Keeping the Faith

LUCY RUSSELL

ABSTRACT This article argues that we live in a culturally, politically and religiously diverse society and that faith schools are the *product*, rather than the *cause*, of this diversity. As an easy target for those with fears about social cohesion, faith schools are being 'scapegoated'.

I found myself thinking about my son's education before he was six weeks old. What did I want for my baby? I and my husband are Catholic. The local Catholic primary school will share our values and uphold the teaching of the Catholic Church, working with us, and our parish, to raise our son. This is important to us. But my son doesn't *need* to attend a Catholic school to be brought up a Catholic. He attends Mass with us, and we can teach him about the Gospels.

I want my son to attend a school in which he will be happy; where he will mix with and learn to relate to children from a cross-section of society; where he will learn about respect and responsibility for others (Bernard Bassett writes that 'knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and be responsible for others' [Bassett, 1965, p. 119]); and where there is equality of opportunity. These comprehensive principles of inclusion, social justice and equality are important to us. And so, he will attend the local Catholic primary school.

Polly Toynbee (2006), writing in *The Guardian*, is dismissive of the idea that faith schools have a distinctive ethos, but the culture and philosophy of the Catholic schools I have taught in are significantly different from those of the state schools where I have taught. There was a school in which I once taught (school A) where there was a teacher who was 'Head of Charities'. It was her responsibility to organise fund-raising events at the time of appeals like Children in Need and Comic Relief. In staff briefing one morning this teacher stood up to proudly announce that £250 had been raised by the lower school fair for one or other of these appeals. One tutor group had raised £20 by offering face painting. Applause rang out! There was also fund-raising going on in another school (school B) at about the same time. In this school there were (among other things) cake sales (the cake ingredients paid for by the staff who

baked them; the pupils decorated them), and breakfasts (cooked by teachers who had come into work early, for no financial reward) were on sale to parents and children before school. Almost £2000 was raised. There were 2500 pupils in school A. There were 210 pupils in school B. School A and B had a similar intake of pupils in terms of their (poor) socio-economic backgrounds. School A was a state-run secondary school. School B was a Catholic primary school. No doubt there are exceptions. I am not for a moment suggesting that Catholic schools are distinctive because they care more. I am sure all schools try to care. But this experience spoke volumes to me.

I am aware of (but not convinced by) the arguments put forward against faith schools: denominational schools lead to sectarianism and division within society; they indoctrinate children; all children should be taught in the same schools, have the same opportunities and be trained to take their place in a pluralistic society. These are arguments I will consider in turn. But first a few words about the term 'faith schools'.

This term is used as a generic descriptor to band together a range of schools including voluntary-aided and independent schools of a religious character and background, Anglican schools set up to serve the broader community irrespective of religious commitment, and academies which teach creationism (which is a belief, not a faith). For the purposes of this article, I will use the term to refer to Anglican, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim schools funded by the state: In England there are 4642 Church of England schools, 2037 Catholic schools, 37 Jewish schools and 7 Muslim schools.[1]

Social Cohesion

The central concern in the current debate is about social unity; but this does not exist in modern Britain only to be somehow marred by the presence of these schools. We live in a culturally, politically and religiously diverse society. It could be argued that faith schools are the product, rather than the cause, of this diversity. The education system in Northern Ireland is an example often cited by those who are opposed to faith schools. The National Secular Society states on its website that:

> Because they believe religious schools result in increased levels of sectarianism, secularists would like to see the elimination of denominational or religious schools. This particularly applies to areas of historic tension between Protestants and Roman Catholics, such as in Northern Ireland ...
> (http://www.secularism.org.uk/religioninschools.html)

Professor Richard Dawkins has said that 'if Protestant and Catholic children ceased to be segregated throughout their schooldays, the troubles would largely disappear' (Dawkins, 2001, p. 17). But isn't this statement itself an article of faith? Where is the evidence? The divisions within Northern Ireland were deep rooted and associated more with historical, social and political causes than they

were with religion and the education system. (Dr Geoffrey Short notes that the 'conflict long pre-dates the establishment of a national school system [the latter having only been introduced in 1831]'[Short, 2002, p. 562].) David Aaronovitch, writing from an anti-faith school perspective in *The Observer*, conceded that, despite his position on the issue, he didn't 'accept that faith schools need to lead to a Northern Ireland situation, since that was as much a product of competing nationalisms as of religion'. Indeed, Short argues that 'faith schools are, in principle, as well positioned as their non-denominational counterparts to contribute to a well-integrated society' (Short, 2002, p. 570).

