Never Mind the Evidence: Blair's obsession with faith schools

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ABSTRACT In this article the author describes how the Blair governments have sought to increase the number of schools controlled by churches and other religious groups despite a mass of evidence about the dangers of faith-based education and in the face of widespread professional, political and public concerns.

Until about 1880 education in England was provided largely by the churches (mostly the Church of England). When, in the early years of the twentieth century, the provision – and therefore the cost – of education increased rapidly, the churches looked to the state for financial support. The Education Acts of 1902 (Balfour) and 1944 (Butler) redefined the relationship between church and state: 'a measure of independence was exchanged for the comparative security of financial support from the public service' (Brooksbank & Ackstine, 1984). Public support for church schools was controversial, however. During debates on the 1902 bill, for example, 'inside and outside Parliament there was outcry against "Rome on the rates"' (Gates, 2005).

As a result of negotiations between Minister of Education R.A. Butler and Archbishop William Temple, the 1944 Education Act 'created a unified framework which brought the church schools under state control but left them with varying degrees of independence according to how much financial support the church continued to provide' (Mackinnon & Statham, 1999).

By 1997, when Tony Blair's 'New Labour' party swept to power, a quarter of England's primary schools (6384 schools with 790,000 places) and one in twenty secondaries (589 schools with 150,000 places) were run by faith groups, all but a handful Church of England or Roman Catholic. During his 10 years in office, Blair was to demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to faith-based education, no doubt prompted, at least in part, by his own religious convictions.

Blair's First Term: making a start

In fact, relations between the churches and the Blair government got off to a shaky start. Anglican bishops threatened to contest the 1998 School Standards and Framework Bill because they feared it would dilute Church of England representation on the governing bodies of aided schools and change the religious character of the schools by amending admission procedures. They were also concerned that controlled schools opting for foundation status would lose their religious character. The dispute was resolved when the new Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, assured them that he did not want to upset the compromises of the 1944 Education Act and that church schools would continue to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy within the state system.

The Government then turned its attention to other faiths. It was concerned that a system which gave huge amounts of state funding to thousands of Christian schools but hardly any to schools of other faiths was inherently discriminatory. Anxious to demonstrate its commitment to multiculturalism, it quickly set about addressing the problem. In January 1998 Islamia Primary School in Brent (London) and Al Furqan Primary School in Sparkhill (Birmingham) became the first state-funded Muslim schools in England, and later that year John Loughborough Secondary School in Haringey (London) became a state-funded school run by the Seventh Day Adventists. In 1999 two more Jewish schools were given state funding and a Sikh school became the first of its kind to become state-maintained. Two years later the previously independent Feversham College in Bradford became Britain's first state-funded Islamic secondary school for girls. Having thus demonstrated its commitment to non-Christian faith groups, the Government then announced that it wanted to see a hundred new Church of England secondary schools opened within the next five years.

In March 2000 Blunkett announced that the Government intended to create a network of 'city academies' – effectively private schools paid for by the state – closely modelled on the charter schools in the USA and the Conservatives' city technology colleges. City academies (the 'city' was later dropped to allow for the creation of rural academies) were to be public/private partnerships. Businesses, churches and voluntary groups would build and manage them, and they would be outside the control of local authorities. In return for a £2m donation towards the capital costs, sponsors would be allowed to rename the school, control the board of governors and influence the curriculum. The scheme was the brainchild of Blair's chief education adviser, Andrew Adonis.

In the run-up to the 2001 general election, Tony Blair told a conference of faith groups organised by the Christian Socialist Movement that church schools were a pillar of the education system, 'valued by very many parents for their faith character, their moral emphasis and the high quality of education they generally provide' (*The Guardian*, 30 March 2001).

Blair's Second Term: against the grain

With New Labour returned to power, it quickly became clear that the Government's commitment to faith-based education would be even more marked in its second term. It cut the capital contribution for voluntary-aided schools from 15 per cent to 10 per cent and announced that religious groups would be encouraged to work with the private sector in running weak or failing schools (*The Guardian*, 15 June 2001).

In fact, 2001 was to prove a difficult year for anyone seeking to promote religious involvement in education. A report commissioned by Bradford Council concluded that communities were becoming increasingly isolated along racial, cultural and religious lines, and that segregated schools were fuelling the divisions. The report was prophetic. At Easter there were riots in Bradford and during the summer the disorder spread to Oldham, Greater Manchester and Burnley. In September, angry Protestants were seen shouting abuse and hurling stones at five-year-old girls making their way to Holy Cross Roman Catholic School in the Ardoyne, and Islamist fundamentalists destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York.

