

# Divisive Faith Schools Urgently Need Reform

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Schools serve two purposes: to educate individuals, and to help create the society of tomorrow that they will inhabit and fashion. If we have schools that are tolerant and inclusive, there is every hope that society will develop in that way. Conversely, if we have schools that are restrictive and segregated, there is reason to fear that society will develop likewise.

This is the danger posed by faith schools – which not only are a third of all schools today, but are growing in number, especially among the minority faiths, with Jewish and Muslim ones increasing, while Sikh and Hindu ones have recently made their appearance. They reflect the fact that society has changed in the last century: from being predominantly Christian with a small Jewish minority, to consisting of a plethora of faiths. If you colour-coded Britain according to each religion in the 1930s and again in the 2000s, then the map of the UK will have changed from virtually monochrome to a kaleidoscope of colour. That can be seen as enormously enriching in many ways, but it begs the question of whether separating children of different faiths, which can also mean of different ethnic backgrounds, into separate schools encourages integration or inhibits it?

Ten years ago we saw the riots in Bradford; the ensuing 2001 Cattle Report referred to the 'parallel lives' between different religious and ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> One of the three subsequent local reviews, the Ouseley Report, blamed part of the problem on the segregation in schools between different local communities.<sup>2</sup> Ted Cattle, leading the Independent Community Cohesion Review Team, concluded that it is vital for the future stability of the country that children mix with each other in harmony. That period also saw the terrible scenes of Catholic children trying to battle their way through screaming ranks of Protestants to the Holy Cross School in Belfast.<sup>3</sup> If, when they were children, those Protestant parents had mixed with Catholic children, they might have grown up knowing that Catholics are not demons, and they might not have been so hate-filled as to man the barricades against them.

In England, thankfully, we do not have such dire problems as Northern Ireland – but it seems astonishingly shortsighted to encourage the conditions that might lead to them. The Catholic-Protestant animosity was not caused by the education system, but dividing the children did help perpetuate the stereotypes and reinforce prejudice. It is all too easy for separation to degenerate into ignorance of each other, resulting in a downward spiral of suspicion, fear and hostility. Moreover, while many faith schools have laudable aims, others have been set up precisely because they wish to avoid any integration with wider society. Even if the better ones teach about other faiths, cardboard cut-outs from a school text book are no substitute for everyday interaction.

The key lesson, though, starts at the school gates: in terms of who is allowed in – those with the 'right faith'

– and who is not admitted – those with the ‘wrong’ or no faith. Consciously or not, we are giving a very powerful message to those children about others. The problem is that we are so used to it we fail to realise how offensive it is. In no other part of public life or state-funded institutions can you be selected or turned away because of your religion: not in hospitals, libraries, the police force, the civil service or anywhere else. It is illegal and morally unthinkable. Yet that is exactly what happens with state-funded faith schools, in the very institutions that we like to think are preparing young children for a better, fairer, more inclusive society. Separating children also means separating parents, who no longer meet one another outside the school gates, at parent-teachers meetings and sports days, thereby cutting huge swathes between the communities. Future historians may look back at this moment and blame us for increasing social fragmentation. We have spent over a century trying to rid ourselves of class divisions; surely it is madness to rush in and replace them with religious divisions. The good news in Northern Ireland, though, is the remarkable success story of the integrated schools. In 1981 a group of parents ‘broke the mould’ by coming together to open the first planned integrated school, Lagan College. Since the initial 28 pupils at Lagan College there are now 21,745 pupils at integrated schools throughout the province of Ulster, while the demand for places in integrated schools is continuing to grow despite a drop in the overall school aged population. Could that have any message for the rest of us?

An added problem is that if children from particular faith groups are largely in their own faith schools, it means depleting community schools of them and the chance to interact with each other. When I visited a

school in Finchley in North London – an area of a high Jewish density – there was not a single Jewish pupil there. They were all in Jewish day schools, so the Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and non-religious children living locally saw Jews all around them but never actually met them. Schools should be used to build bridges, not erect barriers. Would it not be better for the health of British society to encourage schools that are cross-religious: that are open to all children, do not promote one particular faith, nor regard religion as a waste of time? Instead, they treat faith seriously, respect religious differences and acknowledge the richness of each tradition. Meanwhile, the children receive their own particular religious direction from the source that has the greatest impact: their home. Parents also have the option of taking them to church, synagogue, mosque and gurdwara, not to mention after-school classes, Sunday school or religious summer camps. Religious knowledge can come from the school, but religious belief from the home environment.

It is not good for children to be the religious equivalent of Rapunzel – locked away in her tower – because isolation is a poor teacher for later life, and it is certainly not helpful for Britain at large if the next generation grows up disconnected. It is important to note that these reservations do not stem from a secular attack on faith but are based on religious conviction. The Book of Leviticus (19.18) – which Jesus later echoed – urges us to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ The only way we can achieve that is *knowing* our neighbour.

