

Are hijabs really a statement of your school's values and ethos?

By Elaine Chambers

I recently went on a tour of a new academy school in my area, the UCL Academy in Swiss Cottage. It is sponsored by University College London, a specifically secular university. After the visit, I wrote to the head teacher – and this is the correspondence that resulted.

Dear Mr Street,

Re: UCL Academy Swiss Cottage

Thank you for meeting the local community and showing us around a really magnificent state of the art school. We missed out the library, perhaps this can be viewed next time?

There is however a matter about which I felt somewhat queasy, especially as your building, its staff, and its ethos is determined to look to the future. The point I brought up could not be dealt with at this public meeting because it was regarded as somewhat sensitive, and the word 'political' was expressed in a manner that was once reserved for sexual matters. So, I have confined my concern to electronic print in the hope that it will be given serious thought, and respectfully, a comprehensive response.

My concern does involve matters of sexuality, or more precisely gender. It is political. It is of major political importance worldwide, as well as locally, that we address gender prejudice and violence in this, the 21st century. We need to confront, with a morality that reflects a humane determination, the horrific record of violence against women and girls carried out in the self-interest of so called patriarchal 'needs'; most noticeably upheld by religions.

You showed a potential to understand the need to challenge this and pave a better way hopefully for our daughters' future by having on the front cover of your "6th Form" prospectus a girl, a black girl, thus showing your recognition of the demographics of the UK. However, as we see later, there follows a lack of coherence in your grasp of these matters, or your determination to see it though wanes.

Inside the prospectus there is a young girl wearing a hijab! This demonstrates your complete acceptance (along with our previous and current governments and their respective education departments) of the symbolic meanings attached to this headdress. "It's ok with us." is the immediate, overt and succinct message. This, I maintain, is born of ignorance and is inexcusable. I fear you haven't really thought this through and so understood that acquiescing with a symbol does have consequences, some of which [UCL has experienced recently](#) in relation to IERA. The principle here being, 'give us an inch...'

If Jeremy Bentham hadn't already lost his head, now made of wax, he would have in 2013! UCL was set up to avoid religion. How is it you can open a futuristic school while displaying an overt acceptance of a symbol with 8th century values? There are, I note, no turbans, kippahs, kufis displayed in the prospectus.

The hijab

This was, and still is, worn to protect a girl's sexual modesty. It bestows upon her the responsibility to gate-keep male sexuality, thus relieving him of any responsibility for his own sexual urges. Traditionally, and in even the most draconian Muslim countries, it is only worn by pubescent girls. Here in the UK, as an example of the 'give an inch...' principle, the hijab has become a very British Muslim affectation. It is worn, ludicrously, by primary school girls; I have seen it worn by pre-school girls, in their pushchairs, on their way to 'Sure Start'. Toddlers are protecting their sexual modesty in a 21st century so called modern liberal democracy! You could not make it up!

Clearly it has more 'meanings' today here in Western European countries than the merely traditional or the oppressive religious requirement. There are Muslim girls, and I suspect non-Muslim girls, wearing the hijab for no better reason than they believe it's fun, and have no understanding of its history.

The hijab has expanded in volume and is now multi coloured. It appears to be in competition with the Quangle Wangle's hat. It's become a fad, and its significance to some teenagers will be as transitory as any other fad, such as the back-to-front cap, or a nose stud.

More seriously, some girls wear it because they are made to. This is maintained by virtual ghettos supervised by patrols of bothers who make sure that their sisters are not seen out and about without a hijab.

Others are wearing the hijab willingly under the specious belief that it denotes piety and is a genuine requirement for any truly Muslim female to wear.

It is the consequence of this unquestioned acceptance that affects all other females. It seeks to place them in a position that ought not to be tenable in a so called modern liberal democracy. It is divisive. Its purpose is as old as patriarchy: it allows men the freedom to have sex whenever desired with identifiable females necessary for the gratification of their uncontrollable 'needs', while maintaining a supply of identifiably pure females to mother, with genetic certainty, their undisputed progeny. The mother and the whore. Some of the more heinous consequences of this despicable code have been seen in Rochdale and currently in Oxford.

Should your school be pandering to this dichotomy of the clearly labelled 'worthless' and 'worthy' female? Would your school perhaps allow all its other girls in the school, those Muslim girls who do not wear the hijab, all other religious and non-religious girls to wear a hat as visible as the hijab, top of head, stating, "We are just as pure as you are and will expect the same respect."

This of course can easily be seen to be provocative. Yet we have become blind to the provocation of those who seek to demonstrate, ostentatiously, with an advert atop of their heads, that they are pure, and ought to be respected, because they are 'Nice Girls'; with the implication that all others are not.

