

Ep 16: Operation Christmas Child | Faith schools

Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIQHMg3_wsY&feature=youtu.be

0:00:02.169,0:00:07.220
(Emma Park) Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast I'm Emma Park,

0:00:07.220,0:00:11.389
and this week i'll be talking to Alastair Lichten, the NSS's education

0:00:11.389,0:00:15.950
officer and Megan Manson, the campaign's officer. In the first half of this

0:00:15.950,0:00:18.770
podcast we'll be looking at Operation Christmas Child

0:00:18.770,0:00:23.300
and how a seemingly innocuous appeal to send toys to developing countries is

0:00:23.300,0:00:28.460
being exploited by Christian evangelists. Later in the show I'll be speaking to

0:00:28.460,0:00:31.970
Alistair about why twenty thousand primary and secondary school children

0:00:31.970,0:00:38.400
are being sent to faith schools despite their parents preferring non faith schools.

0:00:39.980,0:00:45.640
Do you remember filling shoeboxes with toys when you were at school, to be sent to

0:00:45.650,0:00:50.390
children in developing countries. I certainly do. Many schools, youth groups

0:00:50.390,0:00:53.780
and others have been taking part in this well-meaning practice for years at

0:00:53.780,0:00:58.130
Christmastime. But did you know that the organization behind Operation Christmas

0:00:58.130,0:01:02.820
Child is an evangelical Christian charity called Samaritan's Purse?

0:01:02.820,0:01:07.840
This organization seems to be using the shoeboxes as, in effect, a bribe to

0:01:07.850,0:01:12.620
persuade children to attend it's religious program. as their website puts

0:01:12.620,0:01:17.360
it "after receiving a shoebox gift, children have the opportunity to enroll

0:01:17.360,0:01:22.520
in The Greatest Journey - 12 fun and interactive Bible lessons where they get

0:01:22.520,0:01:26.990
the chance to discover who Jesus is and how to begin their own journey of faith.

0:01:26.990,0:01:31.870
The website also states that operating with "communities in needs" in

0:01:31.870,0:01:35.150
Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

0:01:35.150,0:01:39.600
Samaritan's Purse describes itself in its mission statement as

0:01:39.600,0:01:45.260
"a non-denominational evangelical Christian organization that helps to meet needs of

0:01:45.260,0:01:49.490

people who are victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease, and famine

0:01:49.490,0:01:55.100

with the purpose of sharing God's love through His Son, Jesus Christ.

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In other words, as with many religious charities laudable motives of

0:02:00.350,0:02:03.710

helping people in distress are mingled with the more problematic

0:02:03.710,0:02:08.240

aim of proselytizing and converting people to the version of Christianity

0:02:08.240,0:02:12.990

which they espouse. And in the case of Samaritan's Purse,

0:02:12.990,0:02:18.960

this seems to be a fairly dogmatic, if not fundamentalist, version. The statement

0:02:18.960,0:02:22.920

of faith on the charity's website asserts among other things in the same

0:02:22.920,0:02:28.320

vein that "We believe that, for the salvation of lost and sinful man,

0:02:28.320,0:02:33.000

repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ result in regeneration by the

0:02:33.000,0:02:38.870

Holy Spirit and that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation."

0:02:38.870,0:02:42.270

Under current English law Samaritan's Purse

0:02:42.270,0:02:46.650

is entitled to have charitable status, with the concomitant tax relief and

0:02:46.650,0:02:52.530

other benefits that this brings. This is because the "advancement of religion" is a

0:02:52.530,0:02:58.340

recognized charitable purpose. In the 21st century, in a society in which

0:02:58.340,0:03:03.320

around half of the population is non-religious, is this situation justifiable?

0:03:03.320,0:03:08.640

I'm joined now by Megan Manson and Alistair Lichten to discuss these issues further.

0:03:08.640,0:03:13.980

Megan and Alistair, hello. Megan first, are the schools and

0:03:13.980,0:03:18.810

other organizations who send shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child aware of

0:03:18.810,0:03:21.540

the evangelical purpose for which they're being used?

0:03:21.540,0:03:23.360

(Megan Manson) Not necessarily .

0:03:23.370,0:03:28.560

Operation Christmas Child has grown more transparent about what they do and their

0:03:28.560,0:03:33.090

website actually explains it in quite a lot of detail. But, of course, the thing is

0:03:33.090,0:03:37.350

not everyone who participates in the scheme reads the website or read their

0:03:37.350,0:03:42.870

leaflets. In the cases of schools, parents simply find out that they have to help

0:03:42.870,0:03:47.100

their child fill a box of toys and that box will go to children in an

0:03:47.100,0:03:51.680
impoverished country. and they'll
understandably take that at face value,

0:03:51.680,0:03:56.520
as on the surface it seems like a nice
thing to do and a good way to teach

0:03:56.520,0:04:00.960
children about the importance of
generosity and civil responsibility.

0:04:00.960,0:04:05.430
Few of those parents are going to think
to question it. They probably wouldn't

0:04:05.430,0:04:10.280
even imagine that those toys will be used
as part of a religious missionary scheme.

0:04:10.280,0:04:15.300
(EP) What are the National Secular
Society's objections to the scheme?

0:04:15.300,0:04:20.700
(MM) Well, the main objection we have is that
it's
unethical and exploitative. So primarily

0:04:20.700,0:04:25.410
its exploiting children and families in
poor countries by putting them under

0:04:25.410,0:04:29.640
pressure to convert to fundamentalist
Christianity.
It's hard to say no to

0:04:29.640,0:04:34.830
people who come bearing gifts, especially
for one's children. Many critics have

0:04:34.830,0:04:39.660
pointed out that the scheme smacks of
colonialism. And it exploits children and

0:04:39.660,0:04:44.610
families in rich countries too. It uses their
generosity as a tool for religious conversion.

