

Solving Divisions

I am helping a group of students in a corner of my classroom when on the other side of the room I hear Andrew mutter contemptuously, 'Bloody Muslims!' I am unaware of teaching any Muslims in this class, and Andrew's a lad who doesn't think too hard before speaking.

I haul him out of the room, where he leans against the wall, a tad sheepishly.

'Andrew,' I say. 'I just want to check on how much you know about Islamic culture. Can you tell me how the Arab world kept maths alive in the time between the Greeks and the Renaissance?'

He looks at me uncomprehendingly, so I take this as a 'no.'

'Or perhaps you can tell me about the wonderful tiling patterns you can find in many mosques?'

Am I overdoing it, I wonder? I press on. 'Andrew, do you call your Islamic friends 'Bloody Muslims'?''

By now Andrew's head is bowed – he has well and truly got the message.

I like Norfolk, where I teach, enormously; its people and culture. But only about 1% of the county is made up of an ethnic minority which

can leave our students finding other cultures a challenge, unsurprisingly, to a sometimes insular world view.

Some people say that religion is a malignant virus, and that a world without it would be a better one. I would say that bad religion is indeed a grave problem, but that good religion is the bee's knees.

Speak to a true Muslim, or a true Christian for that matter, and one cannot fail to be drawn to their faith. Purity, truth and justice are the obvious fruits of a life spent worshipping the Almighty.

But then... I remember reading six years ago about Mr Halim, a teacher from Afghanistan. *The Independent* newspaper in an article titled '*The Price of Daring to Teach Girls*' described his fate: 'his life was over, as a warning to others against defying Taliban orders.'

Killing a teacher for teaching girls? Would Andrew find fuel for his prejudices here? I felt, as I read, a shocked sense of solidarity with Mr Halim, and a horror that he should lose his life pursuing the vocation that we shared.

But then... I also remember asking a Muslim fellow-student once why she had chosen the University of East Anglia for her studies.

'Because it's safe,' she said simply. The 'Christian' West has its problems with violence too.

When it comes to encouraging an awareness of the riches of Islam, I've hopefully demonstrated that mathematics teachers the world over are well placed to help. 'Algebra' is itself a word gifted to the world by an Islamic mathematician. So I would plead with the members of the Taliban, and with Mr Bush and Mr Blair too - and Christians like them, too ready to take us into conflict with Muslim countries - to make peacefulness a cornerstone of their faith. That would make it so much easier for us, the mathematics teachers of the world, to oppose Islamophobia and Christianophobia wherever we may find them.

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