No Laughing Matter:

Can Showing Religiously Sensitive Cartoons in the Classroom Ever Be Justified?

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England's Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015 (commonly known as the Prevent Act) was a political response to wider concerns about the rising influence of extremist radicalism, religious and political, on the potentially vulnerable. The duty of English schools under this Act is to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism" in all its forms. In summary, the duty to Prevent assumes the following:

- *Protect school families from radicalisation and extremism*
- *Identify any individual vulnerabilities and changes in behaviour*
- *Have a sound understanding of what steps to take if you have concerns about extremism*
- *Teach how to build resistance to extremist ideas and terrorist ideology*

Schools answer to local government, who in turn must by law assess risk and co-ordinate Prevent activity in schools, with senior officers providing advice and support and overseeing effective monitoring. The duty is controversial. Young people's wellbeing and the need to safeguard them is of paramount concern, but there are concerns that Prevent reinforces popular stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. This adds to the pedagogic challenges that teachers and schools must navigate when crafting their response to the duty in their particular context.

In other aspects, the governance of schools in England is shifting away from local education authorities (LEAs) to 'Multi-Academy Trusts' (MATs), which are state-funded but independently-governed school networks led by a CEO. An Education White Paper (2022) aspires for all schools to become part of a MAT by 2030, claiming that by encouraging all schools to be academies by 2030, they will create an efficient single regulatory system. This claim is contested. All schools in England, whether academies or local authority maintained, are led by volunteer governors, alongside professional school leaders. Governors are not involved with the day to day running of a school but play a strategic role in improving education for local children.

"Thank you so much for driving all the way over!"

Imperial Multi-Academy Trust CEO Saima Ahmed welcomed Rebecca Mitchell, Head Teacher of Tate Academy, warmly as she stepped from her car. Although Tate was one of the Trust's longstanding members, it was an outlier, both geographically distant from the other five schools and demographically unusual. Most of its student body identified as "White British," without the racial and ethnic diversity of the wider area.

"The traffic is terrible at this time of day," Saima continued, "but it seems important to meet in person for this discussion, rather than by Zoom."

"I agree," Rebecca nodded, following Saima to the Executive Conference Suite. "Thank you for bringing everyone together at short notice."

"How are things?" Saima queried.

“Not good,” Rebecca admitted. “We found more graffiti around the Year 9 boys’ lockers this morning. Mrs. Abdi called yesterday to report her daughter being upset by racist, anti-Muslim taunting in the cafeteria. We’ve increased teacher numbers on lunch duty, but we’re still not picking up everything.”

Saima winced. “So, you still want to use Jack’s expanded *Charlie Hebdo* lesson?”

“’Want’ is probably not the right word, but I don’t see we have a choice,” Rebecca sighed. They joined their colleagues in the conference room. “The graffiti was clearly based on those cartoons. The kids have clearly seen them. We must tackle this directly — we can’t carry on skating around it.”

“More graffiti?” Maggie Brown groaned, hugging both colleagues. Maggie was Head Teacher at Lyle Academy, one of the most diverse schools in the Trust. Before becoming head, Maggie had taught Religious Education (RE) at Tate for many years, alongside Rebecca, and then worked as an Assistant Head at Lyle under Saima, prior to Saima’s becoming CEO. All three remained close, valuing each other’s professionalism.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Rebecca confirmed. “I don’t know what’s going on with this Year 9. One class particularly doesn’t accept our school’s values. I’m worried if it goes on much longer, we’ll be challenged for failing to comply with the duty to Prevent — White nationalist radicalism, not the jihadist nonsense our MP is always spouting on about.”

Saima grimaced, reflecting on the Trust’s latest, unexpected challenge. As part of their response to the ‘Prevent’ duty to protect students from radicalisation and violent extremism, all six schools had adopted a specialist curriculum. This supported students at each key developmental stage to understand and discuss sensitive topics, including extremist ideas associated with terrorist ideology, and to learn how to challenge them. Developed by former specialist history teacher and educational consultant Jack Dawson, now with his own consultancy firm, Dawson Corps, the curriculum had successfully helped students think through the complex causes of extremism and terrorism and the different political ideologies that fuel them.

While the precise causes of the unrest at Tate were unclear, something strange had happened there over the past year, suggesting an undercurrent of Islamophobia. Students, parents, and teachers had raised concerns about rising tensions; steps had been taken to ‘nip the problem in the bud’. Unfortunately, further trouble had recently broken out: explicitly anti-Muslim graffiti had appeared in several prominent places, seemingly inspired by cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*. These became famous after extremists, claiming they were “avenging the Prophet” for the racist and demeaning depictions of Muhammad, killed 11 people in the *Charlie Hebdo* office in 2015. The magazine reprinted the cartoons on the fifth anniversary of the shooting in 2020, just as accused confederates of the gunmen were going on trial. One lesson in Dawson’s curriculum referenced these images, asking students to map the complex causation of violent extremism. The lesson didn’t include the cartoons directly, but it seemed the graffiti artists, whoever they were, had found them online for themselves.

