

# Indoctrination, Islamic schools, and the broader scope of harm

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## Abstract

Many philosophers argue that religious schools are guilty of indoctrinatory harm. I think they are right to be worried about that. But in this article, I will postulate that there are other harms for many individuals that are more severe *outside* the religious school. Accordingly the full scope of harm should be taken into account when evaluating the harm that some religious schools may do. Once we do that, I suggest, justice may require that we choose the lesser harm. To simplify matters, I focus my attention on the stigmatic harm done to Muslims, and the role that Islamic schools might be expected to play in mitigating that harm. If the full weight of stigmatic harm is factored into the ethical analysis concerning Islamic schools, then I suggest that there are sufficiently weighty *pro tanto* reasons for Muslim parents to prefer an Islamic school over the alternatives, notwithstanding the potential indoctrinatory harm.

## Keywords

Harm, indoctrination, stigma, racism, Islamic schools

## Introduction

Many philosophers argue that religious schools are guilty of indoctrinatory harm. I think they are right to be worried about that. But in this article, I will postulate that there are other harms for many individuals that are more severe *outside* the religious school. Accordingly the full scope of harm should be taken into account when evaluating the harm that some religious schools may do. Once we do that, I suggest, justice may require that we choose the lesser harm. To simplify matters, I focus my attention on the stigmatic harm done to Muslims, and the role that Islamic schools might be expected to play in

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mitigating that harm. If the full weight of stigmatic harm is factored into the ethical analysis concerning Islamic schools, then I suggest that there are sufficiently weighty *pro tanto* reasons for Muslim parents to prefer an Islamic school over the alternatives, notwithstanding the potential indoctrinatory harm.

The argument that I develop is both principled and pragmatic. It is principled, first, because it is motivated by the conviction that to harm is morally wrong. Second, there are additional reasons to protect young people given that they are more susceptible to many kinds of harm. Third, justice arguably demands that we prioritize the mitigation of harm where the most harm is being done, and I think it is reasonable to suppose that it is the stigmatized and disadvantaged who ordinarily suffer the most invidious harms. But the argument is also pragmatic<sup>1</sup> inasmuch as I concern myself with the non-ideal societies and educational systems that we have, rather than the ones we wish we had. Whatever may be compelling about educational justice in ‘ideal worlds’, for millions in the real world harm is a daily feature of life, and this includes their ordinary school experience. Moreover in the real world, our options may not be between harm and the absence of harm, but rather between different kinds and degrees of harm.

And so when we adopt a broader perspective on the full range of harms that may be caused by different kinds of schools, but also by other structural inequalities that prevail in the broader society, we may discover that it is not quite so simple to pit religious schools against non-religious ones. For example, one often hears that religious schools are simply too insular, an obstacle to, say, the cultivation of ‘civic virtue’ or ‘social cohesion’. To this concern one often hears renewed appeals for an integrated ‘common school’ ideal, where pupils come together to learn, to reason, to deliberate and to respect one another (int. al. Kymlicka, 2001). But this criticism directed against religious schools is odd considering how insular the average *non-religious* school is owing to high indices of de facto segregation between and within neighborhoods and schools (Johnston et al., 2007); middle-class parental behavior that entails avoiding schools where one’s own children are not in the majority (Goldring and Phillips, 2008; Reay et al., 2007); peer group homophily (Hattie, 2002); and the various ways in which bureaucratic school organization ensures minimum contact between pupils of different backgrounds through selection, labeling, tracking and grouping (Downey and Condrón, 2016; Schmidt et al, 2015).

An honest appraisal of these well-known facts does not mean that we ought to forfeit attempts to make our school systems more fair, or that we ‘give up’ on attractive ideals. But it does suggest three things: first, we ought to apply the same standards to non-religious schools that we apply to religious ones. Second, choosing alternatives to the ‘common school’ ideal in the short-term need not be incongruent with reforming the status quo in the long term. Third, pursuing pragmatic alternatives to the status quo for one’s child under highly non-ideal circumstances is not only a reasonable and responsible thing to do, it also is arguably more consistent with what justice demands, which in many cases means opting for the lesser harm.

The structure of my argument is as follows: I first articulate what I understand indoctrinatory harm to entail, followed by a sketch describing what many contemporary liberal philosophers understand the opposite of indoctrinatory harm to be: an education for the cultivation of reason and autonomy. I then broaden the scope of harm to include stigma.

