

Negotiating Faith: Education Among Muslims in South Africa

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Abstract: This critical examination of Muslim religious education in South Africa situates it within its historical development and identifies key tensions and challenges in the field. Muslim South Africans form a heterogeneous community shaped by diverse historical trajectories and theological orientations. Although South Africa formally transitioned to a non-racial democracy in 1994, the enduring legacies of racial classification, class inequality, and spatial segregation continue to structure social life. Drawing on qualitative research, including institutional policy analysis, oral interviews, digital and social media sources, and secondary literature, this article critically examines the range of educational institutions that have emerged in response to shifting political conditions, socio-economic change, and the evolving needs of Muslim communities. These institutions include traditional madrassahs, Islamic private schools, Darul Uloom (theological seminaries), private academies, academic programmes at tertiary institutions, and online offerings delivered locally and through international networks. The proliferation of religious education coincides with a period in which Islam has become more visible and central in the lives of many Muslim South Africans, intensifying demand for religious learning across age groups and social classes. These institutions face notable shortcomings, particularly regarding the relevance of their curricula and pedagogical approaches. More broadly, they raise a fundamental question: can the teaching of a single, exclusive religious tradition—aimed at reinforcing religious identity—be reconciled with the goal of cultivating inclusive democratic citizenship in a culturally and religiously plural society?

Keywords: Islamization, religion-in-education policy, democratic citizenship, Darul Uloom, madrassahs, Deobandi education, Islamic private schools

Zusammenfassung: Diese Untersuchung ordnet die muslimischen Religionserziehung in Südafrika in den historischen Entwicklungskontext ein und identifiziert zentrale Spannungsfelder und Herausforderungen. Die muslimischen Südafrikaner bilden eine heterogene Gemeinschaft, die durch unterschiedliche historische Entwicklungen und theologische Ausrichtungen geprägt ist und in der die Folgen von Rassenklassifizierung, Klassenungleichheit und räumlicher Segregation nachwirken. Auf der Grundlage qualitativer Forschung untersucht dieser Artikel die Bandbreite an Bildungseinrichtungen, nämlich traditionelle Madrasas, islamische Privatschulen, Darul Uloom (theologische Seminare), private Akademien, akademische Programme an Hochschulen sowie Online-Angebote. Die zunehmende Verbreitung religiöser Bildung fällt mit einer Zeit zusammen, in der der Islam im Leben vieler muslimischer Südafrikaner an Sichtbarkeit und Bedeutung gewonnen hat. Diese Einrichtungen weisen erhebliche Mängel auf, insbesondere hinsichtlich der Relevanz ihrer Lehrpläne und pädagogischen Ansätze. Allgemeiner betrachtet werfen sie eine grundlegende Frage auf: Lässt sich die Vermittlung einer einzigen, exklusiven religiösen Tradition – die auf die Stärkung der religiösen Identität abzielt – mit dem Ziel vereinbaren, in einer kulturell und religiös pluralistischen Gesellschaft eine inklusive demokratische Bürgerschaft zu fördern?

Schlagwörter: Islamisierung, Religionspolitik im Bildungswesen, demokratische Staatsbürgerschaft, Darul Uloom, Madrasas, Deobandi-Bildung, islamische Privatschulen

I. Introduction

Islam is a minority religion in South Africa, where Christians make up 85% of the population. Estimates consistently put the Muslim population at about 2%, which, based on the most recent 2022 census (Stats SA, 2025), indicates a population of approximately 1,262,000 people. South Africa, as a white-minority-dominated unitary state, was formed as the Union of South Africa in 1910. It was made up of the two British colonies of the Cape and Natal, and the two Afrikaner (Dutch) republics of the Orange Free State and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. South Africa became a republic dominated by a White minority government outside the Commonwealth in 1961 and a non-racial democracy in 1994 with Nelson Mandela as the country's first Black president.

Historically, the South African population has been categorised by race. While the designation has changed over time, the current racial categories are Black African, White, Coloured, and Indian/Asian. South Africa's population in June 2025 was estimated at 63,1 million. In terms of the racial demographics, the majority of the population was Black African, accounting for about 51,6 million people (82 per cent of the total population). The White population was estimated at 4,5 million, while 5,3 million people identified as Coloured and 1,6 million as Indian or Asian (Stats SA, 2025).

Muslims in South Africa constitute a diverse and internally differentiated community, shaped by distinct historical trajectories. Islam has been present in the region since at least 1658, when enslaved and exiled Muslims from the Dutch East Indies were brought to the Cape as slaves under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company. Despite periods of repression and restriction, Islam endured and gradually took root in the colony (Tayob, 1999, pp. 21–39). The presence of Islam in what is now South Africa significantly expanded in the nineteenth century with the arrival of Indian indentured labourers and traders who came of their own volition, and settled primarily in the British colony of Natal and the Afrikaner-dominated Transvaal (Vahed and Bhana, 2015, pp. 1–36).

This layered history has produced a multiplicity of Islamic traditions, theological orientations, and institutional forms. Within this broad historical and social framework, Muslims access religious education from a range of overlapping sources, including *madrasahs*, Islamic private schools, *Darul Uloom*s (theological seminaries), private academies, tertiary institutions, and, increasingly, online programmes offered both locally and internationally. This article traces the historical development and current challenges of Islamic education in South Africa, examining how institutions have adapted to changing political and social conditions from the colonial era to the present. By critically evaluating how Islamic education shapes contemporary forms of identity, knowledge production, and citizenship, this article contributes to wider debates on religion, education, and social transformation in postapartheid South Africa.

Given the diverse Islamic educational settings, religious education, as used here, refers to both the teaching of the tenets of Islam (knowledge transmission) and to Islam as a worldview that actively shapes how students understand and live their identities as “good” Muslims. South Africa's postapartheid constitution promotes diversity and human rights while accommodating multiple religious belief systems (Chidester, 2003). The National Policy on Religion and Education (2003) implemented Religion Education as a non-confessional subject within the curriculum, teaching about different religions in a comparative way without emphasising the truth of any particular religion. The policy aimed to promote a common humanity, diversity, and tolerance, supporting both pluralism and inclusive citizenship (Nogueira-Godsey, 2016, pp. 229–231). Religion was considered important for individual development and for South Africa's moral regeneration (Tayob, 2018, p. 82).