Rebecca had responded with a request that she knew would be controversial. She wanted to pilot a new resource from Dawson Corps which *did* use the cartoons to help students analyze the imagery to question the anti-Islamic stereotypes presented. As a Muslim, Saima had initially recoiled at the suggestion; she found them personally and professionally offensive and questioned their use, given the Trust’s sizable Muslim population. However, the circumstances at Tate were unusual.

Not wishing to further escalate an already volatile situation, Saima called the meeting to discuss Rebecca’s proposal. With Saima, Rebecca, and Maggie, the group included Jack Dawson himself and

Farid Iqbal, a local imam and governor of Whitworth School, also in the Trust. Having spent too many years being the only Muslim present during such discussions, Saima didn't intend to repeat the experience. She was grateful to Farid for rearranging his schedule to attend at short notice.

"Failing to comply with Prevent and triggering further scrutiny is definitely not what we want," Saima agreed, "but I'm not expecting it to happen here. I'm grateful to Rebecca for initiating this meeting. Our governance agreement requires us to review decisions by individual schools together where there is potential reputational risk to the whole Trust."

"Thank you all for making the time," Rebecca began carefully. "I think it's important to stress the proportionate nature of our proposal. One additional lesson, in our school only, taught to one year group, which we'll plan carefully and simply pilot.

"We're also trying to find out who the perpetrators are, to deal with them directly," Rebecca continued. "In the meantime, we know other students have seen the graffiti and heard the comments. We need to prioritise going through with them why these images are such inaccurate representations and therefore harmful, while recognising people's rights to freedom of expression. By talking about them explicitly in class, we can better establish who may be particularly vulnerable to far-right influence."

"It's certainly worrying, and I do understand your difficulty," Farid responded. "However, one can never justify using these cartoons in the classroom. Many Muslims believe that even respectful depictions of the Prophet are wrong—at best they are inaccurate; at worst they idolise him, *'shirk,'* and that is a serious sin. Anyway, these images are hardly respectful."

"I appreciate your concerns," Jack spoke up, "but the lesson Rebecca is proposing to use is specifically designed to address underlying causes of Islamophobia and anti-Islamic radicalization with young people who have encountered the cartoons in some form already. We've trialled it in similar settings. Teachers have reported students better understanding the need to balance being respectful with freely sharing their opinions. That seems important to try in this situation."

"Jack, you know I am hugely impressed by your work," Saima said. "But why would you promote using these cartoons with anybody, anywhere, knowing just how offensive Muslims find them? How could that hurtful portrayal ever be educationally justified?"

"We would definitely not advise using the lesson at schools with significant Muslim representation, like Lyle or Whitworth," Jack reassured her, "given the offence they might cause to staff or others. However, given the severity of the circumstances at Tate, the risk seems justified. It's using the cartoons to promote 'religious literacy', if you like, engaging with what's wrong about the way they depict Islam, what is factually incorrect about the copycat graffiti. Remember, there is political support for using images of the Prophet, where they are carefully structured to teach about blasphemy, free speech, political Islam and so forth."

"But people will be offended," Saima reminded him, "including the Muslim minority students at Tate and their families. What about them?"

"We will be as transparent with those students and families as possible and devote significant time over the next few weeks to speaking with them. We'll certainly hold a community meeting to explain the lesson," Rebecca reassured the group, "and we'll obviously allow Muslim Year 9 students to opt out entirely if they want to."

“Just to clarify—the outright prohibition of cartoons only applies specifically to Muslims who find them disagreeable. It can’t be applied to people outside Islam, right?” Jack asked.

“True,” Maggie confirmed, “further complicated by the fact that certain images of the Prophet have been used historically by Muslims themselves in Islamic culture, for example in Persia. But there is nothing ‘pietistic’ or respectful about the images Charlie Hebdo chose to publish. On the contrary, they are deliberately provocative, which is why we don’t go anywhere near them in my school. Haven’t these issues come up before in the council’s interfaith network?”

“They have,” Farid nodded. “The Sikh representative—do you all know Manpreet? —mentioned a textbook in the States that had printed a hurtful image of Guru Nanak, I believe. Local Sikhs said it was offensive and the state education board took action so children didn’t see the image.”

“It is helpful to be reminded this isn’t just an issue for Muslims,” Rebecca observed. “But that may not be how others see it, especially those who aren’t religiously literate or sensitive. We can’t just let Islamophobia, or the possible risk that our students are being radicalized by members of the far right, pass us by. Our students have clearly seen the cartoons. We can’t directly intervene if we’re standing on ceremony about how respectful or not it is to show them!”