Despite this unhelpful context, the Government's White Paper, *Schools – achieving success*, proposed a large increase in the number of schools run by religious organisations. Religious groups were, unsurprisingly, delighted at the prospect of getting their hands on more public funds to promote their private beliefs. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) revealed that 'considerable interest' had been expressed by minority faith communities in setting up schools within the maintained sector. Forty projects were already being planned, including a £12m Islamic secondary school for girls in Birmingham, an evangelical Christian school in Leeds and a new Jewish school in London. The Salvation Army and the Seventh Day Adventists said they were evaluating 'opportunities created by the white paper' (*The Observer*, 30 September 2001).

But there was widespread opposition to the White Paper's proposals. A poll of nearly 6000 people, published in *The Observer* on 11 November, found that only 11 per cent were in favour of more faith schools. Even the new Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, was said to be less than happy about them and may well have privately agreed with Professor Richard Dawkins, who, in an open letter to her, said: 'After everything we've been through this year, to persist with financing segregated religion in sectarian schools is obstinate madness' (*The Observer*, 30 December 2001).

When the bill was debated in the Commons, 45 Labour MPs defied the party whip and backed a move led by former health secretary Frank Dobson to require new faith schools to take at least a quarter of their pupils from other religious backgrounds or none (*The Guardian*, 7 February 2002). But the amendment was lost and the White Paper's proposals were implemented in the 2002 Education Act. The teacher unions were dismayed. At the ATL conference in March 2002 delegates voted decisively to 'press the government to abandon the proposed increase in faith schools' (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2002). And at

the NUT conference, delegates criticised the decision to turn Ducie High School, a multicultural school in Manchester's Moss Side, into an academy run by the Church Schools Company (*The Guardian*, 1 April 2002).

There was more criticism of faith schools when, in March 2002, *The Guardian* reported that Emmanuel City Technology College in Gateshead, sponsored by evangelical Christian Sir Peter Vardy, had hosted a 'creationist' conference and that senior staff had urged teachers to promote biblical fundamentalism. Liberal Democrats demanded a government inquiry, senior church figures expressed their concerns, and a group of prominent scientists demanded that Emmanuel should be reinspected. Chief Inspector Mike Tomlinson contacted the school to seek clarification of its policy on science teaching (*The Guardian*, 26 March 2002). Sir William Stubbs, Chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme (March 2002) that 'the science curriculum requires that young people should be taught about evolution ... creationism is not in the National Curriculum' (which was fairly academic in relation to Emmanuel College, since city technology colleges were not required to teach the National Curriculum).

The furore grew. At the beginning of April 2002 leading clerics and scientists wrote to the Prime Minister expressing their 'growing anxiety' about the spread of faith schools and the introduction of creationist teaching. Downing Street officials told the group that Tony Blair would respond to their concerns 'in the near future' (*The Observer*, 7 April 2002). But despite the deluge of criticism, Blair remained silent. Questioned in the Commons about the use of taxpayers' money to fund the teaching of creationism, he avoided answering the question and said: 'In the end, it is a more diverse school system that will deliver better results for our children and if you look at the actual results of the school, I think you will find they are very good'. Tomlinson's successor as Chief Inspector of Schools was David Bell. On 7 May 2002 Bell wrote to Peter Vardy: 'I am happy to accept your assurance about meeting the requirements of the curriculum as they apply to city technology colleges ... I do not feel that I need to pursue this matter further with the college'.

Creationism wasn't the only problem at Emmanuel. There was also homophobia. Head teacher Nigel McQuoid expressed the belief that 'the Bible says clearly that homosexual activity is against God's design; I would indicate that to young folk' (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2005). Neither was Emmanuel College the only state-funded school teaching creationism: the Seventh Day Adventist School in Tottenham and several Muslim schools were also doing so, and there were plans for another creationist school at Torfaen in South Wales. However, Blair's commitment to 'diversity' meant he was quite happy to hand over state schools not only to creationists but also to a bewildering variety of faith groups.

Others were less enthusiastic. Robin McKie, for example, warned that England was plunging towards a 'sad, sectarian future' (McKie, 2002). And the case for faith schools wasn't helped when the London School of Islamics claimed that a 16 year-old Muslim girl who had been murdered by her father in

an 'honour killing' was the victim of British state education. The tragedy could have been avoided, it said, if the 'poor girl' had been educated 'in a Muslim school by Muslim teachers' (*The Guardian*, 14 October 2003).

