

Research or propaganda? How the apologists for faith schools are fighting back

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Faith schools have been getting a bit of a bad press lately. Despite the fact that successive Governments have encouraged them, [parents are far from convinced](#).

The churches and mosques, of course, are taking full advantage of the Government's enthusiasm and expanding their reach into education as fast as they can. Large proportions of the new schools that are opening are now under the control of one religion or another, and the take-over continues at a pace.

Can it be a coincidence that the report comes only months after education secretary Michael Gove announced he is hoping to ramp up the involvement of the Church of England in the running of secular state schools? In July, it emerged that Church of England schools will soon be able to take over the running of non-faith schools, as long as they preserve their non-faith character.

What is this expansionism all about, really? For the answer, we can look at the words of Bishop John Pritchard, the Church of England's education supremo, who told the General Synod last year:

"Do we train our clergy for that opportunity or do we see engagement with schools as optional? The clergy ought to have a camp bed in there for heaven's sake! We don't have to bemoan the fact that our Sunday school has collapsed if there are 200 children at the local church school. The first big challenge is truly owning the centrality of our church schools in our mission and that's a real culture change...

"Make no mistake, the days of equivocation are over. Church schools are under suspicion or attack in many corners of society. I've been involved in debates on the Today Programme, the Time Educational Festival at Wellington, in academic seminars and newspaper articles.

"The pressure is on. And our response must not be defensive but confidently on the front foot. We have so much to offer. In an age of creeping scepticism about religion we know we have the greatest story ever lived, one with never ending relevance to every human life. So we need to make sure our schools are so rooted in the Great Story, so distinctively Christian in beliefs, values and behaviour, that people will be thrilled and challenged by what they see. We are working on a new scheme for teaching Christianity in our schools and on what a teaching curriculum looks like when it reflects in every part, the Christian spiritual foundation of the schools life."

There is an urgency because the churches know that religious schools are increasingly unpopular. The churches want as many schools as possible under their control before the tide turns against them. They know that once schools are in their grasp it is almost impossible to remove them.

So, now comes the propaganda response that Bishop Pritchard promised. Groups that have worries about faith schools — whether because of the unjust privileges they enjoy, such as the Accord Coalition and Fair Admissions campaign — or those that are opposed to religious schools in principle, like the National Secular Society, have been making more and more people think about what is going on.

At the NSS we receive almost daily emails from parents concerned about the level of religious pressure their children are being subjected to. Tackling the undue influence of religion in schools isn't easy. The law favours the indoctrinators. The free school system is going to make it worse, as they are given leeway to do almost anything they want in terms of religion.

Now the Theos Christian think tank has joined the fray with a supposed investigation into the value of "faith schools" entitled "[More than an Educated Guess](#)".

(That, by the way, is the same Theos think-tank that was started in 2006 by Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor – so it's utterly objective, of course.)

Unsurprisingly, after examining the evidence, Theos comes down generally in favour of faith schools. There are a few caveats – yes, they accept that there is an element of social exclusion due to the way "faith schools" are allowed to select pupils, and this also reflects in the academic performance. "The evidence that the higher academic attainment of faith schools is due to something other than pupil selection criteria is weak," the report says and recommends: "Schools should move away from justifying the religious character of their school on the basis of exam results alone."

So, the much-lauded "faith effect" is not the explanation for their performance, and at least that is one conclusion we can agree with.

But what about divisions in society caused by religious schools? Are faith schools aiding or hindering social cohesion?

Writing about the report on [Huffington Post](#) one of its authors, Elizabeth Oldfield, criticises a blog by me on the [NSS website](#) which drew attention to the way Islamic schools are being hijacked by extreme religious groups and the system exploited by sinister interests.

My point was that there cannot possibly be social cohesion when schools are encouraging children to embrace a culture that is not just alien, but in some instances hostile to that of most British people.

Ms Oldfield, however, says: "Our review of the evidence showed there is little reason to be concerned about this, as the 'schools with a religious character' (as they officially known) are at least as good at other schools at promoting cohesion, and possibly better."

This sounds rather complacent when read beside a story in this week's *Sunday Times* that began:

"Former MI5 agents have been recruited to crack down on extremism in schools following evidence that Islamic fundamentalists are trying to take over some state primaries.

