

Education about Religions and Prime Minister Cameron's Munich Speech

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The essence of David Cameron's [Munich speech](#) (5 February 2011) was his response to the threat from terrorism, specifically terrorist acts committed by young Muslim men drawn to an extremist ideology, because, says Mr Cameron, of a crisis in their own identity.

In the UK, suggests Mr Cameron, such young people find it difficult to identify with 'traditional Islam', in which the religion is difficult to disentangle from South Asian cultural accretions brought here by earlier generations. Equally, they are not attracted to a Britain lacking a clear sense of 'collective identity'. The 'doctrine of state multiculturalism', suggests Mr Cameron, has encouraged a kind of cultural apartheid, and there has been no countervailing vision of the British society with strong shared values.

What is this common culture and what are its shared values? We can deduce, from another part of Mr Cameron's speech, that these include universal human rights – including for women and people of other faiths; equality of all before the law; democracy and the right of people to elect their own government; and support for social integration rather than separatism. 'To belong here', says Mr Cameron, 'is to believe in these things'.

So, what are his solutions to the identity crisis? His three practical steps are: ensuring immigrants 'speak the language of their new home'; 'ensuring that people are educated in elements of a common culture and curriculum' (he mentions the introduction of national citizen service for 16-year-olds from different backgrounds to live and work together); and 'encouraging participation in society by shifting the balance of power away from the state and to the people'. This, he says, will bring about a common purpose and pride in local identity.

My first comment is that the shift in understanding of 'multiculturalism' at the normative, political level put forward by Mr Cameron is now common. Not only was it expressed by New Labour, in speeches from Ruth Kelly when Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, it has also been put forward by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and by others. Few would disagree with the idea that the state should not give resources to separate, homogeneous cultural groups living within a society who reject the democratic values that are fundamental to the society itself.

But this is the politicians' construction of multiculturalism. Research shows a much more complex picture of the 'multicultural' nature of society and of cultural relations, with constantly changing, complex and heterogeneous cultural groupings, exhibiting much diversity and some tension over issues such as identity. Moreover, 'cultures', and indeed 'religions' understood in this sense cannot be portrayed as isolated, and there are many examples of overlap with values and practices of other groups within society, both at the level of the individual and the level of various movements. Mr Cameron recognises this himself to some extent when he refers to intergenerational issues of identity within Muslim

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communities. Moreover, he recognises that Islam as a religion, although it has unifying elements, is not monolithic, although he paints a rather simplified picture of its diversity.

What is not clear is the extent to which he recognises that individuals, and religious and cultural groups to which they relate, may *themselves* have something very positive to *offer* to discussions about the social values of a democratic society – in other words to discussions about citizenship. He gives an example of how young people from different backgrounds might spend some time living and working together (all well and good), but he says nothing about how he would ensure that ‘people are educated in elements of a common culture and curriculum’. If this means ignoring or bypassing issues of difference within society (and tolerance of difference within the law is basic to the democratic state), then the solution is not educative, nor does it square with what young people say they would like to have in schools.

So, what do young people themselves think? Recent European research – the European Commission [REDCo Project on Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict](#) – among 14-16 year olds from wide ranging religious and cultural backgrounds in England and seven other nations, gives us information about what young people *themselves* want. Mr Cameron might give some careful attention to their views.

- First, the majority of students surveyed wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible.
- Second, they believe that peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together.
- Third, students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not.
- Fourth, young people say that they tend not to discuss issues of religion and culture in their friendship groups. They see the *school* as the setting that potentially gives them the opportunity for learning and exchange. However, they want learning to take place in a ‘safe’ classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion – and they acknowledge that this is not always provided. They want teachers to combine expertise in the study of religions and social and cultural issues with expertise as facilitators of discussion and exchange, where students can draw on their own knowledge and experience as well as that of the teacher. Students do not want to be told what to believe, but would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning about different religions, and for clarifying their own views.
- Fifth, they recognise that the ‘safe learning space’ needs very careful handling in order to avoid conflict. Moreover, religiously committed students who sometimes form minorities in classrooms feel potentially vulnerable, and want this concern to be registered by those planning curricula or training teachers.

The young people who took part in the research want learning about religions and beliefs to take place in *schools*. Their view is shared by international and European institutions concerned with the same human rights values that Mr Cameron lists in his speech. These are the [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#) (OSCE), the [Council of Europe](#), and the United Nations through its [Alliance of Civilizations](#) initiative. Ironically, each of these institutions is supported by the UK Government.

David Cameron’s speech was fundamentally about security, but he does not make the connection between security issues and education in schools. Britain and 55 other countries,

including most European countries plus the USA and Canada, are signed up to the largest security organisation in the world, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The OSCE's view of security includes a human dimension, concerned positively with activities related to human rights and democracy, including education. On this basis the OSCE's [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) produced a set of guidelines for teaching about religions and beliefs in publicly funded schools of participant states. Thus, the OSCE's [Toledo Guiding Principles](#) recommend that all young people should learn about and discuss religious diversity as part of their schooling (OSCE 2007).[†]

Similarly, the Council of Europe, consisting of 47 member states, including the United Kingdom, issued a [Recommendation from its Committee of Ministers](#)[‡] (including the UK Foreign Minister) that all young Europeans should learn about and discuss the range of religions and beliefs present in European societies (Council of Europe 2008). The recommendation even mentions the value of a 'safe space' in the school where young people can articulate and discuss their views in an atmosphere of sensitivity and reciprocity, and reverberates with the views of young people from the European [REDCo Project](#) outlined above. The views of the OSCE and the [Council of Europe](#) are mirrored by the [United Nations Alliance of Civilizations](#) initiative which, again, argues for mutual understanding through [education about religions and beliefs](#).

Mr Cameron's speech raised some important issues. His points need to be discussed. Young people, with their own knowledge and experience, should have the opportunity to contribute to such discussions in the safe arena of the school, and have the opportunity to break the stereotypical representations of religions and cultures encountered in the popular media. This can be done through the study of religions and beliefs as a separate subject or through broader fields such as citizenship education.

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[†] OSCE. 2007. *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools*, (Warsaw: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights). (full text available online at <http://www.osce.org/item/28314.html>).

[‡] Council of Europe. 2008. 'Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education', available online at: [https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec\(2008\)12&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&BackColorIntranet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec(2008)12&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&BackColorIntranet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864)