Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools

This timely book focuses on the central issues and questions that emerge in relation to the teaching and learning of Islam in confessional and constructivist religious education. Considering the consequences of a lack of diversity in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, the text also explores the challenges faced by Muslim pupils in connection with secularism and radical Islam.

Through rich analysis of research carried out across Muslim and public secondary schools in the UK, this book develops a meaningful pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education. In particular, the volume investigates the benefits of Critical Religious Education and Variation Theory frameworks on students' learning in religious education classrooms and illustrates how these didactic frameworks can help ameliorate distinct problems seen across Islamic Religious Education. Chapters identify discrete pedagogical issues that arise in the confessional and constructivist approaches to Islamic Education, such as students' difficulties in relating to concept of Islam and progressive approaches taken in public schools. In addressing these, the text proposes a new theoretical and pedagogical approach to the teaching of Islam, which draws on the philosophy of Critical Realism, the theories of Critical Religious Education, and Variation Theory.

This book will be of great interest to postgraduate students, research scholars and academics in the fields of religion and education, and Islamic studies. In addition, it will be of interest to social equity professionals and public policy decision makers.

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Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools

The Role of Critical Religious Education and Variation Theory

Ayse Demirel Ucan

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To my husband, Serkan, and daughter, Hanne Nisan

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Series Editor Foreword

The opening years of the 21st century brought increased attention to religion as an important dimension of culture and politics. Early in this period, the dramatic multi-pronged attacks of 11th September, 2001 came as a jolting reminder of the potential for violent action that can have basis in religious motivations. Over the same period, we came to see an increase in religiously motivated activity in politics. In the US, we see this in the evolution from the Moral Majority movement that emerged as a force in the late 1970s as the beginning of the New Religious Right. On further reflection, however, we can see the involvement of religion extending much further back as a fundamental part of our social organisation rather than a new or emerging phenomenon. We need only recall the religious wars of early modern Europe through to the contentious development of US church and state relations as evidence of the long-standing role religion has played as a source of competing values and beliefs. We also recognise religion as a positive source of motivation for social action seen in the 19th century abolitionist movement, the social gospel and its humanitarian contributions, and the civil rights movement to name a few. That said, there has indeed been a significant upturn in research and scholarship across many disciplines relative to the study of religion since the first decade of the 21st century. This is particularly the case in the area of the interplay of education and religion.

While religious education—study *toward formation* in a particular faith tradition—has been with us for millennia, religion education—study *about* religion as an academic subject apart from theology—is more recent. Whereas theology departments proceeded from religious assumptions aiming to promulgate a faith tradition, the religious studies field emerged as a discipline that sought to bring a more objective social scientific approach to the study of religion. The origins of this approach date back to the European research centres that influenced US scholars beginning in the 18th century. The formalisation of this trend, however, is a fairly recent phenomenon, as illustrated by the 1949 formation of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion with its own scholarly journal and the creation of religious studies departments across the US in the

wake of the US Supreme Court decision in 1963 that allowed teaching *about* religion (rather than *for*) in public education institutions. It was also that same year that the American Academy of Religion was born out of a group of scholars that had since 1909 been meeting under various names related to biblical studies.

It is out of this relatively recent increase in scholarly attention to religion and education that this book series has emerged. Routledge Publishers has long been an important presence in the fields of both religion and of education. It seemed like a natural step to introduce a book series focused particularly on Research in Religion and Education. My appreciation extends to Max Novick for guiding this series into being and now to Elsbeth Wright, for continuing Routledge's oversight.

In this 15th book in the series, Dr. Ayse Demirel Ucan's *Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools* argues for a new theoretical and pedagogical approach to teaching about the Islamic faith tradition—one that is more nuanced, honouring adherents' truth commitments and contributing to their identity development. It is not just an approach that goes beyond the essentialist aims of basic literacy—names, dates, and beliefs—but one that enables a teaching environment in which the truth claims of Islam may be taken, with integrity, into the realm of not only comparative religion education, but in confronting the challenges of Western secular values. This is an important contribution to the work of religion education and literacy. The initial basic approaches of teaching *for* (religious formation) and teaching *about* (academic) religion (or whether they may be called sectarian and secular, confessional and non-confessional) have attempted to establish distinctive rationale, purposes, and methods for each kind of education. What Dr. Demirel Ucan proposes takes religion education and literacy to another level. Another book by P. Jesse Rine, coming later in this series, makes a similar argument for Christianity from a different philosophical base.

Dr. Demirel Ucan is critical of what she calls a liberal/constructivist approach that she argues has deeply influenced teaching about Islam in multi-faith, multicultural contexts in the United Kingdom, with the consequent disregarding of truth claims in the interest of "suppressing potential conflict among students from diverse backgrounds." Using Critical Realism and Variation Theory employed in a learning study model, Dr. Demirel Ucan proposes and illustrates a new approach to Islamic Religious Education (IRE).

Michael D. Waggoner
Series Editor
Research in Religion & Education

Credits Page

Excerpts from the article "Improving the pedagogy of Islamic religious education through an application of critical religious education, variation theory and the learning study model" in *British Journal of Religious Education* (2019) by Ayse Demirel Ucan & Andrew Wright. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com).

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I owe immense thanks to the Ministry of Education of Turkey for sponsoring my doctoral study, from which this book is derived. Without them I might not have been able to have this experience in the first place. My special thanks go to the teachers and students whose participation in this research provided me with insightful and useful information that contributed to the successful completion of this work.

