

Ep 47: Blasphemy in the classroom – The Batley Grammar case

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/podcast/2021/04/ep47>

0:00:06.960,0:00:13.040

"Extremism takes root in minds which are not able to have the mental resilience

0:00:13.040,0:00:16.240

to deal with different and varying positions and views."

0:00:22.000,0:00:26.640

You're listening to Episode 47 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma Park

0:00:26.640,0:00:32.000

(EP). Just before Easter a group of largely male

Muslim protesters assembled outside Batley Grammar

0:00:32.000,0:00:36.480

School in Yorkshire. They were protesting against the use of an allegedly blasphemous and racist

0:00:36.480,0:00:40.640

cartoon of Muhammad, possibly from Charlie Hebdo, that had been used by a teacher at the school

0:00:40.640,0:00:45.440

in a religious studies lesson. The Headmaster, Gary Kibble, rather than supporting the teacher

0:00:45.440,0:00:50.560

or even reserving judgment, immediately issued an unequivocal apology. He described the use

0:00:50.560,0:00:55.440

of such material as totally unacceptable and suspended the teacher pending a formal inquiry.

0:00:56.160,0:01:00.560

Meanwhile the teacher himself has gone into hiding after receiving death threats from Islamic

0:01:00.560,0:01:06.160

extremists. His father said that he had been "thrown under a bus" by the school. The National

0:01:06.160,0:01:10.480

Secular Society was one of the first organisations to draw attention to the Batley case.

0:01:10.480,0:01:14.000

Stephen Evans (SE), the Chief Executive Officer of the NSS, wrote an open letter to the school urging

0:01:14.000,0:01:18.400

it not to allow protesters to impose a blasphemy taboo that would restrict freedom of speech.

0:01:18.960,0:01:23.840

Since then responses from the rest of society have been mixed. The commentators who have come

0:01:23.840,0:01:27.600

out most firmly in support of the teacher's use of the cartoons are predictably those in the

0:01:27.600,0:01:32.640
right-wing media. The Government has condemned the protesters but without doing anything specific to

0:01:32.640,0:01:37.680
help the teacher. Opinions on the left, from the media, to politicians, to teaching organisations,

0:01:37.680,0:01:42.240
have varied from support for the principle of free speech, albeit hedged with qualifications,

0:01:42.240,0:01:45.840
to disapproval of the teacher's decision to use cartoons that were offensive.

0:01:47.200,0:01:50.160
In this Episode I'll be talking to three guests whose perspectives

0:01:50.160,0:01:53.360
do not straightforwardly align with either the political right or left:

0:01:53.360,0:01:58.000
a British Muslim campaigner; an ex-Muslim journalist; and the NSS's Stephen Evans.

0:01:59.680,0:02:05.280
My first guest is Fiyaz Mughal OBE (FM). Fiyaz is a British Muslim who in 2011 founded 'Tell Mamma',

0:02:05.280,0:02:09.920
an organisation that aimed to monitor anti-Muslim hatred and provide support to its victims.

0:02:09.920,0:02:14.240
He is currently Director of 'Faith Matters',

an organisation that works to resolve conflicts

0:02:14.240,0:02:19.040
and strengthen relationships between faith communities. In response to the Batley case

0:02:19.040,0:02:24.000
Fiyaz wrote an article for The Spectator entitled "The Batley Protesters do not Represent me".

0:02:27.440,0:02:31.440
(EP): Fiyaz Mughal, welcome to the podcast. (FM): Thank you. (EP): In your article for The Spectator you claimed that the Batley protesters did not represent you. What motivated you to write

0:02:37.200,0:02:43.120
this? (FM): Well it was important to get an alternative opinion out there into the

0:02:43.120,0:02:49.680
public sphere and public domain, predominantly because the key view that was coming out from

0:02:49.680,0:02:56.560
Batley was that a group of Muslims, a group of mainly predominantly overwhelmingly Muslim men,

0:02:57.280,0:03:04.000
were standing outside of school and the impression given was that it was potentially intimidating to

0:03:04.000,0:03:11.520
the school itself, religious chants outside the school, the view that a certain perspective

0:03:12.320,0:03:20.000
of the protection of religion was coming across and I just thought there are many

0:03:20.000,0:03:25.840
different opinions around issues of Islam within Muslim communities and the way that the Prophet

0:03:25.840,0:03:30.480
can be depicted within Muslim communities. You know people have different perspectives and I

0:03:30.480,0:03:36.720
wanted to ensure that different perspectives came out. Many Muslims like myself want to get

0:03:36.720,0:03:42.720
on with their lives. Islam is a very personal thing in our lives. We don't particularly see

0:03:43.840,0:03:52.240
see this enforcement, rigid enforcement of the way Islam is practised, as being fundamental to Islam

0:03:52.240,0:03:59.920
and we see a flexibility in interpretation of Islam and a flexibility which also involves how

0:03:59.920,0:04:11.200
to discuss, learn, enjoy and also include the views of others in how we practise and how we believe

0:04:11.200,0:04:18.960
in our faith. (EP): On the spectrum of different Muslim beliefs, say from fundamentalists to more

0:04:18.960,0:04:24.720
liberal, where would you put yourself ? (FM): It's a very difficult scale that you've given me you know:

0:04:25.680,0:04:32.560
the conservatives and groups of fundamentalists and you know, there are

0:04:32.560,0:04:38.560
differences even in what I've just suggested here, would say that I would probably sit in a more

0:04:38.560,0:04:44.000
progressive, liberal form of Islam but I don't. I reject that totally. I reject those kind of

0:04:44.000,0:04:51.520
bracketing totally, because actually Islam is never, and religion never really, sits into

0:04:51.520,0:04:57.520
these forms of brackets. Traditions can be interpreted and interpreted fluidly

0:04:58.240,0:05:05.920
and they change and go back and re-adapt and change over time so if I have to kind of say

0:05:05.920,0:05:14.400
something I would say that I would, I see myself as practising an Islam which is fluid, which takes

0:05:14.400,0:05:20.080
into account the changing context of society. And I think any religion, any thought process

0:05:20.800,0:05:28.000
exactly goes through that adaptation over time. So they may say progressive/liberal;

0:05:28.640,0:05:37.600

I would say actually REALISTIC of my view of my religion. (EP): What response have you had so far from

0:05:37.600,0:05:42.720

readers of your article in The Spectator both Muslims and others? (FM): Well the responses have been

0:05:43.360,0:05:50.080

overwhelmingly positive, but obviously there are those who I've had responses, from a handful

0:05:50.080,0:05:55.440

of members of British Muslim community, that have been negative. Many responses from British Muslims

0:05:55.440,0:06:02.080

who have been very positive saying EXACTLY that, that actually you know they don't see a clash

0:06:02.080,0:06:07.120

of values, that actually they live their lives and Islam is very personal to them and you know

0:06:07.120,0:06:13.440

and that they are just thankful somebody speaks up against the kind of brittle and against the

0:06:13.440,0:06:21.520

marginal views of individuals like those standing outside Batley school. And so I've had

0:06:21.520,0:06:25.600

a lot of positive responses from British Muslims but also I've had some responses which have been

0:06:26.560,0:06:34.000

literally saying, "Oh we agree with you BUT", and that we agree with you but then goes on to

0:06:34.000,0:06:41.120

say but the picture was one which showed Muhammad with a bomb on his head, in the school.

0:06:42.320,0:06:48.720

And my view to them is well are you trying to then justify the actions on the back of what

0:06:48.720,0:06:53.840

you've just said? You know, so there's this kind of

"Oh we agree with you but" there's NO "we agree with

0:06:53.840,0:07:00.880

you but" in this in this conversation. You can't agree and then take a dissenting view which says

0:07:00.880,0:07:06.080

"BUT you shouldn't show a cartoon", you know irrespective of what that cartoon was.

0:07:06.080,0:07:14.320

If it was used in the context of discussion to say, "What is the role of racism in our society?"

