# Socialists and Religious Schools

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ABSTRACT This article argues that the issue of religious control of schools is becoming more and more important with every day that passes. We have a situation where one-third of our state schools are faith schools, and the New Labour Government seems intent on increasing their number. It is the author's contention that the state should not be allowed to fund and privilege religious schools, and that the Left should not be mealy-mouthed in campaigning for a fully secular education system.

> There are persons who like to smoke opium. But it would be criminal for the state, at its expense, i.e. at the expense of the entire population, to maintain dens for the smoking of opium and to hire special persons to minister to the needs of the frequenters of these places. (Nicolai Bukharin, *Why Church and State Must Be Separated*)

## The Background

We have a government clearly intent on expanding the role of religious organisations in the running of schools and an 'opposition' that criticises them only for their lack of speed in carrying this out. The Academies programme has seen fundamentalists like the Vardy Foundation and more mainstream Christian organisations like the United Learning Trust move quickly to exploit huge investments of public money in order that they get control of the education of young people. The Education and Inspections Act proposes much more of this through the establishment of trust schools and the abolition, in the end, of community schools. Jewish, Muslim and other denominational groups have created powerful lobbies for additional 'faith schools' and there is every sign that they will have their way. The question of religious control of schools is becoming more and more important with every day that passes. And yet the response of the teacher trade unions, and indeed the Left, is either muted or uncertain.

A major debate on the floor of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) Conference in 2006 was indicative of the problem. The contending attitudes both came from left-wing branches in the union. On the one hand was a set of

motions and amendments which argued for a secular education system through the integration of existing voluntary-aided schools into the community school sector and a bar on any new religious schools. Against that was a motion insisting that while secular education was an important long-term goal, in the meantime we had to support 'the right of Muslim communities to faith schools'. In time-honoured fashion both of these positions were defeated in favour of a holding position from the union's Executive, which proposed that a 'working group' be established to look at the issue in more detail and advise on the development of policy on the matter.

The NUT's Working Group has met on a number of occasions since, and has received written and oral evidence from, amongst others, the Jewish Education Council, the Catholic Education Service, the British Humanist Society and the National Secular Society. It is looking, amongst other things, at the impact of 'faith schools' on pupil attainment and on inclusion. Supporters of religious schools point to evidence that suggests that attainment at the end of each key stage and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) judgements demonstrate clearly the benefits to young people of their provision. Opponents and sceptics point to evidence that this is achieved mainly by covert social selection and is, in any case, hugely exaggerated. A study by the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2003, for example, found that church and foundation schools were 25 times more likely to select pupils who will boost their league tables. A spokesperson for Ofsted commented in February 2001 that 'selection, even on religious grounds, is likely to attract well-behaved children from stable backgrounds'. Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 2002, based on an analysis of 3044 schools, concluded that there was no evidence that faith schools added more value to pupil attainment than did other state schools. The evidence on inclusion is more clear cut. Voluntary-aided (church controlled) schools are consistently less likely to admit pupils with statements of educational need in both primary and secondary sectors even though they very often serve areas of greater social disadvantage and deprivation.

The NUT working group is due to produce its final report in time to be considered by the 2008 Annual Conference. It will not be easy for a union which represents thousands of members who work in religiously controlled schools to adopt a policy which is both in line with its comprehensive, egalitarian convictions and capable of unifying its members. And that is to say nothing of the ability to deliver such a policy. The two other main teacher unions (ATL and NASUWT) have, however, passed policies in favour of the abolition of faith schools and public opinion polls now consistently show opposition to faith schools growing. In addition, it is important to repeatedly insist that there is a difference between secularism and hostility to religion. Very many people of religious belief understand and support the idea that the state should not fund and privilege religious schools.

## Why This Debate Now?

It is worth considering why NUT associations have submitted and prioritised motions on faith schools recently and not especially before. The central reason, I think, was the publication of the White Paper and then the Education and Inspections Bill (with the developing Academies programme as important background). These initiatives taken together threaten to take us from a position where the influence of religion was relatively mild, liberal and in decline to one where it is in the ascendant and aggressive. The emergence of Christian fundamentalists as Academy sponsors may now be the forerunner of a more systematic growth of religious influence under the umbrella of trusts.

