



Mr Gary Kibble, headteacher
Batley Grammar School
Carlinghow Hill,
Batley
West Yorkshire, WF17 0AD

Cc Batley Grammar School Local Governing Body
Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE, Secretary of State for Education

26 March 2021

Dear Mr Kibble,

We are writing in response to the school's actions following protests regarding the use of a cartoon of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

We hope, first and foremost, that the school's first priority is the safety and wellbeing of the staff member in question, in addition to the safety of other staff and pupils. The situation has disturbing echoes of the killing of Samuel Paty, the history teacher murdered by a Muslim fanatic who objected to his use of cartoons from *Charlie Hebdo* in a class about freedom of expression.

We were disappointed at the school's immediate response, which included the suspension of the teacher; an unequivocal apology for using a "totally inappropriate" resource; and withdrawing teaching on the associated subject. We are further concerned by claims that this statement was in part written by a representative of one of the groups protesting.

The protesters are clearly seeking to attempt to impose a blasphemy taboo which will restrict the freedom to teach. Their bullying tactics appear to have succeeded.

The school's initial response was to acquiesce to religious demands. This was unfair to the teacher in question and will further fuel a climate of censorship brought on by demands to accommodate unreasonable, reactionary religious views.

By issuing an immediate apology rather than defending the principle of free expression, one of the most precious pillars of our liberal democratic society, the school is siding with religious fundamentalists.

Teachers should have a reasonable degree of freedom to explore sensitive subjects and enable students to think critically. Education should open minds rather than close them. Those responsible for our children's education must therefore place a high value on the fundamental right to freedom of expression, which is applicable to ideas that may shock and offend as well as those which are received favourably.

Your actions have sent the opposite message to students. This incident is also likely to undermine teachers' freedom to do their jobs, on any number of sensitive subjects, both within your school gates and beyond.

It is patronising to assume that all British Muslims will take offence at the use of a cartoon. We urge you to keep in mind that the protesters who shout loudest are not representative of all Muslims.

We understand that your school wants to promote cohesion and inclusivity. But this cannot be achieved by pandering to religious groups who wish to dictate what can and cannot be taught within the school.

We ask for an explanation of the rationale behind your decisions on this issue. And as investigations are carried out into the matter, we urge you to uphold the vital principle of free speech and not submit to the unreasonable demands of those who seek to impose blasphemy taboos on society as a whole.

We look forward to your response.

We are considering this an open letter.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Evans
Chief executive, National Secular Society