‘Our job now is compassion’ – professional and personal priorities in the wake of the London bombs

Robin Richardson

(Please note: this article appears in the journal *Race Equality Teaching,* autumn term 2005)

At 11.12am on Thursday 7 July 2005 a teacher wrote as follows to a discussion forum at the *Times Educational Supplement*:

> This is shocking! I've just heard this news from a kid (I'm currently in ICT) and it turns out the teaching assistant's husband is working in London. She has tried to call but the network is jammed. She is worried sick!

Many people reading this no doubt recall well the sick worries they too had that day. In the next day or two there were hundreds of further messages on the TES website. Most of them were slightly less worried, but all – of course – were deeply concerned.[1] A small selection of the messages is printed below. Between them, they show teachers reacting to the news of the bombings both as private individuals and as professional educators. Further, they raise general issues about teachers’ professional responsibilities at times of crisis and tragedy and in contexts of deep controversy. And they evoke the kinds of question about British society and its education system that teachers, together with millions of their fellow-citizens, have been talking and thinking about these last few months:

> I was on a course at the Institute of Education and had to be evacuated from my tube train at King's Cross, but I saw all the injured and later heard the bus bomb, which was close to the IOE.
>
> We were watching the news at lunchtime and people clapped Ken Livingstone’s speech…
>
> I ran an assembly today for Year 9 pupils on good and evil and they got it quite clearly. There is no debate in their mind or mine.
>
> Londoners are a stoic lot and will carry on almost as normal. But school was very strange today (we're in west London). Kids quite scared, but weirdly mature about it.
>
> … Mind you my tears were also to do with relief: number two daughter and boyfriend live in London, and boyfriend was on the underground when the first bomb went off. It was a very long morning until they replied to my texts.
>
> We reap what we sow. Live with it, and keep it in proportion. This is not a risk-free environment and never will be.
>
> My daughter was supposed to go on a school trip today - her school's well south of London and they were going to northern France by coach for the day. The trip was cancelled. And there was me thinking we're not supposed to bow down to terrorism.

---

[1] Talkback, *Times Educational Supplement*, 22 July 2005

> Nobody is destroying my way of life because I will not let them. I refuse to be cowed by terrorists, as do the rest of my colleagues who came into work this morning, as do the people on the bus who all spoke to the driver this morning and as do my fellow commuters on the train into town.
>
> … I am also proud of the schools I chair in Tower Hamlets where staff made an extra effort to get into work, even though we advised parents that we might have to suspend some classes. The real heroes are those who get on with it, do their jobs and do not let others derail their futures.
>
> Our job now is compassion, for the families and victims of the bombs and for the children taught that suicide is glorious. Compassion is all that will bring hope from this: anger's done enough already. All we can do is keep open the possibility of reconciliation in our torn world. I feel really, really sad. My thoughts and prayers are with everyone who lost someone yesterday.

A new thread of messages started after one of the bombers was identified as a former learning mentor in a Leeds primary school:

> I don't understand the shock aspect. Surely there are religious freaks and fanatics in all walks of life?
>
> The fact that this man (for want of a better word in light of what he did) was so highly regarded in his school, did so many extra-curricular activities... leaves me feeling sorry for the students he left behind.
>
> I'm sure that there were students who held him in high regard, who looked up to him for all the "good" that he did in the school and for them as individuals. There are children whose lives he touched. They are going to have a rough time coming to terms with his actions, and I hope that they are getting the counselling and support that they need.

'Good and evil'… 'no debate in their mind or mine' … 'carry on almost as normal'… 'Kids quite scared, but weirdly mature about it' … 'We reap what we sow. Live with it, and keep it in proportion. This is not a risk-free environment and never will be' … 'proud of the schools I chair in Tower Hamlets' … 'The real heroes are those who get on with it, do their jobs and do not let others derail their futures'… 'Our job now is compassion, for the families and victims of the bombs and for the children taught that suicide is glorious' … 'Anger's done enough already' …'religious freaks and fanatics in all walks of life' … 'sorry for the students he left behind' … 'a rough time coming to terms with his actions, and I hope that they are getting the counselling and support that they need.' The phrases pose searching questions about teachers' professional responsibilities:

- how as teachers do we keep our nerve and our heads and our sense of proportion in the increasing absence of 'a risk-free environment'?
- how do we support and counsel and help kids to be 'weirdly mature'?
- what's going on inside the hearts and minds of 'religious freaks and fanatics'?
- how helpful is it, if at all, to talk in this or any context about 'evil'?
- in what sense and in what ways is compassion a professional duty ('our job now is compassion')?

