

## BHA BRIEFING: Ofsted and 'faith' schools 12 March 2015



**Backbench business: Education regulation and faith schools** (Sir Edward Leigh, Robert Ffello and Martin Vickers)  
12 March 2015

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March MPs will have the opportunity to debate *Education regulation and faith schools* and discuss the motion: 'That this House believes that Ofsted should respect the ability of faith schools to teach their core beliefs in the context of respect and toleration for others'.

**The BHA's view is that continued Ofsted inspections are crucial for ensuring 'faith' schools provide their children with a broad and balanced education and prepare them for life in modern Britain. We are not convinced by claims that Ofsted is biased against 'faith' schools in any way and see no evidence of this in their reports.**

### Key points concerning inspection of faith schools:

- In schools designated as having a religious character, Ofsted inspectors [do not specifically inspect](#) the content of collective worship or on denominational religious education.
- At such schools, religious education and collective worship [are inspected by](#) a person chosen by the school's governing body in the case of voluntary schools, or by the foundation/Academy Trust in the case of foundation schools or academies.
- Following [guidance](#) introduced last year, Ofsted now inspects schools' promotion and pupils' awareness of 'the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'.
- Since then, Ofsted has downgraded a number of 'faith' schools due to their failure to promote British values, leading to criticism of both the guidance and school inspections.
- Criticism has particularly focused on the requirement to 'actively promote' British values and on the conduct of individual inspectors.

### Our position

Schools have a vital role in building strong, dynamic and inclusive communities. It is therefore of the utmost importance that Ofsted continues to evaluate how well 'faith' schools contribute to community cohesion. We welcomed the Government's willingness to address these issues through the guidance on British values, though it is the BHA's view that Ofsted inspectors should also consider the impact on cohesion of discriminatory admissions, unbalanced teaching of sex and relationships education, and biased religious education lessons.

Every young person has the right to receive a broad and balanced education, including teaching about the range of religious and non-religious beliefs common in Britain today, and availability of accurate sex and relationships information. While certain 'faith' schools continue to deny their pupils access to such an education on the grounds of their religious designation or ethos, the need for Ofsted to inspect 'faith' schools on these matters.

## Recent cases

In the wake of the 'Trojan Horse' scandal, a number of concerns have been raised regarding the practices of some 'faith' schools:

**Grindon Hall Christian School** in Sunderland (which became a Free School in 2012, having previously been a private school) was also recently [found to be 'inadequate'](#) by Ofsted. The report stated that 'pupils were not taught to develop appropriate levels of respect or tolerance for those from other faiths, cultures or communities', concluding that the school's efforts to 'tackle discrimination are inadequate'. The report also stated that when asked, pupils 'found it difficult to name a religion other than Christianity'. The school was at the centre of a scandal in 2012 after it [emerged that](#) it had a '[Creation Policy](#)' statement on its website advocating teaching both evolution and creationism as scientifically valid theories. The school also, at that time, had John Burn as chair of governors. Burn is the founder of the creationist and homophobic Christian Institute, was former chief academic advisor to the Emmanuel Schools Federation, owned by Peter Vardy, at the time those schools were at the centre of scandal over teaching creationism as science, and is a prominent advocate of teaching creationism in schools as science.

**Durham Free School** was recently ordered to close by the Education Secretary after an [Ofsted report](#) found that the 'religious studies curriculum was too narrow' and consequently some students held 'prejudiced views which were not challenged'. It has since been [revealed](#) that pupils were taught creationism as fact in Science lessons. John Burn is [also a governor](#) of Durham Free School, and it is clear that there are extensive links between Durham, Grindon Hall, the Christian Institute, and the Emmanuel Schools Federation. The Christian Institute has been driving the media narrative against the school's closure, and the lawyers representing Durham Free School in its bid to overturn the decision frequently represent the Christian Institute as well.

**Yesoday Hatorah Senior Girls' School** in Hackney was found in 2013 to be '[blacking out](#)' [GCSE science exam questions](#) if they contradicted the beliefs and values of the school in areas such as creationism and sex education. In a letter to parents, the school claimed that this practice had 'successfully been in place within the charedi schools throughout England for many years, and to date has never posed a problem with the Examination Boards'. The school also stated that it 'does not teach Sex Education because in practice all parents will exercise their statutory right to withdraw their children' (in spite of the fact that the school is legally obliged to teach about anatomy, puberty and reproduction as part of the national science curriculum, from which parents have no right of withdrawal, as well as sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS, which parent can withdraw their children from). Despite these concerns, Ofsted [not only found](#) the school to be 'good', but did not mention evolution, creationism or sex education at all in its inspection report published last year. The BHA has complained to Ofsted about the outcome of its inspection.

**Beis Yaakov High School**, a girls' Jewish school in Salford was found in November last year to 'not adequately promote tolerance and understanding of people...in different communities'. Like Yesodey Hatorah, Beis Yaakov is a Charedi Jewish school, and individuals have expressed concern to the BHA about attitudes to the role of women taken by the school..

**Sir John Cass Foundation and Redcoat Church of England Secondary School** in East London was [downgraded by Ofsted](#) from 'outstanding' to 'good' for failing 'to ensure that students, staff and governors understand the risks posed by extremism'. Pupils at the school, more than 90% of whom are of Bangladeshi heritage, were found to misusing social media, posting links to extremist sites and attempting to discourage students from engaging in school activities that did not 'adhere to a particular religious viewpoint'. Ofsted's report stated that the school's leadership had failed to react

to warnings provided by counter-terrorism police. The school's headmaster, Haydn Evans CBE, did not dispute the finding and promised to make rectifying the problems his priority.

***Pupils at Six Muslim private schools*** in East London [were found](#) to be subject to extremist views by Ofsted last year. The schools were variously found to be teaching curricula 'focused solely' on Islamic themes, denying pupils access to art and music, and espousing a 'narrow view' of women in society.

Around the same time, ***JFS***, a 2,000 pupil Jewish school in Kenton, north London, received an unannounced inspection after [Ofsted received a letter](#) claiming the children were indoctrinated and taught extreme views. The school was downgraded from 'outstanding' to 'requires improvement'. However this wasn't as a result of 'British values'-style concerns but was due to other issues.

***The Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation***, a private school, is facing action from the Department for Education over its school in Tottenham, which [Ofsted found](#) to have classes 'too heavily based around Islam' with British values 'not sufficiently well promoted'. The Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation has previously been dogged by allegations of links to extremist Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, highlighted as early as 2009 by both David Cameron and Michael. Whilst a Charity Commission investigation found no evidence of such links, the Haringey school was [found by Ofsted](#) to be failing to promote British values.

### **Criticism of Ofsted's inspection of faith schools**

The recent spate of 'faith' schools downgraded by Ofsted has led to some criticism of its inspections and the guidance they follow. For example, questions asked by inspectors about sexuality have been deemed 'inappropriate' by some parents and schools have complained that the requirement to 'actively promote' British values has, in some instances, put pressure on them to 'breach' their religious ethos. These claims have been rubbished by Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw, who states that Ofsted is committed to 'being fair to every school we inspect – whether it's a "faith" school [or] a secular school'. At the same time, it is vital that every school provides unbiased, age-appropriate sex and relationships education, including primary schools, and this must include information about LGBT issues.

### **About us**

The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It promotes a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief.

For more detail and evidence on our position, please contact us:

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