

NO DOUBT

WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN WHEN WE CALL FOR SCHOOLS TO UPHOLD 'BRITISH' VALUES AND 'SAFEGUARD AGAINST EXTREMISM'? LYNN DAVIES DIGS BENEATH THE HEADLINES...

The 'Trojan Horse' affair in Birmingham schools has thrown up renewed calls for the protection of what are called 'British values'. Whether in primary or secondary schools, there has been a moral panic about the infiltration of Islamic practices and beliefs into state institutions. The original letter that made the accusation of a conspiracy has widely been accepted as a hoax; and investigations have found no evidence of extremism or radicalisation. It would seem that there have indeed been attempts by some governors to impose a conservative Muslim ethos in schools with a predominantly Muslim intake. Yet heavy handed inspections of these schools, under a counter-terror label, have acted both to endanger the students' reputation and to scapegoat Muslims.

Two key imperatives stand out from this debacle: one is even-handedness, the other is critical doubt.

Different strokes

Firstly, one glaring omission stands out in the debate. The obvious parallels are not being drawn. If Muslim parents and governors want to make their schools more reflective of an Islamic ethos, this is viewed as subversive, even anti-British. Yet if a group of parents and governors of a Church of England or Catholic school wanted to make their school more reflective of Christian values, this would not be a cause for shock, rather it would be celebrated. An imam coming into a Muslim school to talk



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to children about their faith is viewed by the media very differently from a vicar coming in to a C of E school. If a Muslim school has an Arabic prayer on a classroom wall, this is cast as one step away from preaching jihad, while a Christian cross showing a man being violently tortured to death is happily accepted.

Is Britain then really a tolerant, unbiased society? Politicians jumped on the bandwagon, making their appeal to voters that Britain is a Christian country and Muslims should accept this (with the Daily Telegraph headline of 24 April shouting 'Muslims must accept Britain's Christian values, says former Home Secretary'). The Prime Minister has toned this down to 'British' values, but the message is still the same: that (all) Muslims have their own code, which does not embrace tolerance, liberty or the rule of law. There may indeed be conservative elements in Muslim schools who want to see their institutions run differently.

But there will be conservative elements in Christian schools too, who object to sex education, the teaching of evolution, to abortion, to homosexuality. We have free schools applying for state funding which support the teaching of creationism.

Singling out Muslims for approbation is a sure fire way to increase marginalisation and to decrease community cohesion, not

enhance it. Tony Blair's pronouncement

'School plotters 'are like Boko Haram'' (Times headline June 16th 2014) is truly shocking, not only in its gross misunderstanding of the issues but in its lack of care for how this impacts on perceptions of Muslims in UK.

Because they could find no actual radicalisation, inspectors resorted to saying the schools were 'failing to take adequate measures to safeguard against extremism'. Yet they should be going into all schools to check for this protection, not just Muslim ones.

A critical situation

Children do need safeguarding. But one of the most important safeguards is the capacity to critically analyse messages, particularly in this instance, religious messages. In my recent book *Unsafe Gods: Security, secularism and schooling*, I argue for a dynamic, inclusive secularism which accommodates and accepts religion but does not elevate it above critique. An inclusive secularism certainly does not single out only one religion for critical challenge. While a country's security comes partially from counter-terror activities, in the long term and educationally, it comes from citizens able to exercise critical doubt about the communications they receive, and to argue for change through democratic, non-violent means.

If there is such a thing as a British value, then the tradition of scepticism, satire, gentle mockery and self-deprecation is one to cherish. A healthy doubt about what both politicians and religious leaders tell us is the best safeguard against dogmatism and acceptance of authoritarianism. The iconoclastic Christian website 'ShipofFools' is a great example – their aim is to be self-critical and honest about the failings and even stupidities of the church, regarding such debunking as actually strengthening faith. Their regular slot for the 'Mystery Worshipper' would be a lesson for Ofsted.

Healthy doubt cannot start too young. The spread of social media means schools have an urgent and increased responsibility to instill a respect for evidence, questioning the sources of what is seen, as well as the motives behind what is posted. ISIS, Al-Shabaab and Al Qaeda are all experts in social media, with heavy use of Twitter and almost exclusively in English – with a global reach. Fascist, ultra right-wing networks, as used by Anders Breidlid, also promote gun use and massacre. We are aware of the need to protect against cyber bullying and grooming, but this should be part of a much wider repertoire of skills around being resilient to powerful online messaging. Let's have a Healthy Doubt week.