



## *What should schools do about radicalisation?*

*Westminster Faith Debate 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015*

<http://faithdebates.org.uk/debates/what-should-schools-do-about-radicalisation/>

### **Presentations**

#### **Charles Clarke**

- Focus of the debate is what schools should do about radicalisation, which is a contemporary topic.
- Government is giving schools responsibility in the area of radicalisation.
- We need to look again at the relationship between religion and schools in the modern era.

#### **Zehra Jaffer**

- Radicalisation forms part of the safeguarding framework for schools.
- The school reviews external events to view the impact that they could have on the school community.
- It is easy to spot a child who has extreme views but how do we spot a child who is vulnerable from all kinds of safeguarding concerns?
- There is not enough time for those in education to see what research is saying about radicalisation.
- There is no one type of student that needs to be looked at closely. We need to look at many factors.
- The school seeks to foster a sense of belonging in the Academy community.
- How do we deal with uncertainties?
- There is a need for rules, expectations, a sense of purpose and an embedding of British values and those of the school.
- Students want safe spaces to discuss issues and they need ways to respond democratically.
- Students are more vulnerable when there are more uncertainties in their lives. Educators need to know students. Weekly meetings to evaluate students are helpful to know students and their circumstances.
- Introduction of project to learn how to face adversity. It draws on community cohesion and identity. Students need to know that multiple identities that fit under umbrella of 'British' can fit together.
- Parents need to understand what type of behaviour is acceptable.

#### **Professor Paul Thomas**

- Prevent has been in effect since 2007 but only recently have schools been brought to the fore.
- We have to find ways to help schools in their legal responsibility.
- Radicalisation has a very weak predictive power. Even if an individual expresses radical sentiments, he or she may never act.
- A helpful model to visualise the situation is a triangle with those who are acutely at risk at the top, those who are at risk because they fit the right demographic in the middle and general young people at the bottom.



- Currently, Prevent in schools only focuses on the top group – those acutely at risk. The balance is wrong and needs to focus on the other groups, too.
- Just focusing on the at risk group is radicalising, stigmatising and counter-productive.
- There is a need for more radical politics and topical issues to be discussed in schools both planned and in response to current events.
- Teachers need additional initial and CPD training.
- Schools are being asked to spot radicalised students but there is also a need for schools to, conversely, encourage radical discussions.
- Emphasis on citizenship moves away from a Muslim-only focus on thereby reduces stigmatisation.
- The Prevent budget provides police salaries but money needs to be out into educational programmes.
- We must trust educators and education.
- Focusing on citizenship, trusting teachers and focusing on all students will not prevent radicalisation but it will show congruency with the values that we claim to have because, currently, Prevent is stigmatising.

### **Dr Sarah Marsden**

- Fewer than 450 people have been convicted of terrorism between 2001 and 2014. This figure is not enough to understand and to predict the kinds of attitudes and characteristics that are common to those who are radicalised.
- Asking educators to identify those who are in danger of radicalisation to extremism or non-violent extremism is problematic and is a risk for the relationship between teacher and student. It is a challenge to the protected space of schools, which then becomes politicised.
- There is a need to reclaim the project from the security framework and to reaffirm teaching's aim of developing critical, informed, compassionate citizens who can engage with questions.
- What should the space where politics, extremism and terrorism are discussed look like?
- On who basis should we negotiate difference?
- We must widen and deepen the object of young people's critical thinking.
- We need to cultivate caring thinking and pay attention to our fundamental relatedness.
- Safe spaces without fear of sanction are important.
- We should confront difference rather than tolerate it.
- Critical thinking skills will allow young people to counter what they see online.
- Educators must not impose answers but ask students questions so that they are part of a shared social project.