0:04:44.610,0:04:49.080

Once they find out how the
shoeboxes are being used, many

0:04:49.080,0:04:53.010
participants are rightly horrified. They
never wished to be used as the unwitting

0:04:53.010,0:04:58.650
agents in religious propaganda. And there
are other considerations, as well. We have

0:04:58.650,0:05:02.220
to think about the environmental impact
of flying tons of plastic toys across

0:05:02.220,0:05:06.360
the world every year. And then there's
the potential impacts on the local economy.

0:05:06.360,0:05:10.160
How are local vendors trying
to sell their own products supposed to

0:05:10.170,0:05:14.550
compete with a multi-million pound
scheme with this aggressive agenda and

0:05:14.550,0:05:19.260
these free handouts. And then, finally,
there's the ineffectiveness of it all.

0:05:19.260,0:05:23.730
Filling shoeboxes with plastic trinkets
to send overseas is a really inefficient

0:05:23.730,0:05:29.060
way to give to charity, monetary donations are
far more effective for really helping people.

0:05:29.060,0:05:32.010
(EP) You mentioned on your blog that
some religious charities

0:05:32.010,0:05:36.510
are less objectionable, because they
follow third sector best practice.

0:05:36.510,0:05:41.500
Could you explain what this means, and how is
it that the Samaritan's Purse are failing to
follow

0:05:41.500,0:05:45.720
third sector best practice?
(MM) Reputable charities providing

0:05:45.720,0:05:49.590
aid in developing countries are well
aware and they understand the

0:05:49.590,0:05:53.970
sensitivities involved in such activities.
And they work to ensure that

0:05:53.970,0:05:58.950
human rights and dignity is central to
their work. For example, equality is a key

0:05:58.950,0:06:03.330
part of this work. Aid must be
distributed equally and fairly. But with

0:06:03.330,0:06:07.400
Operation Christmas Child, children get
random boxes with different things inside.

0:06:07.400,0:06:10.880
And inevitably some children get
more toys or better toys than others,

0:06:10.890,0:06:16.890
which could stir up tension.
Many organizations, including international

0:06:16.890,0:06:20.880
aid charities, have expressed their
concerns about Operation Christmas Child.

0:06:20.880,0:06:24.840
Brendan Paddy of Save the Children has
criticized the scheme and said it is

0:06:24.840,0:06:28.710
dangerous when charities mix
humanitarian work with the promotion of

0:06:28.710,0:06:33.270
a particular religious or political agenda.
(EP) Does the National Secular Society

0:06:33.270,0:06:37.350
think Operation Christmas Child ought to

be abandoned altogether?

0:06:37.350,0:06:41.440
Wouldn't that be a bit harsh on children
in developing countries who might be

0:06:41.440,0:06:45.040
looking forward to a Christmas present?
(MM) Well, firstly it's worth pointing out

0:06:45.040,0:06:48.180
that many of the communities targeted
by Operation Christmas Child

0:06:48.180,0:06:51.360
don't even celebrate Christmas.
The charity targets

0:06:51.360,0:06:55.560
majority Muslim areas, which makes sense,
because the whole idea of the program is

0:06:55.560,0:07:02.580
to turn non-christians into Christians.
When we look at who's behind the

0:07:02.580,0:07:06.840
Samaritan's Purse charity, we can
understand just why this is so insidious.

0:07:06.840,0:07:11.400
The president of Samaritan's Purse
is American missionary Franklin Graham,

0:07:11.400,0:07:17.360
who is the son of the former notorious
televangelist Billy Graham.

0:07:17.360,0:07:21.660
Franklin Graham has some alarming views,
including when it comes to Muslims.

0:07:21.660,0:07:25.620
He is supportive of banning Muslims from
entering the US, and he has helped

0:07:25.620,0:07:29.760
propagate the conspiracy theory that
Barack Obama is a secret Muslim.

0:07:29.760,0:07:34.260

Bearing this in mind, his suitability as a figurehead of aid work in Islamic

0:07:34.260,0:07:37.430

countries is, well, questionable to say the least.

0:07:37.430,0:07:41.550

Samaritan's Purse does do other work, but its resources are dominated by this

0:07:41.550,0:07:47.660

Operation Christmas Child initiative. So let's take a look at its finances.

0:07:47.660,0:07:55.940

It's got an income of over £15.9 million, as of 2018, which means it's one of the richest charities

0:07:55.940,0:08:02.480

in the country. Last year it spent under £400,000 on emergency responses,

0:08:02.480,0:08:06.920

£1.4 Million on long-term development ,

0:08:06.920,0:08:11.360

just over £51,000 on other activities,

0:08:11.360,0:08:16.380

over £230,000 on their Greatest Journey indoctrination program,

0:08:16.380,0:08:20.970

and then a whopping £13 Million on Operation Christmas Child.

0:08:20.970,0:08:24.330

In other words, Samaritan's Purse spends far more of its donations on Operation

0:08:24.330,0:08:28.790

Christmas Child, and the related indoctrination programs, than anything else.

0:08:28.790,0:08:33.780

If Samaritan's Purse is serious about genuinely making a positive difference

0:08:33.780,0:08:37.620

to the lives of children in developing countries, it would make sense to ditch

0:08:37.620,0:08:43.240

the Operation Christmas Child Scheme and focus more on aid work with no religious strings attached.

0:08:43.240,0:08:47.500

(EP) What does the National Secular Society propose should be done with the money

0:08:47.500,0:08:52.000

that would otherwise go to the shoeboxes? (MM) Giving to charity is a personal choice

0:08:52.000,0:08:55.540

at the end of the day.

