

THE CONTEMPORARY FAITH SCHOOL DEBATE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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In June 2010 the introduction of 'free schools' was announced, highlighting the government's continued drive for greater choice and diversity in school education in the UK. One of the major debating points has been the recognition of the traditional and contemporary role of faith schools. In this article Dr Stephen McKinney attempts to explore the parameters of some of the key strands of the contemporary faith schools debate, including: state funding for faith schools; faith schools, religious autonomy and the rights of the child; faith schools and Christianity; and faith schools and social cohesion.

Introduction

On 18 June, 2010, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education for England and Wales announced the introduction of 'free schools' – schools that will have academy freedoms including freedom from following the national curriculum. The aim is to enhance greater choice in school education by creating more state-funded schools that would be run independently by teachers and parents (Department of Education, 2010; Gove, 2010; Paton, 2010). There has been a mixed response to this initiative (despite initial interest from over 700 schools, only 25 have been granted initial approval), but it highlights the continuing government drive for greater choice and diversity in school education in the United Kingdom (BBC News, 2010; Gabbat, 2010; Shepherd, 2010). One of the major debating points in this era of choice has been the recognition of the traditional and contemporary role of faith schools and the potential further growth and development of these schools. This would seem an appropriate juncture to review the contemporary faith schools debate in the UK.

The scope of this article will primarily be focused on faith schools in the United Kingdom that are partially or fully state-funded. The faith school debate in the UK is complicated by the increasing variety of faith schooling

that has emerged since the late 1990s: Christian and Jewish schools are now augmented by Hindu, Sikh and Muslim schools (Jackson, 2004). The debate is further complicated by the increase in denominational schools within particular religions, so the range of Christian schools in England now includes the long established Catholic and Church of England schools but also Orthodox and Seventh Day Adventist schools (Gardner, 2005).

There are different models of funding – some faith schools remain privately funded, but many are partially or completely state-funded. In England, the majority of Catholic, Jewish and Church of England schools receive some form of state funding, while, by contrast, the majority of Muslim schools are independent (over 120 schools) (Tinker, 2009). Currently, the vast majority of Catholic schools are voluntary aided and the Church of England schools are a combination of voluntary aided and voluntary controlled (Catholic Education Service). In voluntary aided schools, the Church has custodial trustee status; there is state funding for running costs, but not all capital building costs. The religious education and worship will reflect the distinctiveness of the school. In voluntary controlled schools the church has no majority on the governing body, the state funding covers running costs and capital costs. The religious education is based on an agreed programme, but the worship will reflect

the Church tradition (Church of England, Schools and the Church of England: Church schools).

There are contrasting and sometimes polarised positions adopted in support and in opposition to faith schooling (Morris, 2008; Marples, 2006). Faith schools have become increasingly popular. As would be expected, many members of religious communities support faith schools, though some prefer that the children be integrated in community schools (e.g. some members of Muslim communities) (Parker-Jenkins *et al.*, 2005). The popularity of faith schools, however, has extended to many families who do not share the same denomination, faith (or even hold a faith view) of the faith school, for example, some Jewish schools in England have been 'overwhelmed by applications' from non-Jewish families (DCSF, 2007; Glaser, 2010). There is also significant focus on recent government support for faith schools in Scotland, England and Wales, as represented in documents such as *Faith in the System* that emphasises the positive contribution of faith schools in England (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). It is clear, nevertheless, that not all members of the government or other political parties support faith schools and there is strong, concerted and very persistent opposition to faith schools from bodies such as the British Humanist Association, the National Secular League, the Accord coalition

and some prominent academics (Lipsett, 2008). Professor Richard Dawkins, a well-known critic of faith schools, recently presented a widely publicised television programme in the UK (18 August, 2010) arguing passionately for an end to state funding for faith schools (Channel 4).

This short article will attempt to explore the parameters of some of the key strands of the contemporary faith schools debate. Initially the article will outline the nature and features of faith schools. The article will further explore the following key strands in the contemporary debate: state funding for faith schools; faith schools, rational autonomy and the rights of the child; faith schools and divisiveness and faith schools and social cohesion. These key strands tend to be inter-connected and cut across various academic disciplines (philosophy, education, sociology and religion).