0:07:14.320,0:07:18.560

because you know, let's be honest, some of these cartoons have a very very strong

0:07:19.120,0:07:26.960

racial overtone right? They place Muslims, they place BME individuals in a very aggressive tone,

0:07:26.960,0:07:32.080

obviously threatening tone, with the bomb on their head, you know a terroristic tone, if i

0:07:32.080,0:07:36.960

can say that. But you know we're going to have to have these discussions because these cartoons

0:07:36.960,0:07:42.320

are already out there. As I've said before: within one or two clicks somebody can find them online.

0:07:42.960,0:07:49.280

We don't live in a society where you can hide things actually I think thankfully. And you know

0:07:49.280,0:07:52.720

we're going to have to have this discussion so if you can if we can have these discussions in

0:07:52.720,0:07:58.160

a fashion which is facilitated in which Muslim students do not feel targeted but have their

0:07:58.160,0:08:03.360

chance to say what they need to say and be heard and feel included in that discussion -

0:08:03.920,0:08:10.480

and it's a discussion about racism on cartoons and and it is a discussion about faith and its place

0:08:10.480,0:08:18.000

in society. But it is done in a facilitated fashion which does not target Muslim students

0:08:18.000,0:08:22.640

as I believe it wasn't done in Batley, then these are discussions we need to have because frankly

0:08:23.440,0:08:29.520

any kid or any individual within two clicks can find these cartoons and if you don't

0:08:29.520,0:08:36.080

have these discussions the views that they can gather and gain by going online and just

0:08:36.080,0:08:41.760

sitting in their rooms and watching these kind of cartoons and listening to these kind of debates

0:08:42.560,0:08:49.200

can be very polarising. So we need to have these debates in our educational settings

0:08:49.200,0:08:55.840

in a facilitated and in an inclusive way which gets people to talk, young people to talk about

0:08:55.840,0:09:02.000

these things, without targeting other individuals in the classroom. (EP): So what you're saying is

0:09:02.000,0:09:09.200

actually one of the things that education can and should do is enable students to have the tools

0:09:09.760,0:09:15.920

to look at controversial material, material which may inadvertently or may be designed to

0:09:16.640,0:09:23.200

either satirise, attack, criticise people on the basis either of their race or religion. But

0:09:23.200,0:09:26.960

doing this in the classroom looking at it critically, looking at it in an open way

0:09:27.520,0:09:33.680
with everyone being allowed to speak, is actually a way of enabling students to deal with it, to test

0:09:33.680,0:09:41.040
ideas and and thereby to to ultimately have a much more sort of a better more mature understanding of

0:09:41.040,0:09:46.400
it without just being polarised and absorbing extremist views either way? (FM): I think that's a really

0:09:46.400,0:09:51.840
fair statement and I think that sums up exactly what I'm trying to say; it's just that. And I

0:09:51.840,0:09:57.280
would also add you know I had an example, I've lived an example of this when I was

0:09:57.280,0:10:06.480
17 you know. A debate took place in my physics class where

0:10:06.480,0:10:11.840
the Salman Rushdie affair was taking place at that time and another individual had raised the issue

0:10:11.840,0:10:17.200
that Rushdie, he had every right to publish his book. (EP):Just to be clear this was when you

0:10:17.200,0:10:21.760
were at school in Kent in the 1980s? (FM): A school in North London actually. (EP): In North London okay.

0:10:23.040,0:10:29.520
(FM): O the 19 yeah 80s that's right, late 80s. And so I was, you know, I was taken aback. I was hurt by that,

0:10:29.520,0:10:34.000
that opening up of the discussion, by this individual. I thought "It's a physics class

0:10:34.000,0:10:40.400
why are we discussing this?" but I had my chance to say what I needed to say and actually the

0:10:40.400,0:10:46.400
the teacher was really good at allowing different voices to speak and the teacher

0:10:46.400,0:10:54.560
made very clear that 'The Satanic Verses' was clearly a work of fiction and he made very clear

0:10:54.560,0:10:59.840
that it does not reflect, the reactions do not at that time, the reactions in Bradford and other

0:10:59.840,0:11:07.360
parts of the country, do not reflect British Muslims. This is a debate in 1989 that was had in

0:11:07.360,0:11:12.080
my classroom and the teacher facilitated really well. He made me feel that it was

0:11:12.080,0:11:19.120
not an attack on Muslims. It was not a personal attack. It was a discussion about social issues

0:11:19.120,0:11:24.080
and that actually my voice was important to be

heard in that debate. Now I was angry and I thought

0:11:24.080,0:11:28.560

we shouldn't have had that discussion but actually

I changed my opinion after that and I changed my

0:11:28.560,0:11:32.800

opinion and I looked back on that discussion and

it was totally reflective of discussions we

0:11:32.800,0:11:39.840

are still having to this day. And so I'm very thankful. I'm very thankful that teacher did

0:11:39.840,0:11:43.840

what he did and he came up to me at the end and said, "Look how do you feel?"

0:11:44.800,0:11:50.240

you know, "I hope you're not being hurt by this, it's not about you, I'm glad you had your say".

0:11:50.240,0:11:55.680

The teacher did it so well and I look back and I think thank God we had that discussion because

0:11:55.680,0:12:02.400

it exposed me to alternative views. It got me to think. It got me to understand different people

0:12:02.400,0:12:07.680

had different opinions and it also got me to to take on board that we could have a deeply

0:12:08.560,0:12:14.640

divisive debate but actually in the end I can still get on with people and I can still sit

0:12:14.640,0:12:19.840

in the classroom and I can still smile and say hello to those pupils who have had these kind of

0:12:19.840,0:12:26.240

discussions. So it made me learn how to listen to different views. So that is an example in

0:12:26.240,0:12:31.840

1989 of what happened to me and if that took place 30 years ago, nearly 30 years ago odd -

0:12:32.560,0:12:38.560

frankly, why are we not having these discussions in that sort of a manner (and clearly teachers can do

0:12:38.560,0:12:44.960

this without Muslim pupils feeling marginalised and isolated). It's as if, it's as if those Batley

0:12:45.680,0:12:51.840

individuals standing outside the school think that Muslims don't have the mindset or the capability

0:12:52.480,0:12:59.440

to actually deal with such issues; it's ludicrous.

Actually they're marginalising ourselves, those

0:12:59.440,0:13:05.920

Batley demonstrators are marginalising Muslims out by giving this view that we are, you know,

0:13:05.920,0:13:11.680

that we take slight to every issue, that actually we don't have the mental capacity to deal with

0:13:11.680,0:13:18.320
these issues which is just LUDICROUS. (EP): So what you're saying is actually Muslims like anyone else,

0:13:18.320,0:13:23.040
the best way of dealing with these controversial subjects is for everyone to be

0:13:23.040,0:13:28.400
allowed to say, everyone to be involved rather than excluding some people because you know the rest

0:13:28.400,0:13:33.280
of society is so worried about even mentioning these issues? (FM): Well that's right and I'll

0:13:33.280,0:13:37.760
go further to say this: you know I've worked in the field of extremism, countering extremism, for 20

0:13:37.760,0:13:45.040
years. If you start, if society starts to say "Don't talk about certain issues, don't look at certain

0:13:45.040,0:13:52.240
things, don't go in certain areas... Now there is a line okay there is a line. You don't really want to

0:13:52.880,0:13:59.680
promote violent extremist material in society. Clearly there is a line, but if the

0:13:59.680,0:14:05.760
view is taken within schools, educational establishments within statutory authorities

0:14:05.760,0:14:13.120

and other sectors of society that you, that society really can't discuss, go there, look at

0:14:13.680,0:14:20.480
or view material to which has, all which has alternative viewpoints, then we're in a very bad

0:14:20.480,0:14:26.480
place. Because what it does, it reduces the ability for somebody to have that mental resilience to

0:14:26.480,0:14:32.240
deal with difficult issues in life and actually it creates a society where polarisation

0:14:32.240,0:14:38.720
and ultimately extremism can take root because extremism only takes root

0:14:39.440,0:14:45.120
in mindsets that are not able, that are not able to be resilient to different thoughts.

0:14:45.120,0:14:52.640
This is really key. Extremism takes root in minds which are not able to have the mental resilience

0:14:52.640,0:14:55.920
to deal with different and varying positions and views.

