



2014 Annual Curriculum for Cohesion Dinner

Address of Professor Royal Bhaskar

World Scholar Institute of Education, University of London

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It's a wonderful pleasure to be here this evening and I'd like to start by contextualising Matthew's book ['A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-Faith World: a philosophy of success through education']

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415813198/> which our Patron [The Rt. Hon. Sadiq Khan MP] has so generously praised.

This book starts from the situation of Muslim youth today in the UK and many other Western contexts and the situation is really a very unpalatable one.

They [many Muslim young people] are caught in a sort of cleft stick and are faced with a dilemma between identifying with on the one hand a materialist culture, a disenchanted and aspiritual world view, in siding with the materialist West or, on the other hand, identifying with a world view with reactionary elements and that is out of kilter with contemporary norms. This is a difficult dilemma and they become either materialists or dyed in the wool traditionalists.



Matthew in his book is trying to repair this situation and what he is trying to do is to give an interpretation of authentic Islam using the tools of contemporary Critical Realism.

Contemporary Critical Realism is different from the other philosophies of the modern and post-modern epoch in that it vehemently stresses the priority of being to knowing.

Critical Realism stresses the necessity of nature and society for individual wellbeing; it tries to put forward a philosophy which is operable, which is not an academic exercise but gives you a talk which you can actually walk and, finally, Critical Realism puts forward a view of the world as enchanted and spiritual.

It does this by moving through three phases which are called basic critical realism. Basic Critical Realism is really the philosophy of science, social science and ethics. Dialectical Critical Realism is a critique of the history of western philosophy and the philosophy of meta-reality, which refocuses on spiritual matters.

Using Critical Realism, Matthew formulates a philosophy which he calls Islamic Critical Realism.

Islamic Critical Realism is designed to reverse the decline in the prestige and reputation of Islamic philosophy and Islamic civilisation from those wonderful days in the Middle Ages when it acted as the carrier of



civilisation: from the ancient world, from the east, China, India and elsewhere, to the Renaissance and to modernity.

Islamic philosophy and Islamic civilisation then preserved and brought civilisation to Christian Europe. Matthew's philosophy is designed to bring Islam into the twenty-first century and make it a towering presence within the world of faiths.

In formulating Islamic Critical Realism, Matthew differentiates between Islam - authentic Islam - from political Islamism, Wahhabism in one form or another and, of course, from the extreme violent terrorism associated with Isis and others.

These two tasks of: (1) bringing Islam into the 21st century and (2) making a clear differentiation between authentic Islam as reinterpreted using Critical Realism against current ideologies of Islam are what Matthew is looking at.

Now there are three points in particular that are worth mentioning here about Matthew's sense of this.

The first is that Matthew makes use of what we Critical Realists call our 'Holy Trinity'. There's nothing particularly holy about it. It is actually (1) *ontological realism* which means a belief in the reality of the world, (2) *epistemological relativity* which means a belief in the social and relative infallible nature of our cognitive claims about the world and (3) *judgemental rationality* which is the position that holds that it is possible to



argue for and against any particular interpretation in order to arrive at the best interpretation.

So it is very important to hold these three concepts together and use them for what Matthew calls the fulcrum of Islamic critical realism. In other words, you have a picture of Islam as a faith in a family of faiths and are able to communicate and dialogue with people of other faith and no faith at all. In such a position, you can produce very good arguments for Islam but you also will accept that there are valuable insights in other faiths or atheism or other world views. In such a position, you will not claim to have a monopoly on knowledge even while you remain true to what you have decided is the best interpretation.

This position enables us to situate Islam in a coherent way for religious education and for the whole field of comparative religious dialogue.

Matthew also stresses the generative role of absence and incompleteness in social pathologies. He has identified the effect of what is *not* taught in school and this he calls the absent curriculum. The absent curriculum exacerbates feelings of alienation and a lack of integration that many Muslim kids feel.

Matthew puts forward a programme to remedy this alienation by presenting the absent curriculum in history, in religious education and in citizenship studies and I think this is very, very valuable.



Matthew also uses Islamic Critical Realism to show how Muslim people can work with people of other faiths to offer an enhanced understanding of society and to initiate and sustain rational programmes for changing society for the better of which Islam has a very proud tradition.

There are many features of Islam which stress equality and are firmly oriented towards social justice. Muslim kids should feel that they can be at the forefront of the struggle to unite the human race and the creation of a society in which there is a flourishing for all. We could say that the free flourishing of each was in fact a condition for the free flourishing of all.

This is the critical realist social goal to which we should, so critical realism argues, orient ourselves.

Of course it is a world, a sort of paradise compared to what we have now but it is a paradise which has already been intimated in many of the finest fruits of Islamic civilisation.

You can get a feeling for this paradise in the poems of Rumi, in the great Mogul architectural wonders such as the Taj Mahal and in the scholarship and care of Islamic doctors, mathematicians and philosophers in the Middle Ages when they occupied such a pivotal role in restoring and preserving the fruits of civilisation.

This is what I think we should all be striving towards. I think Islam can play a great role in this struggle, and I think Muslim kids can be leaders in these struggles. Rather than wandering off to Syria to fight in someone else's



war they can become engaged in the struggle that we all have for a better and more just society.

Thank you.