This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this what?

By Elizabeth Rigby, Deputy Political Editor

Freedom, tolerance, the rule of law, personal liberty, and respect for institutions: these are the "British values" that David Cameron believes all schoolchildren should be taught, regardless of religion or race.

Yeomen of the Guard patrol the Houses of Parliament the night before then state opening - a 400-year-old tradition

Obliging schools to promote these values was a central part of the prime minister's response to allegations this week that Muslim leaders were coercing the leadership of some Birmingham schools to inculcate extreme Islamist ideology into young minds.

But the initiative brings to the fore the vexing question – posed by previous prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – about what it is to be British. Trying to pin down what this means in a diverse society like today's UK "is the devil's own job" remarked one libertarian Tory this week.

Even Michael Gove, the education secretary who unveiled the prime minister's "British values" policy in the House of Commons, took a dim view of such an exercise when he was in opposition. "There is something rather un-British about seeking to define Britishness," he said in 2007 when Mr Brown was trying to do just that.

David Lehman, reader in social science at Cambridge university, says the government would do better to describe Mr Cameron's list as "universal values" rather than British ones. The latter, he argues, invoke a "particular history" that can make migrants and non-Christians feel excluded.

"The trouble is that politicians want to hold on to the Ukip [UK Independence party] voter so they like to use the word British. They are afraid to call these values universal, let alone European – which is what they are."

Research shows UK ethnic minorities overwhelmingly define themselves as British but they qualify their identity as British Muslim, British Chinese, British Indian, Black British and so on.

What they do not identify with is the narrower identity of the British nation, which gave the world great Shakespearean literature or enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, says Nasar Meer, reader in comparative social policy and citizenship at Strathclyde university.

"There are many histories of Britain from the perspectives of people who were on the sharp end of empire – are their histories not part of the British story too?"

Some politicians and academics fear that the debate on British values will achieve little more than to increase tensions between Muslim communities and secular British society that have been simmering since the co-ordinated suicide bombings of July 7, 2005 in London.

Cabinet ministers publicly arguing over the issues is also unhelpful, says Rushanara Ali, Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow. She criticises Mr Gove and Theresa May, the home secretary, for airing disagreements over tackling extremism in the press.

"Political leaders must take great care and act responsibly when debating national security issues like extremism so that the public has confidence and law-abiding British Muslims don't feel they are being tarred with the same brush and viewed through the lens of suspicion and hostility," Ms Ali says.

Mr Meer believes that Mr Gove has used the extremism accusations to blame Muslims for a wider problem "about how academies have been devolved under his tenure by giving more power to governors".

There has been a steady growth of faith schools under successive governments since Tony Blair. The proportion of secondary pupils in religious schools has risen almost 20 per cent since 1998, according to the British Humanist Association (BHA). The number of pupils across the system attending faith schools has risen by 250,000 since 2000 and there are now 3,329 secondary faith schools.

Richy Thompson, BHA education campaigns officer, argues that the Birmingham schools affair raises broader questions about religious schools.

"The problem with faith schools is they cause segregation between children . . . We have seen issues in Catholic schools in their approach to teaching children about sexual orientation, abortion, contraception. Issues also arise in Jewish schools with evolution. We will only be able to stop problems like these and desegregate our schools by getting away from the whole mentality of having different schools for different children."

Mr Meer says the Muslim community remains the focus of pressure.

"There is a moral panic about Islam in public life – the idea that there's a conspiracy to take over. None of this would have any traction in a political context where there wasn't already widely prevailing suspicion about Muslims."

Some European countries take a different approach to the UK, insisting that their religious minorities adopt a national identity first and foremost.

France, which has the biggest Muslim population in western Europe, bases its identity on secular republicanism. The state bans conspicuous signs of religious affiliation – Islamic headscarves, Christian crosses – in state schools. Full-face veils – burkas and niqabs – cannot be worn in public places.

Germany's approach to multiculturalism has been broadly in the same vein as Britain's, according to one German official, who argues that his country believes a diverse population improves the economy and makes the nation more open to the world. But the official adds that Germany has, like Britain, tried to encourage more integration of minorities into overall society.

Linda Woodhead, professor of the sociology of religion at Lancaster University, argues that the fretting is overdone. Britons already live by the sort of values Mr Cameron wants to see.

More than nine out of 10 people in the UK hold liberal values about personal life and morals. And while the "moral minority" is mostly made up of people who are religious, the vast majority of religious people – and even a majority of Muslims in Britain – belong to the liberal moral majority.

"I am not being a woolly liberal and saying let everyone live their lives," says Professor Woodhead. "There are real problems with fundamentalism and you need to deal with that and it needs to be thought through in the school curriculum. But stop posturing about these liberal values. It is totemic and it puts the backs up within Muslim communities fed up with being constantly tarred as non-British."