of the different religions is to refer to the oneness of God: “The Quran is the final holy book and it summarizes and expands the older holy books.” T3 adds that she wants her students to be engaged in interfaith dialogue, but she wants them first to be able to talk about and defend their own religion.

This apologetic perception of Islam, we argue, may lead to religionism (Hull, 2000), which entails promoting a puritanical conception of one religion based on prejudice against other religions. Hull (2000, p. 76) explains, “The identity which is fostered by religionism depends upon rejection and exclusion. We are better than they. We are orthodox; they are infidel. We are believers; they are unbelievers. We are right; they are wrong. The other is identified as the pagan, the heathen, the alien, the stranger, the invader, the one who threatens us and our way of life.” Another teacher (T2) teaches about other religions from an Islamic perspective: “We are (Muslims) obliged to protect our own religion… I tell my students that if you cannot convince believers of other religions that Islam is right, then you have to end the debate to avoid being swayed by their position.”

Only one teacher (T5) in this study supports the teaching of other religions in Islamic education. He prefers to concentrate on the common elements between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, arguing that they are similar in terms of the creed (coming from the same God) and different in their moral instructions (in order to meet the needs of people living in different time periods). He adds that all religions talk about marriage and divorce, prohibit drinking alcohol, and uphold values of tolerance, equality, integrity and justice. He points out, “They all come from the same origin and lead to the same end (salvation in the hereafter) … why talk about the differences… the purpose is to reduce violence, to achieve mutual understanding, and to avoid destroying our society.”

Not teaching about alternative conceptions of morality and/or spirituality in the multi-faith Israeli society may cause religious illiteracy, which may lead to hate crimes, antagonism, and violence (Moore, 2010). Furthermore, a quick look at ethno-religious conflicts in Muslim societies in the Middle East confirms this analysis. Critical scholars of religious education recommend developing students’ intelligent consumption of religious knowledge or intelligent spirituality (Alexander, 2016b). This means the ability to think beyond the framework of a particular faith community and to challenge the clergy who may abuse their power or privilege in the name of Islam. Others discuss the significance of developing the students’ informed empathy towards other religions and secular worldviews (Nord & Haynes, 1998; Saada & Gross, 2017). In addition, some scholars reject the indoctrinating nature of the exclusivist understanding of religion (Saada & Gross, 2017) because it does not meet the basic conditions of moral agency: “that people have the freedom to choose a life path [or an ethical vision] within reasonable limits, the intelligence to tell the difference between right and wrong according to such a path, and the capacity to err in the choices that they make according to the life they have chosen” (Alexander, 2016b, p. 14-15). Finally, they argue that not exposing the students to alternative communities of ethical practice threatens the liberal values of public education, including personal autonomy, equality of respect, and rationality (Feinberg, 2006; Halstead, 1996; Tan, 2008). Teachers may opt to avoid the problem of relativism, but they need to do so by examining the validity of the different religious arguments and letting their students decide for themselves.

Similarly, all teachers but one see no need to teach about the different intellectual traditions within Islam (Ala`wa, 2016) or to deal with contemporary events in Israel or the Islamic world. As one teacher claims, “There are many other important things to learn about Islam” and “who has time to deal with other traditions?” In addition, all teachers believe that teaching about other traditions may lead to confusion and conflict among students and ultimately to *fitnah* (a state of confusion, dissent, or chaos within the Muslim community) (Leaman & Ali, 2008, p. 39) in the Islamic community. One teacher (T4) argues, “I cannot provide an answer to controversial contemporary issues such as the war in Syria… or the divide in the Islamic movement regarding participation in the Israeli elections… this leads to *fitnah*… I avoid dialectical questions in my teaching because they may lead to a rift in the Muslim society…in order to prevent the *fitnah,* you do not talk about these issues.” Later on, this teacher explained that he can teach what is known or agreed upon by the Muslim scholars who follow the Islamic methodology of religious reasoning (*ijtihad*) and that students may disagree with what is legitimately debated in Islam. Interestingly, the same teacher agrees with the contextualization of halal and *haram*[[6]](#footnote-6) when it comes to new *fatwas* by scholars living in non-Islamic countries. This is because, he argues, not all Muslims live in societies where they can follow or apply the Islamic teachings of Sharia. He would also like the textbook to include the Islamic perspective on contemporary issues, such as car insurance, cloning, democracy and governance. He adds, “We should take the idea of democracy and analyze it, we should investigate whether Islamic governance includes elements of democracy under a different name…we should evaluate the idea of democracy according to the Islamic Sharia…and take what works for us and reject what does not.”

