

'How dare they?'

Islamophobia, the media and an educational resource

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This article appeared in the journal *Race Equality Teaching*, vol. 25 no.2, spring 2007

Introduction and summary

'How dare these people dictate what happens in our schools?' ... 'Who do these people think they are? They have been welcomed into this country as immigrants and now they have the cheek to try to tell us how to run our country' ... 'I am sick to the back teeth of hearing about muslims this, and muslims that. Every day we hear of another atrocity committed in the name of Islam. No way should they even have a say in how the schools of this country are run' ... 'The gradual and creeping Islamification of this country' ... 'The Islamic tail wagging the British Bulldog' ... 'This latest demand infuriates me. Taliban style education my foot! The Taliban are the cruellest most inhuman beings on the modern earth. Look at Afghanistan as a guideline ... I hope my lovely wee granddaughter doesn't have to live under such an oppressive regime.'... 'The do-gooders, PC brigade and Blair are destroying this once magnificent country.'

These were amongst 210 comments that appeared on the *Daily Express* website between 21 and 23 February 2007, and are representative of at least 190 of them.¹ The authors of the comments believed they were responding to a new publication from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). In fact, they were responding to a monstrously distorted and inaccurate depiction of the MCB publication in the *Daily Express*.

This article describes the publication; outlines the distorted report about it in the *Express*; quotes extensively from the comments on the website; and closes with reflections on matters arising for those of us who work in education.

The publication

The MCB publication is entitled *Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils in State Schools* and is sub-titled *Information and Advice for Schools*.² It derives in large part from publications on the same theme issued by various local authorities over the last ten years, notably Birmingham and Bradford, and describes relevant developments that have taken place, and continue to take place, in large numbers of schools. It contains 16 chapters and a key component in most of them is a box entitled 'Features of good practice'. The lists in these boxes are convenient and user-friendly summaries of points that headteachers and governing bodies should and do think about, in consultation and partnership with parents and local communities, to fulfil their legal duties. These practical chapters are prefaced and introduced by an account of Islamic theological and philosophical approaches to education. The publication as a whole is beautifully designed and produced, with several striking full-colour illustrations. The tone throughout is reasonable, respectful and professional and the recurring emphasis is on providing information and supportive advice. Teachers, headteachers and governing bodies will find it invaluable, as will Muslim parents and organisations.

¹ Many of the quotations in this article from the *Express* website have been slightly edited in order to correct errors of punctuation and spelling. Some of the errors were probably due to haste, or to using conventions that are acceptable in emails but not elsewhere. To leave them uncorrected would be to draw attention to them and to imply the writers have poorer literacy and keyboard skills than is likely.

² Available at www.mcb.org.uk. See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6391271.stm>

To give a sense of the publication's supportive and positive tone and content, there are several quotations from it in Box 1 below.

Box 1

THE NEEDS OF MUSLIM PUPILS

Mutual understanding

'Many of our schools have a cherished tradition of fostering an inclusive ethos which values and addresses the differences and needs of the communities they serve. We are convinced that with a reasonable degree of mutual understanding and goodwill even more progress can be made in responding positively to the educational aspirations and concerns of Muslim pupils and their parents. The current climate, in which there is much negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, requires that this be given greater priority and impetus, to ensure that Muslim pupils are appropriately accommodated and become an integral part of mainstream school life, and thereby of society as a whole.' (Page 7)

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide background information on relevant Islamic beliefs and practices and values, and to deal with issues arising within schools that are important to, and may be of concern to, Muslim parents and their parents. (Page 9)

Diversity of belief and practice

We have attempted to cover the issues most commonly raised by pupils, parents, teachers, schools and governors, while taking into account the diversity of belief and practice within the Muslim community. (Page 9)

Common and shared aspects

It is important for educators to appreciate and understand the centrality of knowledge and education in the philosophy of Islam and the substantial Muslim contributions to European and world civilisation. Within the educational context it is important to explore opportunities to emphasise common and shared aspects of Islamic and European civilisations in fields such as religion and culture, and linguistic and intellectual exchanges. (Page 11)