So whether or not one should partake in

0:08:55.550,0:09:00.260

a particular charitable activity is entirely up to the individual. The same

0:09:00.260,0:09:04.520

applies to Operation Christmas Child.

But we want to make sure that, before parents

0:09:04.520,0:09:08.780

and schools decide to contribute to this project, they are aware of exactly what

0:09:08.780,0:09:13.320

will happen when they take part, so they can make an informed choice.

0:09:13.320,0:09:18.800

We've made a few suggestions on our website about alternative appeals to Operation Christmas Child.

0:09:18.800,0:09:23.320

they include Oxfam Unwrapped and Plan UK Sponsor a Child program.

0:09:23.320,0:09:27.020

We also have information for parents and others whose school, club

0:09:27.020,0:09:30.220

or other organizations are taking part in Operation Christmas Child,

0:09:30.220,0:09:35.660
and what they can do to raise objections. (EP) Now moving on to the wider issue of

0:09:35.660,0:09:40.610
charitable uses of religion, where in the laws of England and Wales does it say

0:09:40.610,0:09:44.500
that advancement of religion is a charitable purpose?

0:09:44.500,0:09:52.100
(MM) So this is all determined by the charity law. The Charities Act 2011, which lists 13

0:09:52.100,0:09:57.620
different purposes a charity can have. Advancement of religion is one of those.

0:09:57.620,0:10:03.240
This purpose, advancement of religion, has been part of charity law in various forms

0:10:03.240,0:10:07.200
for a very long time, pretty much as long as charities have been around.

0:10:07.200,0:10:11.820
(EP) So is it time to legislate to stop the advancement of religion being

0:10:11.820,0:10:15.080
a charitable purpose?
Is it right that Christian and other

0:10:15.080,0:10:19.160
religious organizations should have to pay taxes for the work they do, even if

0:10:19.160,0:10:24.020
it involves helping people in distress?
(MM) Well, we think it really is now the time

0:10:24.020,0:10:28.100
to remove the advancements of religion from the list of charitable purposes.

0:10:28.100,0:10:32.560
The many religious charities out there that do provide a genuine public benefit and

0:10:32.560,0:10:36.600
do help people would have no difficulty in registering under a different

0:10:36.860,0:10:41.740
charitable purpose. So, for example, a Christian charity that does overseas aid work

0:10:41.740,0:10:46.100
could list under 'relief of poverty'. But organizations that exist solely to

0:10:46.100,0:10:51.080
promote religious ideology with no apparent tangible public benefit should

0:10:51.080,0:10:56.480
not be entitled to all the tax breaks and other benefits that charity status confers.

0:10:56.540,0:11:00.200
So, removing the 'advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose would

0:11:00.200,0:11:05.180
ensure all charities are treated equally, and they're all held to the same high standard,

0:11:05.180,0:11:10.380
regardless of their particular religious ethos. (EP) Alistair do you have anything to add?

0:11:10.440,0:11:13.300
(Alistair Lichten) No. I think that really covers it quite well.

0:11:13.310,0:11:19.550
I just again plug Megan's blog, which will be linked in the show notes

0:11:19.550,0:11:25.130
and the links to the other material that we have. This is the sixth year that

0:11:25.130,0:11:31.940
I've had inquiries

about Operation Christmas Child.

0:11:31.940,0:11:37.310

I'll just say, if this is going on in your school, this is an area where I've

0:11:37.310,0:11:43.070

seen schools and organizations which have done Operation Christmas Child, do

0:11:43.070,0:11:49.190

actually respond. It's possible to be constructive on this.

0:11:49.190,0:11:54.180

If your school is committed to doing Operation Christmas Child this year,

0:11:54.180,0:11:59.120

they may not necessarily abandon it this coming year, because they may have made

0:11:59.120,0:12:02.990

the arrangements. But if you bring this information to school's attention and

0:12:02.990,0:12:07.310

actually show the very clear information that's out there, I think a

0:12:07.310,0:12:10.370

lot of schools will just take a look at it and go "actually,

0:12:10.370,0:12:15.110

sorry, we didn't know enough about this. If we want to do some sort

0:12:15.110,0:12:19.400

of charitable thing around Christmas then we'll look into something that's

0:12:19.400,0:12:26.600

more ethical, more effective, more educational."

(EP) Megan and Alastair thank you very much.

0:12:26.600,0:12:34.620

(MM) Thank you.

(EP) Before we move on to our next topic we wanted

0:12:34.620,0:12:39.760

to share with you a couple of clips from the recent Bradlaugh Lecture 2019, delivered by

0:12:39.760,0:12:44.740

Andrew Moffat and entitled 'No Outsiders Reclaiming Radical Ideas in Schools'.

0:12:44.740,0:12:48.770

Andrew is an assistant head teacher who encountered fierce opposition when he

0:12:48.770,0:12:52.250

tried to teach about equality and diversity in his primary school in

0:12:52.250,0:12:56.580

Birmingham. Here's Andrew.

(Andrew Moffat) So, I'd like to show you some of

0:12:56.580,0:13:01.060

the books that we use. This is one of them. You'll be forgiven for thinking by looking

0:13:01.060,0:13:06.640

at the various MPs and protesters, that all our books are all about gay people.

0:13:06.640,0:13:10.560

I'm going to show you the books that I use, not all of them - there's 35 books that I use. -

0:13:10.560,0:13:14.260

I've based the whole scheme on this book. Actually I think this book

0:13:14.260,0:13:17.800

is absolutely brilliant. It starts the whole scheme off: Red Rockets and

0:13:17.800,0:13:21.490

Rainbow Jelly. I use this book with four-year-olds. It's about Nick and

0:13:21.490,0:13:27.860

Sue. There's Nick and there's Sue.