Such a development would be retrogressive not only because it gives the advocates of particular beliefs greater influence over children but also because it increases the number of schools with weak or non-existent links to the local community of schools overseen by elected local authorities. For sure there may also be a reaction against the revival of political religion, whether in the form of US evangelism, Blair's promotion of Christian values or Islamic fundamentalism. If teachers are responding to these developments with concern and a wish to assert secular values, that is positive and we should encourage it.

Whilst there might be tactical differences about the precise means and speed of a move from the existing voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools back into a fully integrated local authority system, there should surely be no question that our aim is for a fully secular education. No hostility or intolerance toward religion is implied here. The right to religious freedom, including the right to practise and to worship, should be protected against any suggestion of repression. These are private matters, however, and should not be promoted by the state in any way. Schools, in particular, should not be used to promote a particular faith, whether by the content of the curriculum, the selection of pupils or the conditions imposed on staff.

Neither does this mean that there is no place at all for religion in schools. The religious education (RE) curriculum should allow pupils to learn about the variety of religious beliefs in society as well as alternative belief systems and codes of ethics. Staff of non-Christian religious background should be entitled to special leave for religious festivals for as long as the school calendar is based on Christian holidays. Equally, however, all children should have access to a thorough health and sex education, including physical education (PE) and science, and these should not be areas of the curriculum from which religious parents can exclude their children by opting out.

## The Left and Religious Schools

The paradox here is that the most progressive and politically radical of the teacher unions is at the same time the most hesitant and indecisive. More than that: the Left of the NUT is the main source and loudest voice of caution and doubt. There is, to be fair, an element of sensitivity to issues of equality and racism here. Overall, however, it is a tale of the modern socialist Left, a tale of

political collapse, of loss of confidence in our ideas. Since the NUT is unlikely to adopt a clear policy of opposition to religiously-controlled state schools until the Left develops a clearer and more confident position, I want to argue that support for a secular education system is an irreplaceable component of socialist education policy.

At a national meeting of the Socialist Teachers' Alliance (STA) just before the 2006 Conference there was a serious proposal to keep this issue of religious schools off the agenda on the grounds that we lived in an atmosphere of 'Islamophobia' and someone might make a controversial speech which could be picked up by the media. At an earlier meeting a paper from Richard Hatcher asked the question, 'should the STA have a position on faith schools?' and answered, 'Not necessarily. It depends how much agreement there is on it'. The only broad consensus appears to be of the sort that wrings its hands, frowns and declares solemnly that 'this is, of course, a very difficult issue'.

There *are* complexities and difficulties about religion in schools, but we should be able to agree on some basics, some principles which guide us through the complexities. First of all, of course we *should* have a position on faith schools; one of *opposition* to them. It seems pedestrian to have to rehearse the arguments for this but it seems we still need to do that. One revealing sign of the vacillation on this subject is the widespread acceptance of the term 'faith schools'. This warm, cuddly nomenclature serves to obscure the fact that we are talking about something quite precise here - the control of schooling by religious organisations. Religious indoctrination and religious segregation have no place in schools. Children should be able to learn and work out their ideas without officially imposed or sponsored indoctrination from priests, imams, or rabbis. Schools should deal in inquiry and reason, not faith. That is the basic issue highlighted by the outcry against the mild comments on faith schools made by the Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell, in a speech on 17 January 2006. Trevor Phillips, the head of the Commission for Racial Equality, has endorsed the comments.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society recently said:

> Our position is that there is a problem in the state sector, and not just in the relatively small number of independent faith schools. One third of our state schools are faith schools, and the Government is embarked on a process of expanding faith schools in the state sector.
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> The Church of England has a target of 200 new Church of England secondary schools, which the Government has endorsed. In our view it is not the state's role to be subsidising proselytisation. But there is a further problem. We accept that if we are to have Church of England schools, then we have to have Muslim schools. But that leads straight to religious segregation and apartheid, promoted as a matter of national government policy. The only sensible way forward is to make all schools community schools.

