

# The folly of faith schools

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Contributing Writer

**LONDON** Last year, the council in Birmingham, Britain's second largest city, received an anonymous document that supposedly advised militant Muslims on how to take over the governing bodies of state-run schools and impose Islamist values. Since the so-called Trojan Horse plot was reported in March, it has become the center of a national controversy.

The original document is almost certainly a hoax, but it is clear that something is profoundly wrong with several schools in Birmingham and elsewhere. What, exactly, has largely been lost in the fog of ideological dispute. The Trojan Horse affair has become an illustration both of the fraught debate about Islam and of the contradictory character of public policy.

The government's initial response — to begin an inquiry led by a former police counterterrorism chief, Peter Clarke — suggested that the issue was as much about terrorism as educational values. Since then, four other official inquiries have investigated some 21 schools in Birmingham. Two of those — by Ofsted, Britain's school inspectorate, and by the Education Funding Agency, another government regulator — recently published reports. They painted a grim picture. Five of the 21 schools were placed in "special measures," an administrative status applied to schools deemed to be failing. Another 11 would be "monitored" because the "quality of leadership and management requires improvement."

The Ofsted report described members of the governing body at one school attempting to "promote a particular and narrow faith-based ideology." In another, certain subjects regarded as un-Islamic, including music, were removed from the syllabus. The report talked also of gender segregation in some subjects. None of the five schools, the report concluded, were "doing enough to mitigate against cultural isolation" or to "prepare pupils adequately for life in modern Britain."

But if the management at these schools is disturbing, so is the official response. Although no evidence has been

produced to link the Trojan Horse affair to terrorism, Ofsted criticized the schools for not taking sufficiently seriously the government's counterterrorism program, "Prevent." But why should they — unless all Muslim children are considered potential terrorists? The report's conclusions seem framed by a political agenda rather than certain schools' need for better governance.

What the investigations have revealed is not a jihadist plot, but attempts to enforce conservative religious values. What is particularly ironic is that the government itself has encouraged communities to pursue their values within schools. The state education system has always incorporated a substantial sector of so-called church schools, both Catholic and Anglican. Other faiths also receive state funding: There are a number of Jewish schools, a handful of Sikh and Hindu ones — and about a dozen Muslim establishments.

**A "Muslim plot" reveals a contradiction at the heart of Britain's education policy.**

In the name of a "more diverse school system," the coalition government expanded the policy of the previous Labour government to free schools from state control and the national curriculum, and give parents and school officials greater say in setting a school's ethos. Two years ago, after criticism of a booklet used by Catholic schools that told pupils "the homosexual act is disordered" and contrary to "God's natural purpose," Education Secretary Michael Gove defended the right of schools to promote their values.

Private schools, outside the state system, should be free "to teach creationism" and other types of religious teachings, the government has ruled, because of "the right of parents to bring up their children as they see fit." Ofsted guidelines published earlier this year permit Muslim schools to segregate pupils by sex, "restrict" the teaching of music and art and allow girls to wear the hijab "as a part of their identity and a commitment to their beliefs within Islam." (In light of the Birmingham events, Ofsted appears to be reconsidering its advice, but no new guidelines have yet been issued.)

If such practices are acceptable in faith schools, why not in all schools

where parents may desire them? And if these values were unacceptable in the nondenominational Birmingham schools because they did not "prepare pupils adequately for life in modern Britain," why should they be tolerated in faith schools?

The Trojan Horse story reveals the contradictions in government policy, raising questions not only about the encouragement of faith schools, but also about the approach toward "multiculturalism." Policy makers have tended to treat minority communities as if each was distinct and homogeneous, composed of people defined by a singular view of culture and faith. Successive governments have managed diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes and using those boxes to shape public policy.

As a result, policy makers have too often ignored the diversity within minority communities. And they have taken the most conservative, reactionary figures to be the authentic voices of those communities.

Whether or not there was a plot to take over Birmingham schools is almost moot. There was no need for a plot. By fragmenting the school system, pushing the mantra of "parental choice" and encouraging communities to promote their values, the government itself opened the door to Islamists.

The Trojan Horse matter reveals how the public debate about Islam has become polarized between those who think that any problem concerning the Muslim community must involve the threat of terrorism and those who insist that any criticism of Muslim customs is Islamophobic. Issues of poor leadership at specific schools have become politicized, while the real political problems that helped create the mess are ignored.

Instead of promoting a secular state education system, with a shared educational framework that would ensure that all children are taught to a common standard, the government has encouraged different minority communities to define their notion of education and to devise their own curriculum. And when it goes disastrously wrong, as in Birmingham, rather than question its own policies, it blames the community.

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