Further claims that state education was failing to meet the needs of Muslim pupils were made in June 2004 in the *Muslims on Education* policy document. It demanded special classes in Islamic subjects, prayer rooms in secondary schools, and more single-sex education. It argued strongly for the benefits of faith-based schooling and rejected claims that segregated schooling contributed to community division (*The Guardian*, 8 June 2004).

But there was more damning evidence of the damage caused by segregated schools. Researchers at Bristol University, led by Professor Simon Burgess, warned that the lessons of Sir Herman Ouseley's report on the Bradford riots of 2001 had been ignored and that 'white flight' and the rise of Muslim schools were turning England's inner-city playgrounds into monocultural zones which were potential breeding grounds for intolerance and racism (*The Guardian*, 1 April 2004).

There was also evidence that non-religious families were being discriminated against. A survey by the British Humanist Association (BHA) in 2003 had found that while a third of local authorities provided transport subsidies for parents who wished their children to attend religious schools, they did not do so in the case of families who wanted their children educated in secular schools. The issue came to public attention in April 2004, when Lancashire County Council agreed to pay compensation to Ian Abbott, who had been refused a bus pass for his atheist daughter so that she could attend a non-religious school. Lancashire conceded that non-believers were entitled to the same rights as religious families (*The Observer*, 4 April 2004). The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee agreed that school transport policies should treat religious and non-religious families even-handedly.

In July 2004 the Government published its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, which proposed a massive expansion of the controversial academies programme. The aim was now to have 200 academies open by 2010. Five opened in September 2004, bringing the total to 17, and there were already plans for dozens more. There were widespread concerns about the programme, some of which focused on the involvement of religious groups. Church of England Commissioner Peter Bruinvels gave the game away when he said, 'It's about front-line evangelism' (*The Guardian*, 20 July 2004).

Vardy's academies continued to be criticised for teaching their students creationism as science. Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society (NSS), said, 'Religious organisations can now have a say in selecting kids and controlling the religious curriculum. They are free to peddle whatever anti-science they like. They are also in a position to recruit and select teachers who share their views. What's even more disturbing is that the government is actively soliciting partnerships with such organisations' (*The Guardian*, 20 July 2004).

Labour MPs were concerned that around half the planned academies were to be sponsored by faith groups. Commons Education Select Committee chair Barry Sheerman said, 'If we are going to not have divided, ghettoised communities we have to be very careful of this enthusiasm that some in the Department for Education have for faith schools, and we have got to be very careful about the growth of very religious minorities getting a hold on academies' (*The Observer*, 7 August 2005).

In May 2006 more than 200 parents attended a meeting to complain that Vardy's Trinity Academy at Thorne, near Doncaster, was excluding large numbers of pupils and that it was 'pushing an aggressive religious agenda' (*The Guardian*, 30 May 2006). Two weeks later parents' groups began legal challenges against the imposition of academies in the London boroughs of Islington and Merton and in Sheppey in Kent. The challenges focused on the alleged reduction of parents' and pupils' human rights at academies. Because the academies were legally independent, they argued, the education acts which gave parents and their children rights in ordinary state schools – to withdraw from religious education, for example – did not apply (*The Guardian*, 13 June 2006).

Parental concerns about faith schools were shared by Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell. In a speech to the Hansard Society in January 2005 he warned that a traditional Islamic education did not equip Muslim children for living in modern Britain. (*The Guardian*, 18 January 2005) Referring to the fast-growing independent faith school sector, he said:

> I worry that many young people are being educated in faith-based schools, with little appreciation of their wider responsibilities and obligations to British society ... our common heritage as British citizens, equal under the law, should enable us to assert with confidence that we are intolerant of intolerance, illiberalism and attitudes and values that demean the place of certain sections of our community, be they women or people living in non-traditional relationships.

His comments were condemned as 'irresponsible' and 'derogatory' by senior Muslims but supported by Commission for Racial Equality chair Trevor Phillips, who said, 'We can choose ... whether we want to bring our diversity together in a single rainbow or whether we allow our differences to fester into separate cultures and separate communities' (*The Guardian*, 19 January 2005).

