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## Social Selection and Religiously Selective Faith Schools

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**ABSTRACT** This article reviews recent research looking at the socio-economic profile of pupils at faith schools and the contribution religiously selective admission arrangements make. It finds that selection by faith leads to greater social segregation and is open to manipulation. It urges that such selection should end, making the state-funded school system more inclusive and reducing disadvantage.

It has long been established through various measures that state-funded faith schools admit more pupils from affluent backgrounds than do other schools. Explanations as to why this is so vary. Some have made the accusation that religiously selective pupil admission arrangements (used by most faith schools) are more readily manipulated by aspirational parents than admission policies at non-faith schools. Others argue that faith schools merely reflect the social profile of their catchment or/and congregation. In recent years research has shown all these explanations to have validity.

Determining whether there is a relationship between religiosity and affluence is relatively straightforward and has been identified in various surveys over time. One such survey, by the Christian charity, Tearfund, in 2009 [1], found that while 26% of British people attended a church at least once a year, this rose to 34% among socio-economic groups AB and fell to 22% among those of socio-economic groups DE. Assessing whether faith schools admit children from wealthier homes because the schools are located in more affluent areas is trickier to show.

In 'Measuring Social Segregation between London's Secondary Schools, 2003-2008/9' [2], Harris found that:

faith schools, too, tend to have lower proportions of FSM [free school meal] eligible pupils, on average ... It also cannot be due to location – the possibility the schools are located in areas of low eligibility – because they under-recruit FSM eligible pupils when

compared to their local competitors. Instead, it is more a consequence of who is able or willing to demonstrate some sort of commitment to or practice of the faith.[3]

However, unsure as to the explanation, Andrew Brown, Editor for the Belief section of *The Guardian's* 'Comment is Free' website, and colleagues, decided in 2012 to try and offer a comprehensive answer as to whether the different socio-economic profile at faith schools could be explained by the locations of schools by looking at all state-funded schools in England.

Statistics showing the number of pupils claiming and entitled to free school meals are a very useful tool in considering the extent to which schools are socio-economically inclusive or exclusive, because it is the only pupil material well-being measure calculated by government at every state-funded school. They already showed well (see Table I) how faith schools admitted fewer children from deprived backgrounds than other schools. Helpfully, the number of children entitled to free school meals is also provided by geographical area, allowing a direct comparison to be made between a school's pupils with that of children living in its respective neighbourhood, which is precisely what *The Guardian* investigated.

Primary		Secondary	
Non-religious	21.5	Non-religious	15.6
Church of England	13.0	Church of England	12.0
Roman Catholic	16.3	Roman Catholic	14.0
England overall	19.3	England overall	15.2

Table I. Percentage of pupils claiming free school meals in England (2012).

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/mar/05/faith-schools-admissions>

The newspaper looked at the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals at every school and then compared it to the proportion of children entitled to free school meals living in the area represented by the first three characters of the postcode of each school. They then compared schools against the others in the local authority area; a useful measure given that faith schools often do not have a catchment and may draw many pupils from outside their neighbourhood. They then compared all schools nationally by their faith designation.

About a third of state-funded schools in England are faith schools and 96% of these are either Roman Catholic or Church of England. *The Guardian* found that 73% of Roman Catholic primary schools and 72% of Roman Catholic secondary schools had a lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than the average for schools in their respective local authority area, and that 76% of Roman Catholic primary schools and 65% of Roman Catholic secondary schools had a lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than children living in their respective local postcode. For Church of England schools, 74% of primary schools and 65.5% of secondary schools had a

smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than was average for schools within their local authority, while 63.5% of primary schools and 40% of secondary schools had a lower proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals than children living in their local postcode. Regardless of whether faith schools were more or less likely than other types of school to be located in more affluent areas, they were clearly found to be cream skimming from the areas in which they were located and served, with Roman Catholic faith schools most likely to do so.

