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# Faith Schools are Still a Recipe for Social Disaster

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**ABSTRACT** This article argues that the creation of a range of separate religious schools can prevent integration and encourage separation. It might well be that in fifty years' time, people will look back at this moment and blame us for exacerbating the social fragmentation that characterises modern Britain.

Let's start with why we are debating this issue in the first place. The answer is partly because despite the cries of woe uttered by bishops at how disbelieving the country has become, Britain is still very much a Christian country in the eyes of non-Christians. At the very simplest level, but one that affects many aspects of life, the calendar is Christian. This is then reflected in working times, school plays, high street shopping and many television programmes.

Every year, I receive a Christmas card from a Sikh friend and duly respond in kind: two non-Christians communicating via Christian culture. When they were younger, my children enjoyed watching Postman Pat ... and became familiar with the delightful Reverend Timms. One of the leading synagogues in Britain is called St Johns Wood Synagogue, without the slightest hint of irony. These are not major difficulties and are accepted by Jews, Muslims and others as part of British life that is based on centuries' worth of tradition. However, it does pose the question of how to be part of that general culture, yet also retain one's own distinctive heritage.

In the three decades after the Second World War, the emphasis for most minorities was to integrate as much as possible. The formula was to distinguish between home life (where religious practices were kept, such as dress or diet) and public life (where general lifestyle was the norm). This was summed up by the slogan, 'Be a Jew at home and an Englishman on the street'.

By the 1980s, some felt that the pendulum had swung too far and that the process of Anglicisation had been too successful and religious identity was being lost. There was the fear of a loss of continuity, epitomised by the saying that 'a real Jew is a person with Jewish grandchildren'. In other words, it's not enough to keep the faith yourself; you have to make sure that you pass it on to

succeeding generations. Suddenly, in order to address these fears, it became 'okay to be ethnic', and faith-based schools began to be established so as to stop the next generation assimilating away completely.

In addition, some parents were upset that ordinary schools had abandoned religious education altogether and had created a 'moral vacuum' in school life. The Ten Commandments were no longer 'pc' and religious nihilism was rampant. Another factor that encouraged the transition to faith-based schools was their reputation for higher academic achievements – often the result of a greater sense of discipline and direction.

The consequence is that today Catholic schools account for 820,000 children, and the Church of England have just under a million. Jewish schools have been built apace and the number of pupils has doubled in the last fifteen years, while Muslim schools have developed rapidly, with 72 currently in existence and government backing promised for state-aided ones.

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Okay – let's jump continents for a second.

If you ever go to Los Angeles, be sure to go to the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, which covers not only the Holocaust but also black-white racism as well as conflicts in Asia. But the best bit is at the very beginning, when you enter and are presented with two doors through which to go: one marked 'For those who are tolerant' and the other marked 'For those who are intolerant'. Well, I like to think of myself as reasonably open minded and so I chose the one marked 'Tolerant' – and as I pushed the door handle, a lock clicked and a red light flashed up saying, 'Try the other door'. And, of course, it was right, for however liberal we are in certain areas, there are others in which we are definitely not.

To my shame, I found that out when my 14-year-old brought home a friend from school. He asked me the day before if Leon could come over and I said 'sure' but what took me by surprise was that Leon was black and Muslim. Ask me if I mind blacks ... no ... avoid Muslims ... no ... but I was momentarily shocked, partly because when I was at school I never had a black friend, and then it dawned on me that although I go to plenty of inter-faith gatherings and meet Muslims or Christians who are black, those meetings are always in public or at a special conference centre, but probably a Muslim had never even been inside my house, certainly not socially. And on reflection I was very glad that my son saw no reason not to be friends with Leon or invite him home – because they had met at school and shared similar interests.