Would my own children, who are Jewish, do well in a Jewish day school? Undoubtedly, but there are higher values to be considered too: social cohesion, the national interest, the creation of well-rounded individuals. This

is the reason I sent my children not to the local Jewish school but to a community school, because I considered it important for my Jewish children to sit next to a Christian in class, play football in the break with a Muslim, do homework with a Hindu and walk back with an atheist – for my children to know them, and them to know my children. Moreover, there has been a spate of independent evidence over how faith schools also divide children according to their socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2007 showed that ‘where faith schools are their own admissions authorities [i.e. voluntary aided schools] they are ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area’.<sup>4</sup> The following year appeared a report by the Runnymede Trust, entitled ‘Right to Divide? Faith Schools and Community Cohesion’. It, too, detected a social discrimination problem posed by faith schools:

Despite high level pronouncements that suggest a mission to serve the most disadvantaged in society, faith schools educate a disproportionately small number of young people at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale.<sup>5</sup>

The Runnymede Trust’s evidence included research by Anne West of the London School of Economics, which found that some Catholic and Church of England schools are socially-selective ‘elite’ secondary schools which appear to select out low-income religious families.<sup>6</sup> This evidence was supported by comments by the then Department of Children, Schools and Families: ‘Faith schools were found to be engaging in practices that were exclusive and favourable to those with greater social capital and higher socioeconomic status.’<sup>7</sup>

Returning to Ted Cante's work in response to the Bradford riots, 2009 saw a further report by Cante examining segregation in Blackburn. He found that the 'level of segregation in schools is high, growing and more extensive than the level of residential segregation would suggest', with a number of faith schools 'a particular issue'.<sup>8</sup> This selectivity is borne out by statistics about the most indisputable of objective measures, free school meals. A remarkable map of how schools in Britain select their pupils – published in 2013 by the Fair Admissions Campaign – confirms the previous findings: that many faith schools use their legal right to choose pupils by faith as a covert means of choosing them by ability or wealth. Whereas comprehensive secondary schools with no religious character admit 11 per cent more pupils eligible for free school meals than live in their local areas, comprehensive Church of England secondaries admit 10 per cent fewer, Roman Catholic schools admit 24 per cent fewer, Muslim schools 25 per cent fewer and Jewish schools 61 per cent fewer. This mapping shows that it is no surprise that some faith schools do well in league tables when they have edited their intake to such an extent.<sup>9</sup>

These are extraordinary figures in two other respects. First, there is the massive religious embarrassment that schools whose principles mean they should be supporting the poor and championing the vulnerable are failing to do so. This is reinforced by the fact that they also cater for fewer pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN): 1.2 per cent of pupils at state faith schools had stated SEN and 15.9 per cent unstatemented, compared to 1.7 per cent and 18.9 per cent at schools with no religious character.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, it begs the

question of why a placement system allowing selection on religious grounds which was originally designed to protect faith has been so easily hijacked by those seeking to manipulate pupil admissions, be it by the parents or the schools themselves. A dramatic example of this was seen recently when The London Oratory School was criticised by the Schools Adjudicator for breaching the Schools Admissions Code and effectively discriminating against non-Catholics.<sup>11</sup> The school's criterion for entry included parents participating in church life for at least three years beforehand through activities such as singing in the choir, serving at the altar or arranging flowers. Such practices should not determine whether children qualify for a place in a state-funded school. The Fair Admissions Campaign's map illustrates that the issue is not limited to The London Oratory School, but is endemic to the way many other faith schools operate. Spending time in church to gain a school place has become the religious equivalent of paying cash for honours.

Further evidence of religious manipulation came in data released in 2014 by the Pastoral Research Centre Trust, on Catholic baptisms. While the number of baptisms for children in England and Wales under the age of one was in long-term decline, the number over one had risen dramatically in the previous decade. Rather than being an expression of piety, this new baptism trend suggested a level of deliberate strategy by parents keen to increase their child's chances of obtaining a place in a popular Church school.<sup>12</sup> These findings also mean that the traditional argument over equality in the education system – grammar schools versus comprehensives – is rendered barely relevant and completely misses the hidden unfairness that is

secretly going on in the state sector. Whereas only five per cent of secondary age children attend grammar schools, over three times that number attend state schools that select according to faith, and it is in those schools that a high degree of socioeconomic jostling is taking place.<sup>13</sup>

Faith admission discriminations may not only be undesirable but illegal, for in August 2012 the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report entitled 'Religion or Belief, Equality and Human Rights in England and Wales'. It warned that allowing publicly-funded schools to use faith-based admissions criteria may not be compatible with Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the right to education) and Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination).<sup>14</sup> The debate has been given an added impetus by the so-called 'Trojan Horse' debacle over certain schools in Birmingham last year. Attention was drawn not only to admissions policies, but also to the width of the curriculum that is taught and the competence of inspection regimes that are used. It has led to Ofsted cracking down on faith schools throughout the country and across religious boundaries, instigating no-notice inspections and being tougher in their verdicts. The irony is that the Birmingham schools at the centre of the original scandal were not faith schools, but the exposure of their failings raised major question marks about how faith schools operate. The alarming fact was that if the Birmingham schools had been designated faith schools, then many of the practices condemned – such as limiting the curriculum to exclude lessons about sex education and reinforcing a cultural identity to the exclusion of others – would have been permitted. How can that which we find



offensive in what are designated ‘community schools’ suddenly be acceptable if they are labelled ‘faith schools’? Blinkering the horizons of children must be wrong wherever they learn.