I argue that we ought to take seriously a whole range of harms to which stigmatized cultural/religious/racialised minorities are subjected both inside and outside of school. In the Islamic school, I argue, we recognize the familiar harms of indoctrination on the one hand, and the ability to mitigate a great many other harms on the other. I later anticipate and respond to several objections. I then conclude by arguing that under non-ideal conditions Muslim parents who opt for the Islamic school are justified in doing so, notwithstanding the potential indoctrinatory harm.

## Indoctrinatory harm

Indoctrination entails the inculcation of attitudes or beliefs<sup>2</sup> that are contested, where there is intent to instill those beliefs, and where the methods circumvent important arguments or evidence (Flew, 1966; Gatchel, 1972; White, 1967). An indoctrinated person, John Kleinig writes, will be someone who ‘falls back on implausible claims of self-evidence, continually engages in distortion, resorts to question-begging devices, professes to find reasonably clear objections unintelligible, or becomes chronically unable to feel their weight against his/her position’ (Kleinig, 1982: 29). Thus, we suspect that someone has been indoctrinated who holds her beliefs in such a way as to imply indifference to rational assessment and contradictory evidence.<sup>3</sup> In its most explicit form, religious schools are presumed guilty of indoctrination *if* and *when* they discourage rational thinking and instead opt for coercive forms of faith inculcation with no regard for argument or evidence. This is what James Dwyer (2001) appears to have in mind when he claims that students in fundamentalist religious schools

Are not permitted to question what they are taught on any subject or to express any opinion contrary to orthodox views that teachers, school administrators, and pastors aggressively impress upon them. To do so would constitute rebellion, a grave sin warranting harsh punishment. (pp. 24–25)

And these actions have long-term consequences, he continues, inasmuch as graduates from these schools

Internalize sanctions against free thought and expression to such a degree that those who later develop some inclination to question, privately and/or interpersonally, the religious, political, or social beliefs that their schools taught them find that psychological barriers prevent them from doing so.

Notice, too, both the intellectual and emotional properties of indoctrination. Not only is one not encouraged to consider alternative points of view; one also may be *afraid* to do so. The upshot is this: if and when teachers – with or without the approval of parents – substitute irrational belief for scientific inquiry or rational debate, or even discourage a healthy degree of doubt, they are presumed guilty of indoctrinatory harm. Even when the content, methods or intent used may not succeed, religious schools may also be guilty of *facilitating* indoctrinatory harm to the extent that they reinforce the interests and beliefs of parents or school staff at the expense of the child’s interest in being educated.

In short, indoctrination works contrary to education, at least in some domain. It works contrary to education not only because it entails the inculcation of unshakable beliefs or commitments, but also because it involves the inculcation of *unwarranted* beliefs and commitments – that is, those unsupported by reasons and evidence. The aim to inculcate unshakable beliefs or commitments without reasons or evidence is a kind of harm. And if religious schools have among their aims to indoctrinate their pupils into the tenets of their respective faith without reason or evidence, religious schools are guilty of that harm. Putting it in the starkest terms possible, Michael Hand (2004) observes,

To indoctrinate people is to interfere with their minds in the most serious way possible. It is to prevent them from thinking rationally in some area of their lives. This is the very antithesis of what education is about, and a flagrant abuse of the power wielded over young people by those who teach them. (p. 352)

Hand (2004) takes this to be a powerful reason why religious schools ought to be abolished because they are ‘defined by an aim that can only be realized by means of indoctrination’ (p. 346). Now abolition is a radical demand, one that strikes me as being wildly unfeasible, at least within pluralist constitutional democracies. Nevertheless, more than a few liberal philosophers are sympathetic to this view (e.g. Marples, 2005; Short, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

Now in rejecting indoctrination, a number of liberal philosophers have argued in the following register: *children ought to receive an education that conduces to becoming autonomous agents*. Characteristically, Eamonn Callan (1997) asserts that children ‘have a right to an education whose content is given by their prospective interest in sovereignty’ (p. 189). Elsewhere, Callan (2002) stresses its importance in more detail: ‘autonomy enables us to choose intrinsically good lives; autonomy confers that ability without creating bias against any particular ways of life that might have intrinsic value’ (p. 118). Matthew Clayton (2006) fixes his attention on parents, yet makes the same point when he says that ‘autonomy is an *end-state* to be achieved (p. 90). Whatever else parents do to or with their children by way of a religious upbringing, they must not prevent them from eventually leading an autonomous life’. And Ian Macmullen (2007: 71) adds that ‘autonomous persons must be the *ongoing* authors of their own lives’ and weds this faith in autonomy to a related conviction concerning the role that schooling might be expected to play:

Once the nature of autonomy is properly understood, the vital role of schools can perhaps be accepted without empirical evidence: as a rational-cognitive ideal, [autonomy] is not something that children can reliably be expected to pick up outside of formal educational institutions. (p. 161)

The upshot is that being or becoming autonomous means being capable of reflecting upon different points of view and arriving at a reasonable and considered opinion about those things one has reason to value and is able to pursue.