Nick likes red apples and Sue likes green pears.

0:13:27.860,0:13:31.330

He likes yellow socks and she likes yellow ducks.

He likes orange hair

0:13:31.330,0:13:35.260

and she likes purple hair. On every page Nick and Sue like different things.

0:13:35.260,0:13:40.940

Cats and hats and cars and dinosaurs and jelly. But last page says

0:13:40.940,0:13:45.500

that Nick likes Sue and Sue likes Nick. And that's the end of the story.

0:13:45.500,0:13:49.160

So what's the message in that story? The message is that you can like different things

0:13:49.160,0:13:52.660

and you can still be friends. It's as simple as that. And as

0:13:52.660,0:13:57.180

we grow through our school, we talk about how we're different - different skin,

0:13:57.180,0:14:01.060

different abilities, different faiths, but it all starts with apples and pears

0:14:01.060,0:14:05.020

with four-year-olds. There's a bit of work there from a four-year-old:

0:14:05.020,0:14:09.360

"We like different things. Naya likes dolls and Samaya likes cars. We're all friends."

0:14:09.360,0:14:13.390

Those are all the books that I'm using with four-year-olds.

0:14:13.390,0:14:17.580

Bless him, Roger Godsiff MP talked about this book called

0:14:17.580,0:14:22.000

"Why is gotcha gay?" I've never heard of that book.

Apparently it's in my scheme.

0:14:22.000,0:14:26.520

No, it's not. These are all the books in my scheme.

You can buy them all in Waterstones.

0:14:26.520,0:14:30.660

You'll notice that Elmer is there.

Elmer has been around schools for 30 years.

0:14:30.740,0:14:34.500

These are the books that I am using.

Now there is one book there

0:14:34.510,0:14:40.090

which is, apparently, controversial, which is a Mommy, Mama and Me. I use this

0:14:40.090,0:14:43.300

one for four-year-olds because I want children to understand that

0:14:43.300,0:14:48.730

some families have different makeups. Some families have a mum and a dad,

0:14:48.730,0:14:54.430

some have just a mum, some have just a dad, some live with their grandma or grandpa,

0:14:54.430,0:14:58.000

some have two mums, some have two dads, some live in a foster family,

0:14:58.000,0:15:01.900

All families are different.

0:15:05.260,0:15:10.680

We've been doing this for four years and it has worked fantastically, so what went wrong?

0:15:10.680,0:15:16.160

In October last year the government put out for consultation for new

0:15:16.160,0:15:19.550

RSE guidance, relationship and sex

education, and it's right they did that

0:15:19.550,0:15:25.610
because it's been 18 years since
the last one. Lots of rumors started

0:15:25.610,0:15:29.960
spreading around about what this would
mean for sex education in schools.

0:15:29.960,0:15:34.020
There's a really interesting video on YouTube
You can look it up: Dr Kate Godfrey-Faussett.

0:15:34.020,0:15:37.640
I'm sure she wont mind me
plugging her. A parent came to me in

0:15:37.640,0:15:40.760
December and said
"Mr Moffat, you've got to watch this video.

0:15:40.760,0:15:44.720
Everyone's talking about it. It's going
around the community like wildfire."

0:15:44.720,0:15:48.650
I watched it on Christmas Eve.
It ruined my Christmas, because

0:15:48.650,0:15:54.300
on the left-hand side is what this video
is saying. It's saying that the new RSE
guidelines

0:15:54.300,0:15:59.340
are going to be like this kind of stuff:
teaching four-year-olds pornography,

0:15:59.340,0:16:03.380
sexualizing young children,
their innocence is going to be destroyed,

0:16:03.380,0:16:06.920
it's a war on spirituality, it's a war on morality.
If we do nothing our

0:16:06.920,0:16:12.410
children will be lost and it's
brainwashing children. Now, suddenly, in

0:16:12.410,0:16:17.330
January, the first week back, we started
having petitions for the first time ever

0:16:17.330,0:16:22.490
about No Outsiders, about sexualizing
children "you're secularising children", and

0:16:22.490,0:16:26.720
photocopies of some of the
books that I use. And very, very

0:16:26.720,0:16:32.150
quickly people are linking No Outsiders
to sex education. Now there's no sex

0:16:32.150,0:16:35.690
in No Outsiders, there's no books
about how babies are made, no naked

0:16:35.690,0:16:40.250
bodies, nothing at all. But, because I
talk about LGBT people in four of the

0:16:40.250,0:16:45.440
books, four out of 35, it's a very easy
thing to pick on: "Look! Here's an example

0:16:45.440,0:16:53.620
of what's going to be happening in all schools."
(EP) A full video of all of the Bradlaugh
Lectures

0:16:53.620,0:16:58.160
given so far is available now
and will be in the program notes. I'm now

0:16:58.170,0:17:01.680
going to be talking to Alastair about
the latest data about faith schools

0:17:01.680,0:17:05.340
which the National Secular Society has
obtained from the Department for

0:17:05.340,0:17:09.600
Education, through a Freedom of
Information request. Alastair, could you

0:17:09.600,0:17:14.740
explain what questions you asked in your

FOI request and what information you obtained?

0:17:14.740,0:17:20.520

(AL) Thanks, Emma. So the first thing to note is these figures are for England only.

0:17:20.520,0:17:24.080

We think there are similar issues elsewhere in the UK, but just the way the data

0:17:24.090,0:17:28.530

works meant there had to be an English-only focus.

0:17:28.530,0:17:34.820

These are updated figures, so we did similar FOI requests in 2017 and 2018.

