

The abomination of sectarian schooling

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Editorial by Terry Sanderson

Secularism in Britain took a mighty blow this week when the Government announced that it had been conniving behind closed doors with leaders of the “faith communities” to hand over hundreds more of Britain’s schools to the clerical establishment. It will use taxpayers’ money to achieve this multi-billion pound own-goal.

Ed Balls, the minister for education, published the results of his cosy chats with the bishops and imams, in the form of a report “Faith in the System”. It was launched on Monday with the usual claims that more sectarian religious schools will somehow make community relations better and that private Muslim schools need to be brought into the state so that an eye can be kept on them.

He might as well have thrown in the claim that black is white and up is down.

How on earth can anybody argue that separating children on the basis of their parents’ religion helps them understand each other? 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.

And along comes Mr Balls (or more likely Lord Adonis, whose pious fingerprints are all over this document) to encourage that – using public money to do it. What on earth can they be thinking of? Votes, perhaps? For surely it is Labour who has most to lose if the Muslim community were to turn against it? It is in Labour constituencies that the concentrations of Muslims are most likely to be able to swing an election result.

And another pipe dream is the idea that currently the almost unsupervised private Muslim schools sector can be tamed if it is brought into the state sector. The imams must be rubbing their hands with glee at this development – no-one is more anxious than they to control the education of “their” communities, because they know that they can hammer home Islam in schools like nowhere else. If the state thinks it will change the direction of Muslim schools by bringing them into the state sector, it should think again. It is Muslim schools that will change the direction of the National Curriculum.

I will predict right now that as soon as these Islamic schools are brought into the state sector they will begin to demand exemptions (on grounds of “faith”, of course) from the need to observe the National Curriculum. How long before their demands for no mixed sex classes, no swimming lessons, no music, no dancing, no science that contradicts the Koran, different lessons for girls and so on are acceded to?

Soon, Islamic education in the state sector will become exactly the same as it is in the private sector (it will have to be, or the parents who opted out of the state sector in the first place so that

their children could have a strictly Islamic education will simply take their children back into the private sector, where madrassa-style 'education' can re-commence).

Regular readers of *Newsline* will know that enough evidence has now accumulated to show that religious schools are not all they are cracked up to be by the people with the greatest vested interest in their continuance.

Yes, they perform well in the league tables. But so do most selective schools. If you can pick and choose your intake, of course your academic achievement will be high. The performance of "faith schools" has been shown to be entirely connected to the selection criteria and has nothing whatever to do with "faith". And, of course, community schools are already victims of this cherry picking – they are the ones who have to take the problem kids and the unsupported kids who, unfortunately, don't qualify for "faith schools". Indeed, new evidence published this week contradicts claims by "faith-school" leaders that they are serving all sections of society. Rebecca Allen, of London University's Institute of Education, and Anne West, of the London School of Economics, said religious secondaries in London do not serve the most disadvantaged pupils. "Overall, religious schools educate a much smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their intakes are significantly more affluent than the neighbourhood they are located in," they said. "Some London religious schools may have undergone a distortion of mission as happened with elite public schools, which were set up to educate the poor but then shifted their focus and catered predominantly for the wealthy."

Other injustices spring from these schools. The government has granted them 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. They force local authorities to make spiteful and petty decisions about who can ride on the school bus. [see here](#) and [here](#)

They claim popular support, even though two polls within the past week (John Humphrys in the *Times* and the *Readers Digest* both commissioned YouGov polls) which both indicated that 52% of people think "faith schools" are a bad idea and should be stopped.

Parents clamour for places at "faith schools" because the system forces them to. If they want 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?

Keith Porteous Wood took part in a debate on Premier Christian radio with Jan Ainsworth, the Church of England's chief education officer this week. Ms Ainsworth insisted that no new church schools would be opened without the approval and consent of the local community. Where have we heard that before? I'll tell you – it was last time the government agreed to a large-scale expansion of "faith schools" five years ago. In actuality, such consultations with the local community are often over before anyone even knows they are happening. Or if parents do manage to find out about them before it's too late, their objections are dismissed out of hand.

An example of this was described this week in the *Guardian*, when it was revealed that the Marches Secularist Group had been told that it wasn't welcome to participate in a consultation on a new Church of England Academy because it was too closely associated with the National Secular Society. [Read the full story here](#)

Sectarian schools are an abomination, and they will benefit no-one but the clerics who want to use them to revive their dying religions. Ed Balls, Lord Adonis and Gordon Brown have done a massive disservice to this country with this pact with the churches. But then, they won't be around to pick up the pieces of the resulting conflict in generations to come.

What others have said:

Dr Mohamed Mukadam, chairman of the Association of Muslim Schools UK, said: "There is demand from the Muslim community for state faith schools but it will take time for this to develop. In the fullness of time, we will see many more." But he said local Muslim groups ran into "a lot of negativity" when proposing to set up new schools because there was a "public perception" the schools would "produce fundamentalists".

Thomas Sutcliffe, *Independent*: "*Faith in the System* doesn't actually include a single piece of hard evidence that faith schools will 'promote community cohesion'. Nor does it seriously address any of the important issues about conflicts between religious teaching and the National Curriculum, or between employment rights and doctrinal prejudice. It simply offers a number of anecdotal examples of faith schools which attempt to redress their own cultural homogeneity with exchange visits, comparative religion studies and outreach programmes."

Dr Evan Harris MP: "If we have to have tax-funded faith schools then they should not be allowed to set religious tests for admissions and they must have religion-blind employment policies. Faith schools make existing racial segregation worse and when you adjust for social class their results are no better than community schools."

John Dunford, general secretary of headmasters' union ASCL: "The inherent danger of increasing the number of faith schools is that more schools will become monocultural and less able to promote inter-cultural understanding."

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster: "I welcome the public recognition of the contribution made by faith schools to the harmony of our society. An ongoing partnership between the Catholic Church and the Government based on the right of Catholic parents — under the Human Rights Act — to choose a Catholic education for their children is a proven way of forming youngsters as good British citizens."

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury: "Church schools offer not a programme of indoctrination, but the possibility of developing a greater level of community cohesion through the understanding of how faith shapes common life. This matters for the lives of individuals, whether they are believers or not — because the failure to understand how faith operates leaves us at sea in engaging with our neighbours at local and global level."

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers: "We question whether faith schools, particularly those where staff and children are chosen on a faith basis, provide an environment for 'interaction between different faiths and communities'. And we question why schools, in which the majority of funding comes from the state, should, as the Government proposes, nurture young people in a particular faith. Surely, the job of schools is to nurture children and young people as individuals and as responsible and compassionate global citizens, and the promotion of a particular religious viewpoint should remain the province of religious groups. Our members believe that we need schools which embrace the diversity within our community, not a diversity of schools dividing pupils and staff on religious grounds."

AC Grayling, *The Guardian*: "The secular majority in this country should bitterly oppose the use of their tax money for this misconceived policy. Religion, the bane of the modern world in so many

respects, has got to be relegated to the private sphere and kept there.”

See also: [Ghettoes of superstition](#)

[The unbelievable privilege of faith](#)

[New school course on Islamophobia](#)
