

# **Intercultural Dialogue and Mutual Respect between Europe and Islam The challenge for Education**

*By Gus John*

Let me thank my friend and comrade Dave Gillborn for nominating me to deliver this lecture and thank the School for the invitation to do so.

Professor David Gillborn is one of the few academics in this country who has courageously and consistently engaged education practitioners, policymakers and fellow academics on the issue of race, ethnicity and education in the last period, especially in this era of neo-liberalism and the marketization of schooling and education. We owe a lot to him for his clarity of vision, the incisiveness of his analysis, the relevance of his research and his perseverance in encouraging teachers, students and voluntary education projects to be bold, to think outside the box and to challenge establishment 'wisdom'. Activists for children's education rights, like myself, in communities across the country, continue to look to him for academic research evidence and policy analysis to support our perennial struggles. For me, and I dare to say it in this forum, that is an even more critical endorsement for any academic than the validation of one's peers. It therefore gives me great pleasure to be able to share some thoughts with you today to mark the start of Prof Gillborn's professorship at this university.

Let me begin with a quotation with which you are no doubt familiar:

*Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.*

Paulo Freire

I had a life experience with Britain in Grenada and Trinidad before I arrived in this country in 1964 as a theological student, to continue my life experience in Britain, having already done 2 years theology in Trinidad.

I soon became Chair of the Education Subcommittee of what was then quaintly called the Oxford Committee for Racial Integration and what today would be called the Oxford Race Equality Council. OCRI as it was called then was run by a woman who became a veteran in the anti-racist movement, the late Ann Dummett and her husband the late Professor Michael Dummett. As I engaged in the middle 1960s with the English schooling system and with academia at Oxford University, where I was a member of the African and Caribbean Students Society, I soon became convinced that Britain faced two momentous challenges. One was to determine who and what it was and what its place in global politics was as it tried to remake itself after two devastating world wars, with only two decades separating them. The second and closely related challenge was to determine how it would deal with the legacy of Empire.

There was no doubt in my mind then, and even less now, that neither of those two challenges has had any part in determining the shape, structure, orientation and practice of schooling and education in Britain. In fact, 'Race' is permanently off the radar, despite the Equality Act and the RRAA 2000 before it.

Post war migration and the active recruitment of former colonial subjects from the New Commonwealth to rebuild Britain and its service sector created demands for Britain to examine how the schooling system was dealing with the educational entitlement of its white working class population. We knew that it was only through that lens, after all, that we could see and understand how it would respond to our educational aspirations and expectations. The high aspirations we had as newcomers seemed excessive, out of place, and were dubbed 'unrealistic' in official reports. The nation certainly did not relate those expectations to all the stuff we had been fed by the colonial administration in the lands from which we came. Crucially, our

aspirations and educational demands did not mirror those of the white working class who for generations had been socialised to know their place, pay due deference to their betters and not entertain ideas above their station.

Even before the schooling system under successive governments tried to understand and deliver on those demands, globalisation and the movement of people from the South to the North as economic migrants and as refugees and asylum seekers escaping armed conflict and political repression changed the social landscape in Britain over the last four decades or so. This, too, should have served as an impetus for government to restructure schooling and define its purpose. Instead, ever since the beginning of the 1960s, the trend has been for governments to adopt schooling policies in a manner that suggests that schools are catering for a white, Christian, school population with a common heritage, a uniform class and socio-economic background, espousing commonly shared values within a consensual framework.

White working class children were assumed to share the same values as those planning and delivering curriculum in schools. Curriculum was crafted as if for a white, middle class schooling system that was straining to keep all things British and white, save for the odd nod in the direction of literature in English from foreign parts to add some variety to the canon of English Literature. Social policy, education policy continued to operate in a manner that suggested that it was up to the ethnic minorities to conform and fall into line. Resistance to all that, in the form of the multicultural education movement, the antiracist movement in education, black supplementary schools and the more inclusive curriculum they developed were seen as deviations from the norm, to be tolerated at best, but not worthy of influencing 'the mainstream'.

