



2014 Annual Curriculum for Cohesion Dinner

Address of Dr. Matthew Wilkinson

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Thursday, 26 June 2014

Greetings of Peace.

Thank you Sadiq, Farooq, Roy and Amin for your pertinent addresses. I am most grateful for the presence of such a distinguished and diverse gathering of leaders in this room tonight.

Civilisation feels to me more fragile than when I stood up here one year ago.

The post-1945 settlement of Western Europe and its bottom-line of ethnic and religious tolerance seems imperilled by the rise of far-right political parties that are usually premised on the rejection of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

A newly emboldened Russia has annexed territory and foments civil unrest in Ukraine in flagrant violation of international law.

My hopes for the Arab Spring of genuine democracy in the Middle East with a moderate Islamic flavour have been shattered by military counter-revolution in Egypt and

My fears of the complete meltdown of Syria and Iraq into savage, sectarian anarchy have come to pass with the gains of a group called the Islamic State of Iraq & Sham (ISIS). This off-shoot of Al-Qaeda is neither Islamic



nor a state, but is an organised terrorist insurgency which beheads, blows up and slaughters innocent people without trial just for being different and for seeing things differently.

To compound the horror, this savage organisation, which is driven by the very antithesis of the values that civilisation relies upon - namely the rule of law, free and fair suffrage and religious tolerance - has proved to be a cause worth dying for to some young British Muslims who have been born, bred and educated in this country in our mainstream non-faith schools.

However, the Trojan Horse that I sometimes feel threatens to tear the fabric of civilisation apart is not, I suggest, a few people with extreme ideas who may or may not have aimed to gain control of some schools in Birmingham.

The troops that are disgorging from the belly of the Trojan horse into the dark night of the city of civilisation bent on its destruction are:

1. fear of the other;
2. ignorance of the other and
3. the failure to learn from the other.

The far-right prefers to create a demon Muslim 'other' rather than recognise that Islam and Muslims have made a significant contribution to much of the natural scientific and medical progress of which Europe is rightly proud.

ISIS constructs an eternally, divided Manichean Muslim-Infidel world in which the 'other', that is those of us who think that belief in God is compatible with democracy and religious pluralism whether, be we Muslim



or from another faith or none, are so far outside the pale of the blessed that we are merely mete for the sword.

And, regrettably, this fear of the other, this ignorance of the other and this failure to learn from the other has not been confined to the extremes of society.

For generations, polite British society and elected policy makers have welcomed Muslims and others into this country to fill gaps in our labour market; but Muslims and others have not as yet been welcome to fill gaps in our national affections and our national identity.

We saw this clearly with Mr. Gove and the History National Curriculum: History in school is the key crucible of national identity but Mr. Gove and his advisors were only prepared to let the Muslim contribution begrudgingly into Britain's official past when the gun of academic uproar was pointed at their head and they were left with no choice.

So can we really be surprised when a few misguided young people now say, "To Hell with this tolerant society that does not want us," and run to the open-armed embrace of people who may be maniacal intolerant butchers but at least let them fully in, when our society - and this includes the Muslim community -has failed so far to show how religious faith fits authentically into a multi-faith democratic world.

But to continue the classical theme, I would like to think that Curriculum for Cohesion is like wily Odysseus and his crew of battle-hardened heroes sailing away from the battle-ground of civilisation and towards the homeland of Ithaca.



Our homeland of Ithaca is a realisable vision of a society and an education system in which

- authentic and serious religious faith is enacted in an informed and transformative engagement with the institutions of democratic society;
- enriched by learning from the insights of those of other faiths and none and
- embedded in a deep and useful understanding of the past.

Our ship is a comprehensive application of the philosophy of Critical Realism to its full creative potential.

Our sail is the production of the best ideas fully tested and published in the leading academic journals, having passed through the tough, international peer-review process.

Our crew are a wise, relevant and dedicated team of academic advisors and patrons.

The wind that drives us are our donors and their conviction that we have the depth of ideas, strength of solid financial and institutional backing and absolute determination, God willing, to succeed.

We are wary of the Sirens singing sweetly of sloppy thinking, half-baked reports, unnecessary conferences and political quick fixes.

We have grappled with the one-eyed Cyclops with his fixed, narrow curricular point-of-view.



We are steering carefully between the Scylla of unthinking secularism and the Charybdis of Manichean extremism.

On this year's leg of the voyage, our ship's company has produced:

1. three academic papers published in leading international journals;
2. the development and consolidation of our teacher-training in History and Religious Education at the University of Cambridge and elsewhere;
3. the embryo of our work in helping educate the judiciary in understanding of Islam and
4. a book for teachers, religious leaders and educational policy-makers entitled, *A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-faith World: a philosophy for success through education*, to be published by Routledge this November and to be used on teacher-training courses throughout the land.

These outputs are proof that we are a coordinated crew pulling together in the right direction for the measurable benefit of professionals who work to help young people thrive.

When we land on the shores of our Ithaca, we aim to establish, God willing, a Centre for multi-disciplinary research for the future of faith.

We plan that people from all over the world can return from our Ithaca to their countries knowing how to think deeply and clearly about how religious faith can enhance and be enhanced by the institutions of democratic civilisation: schools, universities, elected government, an independent judiciary, reflective artistic expression and sound gender-relations.



This is where, God willing, we are heading and I would like to thank those of you who have helped us build the ship and plan this critical voyage as we move onto a vital phase of making clear and rigorous distinctions between Islam, Political Islamism and Violent Extremism in the service of the police force, the prison service and the judiciary.

We at Curriculum for Cohesion are determined to reclaim rich and transformative Islamic concepts such as *Jihad* and *Sharia*' that tend towards peace from violent extremists and simplistic journalists. We are highly committed and able to serve the upholders of justice, the bed-rock of our civilisation, in your essential task of bringing justice to all.

I stand here tonight to invite the members of the judiciary, the police and the prison service who are here to become our advisors and associates in this research project and, if you will permit me, we will be contacting you in the coming days to hear your thoughts on my invitation.

Thank you for being here tonight and thank you for your attention.