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I'm actually going to show a PowerPoint because as a learner myself I find visual things helpful, I don't know if you do or not but I hope so. So thank you all very much for coming, we've intentionally kept our presentations as brief as possible because we want to have two discussion periods when, in the first one, after my brief address now you can address particular questions that may already have been popping up in your minds to the panel. And then we're going to have two more speakers briefly and then we're going to have a much more general debate and discussion about the nature and status of faith in a multi-faith society and Islam in particular. So that's coming. So thank you all very much for coming to join the discussion.

And those of you that don't know about critical realism as philosophy have already heard mention the seminal work of Roy Bhaskar who was one of the, if not <u>the</u> founding figures of critical realist thought from which critical realists have all taken a great deal. And he is now, as Michael said, he is now a real determinate absence in the future of critical realist thought, whereas until November, when he died he was a powerful determining presence and absence is a theme that critical realist thought has foreground in a very important and significant way.

Bhaskar used to quote with reference to his own contribution the work of Isaac Newton when he wrote in a letter of 1676, "If I have seen further it
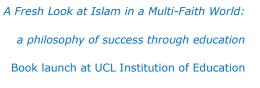
is by standing on the shoulders of giants." And my own work and this book claim to look a little bit further it its own field of the relationship through education of Islam and Muslims to modernity and post-modernity, by standing on the shoulders, not only of Roy himself who was my own mentor and guide in matters intellectual and beyond that, but also indeed on the shoulders of the members of the panel who you have briefly heard talk tonight who have in their own fields and with their own wisdom, applied, adapted, interpreted and expanded critical realist thought so that it now covers an enormous range of fields and endeavours: legal studies – Alan; Paddy in catholic thought; Nissan in developing Jewish theology and thought and so on and so forth. So thank you so much all of you for coming and for your contribution to my work.

So in this session I'm going to be a bit more technical. I'm going to outline the core claims of my book, *A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-Faith World: A Philosophy for Success through Education* and then I'm going to give a taster at quite a fundamental level, rather than the meta-real level that Mervyn was referring to of some of the core principles of the philosophy of Islamic critical realism, which is a philosophy which I intend to under labour through humanity's educational provision to help young people establish a firmer and more nuanced sense of themselves and their relationship, both potential and actual, to multi-faith society.

So just a little bit about me so you know where I've come from. I was a history and Islamic studies teacher for a period of 15 years, and I'm very happy to see ((Ibrahim Adessy?)) here, who at one point was one of my students, so that's a wonderful thing to see. I had a background in theology at Trinity College Cambridge. I actually embraced Islam in the early 1990s partly as a result of my theological studies. I later, after my school teaching career, did a PhD in the relationship of national history

curriculum to the emerging identities and possibilities of Muslim young people in Britain. And then I establish a project called *Curriculum for Cohesion* which looks to build that platform of success for young people through humanities education. I'm acted as an expert witness in Islamic theology. And I'm originator of this work of Islamic critical realism.

So the first part of my book which I'll sketch out for you just so you've got some idea what you can look forward to, I hope! The first section deals with the historical relationship of Islam to modernity and post-modernity which, as Mervyn said, have been geopolitically and conceptually problematic for Islam and the Muslim majority world. Broadly speaking this section outlines the fact that since the 16th century the Muslim majority world has attempted to embrace the paraphernalia of modernity, for example, banks and nuclear weapons, whilst internally the gradual breakdown of the balance of power between the class of religious legal scholars – the Ulama – and the ruling classes, internally and externally the pressures of colonialism prevented the majority of the Muslim majority world from responding effectively and authentically to the essence of the technological social and spiritual changes that have characterised the world since the Western Enlightenment.