I conclude with special thanks to my family and friends for their unconditional love, continuous support, and for keeping me sane during my studies. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my parents who have always supported me throughout my studies. Most importantly, I wish to express my deepest thanks and love to my husband, Serkan, and my lovely daughter, Hanne Nisan, for bringing happiness to my life and for always being there. Their love, understanding, support, and encouragement will always mean the most to me.

1 Introduction

Young Muslims around the world are grappling with clarifying their religious identities in the globalised world, now more than any time in the past. They have to face the dilemmas of modern life, which sometimes seem contrary to—or are often absent from—the classical Islamic education. Moreover, regardless of the country or nation they belong to, they are surrounded by diverse religious and secular worldviews due to constant changes in the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of contemporary societies. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in both Muslim and Western secular contexts does not seem to be catching up with or appear suitable for addressing the ever changing religious and pedagogical needs of modern young Muslims.

As a Turkish researcher and having taught religious studies to young Muslim girls in Turkey, I have been able to closely observe the problems and challenges of IRE in practice and have become particularly sensitive to pupil's questions and dilemmas about their faith and practices. Living in a Muslim country, yet surrounded by Western-secular values, they are struggling to identify their relation to God and to the world in general. However, IRE as it is currently practiced has hardly moved away from the classical rote learning that was once the methodology adopted in the madrasas of the medieval era in the Muslim world. Moreover, while IRE holds fast to the ultimate truth claims of Islam that were laid down in the Qur'an and Sunnah, it fails to engage with the diverse historical, sectarian, and cultural understandings of the Islamic scripture, which has a significant influence on contemporary Muslims' identity formation. Furthermore, it does not enable learners to engage with religious phenomena in an attentive, intelligent, and reasonable manner. These issues motivated me into pursuing this research. In order to address these problems, this book offers a new theoretical and pedagogical framework for IRE based on the philosophy of Critical Realism (CR), and the theories of Critical Religious Education (CRE) and Variation Theory (VT).

The focus of this study is IRE, explored with references to teaching of Islam in Muslim-faith and non-confessional community schools in the UK, in Turkish formal education, and some practices in Europe such as

in Finland and Sweden. The UK and Turkey have been particularly taken into consideration in order to give a better insight into IRE in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Before presenting the aim and structure of this book, the following sections discuss the issues regarding teaching and learning of Islam in confessional and constructivist RE as well as absence of diversity in the IRE curriculum. Moreover, the challenges faced by Muslim pupils regarding the issues of secularism and radical, fundamental Islam are addressed throughout the sections.

1.1 Problems of Teaching Islam in Confessional and Constructivist Religious Education

Confessional IRE refers to teaching according to Islam. The content and resources of IRE are mainly based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Learners are trained to acquire knowledge not merely for intellectual and worldly purposes, but more importantly, for evolving as rational and righteous beings who relate and submit to the will of God in accordance with His teachings (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979; Halstead, 1995). In that sense, knowledge is not an end in itself, but rather means to reach the reality and knowledge of God. Accordingly, in Islam, all knowledge is believed to come from God and thus functions to raise awareness of Him and His relation to the world and human beings (Qutb, 1979). "The pursuit of knowledge should stimulate the moral and spiritual consciousness of the student and lead to faith (iman), virtuous action (amal salih) and certainty (yaqin), which are constantly emphasized in the Qur'an" (Halstead, 2004, p. 525).

The aims of IRE can be examined in terms of different levels. At the individual level, it provides young people with religious and spiritual guidance by which they are expected to form an Islamic identity consisting of faith, virtuous action, and morality. This form of education is called as *tarbiyah* in Arabic and refers to Islamic education in general, aiming to "facilitate growth by guiding and attending to the needs of the learner in the hope of bringing about a balanced and faithful personality" (Sahin, 2013, p. 183). Thus, its aim is "not to cram the pupil's minds with facts but to prepare them for a life of purity and sincerity" (Badawi, 1979, p. 110). Yet, IRE is not only focussed on individual development, but also seen as a means for social integration and belonging. The word *ummah* pertains to a religious community bound by Islamic faith and religious and cultural traditions.

Confessional RE differs from liberal, constructivist RE on many levels. Firstly, there is a stark difference between the way knowledge is acquired in confessional approach and the way it is done in constructivist approach. Influenced by liberalism, in constructivist RE knowledge is constructed; it is contextual and fallible. Confessional RE, on the other hand, adopts a realistic take on the acquisition of knowledge claiming that the reality

of the world exists regardless of human interest and knowledge. Learners are believed to be "discoverers who build copies or replicas of reality in their minds" (Bodner, 1986, p. 3). In confessional IRE, all knowledge comes from God, while human beings are only expected to receive and interpret this knowledge (Al-Attas, 1979). Therefore, knowledge is imparted to students in order to cultivate faith. The methodology of IRE is prescriptive in nature, with the Qur'anic verses, hadith, and the scholarly interpretations of these being used to explain content. For instance, in Turkey, the focus of RE has been Qur'an centred and content oriented, and the identification of content is grounded in the main Islamic sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah (MEB, 2010; Zengin, 2013).

