

Teaching Islam after the Charlie Hebdo murders and the Hyper Casher hostage deaths

A statement from NASACRE

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Without doubt this has been an awful week for the people of Paris and France. A country that has a strong tradition of freedom of speech and expression has, nevertheless, been a country that has welcomed others from around the world to become citizens in its nation and extended full rights to all. This is one reason why France has the largest Muslim population of any west European country. So shocking have these events been that people across the world have joined in solidarity with the French people to uphold the right to freedom of speech and expression.

Issues relating to RE

It would be wrong to assume that the situation in France is not having an impact on other parts of Europe, indeed the world. We at NASACRE have been made aware that there are renewed efforts to get parents to withdraw their children from the teaching of Islam as part of RE. Islam is being characterised as a religion that promotes violence and intolerance and a religion that pupils should not have to learn about. Similarly, Muslims are being characterised as supporting terrorism and violence – either explicitly or implicitly.

NASACRE recognises the right that parents have to withdraw their child(ren) from RE as part of a school's basic curriculum, or as part of the funding agreement with Academies and Free Schools. Nevertheless, NASACRE also supports religious education that is 'in the main the teaching of Christianity with reference to the principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Education Act 1996). As Islam is the second largest religious tradition in Great Britain every Agreed Syllabus in England requires that pupils should learn about it, usually at more than one key stage.

Schools must grant the request of withdrawal from RE by a parent, in whole or in part, but there is also an expectation that schools will work with parents to minimise withdrawal from RE. In discussion with parents it is important to stress that the vast majority of Muslims in this country, and across the world, deplore and denounce the type of events that we have seen in Paris and London in recent times. One of the policemen who lost his life in Paris protecting Charlie Hebdo's offices was himself a Muslim, as was the person who sheltered and protected shoppers from the attack on the kosher supermarket – Hyper Casher. Therefore, to let terrorists define what a religion is, as opposed to the vast majority of its adherents, is to let terrorism itself win.

Issues relating to Muslim teachers, pupils and their families

We have also been made aware of the increased danger to which Muslim teachers, pupils and their families themselves feel exposed. Schools have an absolute duty of care to their staff and pupils and they should be aware of the increased stress that pupils especially, may be experiencing. To imagine that these events would not affect them would be a mistake. Therefore senior leaders should be particularly sensitive at this time to the bullying and intimidation that Muslim pupils might experience.

As the officers and executive of NASACRE we utterly condemn these barbaric actions and we believe that these events put Muslim teachers, pupils and their families at real risk. Therefore we are asking SACREs, local authorities, schools and academies to be particularly vigilant at this time.

Many of NASACRE's partner organisations in the RE community have also been responding to the recent events in Paris and seeking to address the needs of schools, teachers and pupils in the wake of those tragedies. Links to their websites are available on our own website (<http://www.nasacre.org.uk/links>) and NASACRE members may like to make use of some of these materials too. Members might also find this website: <http://since911.com/education-programme> useful to share with schools.