Of course, if faith schools tend to admit the more religious and the more religious tend to be more affluent, then it should be little surprise that the schools tend to attract the children of the better heeled. Some have also found, such as West and Hind in 'Selectivity, Admissions and Intakes to "Comprehensive" Schools in London' [4], that schools in control of their own admissions arrangements tend to be more socially selective. Before the explosion of academies, most faith schools determined their own admission arrangements, whereas the large majority of non-faith schools did not. Uncertainty therefore remained about the contribution that religiously selective admission policies in and of themselves contributed towards greater social sorting at faith schools. In the last year, however, greater clarity has been provided.

### **Fair Admissions Campaign Research**

In June 2013, Accord joined a range of groups to found the Fair Admissions Campaign (FAC), which seeks to bring selection by faith to state-funded schools to an end. In December 2013, the FAC launched an online tool [5] mapping the extent of social and ethnic inclusiveness of all secondary schools in England, and showing the extent to which the oversubscription policy at secondary faith schools were religiously selective.

By using school and neighbourhood level statistics on free school meals eligibility, and taking into account the age of the pupils at each school and the difference in eligibility between primary and secondary schools, the FAC constructed a profile for every secondary school based on what it should look like if it admitted those children living nearest. The FAC then compared these profiles to the actual number of FSM eligible pupils at each school, as revealed by the Department for Education's annual School Census.

Unsurprisingly, the FAC found, as *The Guardian* had in 2012 and others before them, that faith schools admitted fewer children eligible for free school meals than lived locally to them. However, by simultaneously looking at the extent to which each schools' admissions policy privileged applications on faith grounds, it was able to make a comparison between how socio-economically inclusive a faith school was with the level of religious selection permitted.

The FAC found [6], as set out in Table II, that secondary schools without a religious character admitted, in proportional terms, 10.66% more pupils entitled to free school meals than if they admitted those children living nearest

to them (it should be factored in that this group included the very large majority of grammar schools). In contrast, faith schools admitted 18.44% fewer. However, there was a marked difference between those faith schools that selected by faith and those that did not. Those that had an admissions policy that permitted all pupils to be selected on faith grounds if sufficiently oversubscribed (the majority of secondary faith schools) admitted 26.71% fewer pupils entitled to free school meals than if they admitted local children. Those that did not select by faith in any way (a noticeable and growing number of faith schools) admitted 3.87% more.

Religious character	Free school meal difference from local area (absolute terms) %	Free school meal difference from local area (proportional) %	Maximum average religious selection permitted (%)
No religious character	0.58	10.66	0.00
All religious	-4.64	-18.44	76.60
0% selective religious	0.38	3.87	0.00
1-49% selective religious	-1.20	-0.63	22.20
50-99% selective religious	-4.30	-4.69	70.90
100% selective religious	-6.13	-26.71	100.00
Church of England	-3.33	-9.94	50.40
Roman Catholic	-5.67	-23.72	99.40
Generically 'Christian'	-0.39	-2.87	14.00
Jewish	-12.38	-61.43	100.00
Muslim	-7.74	-24.98	94.90

Table II. How socio-economically selective different types of secondary school are. Published by the FAC under the 'Show table' tab on the 'Overall averages' section of <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/>

Although it might be expected that religiously selective schools are more socially exclusive given the greater level of religiosity among the more affluent, we might also assume this was the case at non-religiously selective faith schools through parental self-selection – because the schools offer faith-based education, a greater proportion of those wanting to send their children to them should be more religiously committed and active, so likely to be more affluent. However, the FAC did not find this. It found that non-religiously selective faith schools were more socio-economically inclusive than the mean average for secondary schools as a whole. Why then were those faith schools that selected

by faith when oversubscribed much more socially exclusive – was it because the policies were being manipulated, or were there other factors at play?

### **Sutton Trust and Pastoral Research Centre Research**

Later, in December 2013, a YouGov survey [7] commissioned by The Sutton Trust provided a unique insight as to how faith school admission policies are being widely abused. The poll showed that 6% of all parents with a child currently at a state school admitted to attending church services, which they would not have otherwise done, so that a child could go to a Church school. However, it also showed a strong socio-economic bias – the proportion of parents of socio-economic group A that admitted to false church attendance was 10%.

