

BHA Briefing 2006/4: Faith Schools

Unstarred question tabled by Lord Taverne for 8th February 2006 – expected to be taken during the dinner adjournment.

“To ask Her Majesty’s Government what plans they have for the extension of faith schools”

The BHA has been involved in the debate over faith schools for many years. In that time, we have produced widely-praised policy papers on this issue and amassed a huge base of research about faith schools (see <http://tinyurl.com/avqy6>). In that time, and despite increasing evidence to the contrary, Government has continued to view faith schools as an admirable and superior part of our education system.

The green paper *Schools Building on Success* (2001) welcomed C of E proposals for a hundred extra church secondary schools. Since then the Government has encouraged and funded more schools run by diverse religious groups on the grounds of increasing parental choice and diversity of provision in education. Without a rational or informed debate on the merits or otherwise of increasing faith schools, Government has continued to encourage their increase. **Nine out of ten attempts by faith groups to gain control of schools have been successful in the last eight years** (*Times Educational Supplement*, 20/01/06).

This briefing summarises the main arguments against faith schools and challenges some common assumptions.

“Faith schools get good results.”

Any selective school can achieve better than average results, and Church and other faith schools in the state sector are selective. They take less than their share of deprived children and more than their share of the children of ambitious and choosy parents. This covert selection goes a long way towards explaining their apparent academic success:

- “Selection, even on religious grounds, is likely to attract well-behaved children from stable backgrounds,” said a spokesperson for Ofsted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 16/2/01.
- In the average community primary (secondary) school, 20.1% (15.4%) of children are eligible for free school meals; in the average Church of England school it is only 11.3% (11.6%) – *DfES figures for England, 2005*.
- In 2005, only 14% of pupils in faith schools had special educational needs, as against 17% in community schools – *DfES figures for England, 2005*
- Dr Sandie Schagen, Principal Research Officer at the National Foundation for Educational Research told the Parliamentary Education and Skills Select Committee in 2003: “On the basis of our research, looking exclusively at achievement, there is not any evidence at all to suggest really that increasing the number of faith schools will improve the level of achievement...Our finding is that basically, when you apply value-added analysis, that advantage all but disappears, which suggests that the difference is based on intake. Interestingly, you can

hypothesise that if they do have better ethos and better behaviour and so on that would lead to better achievement, but we did not find any evidence that that is so."

- A study by think tank Iris (November 2005) found that many faith primary schools in England take in pupils whose family circumstances are very different from the neighbourhoods they serve. One school with only 10% of pupils on free meals was in a postcode with over 45%.
- In the case of independent Muslim schools, much vaunted this year for their high positions in the 'value-added' league tables, small class sizes also play a part in the achievement of pupils. The Muslim school that came highest in the table had only 6 pupils taking GCSEs (*Guardian*, 19/01/06). If community schools had the luxury of such small classes, they would no doubt replicate the results achieved.

If we want socially or academically selective education (with the disadvantaged "sink" schools that will inevitably accompany it), we should have an open and honest debate about it, not bring it in by stealth and in a way that benefits only the religious.

In any case, good results are not the only indicator of a good school and in 2004/5, Ofsted judged only 1% of faith secondary schools 'highly effective' as against 3% of non-faith secondary schools.

"Church schools serve the whole community – they don't discriminate or proselytise."

This may have been true of some Church schools until recently. But the Archbishops' Council report *The Way ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium* (2001), "confirmed the crucial importance of the Church schools to the whole mission of the Church to children and young people, and indeed to the long-term well-being of the Church of England". It recommended reserving places for Christians and that Church schools should become more "distinctively Christian", with a mission to "Nourish those of the faith; Encourage those of other faiths; Challenge those who have no faith".

- When only 7.4% adults in England go to church on an average Sunday (*Religious Trends, 2002-2003*), such overtly Christian schools cannot serve the whole community. Neither do they respect the autonomy of children in the vital matter of choosing their own religious and value commitments.
- As Canon John Hall, general secretary of the Church of England board of education, has said: "The Church intends that its schools offer distinctively Christian education and are open and inclusive of all who seek such education" (*TES*, 7/9/01) – a definition of "inclusive" that excludes many. Indeed, one Church of England school's response to a complaint from a parent over discrimination against their pupil, received by the BHA in 2006, explicitly cited *The Way Ahead* in justifying the conduct of the school, highlighting that the report recommended a church school be 'distinctively and recognisably a Christian institution'.

