Religious Education and hermeneutics:
the case of teaching about Islam

"Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." (Berger 1972, 129)

"When we think of discourse that is constitutive and representative of "Islam"/Islamic"…we should … look *expansively* to the full gamut of genres and registers in which Muslims…expressed that which they regarded as being of existential meaning, moment and value" (Ahmed 2016, 304).

On October 6, 2010, the Intelligence Squared organised a debate in New York with the motion titled 'Islam is a religion of peace' (Intelligence Squared, 2010) Those in favour of the motion stressed the peaceful contributions made by Muslims, quoted selected Qur'anic verses that urged peace and appealed to the audience to support moderate Muslims by siding with the motion. Those against, came up with their personal stories of feeling subjugated in Muslim contexts, quoted selected sacred sources of Islam that discussed wars and appealed to the audience to help Muslims face the facts by rejecting the motion. Our concern here is neither with the analysis of the relative arguments of the two sides nor is it to work out the implications of the outcome of the debate which saw the motion being heavily rejected. Rather, our disquiet is with the title of the debate as 'Islam is a religion of peace' – a title which can be put more generally as 'Islam is…x or is not x'. This way of approaching Islam, that is by postulating what it is or it is not something, which can be applied to other religions as well, is widespread. A search on the Internet or a browse through school textbooks on Islam will show many examples: 'Islam is a religion of equality', 'Is Islam compatible with democracy?' 'Islam is incompatible with modernity' 'Are human rights compatible with Islam?' 'What is Islam's view of other religions?' When we start the discourse about Islam, or for that matter about any religion, in this manner, we commit ourselves to what has been called an essentialist understanding. This framing forces us to seek an essence that defines Islam.

Essentialism is the belief that a thing have a set of characteristics which make it what it is. Often this is accompanied with an assumption that how an idea or a phenomena was in its original state, determines its essence. In the case of Islam, for example, essentialism would

mean that it has a certain set of characteristics – beliefs, rituals, social relations – which make it what it is and which are to be found in its origins, that is in earliest texts which are seen to carry claims of revelation and accounts of the founding personalities, the Qur'an and the *Sira*, respectively, and the words of the Imams as well, in the case of the Shi'a Muslims. Consequently, later ideas, perspectives, practices are seen as incursions or deviations from the essence. Such an approach reifies Islam, that is it makes Islam, which is an idea, into a thing, almost akin to a physical object, which is then seen as either compatible or not with an equally essentialist ideas of democracy, human rights, modernity, peace etc. Once a discussion is framed in an essentialist form, the next steps usually are to find verses in the Qur'an or traditions of the Prophet, to make the case that Islam is or is not a religion of peace or compatible or not compatible with democracy or modernity. This is precisely what happened in the Intelligence Square debate and, as we will show below, often happens in the teaching of Islam in religious education in schools.[i]

This article attempts to do three things: the first is an exploration of the ways in which Islam is presented in an essentialist way (with a focus on Religious Education (RE) in England and Wales), leading to stereotypes and unsubstantiated generalisations. Second, it provides a critique of essentialism, and finally a case is made for the role of hermeneutics in the teaching and learning of Islam.

Essentialism in the study of Islam and its criticism
Though the teaching of any religion can be a difficult task, in the current political climate, where fear of terrorism is routinely associated with religiously inspired violence, the teaching about Islam can be particular challenging. Islam was singled out as the source of the most dangerous ideology by Lord Carlyle in his report on UK terrorism laws (Carlyle 2007) and has since become the focus of security fears on a number of levels (Miah 2017). An approach to the teaching of religion that essentialises Islam limits the ways pupils can understand and engage with the varied ways in which Islam has been understood in the past and present and the roles these understandings have played at personal, collective and civilizational levels. More problematically, the essentialisation of Islam can lead to an Othering, contributing to a political climate in which Muslims are often portrayed as the antithesis of the West and values associated with it (Sian 2013).