0:14:57.600,0:15:02.240
(EP): And that's the only way really you can create tolerance and understanding of other people

0:15:02.240,0:15:07.440
is if you are intellectually able to cope with views which you might find perhaps threatening or

0:15:07.440,0:15:11.600

offensive but you've got to be able to deal with them if you want to understand other people and to

0:15:11.600,0:15:16.960
communicate with them. (FM): Absolutely. (EP): The response of the Headteacher in the Batley case

0:15:16.960,0:15:23.440
was absolutely opposite of that. He apologised profusely for the teacher's use of the cartoon

0:15:23.440,0:15:28.320
and he said, you know, the teacher's been suspended pending a formal investigation. How

0:15:28.320,0:15:33.440
should the Headteacher have reacted? (FM): Well the Headteacher should have, in my view,

0:15:34.240,0:15:41.680
taken time to consult with a wider set of parents. The first thing he should have done was to say

0:15:41.680,0:15:48.560
"Look I'm not going to respond to this immediately", because actually by responding to a

0:15:48.560,0:15:53.440
group of demonstrators outside the school I can give the image that these demonstrators have

0:15:53.440,0:15:59.840
effectively changed school policy on teaching and that's exactly what he did by responding

0:15:59.840,0:16:05.120
so quickly to the demonstrations outside his

school. He actually, he gave the impression that he,

0:16:06.000,0:16:11.680
that the demonstrators could carry on this kind of activity, this kind of activity of, I would say

0:16:12.640,0:16:18.320
intimidation, and so you know he should have taken time to consult with other parents but also in

0:16:18.320,0:16:23.440
the end should have come out with a decision i believe which said: you know the school has the

0:16:23.440,0:16:30.160
the right to carry out teaching as it sees fit, again in a way which doesn't marginalise students

0:16:30.160,0:16:36.160
but in a way which allows for debate and dissent. Now that's precisely why we send kids to school.

0:16:37.120,0:16:42.080
(EP): :Let's look now at the details of the Batley case and see how that idea of Islam

0:16:42.080,0:16:46.720
might relate to that. Now the full story of what exactly happened in the classroom has not yet been

0:16:46.720,0:16:51.520
officially confirmed. However, it seems as though the teacher showed his class some cartoons, from

0:16:51.520,0:16:56.480
Charlie Hebdo probably, which you have

mentioned may have included the one with Prophet

0:16:56.480,0:17:01.440

Muhammad with a bomb in his turban. Now it seems that these were shown as part of a discussion

0:17:01.440,0:17:07.440

about blasphemy. It seems though I think (this is not yet confirmed) that the teacher did so after

0:17:07.440,0:17:13.680

warning the students and inviting any who wish to leave the classroom. Now The Muslim Action Forum,

0:17:13.680,0:17:19.120

which describes itself as an assembly of senior Muslim scholars and major organisations in the UK

0:17:19.120,0:17:24.720

working to deal with affronts to global civility, sent an open letter to Boris Johnson condemning

0:17:24.720,0:17:29.280

the use of the cartoons by the Batley teacher. In particular the letter claimed that the teacher's

0:17:29.280,0:17:35.200

use of the cartoons was, and I quote "based on the usual attempt of inciting hatred and

0:17:35.200,0:17:42.800

Islamophobia whilst pushing forward extremist white supremacist ideology". Why

0:17:42.800,0:17:49.440

do you think it is that The Muslim Action Forum framed the debate in terms of racism, Islamophobia.

0:17:50.080,0:17:57.200

Is the simple act of showing an insulting cartoon of Muhammad in itself Islamophobic or do we really

0:17:57.200,0:18:06.000

need to look at the context? (FM): (To) Answer a really good question again... this is really a complex and

0:18:06.000,0:18:10.800

a nuanced set of views I'm going to give you because life is not as simple as black

0:18:10.800,0:18:17.760

and white. We all know that. The first thing to say is there should be no blanket bans on anything

0:18:17.760,0:18:23.680

around thought unless it promotes violence in our society. Okay, that's the fundamental principle

0:18:23.680,0:18:28.240

by which I live my life and it's a mental principle which I believe many British people

0:18:28.880,0:18:36.080

live their lives by. The fact is anything is up for support, critique, etc. Any idea is up for either

0:18:36.080,0:18:43.680

of the two etc so no blanket bans first thing. The second thing I have a real problem with

0:18:43.680,0:18:48.160

is a group writing to the Prime Minister to

effectively introduce blasphemy laws back into

0:18:48.160,0:18:54.240

the UK. I have a real problem with that because we

don't live in the medieval times thankfully and,

0:18:54.240,0:18:59.280

you know, anyone who writes to the Prime Minister

suggesting that we need to introduce those laws

0:18:59.280,0:19:06.560

doesn't even live in modern reality today because

it's bizarre. The third thing I would say is -

0:19:08.640,0:19:16.960

here's the nuance in my thinking - simply providing a cartoon is not the best way or simply

0:19:16.960,0:19:21.520

producing a cartoon and letting kids have a free-fall discussion is not the best way

0:19:22.080,0:19:28.240

to discuss very complex issues. So I would say very strongly you know providing a cartoon picture

0:19:28.240,0:19:32.000

and the teacher sitting back and letting kids go "get on with it" is not the way to teach this

0:19:32.000,0:19:39.360

because it COULD reinforce it could reinforce some stereotypical images. It could do that.

0:19:40.160,0:19:48.000

What I am saying is context is ABSOLUTELY key

and 'with context' means introducing images

0:19:49.360,0:19:57.600

like Mohammad with a bomb on his head sadly needs

contextual discussion: if it is going to be used to

0:19:57.600,0:20:05.840

challenge racism; if it is going to be used to introduce why debate and dissent is important.

0:20:06.400,0:20:14.560

But the context needs to, as I said, make clear that this is a a cartoon which doesn't reflect

0:20:14.560,0:20:20.400

the reality of all Muslims. That actually it is just the perspective of one individual drawing

0:20:20.400,0:20:26.480

the cartoon but actually the bomb on the head of a person who looks like they are from the

0:20:26.480,0:20:33.920

Middle East has racist connotations, but we are discussing free speech. And if it has

0:20:33.920,0:20:39.920

racist connotations let's talk about them. And if people see in that cartoon they need to challenge

0:20:39.920,0:20:45.200

religion let's talk about it. But I mean the presentation of Muhammad with the bomb on his head

0:20:45.760,0:20:51.520

has so many different connotations, then you can have so many discussions and actually by

0:20:51.520,0:21:01.360

doing so you are teaching, you are reflecting, you

are bringing up these thoughts or of critical

0:21:01.360,0:21:08.080
thinking in the minds of young people. You know
I look at that I see a cartoon and I see

0:21:08.800,0:21:13.760
discussion around religion and faith, discussion
around faith in society, discussion around racism

0:21:13.760,0:21:20.240
and prejudice, discussion around stereotypes and
tropes. It brings up so many threads in my mind

0:21:20.240,0:21:26.000
which in the end make me an individual who can have a richer and deeper thought process

0:21:26.000,0:21:30.160
and a more critical thought process which makes me a healthier individual

0:21:30.160,0:21:35.840
going forward. Precisely what you've just suggested -
we need to have these multiple discussions because

0:21:35.840,0:21:40.240
in the end there's no simple answer to a cartoon
being produced but if you don't produce a cartoon

0:21:41.120,0:21:47.920
and a kid then who is inculcated with the view that you must NEVER see this cartoon,

0:21:47.920,0:21:54.240
you must never talk about this cartoon, goes and
sees them, their view, I can guarantee you,

0:21:54.240,0:21:59.760
will be one of anger. When they see it and their
view will be, "Who is it that published that cartoon?"

0:21:59.760,0:22:05.360
What can I do? How can I challenge that? How can
I fight back? Oh this is disgusting. This is an

0:22:05.360,0:22:11.280
attack on me". it becomes a far more aggressive and
polarised response than the responses you get if

0:22:11.280,0:22:17.200
you actually had these nuanced discussions early
on in life. (EP): So one of the functions of education in

0:22:17.200,0:22:23.760
such a case is to draw the sting from these sorts
of materials. (FM): Absolutely. I mean education is all

0:22:24.640,0:22:32.880
ALL about getting people to think and drawing the
sting out of things which are difficult in society.