- Religious Education and worship in Church and other religious schools are not generally as broad-based and multi-faith as in community schools, and faith schools discriminate against everyone not of their faith – in their admissions and employment policies, their curricula, and their ethos and assumptions about their religion and the worldviews of others. Some faith schools will not even try to serve the whole community, and will divide children not just by religion but also ethnically – especially if Muslims, Sikhs, Seventh Day Adventists and other minority religions and denominations get more than the tiny handful of schools they have now. Northern Ireland and Bradford are examples of what happens to communities where children are educated separately and grow up knowing little of each other.

"Faith schools increase parental choice."

Choice is rarely feasible in small communities, and even in larger ones choice for one group is usually at the expense of another. Faith schools choose their pupils, rather than the other way round, and a proliferation of faith schools will decrease choice for the majority of parents, unless they are prepared to join, or pretend to join, a religion.

- A report of the Education and Skills Select Committee in May 2003, based on evidence from numerous experts, stated: "In practice parents have found that the reality of school diversity and choice can act to limit rather than expand their options for their children's education."
- In 2005, the Select Committee found that "In oversubscribed schools, the satisfaction of one person's choice necessarily denies that of another." A plethora of different kinds of school – specialist, trust, faith-based (some of them specialist), and academies (some of them faith-based) – will not necessarily increase choice or raise standards.
- 6292, or 35.6%, primary schools have a religious character, and of these 4468 are C of E and a total of 6258 or 99% are Christian; 593, or 17.5%, secondary schools have a religious character, and of these 201 are C of E, and a total of 582 or 98%, are Christian (DfES figures, 2005). As Church school numbers increase, other religious groups demand their own publicly funded schools on grounds of equity.
- Each year, the British Humanist Association receives many complaints from parents who cannot get their child into the local state school because it selects by faith, or whose only option is a local faith school because there is not a local community school.

Though religious leaders and organisations want more faith schools, poll after poll finds that parents and the general public just want good all-round neighbourhood schools:

- A survey for *Bella* magazine by NOP in June 2000 found that 79% said separating children according to religious belief is as wrong as separating them according to colour or accent. ... 72% believed that children should never be excluded just because they're of a different faith, or of no faith at all. ... 55% said single-faith schools create a divided society. ... 37% said the proper place to teach religion is in Sunday School. ... 8% of parents who had sent their child to a

religious school admitted they attended church just so they could get them in.

- A 2005 ICM/*Guardian* survey found that 64% of people opposed government funding for faith schools, fearing their impact on social cohesion.
- In 2005 96% of *New Statesman* readers thought that Tony Blair should end his support for faith schools.

"Faith schools have a better ethos than community schools."

Religious schools tend to have a religious ethos, and their teachers do often have an enviable confidence in their moral values and invaluable moral support from parents. But teachers in community schools frequently have these too, and the values and successes of community schools are too often underestimated. Moral education is too important to be left solely to religious schools, and schools' ethos and values can be based on shared human values rather than on religion.

- There is no "magic ingredient" in religious schools, as the head of a C of E school revealed in *The Independent* on 15/6/01: "The fact that we select those who are supported by parents is the key defining factor in the kind of pupils we send out into the world."
- Faith schools that operate inclusive admissions policies in difficult neighbourhoods often share the same social problems and poor discipline as other schools. For example, the school outside which headmaster Philip Lawrence was stabbed intervening in a pupil gang fight was a Roman Catholic one. Church schools sometimes get poor Ofsted reports and are put on "special measures" as *The Way ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium* admitted. And many ordinary state schools get excellent Ofsted reports for their ethos and values.

One has to doubt the commitment to truth and integrity of schools that encourage parents to take up religious observances simply in order to get their children into a religious school. The head teacher of an Oldham C of E school was reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* of 22/6/01, as "happy to admit that many 'Church of England' parents actually attend services with the express purpose of winning a place at his school."

"Religious minorities need their own schools in order to preserve their culture and beliefs."

