

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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FAITH SCHOOLS NOW AND TOMORROW

Multiculturalism is under threat. The ideology of integration is cracking. Britain questions the pursuit of racial harmony through celebration of the distinctives of diverse cultural and racial groups. Almost inevitably in this climate the roles of faith schools are questioned. Do they promote harmony, or do they precipitate polarisation and sow the seeds of militancy?

And this is not the only battle line. The forces of secularism, led most conspicuously by Professor Richard Dawkins, are riding forth seeking the destruction of educational centres that dare question their view of human evolutionary genesis or espouse faith in a divine being. Faith schools of course have always been under attack. There have always been influential groups in society who have believed education should be free of moral teaching and religious influence and many of the battles and key trends in education over the last 40 years reflect this. Today, the bombs of religious extremists and the rise of intelligent design have added new fuels to the fires surrounding faith-inspired education. But faith schools do well and enjoy powerful support from government. Faith schools are in the spotlight and this article briefly reviews their place today and their future.

Faith schools are more accurately described as 'schools of a religious character', and are either foundational or voluntary. Note that these schools can also have a secular character.

Voluntary schools were originally set up by voluntary bodies, such as the Church of England or Roman Catholic Church, and were largely self-funding. From around 1870 and particularly in the early part of the 20th century many Church of England schools surrendered much of their autonomy to the state because of high building and maintenance costs. Currently, voluntary-aided (VA) schools pay a portion of their own maintenance costs and are responsible for their own admissions – allowing selective entry. Voluntary-controlled (VC) schools are wholly state-funded and follow the local education authority (LEA) admissions policy. Voluntary schools are usually linked to a faith or other charitable organisation (a 'Foundation'). Foundation schools are maintained by the LEA, but governors authorise admissions, again allowing selective entry. To aid confusion, most Foundation schools are linked to Partnerships rather than Foundations.

Schools with a religious character have a faith-based ethos that is written into the schools' governing instrument. Generally, VA schools have more control over appointing teachers who conform to the tenets of the faith and over the content of religious education lessons. All three can conduct acts of worship according to the teachings of the faith.

Governments in many countries, including the UK, now favour school-improvement schemes based on choice, incentives and governance. In England, this idea has become linked to the expansion of the faith-school sector. This is because faith schools are not just religiously affiliated, but also often embody the kind of admission and governance practices that policy-makers wish to promote. An expansion of this combination of institutional arrangement and school ethos will, it is argued, lead to higher educational standards – including higher levels of attainment both at the Primary and Secondary level.

Academies, of which perhaps the most well-known in evangelical circles are those operated by Sir Peter Vardy's Foundation, are not, by definition, faith schools. However, an academy operated by an organisation with a faith ethos has more freedom and control than the faith schools previously described. For a contribution of around 10% (usually around £2-3million) of the capital costs of a new building, funding organisations are able to manage and run schools with complete freedom from LEA control. They are registered independent schools. This allows them, amongst other things, to appoint their own governors, specify their own ethos (which can be based on religious beliefs or not) and, if they are of a religious character, select teaching staff (but not support staff) on religious grounds. They can also operate selective entry if they wish. All running costs are met by the LEA, but the schools must be located in areas of high educational need and replace one or more failing schools. They are also subject to OFSTED inspection.

The Academies programme aims to establish at least 53 Academies by 2007 and 200 by 2010 with 30 in London by 2008 and 60 by 2010. There are currently around 109 'live' projects (open and in development).

Over 30% of state schools in England have a religious character. There are around 7,000 faith schools from a total of nearly 21,000 schools. Around 600 are secondary schools, the remainder being primary schools. All but 48 of the faith schools are associated with the major Christian denominations. The other 48 faith schools consist of: 36 Jewish schools; eight Muslim schools; two Sikh schools; one Greek Orthodox school; one Seventh Day Adventist school. In addition, two Jewish, three Muslim and two Sikh have been approved.

Growth and Popularity of Faith Schools and Academies

Faith schools were the original schools, here long before the state took responsibility for educating our children. They were often founded on clear biblical principles and were operated and supported by those with a solid commitment to those principles. As society secularised and faith schools surrendered their clear focus and teachings, parents became less concerned about faith principles and more concerned about temporal matters. In 1947 the then Archbishop of York

commented that parents contrasted 'the humble accommodation of the Church school with the palatial buildings erected by the local education authority', and were usually indifferent as to the special type of religious education given to their children.

Today's parents have been weaned on performance tables and the attainment of faith schools appears high in this educational milieu. Parents also appear to want their children to develop outside of the curriculum; they like ordered, disciplined schools and a clear ethos. David Blunkett said as Education Secretary in 2001 'They [*faith schools*] also have a good record of delivering a high quality of education to their pupils and many parents welcome the clear ethos of these schools.' In 2004, the chair of governors at a state secondary school which had converted from secular status to C of E said that parents welcomed the introduction of Christian ethics. 'They understood the idea of a church school and perceived the advantages in terms of discipline and respect for others.' Clarity of ethos, discipline, and respect are often characteristics associated with educationally-successful schools.

The Prime Minister sent his sons outside his local area to a top-performing Roman Catholic VA selective school and the Conservative leader David Cameron, perhaps with his eye on St Mary Abbots Church of England Primary School, recently stated that he was 'a fan of faith schools.'

In addition, faith schools have been perceived as a necessary vehicle for the multicultural journey. Although ill-defined, multiculturalism broadly represents the desire to maintain a diversity of ethnic cultures within a community; integrated, but separate. Cultural groups within a majority host community can only retain their distinctive faiths and values if they are passed on and taken up by their children. Schools are a key component in this process, so faith schools found support in multiculturalism.