The educational path to autonomy further implies that pupils ought to receive an education that enables young people to appreciate the difference between accepting certain things to be true merely as a matter of faith rather than on the strength of reasoned argument and evidence (Dearden, 1972; Siegel 1988). In order for autonomy to germinate, schools ought to be places that facilitate encounters with different cultures, experiences

and perspectives in terms of the teaching staff, the pupil intake, the curriculum, and generally the variety of perspectives on offer, where the intended aim is to facilitate considered reflection on these differences. In this way, young people should be exposed to a broad range of options concerning what their life might be like, with the school refraining from endorsing either the mainstream or the home culture.

Now as it happens, I believe there are a number of difficulties with some of the views sketched in the foregoing paragraphs, and with the autonomy ideal in particular.<sup>5</sup> However, I will not pursue these difficulties here, as they do not diminish concerns about indoctrinatory harm.

## **Broadening the scope of harm**

I now turn my attention to a different kind of harm, and I want to show why indoctrinatory harm is not the only kind of harm with which we ought to be concerned.

### **The harm of stigma**

To be stigmatized is to be harmed. Stigma denotes the negative significance others ascribe to some attribute(s) that persons have that is seen as discrediting in some way. To be stigmatized is to have one or more characteristics that meet with strong disapproval by others not possessing the stigma. Stigmas may attach to any number of different traits that persons have by no fault of their own. By definition, Erving Goffman (1963) writes, 'we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances'. Shame, too, 'becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing' (Goffman, 1963: 7). Stigma is not only 'another kind' of harm; the harms it induces and the consequences that follow from it are profound. The result, Goffman (1963) warns, is a deep-seated ambivalence about who one is:

Whether closely allied with his own kind or not, the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them. The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed. In brief, he can neither embrace his group nor let it go. (pp. 107-108)

We also should not forget the educational context in which many children first learn of their stigma. As a general rule, the harms begin with differential treatment: with sorting, labeling and lowered expectations, a well-documented process that begins very early indeed. 'Public school entrance', Goffman (1963) reminds us, 'is often reported as the occasion of stigma learning, the experience sometimes coming very precipitously on the first day of school, with taunts, teasing, ostracism, and fights' (p. 33). These stigmatic distinctions harden into 'probable destinies' by the time many children reach the age of

10 or 12, the ages at which some European countries administer life-determining exams. Children who are both poor *and* belong to a stigmatized ethnic or racialized group are at risk of even greater harm inasmuch as other stigmas apply.

Though ascribed by others, stigmas devalue the stigmatized, and this devaluation is often internalized by the stigmatized themselves, for many resulting in what Miranda Fricker (2007) has called epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice obtains when persons *lose knowledge*, that is, their ability to know things with confidence is weakened, given how their experiences – but also the manner in which they try to convey these experiences – are not taken seriously by others. She describes this as a ‘hermeneutical gap’, which suggests some kind of interpretive flaw, when in fact it should be taken to mean that the perspectives of stigmatized minorities in many school systems are systematically misunderstood or excluded altogether. This speaks to a broader scope of many harms. Epistemic injustice certainly concerns the harms of sexism, homophobia, and much else besides. But to simplify the point, consider racist harm.

Racism nourishes stigmatic harm, and stigmatic harm in turn emboldens racism. Yet whereas stigma attaches to persons, racism does most of its work not through individual malevolent actions but rather institutionally, and often with ‘good intent’. *Structural racism* corresponds to the sociological notion of stratification in that it broadly describes differential access to goods, services and opportunities among society’s members owing to the ways in which its institutions are designed and structured to benefit the members of dominant groups. Importantly, the mechanisms of structural racism typically privilege members of dominant groups quite irrespective of how ‘well-intended’ our attitudes or choices may be, for our perceptions and understandings more often than not are shaped through habituation, and thus the injustices to which we unwittingly contribute – including the acceptance of particular stigmas – may not rise to the level of conscious reflection.

Summing up, stigmas operate within a broader power structure, in which the possession of some traits systematically affects one’s quality of life inasmuch as it profoundly impacts upon how one is seen and treated by others, and moreover how it persistently inhibits one’s ability to estimate his or her own potential and pursue those things one has reason to value. And hence for those harmed by their stigma and disadvantaged position within racially hierarchical European societies, there is a much broader range of institutional and societal harm with which to contend. These harms derive from the broader context of disadvantage in which the stigma functions. Its harms may include lowered self-respect, lowered opportunities to be challenged and learn, educational failure, and the additional harm of lifelong failure that may ensue.