Influenced by the classical madrasa tradition, the pedagogy of IRE has been based on listening, rote memorisation, and regurgitation, a method that still remains an influential mode of delivery in many Muslim countries (Talbani, 1996). The majority of IRE teachers, who come from a confessional background, are perceived as the deliverers of religious knowledge and respected authorities. They usually adopt teacher-centred/subject-matter focused strategies in their teaching and are not usually open to interactive and challenging teaching and learning methods (Selçuk & Valk, 2012). Their pedagogic focus is mainly on the delivery and transmission of knowledge regarding Islamic beliefs and practices. As such, they tend to view learning as acquiring and accumulation of information, which mostly involves memorisation, recall, and reproduction processes. Accordingly, students' prior knowledge is not considered important; they are simply expected to learn pre-established facts, but not given any real chance to challenge these or to reconcile them with their prior knowledge and understanding of the learning subjects. Therefore, they are not able to develop an intelligent and mature faith understanding. However, the Qur'anic discourse itself embraces a learner-centred strategy that aims to lead the listeners to critically reflect on religious issues, moral issues, and their life choices, so that "they engage with a process of self-transformation" (Sahin, 2013, p. 181). For instance, the Prophet was led through the Qur'anic guidance to reflect on his life and to experience psychological and spiritual transformation (Sahin, 2013). The Qur'anic methodology—including the arrangement of verses, the use of storytelling method, considering the learners' personal qualities and needs, and adaptation of a critical, reflective discourse—can be seen as learner-centred (Sahin, 2013). The same strategy was followed by the Prophet and the early Islamic scholars as well. However, over time, the classical Islamic education grew distant from its primal practices, came to constitute the well-known madrasa tradition and influenced deeply the current IRE practices in many Muslim contexts.

In general, there is a tendency of shifting from confessional to liberal RE in Europe (Rissanen, 2012). However, it has been argued that the IRE curriculum for minorities in the Western countries still represents a

confessional character. It is because there is a demand for Islamic education in Western countries, which accelerated recently due to the increasing number of Muslim pupils. For instance, in Finland Muslim students are entitled to receive RE according to Islam. The first IRE curriculum, founded in 1995, was claimed to be confessional as it merely included Islamic theology and practices aiming to raise committed Muslim pupils (Sakaranaho, 2006). In the recent IRE curriculum, the goal is still to strengthen the Islamic identity of pupils. The difference might be the adoption of constructivist learning theory in teaching Islam as well as "the overt emphasis on tolerance" for other religions and worldviews (Sakaranaho, 2006, p. 361).

The confessional way of teaching and learning had been useful and sufficient in the past since the authoritative body of knowledge was alive and responding to the problems of Muslims (Kaymakcan, 2007). However, it does not meet the needs and expectations of young Muslims today due to it being so deeply instilled in the traditional-historical form of Islam (Selçuk & Valk, 2012). Over and above this, it does not include inter- and intra-religious as well as socio-cultural diversity within the Islamic community. Simply delivering facts and information about Islam does not help these students to form a well-informed and dynamic Islamic identity. IRE is required to promote a deeper understanding of Islamic principles, while at the same time developing the minds of the young by introducing them to the diverse perspectives around them (Thobani, 2007). Hence, it is argued that the pedagogy of confessional IRE generates an appreciation of the Qur'anic knowledge but fails to provide a critical and attentive learning environment in which pupils will be able to develop a deeper discernment of their faith (Selçuk & Valk, 2012). Consequently, there appears an urgent need for young Muslims to be well educated so as to make sense of their religious, spiritual, and moral lives in the contemporary world.

The teaching of Islam in constructivist contexts gives rise to some significant problems as well. The focus of constructivist RE is on the individuality of learners' experiences and their autonomy in creating meaningful learning for themselves (Grimmit, 2000). Consequently, teachers of RE who adopt a constructivist approach to their teaching, are mainly concerned with adopting student-centred teaching strategies through which they aim to improve students' cognitive reasoning skills and to provide them with the opportunities to construct their own understanding. A liberal/constructivist approach has deeply influenced teaching of Islam in the multi-faith and multi-cultural RE classrooms in the UK, through the learning 'about' and learning 'from' religion targets. The main goal of this approach has been to encourage students to create their own accounts of religious phenomena so as to achieve meaningful learning. It is also aimed to fulfil learners' personal development and develop social cohesion. Therefore, students are highly encouraged to

be empathetic, tolerant, and appreciative of different religious and non-religious worldviews (Barnes, 2001). Similarly, although the goal of the curriculum for Islam in Finland is described primarily to be strengthening students' Islamic identity, it is also aimed at helping students encounter diversity in the classrooms (Rissanen, 2012).

However, such an approach to RE is criticised for disregarding the ultimate truth claims of religions in order to avoid and suppress any conflict among students from diverse backgrounds. With regards to teaching of Islam, this results in Muslim pupils gaining only superficial and common knowledge about their faith, whilst also limiting the opportunity of critically engaging with other faith traditions. For instance, in Norway, Islam is taught along with other religious traditions and secular worldviews in the same compulsory module. The curriculum mostly represents Christianity as the major religion in the country. Therefore, Islam is taught only in a simplistic way, including information about basic Islamic faith issues, practices, and symbols (Gelici, 2018). Another problem with teaching Islam in constructivist contexts, particularly in Western countries, is the way this religion is portrayed within the curriculum. In Norway, the RE textbooks have been reported to include controversial theological discussions and historical facts regarding Islam, such as issues related to women and jihad, while this is not the case for other religious traditions. For instance, when discussing the relationship between radicalism, fanaticism, and religion, examples are only given from Islam, as in the example of ISIS (Gelici, 2018).