### **Tom Holland**

- An extremist does not accept the rule of law.
- Magna Carta is almost mythical but still has influence today but there are people who "couldn't care less" about Magna Carta.
- ISIS uses Qur'anic verse "the one who judges not by what Allah has revealed – such people are the disbelievers".
- "Islam has a particular appeal...for rebellious teenagers because it comes...it brings with it the heft of a great and ancient religion that gives it a quality that being a hippy or being a punk just doesn't bring."
- How can the legal understanding of the secular and of Islam be squared?



### Panel discussion

#### **Charles Clarke**

- Is it right for schools to deal with radicalisation? Can schools do anything? Is it that schools are doing wrong not right or should they not be doing it at all?

#### **Professor Paul Thomas**

- What is the appropriate educational response?
- We need to trust in positive education.
- We need “to embody our multicultural, democratic citizenship by doing community cohesion and by believing in our young people and trusting in our young people”.

#### **Dr Sarah Marsden**

- Schools can develop critical thinking skills. The question then becomes how to deal with the subject of radicalisation. We must not isolate the subject matter.

#### **Tom Holland**

- Is it the role of teachers to “firefight”?
- Schools have a role in educating.
- Church of England schooling is “an excellent introduction to atheism” as it focuses on analysing problems and historicity. Is this happening in Muslim schools? Are students getting the counterpart to Muslim doctrine?

#### **Zehra Jaffer**

- With the right groundwork, it is possible for schools to address the issues.
- Teachers need to get students thinking and must talk about many big issues of which radicalisation is just one.
- There is a limit to what schools can achieve as there is a need for students to achieve grades, too.
- Young people want to change the view of radicalisation but the need opportunities to engage and to practise democratic skills.

#### **Professor Linda Woodhead**

- The 1944 Education Act was in response to the “extremism of the day”, which was communism and fascism. The Act sought a positive religious message and made the Church of England the backbone to education and to British values.
- Does religion matter as a background to the current situation?
- The country has transitioned from being a Christian nation to a majority non-religious nation.
- It is time to look holistically at issues.

#### **Tom Holland**

- Many of the issues that we face pertaining to radicalisation have an ideological component.
- “We need a firewall to be erected between what is acceptable in following the prophetic example and what is not acceptable...How we construct that firewall is principally an issue for Muslims and Muslim theologians...but I think the rest of us do have a stake in it because we’re all suffering.”



**Professor Paul Thomas**

- There is an “asymmetrical reality developing that religion is much more important in some communities than in others” but using faith as a forum to discuss extremism is problematic.
- White Islamophobia is often due to a fear of Islam.

**Zehra Jaffer**

- Religious education has a prominent role in religious literacy.
- The Metropolitan Police has engaged well with Muslim youth.

**Dr Sarah Marsden**

- There is a lack of religious literacy in those who go out to fight.
- Religious education may be doing a satisfactory job.
- We must think about what we are doing right.
- There is a need to develop core skills.

**Audience Q&A**

**Nash Jaffer**

- Responding to Sarah’s point regarding those who go to Syria: is the cause an ignorance of their religion rather than a good understanding of their religion?
- Schools have an opportunity to teach students about their religion and the religion of others in a space where open discussion is possible rather than a place where we “are encouraged to spy on each other”.

**Tom Thorp**

- Frustrated about talk of “countering radicalisation” and “being on the back foot” so it is a change to hear discussion of building resilience and of being proactive.
- What sort of training do teachers need to help create resilience?

**Mohammed Amin**

- ISIS and Hizb ut-Tahrir promote a false, idealised view of Islamic history.
- Would teaching the history of Islam that includes a demonstration of the faith’s dynastic ruling help to counter the belief in the need for a caliphate?

**Tom Holland**

- The heritage of Islamic learning is underutilised.
- The Prophet Mohammad is “enshrined as a Western style great man” rather focusing on his qualities as embodying God’s best plans for humanity and his care for the disadvantaged.
- Violence of the narrative can be appealing.
- Many who are drawn to ISIS seek a sense of belonging.
- Telling those who are vulnerable to radicalisation that ISIS is “not liberal” is pointless because that is the appeal.

