

## Part 1: Believing

# Believing, belonging and behaving: some considerations when teaching about Islam

Jenny Berglund and Bill Gent

Even for teachers who have acquired specialised knowledge about religions, teaching about particular traditions can be daunting: I don't think I know enough. What happens if I get things 'wrong'? Am I up to date? What if some students know more than me? In this article, which is the first of two articles on this subject, a Swedish and a British researcher into Islam offer some guidance.

### Religion, representation and the 'three Bs'

As teachers of RE, it is important that we are aware that the concept of 'religion' is itself complex and open to historical fashion. For many people brought up in the secular west, the concept immediately conjures up notions of 'key beliefs' and 'faith': indeed, the words 'faith' and 'religion' have sometimes been used interchangeably.

This notion of religion as being primarily *about* 'key beliefs' can be challenged, however, and it needs to be acknowledged that this way of viewing 'religion' – and, indeed, the very concept of 'religion' itself – is rooted in Christian tradition. But, more than this, the idea of religion as being *primarily about* beliefs and faith can make us blind to the many-dimensional daily reality of 'lived religion' in many people's lives.<sup>1</sup> In order



Dr Jenny Berglund is an Associate Professor at the department of the Study of Religions, Södertörn University, Stockholm, and a Visiting Associate Professor at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), the University of Warwick. Email [jenny.berglund@sh.se](mailto:jenny.berglund@sh.se)

Dr Bill Gent, former editor of *REsource/Professional REflection*, is an Associate Fellow at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), the University of Warwick. Email [billgent49@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:billgent49@yahoo.co.uk)



to remind themselves of this, many people find it helpful to think of religions (and non-religious worldviews) in terms of three intertwined and overlapping dimensions: **B**elieving, **B**elonging and **B**ehaving.<sup>2</sup>

It must be noted at this stage that, although the 'three Bs' are a useful mnemonic for both understanding and teaching, the different dimensions should not be separated too rigidly. To begin with, they are intertwined in the sense that they merge into and affect each other.<sup>3</sup> Second, the emphasis on each of the different elements varies between different religious and non-religious traditions. This has long been recognised, scholars<sup>4</sup> sometimes categorising different religious traditions as having an emphasis on *orthodoxy* (right belief) or *orthopraxy* (right practice), both Judaism and Islam being placed in the latter category.

This article will begin by looking at the term 'Islam' itself. It will then comment on aspects of Islam through the lens of the first of the 'three Bs', believing, highlighting diversity along the way.

The second part of the article (to be published in September) will look at belonging and behaving, and will also include two brief case studies – one on 'learning to be Muslim', the other on 'Muslim attitudes to music'. It will end with some comments on evolution and change within Islam.

### The word 'Islam'

Islam is a broad and diverse religious tradition which, like all religious and secular non-religious traditions, has to be taken *on its own terms*: in other words, each has its own particular dynamic and characteristics. Muslims themselves often claim that Islam should be understood less as a religion and more as a way of life. Now, there are a number of senses in which this claim can be understood, but let's briefly explore two, in both cases with reference to the Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an, believed by Muslims to be the actual words of God.<sup>5</sup>

In the first sense, the three consonants within the word **ISLAM** are highlighted. (The occurrence of three consonants, which

can be tracked across a range of different words, is a feature of classic Arabic.) In this case, the sequence is 'S-L-M' which, in Arabic, carries the root meaning of 'peace'. Thus, the argument runs, the essence of ISLAM is connected with 'peace', most fundamentally in the sense that following the 'straight path' of Islam leads a person towards peace and fulfilment, both in this world and the next. As such, a Muslim is a person who seeks peace through submitting his or her life to God. Again, in everyday life, the traditional greeting of one Muslim to another (of whatever nationality) begins with the Arabic *waṣṣalam* – 'peace be upon you'.

In the second sense, Muslims often point out that there is no Arabic word which can be directly translated as 'religion'. Rather, the word that is most commonly used is *deen*, which means 'way of life'. Understanding this point demonstrates how thinking of Islam predominantly in terms of 'faith' and 'key beliefs' can be misleading: particularly for pious Muslims, being Muslim might affect daily life to such an extent that a distinction between 'religious' and 'non-religious' aspects becomes problematic. So, yes, a pious Muslim would want to take time to pray at five set times daily and to fast during the month of Ramadan (two of the so-called Five Pillars of Islam) and so on, but 'being Muslim' might also affect how one dresses, what and how one eats and drinks, how one greets (see above), how one washes and cleans one's teeth, how one goes to the toilet, how one responds to or looks at other people and so on. The reasons for this will be developed in the rest of this article.

