

## **Interreligious dialogue: How can education contribute to tackle radicalism and fundamentalism in Europe?**

### **Panel II: National policies and practices in perspective**

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*Speech delivered by National Secular Society executive director Keith Porteous Wood on Tuesday 17 November 2015 (PM) European Parliament*

First Vice Presidents Tajani and Timmermans are right; we must focus on education, and for so many reasons. Ultimately, our success in tackling radicalism and fundamentalism will depend on our ability to make sure that as many as possible of those young hearts and minds are encouraged to embrace the values at the heart of the European ideal. Such values, which I will call European values – including human rights, equality, tolerance, the rule of law – should run through the life of our schools, giving young people the best chance of embracing the values necessary to create an inclusive, tolerant and peaceful future for Europe.

Our plans need to acknowledge and be tailored to the current context and trends. Both underline the importance of the task and the difficulty of achieving it.

I will start with some uncomfortable observations.

Firstly, I wish to make some comments about religious aspects. While in Europe, as opposed to the rest of the world, Christian observance has been declining for many decades, the reverse is true of Islam. However there are practically no Muslims in the armed forces. A significant minority of those practising minority religions, particularly Islam and Judaism, are becoming less integrated and tend to be much more religiously conservative than those 10, 20 or 30 years ago.

A UK poll showed that young Muslims are, for example, more likely than their parents to take extreme exception to homosexuality, to those leaving Islam, and to wives marrying without their guardian's permission, while supporting men having multiple wives.

Muslim women have told me on separate occasions how much conservatism has grown in recent decades among Muslims. A number of them have explicitly described this as Wahhabism and they believe it to be Saudi-funded. And this trend of greater conservatism seems set to continue as the size of young families correlates with the degree of conservatism.

The historic model of immigrants, or those of minority religions or denominations, becoming progressively integrated into the mainstream society, can no longer be taken for granted, particularly as in recent decades they identify themselves more with their religion than with their geographic origin.

I emphasise that my comments about religious conservatism and separatism do not just apply to Islam. There is increasing pressure in the UK for more minority faith schools, with orthodox Jewish, Sikh and Hindu schools now all being funded by the state.

Secondly I want to address values in education and more widely.

Some minority faith or denomination schools in the UK teach narrow curriculums and promote religious dogma over key scientific principles that clash with their worldview. Teaching about evolution theory, sex education and even human biology is restricted in some UK schools on religious grounds. This is an affront to children's independent rights, which even in older children seem to be given too little weight relative to those of their parents. Religious dogma is starting to gain ascendancy over key scientific principles in higher education too.

The time has come for education authorities to become much more involved in these questions to ensure that children are taught about these matters and about our values.

The refugee crisis increases the urgency and importance of ensuring the transmission of these European values, particularly to the young. Attitudes are very different in the countries from which most refugees come and many, but not all, will not subscribe to the values that we currently take for granted.

Our solution needs to recognise that migration will continue, and may increase as a result of accelerating climate change.

These different attitudes relate particularly to freedom of religion and belief, of conscience and expression, as well as to democracy and the rule of law that is democratically-determined, and to the human rights of women and sexual minorities. We must emphasise these values with renewed energy in our schools.

I would like to explain why I referred to “European” values, and I of course acknowledge that the values are of course practised way beyond Europe, but not everywhere. Until about ten years ago these values would have been regarded as “Universal values”. Sadly, my experiences at the United Nations Human Rights Council have made me realise that the Universal values codified after World War II in the Universal Declaration are increasingly being dismissed as a “Western construct”, with the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation's rival Cairo Declaration regarding them as being subject to sharia.

Turning again to the UK, our entreaties to successive governments over many years to root out extremism in schools in England were always met by assurances that this was being done. We now know that whatever measures were taken, they have turned out to be painfully inadequate. The management of the publicly-funded school system in some of the largest conurbations with a high proportion of Muslims has been infiltrated by ultraconservatives and separatists. The most notorious of these, in Birmingham, has been dubbed the ‘Trojan Horse’ scandal. Astonishingly, some of the schools where this occurred were notionally secular schools. The problem was so serious that a group of Birmingham schools became the focus of central Government involvement and a fierce national debate.

A significant causal factor was the unwillingness of local government to tackle the problem for fear of being regarded as being religiously or even racially discriminatory. Such fears were not unfounded. When the problem reached a scale when it could no longer be ignored, those first highlighting the problem publicly were mercilessly denounced with the clear intention of silencing them.

I mention this problem in the hope that others will learn from such mistakes in the UK.

Member states will come under pressure to provide more and more minority religious schools that would be attended by children already segregated from the rest of society.

The more this segregation happens, the more fragmented our society will become. The promotion of engaged citizenship and positive community cohesion, based on an understanding of Human Rights should be a key objective of all schools. Too often we’ve seen schools teaching the superiority of one religion whilst denigrating those of other beliefs and none.

Such schools by their very existence reinforce the segregation, which, as well as religious, is in many cases cultural and ethnic too. Research by the UK think tank Demos warned this year that British

schools are "highly segregated" and that "some faith schools effectively exclude other ethnic groups". This segregation is not only to the detriment of the minority, it crucially undermines cohesion in mainstream schools too.

I will end on a constructive and even upbeat note.

I remind educators that the first protocol of Article 2 of the European Convention does not require the public funding of religious schools. So I urge that, as many as possible of publicly funded schools are integrated and made equally open and welcoming to all. And that all schools, whether religious or not, should be expected to promote European Convention values and citizenship.

It is important to highlight that it is the parents' decision to enrol their children in minority faith schools, rather than the children themselves. Many parents of minority faiths are however convinced that a more integrated education is likely to better-equip their child for the future, so choose a mainstream school. More thought needs to be given to encourage a higher proportion of parents to make such a choice.

A girl who fled the Holocaust with her family became a professor at a London University and researched solutions to these problems. The late Prof Irene Bruegel's study *Sharing Crisps with Someone Different*, which is available on the National Secular Society website, shows convincingly how educating all youngsters together substantially increases cohesion, and the younger that integrated education starts, the more effective it is.

I urge you to follow Prof Bruegel's example and do everything we can to facilitate that integrated education.

I conclude by reminding you that secularism is concerned with creating a society in which everyone is treated equally regardless of religion or belief. It was telling that US Senator John Kerry has emphasised the need for Syria to become a secular state.

- [http://www.populus.co.uk/uploads/download\\_pdf-131206-Policy-Exchange-Poll-of-Muslims---Living-Apart-Together.pdf](http://www.populus.co.uk/uploads/download_pdf-131206-Policy-Exchange-Poll-of-Muslims---Living-Apart-Together.pdf)
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