Adjustments were made to the religious education curriculum, with an element of comparative religion providing basic knowledge of the tenets and practices of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism, as well as Christianity. Notably, little was/is done about the major traditional African religions, including that of the Yoruba people of West Africa, despite the growing size of the schooling population of West African

heritage. African religion, including the Ifa Tradition which pre-dates Christianity and which even missionary bishops embraced, is still confined to the realm of ju ju, witchcraft and idolatry.

In the last decade or so, notions of cultural diversity and multiculturalism have been challenged vociferously, undergirding the growth of Islamophobia in Britain as a consequence of the 2001 disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham; the 9/11 massacre in New York, the subsequent USA/Britain initiated 'war on terror', and the July 2007 bombings on the transport system in London. You will be familiar with the concerted attempts of establishment figures such as Mr Trevor Philips and Mr David Cameron to bury multiculturalism, but for those wishing to examine the phenomenon in greater depth, I strongly recommend this wonderful collection of essays, *Defending Multiculturalism*, edited by Hassan Mahamdallie. The whole book serves as a useful backcloth to this lecture, but if you have time for nothing else, read the essay by Professor Tariq Modood, Multiculturalism and integration: struggling with confusions.

In the time remaining, I want to explore the need for an education system in Britain that focuses more pointedly on intercultural education and for internal dialogue within and between ethnic and religious communities, including white British ethnics, such that those communities do not become polarised while the education system continues to operate as if it is dealing with an undifferentiated mass of people whose 'diversity' is acknowledged as 'enriching Britain', while systems of oppression within and directed against those communities, not least in the schooling system, continue apace.

First, though, a few basic propositions:

1. The primary and ultimate purpose, the Alpha and Omega, of schooling and education is to humanize society
2. It is the duty of schools to ensure that regardless of the beliefs or dispositions of parents/carers, children and young people are

provided with the knowledge, understanding and skills to be at ease with and *respect themselves* so that they can *respect others*, especially people who are different from themselves

3. Schooling is increasingly hitched to a neo-liberal agenda that defines its purpose mainly as preparing students to meet labour market needs and improve the nation's economic competitiveness in a global free-market economy
4. Such an ideology promotes:
  - the cult of the individual
  - selfishness
  - greed
  - the survival of the fittest,....even when it pretends that we all subscribe to 'commonly shared values'

Let me share this quotation:

"Today, the men and women living side by side in our states and cities, in our societies, have incredibly diverse roots, are linked by heterogeneous ties of blood or place and are sceptical of ideological systems whose power of alienation has been all too amply demonstrated.

"All these women and men, without exception, disregarding their different origins and nationalities, contribute to the economic and social development of the community in which they live.

"However, the democratic debate which must shape the future of these communities continues to operate within a restricted framework, seeing internal diversity solely in terms of those whose

presence is legitimated by their affiliation to the cultural identity which historically founded the state in question.

“The others remain outsiders, either treated as privileged guests or as ‘minorities’, accepted to the extent that their identity is compatible with the degree of adaptation or ‘integration’ expected of them”.

- Etienne Grosjean (1994)

There has been a vexing debate about multiculturalism in Britain and the rest of Europe off and on since mass migration to the UK and continental Europe after the Second World War. That debate has raged more and more in the wake of the 9/11 disaster in New York in 2001, in which over 3,000 people lost their lives, and as a result of the bombing of the transport system in London in July 2005 in which 52 people were killed. Both incidents were said to be the work of Islamic extremists who set out to launch deadly attacks on the State and people of the USA and Britain respectively.

As we all know, these incidents taken separately and together, have resulted in fundamental changes in how our lives are regulated, in safety procedures governing international travel, in a so-called ‘war on terror’ that the USA and Britain principally have sought to wage with impunity and in the growth in the phenomenon known as Islamophobia across Europe.

Since then, of course, there have been major local incidents that have had huge international repercussions leading to loss of life, such as the Danish cartoon incident in September 2005 in which the Prophet Muhammad was depicted in newspaper editorials, and much more recently, September 2012, the film 'Innocence of Muslims' made in the United States of America which caricatured Islam. This most recent incident led to the murder of the US Ambassador to Libya and protests elsewhere in some predominantly Islamic countries. Some 23 people have since been killed in protests against the film in Pakistan alone. There is now an alleged £200,000 bounty on the head of the film maker.