Islam is essentialised in religious education through a synthesis of a range of factors that can be observed in textbooks, examinations and agreed syllabi. This happens not only through the positioning of Islam within the education system but also through the way knowledge about Islam is constructed, so that the othering frames and then becomes the context in which discussion and analysis about Islam takes part.

Though the tendency to take an essentialist approach to Islam has been strongly challenged in the academia and in scholarly works on religious education, it continues to hold sway in schools, media [the debate referred to at the start of the paper is just one example], policy papers and even among sections of academic work. In scholarship on religious education, for example, many works critique the essentialism of Islam and argue for an RE that gives pupils opportunities to engage in the varieties of religious life (Jackson 1997, Greaves 1998, Hull 1995, Thompson 2004; Panjwani 2005). Many studies on Islam in education reiterate the view that the teaching of Islam and the representation of knowledge about Islam in the curriculum are constructed in a context where many among Muslim communities feel increasingly socially marginalised (Thobani 2010, Jackson 2014).

The way Islam is presented in resources, curriculum and examinations suggests that it is systematically essentialised throughout the RE (Revell 2012). This takes place through various mechanisms, both within the construction and production of subject knowledge as well as the nature of teacher engagement with the idea of religion and purpose of RE. In a recent research on RE, the project *Does RE work?* found that there was a mutually reinforcing relationship between examinations and the agreed syllabi, online resources and textbooks whereby an essentialist model of Islam is articulated and sustained. This means that even where opportunities exist for teachers to explore diversity and difference within Islam they are mostly ignored. Many Agreed Syllabi and the Non Statutory Framework for RE assume an essentialist model of Islam (Panjwani: 2005) which is then reflected in the majority of textbooks. Several Given that textbooks provide an invaluable window into the way contents of subjects are approached by teachers and the way codification of official curriculum knowledge takes place (Apple 1986; Andreassen 2014), several scholars have investigated how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in textbooks. Their work shows that Islam and Muslim communities are often stereotyped, subject to unsustainable generalisations based on one particular understanding of

Islam and in the eyes of many observers, racialised (Otterbeck 2005; Panjwani 2012; Revell 2015; Thobani 2010).

There are a number of processes by which a one dimensional and static understanding of Islam are perpetuated through the curriculum. The first is through the identification and fixing of ahistorical markers to religious identities. The fluidity and intersectionality of human identities is ignored in favour of an idea of community that is legitimised by its claims to sameness and coherence. Difference and plurality are therefore associated with conflict and cast the enemy of community (Bauman 2004). In her discussion of the idea of tolerance the political philosopher Wendy Brown describes how it is accepted that western societies are complex and impossible to understand through the lens of one single category (for example religion). In contrast societies in the non-western world are presented as simpler and comprehendible through simple characteristics or a single lens. (Brown 2006). In endless textbooks we can see the playing out of this narrative as adherence to the same markers (dress, beliefs, festivals, rituals) are identified as the defining characteristics of belonging to religious communities. Approaches to the teaching of Islam that define Muslims through a focus on essential, ahistorical features are in effect creating and legitimising a stereotype. This stereotype is then perpetuated in text books and materials that present the Muslim who regularly worships at a certain type of Mosque and who believes and interprets the Qur'an and key beliefs in certain recognisable ways as an ideal type. Even where diversity within Islam is recognised it is represented within cultural silos so that 'different types' of Muslims appear as a series of stereotypes, the liberal Muslim, the extremist Muslim, the Pakistani Muslim etc.

The positioning of knowledge about Islam as a world religion is the second way that essentialism creates othering through stereotypes. Though the model of world religions is presented as a neutral model of religiosity that emphasises common themes, practices and beliefs among the worlds' great religions, it has been critiqued for ignoring the complexity and syncretistic nature of religious experience (Greaves 1998, Jackson 1995). Further, it has been shown to be a construct, a consequence of European universalism and a product of discourses on empire towards the end of the eighteenth century that conceptualised every religion through the categories associated with Christianity (Masuzawa 2005, Nongbri 2015, Asad 1993). By postulating that each of the world religions has a set of core beliefs, practices, concepts that define and shape its essence, the model legitimises what Eide calls a 'hegemonic

representation'. She argues that essentialism not only presupposes that a particular group shares defining features that are common only to them but also, in the case of Islam, those features are created by a dominant discourse that privileges the values and practices of one religion over another. In the case of RE, the categories associated with world religions are rooted in Christian traditions so that the notion of a world religion, the prism through which pupils engage with all religions is one defined by Christian religiosities. In the context of RE, essentialism others Islam through establishing a series of narratives, reinforcing patterns of knowledge that create not just a stereotype but one which is defined by its difference from the cultural norm.