Nonetheless, the subject of social cohesion and faith schools has attracted attention. The Cantel Report on *Community Cohesion* in 2002 identified faith schools as one of the obstacles to promoting community cohesion.[2] This government report was conducted in the wake of race riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in the spring and summer of 2001. But Short has written that rather than undermining community relations, faith schools can actually *promote* social cohesion. He argues that 'faith schools *per se* pose no threat, actual or potential, to a unified society'. In his view faith schools 'can legitimately be seen as a force for unity … they enhance their pupils' academic attainment, self-esteem and sense of cultural identity … the result of such enhancement is the strengthening of inter-communal ties' (Short, 2002, p. 560). It is a view shared by Abdullah Trevathan, Head of the Islamia School in North London, who says that increasing the number of state-funded single faith schools would actually *improve* race relations. Speaking in February 2002, he said:

> My belief is that if there were a Muslim school, state funded, voluntary aided, [Muslim children] would have confidence, they would have self-esteem and we would not be seeing young men in riots. (BBC News, 2002)

Faith schools can also serve the needs of the wider community. Speaking about Catholic schools to the Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges (CATSC) in January 2003, Bishop Declan Lang noted that:

> The Catholic School is not in existence to serve Catholic needs and to throw around itself a protective shield but exists to encourage and enable students to become active citizens contributing to the common good of society. The Catholic School is not about creating a ghetto but recognises the responsibility Christians have for creating a just environment in which the dignity of all is upheld and the bonds of cooperation are forged. (Bishop Lang, 2003)

The Chief Rabbi has made a similar point: 'Faith schools must teach and exemplify tolerance to those of other faiths … [they should] demonstrate, through teaching and practical programmes, a willingness to engage with the society, beyond the boundaries of their community' (Sacks, 2001). As Bishop Lang points out, the Judeo-Christian tradition 'respects the individual and upholds the dignity of each person, whoever they are, no matter what colour,

creed, age or culture. The Church school should reflect this because it is called to be a community that lives the life of the Gospel' (Bishop Lang, 2003).

Critics argue the opposite point of view on faith schools and social cohesion. There is an assumption that if faith schools were abolished, children and young people would attend state schools with a religiously and culturally mixed intake. It is also presumed that at present, those who attend faith schools have no contact with others who are not from the same religious and cultural background. I don't think either is true.

In his article *Find Faith in Diversity*, Aaronovitch (2004) explains that he does not:

> blame faith schools for the greatest ills of the world, since neither Adolf nor Joseph led religious movements; I don't see how you can have state funded church schools or Jewish schools and deny the same rights to Muslims; I can understand that it is better to have regulated denominational schools than watch all religious instruction be carried out by untrained teachers in madrassas, yeshivas or Sunday schools; I recognise we have plenty of non-faith 'ghetto schools' as a consequence of real ghettoes.

So, why *does* Aaronovitch take exception to faith schools? 'I suppose my presumption was that, with time, denominational schools would become less exclusive'. But on its website, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) says that:

> Around 7,000 of the 22,000 maintained schools in England have a religious character. They set their own admissions criteria but cannot refuse to admit non-faith applicants if they have spare places. And many actively welcome children of all faiths, and none.
>
> For example, Sir John Cass Foundation School in inner London is a Church of England School, but has an 80 per cent Muslim intake. Its Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education] report praised positive attitudes to learning and noted that respect for each other was central to its whole ethos.
>
> The Guru Nanak Sikh primary and secondary schools in Hayes give some priority to children of any faith who regularly attend worship. Currently the school's student community consists of Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh students. (DfES, 2006)

Nationally, 30% of pupils in Catholic schools are from backgrounds which are not Catholic (Stannard, 2007). These schools can hardly be called exclusive.

In sending my son to our local Catholic school, I will be ensuring that he learns about the tradition and heritage of the Catholic Church which he is part of, at the same time as meeting children not only from different religious backgrounds, but also from different social backgrounds: faith is a unifying factor bringing together rich and poor. In a society where middle-class parents move house (and pay more for their homes) to be in the 'right' catchment area

for the 'best' schools, are children being given the opportunity in non-denominational schools to mix with others from different backgrounds?

Perhaps I am guilty of making the same assumption here as critics of faith schools: that simply by ensuring children have contact with others who are different from themselves, they will learn tolerance. Short (2002) cites Allport on this issue: 'It has sometimes been held that merely by assembling people without regard for race, colour, religion or national origin, we can thereby destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes. The case is not so simple' (Allport, 1954). Critics make a further assumption that school is the only point of contact for young people; at 16 months my son meets children from diverse backgrounds at the various groups and venues we attend during the week. As he grows up I am sure he will meet and become friends with children from different schools at sports clubs, dance classes, Scouts or whatever. Now, if the critics say, 'yes, but some children live in mono-culture communities', then tell me how getting rid of the faith school will help? The school will continue to have the same intake and be a faith school in everything but name. Or, is the proposal for some sort of American style bussing system?