### *Muslim stigma*

In the European context, structural racism also incorporates *religion* and *religious identity*, given the ways in which anti-Semitism perpetuates harm toward Jews and ‘Islamophobia’ serves to stigmatize Muslims (Cesari, 2004; Modood, 2003; Romeyn, 2014). There are a great many examples one might consider, but I focus on Muslim minorities for the following reasons: (1) Muslims are the largest single religious<sup>6</sup> minority<sup>7</sup> in Europe, (2) Muslims undoubtedly are the most stigmatized *religious* minority in Europe, and (3) Islamic schools more than any other kind of religious school have come

under persistent attack, only partly in response to post-9/11 incidents of terrorism. Several prominent politicians have called for them to be banned.

I am well aware that Muslims are not all the same, or treated in the same way. Social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, country of origin, educational attainment, language proficiency, occupation and many other factors will mediate what it means to be a Muslim. A Muslim Albanian almost certainly will not experience what a Muslim Swede does, any more than a Muslim barrister in London is likely to view the world in exactly the same way as another Muslim Londoner operating a newspaper kiosk. Muslim men and women, too, deal with different kinds of stigmatic harm. It is also not the case that Muslims are *always* stigmatized and disadvantaged. Yet the fact that some Muslims do not live with stigma, or suffer intimidation or discrimination, does not change the general pattern. And this pattern, one involving racism, stigma and disadvantage for northern European Muslims, can clearly be seen within the institutional norms of European education systems.

The literature on stigmatic and racist harm directed at Muslims is immense. It must therefore suffice to merely rehearse a few basic facts. Racism, xenophobia and hatred directed at Muslims in Europe is a very serious problem (Abbas, 2017; Brüß, 2008; Fekete, 2004; Gündüz, 2010; Kundani 2007, 2014; Kunst et al., 2012; Kutay, 2015; Smeekes et al., 2011; Strabac and Listhaug, 2008; Verkuyten, 2013). This affects how Muslims are reported by the media (Saeed, 2007), spoken about by politicians (Buijs, 2009), and treated by the police (Schneider, 2008); it also influences their opportunities in the housing market (Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2008), the criminal justice system (Spalek, 2013) and the labor market (Lindley, 2002; Park et al., 2009).

The education system, too, is rife with harms done to stigmatized minority children generally, and Muslim children in particular. These harms, some of which impact Muslim boys in particular, include but are not limited to higher rates of special education labeling, more swift and frequent school suspension, disproportionately high representation in lower tracks and vocational education, disallowing the use of one's mother's tongue while at school, curricular erasure and generally low expectations of Muslim children owing to prejudice among teachers (Abbas, 2004; Agirdag et al., 2012, 2016; Crul and Schneider, 2009; Merry, 2005b; Pulinx et al., 2017; Vervaeet et al., 2016; Weiner, 2014, 2016).

## **Can Islamic schools mitigate harm?**

Let me first clarify what I mean by Islamic schools. I am not referring to Qur'anic schools, or weekend schools, Sunday schools, or madrassahs. When I refer to Islamic schools in Europe, I am referring to schools that – outside of the United Kingdom – are largely paid for by the respective state governments (where they are permitted), and that are also subject to state inspections. However, the fact that a majority of Islamic schools in the United Kingdom presently operate within the Independent sector does not change my basic view. I therefore include them in my analysis.

Now before we consider whether or not Islamic schools can mitigate stigmatic harm, let's revisit the indoctrinatory harm that we might expect of an Islamic school. Remember that indoctrination entails the aim of establishing unshakable beliefs with little regard for

reason or contradictory evidence. If we limit our attention to the most fundamental of Islamic beliefs, those corresponding to the earliest canonical traditions, then we find things like belief in the Qur'ān as the *ipsissima verba* of Allah, Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet, and the Day of Judgment that awaits us all. It is also the case, however, that there is considerable interpretative disagreement on many things, including the meanings and applications of *da'wa*<sup>8</sup> and *jihād*,<sup>9</sup> the importance of historically informed exegesis, the authority of the sayings of the Prophet or the *hadith*, opinions concerning Darwin's theory of evolution, not to mention lively debates concerning which activities and behaviors (e.g. music and dance) deserve to be labeled as forbidden or *haram*. Yet simply as it concerns the very basics of the Islamic faith, there is propositional content, and undoubtedly there is indoctrination. Even though many children eventually alter, even abandon, their beliefs, the fact remains that most graduates of Islamic schools – like other kinds of religious schools – have been, and remain for their entire lives, indoctrinated to some degree.