Some in the Blair government were clearly becoming concerned about the faith schools policy, though with Blair still staunchly committed to it, there was, of course, no suggestion that the policy was about to change. Schools minister Stephen Twigg urged faith schools to 'promote understanding' between different religions. 'All schools need to work together to meet the needs of every pupil. Faith schools can and should be part of this collaboration', he said. He called on Muslim schools to promote 'tolerance and harmony' and he warned that 'religious segregation in schools must not put our coherence at risk' (*The Guardian*, 18 February 2005).

But none of the concerns prevented Blair from going into the general election in May 2005 with a manifesto promising even greater control of state education for religious groups and businesses.

Blair's Third Term: taken to extremes

In the event, New Labour won a historic third term in office, though with a much reduced majority in the Commons. The new government's proposals for more religious involvement in education prompted another wave of criticism. Writing in *The Observer*, Nick Cohen commented:

> For a Prime Minister whose place in history will be determined by his reaction to 11 September, Tony Blair has a blind spot about religion. He doesn't understand its power to divide and incite and assumes that all true practitioners are like the Anglo-Catholic priests of middle-class London: upright men who do good works and wish no one ill. Now the government wants to reinforce separation with Muslim schools for brown pupils and Christian schools for white ones. David Trimble [former leader of Northern Ireland's Ulster Unionist party] told John Humphrys recently that the greatest blunder after partition was to allow Catholic and Protestant schools to survive. He might have added that the mainland is repeating Ulster's murderous mistake. (Cohen, 2005)

As the Government prepared to publish proposals to make it easier for independent schools, including Islamic, Christian and Jewish institutions, to opt into the state sector and get millions of pounds in funding, a *Guardian*/ICM poll published in August 2005 revealed that two-thirds of those questioned agreed with the statement that 'the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind' (*The Guardian*, 23 August 2005). In fact, the DfES had already given the Association of Muslim Schools £100,000 to facilitate the transition of more of the 120 independent Islamic schools into the state sector.

Barry Sheerman again warned that religious schools posed a threat to the cohesion of multicultural communities, a view that was underlined the following month when David Aaronovitch interviewed Roman Catholic Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor and Anglican Bishop Tom Butler for his BBC2 programme *God and the Politicians* (28 September 2005). Asked about his views on religious schools, Murphy-O'Connor said, 'A number of Muslim and Jewish people are happy to send their children to Catholic schools because they understand that the ethos of Catholic schools are something which they cohere with – that they want for their children'. But when Aaronovitch asked him how he would feel about sending the children of Catholic families to Muslim schools, he replied: 'Well, that would be another matter, wouldn't it? ... I wouldn't, because fundamentally, the creed of Islam is totally diverse from the creed of Christianity and while there should be dialogue between them I wouldn't want Catholic children to be, as it were, brought up in that particular atmosphere'.

Similarly, when Aaronovitch asked Butler, 'Would you have sent your children to a Muslim school?', the bishop replied, 'No, I don't think I would, because although religion is taken seriously in a Muslim school, I think the particular insight of Islam is not mine'.

NSS director Keith Porteous Wood added his voice to those warning that increasing the number of Muslim schools would only exacerbate 'educational apartheid'. 'Non-Muslims don't want to go to Muslim schools and, increasingly, Muslims won't go to Christian schools', he said. 'It's a disaster that will haunt us for generations to come unless it is nipped in the bud now' (*The Guardian*, 27 September 2005). The NSS wrote to Education Secretary Ruth Kelly to ask how existing private religious schools would be selected to become state schools and how their religious ethos would affect the teaching of, for example, sex education. The NSS dossier said, 'We are alarmed that this expansion is directly leading towards a racially segregated education system ... This separation denies pupils from both minority and majority communities the best, and perhaps the only, opportunity to learn about each other and to live together' (*The Guardian*, 24 October 2005).

And it wasn't only secularists who were worried. Writing in *The Times*, Rabbi Jonathan Romain said:

> The problem with faith schools is not their purpose but their consequences. They may be designed to inculcate religious values, but they result in religious ghettos, which can destabilise the social health of the country at large. ... We have spent more than a century ridding ourselves of class divisions; why now rush to replace them with religious barriers? (Romain, 2005)

Work and Pensions Minister Margaret Hodge, herself a Jewish immigrant, told the Labour think-tank Progress that faith schools should be required to support tolerance and integration. 'We must be prepared to close down faith schools that do not conform in these key areas,' she said (*The Guardian*, 15 October 2005).