0:17:34.820,0:17:39.320

They formed a significant part of our major report on this which was

0:17:39.330,0:17:43.590

published in December, called The Choice Delusion, which really looked at how

0:17:43.590,0:17:49.020

faith schools undermine choice for many parents in England.

0:17:49.020,0:17:53.550

The basic question, which we've now asked for

0:17:53.550,0:17:56.780

the third year in a row, is how many children were assigned a faith school

0:17:56.780,0:18:02.640

after their parents requested a non-faith school. The figures show, for the

0:18:02.640,0:18:07.580

second year in a row, a rise. It's just over 20,600 .

0:18:07.580,0:18:13.640

That includes over 12,000 children sent to secondary faith schools despite

0:18:13.640,0:18:22.560

parental preference for a non-faith school, and just over 8000 sent to primary faith schools,

0:18:22.560,0:18:27.360

against their parents preferences.

Now, I think it's important to note right at the

0:18:27.360,0:18:31.620

beginning that these figures aren't definitive. But they add to the evidence

0:18:31.620,0:18:37.490

showing the many problems with the faith school choice narrative.

0:18:37.490,0:18:43.900

(EP) What is that faith school choice narrative?

(AL) Well it's the number one justification

0:18:43.900,0:18:48.480

given by many people for why we have faith-based schools. It is that

0:18:48.480,0:18:52.440

they promote choice. This is one of the things we encountered

0:18:52.440,0:18:57.060

when creating the No More Faith Schools campaign, is to say faith schools

0:18:57.060,0:19:01.460

support choice does kind of make a bit of an intrinsic sense.

0:19:01.460,0:19:06.320

Actually unpacking that and showing why that's kind of a flawed way of

0:19:06.320,0:19:10.820

looking at it. You can't say that in five seconds. You've got to bring in data.

0:19:10.820,0:19:15.580

You've got to unpack the various hidden assumptions in that.

0:19:15.580,0:19:20.450

(EP) How many of the parents in this report that you're talking about put a faith

0:19:20.450,0:19:24.920

school as their second choice?

(AL) We don't actually know the exact data on how

0:19:24.920,0:19:29.510

many put a faith school as their second choice. Parents, depending on which area they

0:19:29.510,0:19:34.760

live in, can make three to six choices.

I think five is a quite typical number.

0:19:34.760,0:19:41.520

We know that over 4300 people in September 2019, that's where these figures are from,

0:19:41.520,0:19:46.520

were assigned faith schools, despite no faith schools being anywhere in

0:19:46.520,0:19:53.030

their preferences. Again, it's important to unpack the

0:19:53.030,0:19:58.370

data behind these figures, and to consider why some people might make the

0:19:58.370,0:20:03.710

choice of a faith school within their six choices, despite not actually

0:20:03.710,0:20:09.200

wanting a faith school. I've certainly dealt with casework with parents who say

0:20:09.200,0:20:13.280

well we really didn't want a faith school, we didn't get into any of

0:20:13.280,0:20:17.360

our non faith schools, we were assigned this C of E school that was our third choice.

0:20:17.360,0:20:21.260

Well, why did you put it as a third choice?

Many parents think if you have the

0:20:21.260,0:20:25.340

option for six choices that you need to put them all in. Parents might say

0:20:25.360,0:20:29.300

"Oh, I really don't want this faith school but I definitely don't want a school

0:20:29.300,0:20:35.720

that's five or six miles away."

Equally, parents may put a faith school as

0:20:35.720,0:20:38.900

one of their choices because they just don't have any other options.

0:20:38.900,0:20:43.880

If you have one school in the village your choices are pretty limited, and that's

0:20:43.880,0:20:49.520

the other side of the story that we we went

0:20:49.520,0:20:55.310

through in The Choice Delusion report.

(EP) Is there any possibility that, say, parents

0:20:55.310,0:20:59.300

might want to send their children to a faith school but there there weren't any

0:20:59.300,0:21:03.530

faith schools in the area?

(AL) Yeah. Equally, we can we can look at that

0:21:03.530,0:21:09.200

data, so there will be, within within that 20,600,

0:21:09.200,0:21:12.680

there's going to be obviously some anomalies either way. There will be

0:21:12.680,0:21:15.759

many people who put a faith school despite not wanting

0:21:15.759,0:21:21.100

one, and there will be some parents who

want a faith school but I haven't put
0:21:21.100,0:21:25.990
one as options. The difference in funding
for transport to faith schools means
0:21:25.990,0:21:31.269
that if a parent absolutely, positively
wants a faith school, even if it's
0:21:31.269,0:21:35.769
nowhere near their nearest school, it's
quite a long way away, they can, generally
0:21:35.769,0:21:38.799
speaking, put that as a preference and
are likely to get it if they meet the
0:21:38.799,0:21:45.399
faith-based criteria. Even it means
going past six suitable non-faith schools,
0:21:45.399,0:21:49.210
the council will probably cover the transport
for that.
(EP) But that doesn't
0:21:49.210,0:21:53.480
apply if a parent wants a non-faith school?
(AL) In practice, no.
0:21:53.480,0:21:57.780
(EP) What are the National Secular Society's
main objections to the fact that parents are
0:21:57.780,0:22:01.800
often effectively forced to send their
children to faith schools?
0:22:01.800,0:22:08.139
(AL) Well I think our main objection is this
sort of this perverse thing, that you hear all
0:22:08.139,0:22:11.529
the time, about "faith schools
promote choice", and that
0:22:11.529,0:22:16.720
ignores all people who have no choice
but a faith school, or are not able to