Influenced by the Western-liberal tradition, the constructivist, pluralistic approach has been also adopted as the pedagogical approach in Turkish RE since the 2000s. The idea was that in a democratic and secular society RE should have inclusive and pluralistic characteristics, thus mirroring the religious, denominational, and cultural diversity in the country, in order to empower "religious citizenship development" (Genç, ter Avest, Miedema, & Westerman, 2012, p. 292). With the new curriculum proposed in 2000s, it aimed to move away from the traditional denominational Islamic education that was simply based on delivering Islamic knowledge and beliefs to pupils towards a modern, constructivist, and pluralistic approach (Ev, 2010). The new programme had promoted the values of tolerance, critical thinking, and reflection on traditional Islamic sources and references were provided from other holy books regarding ethical matters (Kaymakcan, 2002). However, other religions were only taught on a basic level such that students would acquire basic academic knowledge about them (Genç, ter Avest, Miedema, & Westerman, 2012). It is argued that despite adopting a constructivist, learner-centred approach in theory, due to some practicalities, such as lack of necessary teacher qualifications and an inadequate curriculum, RE could not move away from the traditional, teacher-centred approach (Buyrukcu, 2006; Ev, 2010). The majority of RE teachers were reported as not having

sufficient knowledge about the objectives of the constructivist approach and depending mainly upon direct teaching methods (Kaymakcan, 2009). Moreover, the curriculum does not submit a proof of having included satisfactory information on religious and denominational differences in the content (Kaymakcan, 2007).

Similar to confessional IRE, constructivist IRE is limited too, in addressing the problems of young Muslims. The tendency of liberal constructivist RE to view all religious perspectives as equally valid manifestations of the same truth gives rise to a serious problem for Muslim minorities in Western countries (Yousif, 2000). Moreover, this approach emphasises the cultural representations and individual experiences of believers, which in turn effectively discredits the ontological reality of religious phenomena as learning is reduced to self-expression deprived of the transformative potential of ontological reality (Wright, 2016). Personal autonomy in decision making and critical thinking skills become essential during the process of learning. That being so, a focus on mere methodology that does not consider content and its relation to the learner is inadequate in generating an engaging and transformative learning environment for students. Consequently, once again, we are facing a RE that is not engaging students with complicated and diverse religious understandings (Wright, 2016). Students do not get the real chance to negotiate and discuss the contrasting truth claims of Islam and other traditions in the classroom. However, it is argued that RE should provide the learners with opportunities to deal with diverse, contested religious truth claims, because "avoiding controversial issues only exacerbates the inevitable conflicts that will surface in a diverse and free society" (Moore, 2006, p. 279). Additionally, such RE that embraces liberal-secular values and acknowledges religious truth claims as divisive to the unity of society might not be sufficient for Muslim children to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their faith as desired by their parents and the Muslim community. This situation already creates a high demand from Muslim parents for a good quality Islamic education, as has happened in the UK (Ipgrave, Miller, & Hopkins, 2010). Similarly, in Sweden, Muslim parents are not satisfied with the secularised RE lessons in which students only learn facts about Islam, but rather request confessional IRE lessons whereby students are educated according to Islamic norms and values (Berglund, 2010).

The problem with the two aforementioned approaches to IRE is that they ignore the relationship between the absolute and transcendent reality of religious phenomena and the contingent and relative nature of value judgments regarding them. This leads to either an accumulation of given knowledge devoid of learners' own perspectives, or construction of knowledge against the transcendental reality of phenomena, both away from enabling learners to pursue a more complex and intelligent account of these phenomena in relation to the objective reality (Wright, 2016).

1.2 Absence of Diversity in the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum

Absence of diverse religious understandings within the curriculum is another problem of the current IRE. One possible reason for this, amongst others, is claimed to be the political motivations underlying the designing of IRE curriculum and textbooks. That is, some contend that protecting national unity and identity by inspecting ethnic and sectarian divisions has become a justification for states to present Islam in a contained and controlled way in the official curriculum (Altan, 2003; Thobani, 2007). The aim thus becomes to create "a single, unified Muslim identity through the suppressing of national, ethnic, and denominational differences of the students" (Thobani, 2011, p. 540). For example, it is argued that in Turkey, the purpose of RE is to foster a monoculture that emphasises the Turkish culture and Turkish Islam (Özdalga, 1999), one that is in harmony with the laic nature of the state, and is against extremism and radicalisation (Leirvik, 2004; Kaplan, 2006). In the end, a monolithic understanding of Islam results in the non-orthodox interpretations being perceived as deviant as well as culturally and historically formulated (Thobani, 2011).

Generally speaking, when teaching Islam, diversity within Islam as well as between Islam and other religious traditions are not sufficiently emphasised in the RE curriculum and textbooks, both in the confessional and constructivist contexts. For example, in the UK, in non-denominational schools, Islam is taught through a focus on the commonality of the world religions, while freedom of expression, respect, and tolerance for differences are the key themes that emerge in order to contribute to social cohesion (Thobani, 2011; Panjwani, 2005). Another example could be Finland, where the current IRE curriculum focuses on the idea of universal Islam, eliminating the diversity within the Islamic tradition. The teachers of IRE there also avoid dealing with the diversity of interpretations regarding Islam (Sakaranaho, 2006). In a similar vein, although the IRE curriculum and textbooks in Muslim contexts are based on the main teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, they mostly represent the distinctive identity and practices of the mainstream Sunni tradition. Other religious divisions, such as the Shi'a and Sufi traditions are not given any considerable attention or coverage in order to avoid any conflict and intolerance amongst students. To illustrate, in Turkey, the Sunni-Hanafi school, the most common tradition in the country, has been adopted as the "official standard interpretation" when teaching Islam in public schools (Özdalga, 1999, p. 434; Aşlamaci & Kaymakcan, 2016). This is mostly to do with the political, nationalist motivations just stated above, yet at the same time the aim was to follow a general religious instruction so that RE would not promote a controversial version of Islam and would avoid generating a biased attitude towards one group over another. According

to Özdalga (1999), this standardisation of RE has resulted in the content becoming repetitive throughout primary and secondary education, while having undergone only insignificant changes.