Time does not allow me in this lecture to deal comprehensively with all of the above issues. Permit me, therefore, to make the following observations:

1. In order to address notions of 'Intercultural dialogue' and 'mutual respect' in relation to Islam in Europe, we must ask the question: what evidence was there in those societies of intercultural dialogue and mutual respect in relation to Islam outside Europe and what role did Britain and other European countries play, through schooling or otherwise, in enabling their population to have an understanding of Islam and all of its complexity?
2. In the summer of 2001, there was widespread rioting in three towns in the North of England, Burnley, Bradford and Oldham. All three have sizeable Muslim communities who live in mono-ethnic districts which were vacated by white people over a number of years as fast as the Muslim families moved in. Indeed, many estate agents and property brokers encouraged white folk to sell and relocate away

from the area in which their families had lived for generations on the grounds that their property would decrease in value as a result of having Muslim neighbours.

3. The British government set up various commissions of inquiry to look into the causes of the riots and, not surprisingly, the 'problem' was felt to be Asian communities who lived segregated lives, whose children went to all-Asian schools and who had minimum interactions with the white population in those towns. As I have observed elsewhere, no government of any political party ever concerned themselves with the fact that white families were indulging their right to sell their houses and move away from the Asians, in other words engaging in 'white flight', thereby making those areas totally devoid of white families and the local schools totally Asian and Muslim.
4. It is worth remembering at this point that the focus on the fact that there are all-Asian or mainly Asian communities in these towns and in certain London boroughs as a negative and undesirable phenomenon is itself deeply racist. I know of no black or Asian household that physically expelled the white residents of the home they now occupy. I know of no Asian corner shop, convenience store or off-licence owner who hounded, firebombed or racially harassed the former white owners of those businesses out of their premises in order that they might purchase them.
5. Why should a school with 90% or even a 100% black or Asian students be considered problematic and undesirable when that is considered 'normal' in the case of whites in the majority of schools in the country? What is more, the Government allows those who



take the ultimate step of removing themselves from the state system altogether, to do their own thing as far as curriculum and communal values are concerned, so they don't even have to concern themselves with the fact, the shape, the composition or the future of multi-ethnic Britain.

William James, a psychologist and philosopher at the beginning of the last century said:

*A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.*

6. White flight cannot be laid at the door of African, African Caribbean or Asian residents of our inner city areas. Moreover, I heard no protests from local councillors, central Government or the media when whites were deserting their new-found and most unwelcome black and Asian neighbours in droves.
7. It has been commonplace in places such as France, Britain and Germany for the dispossessed and forgotten sections of those societies to target 'the immigrants' for causing their situation, whether that be unemployment, poor housing, run-down neighbourhoods, underperforming schools, or any combination of those. This in turn fed and feeds upon an ever present, underlying culture of racism and xenophobia that politicians, and not just neo-fascists such as Le Pen in France or the *Vlaams Bloc* in Belgium and Antwerp were and are always very eager to exploit. The fact remains that those societies always felt themselves to be mono-cultural and homogenous, despite the huge cultural, income and life choice disparities that rendered sections of white Britain or

white France poor, under-valued, economically dispensable and confined to life on the very margins of the society.

8. Therefore, those same societies that refused to see the need to concentrate as much on the cultural heritage and 'roots' of white working class people and on antecedents of the identity formation of white working class males in particular, on tackling cyclical poverty and inequality, as they were concentrating on that of minority ethnic communities, were happy to endorse the racism of white people for crude electoral purposes. They ignored, for example, the lunacy of funding regimes or social engineering programmes that were competitive and that separated 'racial disadvantage' from social and economic deprivation of the worst kind, thereby setting up conflicts between dispossessed whites caught up in a cycle of deprivation and hopelessness and blacks on whom they saw special treatment being conferred.
9. There was the assumption that you had ethnic minorities but no ethnic majority. That the unacknowledged ethnic majority was homogenous and undifferentiated and could be counterposed to the ethnic minorities as an equally undifferentiated mass. The assumption that the notion of 'cultural diversity' is meaningful only when you are juxtaposing cultures of the 'ethnic minorities' with that of the undifferentiated ethnic majority.
10. The discourse on 'diversity' is characterised by the failure to understand that there is diversity both within individual faith communities, or ethnic minority communities, between them and other ethnic minority communities, as well as between them and