While the aims of the policy may be viewed as progressive, its implementation has been uneven. Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis (2016) show that responsibility for implementation in state schools was largely

devolved to individual schools and principals, many of whom avoided enforcing the policy due to concerns about potential conflicts among different religious groups. Similarly, Naidoo highlights the tension between “liberal assumptions of citizenship and religious perspectives,” noting that citizenship education often intersects with competing, and sometimes conflicting, claims of religious identity (Naidoo, 2011, p. 28). In private schools, confessional religious instruction remains permissible, allowing the teaching of specific faith traditions and shaping identity and social belonging (Tayob, 2018).

This raises a fundamental question: can the teaching of a single, exclusive religion aimed at strengthening religious identity be reconciled with the goal of fostering inclusive democratic citizenship in a religiously and culturally plural society? Can South Africa successfully balance strong religious identity formation with the demands of diversity, tolerance, and shared civic values?

2. Islam in South Africa: Arrival and Settlement

The first Muslims in South Africa formed a significant portion of the slave population at the Cape, imported from the 17th century to the early 19th century. The region was originally inhabited by the San, Khoi, and Bantu-speaking peoples when the Dutch East India Company established a supply station at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, the future site of Cape Town. The Dutch imported slaves from Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, the Mascarene Islands, and Mozambique. Among them were some who were strong in their faith and served as imams. In 1694, Shaykh Yusuf (d. 1699) of Macassar came as a political exile. He was a learned scholar in the Shafi'i madhab¹ and played an important role in consolidating Islam in the Cape. Tuan Guru, which means “revered teacher” (d. 1807), came to the Cape from Indonesia in 1780 as a political prisoner and established the first mosque and *madrasah* at the Cape (da Costa & Davids, 1994, p. 23).

The racial classification of “Coloured” emerged in the nineteenth century to describe the population resulting from miscegenation and intermarriage among the Cape's diverse peoples. Muslims among this Coloured group were referred to as “Mohammedan”, “Mussulman”, “Malay”, or “Coloured Muslims” in Dutch and British records. In the twentieth century, “Malay” became the accepted term, primarily for linguistic rather than ethnic reasons, as Malay was the lingua franca of the Indonesian archipelago and was widely spoken among the descendants of slaves. This label was contested by younger “Malay” Muslims during the apartheid period as they preferred the politically progressive label, Black (Jeppie, 1987).

The success of sugar cultivation in Natal's coastal areas led to the importation of 152,184 indentured migrants from India between 1860 and 1911. Approximately 15,000 of them were Muslim (Vahed, 2000, p. 192). Free migrants from Gujarat on the western coast of India arrived from the mid-1870s, settling in Natal and, in smaller numbers, in the Transvaal and the Cape. Strict immigration laws virtually banned Indian immigration from the early 20th century and kept the number of Indians to a minimum. Indian Muslims were incorrectly called “Arabs” because most adopted Middle Eastern dress, which set them apart from other Indians. Social and economic conditions on plantations made it difficult for indentured Muslims to fulfil the many requirements of Islam, but members of the Muslim commercial class built mosques and *madrasahs* within a few years of their arrival and consolidated Islamic practices (see Vahed, 2006).

During the apartheid era from 1948 to 1994, Cape-based Muslim communities were racially classified as Coloureds, and they and Indian Muslims constituted the majority of the Muslim population, with a

¹ This is one of four major Sunni *madhāhib* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence), the other three being the Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali *madhāhib*. All four *madhāhib* are recognised as legitimate interpretations of Sunni Islamic law. While they differ on certain legal details and methodologies, they share the same core beliefs and sources: the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad.

small number of African Muslims. According to the 2001 census, the last to include religious affiliation, there were 74,701 African Muslims, accounting for 12% of the total Muslim population. Muslims were spatially segregated by race in areas defined under the 1950 Group Areas Act, which shaped mosque life, schooling, and associational culture. In the democratic era after 1994, new patterns of migration from Asia and Africa, as well as class mobility, further diversified Muslim identities and institutional forms, but have largely left the racial structure intact (Davids, 2019, p. 46).

Islam has a long presence among the indigenous African population, even though the numbers are small. Academic Tahir Sitoto made the critical observation that the historiography of Islam in South Africa

“foregrounds and associates Islam almost exclusively with what I call Muslim communities of the Asian diaspora. I’m using the term Asian diaspora in a very generic way. And so Islamic history in South Africa, in a sense, is told through the narrative of the Muslim communities of the Asian diaspora. But that’s not an accurate history. It erases Black African Muslim presence in Islam in South Africa” (Soweto Muslim Association, 2025).

Haron, in documenting the expansion of the African Muslim community from 1961 to 2001 and its impact on changing the “face of Islam in South Africa,” intriguingly suggests the possibility of the presence of Muslims in this region prior to the arrival of slaves in the seventeenth century. da Costa and Davids have shown that among the slaves who came to the Cape were African Muslims from East and West Africa and Madagascar (da Costa & Davids, 1994, pp. 12–15).

Indians have been the face of Islam in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, while Malays dominate in the Cape. The public Indian Muslim space in South Africa is wedded to South Asia. There emerged a marked division in the 1970s between the Barelwi tradition, which includes populist practices such as visiting the shrines of saints and offering communal greetings to the Prophet (See Sanyal, 2012) and the reformist Tablighi/Deoband tradition (see Metcalf, 1978).² These traditions, along with the neo-Sufi movements that took root from the 1990s, are spiritually linked to religious luminaries and seminaries in British India (Vahed, 2003).³

Sitoto (2017) contends that African Muslims “remain on the margins of Muslim community life” owing to their relatively small numbers and the limited institutional and financial resources available to them when compared to Indian and Malay Muslims. In his view, African Muslims are perceived by many Indian Muslims as “a pathological case,” as “passive objects” awaiting upliftment. He also contends that Indian and Malay Muslims’ control of most Islamic institutions in South Africa, including mechanisms of financial redistribution, allows them to act as gatekeepers who can restrict African Muslims’ access to funds (Sitoto, 2017).

Apartheid spatial racial geography remains intact, and the lack of investment in African townships makes it difficult to cultivate a strong and cohesive Muslim communal identity. According to Sitoto, Muslim organisations were “oblivious to the need to nurture a dignified community”: second-genera-

² The Deoband movement, founded in 1866 at Darul Uloom Deoband, and the Tablighi Jamaat, founded in the 1920s by the Deobandi-aligned Muhammad Ilyas, sought to purify Islamic practice by removing customs and innovations (*bid’ah*) seen as emerging from local cultural traditions. Their aim was to reform Muslim society by encouraging a return to what they considered the authentic teachings of Islam, as revealed in the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition.