Cohesive future generations

Schools can play a vital role in facilitating the positive integration of Muslim pupils within the wider community and thereby preventing, or at least beginning the process of tackling, some of the problems of marginalisation. Closer cooperation and working between Muslim communities and schools can create an environment where Muslim children feel more included and valued. The statutory and moral responsibility to develop cohesive future generations must and can be achieved through commitment to change, mutual respect and understanding the beliefs, values and cultures of others. (Page 15)

Asset and reference point

The faith of Muslim pupils should be seen as an asset in addressing constructively many of the issues that young people face today, including educational failure, disaffection, drugs, crime and sexually transmitted diseases. Islam is an important reference point for Muslim children, and has an extremely relevant message to convey to Muslims in all spheres of life, and also to contribute to wider society. (Page 17)

Modesty

The concept of *haya*, which is defined as 'to encompass notions of modesty, humility, decency and dignity', is a central value in Islam, as in many other faith traditions, and applies to all aspects of human behaviour and conduct. It is important to recognise and appreciate that different faiths and cultures may and often do differ in their demarcation between modesty and immodesty. (Page 20)

Ramadan

During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness, in order to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealing with others, including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness and avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour. In addition, having empathy with the poor, donating generously for charitable causes and the sharing of food are important features of Ramadan. Muslims also focus on reading more of the Qur'an and performing additional prayers at the mosque every evening. (Page 28)

Source: *Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils in State Schools: Information and Advice for Schools*, Muslim Council of Britain, February 2007

The publication was launched at the Islamic Cultural Centre in London on Wednesday 21 February. There were about 100 people present and the principal guest speaker was Professor Tim Brighouse, formerly chief education officer in Birmingham. The day before, the MCB put the book on its website as a PDF document and issued a brief statement to the Press Association. The PA for its part forwarded the statement through the wires to all newspapers. Even though all papers knew of the new MCB publication, the *Express* claimed that its own coverage was exclusive. In so far as 'exclusive' is code for 'written by one of our staff', as distinct from 'copied verbatim from a press release', the claim was true. Most readers, however, would have assumed that 'exclusive' meant the *Express*, uniquely, had found out about the MCB document through a leak or through investigative journalism; in this sense, the claim to exclusivity was false.

Splash

Splashed across the front page the headline was MUSLIMS TELL US HOW TO RUN OUR SCHOOLS. The lead sentence, printed in bold, was: 'Demands for a ban on "un-Islamic" activities in schools will be set out by the Muslim Council of Britain today.' The inverted commas round 'un-Islamic' clearly implied the term was a quotation from the publication. In point of fact, it does not appear. The next sentence was: 'Targets include playground games, swimming lessons, school plays, parents' evenings and even vaccinations.' In fact, there is no mention in the MCB publication of playground games. The other matters in the *Express* list do appear, but mostly in low-profile ways. The loaded and aggressive term 'targets', following the reference to 'demands' at the start of the previous sentence, implied the MCB publication is confrontational. It is nothing of the sort: as mentioned above, and as can be seen from the quotations in Box 1, it is moderate, reasonable and supportive.

The third sentence much excited and exercised, in due course, *Express* readers: 'And the calls for all children to be taught in Taliban-style conditions will be launched with the help of a senior Government education adviser.' The article's author (Gabriel Milland, the paper's political correspondent) did not attempt to explain what 'Taliban-style conditions' might conceivably be, and his explicit claim that the MCB document was about 'all children', as distinct from Muslim children, was, simply, a falsehood. His description of Tim Brighouse as 'a senior Government education adviser' was eccentric, in the sense that neither Brighouse nor the Government would themselves use the phrase to describe any job he has ever held. Nor would they use the phrase that appeared in the next sentence of the *Express* article, 'chief adviser to London schools'. It is difficult to believe the author was simply mistaken about Brighouse's previous career and current role. More probably, he quite deliberately wished to link the MCB publication in some way, however vague, to the Government. Certainly, in any case, this was the consequence. Several *Express* readers, as will be shown here later, clearly understood that the MCB had the Government's formal endorsement.

The article continued with quotations from a Tory MP and a spokesman for the National Secular Society. Both condemned the MCB publication but neither appeared to have even seen it, let alone read it. The National Secular Society, incidentally, is not customarily cited in the *Express* as a reliable and appropriate authority on religious matters. The article then repeated its use of the term 'un-Islamic activities', falsely implying that it appears in the publication, and gave several examples of such activities.