Ignoring inter- and intra-religious diversity in the curriculum does not help achieving a comprehensive, inclusive IRE for all, for it requires "a structure within which differences can meet, listen to and learn from each other" (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 117). As known from the reality of all religions, one cannot claim that there is only one form of Islam that is practised by all Muslims around the world in the same way (Arkoun, 2006). Quite the contrary, in fact there are several different interpretations within Islam with regard to theology, law, and religious practices—for example the Sunni and Shi'a divisions—as well as differences within these traditions, such as the Wahhabi and Sufi schools of thought within the Sunni tradition, or the Alawis as a branch of the Shi'a. There is also vast ethnic, political, socio-economic, and cultural diversity. Furthermore, often these diverse groups do not feel that they are represented in the curriculum and textbooks, and call for fair representation of their religious identities. For example, some Alawi groups in Turkey are of the opinion that RE in Turkey imposes Sunni teachings on them and therefore functions to assimilate their children into the mainstream Sunni majority. They demand either a right to withdraw their children from attending such RE classes or inclusion of sufficient and satisfactory information about Alawi Islam in the curriculum and textbooks[1] (Kaymakcan, 2002). With several changes made in 2010, the RE curriculum in Turkey became more inclusive. The textbooks included information about the various denominational and cultural interpretations prevalent in the country such as the Alawis, the Yasawis and the Naqshbandi. Similarly, the new curriculum also included information about major religious traditions. (MEB, 2010). However, the content provided about religions was rather vague and generic, reflected through the lens of Islam and mostly emphasising the commonalities between religions (Meral, 2015), therefore not allowing students to critically engage with ultimate truth claims. Moreover, it is argued that diverse interpretations within Islam is represented from the Sunni-Hanafi perspective, the dominant Islamic sect in the country, which might result in intolerance and prejudices against people who hold non-Sunni Islamic beliefs (Meral, 2015).

In general, religious instruction that is not inclusive of diversity, but rather seeks to deliver pre-established religious knowledge does not meet the expectations of young Muslims as it falls short of providing a deeper insight into their faith tradition and of contributing meaningfully to developing their religious identity. It is equally insufficient in enriching young children with secular backgrounds as it becomes no more than a burden for them to memorise religious facts. Therefore, to achieve a comprehensive IRE, alongside a solid and foundational knowledge of Islamic beliefs and practices, students need to engage with diverse religious and cultural

interpretations within Islam. For them to better understand the conflicts in the Muslim world, including the current tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or the political and religious motivations of groups, such as Al-Qaeda or IS, they have to critically examine them in the classroom (Panjwani, 2005; Moore, 2006).

Furthermore, there is also the problem of students' faith backgrounds not being acknowledged properly, being only recognised and represented at a mere general level in the curriculum (Ipgrave, 2004). Muslim pupils often come to the classroom with a strong prior Islamic knowledge because of their strong cultural and parental heritages (Ipgrave, 2010). However, this knowledge is not taken into consideration, or is mostly taken for granted by the teachers, curriculum designers, and policy-makers of IRE. Students coming from different streams of Islam are usually silenced, which also results in mainstream students not getting a chance to explore the diverse, rich variety within Islam.

Muslim pupils cannot develop an Islamic identity in a purely Islamic context, within Islamic parameters, in the modern global world. They are exposed to non-Islamic, Western-liberal, secular ideologies, mostly exhibited by their peers in a non-Islamic context, but also through the media, the Internet, and other forms of communication. This is also valid, though not equally, for Muslims in Muslim countries. These young people struggle between the Islamic knowledge they receive in their schools, their own faith understanding as well as their parents' culture and values. They are more likely to incline towards Western, secular worldviews through direct exposure in Western European contexts. Issues such as democracy, the role of women in Islam, relationships with the opposite sex that can be interpreted differently in Islam are making it more challenging for these people. However, all these dilemmas and problems are not explored in the classroom, within its harmonious and inclusive atmosphere.

On the other hand, particularly in diasporic societies, some young Muslims are inclined to put Islam at the centre of their lives and become more religious due to the discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypical assumptions they face in Western countries as well as due to their constant sense of struggle between the cultural values handed by their parents as traditions and those offered by the Western-liberal social norms (Schmidt, 2004; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Thobani, 2011; Berglund, 2013). To be more specific, in the UK, with the second and third generation Muslims, there has appeared to be a shift from holding on to cultural bonds to searching for an authentic, pure Islam. This is to some extent attributed to them receiving no systematic Islamic education from their parents or gaining an unsatisfactory education in schools and mosques, as well as perceiving a clash between their own cultural-religious values and British-Western values (Panjwani, 2008). Furthermore, segregating other Muslim groups in particular districts, away from the native non-Muslim communities (Ipgrave, 2010), as well as being portrayed as

'different', or 'other' in the media (Revell, 2010) has accelerated the rate of young Muslims adopting a monolithic, essentialist, and political form of Islam that stems from a literal and selective reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For example, in the UK, 2000 Muslims—many of them young—were reported to have travelled to Syria to join the extremist jihadist group IS (Mendick, Verkaik, & Ross, 2014).

A similar dilemma can also be seen among young Muslims in Turkey. Being a bridge between the East and West, Turkey occupies a significant place in incorporating diverse religious and cultural traditions. The modernisation of society, particularly the confinement of religion to the private domain, accelerated the spread of secularism mainly in the big cities. Secularism is one of the hallmarks of Turkish modernity. However, it is contested and cannot be understood without reference to Islam (Keyman, 2007). The Turkish *laicity* is different from the French *laicity* where the church and state are fully separated from each other. In Turkey, the state defines itself as laic and does not advocate any religious tradition while at the same time it is directly responsible for accessing and regulating religious affairs, for example banning the headscarf or providing compulsory RE in schools with the aim of controlling religion in the public sphere (Gole, 1997). In fact, Turkey never lost its penchant for traditional Islamic religiosity, which is still very common in the peripheral areas (Okumus, 2008) and constitutes one of the major characteristics of the Turkish national identity (Kucukcan, 2003; Silverstein, 2003). The Islamic identity of Turkey became more visible after the 1990s with the rise of political Islam and became a prominent factor in forming Turkish secularism (Keyman, 2007).