Although there had previously been anecdotal evidence about families feigning religious belief or adherence to get a child into a popular Church school, there has never been firm evidence pointing to widespread abuse. The Sutton Trust's figures are all the more remarkable when it is considered how relatively few school places these parents are chasing. Faith schools tend to be smaller than other schools, so only educate a quarter of pupils in the state-funded system in England and Wales, while many of the schools are not oversubscribed and, when they are, many do not reward church attendance in the first place. This includes many Roman Catholic schools which show preference to children who have been baptised.

However, in January 2014, the Pastoral Research Centre released data suggesting that baptism may also be being manipulated to aid children in gaining access to a popular Catholic school. The Centre showed [8] that while the number of baptisms of children under the age of one in England and Wales was in long-term decline, the number of baptisms of those aged over one had risen dramatically over the previous decade. The change is consistent with parents having children baptised as they get nearer to school age, as part of a strategy to help to increase the chance of them getting into a popular Church school (and educated alongside more aspirational families), rather than it being merely an expression of their devoutness. This might have been a provocative supposition were it not already shown that religiously selective admission arrangements were already widely abused through insincere church attendance, and if that is a useful marker then we may expect those families using baptism to queue jump to also be from among the affluent.

On one level these findings have provided critics of faith schools with another stick with which to beat them. For many of the school's proponents it is also a painful criticism that the schools have become so elitist. The National Society, which created most Church of England and Church in Wales schools, was established to provide schools for children from poor families. Similarly the precursor to the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales was named the 'Catholic Poor School Committee'. Serving the better-heeled in their communities is a distortion of the original mission of most Church schools.

These findings should also be of particular concern to anyone who supports comprehensive education. Although the grammar schools debate has to some extent been frozen in policy terms in recent decades, religious selection is providing socially selective and exclusive education by the back door, and on a massive scale. The FAC calculates that 16% of school places at the secondary stage can be assigned on faith grounds (if religiously selective schools are sufficiently oversubscribed), whereas grammar schools provide 5% of places. Grammar schools make up 18 of the FAC's worst 100 secondary schools (out of 3336) in terms of free school meal eligibility, whereas religiously selective schools comprise 51.[9] Overall, religiously selective schools make a greater contribution in making the state-funded school system more segregated on socio-economic grounds at the secondary stage than grammar schools.

On top of covert socio-economic selection, selection by faith also leads (by its very nature) to greater ethnic segregation between schools, which is even more pernicious in terms of undermining community cohesion. Furthermore, in contrast to grammar schools, which select children in their last year of primary school, religiously selective faith schools also have a large presence at the primary stage. This means they select many children by faith ahead of their reception year at age 3 or 4. If pigeonholing and selecting children by ability at age 10 or 11 is educationally irrational (as grammar schools do), then covert socio-economic and overt ethnic segregation at an even younger age would seem as much, if not more so. Religiously selective schools should be a major concern for proponents of comprehensive schooling.

### **What to Do**

The last Labour government made a number of positive changes in the area of faith school admissions. The 2002 Education Act prevented state-funded faith schools in England and Wales from turning away non-adherents if a school is undersubscribed, while in 2007 the School Admissions Code was made statutory. Allen et al [10] found that the Code had made schools more socially inclusive where they had used admissions criteria and arrangements that were subsequently deemed inadmissible. Under Ed Balls tenure as Education Secretary (2007-10), most new academy faith schools were also limited in selecting no more than 50% of pupils by faith, and post May-2010 this rule was expanded to cover all new faith academies. Although these changes were individually relatively small ones, they have made a distinct improvement in practice and attest to the reality that government can make faith schools more inclusive, which should embolden future policy makers and political leaders.

Some schools implement stricter faith-based criteria than others, which may serve to reduce manipulation of the system, but in some cases these approaches are being found impermissible. In April 2014, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator determined [11] that the religiously selective admissions criteria at Canon Slade School, a Church of England secondary school in Bolton, broke the Admissions Code because by rewarding applicants whose

family had a past record of regular church attendance of up to 11 years, it was found to unfairly disadvantage children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Adjudicator believed that the effect of rewarding up to this length of church attendance meant ‘families with higher incomes can use that income to mitigate or overcome those challenges. They can pay for extra support with caring responsibilities and are much less likely, for example, to be reliant on public transport to reach church every week’.[12] Much stricter faith-based criteria appear unworkable.