0:22:33.440,0:22:41.120
Okay? It teaches us to cope with the difficulties
of life. (EP): It's a fact that other teachers in British

0:22:41.120,0:22:46.320
schools have in the past used the Charlie Hebdo
cartoons as a resource for critical discussion

0:22:46.320,0:22:51.440

without complaints or certainly nothing that has reached the headlines. Why do you think the Batley

0:22:51.440,0:22:57.440
case has flared up now? (FM): I think the Batley case has flared up because of a combination of things.

0:22:57.440,0:23:04.560
I talked about, I talked about this online/phone cam set of campaigns that

0:23:04.560,0:23:11.840
have rumbled on. Those have taken over the last three, four, five years and so you've got increased

0:23:12.880,0:23:19.040
activity increase. I would say 'silent activity', Whatsapp messages sent by

0:23:19.040,0:23:25.760
groups sending these messages to mobilise and to create anger, to create anger in society in

0:23:25.760,0:23:32.080
parts of micro-religionists which then creates these flashpoints. So there's this bit which is off the

0:23:32.080,0:23:35.840
radar because these groups try to keep off the radar, don't want to leave a digital footprint

0:23:35.840,0:23:41.360
but they use mobile phones to spread this mob style campaigning. That's one element of it.

0:23:41.920,0:23:48.800

The second element of it is after Charlie Hebdo after Samuel Paty, this has become a bit of a

0:23:48.800,0:23:54.560
flashpoint issue which some groups know they can just rouse parts of the community to shut down

0:23:54.560,0:24:01.280
discussion and debate. So we're moving in the wrong direction is what we're saying, with some

0:24:01.280,0:24:05.280
parts of my co-religists, we're moving in the wrong direction instead of, you know, instead of looking

0:24:05.280,0:24:10.640
at these issues in a way which says "Well you know let's just step back and take a level-headed

0:24:10.640,0:24:15.520
approach of talking and discussing and listening to the school". There's a reaction to it.

0:24:16.160,0:24:22.640
And I think thirdly the Salman - I have to go back - the Salman Rushdie affair has in

0:24:22.640,0:24:29.600
the minds of some of my co-religionists created a view that if you shout long enough

0:24:30.560,0:24:36.880
and if you make a noise long enough and if you give a view that people are insulting

0:24:37.600,0:24:42.560
a whole set of communities that actually you

can just get them to stop talking about it.

0:24:43.200,0:24:48.960

And I think a bit of that stuck and that means that people are using those same tactics

0:24:48.960,0:24:56.640

and campaigns when issues like this come up. (EP): How do you see liberal and moderate Muslims or

0:24:56.640,0:25:01.520

Muslims with a more fluid interpretation of Islam as you've characterised yourself.

0:25:01.520,0:25:05.600

How do you see them participating in British civil society today and in the future?

0:25:06.560,0:25:12.160

(FM): They participate really well. They get on and they're engaged in different parts of our society,

0:25:12.160,0:25:19.440

different statutory organisations, in the political sphere. They are in every facet of our society

0:25:21.360,0:25:30.080

but, BUT the loudest voices are constricting the space for them to talk because they are frightened.

0:25:30.960,0:25:36.880

That's a sad reality. They are frightened. (EP): Why are they so frightened? (FM): Because they don't want to

0:25:36.880,0:25:43.120

have mobbing style text campaigns run against them, because they don't want to be smeared by

0:25:43.120,0:25:50.320

Islamist websites which actually are very good at maligning people. They don't particularly want

0:25:50.320,0:25:56.480

to have mosques shut them out and have all the local imams say "Don't speak about these issues". This is

0:25:56.480,0:26:02.720

the reality. This is the reality. If you speak out you will have these tentacles wrap themselves

0:26:02.720,0:26:11.520

around your neck because of the loudest voices who try to malign you, smear you, intimidate you and

0:26:12.560,0:26:16.880

that's why the majority of British Muslims, even if they have an opinion on this,

0:26:17.520,0:26:23.440

will not want to speak out because they, like anyone else, just want a quiet life. They

0:26:23.440,0:26:31.440

are in all parts of our society feeling at home in Britain, feeling at ease with Islam in modern

0:26:31.440,0:26:36.960

day Britain and feeling that Islam has a space in this country. But they just cannot, will not speak out because of the thuggery, the intimidation, of fundamentalists in my, parts of my co-religionists,

0:26:46.480,0:26:54.560

who have had a free rein to intimidate for too long. (EP): How can we as a society counter

0:26:54.560,0:27:01.520
this thuggery? (FM): By calling it out. By politicians having a spine and I just wrote in The Times

0:27:01.520,0:27:07.840
a letter two, three days ago which said just that.
When I have, I've worked for two decades with

0:27:09.200,0:27:13.920
agencies like the Home Office and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. I've

0:27:13.920,0:27:18.400
worked in community issues for two decades and I have simply lost count of the number of times

0:27:19.120,0:27:25.200
when I have said to government officials, "You need to challenge some of the rhetoric of these groups.

0:27:25.200,0:27:30.720
You have the resources to challenge it, you have the means to challenge it, you need to support

0:27:30.720,0:27:36.800
people who stand up against these groups". And civil servants, as I said in my letter to The Times, nod,

0:27:37.840,0:27:46.080
agree and when social media and the mob style tactics start, government are not government. The

0:27:46.080,0:27:51.440

civil servants run to the hills. They don't say anything. There's no, there's no counter

0:27:51.440,0:27:57.520
campaign against this kind of action. Very few politicians will speak up and if they do speak up

0:27:57.520,0:28:04.320
you don't find much support around government machinery to support them. So there is no pushback

0:28:04.320,0:28:11.200
from government, particularly civil servants who literally, literally just wring their hands

0:28:11.200,0:28:18.560
and put their heads in the sand. And that is why, that is why we are at serious risk of our

0:28:18.560,0:28:26.400
values in society - values which are in line with Islamic tradition of

0:28:26.400,0:28:32.560
discussion, pluralism, freedom of thought - they are not different to Islamic tradition.

0:28:33.680,0:28:39.040
They are under attack because actually our government machinery is not willing to push

0:28:39.040,0:28:44.080
back in a coordinated way, nor support those members of British Muslim communities who are

0:28:44.080,0:28:50.800
standing up. And eventually, as I wrote in The Times:
who wants to be alone standing up getting smeared,

0:28:51.360,0:28:58.240
getting your employer written to, feeling in fear of your life? Who wants to do that

0:28:58.240,0:29:05.280
because these people are essentially winning. They're winning and we are as a society corroding,

0:29:05.280,0:29:12.000
corroding from within because we're not willing to stand up for the majority of communities including

0:29:12.000,0:29:18.960
British Muslim communities who actually enjoy the space in our society where they can live,

0:29:18.960,0:29:25.840
be and practise what they want. (EP): Fiyaz Mughal, thank you very much. (FM): Thank you.

0:29:32.400,0:29:36.000
(EP): My second guest is Khadija Khan a journalist and commentator who has

0:29:36.000,0:29:41.120
written for publications including The Nation, sister-hood, Aereo magazine and Sedar which

0:29:41.120,0:29:45.440
is a platform for Muslim heritage voices to challenge prevailing narratives around Islam.

0:29:45.440,0:29:48.960
Khadijah, welcome to the podcast. (KK): Thank you so much Emma for having me.

0:29:49.760,0:29:56.400
(EP): Frst of all maybe we could just start Khadijah by telling us about your position in this. I

0:29:56.400,0:30:03.280
understand you were brought up in a Pakistani

Muslim family. Are you still a practising Muslim?

0:30:04.000,0:30:10.720
(KK): I was born and raised in a conservative household, religiously conservative households, and

0:30:11.840,0:30:16.880
I believe children who are born and raised in in such households, they don't have any choice

0:30:17.440,0:30:24.800
when it comes to embrace our religion or faith. So they do what they are told and they

0:30:25.840,0:30:32.320
practise whatever religion they are taught by their parents, so the same thing happened to me.