The deep influence of *laicity* and secularism in Turkish history paved the way for a moderate form of Islam among the majority of Turkish people, through which they were able to negotiate and reconcile their faith with Western-secular values, such as democracy and human rights (Somer, 2007). As a result, it has been possible to see different variations of Islam, ranging from the mystical to folk, from conservative to moderate. However, the fundamental and extremist forms[2] of Islam are also visible here, particularly among young Turkish Muslims. They have been influenced by the extremist Islamist groups, mainly because of the geographical proximity of Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. According to one Turkish MP, around 5000 Turkish young Muslims have joined IS in Syria, who were convinced to do so through social media channels and some small Muslim organisations around the country (DHA, 2014). Taken together, in order to help Muslim pupils develop a comprehensive Islamic identity and deal with religious extremism, it is necessary to engage with their prior knowledge and experiences of religious phenomena in the classroom, along with the historical, cultural, and denominational differences within Islamic tradition as well as between Islam and other religions.

1.3 A New Theoretical and Pedagogical Approach to Islamic Religious Education

Regarding the problems and challenges mentioned earlier, it is clear that the current IRE, in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts, fails to help Muslim young people in understanding and interpreting their faith in relation to God, to themselves and the world they live in. To address these problems, this study offers a new theoretical and pedagogical approach to IRE grounded on the philosophy of CR, and the theories of CRE and VT.

The problems and challenges of IRE have necessitated a search for a philosophical framework to understand and interpret Islam in the contemporary, multi-faith world. CR is seen as a promising philosophy for interpreting and consolidating Islamic knowledge in the modern world. It can help to reinterpret the principles and methodology of the classical Islamic theology (*kalam*) in negotiating the primary and secondary sources of Islam in order to engage with the contemporary problems of Muslims (Wilkinson, 2013). The philosophy of CR has emerged in order to investigate and explain natural and social phenomena that builds on the key insights of positivism and post-structuralism. Generally, CR posits that a material reality exists independently of human subjectivity and experience (ontological realism), whilst at the same time recognising the subjectivity and contextually-dependent nature of human knowledge (epistemic relativism). This middle-ground approach thus allows for judgments and understandings of phenomena to be non-determined but nonetheless based on the best currently available information and research methods (judgmental rationality). CR offers a useful support to IRE by introducing a philosophical framework that moves away from the limitations of its classical form that is only aimed at students learning the Islamic facts and stories, whilst not falling into constructivism either, in which students are seen as the agents in constructing knowledge. It could be used as an 'underlabouring'[3] tool for IRE and is expected to bring to the subject "theological height and philosophical depth, as well sociological breadth, to make the subject more engaging and useful for young Muslims" (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 191). Perhaps more importantly, it will allow young people to negotiate their Islamic identities, and the contemporary problems of Muslims around the world in a classroom by following a systematic framework.

The CRE approach focuses on the search for the ultimate reality of the order of things, that is, 'truth' and 'truthfulness', as the most prominent features. It is grounded on the three principles of CR; ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgmental rationality (Wright, 2007). According to CRE, the transcendental truth claims are contested and in order to understand the reality of these claims, we bring into play worldviews, symbols, narratives, questions, and praxes that are also contested.

In contrast to liberal RE, it does not focus on the constructive power of learners, but rather, regards "knowledge acquisition as a process of discovery" through active engagement with the reality of the objects or phenomena (Wright & Wright, n.d.). It offers a 'mutually transformative' relationship between learners and the object of learning, whereby both have power in establishing knowledge, although the learner is allocated only a limited role. This study proposes that the use of CRE can create opportunities for IRE to seek ways for the discovery of non-negotiable, ontological critical aspects of Islamic knowledge. Subsequently, it can help identify the epistemically diverse ways in which this knowledge is understood—in more or less differentiated ways—in the Muslim community. In sum, it can thus encourage pupils to engage in an attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible learning process, and hence to discern a more complex and differentiated understanding of Islam than before.

VT is adopted as a pedagogical approach in this study. Established within the phenomenographic research tradition, it aims to develop new and powerful ways of perceiving an object or phenomenon by introducing students to varied accounts of it. It is a learning theory that holds, "learning proceeds, as a rule, from an undifferentiated and poorly integrated understanding of the whole to an increased differentiation and integration of the whole and its parts" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. viii). The reason for choosing this pedagogical approach is because of the close affinity of its theological underpinnings to CRE. Like the latter, VT highlights the learner and the object of learning relationship and defines learning as getting closer to the reality of the object through seeing it in a new and more complex way. Applied to IRE, it can create possibilities for Muslim pupils to develop a deeper discernment of Islamic knowledge through the use of variation.