³ Neo-Sufi Islamic movements sought to reconcile mysticism with stricter adherence to Islamic scripture and reformist ideas. They emphasised personal moral reform, inner purification, and scriptural orthodoxy while rejecting practices such as shrine rituals and withdrawing from society.

tion African Muslims were “conscious of their Muslim identity, but [...]” where do they go” in the absence of mosques and *madrassahs*? “Those kids are born Muslims, but culturally, where do they belong?” (Sitoto, 2017).

These divisions and inequities highlight the racial and class stratification within Muslim South African communities, providing context for the next section of this chapter, which examines the range of institutions that offer Islamic education - *madrassahs*, Islamic schools, *Darul Uloom*s, and tertiary institutions - tracing their historical evolution and assessing their roles in the postapartheid period.

3. *Madrassahs: Elementary Religious Education*

Muslims across the Islamic world employ a variety of methods for the religious education of children. Some of this occurs informally, such as the Islamic guidance within the family or through children attending lessons with local religious teachers, who may lack formal training but conduct classes in their homes. In this chapter, the term *madrassah* refers to these informal or structured programmes of elementary religious instruction. By contrast, institutions of higher Islamic learning, often termed *madrassahs* in other contexts, are here referred to as *Darul Uloom*, which is the common usage in South Africa.

Most Muslim children in South Africa attend *madrassahs* in the afternoons, after completing their day at secular schools. Historically, these *madrassahs* were typically held in private homes or attached to local mosques, reflecting their informal, community-based character. In the contemporary period, however, the many private Islamic schools now incorporate structured *madrassah* programmes within their institutional framework, while independent afternoon *madrassahs*, organised into graded levels with formal curricula and assessments, have also been established to meet the growing demand for formal religious instruction (Waghid, 2009).

The curriculum teaches the rudiments of Islam and core rituals rather than fostering critical thinking. Historically, and to date, children were taught to recite the Qur'an, memorise short chapters (surahs), and perform rituals such as spiritual ablution (wudhu) and prayer. They learn the Arabic alphabet and the sounds of the letters, then combine letters into words, to enable them to read the Qur'an, though few understand Arabic. Arabic is taught to be read, not understood. In the first half of the twentieth century, among Indian Muslims, *madrassah* education included the teaching of the vernacular languages, Urdu and Gujarati.

The first formal *madrassah* schools in Durban were attached to the two large mosques established by traders. The Memani Mosque School, with four teachers, was one of the two formally registered Muslim schools in Durban, as recorded by the 1904 census. The Memani school was a few blocks away from the Surti West Street Mosque School, which had two teachers. In 1909, the school at the West Street Mosque was renamed the Madressa Anjuman Islamic School. The majority of 'ulamā⁴ and *madrassah* teachers in Natal and the Transvaal were imported from India and conversed in Urdu and Gujarati. The 'ulamā' refers to a body of Muslim scholars who are experts in Islamic sacred law, and to a member of such a body. In 1922, the 'ulamā' of Johannesburg formed the Jamiat-ul-Ulema, which has played a leading role in organising *madrassah* education in the Transvaal (Vahed & Waetjen, 2025, pp. 37–38).

The Anjuman sought to upgrade religious education by refurbishing their buildings and improving the quality of education. On 22 December 1947, children were examined at the invitation of the trust board and found wanting. The examiner, S. A. Muslim, proclaimed himself “shocked to ascertain that throughout the *Madrassah* the standard of work done is so terribly bad that there is hardly any teaching

⁴ The term 'ulamā' (singular: 'ālim') refers to Muslim religious scholars who are traditionally trained in Islamic sciences such as Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology, and legal interpretation. They occupy positions of religious authority within Muslim communities as teachers, imams, jurists, and issuers of legal opinions (*fatāwā*).

worth mentioning.” The Anjuman invited Professor Ishrat Husain of Aligarh University, who held an MEd from Leeds University, to review its *madrassah* education. Husain examined fourteen institutions, concluding that the major flaw was the failure to apply modern educational theory to religious instruction. He drew up a 17-point plan for reforming Islamic religious education that would apply child development psychology and modern pedagogical theory (Vahed & Waetjen, 2015, p. 160).

Bengali Wahajur Rasul followed Husain in an attempt to implement the recommendations. Rasul’s holistic approach included the following: “a) a modern school building with an attached playground of goodly size; b) noise-proof rooms for class teaching, c) a small library with necessary educational equipment; d) a few good-honoured, healthy-minded teachers with adequate knowledge of the subjects they are expected to teach.” Critical both of lesson content (which was little more than rote memorization), and of the lengthy time that children were required to sit in class, Rasul introduced proper time-tabling and examinations (Vahed & Waetjen, 2025, p. 169). In the decades that followed, educational methods were gradually modernised and a standard curriculum introduced.

The formation of the Muslim Charitable Foundation in 1982 under the leadership of Mahmood Dawood, then a lecturer in Arabic at the University of Durban-Westville, brought further improvement in Natal. *Madrassah* teachers, Dawood recounted, “had no formal education, no educational psychology background.” Muslim Charitable Foundation courses commenced in February 1984 and offered fundamental instruction on methodology and education psychology to teachers from across the province of Natal (Dawood, 2011).

The syllabus for *madrassah* education in Natal was standardised by the Islamic Educational Organisation of South Africa (IEOSA) and the Muslim Charitable Foundation. IEOSA was founded in 1985 by Qari Ahmed Y. Lockhat⁵, a South African graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo and trustee of the Hajee AM Lockhat Wakuff Trust⁶. IEOSA drew up a structured Islamic education curriculum with proper textbooks, established an institution to train teachers, and monitored and supervised *madrassahs*. *Madrassahs* have undergone a massive transformation, with most teachers now formally qualified, well-versed in Islam, and following a rigorous, detailed syllabus. There is a double burden on many Muslim children who attend secular schools during the regular hours and *madrassahs* in the afternoons.

4. Enriched Content

Despite Muslim parents embracing secular school and tertiary education in the 1960s, *madrassahs* have “continued to provide a primary source of preserving the Islamic faith and practice in South Africa for more than three centuries” (Mohamed, 2019, p. 27). According to Davids, *madrassahs* played a “fundamental role in propagating Islam and Muslim identities.” Muslims had arrived mainly as slaves, political prisoners, or indentured workers. In this context, *madrassah* education was integral in “preserving their community and its specific way of life, rather than finding accommodation within the existing dominant ethos” (Davids, 2019, p. 46).