the ethnic majority in all its diversity. That it is possible for common interests to bind certain sections of minority ethnic communities with some sections of the majority ethnic population rather more than with the rest of both those populations.

11. The assumption that class interests and other differentiating factors were not as evident within minority ethnic populations as among the ethnic majority.
12. The assumption that women of whatever Faith within the minority ethnic populations would be insulated from the movement to end gender subordination and oppression that has evolved and been led by women over many generations within the ethnic majority population and that has radically altered the pattern of social relations in the society as a whole.
13. The assumption, moreover, that Asian women in Britain, of whatever faith, would be ignorant of and opposed to the self-organised movement of women in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in Asia against practices such as forced marriages, dowry punishment, honour killings, genital mutilation and similar violations of the human rights of women. The assumption that the interests of Asian women would necessarily be antithetical to those of other ethnic minority women and of ethnic majority women in the women's movement in Britain generally.
14. The assumption that you could adopt 'one-size-fits-all' solutions to the complex problems facing multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-layered communities with all their historical oppressions, hyphenated

identities, social and economic characteristics, spheres of influence, and the rest.

15. The assumption that culture is static and that the cultural traditions and preferences of the ethnic minority communities are fixed in aspic, with the power to socialise, insulate and contain their young within these seemingly unchanging traditions for all time; the assumption, moreover, that the cultural traditions, preferences and practices of people within Faith communities, Muslims in particular, necessarily emanate from the tenets and practices of the Faith and are consensual and unproblematic.
16. The assumption that, irrespective of local and central government's institutionalising of self-appointed community leaders and their self-conferred mandate to keep their young in check, young, British-born or British-educated men and women would not insist upon their right to help shape the future of Britain like everybody else.
17. Why, for example, is the assumption made that British women who happen to be of Asian heritage and Muslim do not have the same concern about the abuse of their human rights as white English women do? Why should local councils come to a 'settlement' with the 'leaders' of the local Islamic Council and deny Muslim women the right to represent themselves and make their voices heard in respect of the schooling experiences of their children, the oppression they suffer generally and at the hands of their menfolk in particular?

18. Why should a British girl, a high flyer at school, self-confident and sophisticated, not expect the protection of the state when she is whisked away to Pakistan under false pretences and married off at age 14, returning to England with her first child at 15, only to be left with in-laws while her husband goes off to work in Saudi Arabia.. In his absence, she is repeatedly raped by his father, her father-in-law, and by brothers-in-law. Her husband refuses to protest his father's and siblings' abuse of her and she feels totally trapped and suicidal. She eventually runs away and ends up in a refuge for women escaping domestic violence. This makes her a prey for 'bounty hunters', many of whom receive instructions to impose the ultimate punishment, if necessary, for the 'shame' that is brought on the family.
19. 'Shame' not because of the barbaric violation of that young woman's fundamental human rights, not because of the indelible scars and self-aborrence she is left with, to the extent that she indulges in constant self-mutilation, but because she dared to remove herself from that hellish situation and behave in ways contrary to what those men consider to be appropriate for Muslim women.
20. Why is it that, when at the beginning of the 1980's I and the Black Parents Movement in Manchester, which I led, launched a massive campaign against the threatened deportation of 3 Asian women, former brides from Pakistan, all of whom had deserted their families because of similar sorts of abuse, only to have their husbands report them to the immigration authorities..., why is it that I was in fear of my life because of the death threats and daily

intimidation from males within the Asian community? Why did Manchester City Council not take a more robust stand, or any stand at all, in support of those women and of our right, and that of the Asian Youth Movement, to defend **their right** to stay in the UK and not be booted out because they refused to subject themselves to that daily violation of their human rights?