As a result of this, the section explains, many Muslims today perceive or intuit an unessential mismatch between the practice of their professional lives in non-religious contexts within secularising societies in particular and the articulation of their religious faith. This has been exacerbated, I claim, by the absence of a contemporary philosophy of Islam to perform its traditional function as it did in the period of the Muslim Enlightenment of mediating between religious principles and the actualities of daily life.
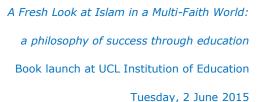
This in turn, this absence, has generated a series of malign and unnecessary dichotomies such as Islam versus the West, global citizenship to the Ulama versus national citizenship that block a mutually healthy relationship between many Muslims and particularly the young Muslims with multi-faith societies and vice versa.

Nevertheless as educators and despite, I think it's fair to claim, the Islamic world being at a spiritual and intellectual low point, as educators we need to remember that Muslim young people can be engaged and reinspired by a tradition of academic excellence that was the patrimony of Islam and Islamic civilisation. So we might note historically in this regard that Islamic civilisation between the period 700 to 1400 made a seminal contribution to the rebirth of learning in what was then known as the Christian west, obviously the Christian renaissance, for example the rediscovery and expansion of Aristotelian natural empiricism by Ibn Rushd, who is known in the west as Averroes, through the scholastics into Europe. Muslim young people need to be reconnected and take confidence from a tradition of intellectual excellence of which one core generative mechanism was creative theological philosophy. In *A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-Faith World* I propose that the philosophy of Islamic critical realism can be the basis for this revitalising creative theological philosophy applied for Islamic self and other understanding in a multi-faith world and then applied systematically through a humanities education. So the first part of the book sets up this historical context.

The second part of the book outlines the philosophy of Islamic critical realism which is a philosophy of religion which is attempting, and this is important, to underlabour for Islamic self-understanding and practice in multi-faith society. So it is not a reforming project, it doesn't in any way touch, if you like, the consensually agreed apparatus of Islamic doctrine
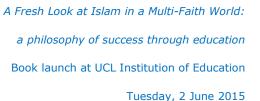
or practice, which has been honed over centuries, but it works underneath to bring that body of connection between the human and the divine alive again in a new way, in new contexts. Islamic critical realism is based on the seminal insights of critical realist thoughts which Alan has outlined for us as applied in particular to Islamic practice and belief. So unlike Alan who made the very fair case that of course critical realists in some senses was a secular spirituality or to bring alive a secular spirituality, I actually apply it to bring alive the properties and tendencies that are already inherent in orthodox Islam.

So there are five foundational principles of Islamic critical realism, the first is this idea of underlabouring, we'll come to it. The second, critically, perhaps the core of it is this idea of philosophical and religious seriousness. The third is the application of the fulcrum of critical realism to Islamic practices. The fourth is adducing a critical realist interpretation of the Qur'an, including Qur'anic meta-reality in which unity trumps duality at a substratum level. And then finally dialectical critical realist interpretation of the life of the Prophet Muhammad which is designed to bring alive the life of Muhammad to show how Muslims could be reconnected to a peaceful but transformative agentic engagement with the world.

So I'll briefly go through these, this is the first. The principle is a word that is actually derived from the English philosopher John Lock, this word underlabouring. So a shared meta-theoretical commitment, underlabouring. The primary purpose one could say of critical realist thought is to underlabour. And this means to bring conceptual and philosophical parity to other intellectual and more practical enterprises. So for example critical realist thinking has turned its hand to the natural and social sciences, environmental activism, disability studies, conflict

A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-Faith World:
a philosophy of success through education
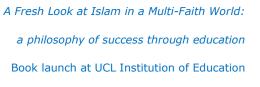Book launch at UCL Institution of Education
Tuesday, 2 June 2015

resolution, by clearing away erroneous and redundant philosophical concepts that lie in the path of knowledge.

