The Malign Effects
of Faith Schools

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ABSTRACT The author argues that faith schools serve to exacerbate existing divisions in society and are therefore a threat to social cohesion. In many parts of Britain where segregation is already a reality, 'faith' has now become another word for 'race'. Ethnic groups are not evenly spread between the religions, creating a situation where religion is used as a 'proxy' for ethnicity. At the same time, there is the distinct possibility that some faith schools (and academies sponsored by faith groups) will use their power to influence the curriculum to undermine the values of a liberal, tolerant and enlightened society.

Introduction

I would like to begin this article by being anecdotal and autobiographical.

I grew up in London just after the Second World War with a father who had very strong racist views, and these were especially pronounced where black and Jewish immigrants were concerned. (He would later become Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and there is no doubt in my mind that 'institutionally racist' was one of the defining characteristics of Scotland Yard while he was there in the late 1960s and early 1970s.)

As far as I can recall, the direct grant grammar school I attended in Hammersmith had no Asian or black pupils in the mid-1950s, but there were a number of Jewish children in my year, and one or two of them became my close friends. It was my inability to comprehend my father's anti-Semitism that led me to question his right-wing views on a whole range of issues; and I was an active campaigner against racism by the time I went to university in 1962.

I sometimes wonder if my outlook would have been different had I not experienced a limited degree of 'racial mix' at my secondary school. My point is that you can't 'love your neighbour' if you don't 'know your neighbour'; and this is very much one of the major themes of this article.

Media Interest

Faith schools are rarely out of the headlines, and they arouse strong views both among opponents and among supporters. On 21 February 2007, there was a front-page story in the *Daily Telegraph* with the title 'Cameron Chooses a Faith School'. In this article, it was revealed that Conservative Leader David Cameron had decided to reject at least 15 primary schools near his West London home in order to enrol his three year-old daughter in a Church of England primary school more than two miles away. The piece went on to report that in an interview with BBC Radio Four's *You and Yours* programme the day before, Mr Cameron had expressed concern that his daughter would get 'a bit lost' in one of the 'enormous' state primaries in the immediate neighbourhood:

> Maybe I'm being over-precious and protective of my daughter, but
> you sort of feel that your small child is going to go into this
> enormous state primary school and may get a bit lost. ... I want
> parents to have a choice. In London you have a choice.

What Mr Cameron failed to point out was that although, admittedly, the school earmarked by him has only 200 pupils, of the 15 schools that are closer, only six have more than 300 pupils.

In a piece to accompany this front-page article, *Daily Telegraph* education correspondent Graeme Paton boldly asserted that David Cameron's decision to choose a faith school for his daughter would surely 'win sympathy with thousands of parents across the country'. Mr Paton went on to argue that faith schools were extremely popular with parents – with more than 2.7 million pupils now attending faith primary schools in England – largely because they invariably achieved impressive academic results. In recent league tables for primary schools, Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools made up 127 of the 209 achieving 'perfect' results – with every pupil reaching the expected standard for 11 year-olds. Even though faith schools made up only a third of English primaries, they accounted for almost two-thirds of those with the 'top' results. In Graeme Paton's view, it was the special 'ethos' of church schools that went a long way to providing the reason for their undoubted success (Paton, 2007).

In a speech delivered in March 2006, Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, claimed that, in contrast to 'popular misconceptions', church schools actually educated children from a wide social background. He argued that faith schools provided their pupils with 'the broadest possible access to ideas' and were not 'divisive, exclusive or irrational'. He also defended the Church of England's decision to become one of the biggest single sponsors of Tony Blair's academies programme, designed to help 'the poor and the disadvantaged' (reported in *The Guardian,* 14 March 2006). Yet even Graeme Paton has had to concede in his *Telegraph* article that official government statistics showing the percentage of pupils in different types of school who were eligible for free school meals clearly revealed the extent to which the intake of

faith primary schools – and particularly Church of England primaries – was weighted towards children from affluent homes.

There is much evidence to indicate that in spite of – or, rather, *because of* – their 'exclusive' status, faith schools at both the primary and the secondary level are viewed as being very desirable; and many middle-class parents are prepared to go to inordinate lengths to ensure that their offspring secure admission. Tony and Cherie Blair are among those prominent parents who have chosen faith schools for their children, in their case the London Oratory School, miles away from their former home in Islington – a school that has been criticized for viewing itself as a grammar school and for interviewing prospective pupils and parents to ascertain the strength of their commitment to the Catholic faith.

All this enthusiasm for faith schools is not, it seems, shared by a large section of the nation's head teachers. A Headspace survey of primary and secondary headteachers, administered by ICM and reported in *Education Guardian* at the beginning of December 2006, revealed a deep level of concern about the effects of faith schools on the education system. Of the 801 head teachers who replied to the questionnaire – 28 per cent of whom actually *worked* in faith schools – 47 per cent felt that there should be either fewer or no faith schools, 32 per cent felt that there should be no change, and only 9 per cent agreed with the Government's policy of increasing their number. Only 25 per cent of the headteachers who participated in the survey believed the presence of schools with a strictly religious character created *more* tolerance in society, 18 per cent reckoned they made no difference, and 45 per cent thought they actively contributed to *less* tolerance. And another finding from the survey would certainly seem to support the view that religious schools can actively discriminate against certain sections of the community. It was found that 17 per cent of the head teachers questioned believed that church schools should be granted exemption – which they have already collectively applied for – from the Government's policy of preventing schools from teaching children that homosexual acts are sinful (Crace, 2006).