0:30:32.880,0:30:42.320
I followed religion, I followed tradition, I experienced religious teaching and religious,

0:30:44.480,0:30:54.880
you can say 'saying', as as a child who was indoctrinated by parents, by the society, by

0:30:54.880,0:31:04.080
peers. So when I have this choice, to choose what to be, then I choose to be a humanist. So

0:31:04.080,0:31:09.120
I call myself a humanist. (EP): In terms of your heritage do you still see yourself as part of the

0:31:09.120,0:31:17.280
wider Muslim heritage community? (KK): Yes it's a part of what I am. I cannot just refuse to be a part of

0:31:17.280,0:31:24.240
this, you know, heritage. It's what I am and they kind of, there are certain elements,

0:31:24.240,0:31:29.360
the radical elements in the Muslim
community;
they would definitely abandon people like
me

0:31:30.000,0:31:36.640
and try to alienate us, but that's the
reality that I cannot change

0:31:36.640,0:31:42.800
my words, my upbringing. (EP): Thank you for
that
introduction to yourself Khadijah. Let's move
now

0:31:42.800,0:31:49.360
to the Batley grammar school case in
particular.
Have you been in touch with anyone who has
been

0:31:49.360,0:31:54.960
connected to Batley or have you been
contacted
by anyone who knows about it from the
inside?

0:31:55.680,0:32:05.760
(KK): I have been contacted by a person
whose sister is a
practising Muslim, you can call her, she
wears

0:32:05.760,0:32:15.040
hijab and she identifies her and defines
herself
as a practising Muslim. She teaches in that
school

0:32:15.040,0:32:23.520
and it's really unfortunate
that these people are facing harassment for
not

0:32:24.480,0:32:32.480
siding with the mob standing outside the

school gates and it was really shocking for
me.

0:32:32.480,0:32:41.760
I would like to read the tweets I received
from
that person. It says, the tweet reads, "Our
family

0:32:41.760,0:32:48.800
have been dragged into this and it's been
awful.
My sister, a hijab wearing practising Muslim
works

0:32:48.800,0:32:56.240
at that school. We know that school well
and the teacher and they are so kind

0:32:56.240,0:33:03.840
and respectful of Muslims. Knowing the truth
from
both sides most reactions are based on
hearsay."

0:33:05.360,0:33:12.240
The other tweet says: "The issue could and
should have been resolved privately and in a

0:33:12.240,0:33:19.600
kind, respectful and civilised manner as
Muslims
are supposed to, and not punish or judge.
These

0:33:19.600,0:33:27.120
extremists will threaten even good Muslims if
they have a different opinion to them and
demand

0:33:27.120,0:33:37.200
they side with them." So this tells us that
these people standing outside the school
gates -

0:33:37.200,0:33:44.240
they are not the representative of Muslim

communities, of British Muslim communities.
But

0:33:45.040,0:33:51.040
by the mainstream media, by the concerned
authorities they have been portrayed as

0:33:51.040,0:33:59.520
the spokesperson who are speaking on the
behalf
of the British Muslims and their demands,
their

0:34:00.720,0:34:08.720
reaction, the aggressive reaction to the whole
situation is just unacceptable. (EP): Why do
you think

0:34:08.720,0:34:14.000
it is that a moderate Muslims or liberals
within
the Muslim community have not had more of
a voice

0:34:14.000,0:34:21.120
or have not been given more of a voice by the
mainstream media? (KK): Yes there is a
problem here

0:34:21.120,0:34:28.800
that prominent people, politicians, journalists
from within the Muslim community, they -
whenever

0:34:28.800,0:34:35.200
something like this happens - they don't
condemn them all, they don't condemn the

0:34:35.200,0:34:44.000
the aggressive reaction of participants
of that, you know, vigilante group. They
always

0:34:44.000,0:34:53.840
condemn what is happening within the
premises
of school : "Why did this teacher do that,
why

0:34:53.840,0:34:59.920
you're talking about equality for LGBTQ
people?"

I'll give you a couple of examples. This

0:34:59.920,0:35:08.640
happened in 2018 when a Head teacher in
East
London, she had to reverse a ban on hijab for
the

0:35:08.640,0:35:14.560
the girls under eight years old. (EP): This was
at
St. Steven's Primary School in 2018

0:35:14.560,0:35:19.760
when the Head teacher Nina Lalas you state,
you
(I'm describing your article) and she'd
introduced a

0:35:19.760,0:35:24.400
ban on the hijab for girls under eight to
improve
integration among the children in the school

0:35:24.400,0:35:30.000
but she was forced to reverse that
progressive ban. Why was she forced to
reverse it?

0:35:30.000,0:35:39.600
(KK): Because it was deemed like anti-muslim
bigotry;
it was deemed an attack on Islam; it was
deemed

0:35:40.560,0:35:47.680
like some kind of conspiracy against muslim
communities; when in reality the truth of the

0:35:47.680,0:35:56.800
matter is that in Islam there is no compulsion
for
the children to wear hijab. It is being
practised

0:35:57.360,0:36:04.960

right now within the communities for modesty reasons. We know that. And it's a very open secret

0:36:04.960,0:36:12.800

but for some propositive, I would say, reasons some people they want their little girls to wear these

0:36:12.800,0:36:21.840

garments which are not made for little girls and the Head teacher: she only did it to

0:36:21.840,0:36:30.560

protect these girls from you know becoming isolated and what happened to her? She received 500

0:36:30.560,0:36:39.840

abusive emails on a daily basis. She was likened with Hitler. She was branded as a paedophile. She had to

0:36:40.720,0:36:50.720

apologise publicly. (EP): Who were the people behind this?
(KK): Yes, that was also a very

0:36:50.720,0:36:57.280

a hot discussion that who is doing it. These are obviously a extremist element and we say

0:36:57.280,0:37:04.960

that we don't know about it, we know when people who are resisting these kind of progressive

0:37:04.960,0:37:14.800

moves within school premises, they are following a radical and extremist interpretation of religion.

0:37:14.800,0:37:22.640

So when these people are heard, she had to.. why did she apologise in the first place? Because she

0:37:22.640,0:37:28.800

had no back(up) and you know what happened after this incident that is more, the most problematic

0:37:28.800,0:37:37.280

part, that the discussion on hijab is, has been shut down. Since then there is no discussion

0:37:37.920,0:37:44.320

on this issue anymore. And that is what they wanted to achieve and they achieve it and

0:37:44.320,0:37:50.880

that must, this incident must have emboldened them and encouraged them to continue with

0:37:50.880,0:37:56.560

these kind of tactics. (EP): Because they saw that they worked, these tactics of intimidation

0:37:56.560,0:38:04.880

and of shouting loudly worked and had an effect on the authorities. (KK): Yes so a very dangerous precedent

0:38:04.880,0:38:12.400

has been set. They know that when they will shout out loud they will be given privileges;

0:38:12.400,0:38:21.440

they will be given you know (a) free pass to harass and to intimidate educators and force them to

0:38:22.320,0:38:30.320
reverse their decisions which are not in line with their own INTOLERANT beliefs.

0:38:31.120,0:38:36.800
(EP): Do you think on the side of of the British authorities, on the side of the School or

0:38:36.800,0:38:44.640
the side of the teaching unions, politicians from both left and right, do you think there is too much

0:38:45.200,0:38:55.280
willingness to listen to extremist representations of Islam and to fail to really champion the values

0:38:55.280,0:39:00.320
of free speech and real appreciation of different people's views and to just instead

0:39:00.320,0:39:05.920
try to shut down discussion because they're so worried of being accused of discrimination?