This philosophical commitment to, in Lock's words, clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge, and to a comprehensive conception of practices of human flourishing is precisely shared by Islam and its tradition of philosophy, both Kalam which is more theological and Falsafa which is more philosophical. Within this tradition brought together of Kalam and Falsafa theological philosophy, Islamic critical realism aims to provide an intellectual bridgehead between the post enlightenment intellectual conditions of modernity and the revealed principles of Islam by clearing away unnecessary, un-Islamic dichotomies such as Islam versus the west, natural science versus religion, that set up the intellectual conditions in which demi-reality, that is to say highly causative falsehood, prevails. And this ideal of demi-reality is very important in my book and as Mervyn said it's a way I think that Islamic tradition can contribute to the body of critical realist thinking.

So the second principle is the idea of seriousness. That is to say that Islam and critical realist philosophy are both philosophically serious. That is to say they demand a knowledge practice consistency which is essential to their very nature. So Islam is serious because once you have committed to a doctrinal believe you have committed at the same time to a set of practices, for example, the so-called five pillars of Islam. It is the balanced interpenetration of practice and belief that in Islam is believed to generate the human relationship with God. So the phrase for example in the Qur'an, ((0:44:37?)) those who believe and do right action are connected by a particle ((Wu?)) which indicates and intrinsic partnership between practice and belief and also an extrinsic relationship.

Similarly critical realism from Bhaskar's earliest imminent critique based on the intelligibility of experimental activity, which I won't go into today but it's outlined in the book in full, has demanded philosophical seriousness in knowledge practice consistency roughly speaking Hume's denial of the ontology of causal laws and deep natural structures, led him to a position where he could state, there is no reason why he should not leave a building by the first storey window. But of course if that was a serious position Hume should have done it at least 50% of the time and he never did this. Thus Humian actualism and modernist derivatives of it extrude thoughts from the experience of the world and are therefore philosophically unserious. Likewise extreme Islamist interpretations of Islam do exactly the same, the extrude Islam from the actual conditions of contemporary life and are therefore unserious.

By contrast the marriage of philosophical and religious seriousness is at the beating heart of Islamic critical realism. The reclaiming of philosophical and religious seriousness by young Muslims is a key to the recovery of a contemporary world view that is consistent with Islamic practice and an Islam that is critically consistent, rather than conformatively consistent with the conditions of modernity.

So the third principle is the fulcrum of critical realism namely the interrelationship of the principles of ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationalism as applied to the dimension of the spirit and God.

So ontological realism, roughly speaking ontological realism claims that being exists independently of knowing in the natural world and in the social natural world that being exists relatively independently of knowing in that once one comes to know people and humans and structures rather
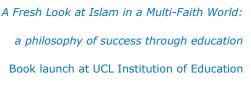
than objects that act of knowing changes things. However in the spiritual dimension we can say by analogy of application that God can be said to exist, or indeed not to exist, independently of our knowledge or belief in Him or indeed in the circumstances Her. By analogy unseen spiritual reality such as the human and divine spirit or the divine will can exist and be allowed to exist philosophically independently of our knowledge or belief in them. Ontological realism philosophically about God does not claim a ((preoria?)) that God exists although of course as a Muslim I believe that He does but the fact and realities of existence are not dependent on our knowledge of Him. Therefore ontological realism about God makes God talk philosophically plausible in the classroom and indeed in many cases necessary.

So ontological realism of its nature necessitates epistemological relativism and in this scheme of Islamic critical realism epistemological relativism pertains to different faith traditions and traditions within traditions and different individual points of view within traditions that all direct their gaze upon the ontological realities of faith. In this understanding all interpretations of the ontology of faith are subject to radical human fallibility and have the potential to be wrong which does not affect the ontological reality of the phenomena to which the traditions pertain. In other words by the principle of epistemological relativism the fact that God has been known differently does not mean that the God that is know is different. The fact that God and his words, if they exist, have been interpreted wrongly does not imply that God does not exist. Critical realists call this conflation of being with knowing importantly which the book explains, the epistemic fallacy.