But despite the tide of criticism, Blair was determined to pursue the policy. The Government's 2005 Education White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, clearly demonstrated that the longer a party remains in power, the more extreme its policies become. It proposed, among other things, that all schools would be encouraged to become independent state schools ('trust schools') backed by private sponsors, including faith groups. They would determine their own curriculum and ethos, appoint the governing body, own their own assets, employ their own staff and set their own admissions policy, though they would be required to 'take note of' guidelines on admissions. 'Failing' schools would be reopened as academies or trust schools with private sponsors.

With Adonis's fingerprints all over it, the White Paper was mired in controversy from the start. 'The first half – promoting private intervention, looking to all but abolish local authority involvement in state schools – reads as

almost unadulterated Adonis', commented Will Woodward in *The Guardian* (Woodward, 2005). This caused problems for Kelly, who warned that the proposal to create trust schools was ill thought through. She was overruled by Adonis and Blair, and was warned by colleagues that if she didn't go along with them her ministerial career would be a short one (*Daily Mail*, 17 October 2005; *The Observer*, 23 October, 2005).

Other Cabinet members were also said to be worried, and former Education Secretary Estelle Morris described the White Paper as 'one of the most contradictory documents ever produced by government' (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2005). More than a hundred Labour MPs threatened to rebel and 58 of them – including nine former ministers – even published an alternative White Paper (*The Guardian*, 15 December 2005).

In *The Guardian*, Phil Revell sought to explain why the Government's determination to create even more faith schools was 'the focus of the biggest backbench backlash since the war on Iraq' (Revell, 2006). He took as his example Canon Slade Church of England school in Bolton. Few local children attended Canon Slade, which controlled its own admissions and selected its intake on the basis of religious affiliation and church attendance. Of the 268 11-year-olds Canon Slade admitted in September 2005, only three were from the two nearest primary schools.

Meanwhile, there was growing concern about the continuing rise of creationist teaching. The national science academies of 67 countries – including the UK's Royal Society – issued a joint statement warning that scientific evidence about the origins of life was being 'concealed, denied, or confused' (*The Guardian*, 22 June 2006). But the creationists persisted. In September 2006 a group calling itself Truth in Science sent a teaching pack promoting 'intelligent design' to the heads of science at all secondary schools in the UK. Fortunately, of the ten thousand or so schools which received the pack, only 59 responded positively (*The Guardian*, 27 November 2006). Education Minister Jim Knight sought to clarify the Government's position: 'Neither intelligent design nor creationism are recognised scientific theories and they are not included in the science curriculum', he said; 'The Truth in Science information pack is therefore not an appropriate resource to support the science curriculum'. The DfES said it was working with the QCA to communicate this message to schools (*The Guardian*, 7 December 2006).

Serious though the issue of creationist teaching was, for most people the main worry was still segregation. In Scotland, First Minister Jack McConnell announced that Roman Catholic and non-denominational schools were to be twinned in an attempt to tackle the country's sectarian divisions (*The Guardian*, 31 January 2006). Back in England, Labour MPs who were worried that church schools were being colonised by middle-class parents feigning religious belief were encouraged when Baroness Morgan, formerly a director of government relations at Number 10, said that faith schools should be prevented from discriminating in the way they selected pupils. Her comments came as a book published by the Young Foundation warned that church schools in east London

had fuelled social segregation. *The New East End* revealed that white working-class parents who did not want their children educated alongside Bangladeshis had taken refuge in Christian schools and that Roman Catholic schools had become 'white citadels', with parents even having their children baptised as Catholics to ensure they got into the right school (*The Observer*, 12 February 2006).

Religious leaders were clearly becoming anxious about the controversy surrounding faith schools. In February 2006 representatives of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist organisations signed a declaration that, in addition to teaching their own religion, schools should promote awareness of the 'tenets' of other faiths. And Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams claimed that faith schools provided children with the 'broadest possible access to ideas' and were not divisive, exclusive or irrational (*The Guardian*, 14 March 2006).

In April 2006 delegates at the NUT's annual conference in Torquay expressed concern at the unprecedented control being gained by fundamentalists in state schools, mainly through the Government's academies programme. One motion called for the state funding of faith schools to be banned (*The Guardian*, 18 April 2006).

But Blair was still determined to get his Education and Inspections Bill through the Commons – preferably without Conservative support. He made a number of concessions on admissions and the role of local authorities, but refused to go further. In the event, he was forced to rely on the Conservatives, and the bill passed its third reading in May 2006 by 422 to 98 votes. It was the largest rebellion ever suffered by a Labour government at third reading (*The Guardian*, 25 May 2006).