Tony Blair was a fervent advocate of faith schools, including those run by the Christian-fundamentalist Vardy Foundation. Former Secretary of State for Education Secretary Ruth Kelly is an 'associate' of Opus Dei, the sinister ultra-Catholic society which grew up under Franco Fascism in Spain and is now a worldwide spearhead of the most conservative forces in Catholicism. (She can only be an 'associate', not a member, because Opus Dei admits only men as members.)

Already there are 7000 faith schools in the state sector, now including 44 non-Christian (Jewish or Muslim) ones. There are about 300 independent faith schools, over 100 Christian, about 100 Muslim, and over 50 Jewish. Of the 7.5m young people attending maintained schools in England, 23% are educated in religiously-based institutions. These make up 33% of maintained schools.

Bell supports faith schools. But he said:

> Religious segregation in schools ... must not put our coherence at risk ... Faith should not be blind. 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. As my Annual Report will say about Muslim schools: 'many schools must adapt their curriculum to ensure that it provides pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England and helps them to acquire an appreciation of and respect for other cultures in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony ...'

This mild comment earned him denunciation as 'Islamophobic'. But there is nothing 'Islamophobic' – or 'Christophobic' – in saying that when children are faced, through government policy, with a choice of either Christian or Muslim schools, then division, prejudice, and fear will prosper. Northern Ireland, with its education system divided into Catholic and Protestant schools, shows us how.

Whether the Christian, Muslim or Jewish schools are more or less liberal, and provide more or less teaching about other faiths, is not decisive. The core idea of any religion is not about love or truth or any morality humanists would recognise. It is that books (Bible, Koran, Torah) or specially-appointed people (priests, imams, rabbis) can transmit instructions from 'God' about what to eat, what to wear, how to conduct sexual relations, and what rituals to perform, and that if we defy those instructions we will be punished. Such ideas may be hardened or softened, interpreted harshly or liberally, adapted to the modern world to survive or counterposed sharply to it, but without them there is no religion. Religion to a large extent means fear. Fear of death, mortality, having to work things out independently. And each particula religion also implies that other religions are traducing and misrepresenting God. Softened or hardened, it implies some degree of hostility to other religions and to disbelief. And it is by definition impervious to reason, for it is a matter of upholding one set of claims to represent God's ukases – Bible and priests, or Koran and imams – against another.

In fact Richard Hatcher's paper for the STA pointed in the right direction by quoting Engels from the Erfurt Programme as a source of the classical Marxist position:

> Complete separation of the Church from the state. All religious communities without exception are to be treated by the state as private associations. They are to be deprived of any support from public funds and of all influence on public schools.

Unfortunately, Richard goes on to undermine that position by claiming that it

> only considered religion from the viewpoint of the relationships of European societies to their own traditional religions. It did not take into account the religions of oppressed peoples in the imperialist countries as a consequence of immigration from the ex-colonised countries, of whom the largest number in Europe are Muslim and poor.

This is a disingenuous way of trying to escape the clarity of the sort of position Engels outlined above. Disingenuous because it is not a fair account of that position and because the real purpose of the revision is to justify a contemporary accommodation with the religious leaders of a particular community in the name of anti-imperialism. There has for years been a dogma on the socialist Left (which I don't share) that there are progressive nationalisms and reactionary nationalisms, good nations and bad nations. They can be identified by their relationship to imperialism defined more or less as the policies of the dominant powers at a particular time. If you look hard enough you can find bits of Lenin which appear to give credence to this view. This now seems, however, to be supplemented by the idea that there are progressive and reactionary *religions* which can be identified in much the same way. You can search through Lenin, Marx and the whole of the Marxist tradition but you won't find anything that gives credence to that view.