And finally within this application the connection of ontological realism with epistemological relativism necessitate judgemental rationality. In

other words there exist, or can be discovered, coherent rational, emotional, experiential grounds for choosing or justifying one mode of spiritual access to these divine realities, as opposed to another. It is therefore possible with this fulcrum of critical realism both to claim that God has accessed and revealed his being through a variety of traditions to choose or commit to one tradition as opposed to another whilst drawing on the insights of other faiths. In the perennialist language we can allow using this framework for the fact that many paths do indeed lead to the higher truth, to the absolute and to God, without thinking or claiming that they are equally effective or truthful routes. And this is obviously important for children from particular faith backgrounds because you don't want to leave them just thinking that all religions are the same both morally, ethically or alethically. It is a framework which I believe can potentially engender ontological confidence in children and depth together with epistemic and interpretive humility in Muslim and other children.

This explanation of the fulcrum of Islamic critical realism gives us the fourth principle and this is that the Qur'an, the revered book that Muslims turn to for guidance, can present a critical realist vision of the universe. For example we can take the Qur'anic verse, in the creation of the heavens and earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for people who have used their intellects, the famous Qur'anic verse, and this verse perfectly describes the relationship which I've just outlined between ontological realism in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night to day, epistemological relativism are signs and judgemental rationality for people who use their intellects. Islamic critical realism reclaims the fact that critical rationality is a core an essential quality of serious Qur'anic belief and approach to the Qur'an. Unthinking belief or blind following is not an Islamic state of mind.

And the final basic principle that's outlined in the second section of the book, in order to revitalise and underlabour for Islamic practice, is the idea that it is credible to make the claim that the Prophet Muhammad's mission in the world was critical realist in that he applied Islamic teaching to transform social structures, for example, tribes, which he recognised were real and existed prior to individual agency and yet that they were open to radical human agentic transformation. Indeed one can describe the prosecution of this transformative mission as a paradigmatic exemplar of the dialectics of critical realism enacted in history.

So very briefly we have the first moment that Alan described earlier, the moment of non-identify of differentiation, of distinction. And in this period of Muhammad's life belief was distinguished from unbelief for example and social welfare was distinguished from social neglect and malpractice. However this led at the second stage to absence so there was an absence, non-identity with tribal beliefs led to an absence of status, a persecution and indeed the absenting of Muhammad of his community from the very society of Mecca.

However this process of absence in itself generated the third stage, the period of totality through emigration when the Prophet Muhammad moved his community to Medina where the entirety of the Islamic paradigm was established including patterns of worship and daily behaviour ibadat and ((Wahamalet?)) in Arabic. And in this period the solidarity of all people of Abrahamic faiths was made constitutional within Islam.

And finally this stage, this dialectical moment gave way to the fourth dimension, the moment of transformative praxis when the Arabian peninsula was transformed from a region based upon tribal differences to one connected through being a community of faith.
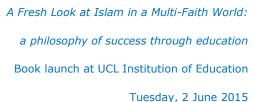
This example of Muhammad thus delineated it can help young Muslims understand that a peaceful engagement with transforming society does not mean to be consigned to passivity, persecution or marginality.

So the third section of the book, and since we're in an education context, and I hope maybe there are some history teachers here or religious education teachers, deals very much with how this theory can be applied to create a connected and serious humanities education.

So let's briefly look at one idea that comes out of that section, using again this fulcrum of critical realism: ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgemental rationalism.

So in RE this philosophy is funnelled down to create a pedagogical framework. So ontological realism becomes spiritual being. Epistemological relativism becomes spiritual knowing and understanding and judgemental rationality becomes spiritual deliberation, experience and commitment.

These in turn are accessed through three pedagogical modes. In the extra-faith mode the teacher introduces the child to looking at the fields of absolute concerns, independently of any sort of religious commitment, or lack of it indeed. Religious phenomena, metaphysical realities, things that are claimed by religions to exist are introduced to children. And this mode of understanding can bring the entire classroom within the field of absolute concern. This gives onto the inter-faith mode, which is the comparative mode of exploring different religious phenomenon from the point of view of different faith traditions and positions within traditions – this mode of course has received a lot of attention over the last 20 years. However for this to be a serious and connected provision it needs to be

brought alive through the intra-faith mode. And the intra-faith mode is the mode for exploring in depth religious experience for children bringing their own experience of the absolute into the classroom and for allowing them and giving them the critical tools to make personal decisions and judgements about the things that they believe. It's the relationship of these modes which can be the basis of a serious religious education.