This article is a kind of stepping-back and taking-stock, in order to help with the discussion of these questions. It recalls various key themes in recent conversations and reflections, and suggests agenda items for the months and years ahead, both in the education system and in society more widely. The stocktaking begins with a review with of the attacks on multiculturalism, and on multicultural education, that were one of the summer's many ugly features.

Attacks on multiculturalism

The quotations from teachers with which this article began show that they were able to keep their heads at a time of great crisis. Quite a lot of commentators in the media, however, including some on the liberal-left, lashed out with unfocused anger against something they called multiculturalism, and they said or implied that teachers committed to multicultural education were to blame for not preventing the attacks in London. For example, William Pfaff, in an otherwise useful discussion of the ways in which Al Qaeda has been constructed in part by the West's paranoid imagination, claimed in *The Observer* that the young bombers in London had been created by 'a half-century of a well-intentioned but catastrophically mistaken policy of multiculturalism, indifferent or even hostile to social and cultural integration'. The policy, he said, had 'produced in Britain and much of Europe a technologically educated but culturally and morally unassimilated immigrant demi-intelligentsia.'[2]

In the web-based journal *Open Democracy* Gilles Kepel announced with a breath-taking mixture of confidence and ignorance that 'in Britain, multiculturalism was the product of an implicit social consensus between leftwing working-class movements and the public-school-educated political elite. Their alliance allowed one side to monitor immigrant workers (Pakistan in particular) and the other to secure their votes, through their religious leaders, at election time.' He then added:

> The July bombings have smashed this consensus to smithereens. In one sense at least, and in spite of the massive difference in the number of deaths, British society was more deeply traumatised by the two London attacks bombings than Americans were in the aftermath of 9/11. The United States assailants were foreigners; the eight people involved in London were the children of Britain's own multicultural society.[3]

Similar attacks on multiculturalism were made from the political left by Jonathan Freedland and Henry Porter. From the political right attacks on the same target were made by, amongst others, Michael Howard, David Davies, Michael Portillo, Matthew Parris and Boris Johnson.[4] Some of these contained extraordinary caricatures of the outlooks and policies they were criticising. At much the same time the British National Party issued thousands of anti-Muslim leaflets with a graphic illustration of the devastated No 30 bus and claiming that multiculturalism was to blame. The journalists and politicians mentioned above would maintain that they are poles away from the BNP. There was nevertheless an eerie similarity between BNP propaganda and the musings of certain mainstream commentators.

The commentators, for their part, derived succour and support from selectively quoting Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, in order to claim that he agreed with them, having seen the error of his ways. It is true that Phillips subsequently criticised what he called 'anything-goes multiculturalism' and speculated that 'in recent years we've focused far too much on the "multi" and not enough on the common

---

[2][2] William Pfaff, A Monster of our Own Making, *The Observer*, 21 Observer 2005. The monster in question was al-Qaeda, incidentally, not the 'home-grown' bombers or multiculturalism. However, busy readers of the headline could be forgiven for misunderstanding it.

[3] Gilles Kepel, Europe's Answer to Londonistan, *Open Democracy*, 24 August 2005.

[4] For precise bibliographical references and internet links go to www.insted.co.uk and then click on Multiculturalism.

culture.' But also he paid handsome tribute to people working in the field of race relations, amongst whom – incidentally – are the readers of *Race Equality Teaching*:

> People talk a lot about the race relations industry, usually disparagingly. I am proud to say that this summer, our industry did its part in holding communities together at a time of great stress. We experienced no major conflicts, and despite the fact that there definitely was an upsurge in anti-Asian activity post 7/7, we understand that this has now subsided; the GLA tells us that in London for example, the level of such activity is lower now than it was before 7/7. This is in no small part due to the work of the people often casually abused as race relations busybodies, working on the ground, calming, cajoling and conciliating. Many are paid, but tens of thousands are unpaid, and do it because they want our country to be a better place.[5]

There was a great gulf between the actual text of Phillips's speech about 7/7 and the way the speech was first trailed and then reported throughout the media. Whether the gulf was down to off-the-record briefings, or to a misleading press release, or to journalistic carelessness, bias or ignorance, or to sheer malice and disinformation, is not publicly known. The fact remains that the interesting and valuable things Phillips had to say were drowned by the headlines he generated and there was widespread disappointment and dismay, even indeed anger, amongst the very people whose support he most needed – for example, the people saluted in the passage quoted above. The dismay was powerfully articulated by Lee Jasper:

> Effective antiracism starts from the view that we refuse to … go along with distortions and generalisations about Islam. In these circumstances, the provocative, headline-grabbing speeches by Trevor Phillips, the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, are counterproductive and generate many of the most unapologetic headlines in the rightwing press, giving succour to those who want to push back antiracism. Asked [by Tom Baldwin for *The Times*, 3 April 2004] whether the word multiculturalism should be killed off, he replied: 'Yes, let's do that. Multiculturalism suggests separateness.' … But the truth is that vile anti-Muslim prejudice, using the religion of a community to attempt to sideline and blame it for many of society's ills, is the cutting edge of racism in British society. Those who consider themselves antiracists need to wake up to this fact.[6]

Islamophobia

In summer 2005 the vile anti-Muslim prejudice of which Jasper spoke took on a more subtle form, in some quarters, than hitherto. Previously, there had been explicit hostility to all of Islam. Samuel Huntington, for example, had infamously said: 'The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.' More recently a commissioned article in the *Sunday Telegraph* declared that 'all Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is not the same animal as a cat just because both species are comprised of different breeds.'[7] The new development in 2005 involved distinguishing between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims', on a direct analogy with the good nigger/bad nigger distinction that was once an explicit hallmark of racism in the United States.

[5] Trevor Phillips, After 7/7: Sleeping-walking to segregation, *Commission for Racial Equality*, 22 September 2005.
[6] Lee Jasper, Trevor Phillips is in Danger of Giving Succour to Racists, *Guardian*, 12 October 2005
[7] Will Cummins, *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 July 2004

The hallmark of good Muslims, in this demonology, is not so much that they are 'decent' or 'law-abiding' or 'peace-loving' or 'mainstream' or 'gentle' (all favourite words amongst non-Muslim commentators), but that they do not seek to apply their faith to social and political affairs, do not criticise British foreign policy on Iraq and Israel/Palestine, do not wear Islamic dress in public spaces, are not inclined to 'self-segregate' or seek 'separateness', are not critical of Western secularism, and do not read or offer for sale the works of, amongst others, Mawlana Mawdudi.[8] The convenient consequence of the demonology is that good Muslims are remarkably hard to find. In particular, the argument runs, they cannot be found in the leadership of major organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Muslim Association of Britain or the Islamic Foundation. A particularly outrageous and simplistic expression of the good Muslim/bad Muslim paradigm was presented in a *Panorama* TV programme, 'A Question of Leadership', on 21 August, with substantial supporting and supportive coverage in the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Observer*.[9]

The MCB has an impressive record of encouraging its members to engage fully with mainstream British society and to develop strong British Muslim identities. So have many other organisations, and so has the Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan. Ramadan's writings and lectures are extremely relevant for educators in Britain, for they inspiringly explore how Muslims can live with integrity in non-Muslim societies and can contribute to their societies' development and creativity. Yet there were extraordinary attacks in the tabloid press on Ramadan. In the course of these he was constructed along with others as 'a cleric of hate' who should be prevented from even entering Britain, let alone lecturing here.[10]

Rebuttals

To their credit, the BBC, *Guardian* and *Independent* gave Ramadan a platform on which to explain his thinking. So earlier had *Open Democracy*, through a lengthy interview with Rosemary Bechler. With regard to the attacks on multiculturalism more generally, magisterial rebuttals were provided by the political philosophers Bhikhu Parekh and Tariq Modood. There is not space here to give a faithful account of their patient clarification of the concepts of assimilation, integration, multiculturalism and national identity. But brief quotations give a flavour of their conclusions. The first quotation below is from Parekh, the second from Modood:

> Multicultural societies are not easy to manage, and there is no saying what external and internal factors might destabilise them. They are, however, here to stay and form part of our historical predicament. Given good will on all sides, they can also become sources of great richness and vitality. If we mismanage or try to mould them according to some naïve and nostalgic vision of a culturally homogeneous and tension-free society, they can easily become a nightmare. But we can make a reasonable success of them if we accept cultural diversity as an ineliminable and valuable part of human life and devise imaginative ways of forging social unity out of it.[11]

---

[8] Mawlana Mawdudi (1903–1979) was an extremely influential Muslim writer. The BBC *Panorama* programme on 21 August 2005 devoted much space to deploring his influence and the fact that his writings are promoted by, for example, the Islamic Foundation in Britain.