The Office of the School Adjudicator has previously suggested that the Department for Education should draw up, with faith bodies, model supplementary information forms to access applicants by school’s faith criteria. This would certainly provide greater consistency and fairness. However, from the point of view of the FAC and Accord, which seek to end selection by faith, it would be a welcome change, though one which tinkered around the edges.

While ending selection by faith could be achieved over a fixed time frame by revising the School Admissions Code, the two campaign groups would ultimately welcome change to primary legislation. In the meantime they hope to empower reformers within government and faith groups who would like schools to be open to the whole community. There are tentative signs of a cultural shift.

### **Approaches by Different Dominations**

Most state-funded faith schools have a Christian denominational faith designation, but at the secondary stage in England a noticeable and growing number are generically ‘Christian’ in their religious character (51 out of 628 faith schools). They are twice as numerous as all non-Christian faith schools at the secondary stage put together (25 schools) and, as shown in Table II, the FAC found that no more than 14% of pupil places at ‘Christian’ schools could be apportioned by faith. Furthermore, the Church of England has also hinted at new approaches.

There are already a wide of variety of approaches at Church of England schools. Some do not select by faith and more choose to only reserve some places on these grounds, and, as shown in Table II, about half of places at these schools at the secondary stage can be allotted by faith. Back in April 2011, the Chair of the Church of England’s Board of Education and the Episcopal spokesperson on education in the House of Lords, the Bishop of Oxford, The Rt Revd John Pritchard, urged for further change, saying [13] in an interview with the *Times Educational Supplement*, that faith selection by Church schools ‘ought to be minimised because our primary function and our privilege is to serve the wider community. Ultimately I hope we can get the number of reserved places right down to 10 per cent’.

Meanwhile in an interview [14] with *The Times* in November 2013, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, praised Church schools that were inclusive, saying:

What you are seeing in the Church schools is a deeper and deeper commitment to the common good. There's a steady move away from faith-based entry tests ... It is not necessary to select to get a really good school. There are unbelievably brilliant schools that are entirely open to all applicants without selection criteria apart from residence, where you live, and which produce staggeringly good results. It's a question of – and you can point to them all over the place – it's a question of outstanding leadership.

Although Lambeth Palace released a subsequent statement [15] from the Archbishop, clarifying that he still supported Church of England schools being able to select by faith, that he inferred the common good was better served by schools refraining from doing so was significant.

In June 2014, the Church of England's newly-appointed Chief Education Officer was also quoted [16] in an interview with *The Telegraph* as stating that a rising number of its new schools will not select by faith at all. Questions remain about the extent to which media headlines about inclusivity generated by senior Church of England spokesperson match up with reality, and especially about practice at the Church's very large number of existing schools, but these public aspirations are welcome, and serve to affirm that faith schools do not need to select to maintain their ethos. The FAC intends to update its online map over time, and so will be charting changes in both the level of religious selection and social exclusivity at secondary schools.

In contrast, however, the response of the Roman Catholic Church has been defensive and intransigent. In November 2013, the Church reaffirmed [17] its opposition to new Catholic academies because such schools would be limited in selecting no more than half their pupils by faith and so not provide 'a secure basis for the provision of a Catholic school'. This seems especially confrontational given that most private Catholic schools do not select by faith and, as annual school censuses [18] from the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales show, about 30% of children at state-funded Catholic schools are not considered to be Roman Catholic. As some state-funded Catholic schools admit entirely or almost entirely Catholic children then so it must follow that some admit noticeably more than 30% non-Catholics. Although the Church argues that their schools need to select by faith to educate Catholics and so maintain their ethos, many of the Church's own schools demonstrate this is not case.

Evidence, however, does suggest that by making schools more ethnically homogenous, religiously selective schools appear to be better at transmitting religiosity to pupils. 'The Religiosity of Children of Immigrants and Natives in England, Germany, and the Netherlands: the role of parents and peers in class' [19] by de Hoon and van Tubergen, published in February 2014, found:

Adolescents with classmates who are more religious find religion more important, attend religious meetings more often, and pray more often. Elaborating on the multiple-group perspective ... our



findings with regard to religious attendance and prayer in the Netherlands suggest that the religiosity of classmates has a stronger socializing influence if a larger proportion of the classmates are from the same ethnic background.[20]

Although Accord questions the appropriateness of state-funded schools transmitting religiosity, it is something that many faith schools and some parents seek, and it is an outcome that religiously selective schools appear better able to achieve.