Madrassahs continue to occupy an important place in Muslim religious life in South Africa. For many, they remain the primary institutions through which children acquire foundational knowledge of the Qur’an and ritual practices. *Madrassahs* also function as spaces for socialization into a shared communal identity. They have evolved considerably from earlier periods when instruction was often informal and delivered by individuals with limited formal training. Most contemporary *madrassahs*, especially those in urban and middle-class settings, follow structured programmes with clearly defined syllabi. Learners

⁵ A Qari is a person who is trained in the proper recitation of the Qur’an.

⁶ A Wakuff trust (also spelled *wakf* or *waqf*) is an Islamic charitable endowment in which property, money, or other assets are permanently dedicated for religious, educational, or public welfare purposes in accordance with Islamic law.

are divided into age levels, use prescribed textbooks, undergo regular assessments, and must meet certain benchmarks before progressing to the next stage. Teacher training has improved, with instructors given either professional training or completing specialised courses in Islamic studies and pedagogy. At the same time, Muslim communities are heterogeneous, and the quality and structure of *madrassah* education vary according to race, class, locality, and resources.

While *madrassah* education is an important vehicle for knowledge transmission and Islamic identity formation, critics have pointed out that, despite the tremendous community effort, progress has been uneven, and that shortcomings include an excessive focus on ritual and basic doctrine in the curriculum and a pedagogy that lays too much stress on rote learning. The education provided is detached from local reality and lacks contextual relevance. There is a failure to address gender dynamics, and the time that is spent in the *madrassah* after a full day of secular schooling places a burden on children. Waghid additionally notes that *madrassah* educators did “not consider it their function to prepare learners as democratic citizens.” *Madrassahs* focus on inculcating “in learners the tenets of Islam, such as cleanliness, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage – that is, teaching learners to be good ‘practical’ Muslims” to secure their “place in paradise in the afterlife” (Waghid, 2019, p. 121).

5. Faith-Based Schooling

Attempts were made to introduce Muslim secular schools in the early twentieth century. In the Cape, Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman established the first state-aided Muslim school in 1913. It was called the Rahmaniyyeh Institute and ran a *madrassah* on the premises in the afternoons. There were 15 Islamic state-aided schools in Cape Town by 1956 (Davids, 2019, p. 47).

During the 1940s and 1950s, Muslim leaders in Natal, under the auspices of the Anjuman, attempted to combine religious and secular education. They opened the South Coast Madrassah State Aided School, Ahmedia State Aided Indian School, Anjuman Islam State Aided School, and Orient Islamic High School. This was known as an integrated system of education since limited religious instruction was provided in these secular schools. The government ended this concession when other faith groups requested similar concessions (Vahed & Waetjen, 2015, pp. 115–120). According to Davids, “in the context of the state-supported dominant Christian ethos,” these schools aimed to preserve Muslim identity and way of life and thus “cultivate a separate form of citizenship” (Davids, 2019, p. 46).

During the apartheid era, when education was rigidly racialised and had a Christian National ethos, Muslim children attended schools designated for Indians, Coloureds, or Africans, and they were typically a minority within those institutions. Due to the efforts of the Durban-based Arabic Study Circle and the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville, Arabic was introduced in 1975 as an option in schools in Natal and the Transvaal (now Gauteng), which were under the control of the Department of Indian Affairs.⁷ The Orient Secondary School in Durban was the first school to introduce Arabic. Thirteen of its pupils wrote Arabic as a matric subject in 1979 (Medar, 1987, pp. 63–84).

In terms of secular education, the postapartheid period has witnessed some complex changes in schooling which can only be outlined briefly here. There has been, on the one hand, significant growth in private schools, referred to as independent schools in South Africa, including the establishment of Islamic private schools. Changes in state education have also affected Muslim pupils. During apartheid, learners generally attended racially based schools, but the early 1990s saw the emergence of Model C schools, formerly White schools, which became non-racial. Many Indian children began attending these

⁷ The Department of Indian Affairs was established by the white government during the apartheid era to administer Indians separately from other racial groups. It formed part of the broader logic of apartheid in which different racial communities were governed through separate state structures.

schools, while African learners began enrolling at state schools formerly reserved for Indians. Muslim children follow diverse educational pathways: many attend public (Model C) or private schools that are non-racial, multicultural, and non-denominational; others enrol in (independent) Islamic schools where the student body is almost exclusively Muslim, but the curriculum largely follows the official state syllabus; and still others attend (independent) schools that place a strong emphasis on the transmission of Islamic knowledge alongside an elementary knowledge of English and arithmetic.

The postapartheid proliferation of private or independent schools has included faith-based schools, among Muslims and other religious denominations, as well as non-denominational profit-making educational enterprises. This mushrooming of private schools is due to a range of social, religious, and educational factors. There is a perception among parents that, as a result of the influx of township (read African) children with inadequate prior education, the high teacher-learner ratio, and inadequate resources, the quality of state education has dropped (Davids, 2019, p. 49). Some parents also oppose the teaching of religion at state schools, sex education, and fluid gender identity. According to Hoel (2016), the *‘ulamā’* warn Muslims “against the atheism and moral corruption (of girls and women in particular) that would ensue from the new curricula introduced in state schools and universities” (p. 37).

The founders of Islamic schools insist that their agenda and focus “involves positive community involvement and, as such, contribute to the public good of society” and as part of “diverse and pluralist societies, they serve to enhance democracy” (Davids, 2019, p. 59). In his study of religious schools in Cape Town, Cawood (2018) found that the

“ideal student at the Muslim school strongly privileges a communalised religious dimension which regulates all other aspects of her identity.... Under the regulation of this dominant ‘religious identity,’ the ideal student construct also privileges a particular societal dimension in which harmonious and successful contribution to broader society is prized. This societal dimension includes emphasis on academic specialisation and societal integration” (p. 221).

There were over a hundred Islamic private schools in South Africa by 2026. Many are members of the Association of Muslim Schools, established in 1989 and a founder member of the National Alliance of Independent Schools (Naisa), which articulates the voices of all national private school bodies in South Africa. There is no archetypal Islamic school. Differences are evident across regions and communities, reflecting diverse understandings of Islamic education and the social and economic contexts in which these schools operate. Islamic schools range from modest community efforts in working-class townships with few resources to those based in wealthy areas with state-of-the-art facilities, on par with the finest private schools in the country. Islamic schools differ in their organisational structures and the extent to which they emphasise religious instruction or secular education.

Islamic schools have also been established by foreign entities. The Al-Azhar Institute’s schools in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban were established by the Al-Azhar Al-Sharif Mission of Egypt. They follow the Al-Azhar syllabus, and Al-Azhar maintains a mission in South Africa comprising a number of *shuyukh* i. e. religious teachers, seconded to teach at schools under Al-Azhar’s supervision (<https://www.alazharschool.co.za/>).