Another teacher (T3) explains, “There are major differences between the Sunni[[7]](#footnote-7) and the Shi`a creeds; they believe that God chose Ali to be the prophet and Gabriel (the angel) missed the point by choosing Prophet Muhammad… if we are so different about this basic thing, can you imagine the differences about other things… also they say bad things about the Prophet’s wife Aisha, and his companions Umar and Uthman… If students learn about the Shi`a, they would hate them.” The same teacher adds that she does not support the politicization of Islam because, “I believe in understanding Islam as it is revealed by God; it is a convenient and not a tough religion; the Islamic Sharia is comprehensible and Islam shouldn’t be connected to a specific *sheikh*, stream or movement.” Similarly, (T5) argues that he does not teach about different intellectual traditions in Islam unless he is asked by his students. He believes that students may accept the different interpretations of Islam as long as they meet the agreed instructions and principles of the Islamic Sharia.

Another teacher (T1) says, “I do not think that students at this age are able to learn about other Islamic traditions… If students ask about the Shi`a, I answer based on my own religious creed (Sunni)…I show the Sunni evidence that the Shi`a are wrong … I do not think schools should be a playground to combat the Shi`a, but if students ask, I tell them why Shi`as are wrong in their claims against Umar and Abu Baker (the Prophet Muhammad’s companions) … I do not think Shi`as belong to Islam because they believe in a different religion.” Another teacher (T4) contends that the current events in Syria and the killing of Sunni Muslims by the Shi`a have revealed their egoistic interests and their efforts to undermine Islam by re-establishing the pre-Islamic Persian nation. Another teacher (T2) says, “It is important to teach them the basic principles of Islam… they may learn and compare other streams of Islam in higher education… they have to have an absolute faith in the Sunni tradition and only afterwards they may learn about other schools of thought.” By the same token, (T5) says that he avoids dealing with current and perhaps controversial issues, such as the outlawing of the northern faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel, because this may lead to distracting students from their goals. He adds, “I say you do not need to take a position on these matters because in either case you will have enemies.”

Viewing difference as a deficit represents a reductionist, depoliticized, essentialised, and non-liberal conception of Islamic civilization, identity, and intellectual heritage. By so doing, we argue, students will miss the opportunity to exercise critical thinking about the validity and consistency of truth claims and to reflect upon their own beliefs and convictions. However,, Tan (2008) and Halstead (2014) highlight the significance of allowing students to think critically from within their religious traditions. A critique from within occurs when students are exposed to the different interpretations of the religious text and its historical and contextual implications. This approach balances rootedness (respect for tradition) with openness in Islamic religious education (Tan 2008). When students are exposed to competing interpretations of Islamic teachings, they are, in fact, encouraged to exercise what Tan (2014) calls a “weak rationality.” This means being engaged in critical reflection, filtering, evaluating, analyzing, appraising, and judging the claims of religion scholars and authorities and revising their own religiosity if necessary.

The idea of *fitnah* and the view of intellectual diversity as a threat to the Sunni tradition and the truth of Islam in Muslim-majority societies (Haddad, 1995) do not meet the demands of equality of respect, mutual understanding, and tolerance in deliberative democracy. The depoliticizing of Islam and the search for authentic identity reflect the Salafi ideology in Islam and this may silence alternative ways of knowing and of living according to Islam. In reality, Islam has been politicized, like many other religions (Moore, 2010). The rise of political Islam in Middle Eastern societies (Ayoob, 2008) as well as the active engagement of the Islamic movement in the local politics confirm this analysis.