The examples were mostly accurate, in the sense they do appear in the document. They do not, however, appear as demands. Rather, they are presented as points about which Muslim parents and pupils may feel anxious and towards which schools will wish to be sensitive. To cite a single example of the *Express*'s distortions in this respect, the publication says that schools 'can respond positively' to the concern of most Muslim parents (and, for that matter, most non-Muslim parents, surely) that, post-puberty, contact sports should be in single-gender groups; but the *Express* changed the original phrase 'schools can respond' to 'schools should ensure', thus making the publication sound confrontational and uncompromising when in fact it is thoughtful, tentative and positive.

In addition to inaccuracies, distortions, false quotations and misquotations, the Express coverage contained a spectacular howler. It said the MCB document maintains that for swimming lessons boys should be covered 'from the navel to the neck'. Presumably, this means boys should wear T-shirts and nothing else. What the document actually says is that boys should be covered from the navel to the *knees*! The error was presumably due to carelessness, not malice. Nevertheless it discloses extremely shoddy standards of elementary journalism, both in the writing and in the checking.

Readers' opinions

'Should Muslims tell us how to run our schools?' asked the paper, and readers were given telephone numbers to which they should phone or text a Yes or a No. To help them decide, the paper provided a substantial editorial comment. This began as follows:

Is the Muslim Council of Britain deliberately setting out to inflame race relations? The MCB today is calling for a ban on 'un-Islamic activities' such as mixed sports lessons, and parents' evenings and swimming in the month of Ramadan. All this is unworkable, impractical and bound to cause widespread anger to the vast majority who do not wish to have activities such as school plays curtailed.

In addition to voting yes or no, *Express* readers were invited to send a message. As of 4 pm on the Friday, two days after the initial coverage, 210 messages had appeared on the paper's website. Of these, just six were from people who said they had actually read the MCB publication, as distinct from the newspaper's distorted account of it. Five of the six castigated the paper for its misrepresentations and distortions and three of these were as follows:

'I have read this article and, curious, I read the MCB's report. I was surprised to find that the MCB report contains NOTHING about forcing children/schools to do anything whatsoever. Where are these 'Taliban-style conditions' you write about in the report? Under your posting rules, you won't publish anything that incites people to commit a crime but you will print a misleading front-page story that incites fear, suspicion and animosity.'

'I am surprised, I can see so much hatred in these posts. Reading the article I can understand why these views exist, but then I read the report.. It's just full of suggestions and doesn't call for a 'ban' on anything. I suggest you read it for yourself and make up your own mind.'

'You are wrong. Having read the report, it does not call for a ban on un-Islamic activities, instead it sets out to be an advisory document for schools to be able to refer to, and cites what could be considered to be good practice in schools with Muslim pupils, so that their needs may be met in a sensitive and inclusive way. As a teacher, this is a vital document! Enough of your ill-informed Islamophobia, try reporting the issues with a modicum of intelligence and respect!'

The third of these occasioned a striking response from someone else. Rather than giving thoughtful consideration to a point made by someone who (a) had read the MCB document and (b) was a member of the teaching profession and therefore spoke from relevant experience of the matters under discussion, the writer engaged in crude personal abuse:

'Everybody is entitled to their opinion, it's true. It's when you see comments from the likes of [name omitted] which worry me greatly. This is the type of trendy left wing bleeding heart Liberal that is conditioning the minds of our children.'

Crude abuse along such lines will be considered here further in due course. In the meanwhile, it is relevant to flag up the fact that anyone who ventured to challenge the consensus on the website on the basis of evidence, as distinct from bigotry, ran the risk of being dismissed as 'a trendy left wing bleeding heart Liberal'. Someone else who criticised the paper accused it of demonising Muslims. The accusation did not elicit personal abuse; it did, however, produce a statement of total trust in the reliability and probity of the *Express*:

Please tell us all how this is the case. The Daily Express has merely reported the news, that the MCB wants all school to teach Islam, they have said that every school has to teach this, that they also have to abide with all Islamic rules!