Now what I am suggesting is that an honest assessment of the indoctrinatory harm we might expect of the Islamic school requires that we also consider the broader scope of harm. As we have seen, Muslims across northern Europe are subjected to a range of other harms thanks in no small part to the stigmas ascribed to them. These include racist misrecognition, mistreatment, and social exclusion. While many Muslims – similar to other stigmatized persons – manage to thrive in spite of their stigma, many others are at considerable risk of despair, resentment, resignation, and even radicalization. And thus what the foregoing suggests is this: Islamic schools may commit one kind of harm, yet harms of a very profound sort abound outside the Islamic school. Should these stigmatic harms inform how we evaluate indoctrinatory harms? I believe they should.

But can we be confident that Islamic schools *actually* do the lesser harm? There are two ways we might answer this. One is to offer a judgment concerning whether it is worse to be indoctrinated or to suffer the effects of stigma. As we have seen, there are intellectual and emotional harms in both cases. Yet because we cannot settle the matter in the abstract, there can be no *decisive* answer to this question. Too many hypotheticals are involved, and specific cases will need to be considered. But my own position is that religious indoctrination, though admittedly harmful and sometimes devastatingly so (e.g. when it combines with one's socialization to produce, say, abject servility), as often as not concerns innocuous belief (e.g. in a soul, an afterlife, a Higher Being), or else it describes a temporary state of mind from which many people eventually recover. Notwithstanding the intellectual and emotional harms of indoctrination, a great many indoctrinated persons later repudiate things they once held to be true. Stigma, conversely, is not something one can simply 'cast off'. Indeed, it involves greater risks of having one's quality of life severely compromised, especially when combined with other debilitating factors such as structural racism and poverty. One may succeed in categorically rejecting the inferiority ascribed by others to oneself<sup>10</sup> and yet still be unable to escape its dastardly consequences given the efficacy of the stigma in the dominant culture. This observation does not reduce one to the status of a victim; it does, however, add more weight to the scale of comparable harms.

The other way to answer the question concerning whether Islamic schools do the lesser harm is to examine the empirical research related to this claim, and the empirical research we currently have suggests that there are good reasons and evidence to conjecture that Islamic schools can and will continue to mitigate stigmatic harm (Beemsterboer



2018; Driessen et al., 2016; Merry and Driessen, 2016). Indeed, given the harms deriving from stigma in mainstream schools and the broader culture, it is reasonable to assume that for Muslim children in a Western European context learning in a non-stigmatizing environment may be conducive to an overall more favorable educational experience, notwithstanding the presence of some religious indoctrination. It is also reasonable to conjecture that while one cannot escape stigmatic harms in the broader culture, attending an Islamic school can better equip one to resist *internalizing* the beliefs associated with stigmatic harm.

In light of the above, and under non-ideal conditions, the magnitude and severity of stigmatic harm offer Muslim parents a weighty *pro tanto* reason to prefer the Islamic school for their child over a non-religious alternative. They have this *pro tanto* reason not only because the indoctrinatory harm in question is arguably the lesser harm, but also because of the wide range of educational and social goods available to them in the Islamic school that have the potential to mitigate the unique set of harms occasioned both by stigma and the racism that nourishes it. Provided that the right amount, *and* especially the right *kind*, of resources are present, Islamic schools – even those dealing with high concentrations of poverty – can lift every student. Resources obviously include financial investments, and in some cases may require private sector assistance if opportunity gaps are to be reduced. But resources also will include things like positive school climate, appropriate discipline, and nurturing teachers with consistently high expectations and cultural competence (Merry, 2013).

Before moving to a few worries that some readers will have, let me clarify a couple of basic points. First, the real world dilemma I pose is not a choice between harm and no harm, but rather between different kinds, but also degrees, of harm. Obviously, if and when it is possible to avoid *both* kinds of harm that approach should be favored over the either-or. But that does not change the basic dilemma here, which is that the ‘no harm’ option is often unavailable. Second, reprieve from stigmatic harm *inside* the school does not necessarily protect one from stigmatic harm *outside* the school. As I say above, persons can avoid internalizing low self-image associated with stigma, yet because stigma is constructed and imposed by others, it is not a foregone conclusion that a more positive learning environment will necessarily allow one to avoid the harms of stigma elsewhere.