So if we look at the idea of the afterlife, in the extra-faith mode we could discuss the nature, if it exists, of an afterlife in religions. Is there any empirical evidence for it? If it did exist what would its nature be? In the inter-faith mode we can look at different conceptions of the afterlife – heaven and hell, garden and fire, so on and so forth. And in the intra-faith mode we can say, "What does it mean to believe in the afterlife? How might such a belief affect the world as we live in it now and here? And by what criteria can someone judge the plausibility or lack of it of different conceptions of what happens after death?

This framework can be the basis of an RE that both does justice to the faith of young people and engenders in them epistemic humility with intellectual curiosity and the ability to learn from the other.

This can also be a framework for exploring highly contentious issues such as the role of martyrdom in violent Jihadist extremism, without stigmatising or singling out a single faith community.

So if we look how the same fulcrum could be applied to history education. So ontological realism in a history education provision means providing a broad interconnected ontology of events as they have happened in the past. They really did happen and they were massive, they were vast, they were interconnected. And especially in terms of a relatively narrow
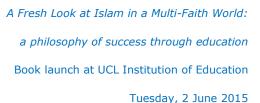
national curriculum that we now have it means absenting what I theorise in this book as the absent curriculum.

The absent curriculum is everything that could have been but has not been included in the teaching of history in a classroom and it exists at the level of national syllabus, of departmental schemes of work or what happens in the classroom from the departmental schemes of work. And it's critically important if we are to create an ontologically embracing historical provision that these absences are absented to create a greater totality of provision. However this ontological realism is connected to the necessity for diverse interpretive perspectives and indeed these need to be brought to life themselves by rich and varied pedagogies, school visits and so on and so forth, and introducing children to the possibility of historical decision-making and the criteria of critical plausibility.

This framework can be one tool for enabling a historical provision that is more socially inclusive because it is more ontologically embracing and epistemologically challenging. It can provide all children with valid and interesting points of access on our national history and on the history of our interconnections with the rest of the world, including vitally at this time the Muslim majority world.

It can also be applied in citizen education. In the extra-systemic mode we ask the big questions, what is the nature of governance? What is a citizen? Let's not assume anything, let's throw it all up for grabs. What does it mean to be a civic part of any society?

In the inter-systemic mode we can say, what are the different types of government and citizens? How do they compare? We could introduce

children to democracy of different types – to oligarchy, to theocracies, to any number of hybrid versions of these things. How do they compare?

And finally we can say if we are to plump for liberal democracy, what is in its central nature that makes it better than other things? Let's not assume a priority that it is, let's get buy-in from children to democracy on their own terms and let's allow Muslim youngsters to see how the frameworks and traditions of governments that have existed within Islam can enrich and cross-fertilise and find a place within democratic systems.

So finally there are four big things which I think the book expounds and articulates which I would like you to maybe think about and if you are to get the book to reflect upon. The first is the claim that the spiritual dimension is one real component of an articulated, holistic ontology of human being along with the intellectual, emotion, civic, instrumental dimensions, the spiritual dimension has to be accounted for in education. This spiritual dimension requires a serious humanities education if this dimension is to contribute properly to human flourishing.

The third point is the absence of a serious philosophy of Islam has hindered the relationship of Islam with modernity. And the final point, and I think it's an important one, is given the presence of a theological philosophy such as Islamic critical realism and Islamic critical realism claims no monopoly on the theological philosophical enterprise, and if it, with its attendant application through humanities education, Islam and Muslims can both benefit from and be beneficial to the just critical operation of liberal democracies and indeed other types of society.

So thank you very much for listening and now we'll have a discussion.