The originality of this study lies in generating a new theoretical and pedagogical approach for IRE based on the theories of CR, CRE, and VT. Despite the public debate and academic discussions with regard to its theory and philosophy, there has been little empirical research on the content and pedagogy of IRE as well as on student learning. For instance, in Turkey, the research mainly focuses on either some theoretical issues such as plurality in RE or how to capitalise on the constructivist approach in IRE by means of developing engaging and creative teaching methods and strategies and thus delivering the content to the students (see, for example, Akyürek, 2003; Arpacı, 2012; Ceylan, 2006; Çınar, 2016). Similarly, in Europe, the majority of studies have focused on Muslim schools, and thus integration of Muslims to the wider society (Berglund, 2010; Rissanen, 2014). The theoretical and pedagogical approach proposed in this study can encompass both the confessional/traditional and liberal/constructivist approaches, and could be applied in both European countries including the UK and Muslim countries. Additionally, this framework could help students make sense of their religious

and spiritual beliefs and practices, live religiously literate lives, as well as enhance RE teachers' pedagogical perspectives and practices. Overall, the originality of this study is threefold: Applying CR, CRE and VT to IRE; generating a pedagogical framework for IRE; and applying it to the actual classroom context.

1.4 The Aim of the Study

This study is aimed at improving teaching and learning in IRE through a new theoretical and pedagogical approach grounded on the theories of CR, CRE and VT. The purpose is to explore the teachers' and students' understanding of a specific object of learning, to identify the subject matter knowledge, particularly in relation to the primary Islamic sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and subsequently, to organise the teaching and learning environment through the learning study model, based on this knowledge. I argue that the outcomes of this study can contribute to generating theoretical and pedagogical knowledge that can be used by researchers, practitioners, and teachers of IRE. Thus, this study primarily aims to respond to the following research question:

1. What can we learn from the theoretical and pedagogical framework of CRE and VT regarding the development of the pedagogy of IRE?

It is important to note that Islam was not studied as the object of research per se, but rather a specific topic from the curriculum was chosen as the object of learning; 'Islam and being Muslim' in the first, and 'equality in Islam' in the second learning study. In order to find out whether, and if so how, the new pedagogical approach was effective in terms of student learning, a second research question is aimed at exploring the change in the students' understanding of the objects of learning. The question asked is:

2. What kind of variation in understanding the object of learning did Muslim students have prior to the introduction of the framework of CRE and VT in RE classes? How did their understanding of the object of learning change/evolve during the learning study?

The central focus of this study is on student learning, as the aim is to help them gain a more developed understanding of the object of learning. Following the steps of learning study, first, the students' prior understandings of the object of learning were explored through a phenomenographic analysis. Second, the teachers with the researcher drew on this knowledge, along with the subject matter knowledge, to plan and design a number of research lessons through the application of the CRE and VT principles. Finally, for the third level, a post-test was carried out in order

to identify the change in the students' understandings after the research lessons.

The second focus of this research is on documenting the effects of the aforementioned framework study on the participant teachers' beliefs and practices. VT suggests a relational pedagogy, whereby the acts of understanding, teaching, and learning are considered as inseparable. Because of this internal relationship, it is argued that what teachers believe has an effect on how they act and teach, which then influences student learning (Hella, 2007). As a consequence, it was seen necessary to explore the teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the use of the CRE and VT framework in order to draw implications for the development of the pedagogy of IRE. For this purpose, the following question is addressed:

3. What were the pedagogical perceptions and practices of the RE teachers before this study? Did this change during the use of the theoretical and pedagogical framework of CRE and VT and if so, how?

In order to address the research questions, the results of two learning studies are reported, which were carried out in one Muslim and one non-faith community girls' school in London with 58 Muslim students and their RE teachers. Learning study is a form of action research developed within the phenomenography and VT research tradition (Pang & Ling, 2012; Lo, 2012). Employing it made it possible to apply the theories of CR, CRE. and VT to IRE. Phenomenography and VT have also been used as analytical approaches in expounding and illustrating the students' pre- and post-understandings of the objects of learning as well as in the analysis of the research lessons in both learning studies. Overall, this study discusses and outlines a systematic and evidence-based pedagogical approach to IRE, which is aimed at improving teaching and learning about Islam through a dynamic and continuous interaction between the teacher, the students, and the object of learning.

1.5 Structure of the Book

This book consists of eight chapters. The first or the introduction presents a brief background to the study and mentions its aims, also introducing a new theoretical and pedagogical approach to IRE. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the philosophy of CR with a particular focus on Classical CR and addresses the question of whether CR can be applied as an underlabouring tool in understanding and explaining Islamic theology and hence, informing IRE. Chapter 3 presents the theory and pedagogy of the CRE approach, an overview of the phenomenographic research tradition, and consideration of VT as an empirical, educational research approach. Finally, learning study is proposed as a research model through which the theories of CR, CRE and VT can be applied to IRE. The purpose of

this chapter is to establish the grounds for offering a legitimate and useful pedagogy for IRE.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology. It starts with a description of the aims and research questions of this study. Then, the research approach, the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the work are explained. Subsequently, the learning study process, the sampling of research participants, data collection tools, and data analysis process are explained and justified. Finally, the issues of ethics, trustworthiness, and reflexivity are addressed.

The results of the data analysis are presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Chapters 5 and 6 provide the results of the two learning studies on the objects of learning 'Islam and being Muslim' and 'Equality in Islam', respectively. Both chapters follow the same structure such that, first, the students' pre-understandings of the object of learning are presented through phenomenographic analysis; then, the intended object of learning is introduced, including the plans and designs of the research lessons; following this, the description, analysis, and discussion of the research lessons are presented in the enacted object of learning section. The final section includes the students' post-understandings of the object of learning. Chapter 7 involves the final analysis and discusses the focal teachers' beliefs and practices of teaching and learning in IRE before and during the learning study. The aim here is to find out whether there has been a change in their perceptions and practices after applying the proposed framework into their teaching.

Chapter 8 summarises the main findings from the empirical studies in relation to the literature review. It also examines and discusses the theoretical and practical contributions the outcomes of this study can offer for IRE in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Lastly, this chapter discusses the limitations of the study and the implications for practice as well as proposes future research avenues.