**Professor Paul Thomas**

- There is weak evidence that those going to Syria are deeply religious. Latest Belgian research shows that those who have gone to Syria are very young, socially marginalised and have little to no involvement in Islam.
- “Attractions to youth criminal gangs probably tell us much more than Islam as a religion or teaching.”



**Tom Holland**

- Is the essence of religious conversion not that you may be criminal but conversion to faith gives a new beginning?
- Joining ISIS like a voyage of discovery.

**Professor Paul Thomas**

- It's not clear that it's a religious conversion. It's a political ideology.

**Tom Holland**

- "Islam does not recognise the division between the religious and the political in that way that traditional Christian cultures have."

**Dr Sarah Marsden**

- "Religion is the framework within which organisations like ISIS operate. It's the framework. It sets out a series of goals and it provides a space that individual experiences and individual needs can be fulfilled. Some of those are religious. Many are not."
- Improving religious literacy will have a protective factor.
- The notion of redemption of self is important but does it have to be a religious one?

**Zehra Jaffer**

- Schools, as long as schools have clarity and the right training, "have every right to challenge if somebody puts across minority views about their faith which is [sic] not acceptable, which is challenging...and which could be evidence of extremist behaviour".

**Professor Linda Woodhead**

- "Religion isn't one thing that's separate from politics and identity. It's sticky. It sticks to images of gender and politics and whatever."

**Ken Maginnis**

- There is a decline in the number of professionally trained teachers in primary education.
- "We do not respect professionalism in teaching."

**John Baxter**

- Schools, especially academies, have very little religious education.
- "We desperately need properly backed-up, properly trained in the universities RE teachers."

**Zehra Jaffer**

- We must trust teachers and their professionalism. We need to support them and to identify shortages in expertise.
- Teachers are not the only ones on the frontline and there are other partners who can give support.

**Professor Paul Thomas**

- Skills on how to have debates need to be developed.
- There is very little social policy and sociology included in teacher training.



**Dr Sarah Marsden**

- Partnership working is important.

**Tom Holland**

- “If every student in Britain could have the kind of teachers that my children have been fortunate enough to have at their primary and secondary schools, then I don’t think we’d have much of a problem with radicalisation.”

**Bernadette Sheridan**

- There is a bigger issue of persuasion. “We are at risk of ostracising certain faith communities if we just designate this as an Islamic problem. It’s not. We have seen terrorist quasi-religious groups in Japan...we saw that the recruits were young, intelligent people...I think one of the things that we need to do is not just look at the message. Yes, the message might attract some people but it doesn’t necessarily attract most people. In fact, it’s the method that attracts most people.”
- We need to educate young people in psychological methods so that they have a toolkit to help themselves.

**Mark Chater**

- RE provision in state schools often lacks history and sociology of religions. What impact may this have on individuals and their ability to argue critically about religion?

**Fatima**

- Directed at Tom Holland’s earlier points:
  - “The myth that you’re trying to create that it is embedded in Islamic theory is rather flawed because a lot of the ideas you’re bringing forward are embedded within the Orientalist tradition...as you know, since you’re well acquainted with the sharia, the sharia, just like British law and Saudi law is not codified so that is something that is quite crucial to mention when discussing sharia law.”
  - Referencing 2008 MI6 report: “Muslims who have a secure, grounded religious identity are actually not a threat, not individuals to look out for so, again, your argument that it is wholly embedded within the Islamic theology is flawed.”
  - The root motivation for joining ISIS is politics.
  - “ISIS is actually rooted in Baathism, which was founded upon radical secularism in Iraq...because the senior leaders of ISIS are ex-Baathist members of Saddam Hussein’s party...this is crucial to mention because you’re trying to solely focus and create a very linear narrative focusing on Muslims only an Islam specifically but, in fact, it’s embedded within Baathism.”

**Anna Ripley-Scott**

- Teachers are interpreters between different cultures, ideas etc.
- Teachers require a greater understanding of Islam in order to have discussions and to help pupils to understand their own religion.

