



# THE PLOT THICKENS: RIGHTS AND RELIGION IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

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In the last couple of weeks The Guardian, BBC, Daily Mail, and Sunday Times have all splashed with the story of an Islamic plot to take over state schools in Birmingham. Evidence of the alleged plot was in the form of a letter advising fundamentalist radicals on how to overthrow headteachers and replace them with leaders who would be willing to run the schools on strict Islamic principles. Parents should be told that schools are corrupting their children, the letter says, 'with sex education, teaching about homosexuals...Christian prayers and mixed swimming and sports'.

In the last few days inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies in the evidence of the alleged plot have led a number of commentators to conclude the letter may have been a hoax. But hoax or no hoax the incident raises a number of questions about the role of religion and belief in public life.

To read more about Operation Trojan Horse, click on the images above. The quote comes from <http://tinyurl.com/outjlyw>. If you are interested in why it might be a hoax, go to <http://tinyurl.com/pcr6h7u>

In 2009, we wrote a report on the religion and belief strand in law and practice. It's available here: <http://tinyurl.com/l7rfu5j>.

You can read more about our ideas on how to improve community relations here: [www.brap.org.uk/our-ideas/difficult-conversations](http://www.brap.org.uk/our-ideas/difficult-conversations)

Back in 2009 we argued that school pupils should have the freedom to choose the nature of their own engagement with religion or belief. By the same token, we argued, there should be greater scrutiny of faith schools' admissions procedures and a requirement that they produce more robust evidence of their compliance with equalities and human rights legislation.

We didn't argue these things because we are 'anti-faith school'. We said them because we believe approaches to religious education and religious schools should put pupils at the centre of decisions that are made about them. This is essential to ensuring that all children have an education that upholds their human rights.

What is true of faith schools then is true of free schools now. Though parents and community members have the right to set up a school and to influence the running of the school this has to be within certain parameters, ensuring the rights of pupils and teachers are considered. The question is how we balance the (sometimes competing) needs and interests of the wide range of stakeholders involved in schools. As we've argued in various places, organisations and communities need much more guidance on how to do this effectively, fairly, and efficiently.

These tensions are, of course, not limited to the school environment. In the last few years we have seen heated debate on subjects ranging from the refusal of adoption

services to same-sex couples on the grounds of religious belief, to debates about the rights of women within specific communities. Some of these subjects are notoriously emotive and challenging debates to resolve. They often relate directly to people's sense of belonging and deeply held cultural and religious beliefs. They stir passions, so it's no surprise many people lack confidence in questioning and challenging them when they surface in public debate.

But not questioning and challenging them is not an option. Our inability – or unwillingness – to engage in these types of critical debates is at risk of harming contemporary UK society. Multiculturalism advocated 'toleration' of other people's cultures with the best of intentions – to address discrimination and promote integration as new immigrants arrived in the country in the 60s and 70s. But if we're honest this approach led us to abdicating decision-making for the type of society we want to create and the type of shared values we want to live by. For example, where, as a society, do we stand on issues where the rights of different groups are at stake? We're comfortable having these discussions on 'lighter' topics, such as music and food (just look at our tendency to nominate 'foreign' foods as our national dish). And recently we've begun to send out clear messages about more serious issues like forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Yet there are many 'grey' areas where we have not yet had the open discussions we need (the BBC's recent decision to cancel a debate about homosexuality and Islam springs to mind).

Go to <http://tinyurl.com/n8yvveg> for the full BBC story.

So, where do we stand on cultural or religious practices that treat women, disabled, or homosexual people unequally? Where, for that matter, do we stand on the rights of children to define what happens to them in school? Often, in cases like this, there are powerful stakeholders involved – organised religions and parents/ governors in the case of schools – which can make it hard for less powerful people to speak out and for a fair and balanced dialogue to happen on these issues. Yet this doesn't make the need to discuss these issues any less pressing.

We have a responsibility to children and young people to clearly outline where we stand on difficult issues when there are competing needs and expectations about what 'entitlements' we should be protecting. At times 'cultural entitlements' will need to be restricted for the greater good of society. The key to achieving this will be a clear articulation

of what we expect a good society to look like – what freedoms and rights we expect it to uphold.

One final thought. If we are going to have this discussion in relation to religious schooling, let's not do it by scaremongering about Muslims. As the news coverage of the alleged school takeover plot shows, ignorance and fear about Muslims still abounds. This probably reflects a broader concern about whether according Muslims more freedom to enjoy cultural and religious entitlements (in the form of religious schools, for example) will hinder integration and increase the threat of fundamentalism and terrorism. As a society we are both scared and uncertain about this.

But the best way to have this discussion is not by singling out Muslims – or any religious or cultural group for that matter. We should be talking about the rights and values we should be living by in different fields of life. The voiceless and less powerful are at risk of being exploited across a wide spectrum of society and across a range of schools (not just in Muslim schools). Almost two thirds of young LGB pupils have experienced bullying, pupils receiving free school meals are much less likely to obtain good GCSE grades in maths and English, and Black pupils are twice as likely to be excluded as White pupils. The reforms we should make to tackle these inequalities – asking for greater evidence of compliance with equalities legislation, facilitating greater pupil voice, helping schools 'manage' diversity – are not specific to managing religious entitlements. Instead, they are ways of ensuring everyone has a right to a good education which upholds their dignity.

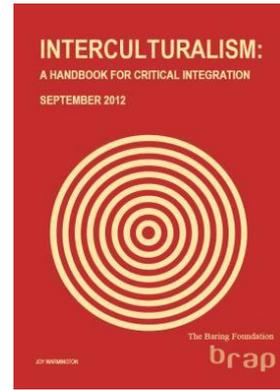
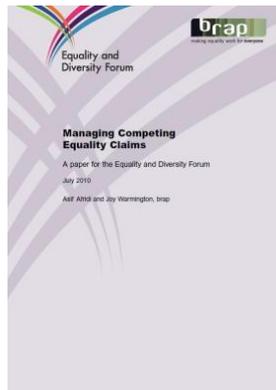
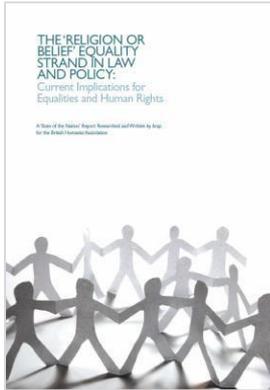
'LGB' stands for 'lesbian, gay, and bisexual'. The figure comes from a Stonewall report (<http://tinyurl.com/bz38hv>). The data for the GCSE inequalities can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/l678nyq>. For more on the exclusion stat visit [www.brap.org.uk/education](http://www.brap.org.uk/education)

It's the responsibility of adults to prepare young people for their future – not to make them live the future we would like. For most young people the future will be a plural society, one where the world is smaller, beliefs collide, and our need to live and get on to together becomes more pressing. There is an inescapable inevitability – and excitement – about a society where difference is the norm. Perhaps young people will be able to make this society one where everyone can flourish – as long as we give them the tools to engage with it and avoid passing on our own limitations.

## FURTHER READING

If you'd like to read more about some of these topics, the following reports are all available for free – just click on the image below or go to our website, [www.brap.org.uk](http://www.brap.org.uk).

- (1) The 'Religion or Belief' Equality Strand in Law and Practice;
- (2) Managing Competing Equality Claims
- (3) Who Moved My Samosa?: A practical guide
- (4) Interculturalism: A handbook for critical integration





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