

Role of religion in schools under scrutiny as Ofsted reveal extent of fundamentalism in Birmingham schools

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The role of religion in schools has come under scrutiny following Ofsted's finding that "a culture of fear and intimidation has developed" in those Birmingham schools caught up in the "Trojan Horse" controversy.

Summarising Ofsted's reports of the 21 schools recently inspected following concerns over extremism and inadequate curricula, Ofsted's chief, Mr Wilshaw, [said that some of the findings](#) are "deeply worrying and, in some ways, quite shocking". The schools, all officially non-faith schools, were all inspected under Section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Findings included segregation of pupils on the grounds of gender in religious education and personal development lessons, unequal treatment of boys and girls, removing music from curriculum against children's wishes, faith segregated singing clubs and a known extremist speaker, Shady al-Suleiman, being invited to address an assembly. Some in the schools testified that they have been treated unfairly because of their gender or religious belief.

In his [supporting advice note](#), Mr Wilshaw, noted a number of the schools are not encouraging their pupils to develop tolerant attitudes towards all faiths and all cultures, by a failure to implement a curriculum that would equip pupils to live and work in a multi-cultural, multi-faith and democratic Britain.

The statutory responsibilities of non-faith schools to provide a balanced curriculum were not being met in many of the schools; instead religious education was being taught in a way that isolated the pupils from a fuller understanding of different religious and cultural traditions. In one school, Ofsted found that pupils had limited knowledge of religions other than Islam. Subjects like art were excluded.

Mr Wilshaw observed that: "In culturally homogeneous communities, schools are often the only places where children can learn about other faiths, other cultures and other styles of living. All maintained schools and academies, including faith and non-faith schools, must promote the values of wider British society".

At one of the schools, terms such as "white prostitute" were used in Friday assembly by Muslim staff and trips to Saudi Arabia for Muslim pupils were arranged. At another, the call to prayer was broadcast over the school's speakers in the playgrounds, pupils were taught that evolution was not what they believed, and an extremist speaker visited.

Some governors were found to have been trying to impose and promote a narrow faith-based ideology, doing so by narrowing the curriculum, manipulating staff appointments, or using school funds inappropriately.

Often governors were found to be intervening against the wishes of the headteacher. In one primary school, governors opposed the head teacher's commitment to mixed-gender swimming lessons. The chair of governors in another school, introduced a madrasa programme of study into the personal, health and social education curriculum. In [Nansen Primary School](#), a Park View Academy school, governors intervened to vet the nativity play script and insisted that a doll shouldn't be used to represent baby Jesus.

According to [Sky News](#), some female pupils attending Park View School said that the school deserved to be put into special measures by Ofsted. They said: "Our school is too extreme but not in a terrorist way. They are strict with us and they use religion as an excuse [...] Basically they don't let boys and girls mix and stuff". They said that pupils were afraid to speak out about what had been happening at the school. Two male students at the school disagreed with this analysis however, saying that, they believed everyone has open choice and that they were taught about other religions: "Everyone is treated equally. No one is forced to pray. No one is forced to do anything. It's an open school".

As a result of the inspections, the five schools named in the "Trojan Horse plot" - including three academies from the Park View Educational Trust - are being placed in special measures. A sixth school is also labelled inadequate for its poor educational standards.

12 of the schools inspected were told to make improvements, and three have emerged as "outstanding".

In response to Ofsted's findings, Michael Gove said keeping children safe was his key mission, and that the allegations made in Birmingham suggested children were not kept safe. The conclusions of these reports are clear, he said: "Things happened that should not have happened. Children were exposed to things they should not have been exposed to".

He stated that the findings require a robust, but considered response. They should not lead to an attack on Islam, "a great faith that inspires countless acts of generosity".

Mr Gove announced that the government will require all 20,000 primary and secondary schools to promote what he describes as "British values". These values will include the primacy of British civil and criminal law, religious tolerance and opposition to gender segregation.

Mr Gove also said that it was right that we have a "debate about the place of faith in education".

Tristan Hunt, Labour's Shadow Minister for Education, agreed that there was a "broader debate to be had about education and faith, underperformance among minority ethnic groups and the limits of communalism in multicultural Britain".

"In an age of multiple religions, identities and cultures", said Mr Hunt, "we need to be clearer about what a state education means for children of all faiths and no faiths."

Debating Ofsted's finding in the House of Lords, Lib Dem peer Baroness Hussein-Ece said: "As somebody from a Muslim background who was brought up with a secular education and is a believer in that, I do not believe in faith schools. We should not be rolling out far more faith schools but promoting children growing up by learning about all faiths and none—and sitting side by side".

Conservative peer Lord Baker of Dorking suggested a "moratorium on the approval of any new single-faith schools".

He said: "The object we are trying to achieve is that students in British schools, irrespective of their race, colour, creed or faith, will sit next to each other, play with each other, eat with each other, go home in the buses with each other and respect each other. If we do not achieve that, our society will be divided by faith and that would be disastrous for our country."

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular society, commented: "Schools are not legitimate places to impose religious dogma or seek to instil particular religious beliefs in children, and there should be no place in our education system for the sort of unacceptable practices revealed in Ofsted's investigation.

"Unfortunately, Christian control of publicly funded schools in Britain is common and it is somewhat inevitable that parents of minority religions now want to control 'their' schools. The lack of separation between religion and education has the potential to seriously undermine social cohesion and the time has come to question whether an education system delineated by religion is in children's or society's best interest."

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