0:22:16.720,0:22:21.779
choose their local school because of
religious discrimination in admissions.
0:22:21.779,0:22:26.049
You have the right to raise your
children in accordance with your beliefs.
0:22:26.049,0:22:31.929
Now that doesn't entitle you to a faith
school but it certainly should entitle
0:22:31.929,0:22:35.549
you to a school that doesn't go
against your religious beliefs.
0:22:35.549,0:22:40.480
In The Choice Delusion report we
had around, I think, thirty short stories.
0:22:40.480,0:22:46.140
Case studies and parents are saying
things like "We're not a religious family.
0:22:46.140,0:22:50.019
So if you are a religious
family and you send your child to a
0:22:50.020,0:22:53.800
faith school and they're
reinforcing that belief, that's fine.
0:22:53.800,0:22:58.800
If you don't share those beliefs then,
as a parent, how do
0:22:58.809,0:23:03.580
you actively counter, how do you deal
with your child being taken to
0:23:03.580,0:23:07.960
school and taught something which goes
against your very fundamental values?"
0:23:07.960,0:23:10.179
That's an experience that
just doesn't happen
0:23:10.179,0:23:15.759
if your child is sent to a non-faith school,
a community ethos school, a religiously

0:23:15.759,0:23:23.649
non-directive school. No child is sent to a community school, or shouldn't be, and

0:23:23.649,0:23:28.360
taught that their beliefs, that they're raising their family wrong.

0:23:28.360,0:23:33.250
Striving for a neutral, inclusive atmosphere doesn't

0:23:33.250,0:23:37.990
disadvantage anyone in that same way. (EP) So the point you're making is

0:23:37.990,0:23:45.070
that non-faith schools do not impose a particular direction on children, whereas

0:23:45.070,0:23:49.659
faith schools do? (AL) Yes and obviously they vary to the degree to

0:23:49.659,0:23:54.730
which they impose that faith direction. Non faith schools aren't imposing

0:23:54.730,0:23:59.799
non faith. It's the idea of

0:23:59.799,0:24:03.820
faith and non faith are opposites. It's a bit weird, where actually

0:24:03.820,0:24:07.120
faith is one end of the scale and there's no other end of the scale, and

0:24:07.120,0:24:10.980
you've got community ethos schools in the middle. (EP) Because, with no faith

0:24:10.980,0:24:14.860
there's simply nothing to be imposed. How far are parents really

0:24:14.860,0:24:18.220

concerned about sending their children to a faith school? Do you have any

0:24:18.220,0:24:25.720
specific data or feedback on this issue? (AL) Well it's an area of growing concern,

0:24:25.720,0:24:30.600
partly as the country becomes much more religiously diverse and

0:24:30.610,0:24:35.230
increasingly non-religious. Obviously parents will tend to be towards the

0:24:35.230,0:24:39.789
younger end of the population, their children obviously even younger, so this

0:24:39.789,0:24:45.490
is an age group that are overwhelmingly increasingly likely to be non-religious,

0:24:45.490,0:24:50.710
to not have religion as part of their life, and don't expect religion to be a

0:24:50.710,0:24:56.320
central part of any other public service which they wish they wish to access.

0:24:56.320,0:25:02.220
We featured dozens, around 30 case studies and short stories in

0:25:02.230,0:25:06.580
the report, of people in this position. It's something that regularly comes up in

0:25:06.580,0:25:12.010
comments in response to our faith schools petition. So, yes, it's

0:25:12.010,0:25:15.639
clearly an issue that affects many people. Even taking the very

0:25:15.640,0:25:22.060
smallest end of the scale of these figures, this is around 4,300 pupils,

0:25:22.060,0:25:26.080
who have put all of their choices
as non faith schools, which

0:25:26.080,0:25:30.440
would seem to indicate that
the parents want a non faith school,

0:25:30.440,0:25:35.500
thousands of children possibly
tens of thousands being sent to faith

0:25:35.500,0:25:40.450
schools against their wishes, tens of
thousands more with maybe no other

0:25:40.450,0:25:45.360
choice, this is serious issue that is
just not being grappled with.

0:25:45.360,0:25:50.600
(EP) Could you just say very quickly
a bit about the Choice Delusion Report?

0:25:50.600,0:25:55.400
(AL) These figures should be seen, I think,
as an update.

0:25:55.400,0:25:59.210
These are the 2019 figures, and
the Choice Delusion Report looked at the

0:25:59.210,0:26:05.610
2017 and 2018 figures. The Choice Delusion
Report
I think was pretty groundbreaking,

0:26:05.610,0:26:11.519
because the government have been
asked over the years various times by

0:26:11.519,0:26:16.200
different MPs "Do you have an
estimate of how many people don't have a

0:26:16.200,0:26:20.220
choice about a faith school? Do you have an
estimate of how many are sent to faith

0:26:20.220,0:26:23.879
schools against their parents wishes?"

The government just haven't made any

0:26:23.879,0:26:28.619
estimate, so the NSS analyzing this data,
the research that went

0:26:28.619,0:26:33.809
into The Choice Delusion Report, this was the
first of its type of any scale to estimate,

0:26:33.809,0:26:38.180
a pretty good estimate, of what the
figures are.

0:26:38.180,0:26:42.059
The analysis we've done now for the third
year running on this, showing it's a

0:26:42.059,0:26:45.659
problem affecting tens of thousands of
families,
not being done by other organizations,

0:26:45.660,0:26:50.780
certainly not being done by the government.
(EP) So, moving from the statistics

0:26:50.780,0:26:54.779
to the practice, how far in
practice do faith schools really impose

0:26:54.780,0:26:59.560
a particular religion on students from a
non-religious background?

0:26:59.560,0:27:06.239
(AL) This is something that varies quite widely.
I never, as an anti faith school campaigner, sit

0:27:06.240,0:27:13.380
and pretend that all faith schools are
9 to 5 indoctrination.