### Islam and ... believing

Though in school RE there is usually clear reference to the Five Pillars of Islam, there is probably less focus on the traditional 'six articles of faith', usually listed as belief in: Allah (an Arabic word meaning God),<sup>6</sup> angels, the books revealed by Allah (notably, the Qur'an), the prophets sent by Allah, belief in the Day of Judgment and predestination.

Much could be said, of course, about each of these 'articles of faith', and there will be reference to elements of them in what follows, but in the context of this article, two useful points can be made. First, the traditional source of this grouping of six fundamental beliefs goes back to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself, the evidence being a *hadith* – a report of what Muhammad (pbuh) said. The use and value of *hadiths* since the early days of Islam has been immense, for reasons connected to the key Muslim belief that Allah sent messengers and prophets to all communities but that the final prophet was Muhammad (pbuh) (570–632 CE), through whom the final message in the Arabic language was revealed during the last 23 years of his life, traditionally by the angel *Jibril* (Gabriel). Muhammad (pbuh) then recited<sup>7</sup> the words to others who, in turn, memorised and recited them to others, thus beginning a chain of transmission that continues to this day. Some years after Muhammad's (pbuh) death, these remembered words were brought together to form the written Qur'an (though the primary experience that Muslims have had, and continue to have, of the Qur'an is that they hear it recited).

### ... a Muslim is a person who seeks peace through submitting his or her life to God.

As the final prophet through whom the Qur'an was revealed, it is not difficult to understand why Muhammad (pbuh) is so revered by Muslims and why both his words and

actions were of such significance. For, as the 'walking, living Qur'an', as Muhammad (pbuh) is sometimes styled, he was believed to embody the truth and spirit of the Qur'an. In other words, if you want to know how to live the Muslim life, then you can do no better than look at the example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

From an early time, then, Muslims began to share and then collate *hadiths* of what Muhammad (pbuh) had said and done: the answers he gave to questions (such as 'What are the fundamental beliefs a Muslim should hold?' – see above), how he reacted and related to other people, the judgements he made about troubling or contentious issues, what he wore and

looked like, and so on. The significance of grasping this is that down the ages the shape of Muslim life, despite its many diverse forms (influenced by other factors such as nationality, culture, custom, age, ethnicity and fashion), has been profoundly influenced, not only by the principles espoused in the Holy Qur'an but also by the practical examples given in the many *hadiths* that were collected together<sup>8</sup>: how to relate to others, what counts as modest clothing, at what times the five daily set prayers (*salat*) should take place, what positions should be adopted in such prayer and so on.

To return to the six articles of faith, it must be noted that diversity in belief can be found here too. So, for instance, Twelver *Shi'a* Muslims<sup>9</sup> uphold what they term the 'five principles of belief', namely: the Oneness of Allah, divine justice, prophethood, divinely chosen leaders (*imamah*) and the Day of Judgment. As can be seen, there is a clear overlap between the two groups, the distinctive feature of *Shi'a* Islam being *imamah* – the belief that Allah chose *Imams*<sup>10</sup> after the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to protect the message and make authoritative interpretations of the message.

In the second part of this article, we will explore two more fundamentally important dimensions as a way of understanding Islam: *belonging*, because religious adherents do not usually live in isolation but are brought up within communities of believers, and *behaving*, where it has to be recognised that, as in any community, there will be differences between people's levels of commitment to inherited beliefs and ways of life.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the debt they owe to Dr Emin Poljarevic of Uppsala University, Sweden, who made valuable comments on an early draft of this article. (Dr Poljarevic, as an aside, remarked that he disliked the taste of haggis, whether halal or otherwise!)

### Further reading

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### Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> The first lecture in the 2016 BBC Reith Lectures by Kwame Anthony Appiah on 'Mistaken identities: creed' – in which he states that though 'we've been taught to think of religion principally as a matter of beliefs ... religion is *not*, in the first instance, a matter of belief' – is well worth reading/listening to as a background to this article ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z43ds](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z43ds)).

