

Questioning our Faith in Schools

So-called “Faith Schools” - schools administered by churches and other religious groups - may seem very successful, but are they judged on a level playing field or do they have unfair advantages?

What is the impact on community cohesion when many faith schools appear not only single-religion but mono-ethnic?

Are faith schools instilling ethics and morality, or are they promoting hatred and discrimination?

Are pupils at faith schools being taught fairy-stories in place of science?

Is violent extremism being bred into young children?

These are all troubling questions which need to be looked at with increasing urgency.

Secular Charter

The creation of a just and equitable secular society in Britain

The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where human rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

- There should be no established state religion.
- The state should not fund religious activities.
- The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
- The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
- The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
- No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
- No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
- The state should not express any religious beliefs, or in any publication, speech, or other implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
- Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
- No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

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A Misguided

Faith in Education



A misguided Faith in Education

How on earth can anybody argue that separating children on the basis of their parents' religion helps them understand each other? This is the question that all sensible people must put to the country's education policy makers.

All the evidence shows that if you want to break down the destructive and dangerous barriers of race and religion, children from different cultures have to be educated together – on a daily basis – from a very early age. Unless this is done, as well as being inculcated with their parents' "faith", they are more likely also to inherit their parents' prejudices and sectarian tendencies.

But this is not the only problem. The government has granted faith schools shocking privileges in the way they select and employ staff. They are permitted to practise blatant religious discrimination in their employment policies, which is surely an affront to every human rights charter ever written. They force parents to lie and cheat in order to get their children in. They practically coerce people into attending church, sometimes against their conscience, in order to win places for their children which they have already paid for through their taxes.

The incentive for people to comply with this religious bullying is high. Naturally parents want the best for their children and they have been persuaded that faith schools perform better. But their better performance is linked to these very unfair practices which allow them to limit their numbers and select the best pupils from privileged backgrounds.

Parents clamour for places at "faith schools" because the system forces them to. If they want to get their child a place in a good school, they have to feign interest in the church and jump through humiliating hoops, in order to get the all-important vicar's letter. How has it come to this, that priests decide who can and cannot attend a state-funded school?

But even as the myth grows that faith schools are better schools, so questions are now being asked about the quality of education in some faith-based schools. Increasingly, a number of academy schools have been handed over to dubious religious organisations. There is now a worry that "creationists" are making a concerted effort to become established in our schools, teaching biblical stories instead of science and biology - especially in academy schools.

Recently some private Muslim faith academies were found to be using radical Wahhabi textbooks from Saudi Arabia. These books were found to be racist, antisemitic and insulting to non-Muslims. Concerns were raised that extremism may now be bred in schools. Even Ed Balls, the Education Minister, said he was "concerned" that these schools are not preparing pupils for "life in wider British society".

There is also a concern in Islamic schools that gender inequalities might be institutionalised and that "un-Quranic" arts and sciences in the National Curriculum might be ignored.

The answer is for faith schools to be phased out and transferred to State control as community schools, unless they wish to continue without public funding.

Myth #1

Faith Groups Pay For Schools

Many assume that handing schools over to faith groups saves the taxpayer money. This could not be further from the truth. In reality, faith schools are funded, not by religious groups, but by the tax-payer to the tune of more than 95% - that is to say, almost entirely! It is not widely understood that the entire revenue costs of maintained religious schools are borne by the taxpayer. This also applies to the capital costs of some categories of faith school while others expect the religious organisations to meet just 10% of the capital costs alone - and even then there are exceptions when the exchequer picks up the tab.

Myth #2

Faith Schools Perform Better

Many parents believe that faith schools "perform better" than state schools and attribute this to the religious ethos and discipline of the schools. This is a myth. While it is true that some faith schools do perform marginally better, the reason is because they're not competing on a level playing field. It all comes down to selection. Church schools are less likely to have children from poorer backgrounds, are more likely to have "pushy parents" and are allowed to be more discriminating about admissions under the cloak of "ethos". In short, they can cherry-pick the best pupils, giving them an unfair advantage over state schools.

Single-Faith schools are a looming disaster For community cohesion

The Commission for Racial Equality has warned that the UK faces a crisis in which schools become increasingly separated along religious and ethnic lines.

Single-faith schools, more than any other institution, contributes to this evolving educational 'apartheid' during a child's formative years - which may lead to all sorts of difficulties with integrations and inter-community understanding in later life.

Some pupils from suburban Christian schools have never met a Muslim or a Hindu. Similarly, pupils from a Muslim or Jewish school may never mix with non-Muslims or non-Jews.

Official figures show that, overall, one in five schoolchildren is from an ethnic minority - a doubling of the numbers in a decade. One in eight pupils now speaks a language other than English at home. But five per cent of primary schools - 750 - have no ethnic minority pupils, while 360 have more than 50 per cent.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society says: "The Government accepts that 'faith schools' are creating a huge problem for community relations and yet they refuse to do anything about it – except create more of them."

The government's answer is to encourage faith schools to make connections with schools of other religions, and for non-religious schools to make trips to churches and mosques. New guidance is "aimed at preventing schools breeding prejudiced attitudes which could lead to extremism." But this is an attempt to address one of the more obvious symptoms rather than addressing the problem itself.

It is obvious that sectarian schools breed an isolationist and competitive attitude between faith communities. They discourage integration leading to a potentially explosive lack of understanding and - where religion and ethnic lines converge - an increase in racism and tension.

Faith schools aren't nearly as much fun as they're depicted in the movies.