0:27:13.380,0:27:17.680
No-one pretends it's all schools at that
that sort of level. Everyone acknowledges

0:27:17.690,0:27:23.999
there is a wide range of practice,
in terms of how aggressively this religious

0:27:23.999,0:27:30.029

ethos is promoted in schools. But faith schools all exist to promote a religious

0:27:30.029,0:27:35.279

ethos, and they all do it to some extent. There's a term 'indoctrination' which

0:27:35.279,0:27:41.369

I think can put some people off - scary word. But I think of

0:27:41.369,0:27:47.549

it as a scale. You've got inculcation, immersion and indoctrination.

0:27:47.549,0:27:53.549

Inculcation is that softer pushing, guiding people towards a religious

0:27:53.549,0:27:57.930

ethos, or at least a positive view of religion. This idea

0:27:57.930,0:28:03.510

that faith schools have of immersion: so faith schools may not be trying to turn

0:28:03.510,0:28:08.820

children into members of that faith, but they're trying to create this idea that

0:28:08.820,0:28:13.980

the world is a very religious world and surround them, immerse them, in these

0:28:13.980,0:28:19.080

religious ideas, to make what is just not normal for most families. It's not

0:28:19.080,0:28:23.730

saying there's anything wrong with it, but just isn't the normal experience of the

0:28:23.730,0:28:27.690

vast majority of people in the country, this very religious community,

0:28:27.690,0:28:32.750

and trying to make that seem as if that's normal.

0:28:32.750,0:28:41.040

Often C of E schools in the past were not seen as particularly faith

0:28:41.040,0:28:47.640

promotional. Often you saw C of E faith schools were kind of faith

0:28:47.640,0:28:51.180

schools by a sort of a historical accident. But there's definitely been, in recent

0:28:51.180,0:28:55.660

years, an increased focus on promoting their faith within those schools.

0:28:55.660,0:29:00.840

(EP) Do you have any particular examples?

(AL) Yes. We've got case studies and some of the

0:29:00.840,0:29:07.200

testimonials on the No More Faith Schools site from teachers and governor's at C of E faith

0:29:07.200,0:29:12.900

schools about how there's the pressure to promote a religious ethos. I see

0:29:12.900,0:29:18.300

it a lot in the case work, particularly examples from

0:29:18.300,0:29:24.280

collective worship etc, that parents might say "This was the only school in the village.

0:29:24.380,0:29:28.760

It was a C of E faith school. I went to

0:29:28.760,0:29:31.410

a C of E faith school when I was young that didn't seem very religious. I was

0:29:31.410,0:29:36.810

actually surprised by just how religious it is." I've chatted

0:29:36.810,0:29:40.020

about the subject with my wife. She

attended a C of E faith school that was

0:29:40.020,0:29:46.500

in some ways less religious than my community school. The harm of

0:29:46.500,0:29:51.390

this ethos being promoted - often I think, the C of E in particular, they

0:29:51.390,0:29:54.660

don't really believe that people are non-religious. There's this sort of

0:29:54.660,0:29:59.760

refusal to believe the majority who say they're not religious, and so

0:29:59.760,0:30:05.160

people are sort of seen as Christian by default. So promoting and imposing a

0:30:05.160,0:30:10.000

Christian ethos on people is seen as kind of more neutral and fair.

0:30:10.060,0:30:12.900

(EP) Do you have a particular example of that?

0:30:12.900,0:30:17.730

(AL) Well, we recently wrote up some figures from a survey of teachers which

0:30:17.730,0:30:21.000

very interesting. It incidentally showed a clear majority of

0:30:21.000,0:30:24.940

teachers supporting an end to new faith schools.

(EP) Is this secondary or primary?

0:30:24.940,0:30:28.820

(AL) This is across secondary and primary. We'll link it in the show notes.

0:30:28.820,0:30:33.440

One of the less headliney figures in that actually I found really

0:30:33.450,0:30:37.470

interesting. This was, again, a survey of school teachers in

0:30:37.470,0:30:43.140

England, and it showed that 23% would find it acceptable for a

0:30:43.140,0:30:47.400

child from a non-religious family to be allocated a place against their will at a

0:30:47.400,0:30:53.460

Catholic school, but only 17% would find acceptable for a

0:30:53.460,0:30:58.050

Christian family to be allocated a place against their will at Sikh school. So

0:30:58.050,0:31:00.810

there's clearly a sort of religious hierarchy if you're a

0:31:00.810,0:31:05.060

different religion, obviously having certain religious imposed on you.

0:31:05.060,0:31:10.200

We helped a case where there were twenty families assigned a

0:31:10.200,0:31:13.440

place at a Sikh School against their wishes. People sort of see that

0:31:13.440,0:31:18.120

clearly that's wrong.

We've examples with an Islamic

0:31:18.120,0:31:21.630

family assigned placed at Jewish orthodox school, and people see clearly that's

0:31:21.630,0:31:26.820

wrong. But then we had an example a few years ago with, I think, it was six families.

0:31:26.820,0:31:31.560

They were assigned a C of E faith school against their wishes, and the attitude we

0:31:31.560,0:31:35.940
saw there was that "It's a Christian country.
You should have to just put up with that."

0:31:35.940,0:31:38.610
(EP) In fact this leads on to my next question
which was going

0:31:38.610,0:31:42.630
to be what about parents of one religion
being forced to send their children to a

0:31:42.630,0:31:47.360
faith school of another religion.
Is this an issue? But it seems that

0:31:47.360,0:31:52.440
there is a difference between the
move from one religion to another, as

0:31:52.440,0:31:57.840
opposed to from non religion to a religion.
(AP) Yeah. It should be said that

0:31:57.840,0:32:03.720
because there are many families, if
they're not religious, perceive, and in

0:32:03.720,0:32:08.610
some cases accurately, that Christian
faith schools, while less aggressive at

0:32:08.610,0:32:12.540
promoting the ethos, some think
"Oh. I'll be willing to put up with that.