<sup>2</sup> There are other ways of approaching religion and non-religious worldviews, of course. The authors of this article, for instance, have been influenced by ethnographic ways of understanding religion (that is, by going out into the field and observing, talking to and listening to participants in particular religious traditions) and by the 'interpretative' approach to RE that was developed at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit at the University of Warwick. The latter acknowledges three dynamic dimensions of religion: the ongoing historical tradition, the community to which adherents belong and the life experiences of adherents themselves.

<sup>3</sup> In his first 2016 Reith Lecture, for example – see note 1 above – Kwame Anthony Appiah illustrates how belief and practice inform each other.

<sup>4</sup> The famous Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell-Smith (1916–2000), employed this distinction in his famous and very readable book, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (first published in 1963).

<sup>5</sup> Though the global Muslim community is marked by great diversity, it has certain vital common elements, including the reverence paid to, and use made of, the classic Arabic language, even though the majority of Muslims in the world do not have Arabic as their first language.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Christians living in Arab-speaking cultures might well use the word 'Allah' when speaking of God.

<sup>7</sup> The word 'Qur'an' itself derives from the Arabic word *iqra* meaning 'recite', traditionally the first word of the first revelation to Muhammad (pbuh) (Qur'an Surah 94).

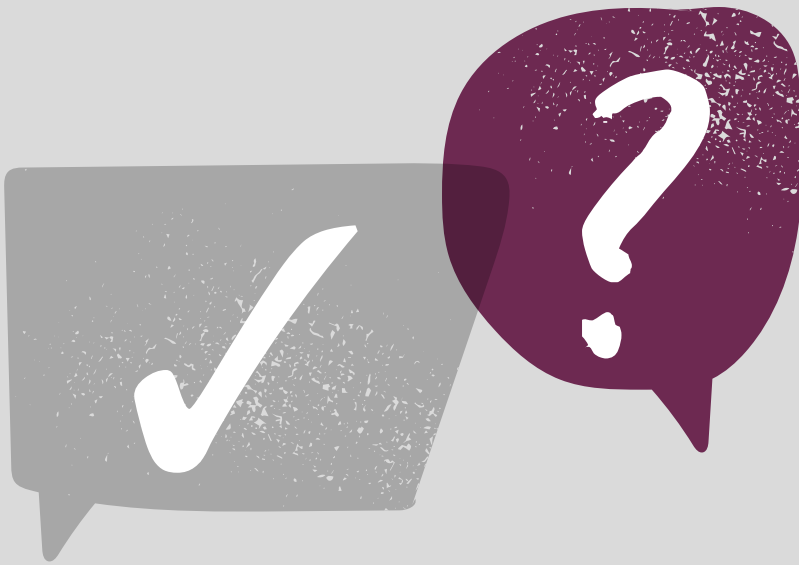
<sup>8</sup> A huge number of *hadiths* were collected together and graded by Muslim scholars according to how reliable they were thought to be. The process of using them to help form judgements on particular issues related to Muslim life, however, was made more difficult because *hadiths* sometimes appeared to contradict each other.

<sup>9</sup> In the early years of historical Islam, a violent dispute took place over the issue of who should have taken over the leadership of the burgeoning Muslim community after Muhammad's (pbuh) death. Some favoured Abu Bakr, while others claimed it should have been Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet (pbuh). The former group were known, from then on, as *Sunni* Muslims (the majority of Muslims in the world today), the latter as *Shi'a* Muslims (forming about 20 per cent of the world's Muslims today).

<sup>10</sup> The *Shi'a* Muslim use of the word *Imam* must be differentiated from the universal Muslim use of the word *imam* to mean the 'professional' who leads community prayers daily in a mosque or elsewhere.



## Part 2: belonging and behaving



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Even for teachers who have acquired specialised knowledge about religions, teaching about particular traditions can be daunting: I don't think I know enough, what happens if I get things 'wrong', am I up to date, what about if some students know more than me? In this second part of a series of contributions in which experienced religious educators suggest ways into particular religious traditions, researchers into Islam offer some guidance.



