

## **Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics – Seminar on Religion and Education**

**Speech by Keith Porteous Wood Executive Director of UK National Secular Society**

**European Parliament - 15 October 2008**

*The topic and purpose of the meeting is to discuss a range of issues within this context such as science education, sexual and reproductive health education, religious education, education for citizenship, public school funding, discrimination and religious freedom. The audience is composed of MEPs and specialists in these areas.*

What I hope to demonstrate this afternoon is that while the pressure to open religious schools is growing, the reasons to oppose them are becoming more pressing.

The reason religions have involved themselves in education over the centuries, and indeed millennia, I believe, is mainly to coax the emerging generation into the faith – while their minds are fertile and unquestioning. While the churches are keen to take credit for their undoubted historic role in education, there are many instances in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century where archbishops and bishops actually opposed public education, solely because it was not controlled by the churches.

My contention is that states have been providing free education for all for generations, and so continued religious involvement has now become simply one of self-interest. This is their privilege in the private sector but it is not a legitimate function of the state to facilitate and fund proselytisation. And the more religiously diverse we become - and also the less religious we become - the more obvious it is that religion should be a matter for the home and place of worship, rather than the school.

Given the continuing decline in Christian adherence throughout most of Europe, compounded in some states by the forecast reduction in the number of teenagers, it is astonishing that any new Christian schools are being opened. But such is the political pressure, they are being opened in the UK in quite large numbers, despite it being one of the least religious countries in the world.

More recently, there is an increasing tendency for those seeking to encourage the opening of religious schools to claim that the European Convention on Human Rights supports their cause. They frequently misinterpret Article 2 of Protocol 1 (the Right to Education):

*“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions.”*

I have recently even had to point out to a UK Education Minister that this Protocol does *not* oblige the state to fund religious schools of any kind.

The level of religious schools has reached the point in some parts of the UK that pupils of the “wrong” faith or more generally no faith are finding it difficult to secure school places. Even though only one in 14 people are in church on an average Sunday, it has become an accepted part of middle class life to attend church – and pay into the collection - simply to secure a publicly-funded school place. One school insists on church attendance 48 times per year.

Religious schools are popular in the UK, but is it any wonder? It is mainly because they alone have the privilege to select good pupils. Having picked the *crème de la crème*, they then attribute the resultant examination success to the school’s religious ethos. Every privilege has a victim, and this ability to select more able pupils, which surveys have confirmed, deprives the remaining schools of many aspirant pupils.

UK laws permit religious schools to discriminate in employment, in ways that we suspect flout the Employment Directive. Teachers, especially those in rural areas where religious schools are more prevalent, complain to us that they have to pretend they are believers to obtain employment. How religious need a teacher be to teach mathematics? Such discrimination makes nonsense of the concept of the best applicant securing the job.

Clearly the precise circumstances in each other member state will differ from those I have described. But I would be surprised if at least some of my arguments against any further openings of religious schools did not apply in all community countries.

Issues we have to take on board for all religious schools – but especially minority denominations and religions - is whether excessive time is spent on religious studies, whether there is unreasonable sex-segregation including in access to the curriculum, whether there is proper Physical Education and Sex Education. I have no expectations that gay pupils will receive any support, regardless of the likely consequences for self-harm. And that is before we consider whether science lessons are undermined by religious

teaching, as is seemingly routine in many minority religious schools and increasingly Christian ones too. The Council of Europe is so concerned about this, it has issued a paper on the subject<sup>1</sup>. There has been a recurring problem of children in independent minority religious schools even being beaten for failing to learn huge texts from religious books. So, however reasonable to demand that Religious Education lessons are not proselytising, to do so is just unrealistic - but we should at the least insist that other religions are included and that some people do not have beliefs.

