

Towards a Secular Society

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Seven hundred Muslims in the British armed forces but up to 2000 British Muslims are fighting for Islamic State. How did it come to this? What has led so many young Britons to turn their backs on the liberal democracy into which they were born, and risk life and limb in defense of extremism and absolutism?

A big part of the answer, I believe, is Britain's failed experiment in multiculturalism – the policy of allowing, or indeed encouraging, minorities to keep their own language and cultural identity while living under our jurisdiction. We have encouraged a separate non-British identity in Jews, Moslems and Catholics by funding separate education and permitting schools to select pupils by faith and employ teachers trained in religious institutions abroad.

The tragic experience of Northern Ireland is testament to the lunacy of this policy: we funded divisive religious education in Ulster, and then

funded a war to keep the two sides apart. Even today, so-called “Peace Walls” separate Catholic and Protestant housing estates and are decorated with murals that are recruiting posters for sectarian paramilitaries.

Today it is Muslims and not just Northern Irish Christians that are indoctrinating children in dangerous ways. As the Jesuit, Saint Francis Xavier said, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man” – he should be the patron saint of brainwashers.

Britain must strive to achieve integration into a harmonious, unitary society. Education is the key, so we must be ready to rethink some well-worn tenets of education policy... even at the risk, dare I say it, of being heretical.

For starters, we should abolish the state funding of religious education and this includes the government flagship Free Schools, which are predominantly religious in character.

In England, state funding of Muslim faith schools was introduced in 1997, a lamentable decision that should now be reversed – but can hardly be reversed for that faith alone. There are now 21 Muslims schools in England with 7,850 pupils and a further number where religious infiltration has altered a school's character. A ban should also be placed on the foreign financing of schools and places of worship, and visas refused to teachers and mullahs trained abroad. Foreign religious influences go hand-in-hand with revolutionary politics – something we have known full well since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I with Roman Catholic terrorist plots against the crown being fomented by clandestine priests trained at the English language Jesuit colleges of Douai and Rome.

Of course, it might be sensible to phase out faith schools altogether over a period of years. The Catholic Church and the Church of England (C of E) run many of the best state-funded schools. It would be sad to lose their contribution to education but the greater purpose –

and equity – requires that it be so. Eventually, all Faith schools should be banned unless they agree to a non-religious curriculum.

What of the right of parents to educate their children in their faith, as enshrined in EU human rights legislation? That right puts no obligation on the state to fund such schools. Indeed, the constitution of France mandates a complete separation of church and state, ensuring that all state-funded education is secular.

I would go further, and argue that – as in all other branches of law – the rights of the child must take precedence of the rights of the parents. Children deserve an education based on facts and deductive reasoning rather than one based on myths for which there is no basis in fact; the teaching of creationism as opposed to evolution, for example. In an open society, education should be about being taught to reason for yourself, not just to believe what you are told.

How can society create harmony and foster integration if children are taught that their brand of religion is the only true way, so engendering an assumption of moral superiority? We can only hope that if we start now, religious hatred will be bred out over time.

Is this proposal an attack on religious freedom? Not-at-all. Children of religious parents will still receive religious instruction at home and in places of worship; but that they should mix at school on terms of equality and make friends with children of other faiths.

State schools, I would add, should be English language medium; a common language is the most important building block for a nation. The USA and France got this right from the outset. Immigrants aspired to the American dream, learned English, and created a new national identity in the process. In France, Napoleon created a national school system with standard French as the medium of instruction and within a generation eliminated most of the regional languages – people came to think of themselves as French first and Gascon or

Provençal second. We should insist that all immigrants have a working knowledge of our language and we should stop translating every government leaflet.

There is an obstacle to creating a secular state in Britain: the fact that, in England, we still have a state religion, the C of E. (The Church of Wales was disestablished in 1914 and the Church of Scotland in 1929.) Disestablishmentarianism was a matter of heated debate in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but gave way to antidisestablishmentarianism following the independence of the Irish Free State in 1922 – which, as well as being retrograde, is the longest word in the English language.

More than two thirds of Britons today are non-religious, and the minority of believers is spread across a multiplicity of faiths. That makes it especially anomalous to put one religion before others, reserve seats ex-officio for C of E bishops in the House of Lords, and make the reigning monarch head of the Church instead of an

unaligned symbol of national unity. It makes it impossible for the state to claim that all religions – and humanism – are of equal value. It can never be justified for a country to mandate a national faith: by doing so you consign some citizens to an inferior status.

It is time to put religion in its rightful place – the private sphere. The UK should adopt the French requirement that unions be conducted as civil marriages; the choice to have a religious service should be a private one. We must reject demands that the law protect religious sensibilities; some, such as Prince Charles, have even argued for the reenactment of the law against blasphemy, only repealed in 2008, but this time to embrace all religions. This would undermine freedom of speech by insulating religion from ridicule.

Enlightenment values should be taught to our children. Let schools, including private schools, have lessons in citizenship, secular morality and the values that define our society, as a compulsory part of the curriculum. The law should draw our cultural boundaries. France, for

example, has banned the wearing of the burka and niqab in public places. There is no reason why these offensive garments should be tolerated in England; they represent an extreme form of Islam with which we are odds. It is not enough to ban otiose practices like female circumcision and forced marriage, we must be seen to enforce the bans and meet out condign punishment to transgressors. In the UK there have been few prosecutions for either crime. We should end cultural relativism where some are accorded more favourable treatment for fear of causing racial or religious offence. We must be clear that where religious dogma conflicts with human rights, the latter must prevail.

I am optimistic that we will eventually take these politically risky decisions – but perhaps only after pressure is applied by events. How often have we heard the same old platitudes and expressions of sympathy for victims after a terrorist atrocity? How many bomb outrages will it take before the government acts? The Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan has recently suggested that all pupils be

taught that Britain is a Christian country. This is misguided and untrue for most UK citizens.

It is a sad fact that democracy ensures unpalatable medicine is not taken until the last moment. Yet there are signs that people are waking-up to the dangers facing our liberal democracies; the tide has turned against multiculturalism. Religions should not teach children that blind faith is more powerful than reason, nor should they promulgate values contra to our own.

We are a liberal society; that is our weakness and our strength but we should be tolerant of everything except intolerance. Our government should never allow a fanatic to attempt to deny a person the right to free speech by threatening them, as happened in the cases of Salman Rushdie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali; louder voices must proclaim as much. Nor should we permit doctrines to be preached that deny the rights of apostates, homosexuals and women. Europe's many nations must re-

imagine their own historic cultural identities or risk being subsumed
by the identities of others that are hostile.

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