“I appreciate your concerns, Rebecca, and take your assessment of your pupils’ needs seriously,” Saima said, gently. “Personally, these cartoons cross a line for me in terms of what it is acceptable to share in a public place. I appreciate that as a Muslim I am in a minority, choosing to live in a Western context, and also that Muslims have very diverse attitudes. However, I am wary of the likely reaction, from Muslim pupils, families, and staff members, if they find out we have condoned using these cartoons in any Trust school. Remember, Muslim children are brought up to love the Prophet even more than their own family.”

“Yes,” said Maggie. “I remember a discussion with a Year 9 class at Lyle about their most inspirational person. Quite a few of the Muslim students said the Prophet Muhammad.”

“Precisely,” responded Farid firmly. “Agreed they are a tiny minority at Tate, but Muslims deeply respect and love all Prophets, including Moses and Jesus. Mockery of them is blasphemous, with insults to the Prophet Muhammad treated most seriously. These cartoons depict him as a bomber, prepared to indiscriminately take life - the very opposite of the message of peace he preached. The Trust condoning showing those scurrilous images in one school would be insensitive, Rebecca, and all the community meetings in the world won’t change that reality.”

“Plus the press will get wind of it,” Maggie interrupted.

“Exactly!” Farid declared. “Imagine the media frenzy!”

“I’m afraid we may be facing a media frenzy already,” Rebecca interjected. “That graffiti around the lockers, who knows how many students took pictures with their phones? At a minimum, all our Year 9 students need the chance to talk them through, informed by well trained, experienced specialist teachers. Just now, they’re coming across them unsupervised with their friends. Can’t we do this carefully, proportionately, while supporting the relatively few people who might be offended?”

“Look,” said Farid, “Not everyone feels as strongly about this as I do, but quite a few members of my community would be extremely upset if they got wind of the cartoons being used in lessons locally. I would say there is a real risk of protestors turning up outside the school…”

“I understand your concern, Farid,” Saima acknowledged. “But let me play devil’s advocate. Experts in the school and in critical thinking believe that with the cartoons already accessible and

known to kids, the way forward in extreme situations like this is to discuss them in a safe and supported space, sensitively, to build resilience."

Maggie shook her head. "Critical thinking can be developed without showing or repeating the very things that cause offence. Would we, seriously, use the n-word, or show porn, to make a point and to 'build resilience'? My Head of Media Studies was teaching race representation to her GCSE group. She thought about using the Charlie Hebdo cover which satirised the George Floyd murder. The class was really divided about whether Katie should show the cartoon at all. A couple of the black students said they were keen to see it – but she decided against it."

"So, who gets to decide what's offensive—the black students or the white teacher?" Saima asked.

"And we've already tried talking about the cartoons without showing them," Rebecca reminded everyone.

There was a pause.

"There is no explicit advice from anyone in this area," Jack conceded. "The DfE, the LA, any of the professional associations, have the same guidance everyone can access, like the 'Educate Against Hate' stuff. My materials grew from something that happened a few years ago when I was teaching History. Members of my department wanted to show Nazi cartoons in their lessons on the Holocaust which ridicule Jews, also very offensive. They consulted Jewish parents, and a local rabbi. Turned out most did think using the cartoons was of educational value, even the rabbi, because they communicated how the motivation behind them was to demonise and discriminate. Isn't that where the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons are coming from?"

"But Farid doesn't feel like that. And I'm not sure showing cartoons of the Prophet can be justified in a similar way," Maggie objected.

Jack reflected. "I am concerned that both antisemitism and Islamophobia are at an all-time high; yet neither kind of prejudice gets the attention they deserve. We don't want to play into the hands of people who will exploit local Muslim families' reactions if these images upset them. But we should be calling out the Islamophobia connected to these cartoons. It's part of our duty of care in schools."

"I will agree there, Jack," Farid conceded. "These things we keep saying about British values – respect and tolerance. They need to be modelled in the classroom."

"As well as promoting political freedom and our responsibility to uphold democratic principles," Rebecca chimed in. "How can we say that we're committed to those values when we don't apply principles of freedom of speech ourselves? The images are not illegal; they are out there. The most responsible course of action is to directly address them in the classroom."

"We train all teachers before this lesson," Jack added. " Anyone using the cartoons needs to appreciate the sensitivity of the topic and know about Islam. They mustn't promote stereotypes themselves. We don't expect non-specialist or cover teachers to pick up and run with this lesson."

"Whatever is decided, we must maintain our reputation for covering contentious issues well, and keep the community's trust and support," Maggie declared.

This was one thing, at least, that everyone could wholeheartedly endorse.

Glancing at the clock, Saima saw they had only a few minutes left. She had hoped they might reach a clear decision on using the cartoons by now. Should the Trust allow Tate school to use them, or not?