Somewhere along our moral journey to rid ourselves of racism we have mistakenly conflated racism with cultural relativism and allowed the ethnic godfathers (what do I mean by that? I mean the unelected patriarchs who speak on behalf of their communities) who wish to maintain their gender based power within their communities, to gain control of this journey.

We must challenge this without fear of being called racist. This fear has paralysed us into ignoring the most heinous violence under our very noses against non-white women and girls in the UK. The greatest abomination ever devised to control female sexuality namely, FGM goes on in the UK with impunity.

You are, I understand going to tackle this issue within your school. I know that Ofsted intend that FGM be addressed in schools. The NSPCC is working on a means of addressing primary school children and the Samaritan's, 'Childline' service, in their specific way are training people in how to deal with this horror when they receive a call on the subject.

I'm sure that we would all agree that there can be no moral justification for ripping the genitals out of little girls. So why have we ignored this? We have been engaged in a lily-livered covert deal between the indigenous patriarchs and the ethnic godfathers thus, "You don't call us racist and we will let you treat your women in the manner to which you are accustomed."

There are an estimated 20,000 female children in the London area alone, sans genitals. There are over one hundred child wives, some as young as 9 years old, in consummated marriages in Islington, no less!

'Honour' killings have gone unrecognised for decades, just because we were scared of being called racist. Yet racism has thrived in the back allies of the lives of BME women. This toxic mix of being black and female has allowed their human Rights to be sacrificed to the maintenance of both black and white male hegemony.

There is no tradition, no culture, no religion, no men and no race that has a right to practice gender violence.

So, you have a responsibly to the young black girl on the front cover of your prospectus to ensure her future, and the future of all the other girls who will come to your secular school and not pander to, or acquiesce with old patriarchal notions of well identified, well labelled 'Nice Girls' suitable for the breeding of sons.

Before Jeremy B. bounces out of the box he's kept in, let's see your school lead the way and demonstrate the moral courage to stand up to these despicable gender discriminating values and religious labelling and ban them from the school building. After all it will be for the greatest good of the greatest number of people on this planet -- women.

Dear Ms Chambers,

It was good to meet you at the CLG. And thank you for your kind comments about our building and facilities.

Thank you for your email below. The nature of the issues you raise are not something that I can comment on at this time. I can say that we support all our students pastorally and academically providing them with a support system and academic education to allow them to develop into confident successful and well-rounded individuals.

We have an intake with a range of cultural backgrounds which makes for a diverse student population. This will always be reflected in any of our publications.

The discussions we had when we met were in response to individual queries you had at the time. I would be happy to talk to you further about it when we next meet at the next CLG.

Dear Mr Street

Thank you for your reply which was of necessity, because of your position, diplomatically obtuse. I appreciate your position and its powerlessness in the role you have in this school with the incongruous and anachronistic practices it is allowing to be perpetuated. However, I believe we each, as individuals, have a reasonability to draw attention to inequality and culturally relative practices that are divisive; even at the risk of seeming to be bothersome in the face of these practices which many people, and indeed our various governments, past and present, deem to be acceptable. So I persist in the hope that someone might put forward an argument that rationally challenges my contention that UCL is acquiescent with ancient 'moral' codes. I contest this:

"I can say that we support all our students pastorally and academically providing them with a support system and academic education to allow them to develop into confident successful and well-rounded individuals."

How can your school be supporting girls in your pastoral care, users and non-users of the hijab, if you ignore its meaning and function, i.e. to divide young girls into the 'pure' and by implication the 'not so pure'? This is pandering to the age old patriarchal fetish with virginity.

"We have an intake with a range of cultural backgrounds which makes for a diverse student population. This will always be reflected in any of our publications. "

Well no you haven't reflected in your '6th Form' prospectus a diverse student population. As I pointed out, there is not one person photographed wearing a turban, kippah, or kufi displayed in the prospectus.

This issue I have so annoyingly brought to the school's attention is not a trivial fussiness about head scarves, it is an attempt to wake us up to a continuum that although seemingly innocuous, (merely a scarf, claim some!) is ultimately a part of the control, and in the particular, the sexual control of women and girls. It demeans either the wearer, 'look I am pure' or by implication the non-wearer. It interferes

ultimately with the human rights of women and girls in this so called modern 21st C liberal democracy.

What on earth is the UCL academy doing acquiescing with these values?

I write this with respect, and out of a genuine desire to open what I believe is a necessary discussion, which I believe ought to be on the agenda in all schools, and indeed with CSF, one that is important to the well-being of all females this the 21st C.

See also: [Hijab should be as welcome as bangers and mash](#), says *Christian-Muslim group*.