The influence of the media, Internet and literature should also be remembered. Today's children don't live in a bubble which excludes these outside influences, Deidre Bryant writes:

> In our society, children are aware more than ever of the mores of other faiths and cultures. Through the ubiquitous media they receive views of lifestyles and beliefs outside their own, and isolation by faith or culture is neither possible nor desirable. (Bryant, 2007)

I wonder whether faith schools are being scapegoated. They are a seemingly obvious (and easy) target for those with legitimate concerns about social cohesion. But I fear that the debate about faith schools is a distraction from the real (economic, political and social) issues. I will come back to this, but I would now like to try to answer some of the critics' other arguments. I would also like to note that although I am coming at this issue from the perspective of a Catholic, the arguments are the same for all denominational schools, and I defend the right of all parents who have a faith to send their children to a faith school. Because it is their right.

Parental Rights and Responsibilities

The Vatican Document, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Cardinal Pio Laghi, 1997), says, 'Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs'. *Learning Together* is a website containing resources for the campaign against faith schools; it says that 'Children should not be segregated at school according to their parents' beliefs' (http://www.learning-together.org.uk). But Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, 'that parents have a prior right to

choose the kind of education that should be given to their children'. Similarly, the Council of Europe says, 'In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in education and teaching, the State shall respect the rights of parents to ensure that such education and teaching shall be in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (Council of Europe, 1952).

The National Secular Society, despite stating that they 'want to ensure that human rights always come before religious rights' (National Secular Society, 2007), seeks to undermine the rights of parents as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 'Religion' they say, 'should be a matter of private conscience, for the home and place of worship'.[3] The British Humanist Association is in agreement: 'Children are individual people, not private possessions of their parents. The community should ensure that they receive certain basic opportunities' (British Humanist Association, 1976). When I read this sentence back it sounds hysterical, but it seems that secularists have adopted an anti-parent attitude that any totalitarian regime would be proud of. The secularists want a uniform, secularised culture which excludes God. But, as secularists remind us, *we are a democratic and pluralist society.* And in such a society parents have the right to shape the education of their children according to the beliefs, values and principles they think are important.

Providing a Comprehensive Education

And faith schools *are* popular with parents. Nick Cohen, writing in the *New Statesman* in 2004, claimed that 'Secular middle-class parents go to extraordinary lengths to get their children into C of E schools'. League tables published in December 2006 show faith schools to be among the best performing in the country. It was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* that 'Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools make up 127 of the 209 primaries achieving "perfect" results, with all pupils reaching the expected standards for 11 year-olds in English, maths and Science' (8 December 2006). Cohen argues in his article that the reason for this is that faith schools boost their results 'through covert selection'. This may be true of a handful of schools like Lady Margaret in Parsons Green (Miles, 2007), but the national picture is very different to that seen through the eyes of London-based journalists. In Kent, *where selection has never gone away and the grammar schools remain*, my son's only chance of a comprehensive secondary education *is* the local Catholic school. And in terms of the 'covert selection' argument, it is a myth which government league tables, showing 'value added', dispel.

Oona Stannard, Chief Executive and Director of the Catholic Education Service, told the *Daily Telegraph* that the league tables published in December 2006 reflected the quality of education in church schools. 'I think these results justify what we have been saying. I get fed up with this hoary chestnut that our schools do not have a typical intake', she said. 'Catholic schools have just as many children who have free school meals, they are ethnically diverse and around 30 per cent, on average, are non-Catholic' (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 December

2006). According to the league tables the most improved school in England was in fact St Anne's Roman Catholic Primary School in Ancoats, where almost two-thirds of the pupils are eligible for school meals, a third have special needs and 14 per cent speak English as a second language, *and almost all* the pupils reached the Government's expected standard in English, mathematics and science in 2006 (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 2006). The school that topped the elite 'level 5' table was North Cheshire Jewish Primary School (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 2006).

The DfES notes on its website that there is also a strong argument that faith schools raise standards, *especially in deprived communities*:

> a study by Professor David Jesson shows that, in disadvantaged areas, while the proportion of pupils receiving free school meals is broadly similar in voluntary-aided (usually Church of England or Roman Catholic) secondary schools and others, the number of 15-year-olds getting five or more GCSEs at A*-C is 5 per cent higher. (DfES, 2006)

Brainwashing?