Writing in *The Guardian*, Polly Toynbee acknowledged that religious schools were popular:

> There may be few bums on seats in pews, but there are queues for the schools whose special 'ethos' is called closet selection. God doesn't move in such very mysterious ways: research by the Institute for Research in Integrated Strategies (IRIS) is only the latest to find that C of E and Catholic schools take a lower proportion of free-school-meal children than the average for their catchment area. It means nearby schools have to take more, magnifying the imbalance as an unfair proportion of troubled children congregate in bog-standard schools without the magic 'ethos'. (Toynbee, 2006)

The IRIS survey, published in 2006, covered all 17,000 primary schools in England. It found that in church primary schools only 13.96 per cent of pupils were eligible for free school meals, compared with 18.96 per cent in their catchment areas. In community schools it was the other way round: 20.36 per cent of pupils were eligible for free school meals, compared with 18.76 per cent in their catchment areas. 'The figures seem to indicate a strong correlation

between Christianity and wealth', said Chris Waterman, the author of the report, 'and yet that is not borne out by the population. The alternative explanation is that church schools are selecting or attracting better-off pupils'.

Natasha Walter pointed out that in some areas Waterman's statistical averages concealed 'much starker individual contrasts' (Walter, 2006). At St Michael's Church of England primary school in Haringey, for example, just 5 per cent of the children were entitled to free school meals; at the nearby Highgate community primary school the figure was 20 per cent. Emmanuel Church of England school in Camden had 17 per cent of children on free school meals, but the neighbouring Beckford community school had 44 per cent.

Natalie Hanman, meanwhile, was concerned about the role of women. Writing in *The Guardian* she said, 'Lost in the arguments for and against faith-based education, amid concerns over the creeping influence of creationism, is the role and rights of women, and the effect faith schools may be having on gender relations' (Hanman, 2006). She went on to point out that the Government had not published any gender-specific statistics on faith schools and was not aware of any research in this area. A DfES spokesperson said undertaking such research would be a 'massively disproportionate' use of taxpayers' money. Yet under the gender equality duty which came into force in April 2007, there is a legal requirement for all state schools to promote gender equality. Hanman commented:

> This is of concern to women's rights campaigners, who question whether educational parity can be squared with religions that traditionally subjugate women. Clara Connolly from Women Against Fundamentalisms, which calls for the phasing out of subsidies to existing religious schools and the withdrawal of the right to establish such schools, says: 'The main problem with faith schools is that their primary purpose is to socialise women into their major roles of wives and mothers. All the most conservative faiths – Islamic, Catholic, Jewish, evangelical – agree that women have a place in the family and that women should be educated towards that aim'. (Hanman, 2006)

Her concerns were underlined by a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Faith as Social Capital*, published in March 2006, which warned that power inequalities within religious communities could have negative effects, particularly the subordination of women.

Meanwhile, concerns were expressed about the human rights of young adults in religious schools. Francis Beckett revealed that 17 students at St Luke's Roman Catholic Sixth Form College in Sidcup, Kent, had been suspended for a day because they chose to spend time revising for their A Levels rather than attend the school mass. Even more worryingly, students had been forced to listen to American evangelist Barbara McGuigan, who founded the Catholic charity Voice of Virtue International. Eighteen-year-old student Michael Aldis

told Beckett: 'Once there, we weren't allowed to leave. Teachers were posted at the doors. She told us that if we had an abortion we'd go to hell for ever. Some of the girls were in tears' (Beckett, 2006). McGuigan also told the students that homosexuality was a 'disorder', that homosexuals must remain chaste, and that unmarried couples could not enjoy successful relationships.

Shortly after these events, the principal and the chair of governors of St Luke's both resigned. No doubt many of the students hoped that, with the school under new management, they would no longer have to endure this sort of treatment. But even as these events were unfolding at St Luke's, the Catholic Education Service was fighting a government proposal to allow students over 16 to opt out of compulsory worship and religious teaching, and was campaigning for the legal right to force even 18-year-olds to attend mass and to be instructed in Catholic dogma.

NSS director Keith Porteous Wood commented, 'The inability in law of older pupils to withdraw themselves from collective worship contravenes their rights under the Human Rights Act ... the Catholic Education Service appears to think that religious schools should be exempt from the duty to apply human rights in its schools. But these are publicly funded institutions, and human rights are universal'.