Women who enjoy reprieve from sexist harm in all-female spaces are not guaranteed safety from sexism or misogyny once they re-enter mixed spaces. Neither are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals protected from homophobic hatred or violence once they leave spaces in which they enjoy the benefits of living and socializing in larger concentrations. But a ‘safe space’, which may be just another way of saying *a place to belong*, allows one under fewer constraints to pursue those things she or he has reason to value; it also provides the opportunity to be with others like oneself, and to reflect upon the injustice of stigma with others who experience it, and moreover to collectively mobilize against it.

Finally, what I have hypothesized on the strength of the available evidence about Islamic schools should not be extrapolated to other kinds of religious schools. Other religious schools *may* serve a similar purpose, and there is some evidence that this occurs. But there is little reason to believe that the vast majority of (mostly Protestant and Catholic) religious schools currently operating in Europe do so. That is to say, whatever their contribution may

be, it certainly is not obvious that it includes the mitigation of harm. Many, in fact, exacerbate harm, for example, through discriminatory selection, where the stigmatized are excluded. Nothing in my argument offers these schools any solace.

## Objections

In the following paragraphs I anticipate and respond to several criticisms.

### *Harm*

One criticism might be this: it is no great achievement to simply do less harm. And so if it is merely a question of selecting the lesser harm, the outcome would indeed seem unheroic. Further, none of us would have reason to believe that a school offered a better education simply because it exhibited less harm than another. Thus in addition to mitigating harm we also want a school to contribute a great deal of *good*. I concur. But I have argued that it is reasonable to expect that Western Islamic schools are more likely to deliver on the promise of a quality education for stigmatized Muslims than the alternatives given the broader context of harm. Whether that is true is of course an empirical matter, and as with every type of school there will be failures. I am therefore not suggesting that all Islamic schools will succeed in this any more than I would suggest that all non-religious schools could. But again, evidence (Beemsterboer 2018; Driessen et al., 2016; Merry and Driessen, 2016) emerging from the Netherlands, which on the European continent hosts the largest number of state-sponsored Islamic schools, augurs favorably for my hypothesis.

### *False dilemma*

A second criticism might be that I am posing a false dilemma. There is no reason to accept the either-or in my account of harm. So rather than asking us to choose *between* harms we ought to try to reduce harm *wherever it is found*. This means that we resist the harms in religious *and* non-religious schools, in particular those emanating from stigma. Again I concur. Wherever it is possible to mitigate harm, we should stiffen our resolve in doing so. Yet, however much we may lament it, the world in which we live often does not permit such comprehensive ‘solutions’. Instead we sometimes must make difficult compromises or trade-offs when two or more equally valuable pursuits cannot be simultaneously satisfied, at least not to the same degree. Would that we didn’t have to choose between these harms; would, too, that our educational systems were more just. Alas neither is the case. And thus when confronted with multiple harms, it is our task to determine what the morally justifiable compromise or trade-off ought to be. What I am offering in this account is but one way to think about it. Others undoubtedly will have intuitions that pull in a different direction.

### *Stacking the deck*

A third criticism might be that I have stacked the deck by homing in on indoctrination as the *single kind* of harm that religious schools do, while offering a more expansive account

of other harms that fall under the rubric of stigma. The idea here is that by focusing on indoctrination I have conveniently sidestepped *other kinds of harm* that the religious school might do. After all, it is a no-brainer that an Islamic school might reduce the stigmatic harm of *being a Muslim*. But if Islamic (or other religious) schools only succeed in reducing *that* kind of harm while reproducing *other harms*, then the scale of harm may not tip so easily in favor of an Islamic school. Point taken. But it is not my claim that the Islamic school is harm-free. No school can claim that. And as I say in the foregoing paragraph, where there is harm every effort should be made to mitigate it.

But I focus on indoctrination because it is the kind of harm most often and consistently alleged of the religious school. So, if you like, I am working on the very terms set by the critics of religious schools. I have no doubt that other harms could be specified and cataloged. It is well known, for example, that thousands of children in many countries have been sexually abused in Catholic schools. Yet as horrific as these harms are, they do not speak to the putative value of a Catholic education; rather they concern the problem of sexual abuse, and the fact that the Catholic Church has long provided a safe haven for pedophiles, going so far as to reassign predatory priests in an attempt to cover up its crimes. Let me be clear: *any actual harms* should be identified and extirpated from the school environment. But unlike the charge of indoctrination, other harms posited of Islamic schools specifically (e.g. that they are anti-democratic, anti-science, promote violent extremism, use discriminatory selection, etc.) are generally hypothesized rather than demonstrated.

