

Even the chief architect of the expansion of religious schools is now having doubts

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With the public, of all faiths and none, increasingly recognising the problems caused by faith schools, NSS president Terry Sanderson calls out politicians who complain about religious separatism on one hand while deliberately promoting it on the other.

Tony Blair, who was the chief architect of Britain's dangerous "faith school" experiment when he was Labour Prime Minister, now appears to be having doubts about it.

Speaking at a session on world education at the Global Education and Skills Forum in Dubai in March, Mr Blair said that intolerance must be "confronted" wherever it is found. And school is a good place to do it.

Asked whether, in general, faith schools can lead to greater segregation, Mr Blair replied: "That's a very good question, and it's one I ask myself often because faith schools are a big part of the UK system, a lot of people like to educate their children in those schools because sometimes they have a stronger ethos, a stronger kind of grounding in values and so on.

"I think what I would say is faith schools only work if they're also integrated in the education system, it's very important that young people, even if they're taught in a school of a particular faith, are taught about other faiths, are taught in what I would say is a constructive way".

He went on: "This question of what I call education for the open mind, is really, really important now".

So, there we have it: Mr Blair thinks that "faith schools" only work if they are integrated into the education system". The problem with this is that they *are* integrated into the education system and, as far as community cohesion is concerned, they are a disaster.

Even in community schools, that are supposedly free from a particular single religious influence, it isn't difficult for religious zealots to gain influence. We've seen it happen in some Muslim areas when determined Islamists have overwhelmed community schools and tried to impose a "religious ethos" that wouldn't be out of place in Saudi Arabia.

We are told that these schools are now returned to their original purpose of giving children a balanced education – indeed, a committee of MPs is now saying that there was no problem in the first place. But can we really dismiss the testimony of parents at these schools who were interviewed at the time and expressed their alarm at what was happening? Were the newspaper investigations that found evidence for the plot all made up? Were those teachers who were fired to make way for more Islamically pure replacements telling lies? And if there was no problem, why was the whole board of governors fired?

But it isn't only in Muslim-dominated schools that abuses are taking place.

Now that they've got so many schools under their control, and the Government has granted them *carte blanche* in academies and free schools, religious groups are taking full advantage of

proselytising opportunities.

Walk into almost any state-funded "faith school" and the first thing that will face you is a large religious symbol. The branding is impossible to miss and endlessly reinforced.

I visited a local Church of England school recently to attend a concert. It confirmed for me just how the churches are abusing their access to these schools.

Walking through the main entrance, the first thing to greet the visitor is a biblical verse painted in huge letters over an enormous cross. Walking down the corridor, the first room you come to is the chapel, an expensively appointed space where children are clearly not expected to escape religious indoctrination.

The first result when Googling "school chaplain role" was the Sacred Heart RC School in Southwark. The first five of their 13 roles were religious as were four out of five areas of focus.

We know schools are having more and more difficulty getting staff, particular of the "right" denomination to take collective worship. So it seems likely that in at least some cases, and increasingly, the chaplain is on hand to make sure that when teachers are reluctant to do the inculcating — or are more likely that they are incapable of doing it — they will do it for them. The chaplain's salary comes from the school budget. In most cases she/he is not there to teach the children, they are there to inculcate their religious beliefs into them. In a [CofE survey](#), only 12 out of 58 chaplains had teaching roles, and the allocation of them to teaching roles was described in the survey as being "It's the only way we can fund chaplaincy."

Mr Blair says he wants children given "constructive" religious education that will result in an open mind. But why would a single-faith school want to do that? It is single-faith because it has a bias.

The Church of England is quite open about its "mission" in schools. It has stated categorically that the school will be an extension of the church, sometimes quite literally so.

If parents choose to send their children to such a school, says the Church, then they are consenting for them to have religion imposed on them from arriving in the morning to going home at night.

It is quite possible that the parents have already compromised their own principles anyway by going to a church they don't believe in, just to get the vicar's letter that is an entrée into the school.

Parents frequently feel they have no option but to go to these dishonest extremes in the knowledge that that they will be enrolling their children into a school that has selected (overtly and covertly) other well-supported children from middle class homes. They know the school will perform well because the low-achieving, unsupported and possibly disruptive children who would push it down the league tables can't get anywhere near it.

And in some areas — especially in rural parts — there are so many "faith schools" that parents who don't particularly want their children to be taught in them have no choice but to send them there, and run a greater chance of their children being indoctrinated by chaplains and pious teachers.