Features of faith schools

Much is written about faith schools in the press and in academic literature, but it is paradoxical that there is limited knowledge of the nature and distinctiveness of faith schools (Lawton and Cairns, 2005). It is important to understand how faith schools conceptualise and construct themselves, articulate their identity for the internal and external forum and attempt to live out this identity on a daily basis. Major denominations in Christianity, Judaism and Islam believe that the parents have the responsibility to be the first educators in faith and the religious community and faith schools work in partnership with the parents (Miller, 2001; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007). The faith schools will be conceived as some kind of synthesis of educational and theological (or religious) aims. The balancing in this synthesis can enable concordance with other forms of schooling or can create a (varying) degree of epistemological space between the faith school and other schools. If the faith school overemphasises the educational at the expense of the theological, the faith school can lose the distinctiveness of

the faith dimension. Some Catholic academics have anxieties that this has been a danger for contemporary Catholic schools in England (Grace, 2002; Morris, 2008). If the faith school overemphasises the theological or religious, the faith school can compromise the educational. There are concerns that this imbalance can be discerned in some of the more conservative Jewish and Muslim schools (Short, 2003; Jackson, 2004).

Nomenclature of the faith school will often be important as this presents a public statement about the nature of the school (e.g. St Cyprian's Greek Orthodox Primary School, Surrey; Guru Nanak Sikh V/A Primary School, Middlesex). Similarly, there can be close attention to the display of signs, symbols, iconography (where appropriate) and pictorial representations that pertain to the faith. These are all thought to help the visual identity for the faith school that helps to create a faith environment (Meer, 2007). Within this faith environment, there will be a programme of shared worship and prayer (often daily prayer). The relevant religious festivals, feast and fast days will be observed, or at least recognised (Board of Deputies; McCreery *et al.*, 2007). There may be a link with, or even preparation for, rites of passage or initiation (Archdiocese of Glasgow). Faith schools often have a distinctive form of religious education, focussed primarily, though not necessarily exclusively, on their own faith. Normally there will be close links with the local faith community and the priest, rabbi or Imam may have a chaplaincy/spiritual advisor role or even teach religious classes. The leadership of the faith school will be important. The head of the school will be expected to be a person with a strong personal and public commitment to the faith (Johnson, 2006). This will also apply to other members of the leadership team and, where applicable, other members of the teaching staff, but especially the religious education teachers, who will be expected to teach and model the faith. Interestingly, a number of faiths in England expect teachers from their tradition to witness to the faith in non-faith schools (e.g. Muslim and Catholic

teachers) (Open Society Institute, 2005; Morris, 2008).

State funding for faith schools

Christian, or Christian-influenced, schools of different denominations (e.g. Church of England, non-conformist; Catholic; Episcopalian) pre-dated the mass compulsory state-funded schooling that was introduced between the mid and the late 19th century in the UK (and in most other English-speaking countries) (Miller, 2000; Lankshear, 2007; Anderson, 2008). Historically, some of these Christian schools developed from Christian churches serving the educational needs of children within a Christian context (Church of England, non-conformist). Others were founded by immigrant communities to maintain a distinctive religious and cultural identity and were perceived to offer greater potential for social mobility, for example, Catholic schools in Scotland, England and Wales; this continues to be part of the rationale for some newer forms of faith school (e.g. Muslim schools in England) (Hewer, 2001; Meer, 2007; Gallagher, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2003). As the governing bodies in the UK moved towards national standardisation of school education, the Christian schools (and Jewish schools in England) negotiated various levels of state funding - partial in England and Wales; full state funding in Scotland by 1918. The Christian schools perceived the results of these negotiations in terms of maintaining forms of Christian education in a climate of increasingly liberal ideas (Fitzpatrick, 2003). Some historians have interpreted this as a means by which the Churches could retain a form of social control - a social control that was being transferred increasingly to the state (Miller, 2000).