Portraying Diversity - a response to Essentialism?

A common way to critique essentialist understanding of Islam is to point out to the actual practices and the diversity of Muslims. In this regard, cultural and doctrinal diversity are most prominent. The new exam syllabuses, for example, require students to learn about doctrinal diversity among Muslims, as noted above. It is, however, not clear that this focus on diversity is effective and sufficient in countering essentialism.

A person holding an essentialist understanding of Islam does not have to deny the presence of diversity – be it cultural or doctrinal. S/he can accept diversity and yet deny its validity by claiming that it is the result of misunderstanding the 'real' Islam and its teachings. It is often not recognised that it is not only groups such as Taliban and ISIL who deny the validity of diversity by insisting on a 'real' Islam, much of the reformist movements in Muslim societies – be it modernist or traditionalist – share this view, thereby seeking to find the original, real teachings of Islam. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Muslims were seeking to retain the relevance of sacred texts of Islam in modern times, essentialist approach was a key rhetorical strategy to achieve this goal. For instance, in his book, *Ibtaal-e-Ghulami* (refutation of slavery), Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1818-1898), a well-known Indian Muslim reformer, argued that though slavery was common among Muslims of his time, it is contrary to the original spirit and teachings of the religion. In other words, in Sir Sayyid's view, slavery was not part of the real Islam but a mistaken practice that now needed to be abolished. This pattern of challenging existing Muslim practices by an appeal to original 'true' Islam continues in the reformist writings. When a modernist Muslim claims that the real teachings of Islam are compatible with modern understanding of human rights, and that those

practices among Muslims that undermine human rights are therefore contrary to Islam, s/he is taking an essentialist approach, of course so is the person who claims that Islam is incompatible with human rights. Hence, it seems that pointing out the diversity of Muslims is not enough to challenge the essentialist reading of Islam.

Towards a hermeneutical understanding of Islam

A better response to essentialism is to go further than simply present diversity. We need also to ask, why we have diversity of Muslims in the first place. If it can be shown that the diversity is not an add-on but a necessary feature of the way humans operate, make meaning and form traditions, then we may be able to help students resist the tendency 'to conceptualise and categorize by the elimination of difference, and conceptualize and categorize, instead, *in terms of difference*' (Ahmed, 2016, p. 302). To show this, we need to bring in the notion of hermeneutics.

In its long history, hermeneutics has been understood in many different ways. At its heart is the question of interpretation – be it the question of interpreting texts or taking human understanding itself as inherently interpretive. Hermeneutics deals with a variety of issues; philosophical 'about how we come to understand, and the basis on which understanding is possible'; literary 'about types of texts and processes of reading'; 'social, critical or sociological questions about how vested interests…may influence how we read'; linguistics and communication in terms of reception of texts and impact of readers and communities. (Thiselton 2009, 1). In most of its history, hermeneutics has largely been about textual interpretations, particularly dealing with religious texts. In the twentieth century, however, especially under the influence of Heidegger and more so Gadamer, a new understanding of hermeneutics emerged, called philosophical hermeneutics. As Gadamer notes:

> Heidegger's temporal analysis of human existence has, I believe, persuasively demonstrated that understanding is not one among several attitudes of a human subject but the way of being of Dasein[1] itself. In this sense I have used the term 'hermeneutics' here [in the book *Truth and Method*]. It designates the basic

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[1] The word literally means, 'being there' but in Heideggerian sense it has technical use referring to a being, such as humans, that is situated in the world and is aware of the situatedness and seeks to make sense of it.

movement of human existence, made up of its finitude and historicity, and therefore
it encompasses the whole of his experience of the world…' (quoted in Palmer 1969
page number?).