Doctor Jenny Berglund is an Associate Professor at the department of the Study of Religions, Södertörn University, Stockholm, and a Visiting Associate Professor at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), University of Warwick.  
[jenny.berglund@sh.se](mailto:jenny.berglund@sh.se)

Doctor Bill Gent, former editor of *REsource/Professional REflection*, is an Associate Fellow at the WRERU, University of Warwick. [billgent49@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:billgent49@yahoo.co.uk)

## Islam and belonging

In understanding Islam, the dimension of belonging is very important for a number of interrelated reasons.

To begin with, religious adherents do not usually live in isolation but are brought up within communities of believers. (Not forgetting, of course, that there are many converts<sup>1</sup> to Islam who will not have been brought up in a particular Muslim family, community or tradition. This fact will have implications for their lives and the style or form of Islam that they choose to adopt.)

Clearly, people's identities will be profoundly affected by a whole range of factors: the family or group born into, geographical and historical location, genetic dispositions, local and group traditions, race and ethnicity, personal choice, age and gender, social mores and expectations, and so on.

As such, in order to understand how Islam is lived out in a particular context, it is important to take into account the many variables that might apply. For the majority of Muslims of South Asian heritage, for example, the classic school of Islamic law<sup>2</sup> that is followed in order to judge issues that might arise in daily life is the *Hanafi*. Within traditional Pakistani society, there is also great emphasis placed on the family group (*biradari*) and family honour (*izzat*). Urdu (which uses the Arabic script) is the language of the well-educated. In East African and Somali culture, by contrast, the *Shafi'i* legal school has dominated, with great influence historically coming from Sufism<sup>3</sup> and, more recently, from the *Salafi* approach to Islam, and a literalist approach to the Islamic source texts that originated on the Arabian Peninsula and emphasises going back to the supposedly more 'pure' days of early Islam.



But for younger Muslims living in the West, even though their family heritage might belong to contexts such as these, additional factors have to be taken into account: in particular the impact of globalisation and modern technology (including the use of social media). The role of traditional Muslim scholars (*ulama*), who would be approached for a judgement (*fatwa*) on a particular issue related to living the Muslim life, is being challenged in many modern contexts in which the young and others can turn to the worldwide web in order to find answers to their questions. Within Muslim families within the West, there has sometimes been the phenomenon of older people becoming the 'keepers' or 'guardians' of traditional Muslim culture whilst a generation gap develops between older and younger members. To take an example from a recent interview conducted by one of the writers, a teenage Muslim boy living in England said that he and his siblings were being drawn more towards the *Salafi* approach to Islam, believing that many of the things that his parents associated with Islam were more to do with Pakistani 'culture'<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite the great variety found within Muslim communities, there is also a strong sense that all Muslims belong to the one community of Islam (the *Ummah*), which some non-Muslims have observed as seeming to be an almost

*visceral* feeling. This sense of being part of an imagined worldwide community is demonstrated during the daily set prayer, a time when *all* Muslims face in the same direction (*Qiblah*) – towards the Ka'aba in the Saudi Arabian city of Makkah. The sense of belonging to a worldwide Muslim community – in which people are 'Muslim' irrespective of colour, race and ethnicity – is often one of the great insights realised by Muslims on pilgrimage to Makkah (the *Hajj*).

### Case study 1: Muslim supplementary education

Religious nurture, particularly of children, is important for the continuity of any religious or secular tradition. Much of this will take place through 'absorption' of ideas, practices and customs related to believing, belonging and behaving: through watching and copying what adults do and say, through hearing stories (particularly those related to the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)) and so on. Within a Muslim family, to take a particular example, Muslim children will hear and then begin to use those familiar phrases and asides that tend to pepper everyday discourse between Muslims: phrases such as *Alhamdulillah* ('all praise to God') and *inshallah* ('God willing').

But, overall, knowledge and learning have a very definite and significant place within the Muslim tradition: so much so that acquiring them has the status of *duty*. In order to provide Muslim children with a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Muslim way of life, then, many Muslim children, as well as attending secular state school, will also take part in additional ('supplementary') educational activities organised within the Muslim community itself. This might take the form of having lessons at home or, as in the case of many thousands of British Muslim children, attending classes at a local mosque, often on each weekday evening.