Furthermore, dialogical dealing with controversy is one of the features of deliberative democracy and of the requirements of living in a multicultural and multi-faith society (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). Educationally, dealing with controversial issues in Islam through a critical pedagogy of *tarbiyya* and *ta`dib* will probably enhance students’ critical self-reflection, their skills of perspective taking, and their tolerance towards different opinions. It will also enhance their cognitive reasoning, epistemic curiosity, problem solving capacities, collecting and evaluating data skills, and comparing/contrasting different attitudes (Avery, 2002; Avery & Simmons, 2013; Gutmann, 1987; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Parker, 2003).

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study show the dominance of non-liberal and non-critical conceptions of Islamic education in Arab high schools in Israel. The first theme shows that teachers rely on traditional character education, which highlights obedience to Islamic law as a way for achieving the proper meaning of the good life. Teachers believe that there is a bag of virtues that should be transmitted to their students so that they become good believers and good people in their society. Even when the *a`ql* (rational thinking) is used, it aims to confirm the teachings of Islam. This kind of defensive rationality confirms the confessional nature of Islamic education. No other competing conceptions of morality are discussed and this, we believe, delimits the students' capacities of moral reasoning and the conduction of ethical dialogue with fellow (non-Muslim) citizens in the Israeli multicultural and multi-faith society.

The second theme shows that most teachers reject teaching about other religions or dealing with diversity within the Islamic intellectual heritage. This, as we have argued earlier, may lead to religionism and to religious illiteracy, which is a recipe for misunderstandings and possible tensions between Muslims and believers of other religions. When teachers try to deal with controversial issues or modern problems that Muslims face, they restrict themselves to the contribution of Muslim authorities. This makes us question the potential of Islamic education in developing the students' personal autonomy and their independent thinking. Education through deep immersion in the stories and practices of Islam might be appropriate for students at the elementary level where they acquire primary cultural and moral standards to establish their self-definition and build their basic autonomous being (Halstead, 2014). Alexander maintains that "the very idea of pursuing a moral life means appealing to standards by which to measure the worth of that life" (Alexander, 2000, p. 306). Yet, this religious initiation is inadequate at the high school level where students are expected to become intelligent consumers of their own religions; to develop as tolerant citizens of multiple conceptions of the good; and to exercise well-informed life choices and moral decisions.

One possible implication of these results is that more attention should be paid to preparing Islamic education teachers who are able to advocate for informed empathy towards believers of other religions, for thinking critically about religious authorities and interpretations, and for recognizing the existence of alternative and legitimate conceptions of the common good and the righteous life. Education through moral reasoning as well as reflective and dialogical thinking is crucial for living in a democratic and multi-faith society.

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1. The performance of prayer five times a day, fasting in the month of *Ramadan*, giving alms to the poor (*zakat*), believing that there is one god (Allah) and that Prophet Muhammad his messenger, and performing the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Makkah once in a lifetime (Waghid, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Salafism is the more conservative tradition of Islam. It supports literal and exclusivist interpretation of the Quran, the *hadith*, and Islamic law (Al-Jabri, 1996; Kecia & Leaman, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sunnah means “normal practice, customary procedure or action, or norm sanctioned by tradition (Leaman & Ali, 2008, p. 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Qiyas* is a fourth source for legal interpretation in Islam (after the Quran, the *hadith* and the *Ijma* (consensus of religion scholars). It means a personal opinion of a Muslim scholar—who knows and the Quran and *hadith* very well—it is "based upon making an analogy between a case in the Quran or Sunna and a newly arisen case" (Jackson, 2006, p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In Islam there are four major *madahibs* or schools of legal thinking. These are the Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Maliki jurists (Leaman and Ali, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The teacher here is referring to students who bring fatwas legitimizing the Reba (interest) in non-Muslim societies. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the world’s Muslims identify as Sunni (Leaman and Ali, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)