The most strident argument currently put forward by supporters of faith selection is that by letting schools select by faith it serves to uphold parents' human rights to have their children educated in conformity with their own religious and philosophical conviction. Over time a change in emphasis has been made from defending the liberty of faith schools and faith groups, to faith selection offering an indirect defence of the liberty of parents. It is put forward by many, including by government, and is very important to engage with.

The Human Rights Act gives further effect to rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights, and both make certain that parents can ensure that their children are educated in conformity with their beliefs. The Convention was an instrument created after the Second World War and it sought to stop parents having another religion forced upon their children by the state against their wishes. For example, it would stop the state forcing Jewish children to recite Christian prayers at school. This is why parents of pupils at all state-funded schools can choose to have their children withdrawn from activities like religious education and collective worship.

The obligation placed on the state however is not to guarantee a certain kind of philosophical or faith-based schooling for parent's children, but for the state merely not to interfere. The right provided by the Act and Convention is not a positive right to require the state to help provide education in accordance with the religious wishes of parents, and it cannot be relied upon as such. Otherwise all parents could demand privileged access for their children to schools that accorded with their beliefs – or where these schools do not exist, that the state must establish them. However, they cannot.

### **Conclusion**

It is now clear that to maintain religious selection at state-funded school involves maintaining a system that encourages parents to be insincere about their beliefs (as shown by the Sutton Trust survey and suggested by research from the Pastoral Research Centre), and in the process taints families, faith schools and faith groups with hypocrisy, and in the case of many Church schools goes as far as to distort their original aim to provide education for the poorest. The system is also being justified by twisting the understanding of our human rights laws – laws set up to prevent religious repression are being misapplied to try and justify religious discrimination. In contrast, non-

religiously selective faith schools avoid these problems and instead have a good story to tell in terms of socio-economic inclusivity.

Rather than persisting with the current system, which is having a corrosive effect on the mission of many faith schools, the sincerity with which people hold and manifest religious belief and equality of opportunity (by entrenching social privilege), it is clear to many that the common good in society will be much better served by schools moving away from selection by faith once and for all. An Accord commissioned ComRes opinion poll [21] in 2012 already suggests there is majority support in principle for such a move. It found that 73% of adults agreed that 'state funded schools, including state funded faith schools, should not be allowed to select or discriminate against prospective pupils on religious grounds in their admissions policy', with half (50%) stating that they agreed 'strongly'. Only 18% of respondents disagreed, meaning selection by faith was opposed by a ratio of four to one.

Discrimination may appear a loaded way in which to frame debate, but it is precisely what religious selection entails – disadvantaging others by account of their beliefs. So they can select children by faith, faith schools have an exemption from the prohibition against religious discrimination in the Equality Act.[22] In legal terms faith selection is therefore already defined as religiously discriminatory and, as shown in Accord's 2012 survey, such discrimination is out of step with modern values.

Political leaders may try to avoid tackling the issue, and continue to try and define and claim superiority of 'British values', while simultaneously ignoring what British people actually think. We only have to consider the reaction from some faith groups to same sex adoption and marriage to get a sense of the political pressure they are willing to bear. However, it is also clear that the status quo cannot be maintained.

An opinion poll [23] in June 2014 commissioned by *The Observer* found that 58% of adults were against state-funded faith schools, with 35% surveyed urging that their funding be axed and the other 23% supporting the schools being abolished altogether. The survey indicates widespread unease at how the role of religion in the state-funded school system is currently negotiated, and while Accord and the FAC argue that reform should happen, public sentiment suggests a rebalancing in terms of how faith at schools affects children and wider society must happen, one way or the other. Those who are critical of current arrangements may be dismissed, but they include a majority of the public. Advocates of comprehensive education have long been at the forefront of those urging change and they should remain so.

## Notes

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- [24] <http://www.accordcoalition.org.uk/>
- [25] <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/our-members/>
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