**Dr Sarah Marsden**

- We need to understand how the recruitment and mobilisation processes work to create a strong message of resilience.



### **Tom Holland**

- “Certainly Baathism feeds into it but I think it would be foolish to deny that there’s nothing Islamic about the Islamic State and that the appeal of it is rooted in a certain interpretation of Islam. I perfectly understand that we would all like to think that it is all down to the evils of Saddam Hussein. Unfortunately, I don’t think it is and I think to believe that, essentially, is to stick our head in the sand.”
- Synchronic vs diachronic teaching in religion.
- “A religion is not an absolute. There is no such thing as true Islam or true Christianity. Instead, what you have is dialogues between individuals at a given point of time between an inheritance of traditions and texts and what those individuals choose to emphasise is up to them.”

### **Zehra Jaffer**

- How do we make education about powers of persuasion age appropriate? This is not just a radicalisation issue as it “could also be applied to child sexual exploitation, gang affiliation” and other abuses of power.
- We face increasing safeguarding concerns until we reach a consensus of understanding.

### **Professor Paul Thomas**

- There is a “spectrum of extremism that young people are exposed to and I think that’s not necessarily a religious basis but we have to look at morality and citizenship and democratic protection”.
- “I do get slightly concerned that it’s [the discussion] about theological interpretation. I see a lot of the Islamic extremist ideology being a political understanding of domestic and international events. I think it’s a mistaken one and I’d argue that media skills of helping young people look at alternative viewpoints and debate those actually tell us more than theological interpretation...I think we’re barking up the wrong tree with that. I don’t think there’s an evidence that theological interpretation is what is driving this.”

### **Tom Holland**

- “What we’ve lived through over the past few decades is a moral and ethical revolution of a speed and a totality that is unprecedented in the history of human culture...I think as a society we’ve adjusted to this revolution incredibly well but obviously it is bruising for many people.”

### **Paula Wilkinson**

- Schools are invaluable in preventing grooming whether it’s for child sexual exploitation, gangs or extremism.

### **Alexander Douglas**

- Teaching has become less about educating and more about achieving grades.
- Would critical engagement lead to better critical thinking?
- What is Islamic? What is religious? What isn’t?
- Often we may fit into a set of easy-to-explain beliefs but “at some point in time people aren’t even sure why they are what they are”.
- Theological groundwork is necessary to have depth in academic discussion.



### **Rebecca Sefton**

- As RE teachers “we are...being tasked with solving this problem of radicalisation...we’re dealing with community cohesion fuzz that has been put together to sort of make everyone get along”.
- Instead of getting students to actually think, teachers have to give marks for opinions.
- “It might not be a problem with out training but...with the way we’re viewed in schools. We’re not high on the agenda, nobody values us as a subject...and then we’re being sort of tasked with this solve radicalisation and I just don’t know if it’s possible in the way that RE is actually valued in schools and the curriculum that we’ve got.”

### **Siobhan**

- Teachers have a concern about the online world where students often hear about a news story before their teachers.
- How can the education community respond to the need to deal with the online world?

### **Dr Sarah Marsden**

- Recruitment process can be called grooming. It happens very quickly.
- There is pressure on teachers to find space to deal with these issues.

### **Professor Paul Thomas**

- Policy nationally should be empowering schools.
- This legal power is a resource-free duty.
- The Prevent budget has cut funding for youth workers who have training to deal with these issues.

### **Tom Holland**

- Wandering soul who searches online faces various temptations.
- How do we distinguish between seeming virtue and actual virtue?

### **Zehra Jaffer**

- RE teachers are dealing with controversial issues all the time and should be the lead practitioners showing others how to deal with these issues.
- The responsibility cannot be just for RE teachers – it must be shared.

### **Charles Clarke**

- There is a need to reevaluate the curriculum.
- We must try to build awareness in schools about processes and techniques so that we can help teachers who can, in turn, help their students.

***(Notes by Alice Butler)***