But what about the 'brainwashing'? Cohen (2004) writes that in sending their children to faith schools, parents 'do not for a moment think that they will come out as burning-eyed zealots'. And I don't think for a moment that children do. But Cohen, like Terry Sanderson of the National Secular Society, claims that the Church is engaged in brainwashing. Dawkins is also of the opinion that all faith is blind faith, and Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly. Terry Eagleton, in his review of *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books* writes, 'Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school thought that. For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral part in belief' (Eagleton, 1996). (Would a 'burning-eyed zealot' refer to clerics as 'dim-witted'? Eagleton appears unscathed by his education.)

The late Professor Terence McLaughlin defended the right of parents to commit their children to faith-based schooling but was also aware of the rights of children, as they mature, to come to their own personal position on religious, ideological and value issues. He wrote that faith-based schooling 'can be seen to be compatible with liberal, democratic principles, not least by providing a particular substantial starting point for the child's eventual development into autonomous enquiry and democratic citizenship' (McLaughlin et al, 1996, p. 147). Gerald Grace writes in his obituary for McLaughlin on the Institute of Education website that McLaughlin was convinced that post-Vatican II, Catholic schooling was in the process of developing an educational culture based upon 'openness with its roots', implying that charges of 'indoctrination' could no longer be sustained and were no more than residues of historical prejudices (Grace, 2006).

But, even that aside, as John de Waal writes in *Why Catholic Schools?*, 'One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to think that state schools are neutral in matters of religion and morality' (De Waal, 1977, p. 11). They are not. 'Despite the claims of those who propose a purely secular model for all schools, there is no such thing as a "value free" education' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2 September 2007, p. 3). As it says in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Cardinal Pio Laghi, 1997):

> There is a tendency to forget that education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life. To claim neutrality for schools signifies in practice, more often than not, banning all reference to religion from the cultural and educational field, whereas a correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to 'how', but also to 'why', overcoming any misunderstanding as regards the claim to neutrality in education, restoring to the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity.

One wonders if it is this approach to education which in fact makes faith schools so successful. But, even leaving aside arguments about neutrality and what education is, it is a big assumption (another article of faith?) that non-denominational schools are any more likely than faith schools to foster ethnic and religious harmony; Short argues that they may not (Short, 2002, p. 570).

Why Should the Taxpayer Pay?

It is a good question. Why should the taxpayer pay for faith schools that their (secularists') children cannot attend? Surely this is exclusive, elitist, undemocratic and privileged? As I write this I can hear a stamping foot and sulky protestation, 'it's not fair'. For many critics of faith schools this seems to be the crux of the issue: just because I don't believe in God doesn't mean my child shouldn't be able to attend a faith school.

'Chris' emailed Atheism Central from South Africa to say that 'after much deliberation' he had decided to send his seven year-old stepdaughter to a convent. 'Now five or ten years ago – after my conversion to Atheism you wouldn't have found me within a mile of a Church or Catholic school ... [But] it happens to be the nearest school to our house and has a good academic reputation' (*Atheism for Secondary Schools*, 2001). 'Chris' wanted advice about how to counter and respond to his stepdaughter's exposure to the Catholic faith. Should he have sent her to a convent at all? According to Alan, who responded to this query online, the answer to this question is that it is fine for atheists to send their children to faith schools: 'the most unfortunate aspect of the whole process is the need to conceal the atheism of the parents/child in order to gain entry to the privileged school'. Cohen (2004) wrote in the *New Statesman* that

parents just want 'to get the best education available', and 'everyone has known for years that, to parents who can't afford private fees, church schools offer the next best thing'. The National Secular Society desires a constitution which would include putting 'an end to the divisiveness of publicly funded religious schools by making them open to all without discrimination on grounds of religion, or lack of it, and bringing them under local authority control' (National Secular Society, 2007). Alan writes in his response to 'Chris' that, 'In the UK religious schools are paid for by the general taxpayer and the atheist parent should feel no qualms in sending his child to a school he has helped to pay for' (*Atheism for Secondary Schools*, 2001). Well, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs all pay their taxes too. And taken together, these groups make up the majority – 77% – of the population of Britain.[4] And, in point of fact, the state does not fully fund faith schools. The buildings and land are normally owned by the relevant religious organisation, which also contributes to the buildings and maintenance costs.