0:39:06.960,0:39:15.440
(KK): There is this situation which is that these are people, I always said these are bunch of

0:39:15.440,0:39:24.160
extremist fanatics and they are being represented, sorry they are being presented, as the face of the

0:39:24.160,0:39:29.600
Muslim community. And mainstream media authorities, politicians, whenever they want to talk about

0:39:30.640,0:39:38.560
Muslims and anything related to Islam, they would

go to someone who is very much conservative

0:39:38.560,0:39:45.520
in their views. They want to talk about women's rights in Islam - they would talk to a woman who

0:39:46.160,0:39:52.880
is very much conservative who wears a hijab and who toes the line,

0:39:53.440,0:40:00.160
who would not defend women who would not defend women's place in Islam or in British society

0:40:00.160,0:40:07.760
but to parrot the narrative that is being, you know propagated by the male dominant

0:40:08.560,0:40:12.960
organisations here in the Britain. And the problem with the authorities is that

0:40:13.520,0:40:19.840
there are people who are very much progressive, they are Muslim reformers, activists but

0:40:20.400,0:40:27.440
they are not willing to talk to them because these people are not considered as practising

0:40:27.440,0:40:34.640
Muslims. They are considered as non-practising or who are not like Muslims anymore.

0:40:34.640,0:40:42.320
As Muslims, the thing is that you need to address the problem, the extremist and radical views

0:40:43.040,0:40:48.960
which are taking root in the community. You need

to address that and for that you need to talk

0:40:48.960,0:40:54.480

about those people who want to become a part of the solution, not those who want to become a part of

0:40:54.480,0:41:01.200

problem or who are part of the problem. And one thing

I would like to mention: that there are people

0:41:01.200,0:41:08.800

like Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. After this incident at Bethlehem what was she concerned about? She was

0:41:08.800,0:41:16.160

concerned about children from the Muslim community being bullied and called terrorists in the schools.

0:41:16.720,0:41:24.720

If it happens, if children are bullied it's reprehensible. There are no ifs and buts, but tell me

0:41:24.720,0:41:32.320

a minority group of fanatics from within a minority gather outside of the school gates,

0:41:32.880,0:41:41.520

intimidate the teachers, dictate an apology to the school admin, force them to suspend a teacher and

0:41:41.520,0:41:49.440

force that suspended teacher to go into hiding with his family. You tell me who is harassing who?

0:41:50.400,0:41:57.520

These are the people who should be condemned unequivocally by these politicians, by a journalist

0:41:57.520,0:42:04.880

but they are not condemning. (EP): Have you yourself received violent or intimidating messages?

0:42:05.760,0:42:13.440

(KK): Yes I have received, I had to remove all information, personal information from

0:42:14.160,0:42:23.840

about me from social media. I cannot share anything, anything related to my family, to

0:42:24.800,0:42:31.360

my personal life and still I receive these kind of threats. In fact

0:42:32.640,0:42:39.440

some people tried to, you know, indicate my area where I live in the past and

0:42:40.080,0:42:49.360

it was quite concerning for me. But yes it happens because it's not easy to

0:42:50.160,0:42:57.280

confront these radicals and fanatics without having any support from the authorities,

0:42:57.280,0:43:04.000

and in such situations when authorities, they refuse to intervene and stand up for people like

0:43:04.720,0:43:13.600

me and for people like that suspended teacher, then

obviously these radical elements - they feel

0:43:13.600,0:43:21.120

emboldened, they know that they can do it, they can threaten us, they can just silence

0:43:21.120,0:43:27.440
us with their threats, with their harassment.
(EP): So the more the authorities turn a blind
eye,

0:43:28.080,0:43:32.800
the more the extremists are encouraged, and
the more they are likely to continue their

0:43:33.600,0:43:41.760
techniques of harassment and intimidation.
How can,
how can we as a society deal with this issue
of

0:43:41.760,0:43:50.400
of extremists and neutralise them and
prevent
this spread of extremism and this tolerance

0:43:50.400,0:43:57.520
of this use of intimidation and this inequality
of representation of different Muslim voices?

0:43:58.080,0:44:05.760
(KK): There a reality that we need to
concede; it's like religious extremists have

0:44:05.760,0:44:12.000
successfully deployed harassment campaigns
to
make school administrations comply with
their

0:44:12.000,0:44:18.400
intolerant religious beliefs. We have seen
that. And authorities didn't show any spine

0:44:19.360,0:44:26.320
and their recklessness caused us
this situation where we are today.

0:44:27.280,0:44:33.520
The educators, they have no support; the
people from
within the Muslim community who are
progressive,

0:44:33.520,0:44:43.360
who embrace democratic values of a free
society,
they have no support because the
government

0:44:43.360,0:44:53.760
refuses to intervene and there is always a
preference this to appease these fanatics,

0:44:53.760,0:45:02.480
there are efforts to accommodate the
demands of
these fanatics. So all of these things they are
not

0:45:03.280,0:45:12.080
helping (in) any way and not helpful to anyone
so
we need to reflect especially the authorities.

0:45:12.080,0:45:17.280
There are people who are with conservative
views;
I'm not saying that we need to silence people
-

0:45:17.280,0:45:26.640
we want discussion. And that is the problem,
that
we don't get to discuss these ideas without
having

0:45:26.640,0:45:34.240
any fear of, you know, being intimidated or
harassed. We are not saying to silence people,
to

0:45:34.240,0:45:41.920
shut down you know the debate on the other
side.
We are saying that: let the debate begin; let
people

0:45:41.920,0:45:48.480
come together to gather and discuss the ideas
there.
You can have conservative voices as well as

0:45:49.120,0:45:57.520
progressive voices coming together and then we can find some solution to these problems. But when you

0:45:57.520,0:46:07.360
will shut down a debate by saying that you are not allowed to offend sensibilities of (a) group

0:46:08.320,0:46:15.440
of fanatics, then obviously there is no debate and then you cannot resolve any issue. We need

0:46:15.440,0:46:20.560
to listen to people, those who are conservative in their views and those who are progressive

0:46:20.560,0:46:27.280
in their views, so that we can come up with the solutions. And we also need to uphold

0:46:27.840,0:46:36.080
the secular values of a free society because we know that this freedom of speech

0:46:36.080,0:46:43.120
is not a religious value, it's a secular value and we have to uphold this value for everyone.

0:46:43.760,0:46:48.960
(EP): And that includes extremists as well but that means that they need to accept freedom

0:46:48.960,0:46:56.000
of speech for others too. (KK): Exactly and you know one thing I always say that all the time these

0:46:56.000,0:47:04.800

conservative people and people like say Sayeeda Warsi, they are always in favour of "You

0:47:04.800,0:47:09.040
should not be talking about this, you should not be talking about that, you should not be offending the

0:47:09.040,0:47:15.600
feelings of Muslim community". I always say that the curtailment of freedom of speech -

0:47:16.560,0:47:25.440
it's not good for minorities. We need freedom of speech to voice our concerns and if we will talk

0:47:25.440,0:47:31.600
about the containment of free speech we are cutting off the branch we are sitting on.

0:47:32.400,0:47:38.720
We are a minority and we need to voice our concerns, we need to talk about the rights, we

0:47:38.720,0:47:45.040
need to talk about what are our problems. But when we will say that we should not, you

0:47:45.040,0:47:52.080
know, there are other people who can be offended by there are people who say that

0:47:52.080,0:47:59.680
we are offended by looking at people with having long beard, and you know wearing loose

0:47:59.680,0:48:06.560
clothing and then wearing burkas and all that. So when you talk about protecting sensibilities

0:48:06.560,0:48:13.840

there is no limit once it is started. Then it would be minorities who would be on the receiving end.

0:48:13.840,0:48:19.760

(EP): So let's say limiting free speech in the long run is not going to benefit those

0:48:19.760,0:48:33.840

who are already trying to suppress it? (KK): Exactly.

(EP): Khaadija Khan thank you very much.

(KK): Thank you so much Emma.

0:48:36.160,0:48:41.360

(EP): My final guest is Stephen Evans (SE) who is CEO of the National Secular Society, who led the support for the teacher and was interviewed

0:48:41.360,0:48:46.640

on BBC, ITV and Sky and other media channels. Stephen will be talking to me about the National Secular

0:48:46.640,0:48:51.680

Society's involvement in the Batley School case, and why free speech is at the heart of secularism.