### *Motivations*

But surely, a critic might insist, it is naive to assume that most Muslim parents who select an Islamic school for their child have as their primary motive to mitigate the harms of stigma. Given that this is so, shouldn't parental motives matter? Well, yes and no. Were it the principal motivation of a parent to intentionally indoctrinate their child, that would indeed be objectionable. But we need to know more than what someone's motives may be. For example, parents may be motivated by less-than-noble reasons for having children; teachers, too, often are motivated to become teachers for reasons no one would especially admire. But in neither case can we know with any confidence whether someone will be a good parent or teacher – and still less whether they will inflict harm – simply on the basis of their motives. Much more turns on effective parenting, teaching, or the effectiveness of one's pursuits in general, than one's motives. Similarly with the motives informing the selection of an Islamic school. To be sure, the motive to reinforce one's own religious beliefs is less admirable than the motive to protect one's child from stigmatic harm. But schools of all kinds produce outcomes opposite to what parents hope for or expect. And in any case, given the internal diversity of most Islamic schools in terms of ethnicity, age, piety, gender, political perspective, and educational philosophy, it would be rather surprising if they succeeded only in reproducing parental expectations.<sup>11</sup>

### *Exacerbating stigma*

Finally, rather than reducing stigmatic harm, many believe the Islamic school will only serve to accentuate the otherness of the group in question, thereby exacerbating, rather

than mitigating, stigma. But the idea that preferring a homogeneous educational environment will exacerbate stigma is flawed for at least three reasons. First, it suggests that there is something problematic about stigmatized persons congregating together, rather than with the stigma itself, which after all is deployed and imposed by others. Second, it fails to take seriously the psychic violence of living with stigma, and further demonstrates a failure to discern the reasons stigmatized persons have for needing and preferring a safe space in the first place. Third, it implies that it is the stigmatized who are somehow responsible for making the non-stigmatized more comfortable. But it is both unreasonable and unfair – and, it must be said, emblematic of a privileged point-of-view – to impose the responsibility of educating the majority population on the stigmatized themselves. *That* responsibility lies elsewhere; to imply that the stigmatized owe the non-stigmatized an education imposes an additional burden and amounts to epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, and to underscore a point I made earlier, it strikes me as disingenuous concern to fret over a school that caters to the needs of a stigmatized group given the tendency well-educated parents exhibit in consistently avoiding schools where it is likely that their own children would share a classroom with the stigmatized, where the fear is that their own child's education will somehow be 'compromised'.

## Conclusion

Indoctrination is a harm inasmuch as it involves the inculcation of attitudes or beliefs that are contested, where there is intent to instill those beliefs, and where the methods used render one resistant to contradictory arguments and evidence. As I have shown, in certain respects, an Islamic school is also guilty of indoctrinatory harm. At the same time, Western Muslims are subject to a great many other harms. And thus by focusing exclusively on the indoctrinatory harm that Islamic schools do, critics may fail to take seriously the broader social and political context in which religious schools operate. That context, I have argued, is generally one in which the harms of disadvantage are further compounded by stigma and a broad variety of institutional harms.

I have framed this ethical dilemma not in terms of harm versus non-harm, but in terms of different kinds and degrees of harm. I have hypothesized that notwithstanding probable indoctrinatory harm, Islamic schools in Europe – and, increasingly in North America and elsewhere given the sharp rise in public anti-Muslim sentiment – are likely to mitigate a number of probable harms visited upon Muslim young people. My moral intuitions concerning harm are informed by the following two ideas: first, harm of whatever sort ought to be mitigated whenever and wherever it is possible to do so; second, when confronted with an educational choice involving different kinds of harm, at a minimum justice often requires that we choose the lesser harm. Others may disagree concerning how best to evaluate or rank harm – or whether this can, or even should, be done at all. However, my own view is that most kinds of religious indoctrinatory harm, when seen within the broader scope of harm, are the lesser of the two. More than that, if and when Islamic schools not only can do less harm but also provide a great deal of good, not only in terms of academic challenge and critical thinking but also providing an educational space in which to feel safe, belong, and foster positive relationships, parents have strong *pro tanto* reasons to select them for their child over the alternatives.

I am aware that others may have very different moral intuitions concerning how best to respond to the dilemma as I have posed it. Either way, it has not been my intention to offer general policy advice with respect to religious schools. Rather it has been to offer a way of thinking through some difficult ethical considerations of indoctrinatory harm in the educational domain when the circumstances informing one's response are far from ideal. My own intuitions steer me toward favoring an educational strategy whose potential to mitigate the harms of stigma, racism and social exclusion are morally, even measurably, significant. But as I have tried to show, when confronted with multiple kinds of concurrent harm, some kind of moral compromise is probable irrespective of the option we think it best to choose.

