

The outcome of the Batley investigation is a surrender of liberal principles

Posted: Thu, 27th May 2021 by [Stephen Evans](#)

As an investigation into the Batley Grammar affair concludes, Stephen Evans says we should recognise the censorious precedent it has set.

Earlier this year a number of teachers were [suspended](#) after an image of the prophet Muhammad was used in a lesson to initiate a discussion about blasphemy at Batley Grammar School in West Yorkshire.

Pupils were forced out of school as angry protesters gathered at the gates demanding action against one of the teachers for 'offending' "the whole Muslim community". Some protesters accused him of stirring up anti-Muslim hatred.

The school's head teacher apologised "unequivocally" and sought to placate the protestors by saying the use of the image was "totally inappropriate". Meanwhile, one teacher and his family were forced into hiding after receiving threats.

An independent investigation launched by the academy trust behind the school has now [concluded](#). It's found that the image was used for an "educational purpose" to benefit students and was not used with the intention of causing offence. The suspensions have been lifted – and rightly so.

Everyone's primary concern should be for the safety and wellbeing of the teacher at the centre of this and his family. We should hope they can now move on and rebuild their lives. I would be surprised if the teacher returns to the school.

But we should also recognise that the investigators have given the protesters what they craved by imposing a de facto blasphemy code on the school.

The [executive summary of the investigation](#) says: "It is not necessary for staff to use the material in question to deliver the learning outcomes on the subject of blasphemy; or any such images of the type used... in any trust RS lessons, or any other lessons."

Nobody claimed it was "necessary". But if you're teaching about blasphemy and freedom of expression, you may reasonably think the most effective way of exploring this subject involves using images that have caused controversy. You may also think that if you don't show them, pupils will look them up on the internet anyway, and the best environment for this learning is a teacher facilitated discussion. Teachers appreciate the diversity of their students and can foster civility to ensure students learn about sensitive topics in authentic, sensitive, engaging and meaningful ways.

On a fundamental point, the outcome of this investigation represents a capitulation to the mob. The reason this school and others won't use such resources again is not because they aren't educationally justified, but because they don't want to cause offence. Not because they aren't conducive to learning, but because of the threat of disruption and violence. This is how a de facto blasphemy law works.

Right from the start, the National Secular Society urged the government to take the lead on this issue. We warned that treating it as little more than a local dispute would leave the investigation more vulnerable to pressure from assertive, intolerant religious voices.

And that has now happened. The outcome of the investigation has been influenced by unreasonable religious demands and intimidation and threats from religious extremists.

In many ways, the trust's response is a clever fudge. It endeavours to conciliate between the various parties by offering them all something, while selling out on liberal, secularist principles. It says it's committed to "ensuring offence is not caused". This is a route to censorship that sets a very dangerous precedent.

And the outcome of this local investigation will inevitably affect teachers' ability to do their jobs across the country. One trainee teacher at Manchester Metropolitan University who expressed concern over the weak response to the Batley Grammar affair and said he would be willing to use images of religious figures in class has already been [called to a 'fitness to practise' meeting](#).

Teachers have been given the message that they should censor themselves. And that message could be relevant on any other number of sensitive subjects where well-organised and vocal groups could take offence.

When the incident first happened the Department for Education said it was "never acceptable to threaten or intimidate teachers", adding that schools are "free to include a full range of issues, ideas and materials in their curriculum". With fundamental principles at stake, the government should now launch its own investigation into the handling of the affair and consider how we got ourselves into the position where religious extremists have a veto on which resources teachers can use in the classroom.

But instead the DfE has simply said "parents, families and the local community" should "[recognise the findings of the investigation](#)" and "welcome and support" the trust's plan to "strengthen its oversight of the curriculum".

Everyone will understandably want to move on from this now. But before we do, we should recognise that an Islamic blasphemy code has been quietly imposed. Teachers' and pupils' freedoms have been sacrificed to appease offence takers.

The outcome of the Batley affair is another damaging chip away at the fundamental right to free expression and inquiry.

Additional note - Friday 28 May

The NSS has today written to the DfE about this. The letter urged the department to investigate the handling of the protests outside Batley Grammar School.

It added that the investigation should consider the wider context of [religious fundamentalism being imposed on schools](#) through protests and intimidation, and ask what can be done to protect and support schools in such situations.

Image: Oxana Maher / Batley Grammar School / [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

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