But I have not touched on the most vital reason to oppose religious schools: cohesion. This is not really an issue for Christian schools, except in Northern Ireland where as recently as 2002<sup>2</sup> young female pupils and teachers were subjected to sectarian violence and even death threats. Even now, the sectarian schools perpetuate entirely segregated Catholic and Protestant communities. The headline-grabbing violence may have stopped, but many there pass their entire lives without having a conversation with someone from the “other” side of the 7-metre high walls that, tragically, remain essential to separate those of the same race, nationality and religion. This Christian sectarianism has echoes in the west of Scotland too, especially in sport. But worthy attempts for joint schools there have been met with Catholic demands for separate entrances, classes, eating areas, staffrooms - and unbelievably, even lavatories<sup>3</sup>.

But it is from the opening of minority religious schools that the greatest potential harm comes now. Such schools will not only be mono-religious, they will be almost exclusively minority-cultural and with pupils drawn largely from minority ethnic groups. And many of the pupils will come from communities that are separate from the mainstream society. Some of these schools seek to downplay concerns about separatism by claiming to have open admissions policies. But even those who genuinely want pupils of other faiths (or even none) do not have them. Nor can any quota ever be enforced in practice, because few if any from outside the religion would want their child to be inculcated in it. In addition, young girls moving to Muslim schools would be obliged to wear Muslim dress. Cohesion will be further damaged with the opening of minority religious schools because minority faith pupils will be withdrawn from community schools thus reducing their diversity too.

So, the more such schools are allowed to grow, the closer we come to educational apartheid. And this is more than a theoretical problem: the number of those from religious minorities is projected to double by 2040 in the UK. As the numbers grow, a further element of the apartheid will become evident: we will find sectarianism within religions manifesting itself. It will not be good enough to be a Muslim school; it will have to be the right type of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc07/EDOC11297.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy\\_Cross\\_dispute#2002](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Cross_dispute#2002)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/jan/30/schools.faithschools>

school. We already have that problem with Jewish schools: Orthodox Jews – especially Ultra-Orthodox ones - regard liberal Jews with contempt.

A Hindu school opened recently in a north western suburb of London causing dissent in the majority Hindu community because of excessively-strict entry criteria. Even the Hindu Council UK objected: “we believe it is unfair to rule out other Hindus by imposing on them the strict rules of one particular, minority Hindu group in order for their children to attend.”<sup>4</sup>

But I do understand the frustration in minority religious communities, pointing to the many Christian schools and seeing more being opened. That is another reason why such openings should be opposed and steps taken to convert all currently publicly-funded religious schools to community schools, with appropriate compensation.

I believe that building community cohesion is one of the biggest challenges facing an expanding EU. Academic research confirms<sup>5</sup> what seems to be common sense, that educating children of all ethnicities, religion and beliefs together builds cohesion. And the younger pupils are when the communal education is started, the more successful cohesion is. If it starts at primary level, the parents are drawn together too.

The UK Government is in denial over minority religious schools and this makes the outlook for community cohesion bleak indeed. Both Educational and Communities ministries toe the line by claiming with a straight face that religious schools aid cohesion, and then do everything they can to close down discussion on the topic. Yet they implicitly acknowledge the problem by suggesting artificial interaction between minority ethnic and other schools. These include reciprocal visits, correspondence clubs or joint sports events. The academics worry that such “sticking plaster” remedies are not just ineffective; they may actually make matters worse.

I wish the problem were just one of our failing to communicate evidence supporting our counter-arguments. But the more evidence we provide, the clearer it becomes that the Government does not even wish to listen. So this raises a question of even greater concern: why is the British Government so intransigent over minority faith schools? Part of the answer, and it has some credibility, is that the UK Government will look kindly on anything with a religious tag, almost regardless. But there must be more to it. Delving deeper leads one to consider the Government’s well-publicised failure to tackle extremism, especially in mosques, something that also infuriates the many Muslims who abhor extremism.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/29/schools.uk>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf> and [http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/education\\_and\\_employment\\_project1\\_pr\\_tcm6-16340.pdf](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/education_and_employment_project1_pr_tcm6-16340.pdf)

So, I conclude by asking you to do everything you can in your own country to fight for education that aids cohesion while opposing vigorously policies which will result in segregation.