Though such Muslim supplementary education will be organised in a variety of ways by different Muslim groups, there will also be a number of common features or imperatives: the need to learn to read classic Arabic so that the Qur'an can be read and recited properly<sup>5</sup>; learning stories about the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and other key male and female members of the early Muslim community; learning good habits of living (*adaab*), such as humility and patience, and rules of conduct (*akhlāq*), such as how to relate to teachers and older people; and how to perform the various rites and rituals associated with being a Muslim (such as preparing for set prayer and the physical positions to be adopted during set prayer itself). Learning Arabic and then parts (or the whole) of the Qur'an by heart also creates a very strong sense of *belonging* since, in whatever part of the world, the Qur'an is read and recited in Arabic.

### Islam and behaving

Though there are clear common patterns of religious practices among Muslims, it would be both wrong and inaccurate not to recognise the great diversity that is found among Muslims. Furthermore, it has to be recognised that, as in any community, there will be differences within commitment to inherited beliefs and ways of life. At one extreme, there will be those whose whole way of living is profoundly shaped by a strong commitment to the way of Islam, often reinforced by membership of a particular group or tradition that espouses such strong commitment. At the other extreme, there will be those who, though accepting that being 'Muslim' is part of their inherited identity, have little commitment to the beliefs and behaviour traditionally associated with Muslim living. In some cases, it might make sense to talk about non-practising Muslims.

But there is another factor that helps to account for diversity within Islam: the subtle way in which Muslim law developed. To begin with, Islamic law traditionally has not simply differentiated between actions that are 'right' and those that are 'wrong'. Instead, it has identified a gradation of five positions with regard to an action: *obligatory*, *recommended*, *permitted*, *disapproved* and *forbidden*. There will be differences between the different schools of law about where to place particular actions (such as smoking). Different experts in Islamic law, too, when asked to give a ruling on a troubling issue, are also at liberty to decide what that ruling should be. (There is no one central authority with the power to make one ruling applicable to all Muslims.)

To show just how subtle this process can be, we will take the case of music. The following case study also illustrates why there is no simple or single answer to questions like: can Muslims perform and/or listen to music and, if so, what kind of music is permitted and where?

### Case study 2: the issue of music

Neither the Arabic word for 'music' nor much that could pass for direction on the permissibility or otherwise of music is directly mentioned in the Qur'an. As such, diverse attitudes and opinions on this matter often seek support from one or another *hadith*. And, as might be expected, there are *hadiths* that are interpreted to uphold the use of music as well as those that are interpreted as prohibiting it. This, of course, has led to an immense spectrum of Muslim perspectives on the role of music. Between Muslims of diverse cultural backgrounds, this spectrum can range from absolute prohibition at the one end to unrestricted allowance at the other.

Muslims who advocate the use of music often rely upon the argument that what is not clearly forbidden in the established sources should be allowed until proved unacceptable. These individuals argue that since there is no negative reference to music in the Qur'an and since the *hadiths* are ambiguous, being subject to opposing interpretations, there is no justification for prohibiting music, which should therefore be allowed. But there are also Islamic scholars who claim that it is not musicality itself that is the problem, but rather what a song says and/or where it is performed – lyrics, for example, that make reference to prohibited sexual behaviour performed in a place that serves intoxicating drinks.





This stance is related to the high value placed on poetry in Muslim societies of the Arab world. Singing has had a historically close relation to poetry, which has caused some to judge the appropriateness of song on the basis of text rather than musical style or melody. The high value placed on a beautiful voice<sup>6</sup> in various Islamic contexts has also worked in favour of those who advocate the role of music within the tradition.

But, the historical issue about the appropriateness of music within Islam does not stop here. The intention (*niyya*) of the performer is an important factor in Islamic law when it comes to the passing of judgement on a particular deed. It is also a factor that helps to understand why certain forms of singing – such as a capella performances that occur during religious rites – are widely considered to be *halal* (permitted): they are viewed as having been inspired or motivated by the ‘right intention’.

Finally, it should also be noted that negative attitudes towards particular kinds of music among certain contemporary scholars have been in reaction to the cultural imperialism and worldwide dominance of the West. Because a high percentage of modern music originates from the Western world, attracting a high level of interest among the young (and not so young), these scholars view it as harmful in the sense that it effectively draws human attention away from God.