The assumption that 'the Daily Express has merely reported the news' ran through the vast majority of the 210 responses on the website. It simply did not occur to Express readers that they might have been misled or, indeed, lied to. The few who, having read the MCB document, pointed out that it is moderate and reasonable, not confrontational, were informed they had been deceived. For example, someone wrote:

'What I find so curious - fascinating even - is how whenever there is some Muslim terrorism, extremism, intolerance or some other news showing Muslim antipathy to non-Muslim society, there always seems to be some other Muslim group saying "actually this isn't true Islam/Ramadam/Koranic etc. etc." Now we know which view will always prevail - the one where the infidel is the accursed enemy and must be defeated in holy Jihad war. So I'm left to wonder why on earth we bother to print these "alternative" so called "moderate" Islamic views. They are clearly there just to falsely re-assure, mislead and confuse us. It even says in the Koran that such deception should be used whenever necessary.'

Recurring strands

Criticisms of the MCB document, based on the Express's account of it, contained several recurring strands. Often, and typically, two or more strands appeared in a single message. Sometimes, however, a message made a single point. ('Tell them to get lost' was the full extent of a message contributed by someone who signed himself as 'Colin, Stoke-on-Trent.' There was similar terseness in the complete message from 'Concerned Citizen, Bedfordshire': 'I think it is absolutely ridiculous.') The principal recurring strands were:

- When in Rome do as the Romans do
- If you don't like it here go back where you came from
- We're a tolerant nation, but don't provoke us – enough is enough
- Islam is an evil religion
- The phrase 'moderate Muslim' is a contradiction in terms
- There's a creeping Islamification of British society
- The British are losing their identity
- Christianity is being supplanted by Islam
- Most Muslims in Britain are refugees and should be grateful to their hosts
- Religion is a private matter, or should be
- The Muslim Council of Britain should be banned
- The political correctness brigade has a lot to answer for
- It's basically all the fault of the Labour government

Virtually every single criticism of the MCB, or of Muslims and Islam more generally, was Expressed with fear, panic, hostility or hatred, or with a mixture of these emotions, and with total, unquestioning assurance that 'we' (non-Muslims) are right and good and 'they' (Muslims) are wrong and bad. The binary opposition between 'us' and 'Muslims' had been a central component of the initial splash on the front page, as mentioned above: MUSLIMS TELL US HOW TO RUN OUR SCHOOLS. It was not surprising, therefore, that this conditioned the outlook of the vast majority who contributed their views to the

ensuing discussions. At the same time, the headline was presumably reflecting back to its readers what they already thought and felt, and pandering to fears and hostilities they already had, not merely creating opinions from scratch.

'Sick to death'

Below, there is a selection of quotations from the messages, to show their content and their tone, and their ways of thinking, relating and engaging. First, some quotations which show the overall approach:

'I am sick to death of this particular religious group attempting to dictate to us how our institutions and way of life should be run. All we get from them are demands, demands, demands. And all we get from our milksop politicians is concession after concession after concession. If our way of life is not suited to them, then get out and, preferably, take our politicians with them. How much more do we have to put up with!!!'

'I long for the day we take our Christian, Anglo Saxon country back into our own hands. This insidious attack on the overall education of our children is yet a further example that things have gone too far. In my opinion, Islam is the greatest threat to world peace and the freedom of the individual since the Nazis – in fact it is more of a threat than the Third Reich and Communism put together.'

'This is an absolute kick in the teeth to anyone who is proud to be British! Our armed forces are fighting in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan to rid the world of regimes who force this way of life on people and at the same time the extremists have got into positions of power in Britain and are doing the same under our noses in our own back yard! How would our troops feel if they spend 6 months fighting just to find their own kids preaching the Koran when they get home? Enough is enough, endorse our culture or get out of our Britain!'

'Excuse me, thousands and thousands of men died in two world wars so that this country was not taken over by the dictator Hitler. 60 or so years later we are being dictated to by Muslim extremists and that PC Brigade . Is this what my descendants died for?'

The use of the word 'descendants' rather than 'ancestors' in the last of these comments was presumably an oversight in the heat of the moment. It was also eerily appropriate, however, for evocations of past and present wars and enemies were accompanied by predictions of violence in times to come:

'Come the revolution us Brits will fight with no mercy.'

'A war will happen, revolution to start - don't blame us who have a right to live here, do not hate us who want to live in OUR country.'