9 *Panorama*'s conclusion was: 'It's a battle of ideas - between those for whom Islam is personal - and those who also wish to pursue Islam as a political ideology, fuelled by the rages and injustices of much of the Islamic world.'

[10] According to the front page of the *Sun* on 11 July Ramadan is even more dangerous than tabloid bogey figures such Abu Hamza and Omar Bakri, for he presents 'an acceptable face of terror to impressionable young Muslims'. Other papers ran with the same story.

11 Bhikhu Parekh, British Commitments, *Prospect Magazine*, September 2005. The article was based on a lecture that Lord Parekh had given earlier in the year for the International Labour Organisation, Geneva. The full text of the lecture is at Prospect's website.

> British involvement with the United States's geopolitical projects – including the creation of Saudi-backed *jihadism* in Afghanistan in the 1980s as well as those following 9/11 – is certainly part of the current crisis and is putting great strain on multiculturalism. Yet in the same period New Labour has been part of an evolving multiculturalism, not least in understanding that religious equality is a necessary part of multicultural equality. These developments of recent years should not be called into question in the name of integration, anti-terrorism or secularism. What is urgently needed is not a panicky retreat from multiculturalism, but to extend its application by recognising Muslims as a legitimate social partner and include them in the institutional compromises of church and state, religion and politics, that characterise the evolving, moderate secularism of mainstream western Europe, and resist the calls for a more radical, French-style secularism… The lesson from the current, post-7 July crisis of how to respond to the appeals and threats from Salafi *jihadism* is that we need to go further with multiculturalism: but it has to be a multiculturalism that is allied to, indeed is the other side of the coin of, a renewed and reinvigorated Britishness.[12]

There is an urgent need in the education system to make the writings of scholars such as Parekh, Modood and Ramadan available to teachers, student teachers, education officers, Ofsted inspectors and school governors in forms they can readily use in their own thinking and day-to-day work. Equally, their treatment of the issues should be made known, through appropriate curriculum materials, to young people and children. The debates and discussions will not be easy. Most of the voices with which this article began show, however, that teachers are readily up to it.

The need for debate

One of the teachers quoted earlier mentioned that they had talked to their students about good and evil and that 'there is no debate in their mind or mine'. Readers of *Race Equality Teaching* can empathise with the teacher and can also, given the circumstances, sympathise. But it's seldom if ever appropriate for someone involved in education to condone or welcome the absence of debate, or to take refuge in discourse of evil. A core task of education, after all, is to foster debate – to enquire, weigh evidence, withhold judgement, listen, empathise. It may suit politicians to speak of evil ideologies and empires, but it is seldom if ever appropriate for educators to characterise something as evil, and therefore to deny any responsibility for trying to understand it, or any collusion in its existence.

William Pfaff, in the article already quoted, said it was pointless trying to understand al-Qaeda and the London bombers:

> Like the anarchists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, these people have no realisable goals and make no meaningful political demands, only Utopian ones. Thus, like the anarchists, they must be called nihilists. For that reason, they present a profound problem to governments accustomed to dealing with rationally manageable threats, enemies and demands. Reason has no answer to nihilism.

This was deeply anti-educational. To label something as nihilistic, in the sense of being impossible to engage with, is itself nihilistic. It is a counsel of despair. On this point as on so many others in summer 2005 Gary Younge was a beacon of calm and unwavering determination:

[12] Tariq Modood, Remaking Multiculturalism after 7/7, *Open Democracy*, 29 September 2005

> For political and emotional reasons it has been necessary for some to dehumanise the bombers – to eviscerate them of all discernible purpose. Stripped to their immoral minimum, they are simply 'evil monsters'. .. [But] those looking for tails and tridents on the CCTV footage of the bombers will be disappointed. They look like everybody else. If the security services are going to have any chance of infiltrating the bombers, they must first humanise those involved. They need to find out what would motivate young men who apparently have so much to live for to die – and kill. Only then can they discover how to spot the determined and stop them, and how to catch those vulnerable to their message before they fall into the clutches of the terrorists. The only extra power the police need in this effort is the power of persuasion – the ability to gain the confidence of the Muslim community by convincing them that the aim is to catch terrorists, not to criminalise their community. [13]

Younge's article was based in the fist instance on the killing of a young Brazilian by the Metropolitan Police. He recalled also that earlier in the year, after a young British Muslim from Gloucester admitted planning to blow up a flight between Amsterdam and the US, the head of the Met's anti-terrorist branch said: 'We must ask how a young British man was transformed from an intelligent, articulate person who was well respected into a person who has pleaded guilty to one of the most serious crimes that you can think of.' Younge wryly commented: 'A policy that lets the police shoot first and ask that question later will have a drastic effect on the kind of answer they are likely to get.'