The Turkish Star Colleges are a network of private schools under the Horizon Education Trust (HET) shaped by Fethullah Gülen’s philosophy of *hizmet*, which centres on the idea that faith should be expressed through selfless service to others and to society. *Hizmet* emphasises personal development, community upliftment, and peaceful engagement across cultural and religious differences. The first school was the Star International High School in Cape Town, established in 1999, and by 2020, the HET was running six schools nationwide (Inal, 2020)

Fataar (2005) situates changes in education within the broader transformation through which Muslims “have been negotiating the post-apartheid democratic environment,” (p. 25) which must be understood in relation to both global and local processes of Islamization shaping multiple aspects of Muslim life. Tayob (2011) concurs with this assessment but adds that changes in educational patterns are not restricted to Muslims and should be situated within the wider shift towards the decentralization of schooling among all sectors of South African society (p. 5).

Critics of Islamic schools argue that they are often market-driven and primarily accessible to middle-class families, thereby reproducing class divisions within Muslim communities. Such schools may also limit students' opportunities to engage meaningfully with the wider democratic and religiously plural society. Fataar (2019) observes that in more strictly religious institutions, students are “socialised into adopting a narrow moral behavioural range” intended to insulate them from the perceived corrupting influences of the modern world. A few schools do, however, create opportunities for learners to engage in “constructive and progressive interaction with the secular democracy in South Africa” (p. 28).

Fataar (2019) highlights a further tension: Islamic schools are intended to cultivate moral and religious propriety at a time when broader society is perceived to be experiencing moral decline. This, however, can place learners in a difficult position, as they are “caught between the moral culture of the Muslim community school and the prevailing norms of their townships” (p. 15). Learners are thus required to navigate between the more narrowly defined religious identity promoted within the school and a “less constrained leisure identity” outside it, often without the resources to reconcile these competing expectations into a coherent sense of self.

It is difficult to categorise precisely those independent Islamic educational institutions that place strong emphasis on the transmission of Islamic knowledge alongside basic instruction in English and arithmetic. These institutions primarily serve girls and female adolescents. They differ from afternoon *madrasahs* in that they follow the year calendar, daily timetable, and organisational structure of formal schools. At the same time, they are distinct from *Darul Uloom* institutions, where students typically reside on campus. Scholars who have examined these forms of Islamic education generally classify them as *madrasahs* in their formal writings.

McDonald (2023) offers a case study of a girls' *madrasah* in Johannesburg, which, for the purposes of her research, she refers to as Madrasa Warda. Founded in 1996 by three male ‘*ulamā*’, the institution was led by a male principal trained in Karachi, Pakistan, within the Deobandi tradition. The administrator was a woman who had graduated from a Deobandi women's seminary in Gauteng. Although the teaching staff was almost entirely female, ultimate authority rested with an all-male governing board, the main decision-making body. One of the founding members told McDonald that the curriculum was designed to prepare students to become good mothers, good housewives, responsible people taking their place in society. The Qur'an provided the framework for the curriculum, and the prescribed texts were authored exclusively by men.

McDonald's ethnographic research reveals a more nuanced dynamic than the formal curriculum might suggest. Although female teachers used male-authored canonical texts, they interpreted and taught them through their own perspectives and everyday experiences. Female students, in turn, actively constructed their own understandings of the tradition, often reframing the texts' meanings. Classroom discussions frequently engaged contemporary issues that shaped the students' daily lives, including social media use, beauty practices such as waxing, and questions surrounding marriage, suggesting that learning was not confined to abstract doctrine. By contrast, the themes showcased in the year end jalsa, a public event featuring student performances, songs, poems, and skits, tended to reaffirm the founders' intended messages and the authority of religious texts, presenting a more conservative image to the community beyond the *Darul Uloom*. McDonald (2023) concludes that the women participated in the

ongoing development of Islamic doctrine, even while working within traditional male dominated frameworks.

Kader (2022) similarly observes that although *madrassah* education in South Africa is “underpinned by patriarchal ideologies” and seeks to train Muslim girls and women in the role of homemakers, (p. 68) some of the female teachers she interviewed adopted pedagogical strategies that foregrounded women’s rights within an Islamic framework. She concludes that although these educators operated within patriarchal Deobandi institutional settings, they nonetheless exercised agency by empowering their female learners and fostering a heightened consciousness of women’s rights in Islam (Kader, 2022, pp. 70–71).

6. **Darul Uloom: Theological Seminars**

The ‘*ulamā*’ play a central role in shaping Islamic consciousness and identity in most Muslim societies, serving as custodians of religious knowledge and interpreters of doctrine. Until the 1980s, the majority of ‘*ulamā*’ in Natal and the Transvaal were either Indian nationals or had received their training in India, while those in the Cape generally pursued their studies in Egypt. The first South African Darul Uloom, a formal theological institute of higher learning, was established in Newcastle in northern Natal in 1973. The Darul Uloom Newcastle, College for Higher Education trained scholars in the Hanafi Deobandi tradition, which regarded Western secular education with deep suspicion, characterising it as “poisonous knowledge” (Moosa, 2015, p. 51).

In the decades that followed, *Darul Ulooms* were established across the country (exclusively for boys and men), representing different schools of law (*madhāhib*) and theological orientations. This expansion was driven partly by the growing demand for locally trained religious leaders and partly by structural factors within the religious economy. Many graduates, finding limited employment opportunities after completing their studies, establish smaller *Darul Ulooms* of their own, sometimes with a handful of students, particularly if they have access to family resources. In this way, seminaries are steadily multiplying throughout South Africa.

Darul Ulooms specialize in advanced training in the classical Islamic sciences. Core subjects include Islamic theology (*‘aqidah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and detailed commentaries (*tafsīr*) on the Qur’an, alongside an intensive engagement with hadith literature, a narrative record of the sayings or customs of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Students usually work through prescribed canonical texts composed centuries ago. This rigorous textual training is designed to produce scholars capable of issuing legal opinions i. e. fatwas, leading congregations, and providing religious guidance within their communities. Students also learn Arabic and Urdu, the latter because many of the works they study were authored by Indian scholars. Beyond textual instruction, the ‘*ulamā*’ increasingly influence everyday practices relating to family life, marriage, inheritance, finance, and even political engagement among Muslims (Moosa, 2015, pp. 13–22).