21. It has been put to me by some Muslims, young and old, in Northern towns that the 'preoccupation' with marital issues and practices within Muslim communities is as Islamophobic as the peddling of stereotypes in respect of patterns of African-Caribbean family organisation is racist. But, who is making the distinction between the legitimate opposition to the practices I have just described, opposition to the public burning of books at the height of the Salman Rushdie 'Satanic Verses' affair, the Fatwa itself and the millions of pounds it cost the taxpayer to provide security for Salman? Who is making the distinction between all of that and Islamophobia? Who is ensuring that cries of Islamophobia do not become a smokescreen for the continuation of such horrendous practices?

22. It is important that the nation sees more publicised evidence that those of us who have a legitimate concern about Islamophobia are actively engaged in confronting those practices within Muslim communities and taking a stand, publicly, against them. There is growing evidence that the majority of refugees within ethnic minority communities for women fleeing domestic abuse are populated by Asian women escaping from domestic violence and forced marriages, despite the fact that their lives are potentially more at

risk when they do manage to escape the brutal captivity in which they are held in the name of 'traditional family customs', or of what their oppressors conveniently attribute to 'Holy Scriptures'?

23. Our innate instinct for freedom alerts us, naturally, women no less than men, Muslims no less than Christians, humanists and atheists, to repel invasion of our liberty by others and by the evil-minded rulers and gatekeepers who support them and legitimise their actions.
24. Local Government Councils up and down the land should ask themselves, therefore, why it is that in all the years they have been negotiating with and giving a voice to 'community leaders' in the Asian community, those leaders have invariably if not exclusively been male. Those same Councils have equal opportunities policies, 'zero tolerance' policies on domestic violence, and the rest. But, somehow, they appear to have concluded that only the men speak English, only they know their way around the Council and its systems, and, what's more, that they have an inalienable right to speak for Asian women of whatever Faith and of whatever age, in respect of any and all issues.

Some time in the year 2000, the late Vaclav Havel declared that:

*Courage means going against majority opinion in the name of truth.*

25. Those Councils that seek to regulate if not control affairs within the Asian communities by engaging with these often self-appointed colonial gatekeepers would do well to remember that and, consequently, to develop the political will to put in place democratic

systems of access to power, influence and decision-making by women, by youths and other marginalised groups within those communities.

In summary, then, I would say this:

Clearly, we need to stop thinking and speaking about Islam as if we are talking about a single entity, a Faith without complexity and without myriad allegiances and interpretations; interpretations that lead **some** Muslims to do barbaric and ungodly deeds. We need to resist the attempt of the media, of Islamophobes or of unthinking, ordinary people to make all Muslims responsible for the conduct of some fundamentalists and extremists, or for the criminal acts of some who are followers of Islam.

Since 2005, the domestic 'war on terror' has led to the use of Stop and Search powers that have seen young Asian men, Muslim and not, stopped, searched and arrested in proportions that we used to associate only with young black men, principally African Caribbean. Yet, as a thematic review by HM Inspector of Prisons reported in 2010, 'fewer than 1% of the 10,300 Muslims in prison are there because of terrorist-related offences'.

Danny Afzal, a reformed offender who is Muslim and is working with the Prison Reform Trust, as well as on Goldsmith College's Open Book project helping former offenders into higher education, said:

*The vast majority of Muslim men in prison do not hold radical, extremist views. When I went to prison I found that practicing my religion gave me discipline, structure and kept me safe. One of the biggest problems I had*



*when I was released was that there was no proper resettlement programme in place.*

Juliet Lyon, director of the Prison Reform Trust, said in response to the thematic report:

*The Prison Reform Trust welcomes this timely report and its recognition of the important work conducted in prisons by Muslim chaplains. Too often Muslim prisoners are seen as potential extremists in the making instead of a diverse population in need of a safe environment, individual supervision and support and proper preparation for release.*

We need to remember that the history of religion, whether we are talking about the spread of Christianity, of Islam or of Judaism has been a history of fundamentalism and of barbarism. That barbarism was the hallmark of the Roman Empire and of the British Empire, no less than that of the Ottoman Empire. For many decades before Britain turned its focus on the question of fundamental Islamists on its shores, it grappled with the activities of the Irish Republican Army as the IRA sought to expel the Brits from Northern Ireland and put an end to their ostensible support for the loyalist Protestants.