Faced with the continuing tide of hostility to religious schools, the new Education Secretary, Alan Johnson, announced that faith schools would be encouraged to launch exchange programmes with teachers of other religions, that independent faith schools should demonstrate their charitable status by cooperating more closely with non-faith schools, and that the Government would require new faith schools to admit up to a quarter of their pupils from families of other faiths or none. But the Roman Catholic Church and the Board of Deputies of British Jews vigorously opposed his proposal on admissions and it was quickly dropped (*The Guardian*, 17, 18 October 2006). Johnson attempted to spin his way out of defeat. A voluntary agreement between the Church of England and the Catholic Church had been reached, he explained, making the legislation unnecessary. 'I have listened carefully to colleagues on this issue', he said, 'and recognise we all share the same goal for a more cohesive society where faith schools play an important part in building understanding and tolerance of other faiths and communities' (*The Guardian*, 27 October 2006).

There were two more controversies in the autumn of 2006. Adonis proposed that faith schools should be allowed to favour members of their own religion when appointing support staff. The GMB union and the NSS said the change would extend discrimination (*The Guardian*, 24 October 2006). And there was a national furore over the case of a Muslim teaching assistant who refused to remove her veil in school if a man was present. She was eventually sacked after failing to make concessions (*The Guardian*, 25 November 2006).

Two *Guardian*/ICM surveys in December 2006 illustrated the depth of professional and public concern about religious involvement in education. A Headspace survey of head teachers revealed that many were deeply concerned

about the effects of faith schools on the education system. Of the 801 who replied to the questionnaire (28 per cent of whom worked in faith schools), 47 per cent felt there should be either fewer or no faith schools and only 9 per cent agreed with the Government that there should be more of them. Almost half the heads said religious schools actively contributed to a less tolerant society (Crace, 2006). An overwhelming majority of the public agreed with the heads. ICM found that 82 per cent saw religion as a cause of division and tension, with only 16 per cent disagreeing. The poll also revealed that non-believers outnumbered believers in Britain by almost two to one (*The Guardian*, 23 December 2006).

The widely-held view that non-faith schools were more effective in promoting religious and racial integration was supported by research published in August 2006 by Irene Bruegel, professor of urban policy at London South Bank University (Crace, 2006). And it was becoming even more obvious that faith schools actively discriminated against certain sections of the community. Church schools, for example, applied for exemption from new legislation to prevent schools from teaching children that homosexual acts are sinful (Crace, 2006), and the Catholic Church refused to follow government guidelines urging schools to set up specific policies against homophobic bullying (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2007).

Blind Faith

Why has Tony Blair been so committed to faith-based education? He is, of course, religious himself. But that hardly seems an adequate explanation for what has, at times, seemed like an obsession.

Looking back through his own comments, three motives are apparent. First, he believes faith schools provide, as he himself put it, a 'high quality of education'. Second, he sees them as a means of promoting tolerance and understanding between faith groups. And third, he believes they have a special 'ethos' which facilitates the development of morality.

It is certainly true that church schools do generally achieve better exam results than neighbouring non-church schools. However, as Ian and Sandie Schagen have pointed out, an analysis of the statistical evidence shows not only that the difference is extremely small but that, where faith schools do achieve marginally better results, it is usually because of the 'nature and quality of their intake' (Schagen & Schagen, 2005). In other words, for all Blair's bluster to the contrary, faith schools are operating a covert system of selection. The IRIS research, showing that church schools take a significantly lower proportion of free school meal children than other schools, is just part of a mass of evidence which confirms this. So if a 'high quality of education' is the basis of Blair's faith schools obsession, it is a pretty dubious one.

The second notion – that faith schools can promote tolerance and understanding between racial and religious groups – is equally dubious. In fact they do exactly the opposite, as has been blatantly obvious in Bradford, Oldham, Greater Manchester and Burnley, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Researchers at Bristol and London South Bank universities and at the Young Foundation have all shown that faith schools are turning inner-city areas into monocultural zones; the Roman Catholics and the Jewish Board of Deputies have refused to accept quotas for admitting members of other faiths; and senior clerics Murphy-O'Connor and Butler don't want to see the children of Christian parents attending Muslim schools. So much for inter-faith harmony.