As Heidegger puts it, 'In interpretation…we 'see' it [what is at hand] as a table, a door, a carriage…' In other words, the process of making sense, of seeing something as a chair, or hearing the sound of our name, already involves an interpretive process. Interpretation is inescapable, be it in the reading of a text or glancing at the face a friend.

If interpretation is 'the basic movement of human existence', it follows that religious lives of people too are interpretive, a constant process of meaning making within and through religious tradition. The fundamental insight here is that the meanings of any text [understood in broadest sense to include non-literary texts as well as rituals, artefacts and even tradition] are not in the text completely. Nor are the meanings imposed by the reader completely. Meaning is created, they emerge through a dynamic interaction which Gadamer calls the 'fusion of horizons' of the reader and the text.

Suppose, aged 15, a student reads a novel given as part of a school assignment. The students will come to the novel not in a neutral fashion but within the larger context of schooling, assignments and all that goes with it. She will read the novel and will make sense of it in some ways, reacting to it, making a judgement about it. Suppose further that now aged 40, the former student comes cross that same novel, perhaps while going through old books in her home later in life. Is it the same novel? In a way it is – the physical text is identical. But, precisely because she has read the text earlier in a different context with even vaguely recalled sense and judgement made at that time, it is already a part of her mental universe, her historically situated being and hence, the novel is not the same novel, even before opening it, that she read at 15 for the first time. We do not read the same text twice just like we do not put our hand twice in the same river. The text and its context as well as the reader and her context have both changed and upon re-reading the novel she may now react and respond very differently, or not. The outcome, what meanings, sense and judgement will be made, cannot be predicted. The same process happens with everyone who reads this same novel with myriads of outcomes in terms of meanings. As Emberto Eco observes "A good book is more intelligent than its author. It can say things that the writer is not aware of."

This hermeneutical process, that meanings emerge in the dynamic engagement of text and reader, is the basis of the diversity that we see within the Muslim tradition, or for that matter in any religious context. When people in Makkah first heard the message of the Qur'an, it led to a variety of response – from its acceptance to indifferent rejection to active opposition – depending upon the ways in which the texts fused with the historically situated beings of the people who heard it. And this process of interpreting the message and responding to it a range of ways has continued. As Arkoun notes,

> "Revelation is not a normative speech that came down from heaven compelling man to reproduce indefinitely the same rituals of obedience and action; it is an offer of meaning for existence and can be revised…. It can be interpreted within the scope of the freely consented Alliance between man and God" (Arkoun 1992, ??pagenumber).

Those who grow up in communities that have come to accept the sacred character of the Qur'an, do not come to read it just as another text, but with a pre-understanding of it as a divine text rooted within particular traditions of which s/he is part of. The text does not become sacred as a result of reading it for the first time rather it is read for the first time as a sacred text.

The history of Muslims, as well as their societies today, is an ongoing fusion of horizons, of, on the one side, the range of sacred text and the entire textual, and broadly religo-cultural tradition around them which includes the languages, commentaries, history of ideas, socio-political-intellectual context and, on the other side, the diversity of people, the readers, the believers and their context which includes their background, intellectual and emotional makeup, socio-economic contexts, and historically affected conciseness. The continued fusions leads to the making of meaning in which both sides engage and shape each other and form the basis of resulting diversity in scriptural interpretations, theological orientations, political positions, moral persuasions and artistic appropriations.

