

Religious Schools

By Keith Porteous-Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society.

The following article appeared in *Keeping the Faith?*, published by the NASUWT teaching union in March 2008.

With Mr Blair's departure comes the best opportunity for decades to force a change of policy on so- called faith or religious schools. Religious adherence is a sub-multiple of what it was when the current system was formalised in 1944. Yet, under Blair, religious schools were categorised separately, and some had no idea they were. This was in 1998 when the ability to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief was passed into law, with the limited protections for those of the 'wrong' faith or none at all, some of which was whittled away in 2006. Forget the best teacher for the job. Religious schools find it harder and harder to find religious teachers — and this dwindling band have privileged access to more and more posts, as more faith schools are opened.

Anglican and Catholic schools

Within a decade there will be half a million fewer teenagers. Two thirds of secondary school children do not define themselves as religious and church attendance is forecast by Christian Research to drop to 2% by 2040. Only a Government obsessed with forcing 'faith' down taxpayers' throats would be opening new faith schools in such circumstances. It maintains the fiction that the opening of faith schools is to satisfy local demand. In reality, there is no fair process for establishing this. We know of one local authority, Leicester, to have been pressured to opt for faith schools on pain of financial penalties, and we suspect this to be the tip of the iceberg. And who but a religion-obsessed Government would choose as a long term strategic partner one heading for extinction? I refer to the Church of England (or its academy alter ego the United Learning Trust).

Faith schools are popular, they say. Indeed so, with those aspirant parents able and willing to secure admission to an oversubscribed faith school, even if that means being forced to attend church up to 48 times annually, and of course contribute to the collection. (It is a wonder that both Catholic and Anglican church attendance is in freefall despite this.) Their prize, given the discriminatory admissions and vicar's certificate, is a near private school without any fees. What parents want are good schools, not faith schools. Dividing children by faith isn't popular with over 60% to over 90% of the public at large, according to numerous surveys.

It is no surprise that those over-subscribed religious schools do well, too, as they cream off the most promising and well-behaved pupils from the neighbourhood, and generally have lower proportions of free school meal or SEN pupils than neighbouring community schools. Every privilege has a victim and here the victims are the community schools. With far fewer aspirant pupils and more difficult ones, average pupils are dragged down rather than up. And guess which group of the parents will be willing to stump up the most for extra equipment. No wonder pupils from poorer families do worse than average at school. Given these state imposed impediments, the community schools work marvels. These schools and their pupils are being betrayed.

David Blunkett famously wanted to bottle the essence of faith schools. Easy, it is selection and class. No longer do we say with pride that education is the great leveller.

The reason churches want schools is to inculcate the next generation of believers. There is no reason why taxpayers should fund this. And the religiosity is not just skin deep. Rowan Williams insists that 'a church school is a church'. The increasingly shrill edicts from Rome are being heeded with increasing fervour, as the Bishop of Lancaster made clear in a statement to 'his' schools recently. Forget any notion that education should open the mind. Nothing is to be taught that departs from the Vatican hard line on sex education or RE. They call it RE, but this is indistinguishable from RI. And that hard line on abortion law is only shared by a quarter of Catholics in the pews and a seventh of the population. Their hard lines on contraception and homosexuality are even less in tune with the pews and the country. And you will not be surprised to learn that homophobic bullying is worse in 'faith' schools, or that the Archbishop of Birmingham refused in Parliament to agree to specifically tackle homophobic bullying. We pay all the running costs; they call all the shots — well, up until now.

Despite the 72% of (cultural) Christians in the Census, the non-religious and non-practising are easily in the majority. Religion comes ninth in a ranking of facets important to our identity and only one in fourteen attend church on a normal Sunday. The non-religious are finding it ever more difficult to get into their local school, if it is a faith one. And more and more are. Over 20% of secondary school places in London are in faith schools, two and a half times the percentage of the population in church on a normal Sunday. So, many of those wishing for their children not to attend a faith school are finding that all but impossible. We get sad letters from teachers unable to get jobs without dissembling about their faith, which they will not stoop to doing.

Of course the religious pay their taxes too, but they (or those pretending to be) get privileged access to many of the third of schools which are religious, which the non-religious (and not prepared to lie about it) do not.

Academies

That £2 million (and sometimes not even that) required of sponsors is the bargain of the century, and we are paying for it. Ask an accountant for the present value of fifty years running costs plus the cost of building, including overruns. And sponsors can do almost whatever they like. No wonder the religious are at the top

of the queue. I am convinced that the academy model was designed to appeal most to religious organisations and that they are shoehorned in as sponsors by Whitehall. An example is the forty cathedral academies now being considered, hardly disadvantaged areas, but hundreds of millions of subsidy for the Church.

Minority faith and denomination schools

Given this third of schools that are Christian-run and even being expanded, I can understand indignation at not opening schools for the growing numbers of children from Muslim and other minority faith backgrounds. Many steer away from questioning minority faith schools for fear of being branded racist or Islamophobic. The issue is too important to allow ourselves to be deflected from even debating the subject. I should perhaps make clear that the National Secular Society has been opposing publicly funded religious schools since its founding 140 years ago. And we continue to oppose Christian schools too.

Here the issue of inculcation is even more acute, both on religious and possibly also on ideological grounds. I dismiss the idea that children from minority faith families cannot thrive unless they are cocooned with those of the same faith to foster their identity. That is what the Chief Rabbi maintains when he presses for more and more Jewish schools, yet he and I shared the same class in a local authority grammar school. His identity seems to have survived the experience. Not of course that all Jewish schools will admit all kinds of Jews and some even argue that pupils are inadmissible because their mother doesn't pass muster.

The more the minority is separated from mainstream society, the greater the dangers of separate schools. Opening up new schools for them will result in their children being withdrawn from mainstream schools, rendering them less cohesive. The resulting schools will be almost entirely mono-ethnic and mono-cultural as well as mono-religious. This is where we should be talking about quotas, but there is no point. Practically no one who is not from the religious background will want their children to attend, however nominally open the admissions policy. Could the state tell a non-Muslim girl that the only place for her was at a Muslim school next door with compulsory uniforms? Of course not, so what the Government is doing is creating an apartheid educational system. And that is before we get into difficult questions about how much religion will be taught, whether gender-specific curriculums will be permitted, PE, music, etc. That the Government is having a specialist inspection team for such schools confirms the 'apartheid' label.

Professor Irene Bruegel of South Bank University has shown that the only way to achieve full integration is for everyone to be educated together from primary stage. Correspondence clubs and joint sports are counterproductive. The Government is so religion obsessed and in denial over this issue it has shamelessly closed down debate. We must not let it.

Where to now?

There must be an embargo on new faith schools. If existing religious schools wish to retain their 100% revenue subsidy, they must all be brought under LEA control and discriminatory religious criteria for admissions should be scrapped, as should the provisions permitting religious discrimination in the appointment of teachers and support staff.

This is about fairness and does not call for school closures, so unions should have the courage to push these policies without being deflected by concerns about upsetting their members in faith schools.