In this *Guardian* report of the findings of the Headspace survey of head teacher opinion, Mick Brookes, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, was quoted as arguing that there was now 'a great deal more anxiety about the formal linking of religion to politics and education than was the case 20 years ago'. He went on:

> Many people are concerned about faith schools propagating
> fundamentalism. I'm not sure that their worries are wholly justified;
> but you can see how religion is a vehicle that can be misused.
> There's a big difference between learning about religion and
> promoting religiosity; the latter shouldn't be part of the education
> system. (Crace, 2006)

And the findings of the survey came as no surprise to Keith Porteous Wood, Director of the National Secular Society, who argued that there is a very real

philosophical problem here, because 'diversity and cohesion are virtual antonyms'. He went on:

> A great deal done in the name of 'multicultural diversity' is being shown to have been a mistake. The more the Government seeks to promote diversity through faith schools, the more divided society has become. You can't expect a faith school to do anything other than promote its own religion, usually at the expense of all the others. It's hardly going to say that every religion is pretty much the same and it doesn't matter what you believe. ... The implications of the policy are potentially disastrous. No matter what the Government might say about a quota system in faith schools for non-believers, the fact is that once a school has committed itself to a religion, in many communities no one from any other religion or ethnic grouping will consider applying. So we are on the verge of starting an apartheid education system, which could be disastrous for race relations. (Crace, 2006)

John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, was quoted by John Crace, author of the *Guardian* article, as being particularly concerned about the problem of admissions. Although faith schools might have to select their intake according to certain lawful criteria, it was John Dunford's view that 'the system isn't so transparent that all doubt is removed'. Many head teachers of non-faith schools believe religious schools have an adverse effect on their own admissions' (Crace, 2006).

The Arguments against Faith Schools

What, then, are the chief arguments to be made against faith schools? The comments of Mick Brookes and Keith Porteous Wood quoted above already touch upon one of the main themes I want to develop in this article: the 'threat' religious schools pose to the creation of a united tolerant society. The other major problem to be discussed is the extent to which such schools are able to modify or 'distort' the curriculum.

A 1994 survey of comprehensive schools and colleges – or the lack of them – in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland found that the existence of separate Catholic and Protestant secondary schools in such places as Belfast, Liverpool and Glasgow served to accentuate the religious divide in these cities (Benn & Chitty, 1996, pp. 160-162). Pupils attending one type of religious school invariably learned to regard their contemporaries at another type as 'the other': beings who were sinister, foreign and ultimately God-forsaken. And none of this could be said to facilitate the creation of a cohesive society. It is true that the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), formed in the early 1990s, aimed to promote the establishment of schools which would receive both Protestant and Catholic pupils. But the movement has been treated with suspicion by both main denominations, the

majority of Protestant and Catholic leaders believing that religious schooling merely reflects, rather than creates, differences (Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 161).

In 2006, the Young Foundation published *The New East End: kinship, race and conflict* by Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and the late Michael Young, a provocative study of how life had changed in London's East End over the half-century since the first publication in 1957 of *Family and Kinship in East London* by Michael Young & Peter Willmott. This new study revealed that white working-class parents who were alarmed at the thought of their children being educated alongside Bangladeshis had taken refuge in Christian schools and that Roman Catholic schools in particular had become 'white citadels', with parents even having their children baptised as Catholics to ensure that they got into the 'right' school. Few primary schools in the Borough of Tower Hamlets had a balance between ethnic groups which reflected accurately the local population, of which 58 per cent of those aged 0-17 were, in fact, Bangladeshi at the time of the 2001 census. In 2002, 17 primary schools had over 90 per cent Bangladeshi pupils, while another nine (all denominational) had fewer than 10 per cent each. Out of 16 secondary schools surveyed in 2002, four denominational schools (three of them Roman Catholic) each had 3 per cent or fewer Bangladeshi pupils, while, nearby, three non-denominational schools had in excess of 90 per cent – with a further one having over 80 per cent. Half of the secondary schools (8 out of 16) were therefore very segregated and could not be said to reflect the balance of their local population (Dench et al, 2006, p. 144).