Prejudice ... stereotypes ... dislike of the unlike ... fear of the stranger ... we certainly know it's two way. My son's school was asked to supply three or four Jewish children to be extras in a feature film that was being made nearby. They were needed for a scene that involved Jewish children and so the school thought, 'right, we'll select the rabbi's son – can't get more Jewish than that', and we agreed to let him go to the day's shoot – only to find that the film

company sent him back. Why? Because he has blond hair and blue eyes and (quote) 'didn't look Jewish'. Ah, you think, we don't judge social attitudes from film crews – well what about teachers? – and we had someone who brought their local Church of England school to the Synagogue for a visit and during question time the teacher asked, 'You've shown us the scrolls and ark and other items, but where do you perform the sacrifices?' Well, we haven't performed sacrifices for 2000 years; but if all you know about Jews is from the Bible, you might well gain that impression. Ignorance ... misinformation ... and the breeding ground for so much ill-feeling.

And what makes the best citizens? Those who are free from prejudice or intolerance – and more positively, those who have various qualities, which include being hardworking, reliable, responsible, charitable, conscientious – but the *best* citizen is the person who interacts well with his/her fellow-citizens, or, in religious terms, who will 'love your neighbour as yourself'; and, as others have argued, the only way you can do that properly is by actually *knowing* your neighbour at first hand. Being familiar with what makes him/her tick, in what ways similar, in what ways different, but still a neighbour with needs and feelings and hopes and pains.

And so to our debate: there are good single-faith schools, but this debate is not over the shining examples but about the *principle* of single-faith schools, and although those in favour can point to *individual* success stories, in the larger picture, I worry that they are overlooking a number of serious problems. And, if I speak primarily about Jewish schools, that's because they are the ones that I am most familiar with, but the points apply to schools of *all* religions.

First is the danger of increasing separation between Jews and the general community. As a rabbi I want to reinforce Jewish identity, but I also want Jews to be an active part of the country around us; otherwise why bother living here? If we dislike our surroundings so much that we want to fence our children away from it, then why live here in the first place? Let's go to Israel. Conversely, if we do believe that British culture and values have much to offer, then let's be part of that society, mix with our fellow citizens and participate in the general life around us.

A proliferation of Jewish day schools could lead to creating voluntary ghettos. I want neither assimilation nor isolation, but integration, and although that middle path is often the one that takes the most courage and effort, it *is* worth striving for. I recognise that some Jewish schools do try to reach out to the wider community, but not all. A significant number are incredibly blinkered, narrow-minded and reactionary. They look down on anyone less orthodox than themselves, while non-Jews are considered to belong to a totally different species.

To say, therefore, that Jewish day schools will teach tolerance of others and appreciation of wider values may be true of a few but is not of most. There is a very real danger that large sections of our younger generation could be brought up in what amounts to an educational apartheid system. Separating children also means separating parents, who no longer meet one another at

PTAs, Parents' Days and summer fetes, for example, thereby cutting huge swathes between the communities.

And of course if Jewish children are largely in Jewish day schools it will mean depleting general schools of Jewish participants, of them lacking a Jewish contribution, of non-Jewish children having no real knowledge of Jews and a return of all those old stereotypes which are bred on ignorance. And yes, the better schools will teach multifaith religious education, so non-Jews will learn about Judaism and spend a few weeks talking about Jewish customs – but there is a world of difference between 'learning about' something and actually coming face to face with it – and textbook knowledge about Judaism is no substitute for mixing with real live Jews.

Maybe I should cite here the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn. You may recall the haunting television programme he did a few years ago on returning to his roots and his pre-Holocaust home town, and he pointed out that in his village the Jews and non-Jews were entirely separate communities, virtually never carrying on any activities together. He added that he felt that was partially why the non-Jews made no attempt to save the Jews from deportation to Auschwitz – the Jews were just strangers within their midst, and he posed the question: 'Might we have been saved, or at least had some co-operation from them, if the communities had been closer?'

Secondly, there is the larger picture of the health of British society in general. A few summers ago we saw the riots in Bradford, and the Ouseley Report, which blamed *part* of the problem on the segregation in schools between different local communities. It is vital for the future harmony of the country that children of different religious and ethnic groups mix with each other, along with their families.