0:32:12.540,0:32:16.740
That doesn't seem as bad."
But it's certainly a growing issue, and that's

0:32:16.740,0:32:22.060
because minority faith schools,
by which I mean Sikh,Hindu,

0:32:22.060,0:32:27.820
Islamic, Jewish and smaller Christian sects,
they're even less popular among people

0:32:27.820,0:32:32.380
who don't share the faith than
other larger faith schools,

0:32:32.380,0:32:36.280
which means they're very often likely to
be undersubscribed.

0:32:36.280,0:32:40.930
So if you've got an area where lots of schools
are

0:32:40.930,0:32:47.830
stretched for places and you've got one
minority faith school that's

0:32:47.830,0:32:50.980
undersubscribed, it's much more
likely that you might

0:32:50.980,0:32:55.810
end up being assigned there.
(EP) So, for example, if you're a non religious
person

0:32:55.810,0:32:59.860
in an area where the other schools are
oversubscribed you might end up being

0:32:59.860,0:33:05.110
assigned to a Sikh school?
(AL) Yeah. I think that's in terms of

0:33:05.110,0:33:09.270
single cases, Sikh schools are one
of the one of the biggest examples.

0:33:09.270,0:33:12.970
You have these schools that just
really are not attractive to people who

0:33:12.970,0:33:16.360
don't in any way share their
faith. So you have either people

0:33:16.360,0:33:22.630
traveling from a long way away which
disrupts the balance in other

0:33:22.630,0:33:26.320
schools around the area, so people in
other schools don't get to have Sikh

0:33:26.320,0:33:30.130

friends in the playground, because there's a pressure for Sikh kids to go

0:33:30.130,0:33:34.840
to this one faith school.
(EP) What is the National Secular Society doing to

0:33:34.840,0:33:38.740
campaign against the insufficient provision of non faith schools I think?

0:33:38.740,0:33:43.620
(AL) I think research like this is really important, continuing to publish

0:33:43.620,0:33:48.440
this quite groundbreaking report, and then working every year to keep it up to date.

0:33:48.440,0:33:51.580
I think we're the only organization that's actually publishing such

0:33:51.580,0:33:56.180
estimates. We're the only ones doing this particular research.

0:33:56.180,0:34:01.060
Our No More Faith Schools campaign and the idea that we were to challenge any new faith

0:34:01.060,0:34:06.850
school proposal is important there.
The report contained a series of

0:34:06.850,0:34:12.100
recommendations for the DfE and for local authorities and we've continued to

0:34:12.100,0:34:16.260
raise these issues with local authorities and Department for Education.

0:34:16.260,0:34:22.810
We encourage them to monitor these issues and to plan new schools to

0:34:22.810,0:34:26.890
address them, to set up a

methodology, through this report

0:34:26.890,0:34:30.610
it's a methodology, which allows us to provide some data when responding to

0:34:30.610,0:34:35.120
consultations saying that this proposed new faith school is not

0:34:35.120,0:34:42.260
necessary. We've made recommendations which require a bit of policy change,

0:34:42.260,0:34:45.860
a bit of change in thinking. We've made other recommendations which do require

0:34:45.860,0:34:51.830
legal changes, which we need to campaign for, and work for over time, to make it easier

0:34:51.830,0:34:56.510
for a school community to downgrade or to remove religious ethos, to make the

0:34:56.510,0:35:01.160
school more inclusive. We'd like there to be a secular entitlement of some sort,

0:35:01.160,0:35:06.380
at the minimum to have every child have the the option of a community ethos school.

0:35:06.380,0:35:11.160
(EP) And finally, what can people do if they're affected by this issue?

0:35:11.160,0:35:17.300
(AL) If you're affected by this issue let us know.
There'll be a link in the show notes to our

0:35:17.300,0:35:22.610
Choice Delusion page where there's a form to get in contact, whether you

0:35:22.610,0:35:25.790
just want to share your story of this experience or you're actively

0:35:25.790,0:35:30.290
looking for some help with it.
I'd encourage you to share the report

0:35:30.290,0:35:36.110
with your MP. All MPs received a
copy of the report, but we have a

0:35:36.110,0:35:39.920
template letter. So sending an email
to them saying "Here - this report is

0:35:39.920,0:35:45.310
important. Take a look at it."
helps raise it back up their agenda.

0:35:45.310,0:35:49.370
Support the No More Faith Schools campaign,
particularly if there's a new faith

0:35:49.370,0:35:55.730
school proposed in your area. Less
glamorous, but donate and become a
member

0:35:55.730,0:36:00.230
of the National Secular Society,
because research like this does take a

0:36:00.230,0:36:06.020
lot of time and effort, and the ability
to focus on issues. If you can support

0:36:06.020,0:36:10.040
the NSS that's really great and helps us
to continue doing this into the future.

0:36:10.040,0:36:17.350
(EP) Alastair Lichten, thank you very much
(AL) Cheers.

0:36:17.350,0:36:23.380
(EP) That was Episode 16 of the National
Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:36:23.380,0:36:26.440
If you would like to help us
challenge religious privilege and

0:36:26.440,0:36:32.180
support freedom of and from religion in

Britain today, why not become a member of
the NSS?

0:36:32.180,0:36:38.120
Full details are on our website
at secularism.org.uk/podcast

0:36:38.120,0:36:42.040
If you liked this podcast you can
find further episodes on the website

0:36:42.050,0:36:48.580
along with more information about the
topics discussed. Thanks for listening.