0:48:52.480,0:48:56.800

Incidentally I couldn't help noticing that the motto affixed to the now locked gates of Batley

0:48:56.800,0:49:02.560

Grammar School is 'Forte non Ignave' which means 'with courage not cowardice'. Rather ironic in the

0:49:02.560,0:49:10.400

circumstances. Stephen welcome to the podcast. (SE): Hello, thank you. (EP): First of all, could you, just for our

0:49:10.400,0:49:16.240

listeners, go through what have been the National Secular Society's main efforts and its main

0:49:16.240,0:49:20.880

involvement in speaking out against the protesters and the school's treatment of the teacher?

0:49:21.680,0:49:28.480

(SE): Okay: so we issued a statement very quickly when we learned of the events that were unfolding

0:49:28.480,0:49:34.720

at Batley Grammar because we recognised straight away that this was a a good example of

0:49:34.720,0:49:40.080

how modern-day blasphemy laws work. So it's not through the law, but it's through a culture of

0:49:40.080,0:49:45.680

offence, outrage and intimidation, and of course the underlying threat of violence; that's

0:49:45.680,0:49:50.640

always there. And we were really concerned that the teacher was on the receiving end of some pretty

0:49:50.640,0:49:56.800

rough justice here. So you know we thought we can't have a situation whereby religious fundamentalists

0:49:56.800,0:50:02.560

can have some sort of veto on what gets taught

in schools or over what educational resources

0:50:02.560,0:50:07.680
get used. So i think it was vital for us to make that point and we were particularly concerned

0:50:08.320,0:50:16.480
that the school appeared to concede way too much ground to the protesters, almost as a a knee-jerk

0:50:16.480,0:50:21.280
response which has I think made matters worse for the teacher, I think it's made it worse for the

0:50:21.280,0:50:27.200
school, and actually i think it's made it worse for Muslims everywhere. Because by issuing an immediate

0:50:27.200,0:50:33.360
apology, suspending the teacher, calling the materials totally inappropriate, they just

0:50:33.360,0:50:40.080
sided straight away with the fundamentalists and incredibly, from the footage we saw

0:50:40.080,0:50:47.520
the ringleader of the protesters, or one of them, appears to have been given a a role or had a hand

0:50:47.520,0:50:52.640
in drafting the school statement. So i suppose it's not particularly surprising that it came

0:50:52.640,0:50:58.640
out the way it did. But by doing all of that I think the school, they really hung the teacher out

0:50:58.640,0:51:05.040
to dry, they threw him under the bus and as well

as being grossly unfair to the teacher in question,

0:51:05.600,0:51:12.800
I think it fuelled this climate of censorship and exceptionalism around Islam which again

0:51:12.800,0:51:19.600
it just does ordinary muslims no favours. So as you say I spent a significant amount of time on TV,

0:51:19.600,0:51:25.040
on radio last week, defending the teacher, standing up for the principle of free expression and the

0:51:25.040,0:51:30.720
freedom to teach, and yes the importance of not giving fundamentalists a foothold in our schools.

0:51:31.520,0:51:35.840
And of course we wrote to the school and the governors to express these concerns.

0:51:36.560,0:51:44.160
(EP): You might think that a fundamental principle in fact of English law is that when a tribunal is

0:51:44.160,0:51:51.120
reviewing the case of of someone who against a complaint has been issued they must be impartial

0:51:51.120,0:51:56.320
but if they allow the protesters to be involved effectively in judging the teacher that completely

0:51:56.320,0:52:03.040
takes away from their impartiality. (SE): Well absolutely.
There just seemed to be no, not even any pretence

0:52:03.040,0:52:09.440
of due process here. So we thought it was important
that the School received some pushback for

0:52:09.440,0:52:15.200
handling the matter in the way they did you know. I fully understand that schools want to promote

0:52:15.920,0:52:20.400
harmonious relationships with their local community. I think community cohesion is very

0:52:20.400,0:52:25.280
important and I think the school will obviously
want to behave in an inclusive way. But the mistake

0:52:25.280,0:52:30.960
they made is thinking that could be achieved by
pandering to the religious groups who want to

0:52:30.960,0:52:36.880
dictate what can and can't be taught. You can't do
that by surrendering to the mob because we know

0:52:36.880,0:52:42.560
their demands will never really be met so yes as
I say I think the school's response just fuelled

0:52:42.560,0:52:48.320
this climate of censorship, in which we're all,

we're you know, we're all expected to accommodate.

0:52:48.320,0:52:55.120
and kind of live by these unreasonable and reactionary religious views and blasphemy codes.

0:52:55.120,0:53:01.120
(EP): Khadija Khan has in fact characterised the approach of the authorities in this case

0:53:01.760,0:53:06.960
and in similar cases in the past, such as the Parkland Primary School case, the St.Stephen's

0:53:06.960,0:53:11.680
Primary School case, as one of appeasement of extremists. Would you agree with that?

0:53:12.800,0:53:16.720
(SE) I think that's a fair summary of the school's knee-jerk response

0:53:17.600,0:53:24.160
so obviously they have since launched an independent inquiry. But you know the point

0:53:24.160,0:53:29.840
of our letter to the school was to kind of rein them in a little bit and just just remind them

0:53:30.800,0:53:36.320
first of all that their priority should be the safety and the well-being of their member of staff.

0:53:37.760,0:53:42.960
We ask them to uphold the principle of free speech
and not submit to these unreasonable demands of

0:53:42.960,0:53:49.680
what was actually a very small group of protesters

who want to impose this blasphemy taboo on

0:53:49.680,0:53:55.280

the school and I'm sure society as a whole. And we made it clear to the school that by issuing

0:53:55.280,0:53:59.600

an immediate apology, rather than defending the principle of free speech and the freedom to teach,

0:53:59.600,0:54:05.280

the school had actually sided with the religious fundamentalists. So we urge them to in the letter,

0:54:05.280,0:54:09.600

we urge them to keep in mind that the protesters who shout the loudest are not necessarily

0:54:09.600,0:54:16.320

representative of all Muslims. In fact by assuming that Muslims will take offence at the use of the

0:54:16.320,0:54:22.480

cartoon I think is itself patronising to Muslims. So we asked the school for an explanation of the

0:54:22.480,0:54:28.960

rationale behind their decision. None has been forthcoming so far, but of course we know that an

0:54:28.960,0:54:33.600

inquiry has now been launched. (EP): So you've had no responses to your letter from the school.

0:54:34.320,0:54:41.360

What about reactions to the Batley case: by politicians on the left and the right;

0:54:41.360,0:54:46.400

by the media; and by the unions? What sort of range of reactions have we seen?

0:54:47.920,0:54:54.240

I(SE): Largely as expected I think, most politicians have stayed silent on the issue. The local Labour MP

0:54:54.960,0:55:00.720

praised the school's actions in apologising to the protesters. So that wasn't particularly helpful.

0:55:00.720,0:55:05.520

The Education Secretary and the Department of Education have been a little bit more helpful.

0:55:05.520,0:55:10.080

They certainly condemned the nature of the protest and made clear that schools are

0:55:10.080,0:55:16.080

free to include a full range of issues, ideas and materials in the curriculum, including

0:55:16.080,0:55:21.680

where they are challenging and controversial. So that was somewhat helpful. Teaching unions

0:55:21.680,0:55:27.680

have stayed largely silent on the issue which is somewhat alarming I think, given that you know one

0:55:27.680,0:55:33.840

of their profession is in hiding and in fear of their life, suspended simply for doing his job.

0:55:34.400,0:55:39.760

To be fair, I think the National Education Union, they did call for the teacher's name and

0:55:39.760,0:55:45.600
identity to be protected, so you know that's something I suppose and I've since heard

0:55:45.600,0:55:51.520
quite recently actually the Head of the NASUWT has said that teachers shouldn't be subjected to

0:55:51.520,0:55:55.040
threats for doing their jobs, which you would have thought goes without saying.