Part of the problem is systemic in that Religious Education (RE) is a statutory subject and so must be taught, but it is not part of the national curriculum, and so RE can be taught in any way. It means that while some schools follow a multi-faith syllabus, others limit their pupils to one faith only, especially faith schools. It would be much healthier to have a national curriculum for RE, with all schools having to teach about all belief systems (including humanism) and providing a balanced and inclusive education. This would be partly a matter of general knowledge – RE as an academic subject in its own right – and partly a way of promoting social harmony, so that those living in neighbouring streets understand each other and are equipped to emerge into a diverse society. Moreover, one cannot comprehend world events – from Sunni-Shia tensions in Iraq to Catholic-Protestant problems in Northern Ireland – without a grasp of the religious history behind them. This would not infringe on any religious rights, for it would focus on religious knowledge and not attempt to inculcate beliefs. Far from being an impossible ideal, such a syllabus already exists thanks to the work of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. Moreover, it is supported by all the major faiths groups (and the British Humanist Association). At present it is voluntary and for guidance only; adopting it nationally should be an urgent priority.

Still, as some of the no-notice Ofsted inspections have demonstrated recently, it is not enough to propose a syllabus, the actual teaching has to be monitored. It has

long been an extraordinary own goal that Ofsted has outsourced inspection of RE to teams from within the same faith as the particular school they are visiting. Some of those teams operate with the highest integrity, but others consider the purity of their faith as more important than wider social interests. As RE – much more than maths or geography – can be crucial in shaping the values and attitudes of children, it cannot be left to self-regulation, but should have the same independent assessment as do other subjects. The ‘Trojan Horse’ episode was a wake-up call for those who, until now, regarded benignly the ability of faiths to promote their traditions via the state education system without realising that it could mean allowing them to both indoctrinate children under their care and alienate them from others in society.

The growing sense of unease about faith admissions has permeated religious leaders too. In 2011 the then Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, who was also the Chair for the Church of England Education Board, suggested that Church of England schools should limit the proportion of pupils they select on religious grounds to 10 per cent of their intake.<sup>15</sup> In 2013 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, spoke approvingly of ‘a steady move away from faith-based entry tests’.<sup>16</sup> Unease with the status quo also led to a new alliance of clergy across all denominations and faiths being formed in 2014. It brought together those from Anglican, Catholic and other churches (Methodist, United Reformed, Unitarian, Quaker), along with the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish faiths. They called for an end to discrimination in pupil admissions and teacher employment, as well as broadening the curriculum to make it obligatory for all children to study the major

faiths in Britain. They speak from a position of deep faith, but feel the way faith schools currently operate is an affront to religious values of openness and equality. For example, they pointed out that schools can only select children according to their faith by having a specific exemption from the Equality Act – exemption from equality – and asked what that said about religious teachings?<sup>17</sup> In the run-up to the 2015 election, the alliance has called on the political parties to pledge in their manifestos to change the law in five ways:

1. To work towards ending the anomaly by which state-funded schools are legally able to distinguish between children on religious grounds in their admissions procedure;
2. In the meantime, to bring all state schools in line with the system under which free schools operate, limiting the number of children that can be selected on the grounds of their faith to 50 per cent of the annual intake;
3. To close the legal loophole which currently allows schools to refuse to employ teachers on the basis of their faith;
4. To recognise that removing the duty of Ofsted to inspect how schools promoted community cohesion was a mistake and should be re-instated;
5. To ensure that all children learn about the full range of faiths and belief systems in Britain by adding Religious Education to the national curriculum.<sup>18</sup>

The previous uncritical acceptance of faith schools is changing rapidly. A growing number of parents are resentful of children being denied entry to local schools

because of faith restrictions, while an increasing number of clergy are realising that faith institutions should not be promoting division but encouraging harmony. It is becoming clear that it is possible to be in favour of faith, but against faith schools, both in principle and because of their effects. Discrimination and segregation are neither religious values nor good for social cohesion. The increasing number of faith schools means that there is a real danger of creating an educational apartheid, with not only a corrosive impact on children's outlooks, but a divisive effect on society at large. Britain today is a multi-faith society, but the division of children into faith schools risks turning it into a multi-fractional one unless steps are taken to modify the way they operate.