As has been discussed above, there is significant state funding for faith schools in England, Wales and Scotland. This, however, raises a key question: is it the role of the state in the 21st century to fund faith schooling? (Judge, 2001) This would, of course, depend on how the role of the 'state' is understood. The British Humanist Association and the National Secular League argue that

the state should not fund faith schools because they believe the state should be a secular state that is completely separated from organised religion and the influence of anti-rational religious ideas and morality. The state, complying with the European Convention of Human Rights Article 9, is legally bound to respect religious beliefs and defend the rights of individuals to practise religion (Council of Europe, 2002).¹ The British Humanist Association and National Secular League argue that this compliance should not extend to active support of the mission or maintenance of specific religious groups by assisting them in the education in the faith of their young (suspected to be indoctrinatory practices) with substantial financial support from state funds (British Humanist Association, National Secular League; Pring, 2005).

The religious communities who support faith schooling will argue that the secular state is more of an aspiration than an actuality, and that there is, and should be, engagement between the state and organised religion, recognising, for example, the growth of the multi-religious society in tandem with multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. Further, they will argue that members of religious groups are taxpayers and contribute to state funds and will refer to the European Declaration on Human Rights, first protocol – Article 2 that 'the state shall respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (Council of Europe, 2002). Andrew Morris (2008) helpfully points out that as far as the UK is concerned this Article is subject to a reservation: 'only so far as it is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure'. Those who promote faith schools will consider them a reasonable expense that defends their rights and ensures a greater democratic inclusion. Those who oppose faith schools will deem them to be an unreasonable and unnecessary expense that privileges parents and religious groups and creates divisiveness.

This issue can be difficult to resolve, partly because it is rooted in opposing ideological positions on the relationship of the state with organised religion, but also because the government may not always perceive itself as promoting and operating within a strictly secular state, despite pressure from the British Humanists and Secular League. Why does the state continue to fund state schools in the UK? There are a number of reasons that are cited: historical legacy of the existence of faith schools; faith schools have a successful ethos; faith schools appear to have enhanced social capital and higher attainment in education; coherence with neoliberal policy of facilitating parental choice and recognition of the importance of religion in lives of members of the state (Jackson, 2004, Gamarnikow and Green, 2005, DCSF, 2007). It may also be a case of political expediency in response to the popularity of faith schools within and, critically, beyond the religious communities.

Faith schools, rational autonomy and the rights of the child

The ideal of liberal education is an education that promotes and fosters rational autonomy – children are provided with the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills and exercise their right to think autonomously, and live according to their own ideas and values (with the caveat that this should not harm others or interfere with the common good) (Brighouse, 2005).

The American public school system is often referenced as a model of liberal education and the fostering of rational autonomy. There is a strong suspicion, by contrast, that there is a high risk of suppression of rational autonomy and the possibility of indoctrination in a faith school (Marples, 2006). Brighouse (2005), however, questions if rational autonomy is as manifest in the American public schools as is presumed. He points to disquieting trends such as uncritical acceptance of consumerism, an increase in the affirmation of patriotism and 'slavish conformist loyalty to school and neighbourhood'. Effectively he questions the openness of any school in America to the principles and practice

of rational autonomy. A related line of argumentation is focussed on the privileging of parental rights over the rights of the child. The parents choose the faith school for the child, but Mason (2005) argues that the views of the child are not considered and supports the view of the Humanist Philosophers' Group that the state should not assist parents and faith communities in inculcating religious beliefs. Marples adds that children, after all, have an integrity and moral status of their own (Marples, 2006). The British Humanist Association suggests there is a fundamental conflict in interpretation of legislation on human rights: the First protocol, Article 2 (European Declaration on Human Rights) quoted above may be in conflict with Article 13, Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1989, that 'the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to speak, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds'. There is also an interesting clash of values here: the religious responsibility and right of the parents to educate the children in the faith and the liberal aspiration to fostering rational autonomy and critical reflection and ensuring children's rights. Those who support faith schools argue that the rationale and nature of a faith school aim to create and support a strong faith culture and identity, but this does not necessarily preclude opportunities for children to engage in critical reflection of their religious beliefs.