'All this is going to do is encourage people to vote for right-wing parties and have them thrown out without any rights at all. '

'Unless you want to see your kids brought up by the Taliban et alia, then you must be prepared to fight for your country and your beliefs. Sorry ... but this is driving me into the BNP camp as well. I never thought I'd see the day, but as our politicians are continually betraying us, then I see no other recourse.'

'This piece of PC LUNACY will create racial tension on a massive scale, and ENOCH POWELL'S FAMOUS 'RIVERS OF BLOOD' SPEECH MAY COME TO PASS.'

The only sure way of avoiding such violence, it was said, is to remove Islam from Britain altogether:

'I want all Muslims to respect us and our way of life or LEAVE! Their religion disgusts me.'

'Instead of assimilating into a culture, Muslims whine and complain and expect everyone else to adapt to them. They should return to the homeland of their beloved prophet Mohammed.'

'If they want to live under Islamic law then they should move back to an Islamic country. And may their god go with them.'

Rejection of Islam was often combined with rejection of multiculturalism more generally, of so-called political correctness, and of the present government:

'Britain needs to get rid of the foreign multicultural faiths that has damaged Christianity.'

'Get rid of multi-cultural nonsense. Install legislation to ban multiculturalism before it is too late. When are we going to seal our borders so that we can preserve what is left of our culture before it becomes Shariaized into oblivion and all our heads are cut off for being infidels?'

'Integrate and get rid of these liberal "try to please all but actually please none" multicultural policies.'

'Of course, it isn't only the moslems to blame for the noise they are making; this government's failed multicultural policies are also to blame as is the government for giving this group nourishment in return for votes. It has to stop.'

'They are prepared to bide their time whilst 'CHIPPING AWAY' at our customs and religion. Eventually they will be in a position to impose sharia law on the citizens of our once great country. You can see from this article that they are well on their way to achieving it, with the backing of the government and pc brigade of lily livered liberals.'

'It's time we took the PC brigade et al to task to show them the mess they have already made of our country. It's time strict laws were passed to outlaw crazy ideas and talk like this. Have a referendum and see how many 'British' people want multiculturalism.'

Ignorance

In addition to the fear, anger and blind bigotry in the majority of responses, there was much sheer ignorance. This was particularly evident in the many statements that most or all Muslims in Britain are recent refugees fleeing from oppression in Muslim countries, and in the total absence of any attempt to correct this erroneous view. Incidentally, the truth is succinctly stated near the start of the MCB document: 'The largest migration of Muslims began in the early 1950s, emanating mainly from rural areas of South Asia. Muslim migrants arrived in Britain primarily to compensate for the labour shortages following the Second World War. They settled mainly in the inner-city areas of London, the industrial towns of the Midlands, and the textile towns of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Strathclyde.'

Most other papers did not contain coverage of the MCB document, or else (as in the *Mail* and *Telegraph*) were broadly factual and neutral. Two columnists, however, used the same register of insults and ideas as contributors to the *Express* website. In the *Sunday Mirror* on 25 February, Carol Sarler wrote:

'One wonders why the Muslims who agree with these demands bother to live in this country at all – because patently nothing about it suits them. One also wonders what would happen if Christian children living in an Islamic country rocked up to school wearing a skirt above the knee, a bit of make-up and a shirt that showed off a few centimetres of flesh. At a guess they'd be stoned to death ... Strikes me the Muslim Council will only ever stop whinging the day Britain becomes an Islamic state. And that's never going to happen. And if they're so unhappy with British schools and what goes on in them, why don't they shove off somewhere that suits them better – like Afghanistan.'

In the *Daily Star*, Paul Ross adopted the same abusive style:

'Of course these demands are not just unreasonable – they are downright impossible. And the Muslim Council of Britain must know that if they read even the occasional infidel's newspaper or have an ounce of sense in their bearded bonces.... But it's not really about getting what they want – it's about making a lot of noise and nuisance and promoting a sense of grievance among Muslims – to keep the anger and resentment simmering.'

It is significant that the BNP based its coverage on the *Express*, though without acknowledgement, even to the point of using the terms 'Taliban-style' and 'un-Islamic'. The MCB, it said, had:

'...set out a detailed list of demands to change Britain's schools into Taliban-style centres of learning. The arrogant demands are the most comprehensive yet revealed by the Jihadists who want to bring the UK into the embrace of Islam – a very likely outcome unless our own elected rulers deliver a polite but firm "no" to any further demand from the Muslim community. The MCB claims to be the voice of "moderate Muslims" but if even a fraction of the demands were met the damage done to British society would exceed that of a dozen terror suicide bomber extremists.'