It just isn't true that the basic Marxist position did not take account of the sort of communities Richard is concerned about. At the time of the Erfurt programme (written for the German Social Democrats) there was a sizeable Jewish population in Europe subjected to discrimination under Bismarck, by the Dreyfuss Affair in France and by pogroms in Russia. They were mainly poor and condemned as outsiders. In England the largest immigrant community was the Irish Catholics, forced out of Ireland by the colonial rule and economic barbarism of British governments. Should the French or Russian Jews and Irish Catholics have religious freedom and equality and be protected from discrimination? Of course, said the socialist tradition. Should they have their own schools funded by the state but run by their church? Resoundingly no. Even though the Protestants had theirs? Again no. This position can be right or wrong, useful or not, but it is not wrong and ineffective because it did not take account of poor, oppressed, immigrant minorities and the demand amongst them for religious expression and identity. There has been no new development

which undermines the relevance of that basic approach of full religious freedom and tolerance but no privileges from the state. What is new in the last 20 years is the collapse of parts of the Left into a cultural and moral relativism which paralyses it with fear and self-doubt when there is a need to confront the religious leaders of 'the oppressed'.

We should be very clearly for secular education. That should be our starting point, after which we try to confront honestly the difficulties of ending the religious status of existing schools while opposing the creation of new faith schools. We will do neither effectively if we equivocate on religious schools as such, if we appear ambiguous in our understanding of the role of religion in general and, above all, if we lack any conviction.

## Religious Schools and Race Equality

There is a misplaced fear that to be opposed to an expansion of faith schools is racist (or at least discriminatory on race grounds) since the vast majority of existing faith schools are Christian and mainly 'white'. It is misplaced for a number of reasons:

*Religion is not race*: religious beliefs and practices we should tolerate but not promote. We need to be free to criticise and even offend religious views since people choose to live by and advocate them as superior to the alternatives. Criticism and offence on the basis of race is on a completely different level and is never acceptable.

*State-funded schools for religion is not a right:* all of us, regardless of our race, gender, sexuality or belief should have the right to free speech, expression, to vote and to be free from discrimination in employment and so on. But the idea that people of given religious beliefs should be able to insist, *as of right,* that the state should fund schools run by their chosen religious organisations is absurd. Even Anglicans and Catholics do not have this right currently. A proposal from Westminster NUT at the 2006 Conference asked the NUT to 'support the rights of Muslims, as of other religions, to have faith schools teaching according to the National Curriculum'. This implied that religions other than Islam have the right to faith schools and therefore that this should be extended to Muslims (not to Sikhs or Jews mind, just Muslims). This really is a confused demand. Since you cannot, by definition, have a 'right' that only some people possess, this is clearly a call for all religions to have the right to state-funded schools. No progressive education union could possibly support such a proposal.

*Undemocratic anachronisms aren't solved by extending them:* the fact that historically the churches have been involved in running schools and that the 1944 compromise has left them with a stake in many state schools today is a problem. It leaves us a legacy of a state system which is not secular in a society that largely is. The answer to that anachronism is not to extend the influence over schooling to yet more religious groups and to the nuttier end of Christianity (the Vardys etc.) It is a bit like dealing with the undemocratic problem of Anglican peers in the Lords by allowing the Board of Deputies and

the Council of Mosques to appoint their own peers too. You would have more religious equality for sure, but no more democracy. Worse still, you would reinforce the basic problem, an undemocratic institution, by giving it the appearance of fairness and a broader base.

*There is little or no demand for faith schools:* one of the most encouraging things about modern British society is that there is no real demand for religious control of schools from any significant section (a possible exception is certain sections of the middle classes who believe church school equals high standards). Most people of all religious backgrounds and none wants a good local school for their children which reflects the ethnic and cultural mix of their local communities. We should celebrate this and protect it from being undermined by the encouragement and promotion of schools for particular faiths.