0:55:55.040,0:56:01.040
But it also said that controversial topics need to be debated and not closed down in classrooms so

0:56:01.040,0:56:06.240
maybe we are starting to see a little bit more in the way of support from the teaching unions. I

0:56:06.240,0:56:11.360
think they've been heavily criticised and rightly so. So maybe we have started to see a little

0:56:11.360,0:56:16.800
bit of movement from there. But you know it's often the case that there is an unwillingness I think on

0:56:16.800,0:56:25.280
the left of British politics to speak out against Islamism. I think it's part of a misguided attempt

0:56:25.280,0:56:30.000
perhaps to protect and defend Muslim communities

but I think it actually does them more harm

0:56:30.000,0:56:35.440
than good. But as for the media - well that there has been some really good commentary obviously from

0:56:35.440,0:56:42.800
Fiyaz Mughal and Khadija Khan. We also saw Kenan Malik writing a really solid piece in The Observer,

0:56:42.800,0:56:47.600
Matthew Sayed, the leader writer in The Times, wrote an excellent piece on the issue

0:56:47.600,0:56:53.280
so the media has given this some exposure and I think by and large they handled it fairly well.

0:56:53.280,0:56:58.080
It's quite clear to me that the protesters have very little support, nor should they, but

0:56:58.080,0:57:04.880
unfortunately some of the Muslim commentators on the issue their support has not been forthcoming

0:57:04.880,0:57:09.680
really for the teacher. They've certainly said that they've criticised the protesters but they

0:57:09.680,0:57:13.600
seem to be saying that they do have a point and I think their concern has been more for

0:57:14.320,0:57:21.520
how cartoons can stir up blasphemy than it is for this teacher whose career could be in

0:57:21.520,0:57:28.080
ruins and his life is in danger. (EP): Perhaps the most

sensitive or difficult aspect of the whole case

0:57:28.080,0:57:36.080

is that the extremists, Islamists and the very, we might say, the very orthodox or conservative

0:57:36.080,0:57:42.000

Muslims who have come out, have been the ones protesting have accused the teacher of Islamophobia

0:57:42.800,0:57:48.480

and even of white supremacy and all sorts of things like that. They've very much blurred the

0:57:48.480,0:57:54.160

boundary between blasphemy and racism. They've indiscriminately accused the teacher of both.

0:57:54.160,0:58:00.320

Is this fair? (SE): There are clues to what happened in the lesson from the petition that was actually

0:58:00.320,0:58:06.240

posted by the students to save their teacher's job. So according to their accounts, students were

0:58:06.240,0:58:12.160

given advanced warning that the cartoons would be shown. The intention appears to have been to

0:58:12.160,0:58:18.560

educate pupils about blasphemy taboos within the Islamic traditions and the controversy surrounding

0:58:18.560,0:58:25.680

the cartoons and the way in which the cartoons

have been used or utilised to demonise Muslims

0:58:25.680,0:58:31.520

and feed the narrative that Islam is inherently violent and you know I certainly don't think

0:58:31.520,0:58:38.320

that cartoons poking fun at a religious authority AUTOMATICALLY do that. I think, actually I think

0:58:38.320,0:58:43.360

satire is an excellent way to challenge religious authority. But that racist element can be there.

0:58:43.360,0:58:50.160

So I think it's useful to have an awareness of that but there is absolutely no suggestion that

0:58:50.160,0:58:56.720

the teaching was intended to be in anyway disrespectful towards Muslims and actually I think

0:58:56.720,0:59:02.160

was quite the opposite by all accounts. So some of the things that we've heard from the protesters -

0:59:02.160,0:59:07.360

that this was an attempt to stir up religious hatred, that it's racist, that the materials were

0:59:07.360,0:59:12.800

used in a threatening manner, you know leaving children concerned for their safety and well-being -

0:59:12.800,0:59:18.160

I think some of the protesters said. I mean they're so far off the mark they're quite frankly

0:59:18.160,0:59:25.200

unhinged and the very fact that this assumption was even made shows what kind of a victimhood

0:59:25.200,0:59:32.160

narrative some of these protesters have. (EP): Finally let's just think about the general principle. So

0:59:32.160,0:59:37.040

we have material which might be blasphemous and in its depictions of Muhammad we might have material

0:59:37.040,0:59:44.080

which might be both blasphemous and potentially racist if it depicts a say a Middle Eastern

0:59:44.080,0:59:50.720

man in a turban with a bomb has been the most sort of notorious cartoon. But how can

0:59:50.720,0:59:55.520

materials like these have a place in their class?

I mean, we might think of the parallel that has

0:59:55.520,1:00:02.560

been drawn with say anti-semitic cartoons used by the Nazis which are taught in history lessons.

1:00:03.920,1:00:08.800

How should they be taught? Where is their place?

How can they be used in an appropriate way

1:00:08.800,1:00:15.840

to contribute to a culture of free speech? (SE): Well

I think they are illustrative examples of the

1:00:15.840,1:00:21.760

interface between religion and public life and you know the impact that religion has on society.

1:00:21.760,1:00:29.600

So I think the whole controversy that we've seen, actually it speaks to a need for better human

1:00:29.600,1:00:34.720

rights education generally in schools. I think we need to do a better job of teaching about the

1:00:34.720,1:00:38.720

liberal democratic principles that underpin our rights of freedoms and also our

1:00:38.720,1:00:45.440

responsibilities as citizens and naturally any such education will include giving pupils

1:00:45.440,1:00:51.440

a solid understanding of ideas and principles around freedom of religion or belief and freedom

1:00:51.440,1:00:58.560

of expression and one very obvious and engaging

way of teaching about this is by using the

1:00:58.560,1:01:04.480

cartoons that have caused so much controversy and you know the cartoons that test that ability to

1:01:04.480,1:01:10.240

protect this fundamental human right. No question

the cartoons can be divisive but I think we need

1:01:10.240,1:01:16.000
to trust teachers to handle this appropriately
and
I certainly think they should have the freedom
to

1:01:16.000,1:01:23.120
teach. The decisions around what kind of
materials
get taught in schools should be those
decisions,

1:01:23.120,1:01:28.000
should be taken by the professionals, the
teachers.
And they certainly shouldn't be influenced by

1:01:28.000,1:01:34.960
intimidation and threats from religious
extremists.

But I think as Fiyaz Mughal has said, you
know: we do

1:01:34.960,1:01:40.320
need to have these discussions about religion
and its role in society. And doing it in a calm

1:01:41.040,1:01:46.720
critical mature and inclusive way in the
classroom
is the ideal environment for that to happen.

1:01:47.280,1:01:53.120
I also I think it's an ideal way to address
some of the polarisation and the extremism
that's

1:01:53.120,1:01:58.320
going on in our society, and also the
marginalisation of Muslims that's going on.

1:01:58.320,1:02:05.520
Because in a pluralistic society we all need
to have the ability to live with differences of

1:02:05.520,1:02:12.000

opinion. We need to be able to handle and
evaluate
alternative and conflicting views and schools

1:02:12.000,1:02:18.320
are the ideal place for these discussions to
take
place and of course it should go without
saying

1:02:18.320,1:02:24.160
that Muslims, just like any other pupils, need
to be exposed to these different points of
view.

1:02:24.160,1:02:30.160
(EP): So the messages is: trust teachers, trust
students
allow people to develop the critical tools
which

1:02:30.160,1:02:35.200
will enable them to see others' point of view,
and
make up their own minds. (SE): Absolutely. I
think that's

1:02:35.200,1:02:41.680
the recipe for an inclusive pluralistic secular
state going forward where everyone's rights
and

1:02:41.680,1:02:48.800
freedoms are respected and allowed to
flourish.
(EP): Stephen Evans, thank you very much.
(SE): Thank you.

1:02:54.160,1:02:59.360
This episode was produced by the National
Secular
Society. All rights reserved. The views
expressed

1:02:59.360,1:03:04.640
by contributors do not necessarily represent
those of the NSS. You can access the show
notes

1:03:04.640,1:03:10.480
and subscriber information for this and all
our
episodes at secularism.org.uk/podcast.

1:03:10.480,1:03:16.880
For feedback, comments and suggestions
please email podcast@secularism.org.uk.

1:03:17.520,1:03:22.000
If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe
and leave us a positive review wherever you
can.

1:03:22.720,1:03:29.840
Thanks for listening and I
hope you can join us next time.

1:03:33.840,1:03:34.340