

'Trojan horses' in Birmingham schools should come as no surprise

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*With powerful religious agendas which reach far beyond faith schools and insufficient protections for community schools, **Rumy Hasan** argues, the so called 'Operation Trojan Horse' should come as no surprise.*

The 'Trojan Horse' plot in Birmingham - where some 25 schools have apparently been targeted for takeover by Islamic extremists - is yet another instance of the problems now rising as a consequence of Britain supposedly being a multi-faith society; a view shared by all the three main political parties. Accordingly, a green light has been given to more faith schools, religious Free Schools and academies, which are allowed to run on the basis of a religious ethos. A laissez faire approach to culture and religion has contributed to significant levels of self-segregation, isolation, and lack of integration among some religious-ethnic minorities, not least Muslims. This is highlighted by the fact the Muslim population in which these 25 schools are located is more than 90 per cent. It is worrying that it took a maverick politician such as Nigel Farage to point out the reality when he described parts of Britain as being 'unrecognisable'; a view that most of the population would agree with.

Since the 'Trojan Horse' letter came to light, some 200 reports have been received by Birmingham City Council, including claims that boys and girls are being segregated in classrooms and assemblies, pressure on girls to cover their hair, sex education being banned, the prevention of the teaching of non-Islamic faiths in religious education classes, and non-Muslim staff being bullied. Yet all this is precisely what has been happening in Free Schools such as Al Madinah in Derby (which Education Minister Lord Nash found dysfunctional) and the Madani faith school in Leicester. But none of this should be surprising: on the contrary, it is entirely to be expected that leaders of faith communities wish to impose values and practices in schools in their neighbourhoods that are in accordance with their religion. The reason for this is that the emphasis on a multifaith society facilitates the primary identity of some minorities being on the basis of their faith.

In Birmingham, and elsewhere, community leaders and parents with strong religious identities seek to 'protect' their children - especially girls - from Western secular influences which, quite frankly, they find immoral. Such protection is indeed likely to be on offer as schools in segregated communities and faith-based schools vigorously police the behaviour of pupils strictly in line with their religious doctrines and cultural mores. An inescapable outcome is the accentuation of divisions along religious lines, so that there is a plethora of 'monofaith' neighbourhoods. This is not only profoundly harmful to schoolchildren who are seen as no more than properties of their parents, but flies in the face of the stated goal of increasing integration and social cohesion.

A pointer to the dangers ahead was provided a decade ago at the Muslim Islamia School, one of the first to be granted voluntary aided status. In regard to the teaching of evolution, the school's view was 'we approach Darwinism theory [sic] in a phenomenological way. We say, 'there is a theory believed by some, that we are descended from apes. It's just one idea among many'. In regard to the teaching of other faiths, the head teacher stated 'we can practice any religion we like. We pray five times a day, we learn the Koran in the traditional manner ... One thing we never do is

celebrate Christmas'. The oft-quoted quip 'schools are for teaching and not for preaching' is inverted - indeed preaching and brazen indoctrination is the order of the day - with values that are widely at variance with those obtaining in modern Europe.

The push to expand faith schools and religious free schools and academies in Britain is particularly odd for it suggests wilful neglect or disregard of the sobering example of Northern Ireland where state schools are divided on the basis of faith; as such they are sectarian in character and have long been a powerful incubator of the schism between Catholics and Protestants. An educational policy whose aim is cohesion and inclusion would take serious note of this tragic, divisive phenomenon, learn the lessons, and ensure that it is not repeated in any other part of the country. But evidence shows that the lessons have sadly not been learned.

Education Secretary Michael Gove has appointed Peter Clark to review the evidence of the Trojan Horse plot. But, as has rightfully been pointed out by key people in Birmingham, Mr Clark is the wrong candidate given his earlier role as National Co-ordinator for Counter Terrorism. This highlights a key problem with government thinking: their only real concern is the potential for Islamist terrorism but little regard for the damage to schoolchildren and for community cohesion from those serious about ensuring that members of their communities rigidly adhere to their faith. Bob Jones, the elected West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, is correct to state that 'My main concern is that the Secretary of State is attempting to divert attention away from the governance and diversity issues that might be embarrassing to his policies and approach to school governance'. Indeed they should be embarrassing and it really is high time that the both the government and the opposition grasped the nettle that a firm commitment to a rounded secular education is what is needed for the benefit of children and for society at large, and act accordingly.

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