

## No Laughing Matter:

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

Janet Orchard, Waqar Ahmedi, and Sara O'Brien

Script by Sara O'Brien, Janet Orchard, and Waqar Ahmedi

<https://justiceinschools.org>

*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.*

<b>Setting</b>	
Imperial Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), a network of six schools in London, England	
<b>Primary Characters</b>	
<b>Saima Ahmed:</b> CEO of Imperial MAT	<b>Farid Iqbal:</b> imam and governor at Whitworth Academy
<b>Rebecca Mitchell:</b> head teacher at Tate Academy	<b>Jack Dawson:</b> educational consultant
<b>Maggie Brown:</b> head teacher at Lyle Academy	

**Narrator:** Sitting in a London conference room, Imperial Multi-Academy Trust CEO Salima Ahmed reflected on the latest, unexpected challenge her team faced. She had called a meeting to try to determine how best to address a string of Islamophobic incidents at Tate, one of the six schools in the trust.

**Saima:** Thanks for coming here today. As we all know, the recent incidents at Tate are really alarming. Rebecca, as head teacher at Tate, can you remind us what's been happening?

**Rebecca:** Of course. As you know, the demographics at Tate are quite different to the demographics at the other schools in the Trust. While most of our schools serve diverse populations, Tate's students identify largely as "White British." And while the cause is unclear, we've had reports from parents, teachers, and students about rising tensions. We've tried to nip it in the bud, but it's escalated. We've increased teacher numbers on lunch duty and still had more reports of anti-Muslim taunting in the cafeteria. Also we've seen graffiti around the Year 9 boys' lockers several times. It seems to mimic cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*. You may recall, the cartoons triggered extremists to kill 11 people in the *Charlie Hebdo* offices back in 2015, to "avenge the Prophet," in their words. Jack, maybe you can talk more about the connection between the cartoons and the graffiti.

**Jack:** Certainly. Along with the other schools in the Trust, Tate uses our company's "Prevent" curriculum, created to help students think through both the causes of extremism and terrorism and the different political ideologies that fuel them. Indeed, schools in Imperial MAT have used the curriculum over the years to successfully help students think through these complex matters. One lesson that we currently use does reference the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, although it doesn't involve showing them. Unfortunately, it seems the graffiti artists, whoever they were, have found those online for themselves.

**Rebecca:** So I have a request that I suspect is controversial. I want to pilot a new resource from Jack's company which *does* use the cartoons. It helps students analyse the imagery in order to question the anti-Islamic stereotypes presented. I appreciate this suggestion is radical, but a group of our Year 9's just doesn't accept our school's values. If this goes on much longer, we'll be challenged for failing to comply with the duty to Prevent — to prevent White nationalist radicalism, not the jihadist nonsense our MP is always spouting on about.

**Saima:** Failing to comply with Prevent and triggering further scrutiny is definitely not what we want, Rebecca, but I'm not expecting it to happen here. Let me emphasise first the proportionate nature of Rebecca's proposal. One additional lesson, at Tate only, taught to one year group. Nevertheless, I do have my concerns.

**Rebecca:** We'll plan carefully and just pilot the resource at this stage. We're continuing to try to find out exactly who the perpetrators are. In the meantime, we know other students have seen the graffiti and heard the comments. We need to prioritise work with them, explaining 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.

**Farid:** It's certainly worrying, and I do understand the difficulty, particularly as a school governor. However, as a Muslim, I believe 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. And these images are hardly respectful.

**Jack:** I appreciate your concerns, however 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. In other settings where we've trialled the lesson, teachers have reported that it helps students better understand the need to remain respectful while freely sharing their opinions.

**Maggie:** Jack, my teachers at Lyle have really valued your curriculum. 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?

**Jack:** We would definitely not advise using the lesson at schools with significant Muslim representation, like Lyle or Whitworth. However, given the severity of the circumstances at Tate, the risk seems justified. We're 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.

**Rebecca:** We will also be as transparent as possible with our Muslim students and families and devote significant time over the next few weeks to speaking with them. We'll certainly hold a community meeting to explain the lesson, and we'll obviously allow Muslim Year 9 students to opt out entirely.

**Jack:** 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?

**Maggie:** True, and further complicated by the fact that certain images of the Prophet have been used historically by Muslims themselves in Islamic culture. 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 touch them at Lyle. Haven't these issues come up before in the council's interfaith network?"

**Farid:** Yes, I believe the Sikh representative mentioned a textbook in the States that had printed a hurtful image of Guru Nanak. Local Sikhs said it was offensive and the state education board took action so children didn't see the image.

**Rebecca:** It is helpful to be reminded this isn't just an issue for Muslims. But that is the specific issue we're dealing with here. We can't let Islamophobia, or the possible risk that our students are being radicalised by members of the far right, pass us by. Our students have clearly seen the cartoons already. We can't intervene decisively if we're precious about how respectful, or not, it is to show them!"

**Saima** (*gently*): “I take your assessment of your pupils’ needs seriously, Rebecca. But 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 living in a Western context, I am in a minority, and also that Muslims have very diverse attitudes. However, I am wary of the likely reaction from our Muslim community if they find out the Trust has condoned using these cartoons anywhere. Remember, Muslim children are brought up to love the Prophet even more than their own family.

**Maggie**: Yes, I remember a discussion with a Year 9 class at Lyle about their most inspirational person. Many Muslim students said ‘the Prophet Muhammad’ (Peace be Upon Him).

**Farid** (*firmly*): Precisely. Though a tiny minority at Tate, Muslims deeply respect and love all Prophets, including Moses and Jesus. Mockery of any of them is blasphemous. These cartoons depict the Prophet as a bomber, prepared to indiscriminately take life - the very opposite of the message of peace he preached. I cannot understand how showing those scurrilous images could in any sense be seen as ‘educative’.

**Maggie**: Plus the press will get wind of it.

**Farid**: Exactly—imagine the media frenzy!

**Rebecca**: I’m afraid we risk a media frenzy already. Who knows how many students took pictures of the graffiti with their phones? As a minimum, all Year 9 students need the chance to talk through the cartoons, informed by well trained, experienced specialist teachers. Can’t we do this carefully, proportionately, while supporting the (few) who might be offended?

**Farid**: Look, not all but a number 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.

**Saima**: Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment. Experts in the school and in critical thinking believe that with the cartoons already on students’ radars, the way forward in this exceptional situation is to discuss them sensitively in a supported space, to build resilience.

**Maggie**: But 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’?

**Rebecca**: We’ve already tried talking about the cartoons without showing them.

**Jack**: There is no explicit advice from anyone in this area. 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?

**Maggie:** I'm not sure showing cartoons of the Prophet can be justified in a similar way.

**Jack:** 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.

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

**Rebecca:** As well as promoting political freedom and our responsibility to uphold democratic principles like freedom of speech. The images are not illegal; they are out there. The most responsible course of action is to directly address them in the classroom.

**Jack:** We train all teachers before this lesson. Anyone using the cartoons needs to appreciate the sensitivity of the topic and know about Islam. They mustn't promote stereotypes themselves.

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

**Saima:** At least we can all agree on that.

**Narrator:** 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?