I do not believe that we can successfully address issues of intercultural dialogue and mutual respect between Europe and Islam if we adopt a simplistic and non-nuanced approach to understanding manifestations of Islam in Europe and across the world. In order to adopt such an approach, we need to make a clearer distinction between:

- Culture
- Tradition
- National, regional and geo-politics

- Religious Belief and Scriptural Interpretation and
- The Qur'an and the Spirit of the Prophet's Message to mankind as the Messenger of God, and how that connects with the human spirit

We have a duty to defend the right of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Iraqi, Palestinian men, women and children, and all others who happen to be Muslim, to go about their daily business, including collective acts of worship anywhere in Europe, without being targeted by malevolent folk of any ethnicity simply because they are Muslim.

What certain communities have been experiencing since September 11 and the subsequent pursuit of the Taliban and Bin Laden, and since July 2005 is identical to what Muslim communities (and individuals mistakenly identified as Muslim) experienced here in Britain during two Gulf Wars and the pursuit of Saddam Hussein. Every Muslim was assumed by some to be fundamentalist, a supporter of Bin Laden, committed to the domination of the world by the forces of Islam. For that very reason, children were taunted and physically attacked, Asian businesses targeted and Mosques desecrated during the Gulf War because some people believed that all Muslims must necessarily identify with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the exploits of Saddam Hussein. In order to stop themselves, their families or their premises becoming targets of anti-Muslim attacks, many Asian shop owners (Muslim and non-Muslim) took to flying the Union Flag outside their premises to show their allegiance to Britain and their support for 'Operation Desert Storm'. As a director of education in London in 1991, in the wake of Operation Desert Storm, I was dealing almost daily with physical attacks on Muslim

students, girls wearing the veil in particular, as they made their way to or from school.

This government and the last have imposed surveillance duties upon further and higher education institutions with respect to 'the Prevent agenda' which clearly arise from the notion that all Muslim students are potentially a threat and it is therefore necessary to make them all aware that they are under the spotlight.

That said, we need to be seen to take as firm a stand in defence of the rights of women and of children from emotional and physical violation within Muslim communities themselves, as we do in opposition to Islamophobia in all its various manifestations. Above all, we need to ensure that fear of being branded Islamophobic does not deter us from affirming those rights and acting with progressive forces within Islam itself to safeguard them and give support to the vulnerable and to the excluded.

Recently, in Britain a number of Asian men, the eldest of whom was almost 50, were given long prison sentences for their grooming and abuse of vulnerable white school girls over a long period. Some eight of them subjected those girls, the youngest of whom was 13, to months of sexual abuse, gang rape, intimidation and threats of serious physical violence. Apart from the sheer horror of what those girls suffered, the community was outraged about the fact that those men insisted that their own daughters dressed modestly and in accordance with Muslim custom, stayed away from boys and especially non-Muslim boys, while those same men paraded themselves as upright members of the Muslim community.

Notions of 'mutual respect', not just for them but for what many dubbed 'hypocritical Muslims', meaning ALL Muslims, went straight out the window.

In terms of building for the future, I want to suggest that:

- Every possible step should be taken to stop projecting British and other Asians as a 'race' apart or as Muslims, irrespective of their Faith or their atheism, as if that were the only defining factor in their identity. My work amongst young Asians in England and Scotland would suggest that those who are Muslim define themselves as British (English or Scottish) young people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi (or other) heritage, who profess the Islamic Faith.
- It is when their aspirations and cultural and religious preferences are considered mainstream and 'normal' that they would see the society and its institutions as being ready to accept their self-definition rather than placing them forever on the margins and conferring upon them an alien identity.