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### **Notes**

1. The argument is perhaps also implicitly consequentialist to the extent that under non-ideal conditions the full scope and magnitude of harm ought to inform our ethical analysis.
2. These attitudes or beliefs may be of an evidentiary or non-evidentiary sort, and the indoctrination process may or may not involve propositional content. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere (Merry, 2005a) and will not pursue this further here.
3. One might construe indoctrination in a weaker and a stronger sense. The weaker sense would mean that persons have come to hold beliefs that are wholly or partly independent of the relevant arguments and evidence. Most people hold some of their beliefs in this sense. A much stronger sense of indoctrination would entail that persons are indoctrinated if and only if they are subject to a form of instruction that renders them unable to question a belief or makes it very costly for them to abandon it (e.g. because of fear of the consequences of doing so). I espouse neither definition in this article. The reason is that the former definition is too lax, while the latter definition is too stringent. I think it wiser to acknowledge a variety of middle positions, including the view that indoctrination can be temporary.
4. For example, Geoffrey Short agrees with Hand that if religious schools were guilty of indoctrination they should indeed be abolished, but he argues, puzzlingly, that religious schools are simply not guilty as charged.
5. To enumerate but a few of these difficulties, it has been argued that (1) autonomy is an overly-demanding good; that (2) a fixation with autonomy ignores the social and historical narratives that shape us; that autonomy (3) operates at cross-purposes with the cultivation of moral character; that it (4) potentially harms otherwise healthy parent-child relationships; (5) that it conflicts with commitments and other life projects; and (6) even that its putative requirements

run contrary to the necessity of heteronomy in the educational domain (Dworkin, 1988; Hand, 2006; MacIntyre, 1981; Mills, 2006; Schinkel, 2010; Stolzenberg, 1993; Swaine, 2012). Relatedly, intellectualized accounts of autonomy (such as those typical of rational choice theory) have largely been discredited for what they ignore about the impact of genetics on our personalities and temperament; the role of socialization from parents, peers, teachers, social media and the broader culture; and the almost inextinguishable presence of implicit bias (Kahneman et al., 1990; Trout, 2005). Each of these imperceptibly shapes our – largely unconscious and therefore unexamined – beliefs, assumptions and preferences. In addition, many liberals have defended the notion that a religious education and autonomy need not be incongruent (Burt, 1994; McLaughlin, 1984). Hence rather than ‘exposing’ children to a vast array of ideas or alternative lifestyles from which to choose, the *provisional* construction of a culturally coherent school environment may work in a child’s favor. These and other criticisms have inclined the defenders of autonomy to dial back what they understand autonomy to require. Characteristic is Brighouse’s (1998) more modest (if unhelpfully imprecise) conviction that: ‘commitments generated by non-autonomous processes become autonomous when the agent reflects upon them with an appropriate degree of critical attention’ (p. 728). Characteristic, too, is this equally modest observation from Callan (2002) that becoming autonomous ‘is as much learning autonomously to adhere to a conception of the good as it is learning autonomously to revise it’ (p. 137) But in dialing back the demands of autonomy, it remains unclear just what purpose it serves in the anti-indoctrination – or for that matter, in the liberal education – account. Indeed, one cannot easily discern a coherent position within liberalism itself: either it demands too much; or it can be fostered (if only provisionally) in religious schools; or it requires only that one satisfy a minimal level of critical reflection, in which case the threshold is easily met.

6. This does not mean, however, that most persons identified as – or even self-identifying as – Muslim are religious. As an identity label ‘Muslim’ is as often as not used as an ethnic term.
7. Muslims are of course not necessarily ‘minorities’ in the cities or neighborhoods where they live, but they are numerical minorities in all European countries, and their interests – broadly construed – are disproportionately underrepresented.
8. *Da’wah* concerns witnessing to the faith.
9. *Jihād* concerns spiritual struggle.
10. Bernard Boxill (2010), describes this not only as a capacity but as a moral duty. Even the oppressed, he argues, are obligated to ‘repudiate the insult and falsehood of oppression’ (p. 10).
11. In my own research (Merry, 2007) on Islamic schools, I found that school principals and teachers often had their most difficult challenges dealing with parents’ expectations. To the more conservative parents’ dismay, the Islamic school their child attended often refused to conform to their cultural, but also doctrinal, expectations. This was particularly the case with Islamic high schools, where there are many more possibilities to discuss (controversial) topics that interest teens. In other words, the Islamic school frequently succeeded in distinguishing itself both from the view of the parents as well as that of the wider culture.
12. Berenstain (2016) writes, ‘Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face’ (p. 570).

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