It is understandable that, with 6840 publicly-funded Christian schools, members of other faiths are demanding public funds for their schools, but community needs should not be allowed to override the needs of children for an education that opens windows onto a wider world. Culture and beliefs can be transmitted at home. There is often a gulf between the religious segregation that older generations and "community leaders" want, and what young people in those groups want:

- Lord Ouseley's report on Bradford (*Community Pride not Prejudice*, Bradford Vision, 2001) noted: "What was most inspiring was the great desire among young people for better education, more social and cultural interaction ... Some young people have pleaded desperately

for this to overcome the negativity that they feel is blighting their lives and leaves them ignorant of other cultures and lifestyles..." Young people realise that being taught in religious ghettos is not a good preparation for life in a multi-cultural society.

- The Ouseley report also observes "signs that communities are fragmenting along racial, cultural and faith lines. Segregation in schools is one indicator of this trend...There is "virtual apartheid" in many secondary schools in the District."

Other well-informed commentators criticise the multi-culturalist orthodoxy:

- Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, social researcher, journalist and Muslim, writes in *After Multiculturalism* (The Foreign Policy Centre, May 2000): "traditional multiculturalists believe that equity means that funding Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools must also mean state funding for Muslim and Hindu schools where there is sufficient demand, as there often clearly is. *After Multiculturalism*, we need to take a different approach - to fairly represent the society we live in without breaking it up further into minority groups aided and abetted by the State...there should not be state-funding for state schools of any religion."
- Women of Asian heritage have been amongst those opposing the expansion of religious schools: "...we believe that single faith schools will mean more discrimination and...a greater stranglehold of the most conservative, anti-women and communal individuals over our children's education and our communities as a whole..." (London Development Education and South Asia Solidarity Group, Autumn 02)
- A 2005 Islamic Human Rights Commission survey found that only 42.9% of Muslim females and 49.7% of Muslim males preferred Muslim schooling. Satisfying the demands of some members of minority groups should not take precedence over working towards a cohesive and tolerant society.

"Parents have a right to educate their children in the faith of their choice."

We respect the rights to freedom of belief and to education, and understand the desire of parents to bring up their children with the family's beliefs. However, it is not the job of publicly funded schools to instil a religious faith in children, and states are not obliged to provide schools catering for every shade of belief or philosophy. It is one thing for parents in private to bring up their children to believe what they, the parents, think true and important. It is quite another for parents to expect that the state should undertake the role of transmitting such a belief.

Groups lobbying for religious schools sometimes cite the *First Protocol, Article 2 of the Human Rights Act 1998, Part 2*: "No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the state shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions." But Amnesty International UK, in *Amnesty* (September – October 2000), stated: "This article guarantees people the right to access to existing educational institutions; it does not require the government to establish or fund a particular type of education.

The requirement to respect parents' convictions is intended to prevent indoctrination by the state." If anything, the growth of state-funded schools with a Christian ethos, all promoting one religion, runs counter to the principles of article 2.

The curriculum in some private faith schools would certainly appear to contravene another human right: "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds..." (*Article 13, Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the UN, 1989).

"Government is not going to abandon faith schools, so what can we do about them?"

The British Humanist Association is strongly in favour of a halt to the expansion of faith schools and the reforming of those that exist so as to make them inclusive and accommodating to pupils and parents of all religions and none in a wider system of inclusive community schools. In light of this, there are key points that can be raised in any debate on faith schools:

- Government could oblige all schools (including faith schools) to follow a curriculum of broad and balanced RE (such as that laid out in the new – but non-statutory – National Framework for RE). In the case of faith schools this could be in addition to whatever (optional) religion-specific teaching those schools were permitted to offer.
- Government could oblige faith schools to be non-selective, making their intakes truly inclusive.
- Government could reform the law to remove the requirement on community schools to have a daily act of broadly Christian collective worship, making such schools more welcoming places for families of no faith (65% of 12-19 year olds according to DfES figures) and of other faiths.
- Government could reduce any desire that exists for separate schools on the part of minority faiths, by making community schools more inclusive and accommodating institutions.

If you are planning to speak on 8th February, and would like more information, please contact Andrew Copson on 020 7079 3585 or 07855 380633 or by email: andrew@humanism.org.uk

You can view the BHA's full policy on religion and schools, *A Better Way Forward*, at <http://tinyurl.com/7dlwu>

You can read a selection of points on faith schools and community cohesion, from the BHA's response to the 2004 Government Consultation on a Community cohesion strategy at <http://tinyurl.com/7snfu> (para 16-25)