McLaughlin (1984, 1990) states that the progression towards rational autonomy is a gradual process and parents should be expected to provide 'primary cultures' for the development of rationality, an essential component of any education. These primary cultures can include religious beliefs that can be stable in the sense that they can be open to subsequent challenge, thus respecting the rights of the child. Marples suspects that McLaughlin is over-optimistic about the openness of religious communities, and faith schools, to allow young people to challenge religious beliefs (2006). This continuing debate raises some intriguing questions about the

nature and operation of this gradual progress by which parents and faith schools can introduce critical reflection (MacMullan, 2007).

Faith schools and divisiveness

The question of the potential divisiveness of faith schools can be construed in three ways: social divisiveness; religious divisiveness; attitudes and beliefs that create, or promote a separate identity (Judge, 2001, Haistead and McLaughlin, 2005).² Faith schools separate children from other children physically and often draw from a wider catchment, but all schools have a limit to the extent of their physical environment and geographical catchment area, and the ideal of the children attending the locally appointed school in the UK has become blurred by the increase in exercise of parental choice, the growth of specialist schools and the continuation of the independent school sector. Faith schools can be perceived to separate children on grounds of religion or denomination and the consequences are that children of different religions are not educated together and, thus, are unable to learn from each other and about each other. Faith schools argue, in their defence, that their aim to create a faith community and help children strengthen their identity is not necessarily exclusivist. Many, like the Church of England, state explicitly that they are open to admitting children of other denominations/faiths (The Church of England, Schools and the Church of England: Church Schools). The vast majority of Catholic schools in Scotland include non-Catholic children (Scottish Catholic Education Service: Catholic Schools).

This openness, however, may be exercised more readily when there are insufficient numbers of children of the faith being admitted to the school. When there are sufficient numbers, there can be serious problems as parents of other denominations, faiths (or no faith) strive to have their child admitted to the school, and there may even evolve stricter and

invidious policy on what constitutes membership of the faith, creating an internal divisiveness (Rocker, 2010). The recent example of the controversy over admissions to the JFS (Jewish Free School), London, demonstrates this emerging problem for some Jewish schools. The school attempted to restrict admission to those whose mother was classified as an ethnic Jew, thus debaring those whose mother had converted to Judaism. This was ruled by the Supreme Court to be racial discrimination: faith schools may continue to use religious criteria for admission but not racial criteria (BBC News 2009; Garner, 2009).

There is also anxiety that the religious education in some faith schools in the voluntary aided sector, by focusing primarily on one faith, is too limited in its scope and there is little time devoted to the study of other religions and non-religious world views (Leach, 2010). This is not conducive to a broader education in religion and a greater knowledge and understanding of other faiths and other worldviews (Feinberg, 2006; Law, 2006). There are a number of ways in which faith schools attempt to respond to this anxiety. One response is to emphasise that the approach is more inclusive than is presumed. The Church of England is quite explicit that it ensures that the major world religions are taught in the religious education classes in all Church of England schools whether voluntary controlled (which use a common RE syllabus) or voluntary aided schools (these tend to use a diocesan RE syllabus) (Church of England: Frequently asked questions about church schools). An alternative, and possibly less convincing, response is to emphasise the positive nature of a more exclusive approach. Some of those who support Muslims schools in the UK claim the focus on Islam (not just confined to religious education) in their schools is positive because: it ensures a more accurate representation of the faith; it assists young Muslims to integrate faith and life and be integrated in contemporary UK and it is the early stage of the education of potential religious leaders (Meer, 2007).

Faith schools and social cohesion

The more extreme version of this potential divisiveness argument is the accusation that faith schools can foster religious and cultural identities that are alienating, inhibit social cohesion and are detrimental to the common good. Faith schools counter claim that they educate children to be good citizens and to contribute to the common good, but critics and opponents of faith schools use a number of examples to substantiate this accusation. The example of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and the historical, divisive separation between Catholic schools and non-Catholic schools has been commonly used (NB there are now 61 integrated schools of 18,000 pupils that contain a 'reasonable number of pupils' from both communities) (Jackson, 2004; Marples, 2006; Northern Ireland Direct Government Service). The Northern Ireland scenario is not helpful as the schools may be a symptom of sectarianism but are not necessarily a cause and it is highly questionable that the dismantling of separate schools would resolve the residual conflicts that are rooted in much deeper cultures of geographical segregation and alienation (Gallagher, 2005).

