

How secularism cuts the Gordian knot in education

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Faith schools' approach to admissions and sex education reminds us that religious groups' interests often conflict with those of society. Megan Manson says the only answer to this is to separate education from religion.

When we tie religion and state together, we invariably tie ourselves in knots.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that the interests of religious institutions and the interests of the state are frequently not one and the same. And that's because they ultimately recognise different and mutually exclusive authorities.

For most major religions, ultimate authority lies with divine will. This can be manifested through sacred texts, or the proclamations of a priest or prophet who speaks for a deity. Very often, the standards set by this authority are static and religious institutions will actively resist any sort of change to them.

But in a democratic state, authority derives from elected representatives and the laws they make. Because those representatives change, and the society around them changes, the laws too are subject to continuous re-evaluation and alteration.

It's not hard to see how religious authority and state authority will come into conflict.

That's why in a democracy that is not constitutionally secular, like the UK, we end up getting in a complete mess when we try to fuse the two together.

Education is a good example. We have secular schools, which recognise no authority higher than the state. And then we have faith schools, which are governed by organisations that do recognise a higher authority; namely, God.

The government tries to deal with this by coming up with complex sets of rules and exemptions that don't really work.

In England, our public services must not discriminate against people on the basis of faith – but a special exemption is given for faith schools. Our schools have a duty to uphold the Equality Act – but faith schools can insist on different standards of modesty for boys and girls, teach that only one religion is the "true" one and teach that homosexual acts are wrong. Our schools must teach high quality, impartial sex education – [but faith schools can teach about sex within the tenets of their faith](#) (i.e. not impartial at all). Our schools must promote British values – and we assume that these are automatically the same values shared by religious organisations governing faith schools.

But there's no way a school can uphold the British value of tolerance of people of different beliefs if it teaches that only one particular faith is the 'true' faith, or if it discriminates against children whose families are of no faith or the 'wrong' faith.

By entrusting religious institutions with state education and giving them the green light to promote their faith, we put those institutions into an impossible situation. They have to try and simultaneously obey two authorities: the state and the church.

The depth of this conflict cannot be overstated. The NSS's [Unsafe Sex Education](#) report revealed this. While education and healthcare experts advise that sex education should be [impartial, inclusive and sex-positive](#), the report revealed schools teaching that contraception is wrong, same-sex relationships are wrong, and sex outside of Christian marriage is wrong. After all, that's what the Catholic Church teaches. To try and appease the state by saying otherwise would be to contradict the Catholic Church. Then you would end up with two versions of Catholicism: a 'state approved' version that was taught in state schools, and the 'real' version that you'd only find out about by going to church. You might even end up with a bizarre situation where children in non-faith schools were learning about a more 'authentic' form of Catholicism by studying it through the objective lens of Religious Education, while children at the Catholic schools were only exposed to the watered-down, 'DfE-friendly' version.

Catholic schools are particularly aware of this conflict, and when given the choice between providing mainstream, factual, health-focused sex education and promoting theological teachings on sex, they'll (unsurprisingly) side with God. St Angela's Ursuline School [states](#), "There may be a need to stand against the prevailing secular and permissive culture, and to protect children from lessons in human sexuality which are explicit, premature or misleading." Coloma Convent Girls' School [says](#) "a secularised approach which puts God at the margin of life" is "contrary to the school's ethos". Christ The King Catholic High School's sex education policy even goes as far as to [quote](#) from the 2004 Catholic Bishops' Conference stating that "government-sponsored sex education", which tends to "emphasise the importance of 'safe' or 'safer sex' and has encouraged the use of condoms", is "morally corrosive".

How did we ever get into this situation where state schools are not only defying the state, but openly expressing their opposition to the state? It's simply an example of the disarray caused by tying the state and church together.

Secularising state education is a brilliantly simple solution to this Gordian knot of trying to obey two sets of contradictory directives. It cuts right through it.

And when you cut ties, you allow both parties greater freedom.

If schools are compelled to be religiously-neutral as they are politically-neutral, faith institutions need not worry anymore about trying to please two masters. And they also need not be concerned that the version of their faith taught in schools was an 'inauthentic' version. They can teach whatever version of their religion they want – within their churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. Unlike our state schools, those establishments are purpose-built for religious instruction, and that's where it truly belongs.

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Megan Manson is the head of campaigns at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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