Finally, in relation to the Danish cartoon affair and that recent film made in the USA I would say this:

I believe the argument about 'freedom of speech' and people's right to express awkward, blasphemous or otherwise gratuitous offensive views is a spurious one. I am sure people would not be advancing that

argument if the cartoons or the film depicted the sexual abuse of young children, or other acts which civil society, never mind the law, considered morally reprehensible and an abuse of children's fundamental rights to dignity and protection from harm. The exercise of free speech, therefore, has a social and moral context which is also the context in which the media that purports to reflect public opinion and to give the public what they want actually operate.

In my book, therefore, such gratuitously offensive and self-indulgent acts have no justification, and certainly not on the grounds of defending free speech and press freedom.

That said, however, I have equally little sympathy, or time, for those who rush to the barricades and take up arms in defence of the Prophet.

If, after all these centuries and its turbulent history Islam is not mature enough to withstand the stupidity and mindless provocation of a few individuals, with or without malevolent intent then it must rest on very shaky ground indeed. Islam in Europe has endured continuity and change for at least five centuries. A...h, the Beneficent, the Merciful and the Compassionate can surely not demand that innocent people lose their lives in order that the honour of Islam be avenged and the Prophet defended, as if God and His Messenger are totally incapable of ensuring that Islam goes forward for a further 500 years, long after those zealots doing the maiming and killing have themselves passed on.

This is evidently not the first, and I am sure that it won't be the last, time that some idiot or *agent provocateur* sets out to lampoon the Prophet or rubbish Islam. There therefore needs to be a mature debate within

Islam, in all its complexity and diversity about those acts and the predictable reactions to them.

How do schools encourage and guide a debate among Muslim students and all students on these vexing issues? Where are school students receiving the knowledge they require in order to understand the tendency among some British born Muslims to play out here in Britain conflicts involving Britain's and the USA's foreign policies and the activities that flow from them? How are schools assisting young people in understanding the distinction between the five core issues I mentioned above:

- Culture
- Tradition
- National, regional and geo-politics
- Religious Belief and Scriptural Interpretation and
- The Qur'an and the Spirit of the Prophet's Message to mankind as the Messenger of God

How are schools assisting all young people to understand the human values that make us fit for living in civil society and that bind us as communities, irrespective of differences of language, race, ethnicity, culture, beliefs and country of heritage?

History has taught me that absolutely nothing trumps Human Rights. It cannot be subordinated to faith or religious belief, to caste, to class, to tribal affiliation, to kinship, to national customs, or to anything else. So, how do we create and sustain a human rights culture in our schools, where these human rights standards are articulated and upheld:

## **International Human Rights Standards**

- ☐ The best interests of the child must be paramount (Article 3)
- ☐ Children have a right to be heard (A.12)
- ☐ Children have a right not to be discriminated against on the basis of, for example, class, race, ethnicity, religion/faith or gender (A.2) (OR because of the failings of either parent)
- ☐ Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence. They must be kept safe from harm. They must be given proper care by those looking after them (A19)

Britain signed up to this. How does that square with the appalling record on school exclusion in our schools and the reasons, often quite pathetic, for those exclusions?

CEN, the education charity I chair, is currently dealing with a case in which a 4 year old has been permanently excluded by a Church of England primary school for 'sexually inappropriate behaviour'. The child has been kept at home so far for nearly six weeks. The school tried to get him into a pupil referral unit but the PRU refused to have him on the grounds that he is a little child and should not be excluded and expected to start his schooling career in a pupil referral unit.

What kind of a country is it that makes it legal for a school to use the power to exclude a child of that age for any conceivable reason? What sort of schooling system, what kind of Church is it that would stigmatise a small child in that manner? What sexually appropriate behaviour is the child supposed to display?

The little boy is black.

Even at his tender age, he and his parents cannot have an expectation that his school would act with common sense, discharge a duty of care and guide the child's development. On the contrary, he is starting his schooling career with a blot on his record and stereotypes heaped upon him and his family by a church school that simultaneously purports to

teach Christian values. The fact remains that education law empowers the school to take such action and the Independent Appeals Panel is no longer authorised to compel the school to reinstate the child.