Separate *Darul Ulooms* were established for adolescent girls and young women. The Madrasah Mu’ainul Islam in Zakariyya Park, approximately 30 km south of Johannesburg in Gauteng, was established in 1985 and has an annual enrolment of around 250 female students, mostly in their teen years. Graduates of the institution are serving as teachers and *aalimahs* (women scholars) in institutions across the country, or running their own *madrassahs* for children, adolescent girls or women. For the vast majority of Muslims in South Africa, there is no expectation or acceptance of women graduates of *Darul Ulooms*

leading congregations and providing religious guidance to males, though there have been rare exceptions.⁸

The *aalimah* course is an intense, 5-year course (<https://mmisa.org/about-us/the-curriculum/>). The Al Hudaar Girls *Darul Uloom* was opened in Lenasia, Johannesburg, in 2015, and offers a 5-year *aalimah* course in English and Arabic, combined with secular education, as well as life skills courses such as cooking, computer literacy, and sewing (<https://alhudaarfoundation.org.za/girls-darul-uloom/>).

While *Darul Ulooms* play an important role in sustaining Muslim communal life in South Africa, critics have raised concerns about the curriculum, pedagogy, gender, and social relevance. One criticism is that the curriculum is not equipped to address the problems facing Muslim societies in the 21st century. Ahmed and Sukdaven argue that the curriculum does not include a study of “the objectives of the Shariah, the Islamic approach to politics, anthropology, ethics and reasons for disagreement amongst the scholars, research methodology and contemporary issues relating to finance and medicine” (Ahmed & Sukdaven, 2021, p. 2). Moosa called for intellectual reform to train ‘*ulamā*’ to respond to present-day challenges, think critically, be equipped to interpret texts in contexts, and to foster engagement with the wider South African society:

“The absence of an updated and robust rationalist dialectic blended with a Sunna-centred approach (based on the example of the Prophet) to religious knowledge has only fomented an exclusionary faith-centred or hidebound received tradition-centred mindset. This mindset generates extraordinary hurdles and road-blocks for religious discourse to engage with the challenges of the time. Institutional reforms, without substantive intellectual reformation, tend to yield fewer discursive dividends but a surfeit of apologetics” (Moosa, 2015, p. 175).

Some of the strongest criticism of the ‘*ulamā*’ has been produced by businessman Ismail Omar, a lawyer by training. Omar was not involved in any Muslim organization, but he became increasingly frustrated with the behaviour of the ‘*ulamā*’ and circulated a communication he had written, entitled ‘The Molvi and the Moron’, with the molvi being a learned Muslim cleric and with himself as the moron. With somewhat sarcastic humour, he questioned the quality of some ‘*ulamā*’:

“In some cases school learners not meriting seats in the professions, were sent to uloom as a vocation of last resort. There being generally no academic admission criteria in the uloom resulted in even intellectually ill-equipped individuals enrolling and eventually graduating and being given the mantle of immense authority in pronouncing on Islamic matters. The lack of scholarly mettle required of those assuming the mantle of guiding others in matters of deen (faith), sometimes had absurd results. I once had to subject myself to a lecture in which the alim directed that the weather report was not to be read, as it was haram because it prophesied the future. Some interpretation!” (Omar, 2012).

Omar also observed that ‘*ulamā*’ were “divided into factions pitted for or against a particular view [...] armed with their own firebrand coterie of alims firing salvos at one another, often describing those of different views as being out of the fold of Islam” (Omar, 2012). Omar was arguing that most *Darul Ulooms* train scholars in a specific Islamic paradigm, and these graduates spend their lives preaching

⁸ There was a strong backlash from large sections of the Muslim community when African-American scholar and theologian, Amina Wadud, delivered the Friday khutbah at the invitation of Imam Rashied Omar at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town in 1994 (see Hoel, 2013). Professors Sa’diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat of the University of Cape Town published an edited collection of women’s khutbahs (2022). Their stated aim was to move women from being marginalised and spoken about by male scholars to articulating their own perspectives and experiences. They argue that the Qur’an does not explicitly prescribe the gender of the person leading congregational prayers. However, women who assume such roles are often denounced as unbelievers and, in some instances, subjected to threats of violence.

that form of Islam. This, and the fact that ‘*ulamā*’-led bodies are often competing for limited resources, has resulted in deep divisions among Muslims.

Omar criticized the ‘*ulamā*’ who “extol in the triumph of the fatwa against almost everything around us”, while failing to notice that “others pillage and plunder our lands, destroy our culture, kill, debilitate and deflower our innocents” (Omar, 2012). In a combination of sarcasm and despair, Omar noted the failure of the ‘*ulamā*’ to come to grips with reality in their preoccupation with minutiae:

“We spend thousands of man hours debating whether the audio-visual receptacle/monitor commonly referred to as the television/desktop/laptop /mobile is *haram* or *halal* whilst Obama and his warriors sit in safety in the citadels of technological power around the same monitors and at the press of buttons, kill and maim millions of innocent Muslims whose only sin is their refusal to accept the diktat of subjugation in their own countries” (Omar, 2012).

Underlying the rhetoric, Omar had a serious purpose. In later communications, he observed that large numbers of ‘*ulamā*’ were either unemployed or earning meagre incomes and struggling to make a living. He proposed that *Darul Uloom*s incorporate practical and vocational skills into the *aalim* course in order to better prepare graduates for contemporary economic realities, but his proposal was dismissed. The positive response from many Muslims to his 2012 communication encouraged Omar to establish the House of Ummah, a discussion forum for Muslims. Through approximately 160 communications and two booklets — *House of Ummah: In Quest of Leadership in Empowering the Ummah* (2013) and *Islam: Oligarchies and Ummatis. One Ummah, One Vision* (2014), Omar elaborated on his ideas regarding the detrimental impact of divisions within the ‘*ulamā*’ leadership, the need for reform, and the socio-economic challenges facing the Muslim community.

While there are some exceptions amongst the ‘*ulamā*’, overall, traditional *Darul Uloom* are reluctant to modify their curricula. Rooted in inherited pedagogical models, they view the preservation of classical texts, modes of reasoning, and chains of transmission (*isnads*) as essential to safeguarding orthodoxy. The inclusion of contemporary social sciences, critical theory, or engagement with secular disciplines is perceived as potentially diluting that authenticity. This has important implications for Muslim society more broadly since the ‘*ulamā*’ form the backbone of religious authority: they serve as imams in mosques, teachers in *madrasahs*, and issuers of fatwas (legal opinions). They shape how Islam is understood and practised at the grassroots level, including questions of gender, family, finance, citizenship, and contemporary ethical challenges. While continuity among the ‘*ulamā*’ has helped preserve strong links to classical Islamic scholarship, it has also contributed to the conservative intellectual and moral formation of many Muslim South Africans.