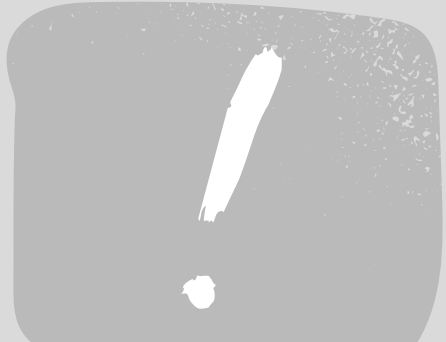
### Change and evolution

It is a truism to say that we are living in a fast-changing world. As part of this, we also have to recognise that the different Muslim communities across Europe, in particular, are changing and evolving. In Britain, for example, the age profile of the Muslim community is very young and there are now ‘third’- and ‘fourth’-generation Muslims growing up in Britain and having to adapt – as their parents and grandparents did in their own time, but in different ways – to their various identities, which include both being British *and* Muslim. The ensuing accommodations and tensions within the self, within the family group and community, and within society at large, will depend very much on individual and group circumstances. But we need to note that this generational gap between the ‘keepers’ of the religious tradition and the younger generations both creates tensions and adds to diversity. The younger generation are multiculturally more aware but also creative in how to handle the rapidly changing world in relation to their religious affiliation – where we can see that minority youth create their own sense of identity, entitlement and religious expressions – through fashion, music, language and so on. Research on young people clearly shows that rapid shifts in youth culture are more volatile today due to a range of reasons, not least the effects of our IT age. Such volatility cuts across beliefs, belonging and behaviour.

But let us end with one image that illustrates sharply what Islam within an often rapidly changing world might involve.

It has, for example, been noted in a recent study<sup>7</sup> that the characteristics of the Muslim community in Scotland differ in significant ways from its larger corresponding community in England. Indeed, some have presented a picture of the Scottish community overall as being more tolerant and ‘better’ than its English counterpart at accommodating its large population of ‘Scottish Muslims’. This is, of course, a simplified and rather idealistic picture, but evidence does suggest that many younger Scottish Muslims are content with that dual nature of their lives (that is, feeling at one and the same time both Muslim *and* Scottish) and, as a consequence, are becoming increasingly involved in civic activities. If so, what are we to make of the fact that there is now an officially registered ‘Islamic tartan’<sup>8</sup> which combines the following elements: blue, the colour of the Scottish flag; green, the traditional colour of Islam; five parallel white threads to represent the Five Pillars of Islam; six parallel orange threads to represent the six key beliefs of Islam; and the use of black to represent the Ka’aba in Makkah? And what, too, of the butcher who hit the newspaper headlines through his sale of ‘*halal* haggis’?





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The authors would like to acknowledge the debt owed to Doctor Emin Poljarevic of Uppsala University, who made valuable comments on an early draft of this article. Doctor Poljarevic, as an aside, remarked that he disliked the taste of haggis, whether *halal* or otherwise!

### For further reading

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### Notes

- 1 There is a strong traditional belief in Islam that all people are born with a divine inclination are thus inherently Muslim; that is one who submits to the one true God but then social realities make them into a Muslim, Hindu or whatever. For this reason, those who convert to Islam later in life are termed 'reverts': that is, they revert back to the original state (*fitra*) in which they were born. A report produced in 2010 estimated that might be as many as 100,000 converts to Islam living in Britain (see [www.faitth-matters.org](http://www.faitth-matters.org)).
- 2 There are four main Sunni schools of law: the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*.
- 3 Sufism is a form of mystical Islam in which followers will follow a particular Sufi master.
- 4 This is sometimes called 'de-culturing of Islam', meaning a striving towards orthodoxy and orthopraxy and supposedly 'cleaning' Islam from non-Islamic practices (i.e. those practices that were introduced after the first generation of Muslims). See, for example, Olivier Roy (2007).
- 5 Each unit of set prayer, for example, includes recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an in Arabic. This short portion of the Qur'an will need to be memorised, though some Muslims go further and set out to memorise the *whole* Qur'an.
- 6 The high value of a beautiful voice is also related to recitation of the Qur'an. The one with the most beautiful voice is the one who is most suitable to encompass the words of God.
- 7 See Stefano Bonino (2016).
- 8 See [www.islamictartan.com](http://www.islamictartan.com)