It is not as if atheist parents do not have a choice; they are not obliged to send their children to faith schools. But many, like 'Chris', want to. In their Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales note that 'Schools with a religious character are a sector of public education with proven success; they are diverse and they are much sought after each year by hundreds of thousands of parents' (2 September 2007, p. 2). So, what of 'Chris's' predicament? How can he counter the influence of the nuns on his stepdaughter? 'If you sow the seeds of doubt in the mind of your child she will probably be able to maintain a healthy scepticism regarding religion', says Alan. He suggests that

> Teaching her that Father Christmas does not exist is a good starting point – there are close parallels to belief in religion. She will see that many children believe in something that is not true and that there is a 'conspiracy' of adults who perpetuate this belief ... Teach your child tolerance. The nuns in her convent are not bad people – just misguided. Often those attracted to religious life do so because they seek security or have confused ideas about sex. (*Atheism for Secondary Schools*, 2001)

This position is arrogant and insulting, and in that sense is reminiscent of Dawkins's position.

I would like to include a note on Dawkins's position, which has come under attack from members of the academic and scientific community. Dawkins has been criticized, for example, by fellow scientist Professor Winston. Raunderson, writing in *The Guardian*, reported in April 2007 that:

> Lord Winston condemned Professor Dawkins for what he called his 'patronising' and 'insulting' attitude to religious faith, and argued that he and others like him were in danger of damaging the public's trust in science. He particularly objected to Professor Dawkins' latest book, *The God Delusion*, which is an outright attack on religion.

Alister McGrath, who is Professor of Historical Theology at the Unversity of Oxford, and Reverend Dr Joanna Collicutt McGrath have responded to Dawkins's *The God Delusion* with their book, *The Dawkins Delusion* (2007). Dr Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project, is quoted on the back cover of this book:

> Addressing the conclusions of 'The God Delusion' point by point with the devastating insight of a molecular biologist turned theologian, Alister McGrath dismantles the argument that science should lead to atheism, and demonstrates instead that Dawkins has abandoned his much-cherished rationality to embrace an embittered manifesto of dogmatic atheist fundamentalism.

And Michael Ruse, Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, is quoted on the cover: 'Richard Dawkins' utopian vision of a world without religion is here deftly punctured by McGrath's informed discourse. His fellow Oxonian clearly demonstrates the gaps, inconsistencies, and surprising lack of depth in Dawkins' arguments'.

A Tolerant and Cohesive Society

Bishop Lang drew attention in his speech to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's book, *The Dignity of Difference: how to avoid the clash of civilizations* (2002), in which he said the Chief Rabbi:

> talks about the importance of conversation and how conversation is an antidote to violence. Our conversation he says should not be limited to people of like mind but extend to those who we might regard as strangers or even enemies. Through conversation, if it is genuine, barriers fall, friendships are formed and differences are seen as enriching and not as a threat. (Bishop Lang, 2003)

I have attempted to answer several arguments in this article. For some of the critics of faith schools – like Dawkins – the argument is simply anti-religious. The position held by Dawkins and those who follow him could be described as secular fundamentalism; this position shows a lack of tolerance in tune with religious fundamentalism. Within the pages of this journal the main concern of the critics of faith schools is social cohesion. But Short writes that:

> if Britain is to become a tolerant and cohesive society, it will be necessary to recognise that the debate surrounding faith schools is a distraction. There is no reason to believe that they are inevitably divisive – in a socially destructive sense – as the long history of Anglican, Catholic and Jewish schools in England clearly demonstrates. (Short, 2002, p. 570)

In helping to create a cohesive society the first step may be to stop scapegoating and start tolerating faith schools; and then to look at what they have to offer in

terms of promoting social cohesion and citizenship, *and providing comprehensive education.*

Notes

[1] There are also 26 Methodist schools; 32 Christian schools; 54 Joint Christian faith schools; two Sikh schools and one Greek Orthodox school (DfES, 10 June 2007).

[2] There is an issue here about language and definitions; is 'community cohesion' the same as 'social cohesion'?

[3] This implies that religion is a hobby which has no impact on a person's character and way of life. In a speech at Oxford University, Professor James Arthur said that 'There is no doubt that religion is and has been a key factor in determining someone's charater, moral norms, idea of duty and has provided many with a sense of national identity. Religion is not simply concerned with abstract ideas, but is also concerned with action and participation in the public realm' (Arthur, 2007, 17 March). People with a religious belief cannot 'bracket' this out from their daily lives.

[4] The 2001 census showed that 72% of the population identified themselves as Christian; 0.3% Buddhist; 1.0% Hindu; 0.5% Jewish; 2.7% Muslim; and 0.6% Sikh. A further 0.3% belonged to other religions. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=293).

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