7. Academic Study of Islam

The ‘*ulamā*’ play a central role in shaping Islamic consciousness and identity in most Muslim societies, serving as custodians of religious knowledge and interpreters of doctrine. Until the 1980s, the majority of ‘*ulamā*’ in Natal and the Transvaal were either Indian nationals or had received their training in India, while those in the Cape generally pursued their studies in Egypt. The first South African *Darul Uloom*, a formal theological institute of higher learning, was established in Newcastle in northern Natal in 1973. The *Darul Uloom Newcastle, College for Higher Education* trained scholars in the Hanafi Deobandi tradition, which regarded Western secular education with deep suspicion, characterising it as “poisonous knowledge” (Moosa, 2015, p. 51). Christian theological and biblical studies dominated the study of religion in South Africa until the 1970s. The University of South Africa, a distance-learning institution, began teaching Islam at the tertiary level in 1955. Mainstream White universities subsequently introduced courses in Islamic Studies in their Christian theology departments. According to Muhammed Haron (2014), “the courses were aimed to alert potential priests and missionaries to Islam’s false truth

claims and were taught by lecturers who were missionaries who had no formal training in Islamic studies and therefore adopted a distinct missionary approach" (p. 54).

The University of Durban-Westville, established by the apartheid regime in 1961 for Indians, initially had departments of Science of Religion, Oriental Studies, Sanskrit, and Arabic. Aspects of Islam were taught in both the Science of Religion and Oriental Studies courses, and the university established the first fully-fledged Islamic Studies department in South Africa in 1974 under the headship of Pakistani Salman Nadvi, who held a doctorate from the University of Chicago. This department established the Centre for Research in Islamic Studies in 1980 and published an annual journal, *Al-'Ilm*, from 1981 to 1998 (Dangor & Vahed, 2025, p. 473).

While the programme produced several hundred graduates, Dangor's interviews with former students revealed important limitations in the department's pedagogical approach. Although it was generally acknowledged that the course offered a useful overview of Islamic history, theology, and the diversity of Muslim societies, it was also noted that the material tended to remain largely descriptive and informational, and failed to engage in critical analysis or rigorous academic debate. Students indicated that the curriculum did not sufficiently interrogate key concepts or expose them to contemporary debates and complained that little attention was paid to local expressions of Islam or to the lived experiences of South African Muslims (Dangor, 2021). With desegregation in the 1990s, the majority of the student population at the University of Durban-Westville became African, with the result that student numbers in Islamic Studies declined. The department was shut down, with a course on Islam taught under the Department of Religious Studies, which has a strong focus on Christian Theology, albeit with a very contextual approach across gender, theology, and biblical studies. (see Dangor & Vahed, 2025).

Rand Afrikaans University — now incorporated into the University of Johannesburg — established a Centre for Islamic Studies in 1979: this centre became a significant site for critical Islamic scholarship, particularly after Professor Farid Esack joined in 2000. Although Esack initially received a traditional Islamic education in Pakistan, he later completed postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom and Germany, and has held academic appointments at leading international institutions, including Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Hamburg. He is the author of several influential works, such as *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, *On Being a Muslim*, and *An Introduction to the Qur'an*. His scholarship spans Islam and gender, liberation theology, interfaith relations, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and questions of socio economic justice. Beyond academia, Esack has been an outspoken advocate for interfaith dialogue; HIV/AIDS activism through the organisation Positive Muslims; and gender equality, having served as a Commissioner for Gender Equality in South Africa (see Okawa, 2021; Fauhatun, 2025).

The Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI) at the University of Cape Town is an interdisciplinary research unit dedicated to the critical study of Islam and Muslim societies in Africa and beyond. Established in 1995, the centre has an international reputation for producing theoretically rigorous, contextually grounded, and socially engaged scholarship on Islamic law, identity, gender, and contemporary Muslim publics. Several of the CCI's academics are internationally recognised, including Abdulkader Tayob, now an emeritus professor; and Ebrahim Moosa, who was a professor of religion at Duke University and is now based at the University of Notre Dame in the United States. The CCI, now under the direction of Professor Sadiyyah Shaikh, describes itself as "a feminist, decolonial research and teaching hub for the study of Islam, gender and sexuality in Africa and globally" (see <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/contemporary-islam>). Professor Shaikh and her colleague in CCI, Professor Fatima Seedat, edited the highly acclaimed *The Women's Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice From Around the World* (2022). The CCI's outlook is increasingly shaped by a decolonial and feminist orientation, particularly through its focus on Muslim ethics, gender, and social transformation

in the global south. Its publications include the Journal for Islamic Studies and the Annual Review of Islam in Africa.

Other institutions of higher Islamic education have emerged in the postapartheid period, including the International Peace College South Africa and the Madina Institute, South Africa. The International Peace College South Africa (IPSA), established in 2005, offers a higher certificate in Islamic Studies, as well as BA and BA Honours degrees in Islamic Studies, and an MA in Applied Islamic Thought. These degrees are accredited by the Department of Higher Education in South Africa. According to Mohamed (2021), the approach of IPSA “is a departure from approaches of a traditional Islamic seminary, where the graduates are expected to not only practice the faith, but also to propagate the faith to others, and to prepare them for personal piety and salvation” (p. 29). Students at IPSA, he continues, attempt to confront “the challenges of secular modernity” and to seek “pragmatic solutions to contemporary Muslim problems.”

The Madina Institute, established in 2014, draws on the expertise of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, in terms of its syllabus and teaching staff. The Institute was founded by Syrian-born Shaykh Muhammad bin Yahya al-Ninowy, a medical doctor who holds PhD in Hadith Sciences from Al-Azhar University. The Madina Institute has campuses in South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Sudan, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia. The institute's higher education programs (BA, BA Honours, and Master's degrees in Islamic Studies) are fully accredited by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) and are listed on the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) register. According to Haroon Kalla, a patron of the Institute, the aim of the 1-year course was to get Muslim professionals to “infuse Islamic values into their professions and make a meaningful contribution to society.” The 3-year degree programme is recognised by the Department of Education, South Africa (Mohamed, 2021, p. 30).

While the academic study of Islam remains vibrant in South Africa, as evidenced by the steady cohort of scholars producing research in history, theology, law, gender studies, politics, and sociology, the impact of this research and these scholars on the Muslim public sphere is limited when compared to that of traditionally trained *‘ulamā’*. University-based scholars publish in peer-reviewed journals, contribute to edited volumes, and participate in international conferences, thereby shaping intellectual debates within global academic networks. While their work often engages critically with sources, employs interdisciplinary methodologies, and situates Islam within wider historical and social contexts, the audiences for such scholarship are generally relatively small.