There is a parallel, predominantly media-based, discourse surrounding the relationship between Catholic schools and sectarianism in Scotland (Gray, 2006, Linklater, 2010). However, it is important to note that the Labour Scottish government (1999-2007) did not identify Catholic schools as one of the causes or sites of sectarian attitudes or activities in its high profile anti-sectarian initiatives including its Action Plan on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2006). The leader of the coalition government (2007-present) has publicly celebrated Scottish Catholic schools as an 'integral and highly successful part of public education in Scotland' (Salmond, 2008).

In England, the discourse has been fuelled by the terrorist attacks of 2001 and 2005, catalysts for Islamophobia, and has become focussed on a dual suspicion. First, there is suspicion about

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of Muslim Schools: Schools Linking Programme). Although *Faith in the System* is restricted to England, there are comparable initiatives elsewhere. The Catholic schools in Northern Ireland stress their openness to 'working in partnership' with other schools (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education). Scottish Catholic schools articulate their openness and the Scottish Executive has promoted twinning between Catholic schools and non-denominational schools to enable pupils to have a 'better understanding of each other's backgrounds and foster friendships' (Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Catholic Education Service).

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Concluding remarks

The continued existence and growth of faith schooling in the UK is a focus for some of the tensions at the heart of contemporary socio-political and cultural discourse - the aspiration for a secular state juxtaposed with the concrete, daily practicalities of the 21st century multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious landscape. When faith schools are state-funded, to whatever degree, they are a public manifestation of partnership and collaboration between the state and organised religion. The rationale, aims and operation of the faith school are, arguably, being publicly valorised and financially supported. Those who aspire to the separation of state and organised religion will continue to oppose this public valorisation and financial support and challenge faith schools as insidious and unwelcome educative instruments of anti-rational organisations.

educational and theological aims.³ Faith schools also demonstrate a willingness to be more open, more transparent. Some faith schools highlight positive relations with other denominations/ religions, schools and local communities to counter accusations of alienation and marginalisation. Apart from the previously mentioned linking programme in London and the initiatives in Northern Ireland and Scotland, other examples include the policy for local, UK and global outreach in the King David High School in Liverpool (King David High School: Community Cohesion policy, 2010)

There remains ample scope to further develop the thinking on the key strands identified in this short article. There are highly challenging questions about the continuing relationship between the state and faith schools. There is troubling speculation about future potential forms of faith schooling: are there limits to which groups would be allowed to open faith schools? (King, 2010). There are accusations that discriminatory employment practices are supported by the state as faith schools seek to target and recruit teachers who are members of the faith, to the exclusion of others, to sustain the faith mission of the school (Kennedy, 2010; Accord: Declaration of Aims; British Humanist Society: Faith schools). *Faith in the System* explains that voluntary aided schools are able to have regard to a person's faith when making a teaching appointment; voluntary controlled schools are allowed to recruit up to one fifth of teaching staff as reserved teachers (e.g. to teach denominational

demands and accountability in leading a school and an anxiety about the leadership role of the faith dimension (Gallagher, 2007).

Other challenges include the expectation that pupils will be willing to engage with the aim of the faith school and participate in the religious activities that include both religious education and religious observance (e.g. prayer and celebration of festivals). This can be problematic for some faith schools because of the diverse nature of the pupil population and the wide variation in the level of religious observance in the home, ranging from very observant to seldom (or never) observant. Sometimes families with a low level of observance can lack confidence, or interest, in religiously forming their children and can devolve this responsibility to the faith school which can create heightened expectations of the role of the faith school (Miller, 2001). In these circumstances, does the state-funded faith school become the main, or sole, site for religious formation? There are also fascinating issues on the periphery of the faith school debate, such as the sensitive and sometimes controversial interface between religious groups and non-faith schools concerning the inclusion of religious dress codes such as Sikh daggers and Muslim hijab (Muslim Council of Britain, 2007; Ford, 2010).

Ultimately, the faith school debate provokes and stimulates discussion into deeper questions on the aim, purpose and nature of school education and the role of the state and religious communities - questions that have once again been raised by the introduction of free schools, proposed by Michael Gove.

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