Notes

1. In Turkey, RE is compulsory and the right to withdraw from RE lessons is only given to students who belong to Christianity and Judaism. The majority of Alawi community ask this right to be also granted to them. Alawis constitute around 15% of the population in Turkey and are regarded as a heterodox sect that is closer to Shi'a and follows the Caliph Ali as their imams (Özdalga, 1999). Since they consider RE in Turkey as ignoring their existence, some Alawi parents sued the Turkish government in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2000 with the accusation of assimilation and violation of their right of freedom of belief. ECHR judged that Turkey must reform RE in schools so as to ensure respect for different beliefs, which resulted in the Ministry of Education providing more information about Alawism in certain grade textbooks (ECHR, 2007; Council of Europe, 2014).
2. Islamic fundamentalism is born out of a desire for the revival of the early Islamic period. It "refers to a strategy by which Islamic 'purists' attempt to

reassert their construction of religious identity and social order as the exclusive basis for a re-created political and social order . . . They try to fortify their interpretation of religious ways of being through selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practices from a 'sacred' past" (Hassan, 2006, p. 319).

3. The concept of underlabouring is first used by Locke (1895) as "clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge" (p. 14). Bhaskar describes the role of the philosophy of CR as an 'underlabourer' (2008, p. xxxi) to guide research and practice in natural and social sciences with regards to ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues.

1. According to the panentheistic belief, God is immanently related to the world, but at the same transcends it. As God is infinite, unlike the universe, He cannot be limited to the finite universe (Rowe, 2007).
2. God's creation has an ontological, ultimate character in the Islamic theology along with the existence and the Oneness of God (Burrell, 2008). In the Qur'an, creation process is spoken of at many times: "Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, "Be," and it is" (Qur'an, 2:117).
3. "It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise (muhkamat)—they are the foundation of the Book—and others unspecific (mutashabihat). As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, 'We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.' And no one will be reminded except those of understanding" (Qur'an, 3:7).
4. There was an agreement among the early Muslim scholars on the ending date of *ijtihad* at the end of the 9th century (Hallaq, 1984).

1. St Anselm, a medieval theologian, coined the phrase 'faith seeking understanding' as one of the tasks of theology (Migliore, 2014).
2. Two general approaches to learning were found in the studies of Marton and Säljö (1976) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), known as 'deep' and 'surface' approaches. Surface approach to learning includes acquisition, storing, reproduction, and use of knowledge, whilst deep approach pertains to construction of meaning, development of an understanding and of personal change and is associated with high quality teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, 1991). It is argued that students who hold a deep approach to their learning are more likely to achieve higher learning outcomes compared to those with surface approach (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Purdie & Hattie, 2002; Peterson, Brown & Irving, 2010).

1. Referential aspect refers to the 'what' aspect and gives the overall meaning of the category, while the structural aspect refers to 'how' a category is constituted based on the similarities and differences in relation to other categories (see 3.3.2 for more information on the 'how' and 'what' aspects).

1. This refers to the discussion in Islamic theology about 'faith through imitation' and 'faith by inquiry'.
2. A chapter from the Qur'an about the nature of Allah.
3. The Qur'an, 2:256.
4. "Say, He is Allah, (who is) One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent." (The Qur'an, 112:1–4)
5. "Say, 'O disbelievers, I do not worship what you worship. Nor are you worshippers of what I worship. Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship.

Nor will you be worshippers of what I worship. For you is your religion, and for me is my religion." (The Qur'an, 109:1–6)

6. Showing a picture of a crowd who seem to be having a protest and dressed in Middle Eastern style.
7. The picture shows several British Muslim women standing all together. They seem to have different ethnicities and some are seen wearing hijab while the others are not.
8. According to the Prophet (sws) there are three levels in terms of faith: *Islam*, *iman* and *ihsan*. Islam is accepted as the lowest level of faith and one could be a Muslim basically by declaring his faith. Iman is the second level and a person who is in that level is supposed to deeply engage with his faith and implement it to his life. Ihsan is the highest level, where a person worships God as if he can see God and he surely feels that God watches over him so that he is in a moment of high concentration and purity (reported by Muslim).
9. "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me" (Qur'an, 51:56)
10. A Shi'a Muslim praying with a small stone on a prayer mat where she puts her head down.

1. Hanbal A. Musnad. Hadith no. 41
2. The picture portrays three people walking on a road somewhere in the Middle East. Two men are leading the way while a hijabi woman follows them.
3. Hadith: The Prophet said: "O People, your Lord is One, you are (from) the same father. It is not allowed for you to make any discrimination between high and low. Neither an Arab has superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab. A white person is not superior to a black person one, nor a black is superior to a white. The most honourable among you in the sight of God is the one who is the most righteous" (Hanbal A. Musnad. Hadith no. 41).
4. "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an, 2:256); Hadith: The Prophet said: "Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment." (Abu Dawud)
5. The teacher refers to a situation that took place in Nigeria involving the terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapping around 200 Christian girls and forcing them to change their religion.
6. The picture shows a contrast between two images: In the first image equality is featured, where three people with different heights are given one box each to stand on to watch a football match behind a fence. The short person cannot see anything because of the fence preventing his view. In the second image, which is about justice, the same people are given one or multiple boxes, as required by their heights so that they all can get clear view of the field, unhindered by the fence.

1. In one of the lessons before the learning study the students were studying a stimulus on a homeless person and some of the students came up with statements, such as homeless people are drunk, alcoholic, etc. According to the teacher, those beliefs were unqualified and anecdotal.

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