"Michael Gove, the education secretary, has warned that "potentially extremist parents" could be flooding the governing bodies of some schools that have large numbers of Muslim pupils.

"He has set up a "counter extremism" unit in his department to weed out educational institutions and practices that do not conform to British values. The unit includes two former intelligence officers with expertise in counterterrorism, two academic experts and senior civil servants.

"[Michael] Gove said: "We do worry. There was a case in Surrey . . . where there were concerns that a maintained primary school, a local authority primary school, was being taken over by a

group of parents who were on the governing body who were potentially extremist." There was a similar case in Birmingham.

"Referring to Al-Madinah Muslim free school in Derby, where non-Muslim female staff were told to wear headscarves, Gove said: "That would be the sort of behaviour that would lead me to want to ensure that the school was inspected rigorously as rapidly as possible, because there are standards that apply to both state and independent schools that say they have to be in conformity with British values.

"His department is investigating the school."

Elizabeth Oldfield's dismissal of these concerns will not do, particularly as the evidence is accumulating. Try this, again from the *Sunday Times*:

"A state-funded school in Blackburn has become the first to force its pupils to wear a hijab both in and out of class. Rules at Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School require its 800 pupils "to wear the hijab [Muslim headscarf] outside the school and home", "recite the Koran at least once a week" and "not bring stationery to school that contains un-Islamic images", such as pictures of pop stars.

"The Lancashire school is the flagship of the Tauheedul charitable trust, an organisation seeking to open a network of 12 Muslim free schools across the country. Ministers have approved three such schools – two in Blackburn and one in Hackney, east London, which opened this month.

"About 10% of those in the sixth form at Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School, a voluntary aided school, wear the niqab, a veil that covers the face except for the eyes, and all pupils have to wear long purple tunics over black trousers so no flesh is exposed...

"Concerns were raised about the Tauheedul charitable trust in a dossier given to the Department for Education by Haras Rafiq, a former government adviser on the prevention of extremism, in 2011. Despite it, the trust was granted approval to set up three free schools.

"In his dossier, Rafiq said Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, a Saudi cleric who is alleged to have referred to Jews as "pigs" and the "scum of the human race", had made a visit to the school. "I raised concerns in June 2011 with the Department for Education," said Rafiq. "Despite presenting them with my findings, they decided to brush them to one side and go ahead and reward them with not just one school but three free schools."

"He added: "I think it threatens to create young British Muslims who are not able to integrate in the wider society, who are living in isolation and outside the wider community."

"Similar concerns were voiced by some residents in Blackburn, one of Britain's most ethnically diverse towns. In particular, some are opposed to the Tauheedul organisation being asked to take over the running of a secular school in the town.

"Religion belongs in the place of worship or the home and not the classroom," said one, who asked not to be named. "There is a lot of anger and suspicion about this plan."

Hamid Patel, headmaster of the Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School, told the *Sunday Mail*:

"We want to develop a network of 15 to 16 schools, including around a dozen Muslim schools along the model of the progressive girls' school. We want these faith schools to reach out to attract Muslims and non-Muslims. Our girls' school is oversubscribed . . . non-Muslims do not apply and I challenge them to do so."

Patel confirmed that Sudais had been asked to address the school three years ago. "The girls wanted to see this guy with 5m followers. They had seen him on YouTube. He stayed 20 minutes."

He also said the organisation had been asked to run failing schools with white working-class pupils. It has plans to develop free schools in Bolton, Preston in Lancashire, Waltham Forest in north east London, and Slough, Berkshire.

But this is only one aspect of the Theos report that is wrong. The issue of free schools is ignored completely, although this is the direction in which our education system is going.

Nor is there any mention of the Church of England's recent [Church School of the Future](#) report which made clear its intention to use its schools as platforms for evangelism.

The issue of homophobic bullying in religious schools is glossed over quickly, although it is a major issue for those on the receiving end.

If the churches want to make a case for their continued domination of the school system in this country, it is going to have to be a stronger one than that put forward by Theos.

In the meantime, the Government remains in denial. Denial about the fact that parents would prefer there to be fewer faith schools; denial of the fact that the system is being exploited and misused by churches and extremist groups; denial of the fact that these schools create resentment and injustice because of their admissions privileges.

When is any politician going to have the guts to actually question and challenge this stampede to hand over our school system to proselytisers?

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