The third notion – that faith schools have a special 'ethos' which facilitates the development of morality – is also highly questionable. Look at the position of the faith groups on, for example, human rights. Is Blair remotely concerned about the stance of faith schools on the role and rights of women, or the effect faith-based education may be having on gender relations? Is he aware that since April 2007 there has been a legal requirement for all state schools to promote gender equality? Do all faith schools comply with this? It seems highly unlikely, given the Rowntree Foundation's warning about power inequalities within religious communities. And what about the appalling events at St Luke's Roman Catholic Sixth Form College in Sidcup? Is Blair happy for the rights of young adults to be ridden over roughshod? Does he approve of the Catholic Education Service's demand that 16 to 18 year-olds should be forced to attend worship and lessons in Catholic dogma? Does he care about faith schools' discrimination against non-religious families? Or their determination to maintain discriminatory employment practices? Or their bigotry against gays – in the case of Roman Catholic schools, even condoning homophobic bullying?

It is clear, then, that the three claims which Blair says underpin his support for faith schools simply don't stand up to critical scrutiny. He may, of course, genuinely believe his own rhetoric. If not, something else must be driving the policy. It certainly isn't public popularity. As polls have shown, only 11 per cent of people are in favour of faith schools, 82 per cent see religion as a cause of division and tension, and two-thirds of the public agree that 'the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind'. So why is taxpayers' money being used to fund private beliefs? Is Blair completely uninterested in the views of the public? Does 'parental choice' count for anything now? If so, why are religiously sponsored academies being imposed on communities that don't want them?

Neither is the policy supported by professionals. Does Blair care about – or even listen to – the concerns of head teachers, of whom just nine per cent are in favour of more faith schools? Or of teachers and their unions? Of his former Chief Inspector David Bell and Commission for Racial Equality chair Trevor Phillips? Of scientists worried about the teaching of creationism in schools? Of his own MPs and at least nine of his former ministers including Estelle Morris and Margaret Hodge? Of his former Director of Government Relations, Baroness Morgan? Of Rabbi Jonathan Romain?

Apparently not. The Blair governments have been wilfully blind to the evidence and determinedly deaf to the widespread concerns. How else is one to explain the comments of a DfES spokesperson, who, without any apparent sense of irony, told John Crace: 'We have a long tradition of faith schools in this

country. They are popular and can make an important contribution to community cohesion by promoting inclusion' (Crace, 2006).

Perhaps the real motive behind the faith schools policy lies elsewhere. Throughout Blair's period in office, two themes have been clear: his commitment to selection and his determination to privatise state education. The first of these – his commitment to selection – has been problematic for him because it is very unpopular with the public, with his own MPs and with the Labour grass roots. He has therefore found it necessary to find ways of extending selection by stealth and has resorted to the Conserviatve ploy of creating a diversity of schools. Faith schools play an important part in this diversity. The second – his determination to privatise state education – has also proved difficult. The academies programme, for example, soon ran out of business sponsors. The 'price' for each academy was reduced from £2m to £1.5m, but that still didn't produce enough sponsors, so religious groups have been encouraged to fill the gap. And they are only too willing to do so. After all, religious observance has been in serious decline for decades. Children in faith schools are seen as the only hope for the future. They are a captive audience for religious mumbo jumbo ranging from the plain stupid (creationism) to the thoroughly evil (misogyny and homophobia). 'It's about front-line evangelism', as Peter Bruinvels admitted.

Tony Blair resigned in July 2007 and Gordon Brown has succeeded him as Prime Minister. Whether Brown will maintain the commitment to faith-based education remains to be seen. If he does, where will it all end? Academies run by Scientologists and Jehovah's Witnesses? Trust schools sponsored by the Moonies and the Flat Earth Society? It doesn't bear thinking about.

The Economist was right, back in 2001: 'handing over the children to the preachers is wrong in principle and dangerous in practice' ('Keep out the Priests', 8 December).

Note

Derek Gillard's two earlier articles on this subject in *FORUM* are available on the journal's website (http://www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM):

Gillard, D. (2002) The Faith Schools Debate: glass in their snowballs, *FORUM*, 44(1), 15-22. http://www.wwwords.co.uk/forum/content/pdfs/44/issue44_1.asp

Gillard, D. (2002) Creationism: bad science, bad religion, bad education, *FORUM*, 44(2), 46-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2002.44.2.2

Longer versions of those and this article can be found on the author's website (http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com).

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Woodward, W. (2005) Andrew Adonis, *Guardian,* 28 October. http://education.guardian.co.uk/policy/story/0,,1602670,00.html

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