Matters arising

The way in which a thoughtful and helpful publication from the Muslim Council of Britain in February 2007 was rubbished by the *Express*, and then subsequently by *Express* readers basing their views on the inaccuracies and distortions they had imbibed from their paper, is an instructive case study. Four points are particularly worth highlighting for those of us who work in education. First, it is important that we unpick the basic assumptions in Islamophobic discourse and assert contrary assumptions. Second, we need to understand as sensitively as possible what *Express* readers mean, as also readers of other such papers, when they say they are worried about political correctness. Third, we should acknowledge there are honest differences of opinion around multiculturalism that do need to be debated, even though the *Express's* style of debating, for example, is based on malicious distortions and intemperate abuse. Fourth, we need to supplement the MCB publication with recommendations on how to assist and support young Muslim people who are growing up in a deeply Islamophobic society.

Islamophobia and racism

Underlying the fear and hostility in most of the messages on the website there were five fundamental beliefs or assumptions: (1) All Muslims are much the same; (2) All Muslims are essentially different from all non-Muslims; (3) Muslims are morally and culturally inferior to non-Muslims; (4) Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims, not only militarily and politically but also culturally, by sapping Britain's sense of national identity; (5) there is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, and therefore no point in their even talking to each other, either in the world at large or within Britain in particular. Together, these five assumptions constitute the dominant narrative in Western societies at the current time. They can be tabulated alongside alternative views, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic assumptions in different narratives

Points of contrast	Dominant narrative	Alternative narrative
<i>Uniformity/diversity</i>	Muslims are all much the same	There is great diversity amongst Muslims
<i>Difference/similarity</i>	Muslims are significantly different from non-Muslims	There are many commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims
<i>Inferiority/equality</i>	Muslims are morally and intellectually inferior to non-Muslims	There is both good and bad everywhere – both in Muslims and non-Muslims
<i>Threat/trust</i>	Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims	There are both real and perceived threats on both sides
<i>Conflict/cooperation</i>	There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies	It is both possible and urgent that Muslims and non-Muslims should work together on solving or tackling shared problems and on building mutual confidence

Closed and open minds

Peregrine Worsthorne once claimed that Islam used to be 'a great civilisation worthy of being argued with' but now 'has degenerated into a primitive enemy fit only to be sensitively subjugated.' He was making two distinctions in this claim, the one to do with content ('great civilisation'/'primitive enemy') and the other with forms of thinking, engaging and relating ('argued with'/'subjugated'.) To see an individual or a group or a civilisation as 'worthy of being argued with' is necessarily to be open-minded towards it. The hallmarks of open-mindedness, all strikingly missing in most of the messages on the *Express* website in relation to the MCB document on education, include:

- readiness to change one's views, both of others and of oneself, in the light of new facts and evidence
- not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts
- not caricaturing the views of people with whom one disagrees
- not over-generalising
- not being abusive when arguing, for example not claiming that one's opponents are evil or insane or sub-human
- not using double standards when comparing and contrasting others with oneself
- seeing difference and disagreement as a resource for understanding more about oneself, not as a threat
- seeking to understand other people's views and standpoints in their own terms, and where they are coming from – the narratives and stories with which they interpret events
- not claiming greater certainty than is warranted
- seeking consensus or, at least, a *modus vivendi* which keeps channels of communication open and permits all to maintain dignity.

To foster open-mindedness is necessarily and logically to foster the alternative narrative briefly sketched in the right hand column of Table 1. It is also to attract – but withstand – the criticism from *Express* readers that you are, in the words of one of them quoted above, ‘a type of trendy left wing bleeding heart Liberal ... conditioning the minds of our children’.

Fostering open-mindedness and alternative narratives is not, however, sufficient. Consider, for example, this message on the *Express* website:

‘This country is being destroyed by all this multicultural political correctness. Muslims are not British despite having a British passport. I don't want their culture taking over. I wish I could abandon this country. It's just a giant shanty town all disconnected and destined for dire cultural destruction and disputes.’

