



Neveen Aboueldahab

November 6th, 2024

## The treatment of religious identity in Western secular schools in Egypt

0 comments | 12 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

*How has the advent of Western-led international schools impacted the religious identities of students? Neveen Aboueldahab turns to the experiences of Muslim students in Western secular schools.*



In many societies, school students often represent their identity in accordance with the language, religion, and culture of their communities. Theoretically, one's identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorisation or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles. Religious identity is not just an abstract individual's right but also a natural and necessary feature of any truly healthy society. However, this is not always easy, for instance, when students are excessively exposed to a Western culture which competes with and dominates their local culture.

Schools play a pivotal role in forming, shaping and enhancing a student's religious identity. The question today for *religious* identity is: how does a Western education influence Muslim students' identity? And how does it compare to the experience outside the West?

Because schools play such a role in shaping students' culture and religious identity, Howard Smith argues that school is itself a "cultural creation", and through several given definitions of culture, religion is a crucial factor in defining both culture and identity.

Several scholars have studied this interplay between education, culture and the process of forming religious identity. For example, George Kneller provides a definition of culture as **a shared way of life by individuals within a certain society**. He frames this in terms of modes of thinking, which appear in religion,

language and customs. For Erik Erikson, **religion plays a significant role in forming adolescent identity**. Erikson argued that religion provides a clear vision towards life. This vision is a keystone of the morals and behaviours that constitute one's ideology. Speaking about identity and sense of belonging, Pamela King argues that **religious rituals enhance the sense of belonging to the community**, giving the example of prayer (*salat*), a fundamental practice that Muslims take part in five times a day. In the same regard, Erikson refers to the importance of the specific timing of *salat*. He writes "**in this repetitive act, believers experience themselves in solidarity with other Muslims prostrating themselves toward Mecca**". In other words, Muslim believers, by practicing this act every day within a specific time, feel a sense of belonging to the Muslim community.

Nevertheless, I have found that Muslim students who study at Western schools are excessively exposed to Western secular culture, which is having an impact on their religious identity.

### **The question of religious identity and Western education in Egypt**

In September 2016, I was invited by *Character Building Academy* (an academy run by a group of female and male volunteers) to participate in a workshop in Cairo, Egypt. The aim of the academy was to meet with Egyptian teenaged students, the majority of whom were Muslim, in an out-of-school activity style. The vision of this workshop was to enhance essential Islamic rituals and morals in order to contribute to shaping Muslim identity.

In this context, there is a marginalisation of religion within Western education in local, non-Western contexts. For example, these schools often celebrate and give a huge concern to Western cultural events at the expense of local and religious events, which can lead to a dysfunction in the development of religious identity.

What surprised me was students' attraction towards whatever is Western. These observations triggered my curiosity to think critically about the causes of this attraction, and to what extent these attractions affect their religious identity.

Egypt is an Arab Muslim country, with Arabic as the primary language. However, in recent years, Egyptian society has been comparatively exposed to Western education (for example, English Medium Language Schools) which promotes Western culture at the expense of local and Islamic cultures. This has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon.

For these students, their native Arabic language has succumbed to other languages, and many of the daily Arabic words were being replaced by Western or English words. The importance of the Arabic language doesn't only lie in it being their mother tongue, but also because it acts as an essential factor in a Muslim student's ability to learn and practice their faith. As Ibn Khaldun writes, for example, in his famous book *The Muqaddimah*, Muslims' interest in Arabic language comes **as a result of the desire to learn and read the Qur'an and religious texts**. Noticeably, in the Western schools, they appear to be distanced from practicing Islamic daily practice, such as praying five times a day. Beyond the lack of provision for religious practice, I observed a significant lack of religious education in the Western schools in Egypt.

Scholars such as Roslyn Sherman emphasise the role of religion in **providing expanded spaces beyond what society affords**; individuals gain a broader perspective on various elements of their lives. As a result, it serves as a vision that helps people create their identities. In the same vein, Inkeri Rissanen contends that religious education allows the student to gain **knowledge and experiences that will help them to better understand life**. And, Jacob Klitmøller and Sarah Jensen's study found that children **need to discuss religion with their professors during all activities, not just religious ones**, as it helps them build a sense of solidarity and belonging.

From my observations during our workshop, and considering the absence of religious education in this type of Western, secular model, I would conclude that Muslim students in Egypt who are educated in such schools are left lacking the essential teachings that assist in shaping their religious identity.

*Photo by Jeffrey Hamilton*

---

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Religion and Global Society nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

---

 [\*\*Click here to sign up to the LSE Religion and Global Society newsletter.\*\*](#)

---

## About the author



**Neveen Aboueldahab**

Neveen Aboueldahab is a PhD student and Teaching Fellow in Sociology at Ibnhaldun University, and a Lecturer at EDEP Center for Excellence and Education. Her interests revolve around religion, education and culture.

**Related Posts**