Traditionally trained scholars, in contrast, occupy highly visible and influential positions within local communities. As imams, *madrassah* teachers, and religious advisers, they interact directly and regularly with congregants through sermons, study circles, counselling sessions, and social media platforms. Their authority is reinforced by communal recognition of their religious credentials and by their embeddedness within everyday religious life. Muslims are far more likely to consult a local alim than an academic specialist in matters of Islamic law, ritual practice, or inheritance.

8. Conclusion

Although South Africa formally transformed into a non-racial democracy in 1994, the legacies of racial classification and geographic segregation continue to shape social realities. However, the democratic constitutional order established in South Africa after apartheid expanded people's freedom to express their religious and cultural identities, as the 1996 Constitution protects freedom of religion, culture, language, association, and expression.

There is a resurgence of Islam as a pivotal identity among Muslims in the contemporary period. There are multiple reasons for this phenomenon, crucial among them is the increasing importance of educational institutions, whether *madrassahs*, schools, or seminaries. A more recent development in education that has not been researched in depth is the rise of online platforms. The media landscape has transformed religious learning: newspapers, dedicated radio stations, YouTube channels, podcasts, and WhatsApp groups circulate sermons, fatwas, and lectures instantaneously. Increasing numbers of South African Muslims enroll in online courses offered locally and internationally, including those associated with figures such as Omar Suleman of the Yaqeen Institute in the United States, Shaykh Abdul Karim Murad and the Cambridge Muslim College in the United Kingdom, and the Pakistan based Zaynab Academy Online, established in 2009 as the first all-women's online Islamic educational institute by Shaykh Mawlana Kamaluddin Ahmed and his wife, Aalimah Sobia Ahmed. Both Shaykh Kamaluddin and Omar Suleman have visited South Africa.

These developments have globalized access to religious authority and diversified the sources from which Muslims draw knowledge. Alongside this, informal Islamic spaces are particularly significant. Many women, for example, participate in local *halaqahs* (study circles), while mosques regularly host lectures, short courses, and thematic programmes. One gets a sense of vibrancy and dynamism. However, there is the danger of dogmatism leading to polarization. Islam and its interpretations are a crowded marketplace, and online platforms in particular lend themselves to supporting a particular viewpoint while being critical of others. This has led to mistrust and division within the South African Muslim community.

One must return to the question of the consequences of religious identity becoming insular, encouraging withdrawal into tightly bound communal spaces, and eroding opportunities for meaningful engagement with wider society. In a plural and democratic context such as South Africa, religious education should nurture citizens who are confident in their faith while also committed to shared civic values and peaceful coexistence. Islam can be a means to foster ethical participation and social contribution. Davids and Waghid's views are apposite. They stress the need for a reconceptualization of how Islamic education imagines the formation of the Muslim subject in contemporary South Africa. They advocate an educational approach that is open, dialogical, and responsive to the ethical and political demands of a plural, democratic society. This "new imaginary" should emphasize critical engagement and the capacity to live with difference, encouraging learners to understand themselves not only as members of a religious community but also as active participants in a diverse public sphere (Davids & Waghid, 2021, p. 1518).

There are numerous historical examples of cooperation across religious communities in South Africa. During the anti-apartheid struggle, prominent Muslims such as Fatima Meer and Imam Haron attained iconic status for their political activism and commitment to non-racialism. Muslims also lived within predominantly Coloured communities, particularly in the case of Cape Malays, and alongside Hindu communities in many Indian areas, where they practised their faith freely while maintaining respect for the religious traditions of others. Photographs and records of earlier cultural, educational, business, and sporting organisations reveal a strong tradition of multi-faith cooperation and shared civic life, standing in marked contrast to the greater social and religious separation evident today. In this way, Muslim education can move beyond a defensive stance and cultivate forms of belonging rooted in Islamic ethical traditions while embracing the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

This article raised the question of whether the teaching of a single religion can be reconciled with the broader goal of fostering inclusive democratic citizenship in a religiously and culturally plural society. Faith-based education is not unique to Muslims; it is a feature of all religious communities, with Chris-

tian schools constituting the overwhelming majority in South Africa. At the same time, Muslim educational institutions are not uniform and should not be treated as a single category. Important distinctions exist, for example, between secular Muslim schools and institutions such as *madrassahs* and *Darul Uloom*s. Secular schools, at least in principle, seek to cultivate tolerance and the ability to coexist within a diverse society, whereas *madrassahs* and *Darul Uloom*s often adopt an inward-looking orientation centred on religious formation and preservation.

South African society is marred by high unemployment, deepening poverty and the rise of racially chauvinist nationalist parties and openly xenophobic movements. Nelson Mandela's Rainbow Nation has long receded from memory. In this context, old identities for new times are being resurrected. One sees, for example, the push for recognition for Khoi and San identities, while tribal nationalism has found growing resonance. In this context of volatility and tension, exacerbated by a sense of the Muslim world being under siege, and perceptions of the state schooling system falling apart, the popularity of faith-based schools is understandable. Such schools are shaped by broader societal developments, particularly changing understandings of religion, culture, and identity. They emerge within social contexts in which communities seek stronger religious identities, cultural continuity, or moral certainty in response to the perceived pressures of secularisation and social change.

While faith-based schools are not necessarily the original cause of social divisions, they can reinforce distinctions between groups by educating children primarily within a single religious or cultural framework. Learners may therefore spend most of their formative years interacting mainly with those who share similar beliefs and identities, reducing opportunities for engagement across religious, racial, and cultural boundaries. In a diverse society such as South Africa, this may unintentionally deepen social separation, even when schools themselves do not actively promote intolerance. A continuing tension thus remains between the preservation of religious and cultural identity on the one hand, and the broader project of social integration and inclusive democratic citizenship on the other.

That said, there is no guarantee that the disappearance of faith-based educational institutions would necessarily produce a more cohesive or integrated society. More than three decades after the advent of non-racial democracy in South Africa, tensions between the preservation and advancement of particular religious, cultural, and ethnic identities and the broader project of nation-building remain deeply embedded in everyday life. These ongoing fractures were among the factors that prompted South African President Cyril Ramaphosa to initiate a National Dialogue in 2025, calling on South Africans to come together once again to craft a renewed vision for the country, much as they did when the country's democratic Constitution was born. Ramaphosa's initiative reflects an acknowledgement that South African society is increasingly fragmented along multiple social, political, cultural, and economic lines, and that deliberate efforts are required to prevent communities from retreating into isolated identities and speaking past one another across these divides.

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