Countering the views and feelings Expressed here (Britain is ‘just a giant shanty town all disconnected’) involves more than simply fostering open-mindedness and presenting alternative views of Islam. Also, alternative understandings of British culture and history are required, and understanding that the worries consuming this person do not have their origins in something that can be adequately conceptualised and named as political correctness.

Political correctness

Many of the alleged signs of political correctness are based on myth and gossip. It is simply not the case, for example, that local councils and schools routinely ‘ban Christmas’, though the claim that they do is recycled in newspapers every December. The ‘political correctness brigade’ is an imagined bogey-figure. It exists inside people’s heads, however, because of real anxieties. The anxieties have their origins in a range of events and trends, not in a single event or trend. The trends include globalisation and the decreasing capacity of governments to control their borders, not only literally but also culturally and economically; the emergence of new power blocs on the world stage; increasing pluralism in personal life-styles and choices; pluralism in competing philosophies and world-views; and the slowly dawning realisation that the planet’s ecological balance is under severe threat. In England, there are fears connected with devolution and the break-up of the United Kingdom, closer ties with the rest of Europe, and nostalgia for the Age of Empire that can never return.

Also, of course, there are perennial anxieties about the younger generation. It may be significant in this respect that at the same time the *Express* was asking its readers to have their say on ‘whether Muslims should tell us how to run our schools’ it was also inviting replies to ‘Are Britain’s children out of control?’

Ideally, newspapers should help their readers cope with such anxieties constructively, not engage in scapegoating and displacement, and not pander to the simplifications about Islam and Muslims that are illustrated above. But alas, there are commercial profits to be made from provoking, and pandering to, moral panics. Up to a point, readers enjoy a *frisson* of anxiety, along with other titillations, in their daily paper. Schools, however, have a higher responsibility. The current consultation around Sir Keith Ajegbo’s report on citizenship education will lead, hopefully, to serious consideration by teachers of moral panics and imagined bogeys.³

Debate

People who complain about the PC brigade refer not only to the alleged banning of Christmas, and so forth, but also to feeling that they dare not open their mouths. The problem, they say, is that there is a curtailment of freedom of speech, or even indeed of thought – the thought police hold sway. They sometimes make this complaint with invective, personal abuse, closed-mindedness, ignorance and barely articulate rage, as

³ *Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review*, foreword by Keith Ajegbo, Department for Education and Skills, January 2007

illustrated above. However, debates really are needed on some of the points the MCB document raises. Issues for consideration include:

- the competing truth-claims of different religions and life-stances, and between religious and secular outlooks
- discernment of the difference between, as the terms sometimes are, 'good religion' and 'bad religion'
- how schools may strike a balance between (a) helping pupils to embrace the beliefs and outlooks of their parents and (b) helping them to think for themselves and therefore perhaps to criticise and move away from their parents
- how people operating with different religious, philosophical and political concepts and frameworks can live and work together for the common good, and how schools can best foster such cooperation
- how to counter the attractions of so-called fundamentalism – the kinds of closed-mindedness and bigotry that have been illustrated above in the attitudes of non-Muslims towards Muslims, but which can exist also in attitudes of Muslims to non-Muslims, and in very many other contexts as well.

These too are major questions for the current consultation on citizenship education, based on Keith Ajegbo's report.

Supporting Muslim pupils

The Ajegbo consultation will lead also, it is to be hoped, to consideration of how, to quote phrasing in the title of the recent publication from the Muslim Council of Britain, to understand the needs of Muslim pupils. The MCB provides suggestions and recommendations for discussion, not demands. Not surprisingly the suggestions and recommendations are to do with religious obligations and expectations. Very few, that is to say, are explicitly to do with the formation of Muslim identity within a society which contains the currents of hatred, hostility and panic that have been illustrated in this article. Further guidelines are therefore required.

In the meanwhile, it is appropriate here for the MCB to have the last word:

'Many of our schools have a cherished tradition of fostering an inclusive ethos which values and addresses the differences and needs of the communities they serve. We are convinced that with a reasonable degree of mutual understanding and goodwill even more progress can be made in responding positively to the educational aspirations and concerns of Muslim pupils and their parents. The current climate, in which there is much negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, requires that this be given greater priority and impetus, to ensure that Muslim pupils are appropriately accommodated and become an integral part of mainstream school life, and thereby of society as a whole.'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6391271.stm>