Here we will give three examples to illustrate the above points.
First example engages with Qur'an's self-referentiality and shows how the very self-perception of the book calls for interpretive activity. Here is the verse seven from the third Surah, al-Imran:

He it is Who revealed to you the Book, in it are verses that are clear (mu<u>h</u>kam<u>a</u>t) - they are the essence of the book (Umm al-kit<u>a</u>b) - and others that are allegorical (mutash<u>a</u>bih<u>a</u>t). Those in whose hearts is doubt pursue the allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by trying to give explanations. And, none knows their explanation except God [.] And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge [.] say: 'We believe in them; the whole is from our Lord'. but only those with understanding really grasp. (Qur'an 3:7)

The first part of the above verse divides the Qur'anic verses into those that are clear and those that are allegorical. But, the verse does not tell us how to distinguish between the two. This decision is left to the reader. Next, though the reader is not told how to distinguish between the two types of verses, pursuit of allegorical verses has been discouraged. Similarly, the very last part of the verse calls for an interpretation, as depending on where the stop sign is put, the section can be read in two very different ways.[ii]

The second example is about a commonly asked question, what is Islam's teachings towards other religions. Note the essentialist formulation of the question. One might be tempted to say that the answer can be found by looking at the Qur'an. But, if we will turn to the Qur'an, we will not find an answer. Instead we will find a variety of attitudes towards Jews and Christians ranging from that in verses 2:62, which creates a bond among people from different religions that rests on faith in God and good deeds, transcending particular theological positions and identities, to that in verse 5:51 which admonishes Muslims against taking Jews and Christians as their friends. These different attitudes reflect the changing nature of relations between neophyte Muslims and Jews and Christians of that time, but they leave Muslims with the task of engaging in hermeneutical activities to work out which attitude they ought to take today.

The third example, pertains to the domain of the arts, poetry, which is often seen as outside the core of religious life. Yet, artistic appropriation of what are considered religious ideas is very common in Muslim contexts and provides yet another example of how sacred texts are constantly interpreted. In the following example from Rumi we see the enmeshing of the spiritual and sexual, the secular and the religious:

If anyone asks you about the houris; show your cheek, say: *"Like this!"*
If anyone asks you about the moon, ascend to the roof, say: "Like this!"
If anyone is in search of a fairy; show your own face;
If anyone speaks of the scent of musk; loosen your hair, say: "Like this!"
If anyone asks, "How do the clouds reveal the moon?"
Untie your shirt, knot by knot, say: "Like this!"
If anyone asks, "How did Jesus raise the dead?"
Kiss me on the lips and say: "Like this!"
           (Mawlana Rumi, *Kulliyat-I Shams-I Tabrizi*, ghazal quoted in Ahmed 2016)

The hermeneutical approach recognises the role of the text and reader in the making of the meaning. But it also recognises the role of the tradition and the communities in this process. The text, tradition and the community puts limits to what is accepted as legitimate interpretation at any time. Not everything goes. There are always boundaries put to what counts as acceptable. These limits can vary from community to community. In some communities there are narrow limits as to who can be a Muslim. In others, the limits can be very broad. But, and this is important to note, these boundaries are at a given time only and do not put limits to the possible future interpretations. That which was deemed Islamic at some point (say slavery) can become un-Islamic at another point; that which is un-Islamic today may become Islamic tomorrow. It is this sense that we can say that Muslims make Islam as much as Islam makes Muslims.

It should be clear by now why Islam can be seen inherently be neither a religion of peace nor a religion of war. Rather, though their engagement with texts and tradition, Muslims conceive and practice Islam as one or the other. Hence, the key question is not whether Islam is a religion of peace or not, but how have Muslims understood their religion to be in terms of war and peace. This reformulated question which starts with people and their understanding

    '*allows us to engage in two complementary analytical strategies. The first is "focusing inwards," by deepening our understanding of intentions, understandings, and emotions surrounding specific practices…What does it mean for a woman or man to follow…Islam. …But at the same time, we follow a second strategy, one of "opening outwards" to the social significance of, and conditions for, these religious practices. …This places an increased emphasis on religious*

texts and ideas, but only as they are understood and transmitted in particular times and places' (Bowen 2012, 3-4).

The biggest weakness of essentialist approach is its failure to recognise the hermeneutical process that results in the continued process of 'the formulation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge' (Asad 1986).