In 2006, the London School of Economics was commissioned by the pressure group Comprehensive Future, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, to carry out an independent pilot research project to examine the religious composition and admission processes of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in London. The context for this research project was, of course, the Labour Government's policy of increasing the number of faith-based schools; and the researchers were also aware that a significant proportion of new and planned academies have been faith-based.[1]

The Report, entitled *Religious Composition and Admission Processes of Faith Secondary Schools in London*, was published in May 2007 (Pennell et al, 2007); and Professor Anne West presented a paper based on the researchers' findings to a parliamentary seminar held on 22 May. The authors' main conclusions were that, generally speaking, Church of England secondary schools were more inclusive of other faiths than were Roman Catholic schools. Schools that set aside a proportion of their places for those of other religions tended to be more inclusive of other faiths than those that did not adopt this practice. At the same time, it was important to note that schools that were inclusive of other religions were not necessarily inclusive in other respects. An analysis of the admissions criteria used by schools with a religious character showed that, in some cases, they allowed schools the opportunity for a fair degree of *social* selection. From all this, it seemed obvious that if the promotion of community cohesion was felt to be a desirable aim, schools with a religious character should be inclusive of

all religions (or no faith). Major tensions arose in balancing policies that aimed *both* to increase the number of faith schools *and* promote religious and social inclusion. These were not easily resolved in a pluralist society, but, given that public money was used to fund schools with a religious character, there was a strong case to be made for all such schools to be open to the wider community in the interests of enhancing social cohesion (Pennell et al, 2007, p. 11).

A front-page story in *The Observer* of 27 May 2007, headlined 'Revealed: UK schools dividing on race lines', claimed to present 'a remarkable picture' of how Britain was '"sleepwalking" towards US-style segregation of schools along racial lines'. It was argued on the basis of recent government figures that many towns were developing schools that were 'overwhelmingly white, Asian or black'. For example: a majority of pupils in deprived former mill towns in the north of England had little or no contact with children from different ethnic backgrounds, 'even though one community often lived in close proximity to another'. In the words of the *Observer* story: 'There are towns ... where social, ethnic and religious divisions are all aligned and create enormous tensions. Schools in these towns are becoming more and more segregated' (Watt, 2007). It seems clear that in many parts of Britain, 'faith' has, in fact, become another and less emotive term for 'race'. Ethnic groups are not evenly spread between the various religions, creating a situation where religion can be used as a 'proxy' for ethnicity.

Whatever can be said in favour of faith schools, it really does seem to be the case that much of the school system is in a mess where the principle of community cohesion is concerned – with religious schools contributing daily to the growing fragmentation of society.

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Let us now turn to the issue of curriculum distortion which worries all those of us who believe there can often be a thin dividing line between 'education' and 'indoctrination'.

It has already been noted in the pages of this journal [2] that fundamentalists of any religion can wield an unhealthy influence when they gain control of a school or college. The case of Sir Peter Vardy and his three 'faith-inspired' academies in the North-east is often cited in relation to this issue; and a perusal of the website of Emmanuel College in Gateshead does provide us with a valuable insight into the way subjects like history and religious education are meant to be taught when Sir Peter is in charge. It seems that God does intervene at key moments in a Christian nation's history – which may be very comforting to true believers, but is not terribly accurate from a historian's point of view.

In an interview with the *Times Educational Supplement* at the beginning of June 2007 (reported in *The Guardian* the following day), the Church of England's new Head of Education, the Rev. Jan Ainsworth, argued that it was perfectly proper for state schools to teach the theory of 'intelligent design' in

science lessons. Mrs Ainsworth, who is responsible for more than 4600 schools, said intelligent design – which argues that living species are too complex to have evolved through natural selection and must therefore be the product of a guiding 'designer' such as God – could easily and profitably be included in a study of the history of science. In Mrs Ainsworth's words:

> While the theory of intelligent design is not something I would necessarily subscribe to, teaching about it is a recognition that there are different ways of looking at the evidence. You would get howls of protest from the scientific community ... but you could do it as part of the history of science. ... After all, religious education lessons in C of E schools already include discussions of different beliefs. (Taylor, 2007)

Not surprisingly, Mrs Ainsworth's views have provoked a considerable amount of opposition. Keith Porteous Wood, Director of the National Secular Society, has argued:

> Intelligent Design is nothing to do with science and therefore nothing to do with the history of science. We challenge the Church of England to keep religion out of science lessons, and, unless it does so, its educational reputation will be tarnished with the stigma of fundamentalism.

And Stephen Cox, Executive Secretary of the Royal Society, has been similarly forthright in his repudiation of Jan Ainsworth's views:

> The theory of evolution is supported by the weight of scientific evidence. The theory of intelligent design is not. The Royal Society supports questioning and debate in science lessons, as long as it is not designed to undermine young people's confidence in the value of scientific evidence. ... Young people are poorly served by deliberate attempts to withhold, distort or misrepresent scientific knowledge in order to promote particular religious beliefs. (Taylor, 2007)

Conclusion

I must admit I find it profoundly depressing that we should have to be making the case against ignorance and superstition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If faith schools are allowed to continue (and it seems highly unlikely that any minister will have the courage to deal with them), they should not be in the business of promulgating the views of bigots and fundamentalists. At the same time, while I accept that many faith schools would wish to be part of an enlightened tolerant society, it seems to me to be arguable that their very existence threatens the creation of such a society.

Notes

[1] It was reported in the *Independent* (10 September 2006) that 42 of the first 100 academies had Christian sponsors.

[2] See the Editorial in *FORUM*, 46(3), 2004.

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