We also saw the terrible scenes of Catholic children trying to battle their way through screaming ranks of Protestants to the Holy Cross School in Belfast. Had 30 years ago those Protestant parents when they were children mixed with Catholic children, they might have grown up knowing that Catholics aren't demons but ordinary kids who share their crisps with you at lunchtime, play football with you in the break and get together with you doing the same French homework; and, 30 years on, those Protestants might not have been so fearful of Catholics and so hate-filled as to man the barricades against them.

In England, thankfully, we have not got such dire problems – but it seems crazy to consciously lay the foundations that might lead to them. By creating a range of separate schools – Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and other day schools – it will prevent integration and encourage separation. It is all too easy for that to then degenerate into ignorance, suspicion, fear and hostility. Multiculturalism is not on their agenda; that's precisely why they are being set up! What sort of society are we letting ourselves in for? And in 50 years time, will people look back at this moment and blame us for creating the terrible social fragmentation that engulfs Britain. We have spent over a century ridding ourselves of *class*

divisions; surely it's madness to rush in and replace them with religious divisions.

After all, each year thousands of schoolchildren in Israel get taken on school outings to where? To Neve Shalom – a unique Jewish-Arab village where Jews and Arabs live together, work together, go to school together. Why? Precisely to break down barriers, and, similarly, there is Corymeela in Ireland, a joint Catholic-Protestant centre where members of both communities have chosen to live side by side and which has become a beacon of hope in such a divided country.

A third danger is – forget about discrimination against other faiths – what about internal discrimination? And we have already seen that quite a few of the single-faith schools operate restrictive policies: with Jewish schools leading the way in declaring that this child isn't Jewish enough or needs to be reconverted; while Christian schools are making unrealistic demands and forcing agnostic parents to attend church services every Sunday lest they jeopardise their child's place at school – a form of family coercion in the name of education.

A fourth danger is that such schools are actually doing a disservice to their own adherents, especially the ethnic minority ones, by limiting their options. Thus, female children at certain schools are shielded from the opportunities that they would otherwise be aware of at secular schools in terms of the possibilities open to them for broader education or jobs or marriage choices – but which they are not allowed to know about and therefore cannot take up.

A particular Jewish danger I will mention in parenthesis: children attending Jewish day schools will no longer need to attend Religion School on Sundays, which will in turn lessen the contact both they and their families have with local Synagogues, for a substantial number of people join a Synagogue only when the children get to Religion School age. So if they get their Judaism elsewhere at Jewish day schools then they won't need to belong to a Synagogue, thereby denuding it of membership and its ability to fund and run activities – and in a perverse way, the proliferation of day schools can actually lessen religious communal life and be a massive 'own goal'.

My preferred solution would be to encourage schools that are cross-religious: that do not push one particular faith, and do not regard religion as a waste of time. Instead, they treat faith seriously, respect religious differences and acknowledge the richness of each tradition. Meanwhile, the children receive their own particular religious direction from the source that counts the most and has the greatest impact: their home – and I'd prefer to pour the money going into Jewish day schools instead into Jewish home learning and adult education so that the parents are knowledgeable too.

Let me conclude by saying that both as a rabbi and a father, I value Jewish education and spend much of my life promoting it, but I also value my children meeting Christian, Muslim and other friends at school, learning about their ways, explaining our ways, having strong Jewish roots from their home and engaging in Synagogue-based education at weekends.

There is no doubt that those promoting faith-based schools have laudable intentions, but it may prove a retrograde step, and both clergy and government ministers should reconsider their support.

Would my children do well in a single-faith school? – undoubtedly, but there are higher values to be considered too: social cohesion, the national interest, the creation of well-rounded individuals and so on. I want my children to sit in a desk next to a Muslim and know what halal is, to play football with a Sikh friend and know why he won't take off his turban. I also want Muslim and Sikh children to know why my children are Jewish and what that means.

Schools should be used to build bridges, not erect barriers. That is what citizenship is about – building bridges, not erecting barriers – and the best citizens are those who bring home a black Muslim friend from school – and don't even notice that he is black or Muslim.

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