The Church of England's own [website](#) makes no bones about it: "CofE schools stand at the heart of the mission of the Church to the nation". And - tellingly - under "Going for Growth" ... "work towards every child and young person having a life enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ. ... All members of the school community should experience Christianity

through the life of the schools, as well as through the taught curriculum".

Note the words "every child" and "all members". Similarly, in the Church's school strategy document [The Way Ahead](#) a major objective is to "Challenge those [pupils] who have no faith". I would not support a community school challenging pupils with faith to think again, but imagine the furore that would ensue if one tried, but we are all supposed to sit back and wave on the opposite.

It seems the more children desert the Church, and they are doing so in even greater proportions than the total congregation, the greater the proselytising in schools. There were 24% more pupils in CofE secondary schools in 2013 than there were in 2000. And let's not forget that the running costs of these schools is totally from the public purse.

It would be a much more efficient use of public money for schools to be secular so everyone could go to them. The greater the proportion of religious schools, the greater the inefficiency, and this inefficiency has reached a new level of absurdity. The pressure on school places is increasingly leading to children from non-religious or Christian families being sent to minority "faith schools", such as those non-Sikh children [being sent to a Sikh school](#) in Stoke Poges.

The parents are upset and complain, which has led to resentment and suggestions of racism. The aforementioned "conservative Muslim parents" want their children to have a madrassa style education in a state-funded school and aren't concerned that their kids will hardly ever meet anyone from the mainstream community. In fact, some of them actually want that.

And that brings us back to Tony Blair's increasing worries about racial and religious isolationism that these schools promote.

They must teach about religions other than their own, he says.

Is he joking? I would be interested to learn what proportion of Muslim and very "Orthodox" Jewish schools are teaching about other faiths and [even teaching science properly](#). Pupils might get to hear a bit about Islam in a Church of England school, but they will still be pressured to *become* a Christian.

If you have a Muslim school with a "conservative religious ethos" — and, let's face it, they all have a conservative religious ethos — which underneath the veneer believes that all other religions are heretical and inferior, then what contribution can this possibly make to community cohesion? The pupils will hear about other religions alright — but what will they hear?

The result can only be more separatism, suspicion and, eventually, in some cases extremism.

And the taxpayer is funding it.

The Government wrings its hands endlessly about separation in communities and [lack of integration](#) and yet it permits this ridiculously dangerous situation to continue to develop. Not just that, it actually encourages it and expands it.

Let's be honest about this — many of these schools, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Baptist, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu are in the hands of religious proselytisers of varying degrees.

The free school system invites such people to get their hands on schools. A bit of dishonesty at the application stage, a modicum of restraint and pretended reasonableness when the inspector calls, can all aid the zealots in their work.

Sometimes, of course, it's just well-meaning people who haven't understood that our schools are not simply platforms for them to spread their own beliefs, whether that is creationism, anti-abortion or disapproval of homosexuality. Religious enthusiasts who are compelled by their religion to "spread the word" are uncomprehending when people object. How can anyone not want to hear the good news about Jesus?

Catholic schools insist all the time that their purpose is to support and promote the teachings of the Catholic Church – teachings that are out of step with the reality of this country. The education minister says she wants schools to promote "British values", but how British are the values of Catholicism? In this country we have reached a democratic decision to legalise abortion and contraception and homosexuality – all things that are contrary to the Catholic Church's doctrine.

This Government has encouraged and assisted the proliferation of religion in our schools – in faith schools and community schools. It has cheered the Church of England's determination to revive itself through its recruitment in schools.

The argument has been made that the continued decline in the Church of England's fortunes indicates that it isn't very good at persuading pupils to embrace the faith. But this daily process of inculcation and normalisation of particular religious ideas leaves a mark on pupils. It denies them the opportunity to make a real, unimpeded, independent choice about what they believe if, indeed, they want to believe any religious idea.

Tony Blair says that children are exposed to many influences outside school and not all of them are savoury. He thinks it's the school's job to counter this.

But there are some of us who think that far too many faith schools in this country are now promoting separatism and even ideas and ideologies that are very unpleasant indeed.

The foolish direction of the British Government has taken (and apparently all the opposition parties, too, except the Greens) in relation to religion in schools negates all its whinging about the lack of unity in our nation.

You cannot complain about religious separatism on one hand while deliberately promoting it on the other.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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