I also think it is important to register some crucial points about the specific role of religion in poor and oppressed communities. The idea that we should be less hostile to, or more protective of, religions which dominate these communities seems to me a collapse of our politics (part of that relativism referred to above). It should be no surprise to any socialist that religion, and often the most virulent and archaic versions of it, hold so much sway amongst the poor and dispossessed. It is impossible to improve on one of the most famous bits of Marx, 'religion is the opium of the people ... it is the heart of a heartless world, the soul of a soulless universe'. The first part of the quote is better known than the rest but the whole conveys the breadth of religion's role. It is a relief from suffering, though an imaginary, illusory one. It provides succour when nothing else appears to. But it also anaesthetises and deadens the reactions and it is a form of social control. It is, fundamentally, one of the main reasons the oppressed remain oppressed.

Everyone with any religious background will have their own experiences and no two are exactly the same. I was brought up as a Catholic in Northern Ireland. My entire secondary school education coincided with the peak years of the Troubles and I went to a Catholic state grammar school run by priests. Generally speaking, the community was protective of what was seen as 'our schools'. In many ways they were presented as havens from the Unionist/British state, where we could be taught Irish, Catholic catechism and our own version of history. They were our cultural space. In reality this was a sectarian smokescreen. These schools were mechanisms for perpetuating the Catholic Church's control of its flock. Boys and girls were taught separately, RE was Catholic doctrine and much of the history was romantic nationalist mythology. As always there was some room for imaginative, independent teachers to do more useful things within these constraints but these schools were not havens against the people who immediately controlled our lives, the priests and Catholic political leaders. Working-class Catholics had a double oppression. There was the sectarian discrimination, the daily presence of British troops on the streets, the even more threatening menace of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Ulster Defence Regiment and the constant reminders that you were part of a second-class minority. But the people who decided daily how you would

behave, what you could and couldn't do and above all what you could legitimately believe were far closer to home. They claimed leadership of your community and exercised their control through their running of schools. Their claim to be an alternative to a hostile state made their power all the harder to challenge.

Religious organisation is not, however, a political response to oppression. It is a cynical exploitation of it. We need to say that loud and clear. The socialists and radicals in my school and community wanted secular schools, integrated across both communities, co-educational and comprehensive. One of the first things that made me a socialist was seeing how young people at 11 were divided into different schools based on the 11-plus, their gender and their religion. In fact we were divided on religious grounds from primary school age. Northern Irish socialists, whether from the Workers Party, NI Labour Party or People's Democracy, argued for an end to religious schools. They didn't argue that Catholics should keep theirs because they were victims of oppression. In general terms the situation for working-class Muslim, Sikh and Hindu children in Britain is the same. The demand for separate schools may have some genuine resonance in parts of those communities but the driving force behind it is unmistakably from religious and community leaders who fear losing control of the young. They fear integration, assimilation and the corrupting influence of what they see as western culture. To give this drive succour in any way is to betray those young people struggling to break free of parental and religious constraints and make their own decisions about how they live and what they think.

## The Most Important Rights of All

Finally, we need to look at this question from the point of view of children's rights rather than those of parents. Children have a right to an objective, critical, enabling education. Schools, for all their many failings, should be at least one bit of free space for young people. They should be different from home and community in that they do not promote a particular set of religious beliefs, customs, dress or rituals and they provide a place where young people can explore alternatives and have access to as much of the world of knowledge and culture as can be provided. It would be easier to create this space if there was no requirement for acts of broadly Christian worship in all schools of course, but that is a reason for campaigning to end that requirement, not to extend it to other religious groups.

We have a very good tradition on the question of religion and schools. Like any body of thinking it is a guide to action rather than a set of complete answers for every case but it is in no way 'out of date'. For our class to become a class fit to rule, it must first, in the words of Marx, free itself of the 'muck of ages' and foremost amongst that muck is the prejudice, superstition and irrationalism of religion. The call for secular schools does not ask that the state becomes actively anti-religious, only that it is kept separate from and does not

in any way privilege religion. It should be a central part of our politics that there is no place for religious organisations of any kind in running state schools.

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