British Muslim identities

The kind of questioning Younge was advocating requires substantial attention to concepts of fundamentalism and to the strand of thought described above by Tariq Modood as Salafi jihadism.[14] Even more importantly, however, it involves much joint reflection on the meanings of key terms such as integration and shared belonging. The debate on these topics got off to a bad start when the community cohesion reports were published in 2001, with their outrageous claim that the principal problem is the so-called self-segregation of Muslim communities, as distinct from the marginalisation of Muslim communities, fed by racism and Islamophobia.[15]

A good example of appropriate joint reflection was provided by a symposium in late July 2005 organised by *Open Democracy* and the Muslim magazine *Q News*. 'What happened?' 'What changed?' 'What now?' These were the key questions. The agenda was divided into two parts: 'Is Islam in Britain failing its young generation?' and 'Is British society failing its Muslim community?'

'The first generation of Muslims that came to this country,' said Humera Khan, one of the panellists, 'did not come with dysfunctional families and politicised views. I can remember, being someone who is from a migrant family in the early 60s, a passive community, keeping themselves to themselves. The question to ask is how this peaceful community can have children who are full of anger, hatred and susceptible to radical ideas.' Other contributions to the debate included:

> If British society views the kids that are involved in this project [terrorism] as separate to the rest of society, a lot of problems that they are trying to solve and the young people that they are trying to address will effectively be excluded from the rest of society.

---

[13] Gary Younge, No Forked Tails Please, *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005
[14] For discussions of these topics, follow the links at www.insted.co.uk/multi.html.
[15] There is fuller discussion of the 2001 reports, and of the ways they were presented by the then Home Secretary and by the media, in the chapter entitled Street and Neighbourhood (chapter 9) in *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action*, Trentham Books 2004.

> I think the broad causes are known and they are a series of factors that have produced humiliation… Violence legitimised by religion wipes away the stain of humiliation.
>
> I found my British identity by finding my faith.

The symposium ended with Fuad Nahdi, the founder and managing editor of *Q News*, recalling a story about Mullah Nasruddin. Once Nasruddin wanted to learn how to play the guitar so he went to a teacher who told him it's very easy, but you have to pay £10 for the first lesson and then £5 for each of the other lessons. Nasruddin thought about this and then said OK, can I start with the second lesson.

All too much of the debate about 7/7, Nahdi emphasised, particularly the debate initiated by the government and developed by journalists, has been about the second and subsequent lessons, not the first.

What, though, is the content of the first lesson? Introducing the symposium, Isabel Hilton, *Open Democracy's* editor, enumerated some of the points the lesson plan needs to contain. She mentioned the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire; the war on terror; the jihad in Afghanistan; the Zia regime in Pakistan; Kashmir; oil; patterns of migration and ensuing social alienation; theological and doctrinal debates within Islam, both in Britain and globally; inter-generational strains in migrant communities; and integration and multiculturalism. Her underlying point was that there are 'overlapping and competing narratives' and that 'each of us tends to attach ourselves to the story that we most recognize as the prime explanation.' She continued:

> If we confine ourselves to the narrative that we are most comfortable with, and we are not open to new facts, then we will be tethered to explanations that don't necessarily work.

Taking strength

As teachers sort out how they are going to live and work with overlapping and competing narratives, and how they are going to help their pupils to live with them, and as they plan not only the first lesson but also the whole series of lessons ahead, they can could do worse than recall the first reactions of some of their colleagues on or just after 7 July:

> Kids quite scared, but weirdly mature about it.
>
> We reap what we sow. Live with it, and keep it in proportion. This is not a risk-free environment and never will be.
>
> … proud of the schools where staff made an extra effort to get into work, even though we advised parents that we might have to suspend some classes. The real heroes are those who get on with it, do their jobs and do not let others derail their futures.
>
> Our job now is compassion, for the families and victims of the bombs and for the children taught that suicide is glorious. Compassion is all that will bring hope from this: anger's done enough already.