It is this absurd obsession with punishment that lies at the heart of this country's record for jailing the most people in Western Europe, excluding the most young people from school, having the most illiterate prison population, and all the rest of it. Is it any wonder, then, that rather than examining the systemic issues that lie beneath the eruption of violence in August 2011, all David Cameron and his government could do is show the nation and the world how tough they could be on 'sick', 'feral', 'thugs' and 'criminals'.

In my book, 'The Case for a Learner's Charter for Schools', I argue that the relentless pursuit of academic excellence as measured by test and examination results at the expense of the holistic development of young people, i.e., mind, body, spirit as well as intellect, displaces the need to equip young people with the moral compass that enables them to act intuitively and instinctively with moral purpose. In other words, acting responsibly because it is the right and just thing to do and not because the law requires it. I cannot stress enough the idiocy of placing such huge emphasis as schools do on coercive compliance and on externally imposed discipline as a brake on the exercise of individual freedom. Clearly, when the law and sanctions for breaking the law become irrelevant and cease to act as a deterrent and a constraint on human conduct, all morality is stood on its head.

This is the scenario that unfolded at Victoria Station in March 2010 when a schoolboy, Sofyen Belamouadden, was stabbed to death by a group of boys from a different school. The fact that it was 5.00pm and rush hour, the fact that hundreds of people were present and trying to get transport home, the fact that they were most likely to be seen by CCTV cameras if not by the traumatised crowd of commuters did not trigger anything in the brain of those twenty school students to prevent them slaughtering their victim so mercilessly and nonchalantly. Yes, they were (many of them) academic high fliers; yes, their school was expecting high grade 'A' level results from them; yes, their parents had high ambitions for



them, but none of them seemed able to deter the others from their potentially murderous revenge attack on the boys from another school.

The social and political landscape in this country has undergone immeasurable change and the demography of Britain necessitates a fundamental rethink of who and what schooling is for. Depressingly, however, almost 50 years since I first engaged with the issue of schooling and society in Britain, I find an education system which is even more backward and is structured to reinforce divisions, compound social exclusion and fail in its duty to prepare this generation to live peaceably together and manage a future that bears the hallmark of equity, justice and inclusion.

So, what is to be done, I hear you asking?

There is a raft of measures which are urgently needed and these have to do with leadership, democratising schooling, monitoring and tackling, the 'ethnic penalty' in teaching, assessment and sanctioning of students, enhancing students' self-management skills and much more besides. I want to deal with what I see as one urgent necessity, however.

As long as 1975, the Black Parents Movement of which I was a founding member produced a manifesto statement in which we argued that:

*Independent Parents Power and Independent Students Power is the key to change in education and schooling.*

Parents and students need to organise themselves independently in their own interests and reclaim schooling and education. Every other stakeholder in the schooling system is organised, whether in trade unions or professional associations, except school students and parents. Some parents are able by virtue of social, cultural and financial capital to manipulate the system and make it to their advantage; the vast majority of parents are not.

School students are highly sophisticated users of the new technology and especially of social networking media. Just think what a revolution

in schooling it would be if they were to empower themselves with knowledge, information, representational and campaigning skills and hold schools to account and act as a brake on the worst excesses of the likes of Michael Gove. What a revolution to find the school students of the land having debates about exclusion policies and practices, about school curriculum and assessment regimes, about youth employment, about access to higher education, about religion in education, about building the future they want in this society.

I don't know that I would see that in my lifetime, but I live in hope. I live in hope that our schooling system will not continue to select and nurture those who are 'chosen to rule', progressing to the universities and the job opportunities that will confirm them in that, while others are written off and seen as surplus to the requirements of the economy, if not a threat to civil society.

I live in hope that my grandchildren will not be fighting these same battles when they get to my age.

I live in hope that this generation will not see the 'status quo' as an option and will organise themselves to make the present leaders of state and organisers of the nation's schools, and those that will come after them, rewrite their script and come to a different settlement with this new nation.

I live in abundant hope!

Gus John  
London  
27 October 2012

07539 476041, [gj@gusjohn.com](mailto:gj@gusjohn.com), [www.gusjohn.com](http://www.gusjohn.com)