

# THE SPECTATOR

*Yahya Cholil Staquf*

## Why Muslims like me are worried about the Batley protests

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(Getty images)

To some, the persecution of a schoolteacher who showed his pupils a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed may seem like a local quarrel. Does it really matter, many Britons will ask, that a few dozen men gathered at the gates of a school in West Yorkshire? Surely it will blow over before long, goes the thinking.

Alas, this view – all too common in officialdom throughout the western world – is deeply naïve. To those of us in the Muslim world who work to counter Islamist extremism, what is happening

at Batley Grammar School is disturbingly familiar. What may look like a local incident is in fact one with national implications and strong international parallels. That is why it draws our attention.

Notably, it shares precisely the same ingredients as the row over Samuel Paty, the French teacher who showed his pupils similar images in a civic education class last autumn, and was then brutally murdered in the street. I only pray that what is happening in Batley does not end in violence.

These incidents illustrate an immense cultural and political gulf that exists in Western societies today. On one side stand proponents of a secular ideology whose cultural, economic and political power verges upon hegemony in much of the West. On the other side of this gulf stand those who embrace more traditional values, including many Christians, Orthodox Jews and Muslims.

Religious believers of all faiths often find their values and beliefs treated with derision and scorn, something that can be extremely offensive and upsetting. It is some Muslims' misguided responses to this challenging and unfortunate reality, however, that so clearly set them apart from adherents of other faiths.

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Rather than leading by example and seeking to raise the level of global discourse among the world's diverse peoples, cultures and religions to that of the highest common denominator, some Muslims have allowed Islam to be hijacked by political opportunists. Instead of inspiring devotion and respect for the noble Prophet and his religion, the behaviour of Islamists and their habitual resort to intimidation and violence inspire revulsion, loathing and fear – in short, the very 'Islamophobia' they claim to oppose.

In my own country of Indonesia, where I am General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organisation, we have seen similar cases of Islamists attempting to dictate what can and can't be discussed in the classroom – and even whether young Christian girls should have to wear headscarves. These disagreements, fuelled by extremist rhetoric and the echo chamber of social media, can escalate quickly. Islamists know very well how to spot and maximise such opportunities – which facts to ignore, and which to seize on.

It is not for me to advise directly what the UK government's policy response should be. Whatever happens, the independent investigation into events in Batley must prove that it is truly independent and not surrender to implicit threats of violence in the name of social cohesion. Genuine social cohesion arises from mutual respect, which is earned through conduct that is worthy of respect from others. The tragic irony of the case in Batley is that, while local Muslims may believe that they are defending the Prophet, they have merely inspired antipathy and fear.

The truth is that this clash is only one small example of a much wider problem. It is directly linked to the fact that the Islamic world has not yet produced a full theological and socio-political

framework that guides Muslims trying to live their lives faithfully and in harmony with the realities of modern life. France is perhaps the epicentre of this problem, as secularism is so much at the heart of the modern French state.

But Britain too will struggle to contain a problem that will only be solved when Muslims develop a theologically legitimate and authoritative framework, grounded within Islamic law, that enables them to dwell alongside those of different beliefs as equal citizens. Otherwise, European Muslims, including many in the UK, will continue to be drawn to groups that reject the authority of the state, leading to confrontations like the one outside Batley Grammar School and the intimidation of state employees.

This situation has been worsened, I would argue, by recent developments in Western political discourse. The re-emergence of identity politics has fostered a dynamic in which a kaleidoscopic array of groups insist that their grievances must be acknowledged, and their demands met, by society at large. Too often the official response to these grievances is to take them at face value. In the case of Islam, this has enabled political opportunists to weaponise Islamic identity and drag Muslim communities into the highly polarised and increasingly lethal 'culture wars' roiling much of the West.

The task therefore is to address this trend towards polarisation and identity-based conflict before it is too late. For present trends threaten to unravel the unique achievements of Western civilisation, which helped give birth to a rules-based international order founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. That should not be allowed to happen.

It is my view that part of the solution must come from within Islam itself. It is imperative that Muslims learn to adapt and live peacefully with others very different from themselves. Rather than allow extremists to turn Islam into modernity's opposition, Muslims should engage in constructive dialogue that seeks to foster the shared civilisational values that may strengthen and enhance a rules-based international order dedicated to safeguarding national sovereignty and fundamental human rights.

*Yahya Cholil Staqf is General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organisation. This article is part of Policy Exchange's Understanding Islamism series – [policyexchange.org.uk](http://policyexchange.org.uk)*

WRITTEN BY

***Yahya Cholil Staqf***

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