A very important implication of starting with believers, rather than religion, is that it helps redress a tendency in the study of the societies of Muslims, particularly at the school level, whereby 'so much *value* is given and *meaning* ascribed to the *prescriptive* and *restrictive* discourses of Muslims, such as law and creed, and so little *value* is given and meaning ascribed to *explorative* and *creative* discourses such as fictional literature, art and music' (Ahmed 2016, 303). This means that much focus has been given to rituals, doctrines and legal prescriptions and prohibitions. And, not enough attention has been paid to other ways in which Muslims have made meaning and expanded the idea of being Islamic: the artistic, the philosophical, the mystical and the literary. Exposure to these ways of making meaning allows the students to engage with a whole range of ways in which Muslims have seen themselves to be so, from those who define Islam in legalistic terms to those who venture in mystical and poetic explorations and from those who think of Islam as their primary identity to those who "while retaining some form of Muslim, if not Islamic identity,…lead secular lives and think through most of life's problems and challenges by means of secular worldview' (Martin 2010, 131; Panjwani 2017).

Conclusion: pedagogical implications

In this section, we wish to briefly draw a few pedagogical implications for our proposal to teaching about Islam hermeneutically. We will discuss two points, a practical pedagogical shift in teaching that can enable teachers to use the hermeneutical approach and implications for students. We plan to develop these ideas further in a separate article.

Early on in the article we listed a set of questions that are often asked about Islam: What is Islam's conception of knowledge? What is Islam's view on Christianity? Such questions seek a trans-historical statements about Islam: Islam sees knowledge as…. Or, according to Islam,

Christianity is… This presumes a perennial response that is assumed to be residing in the sacred texts of Islam. The pedagogical shift required by the hermeneutical approach is to change the question we ask. So, a far more fertile question is, 'how have Muslims understood the concept of knowledge in light of their religious texts/traditions?' Or, 'how have Muslims understood Islam's relationship with Christianity?' This form of question reorients the answer to social actors, their uses of texts and tradition, the processes of meaning making and the broader social contexts in which these takes place. This, in turn, leads to a simultaneous investigation of the 'intentions, understandings, and emotions surrounding specific practices…What does it mean for a woman or man to follow…Islam' and the 'social significance of, and conditions for, these religious practices.' (Bowen 2012, 3-4). In other words, into the ways in which the fusion of horizons of the text/tradition and believers takes place.

The approach also has significant implications from students' perspective. Firstly, it helps them gain insights into the complex ways in which meanings are made by the believers, resulting in the internal diversity that seems to be a feature of all religions. An understanding of the study of religion in schools that engages with what Aldridge calls a 'hermeneutical sensitivity' is certainly one that allows the possibility of different interpretations (Aldridge 2015, 191). Diversity is assumed because of the process of the hermeneutical circle, whereby individuals engage and are transformed as part of a dynamic process of reflection. Diversity becomes a necessary, not an add-on feature. Secondly, for those students who also belong to religious traditions, in this case Islam, it can be autonomy enabling as they will see that religions continue to remain relevant through the interpretative acts of believers and that, in their subjectivities, they too can participate in this process. Thirdly, as the meaning making processes are not restricted to producing morally good and sanctified acts of believers, it allows for a more historically sound presentation of a religious tradition whereby controversial practices, interpretations and outcomes can also be explored without ascribing these to religion per se but seen as a part of a religious experience of humankind.

We have tried to show that hermeneutical approach is a sound way to both conceptualise the phenomenon of Islam and a pedagogical opening to make sense of it. It may help overcome some of the weaknesses of the current ways of teaching about Islam.

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[i] In the study of religions this tendency can be traced back to the 19th century when the disciplines of religious study, comparative religion and Islamic studies emerged. There was a stress on textual and philological approaches to search for the authentically religious in "mythological, textual and doctrinal sources with an emphasis on the classic literary expressions of intellectual elites" (King 2017, 7).

[ii] Often, the Qura'anic translation done from a Sunni perspective will have the following translation: "And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, say: 'We believe in them; the whole is from our Lord'.but only those with understanding really grasp." And, below is the translation from a Shi'I perspective: 'And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, say: 'We believe in them; the whole is from our Lord'. but only those with understanding really grasp." (Qur'an 3:7)