Results published in November 2006 show that faith schools make up 197 of the 209 primaries achieving 'perfect' results in the latest league tables, with all pupils reaching the expected standard for 11-year-olds in English, maths and science. Faith schools make up just one-third of all schools in England. In 2005 they accounted for 44% of the top 500 primaries, but in 2006 the proportion increased to more than 60%. These schools are dominated by Church of England (CoE), Roman Catholic (RC) and Jewish faiths. Out of 1,700 RC primary schools, 141 are in the top 500; and out of 28 Jewish primary schools, six are in the top 500. Of 4,400 CoE schools, 142 are in the top 500.

Faith schools appear to deliver educationally, have the right choice and governance characteristics and are an essential element of multiculturalism. As a consequence their currency in recent years has been high in both government and the country.

Academies were born out of the failure of the state to provide a decent education for its children in some, mainly inner city, areas. Large and failing, 1000-plus pupil secondary schools needed not only teachers, premises, books and a curriculum, they also needed superior leadership and management. Successive governments have been keen to import successfully-applied business skills into the management of schools, and academies are the current conduit. Their popularity, at

least amongst parents, is assured in the short term since an academy in an area often means new, purpose-built modern buildings, cash, new leadership and a clean, fresh start and the hope that things can only get better. And this is not a vain hope. A number of well-publicised academies have already achieved amazing turnarounds in pupil performance, behaviour and motivation. There have also been some poor performers, or at least slow starters, in the early batch of academies but currently the government is enthusiastic in pursuing its target of 200 by 2010. Educational performance, as measured by OFSTED, is crucial to their future.

And what of the Future?

It is instructive first to summarise the strengths and weaknesses of faith schools, and the opportunities and threats they face:

- Key strengths include their popularity amongst parents and their support within government. Underpinning this popularity is a clear ethos often enshrining biblical views of discipline, respect and order.
- A particular weakness is the actual and potential diversity of the faith school sector. This means that failings or fears associated with one faith group tend to reflect on and pressure the faith sector as whole. A further weakness is the focus placed on the educational performance of faith schools; being average can be seen as not good enough. Allied to this, the actual educational performance of the faith sector may be lower than perceived (see inset below).

The performance of faith schools came under scrutiny recently in a report by Dr Stephen Gibbons and Olmo Silva from the Centre for the Economics of Education, an independent research centre funded at the London School of Economics by the DfES. A much publicised conclusion of the report is that results achieved by children in national tests taken at age 11 were only at best one per cent better in the case of faith school pupils. That is, pupils with similar abilities and backgrounds perform broadly as well in an average secular school as in an average faith school.

Contrasting this finding with the success of faith schools in the primary school top 500 league table results (recorded in the inset above) indicates that while for an average school secular and faith school pupils perform similarly, at the top end of the performance spectrum faith schools do perform better. However, the top 500 schools are only about 3% of the total primary school population so they are not typical, and in addition it is not clear why the faith schools are performing better in this part of the spectrum – it's possible, for example, that the higher performance is not faith or ethos related.

- In the current political climate the opportunities for expansion and increased impact of the faith school sector are considerable; the key limitation is the resources particular faith groups can bring to bear.

- The current concerns over extreme Islamic teaching and its extent within schools, allied with the more general view that faith schools may polarise communities rather than promote integration, threatens the faith sector as a whole. The association of Creationist teaching, with its implied anti-evolutionary theory stance, with Christian faith schools, is being used by vocal and organised secularist groups to depict faith groups as anti-science, anti-intellectual and harmful to children.

A number of observations emerge from this review:

- The opportunities for faith groups to expand are limited by resources – finance and personnel. These are broadly the needs of mission. Faith schools lie somewhere between the missionfield and the workplace – their aims are more than salt and light, but less than conversion. Personnel are required who not only strongly and clearly hold the tenets of the faith but have the appropriate teaching and leadership skills, and for school set-up have the capacity and resilience to create a new school or turn around an existing one. These resources are limited and faith schools are unlikely to dominate the educational landscape in the near future. Faith schools that fit our biblical perspective need to be supported but equally, pressure needs to be continually applied to the much larger state secular sector to stop and reverse the rot of declining ethical and moral standards.
- The perception of the success of faith schools is advantageous, but evangelicals, at least, should be concerned with the truth of the situation as it can best be determined. Currently, it appears that, measured from a very narrow view of academic success, faith schools perform broadly as well as secular schools given similar sets of pupils with similar abilities and backgrounds. At the high end of this performance spectrum faith schools appear to do better, at least at the primary level, but this ‘high end’ is only a small percentage of all schools.
- The DfES 3rd Annual Report on Academies, 2006, reveals a mixed performance compared with the state sector. For example, overall academies performed better, but the differences were small; pupil performance was mixed with aspects of performance deteriorating in some academies. New buildings and resources help promote improvement, but over time they are likely to become less influential.
- Those who oppose faith schools with evangelical zeal often do so with the shabbiest of arguments. However, their voice is heard and listened to in government and the media. Not surprisingly both these groups demonstrate a susceptibility to the sophistry that pervades the arguments of the vocal anti-faith school lobby. Bad arguments need to be exposed and refuted; not because good arguments will by themselves win the day but because they are the intellectual bedrock on which our evangelical position is built and maintained.
- The concerns over Islamic extremism and the questions hanging over multiculturalism have

the potential to spill over to the wider faith community. However, they are the issues of the smaller faith groups seeking integration into the majority host group. The historical faith of this majority group has been broadly biblical Christian and whether opponents like it or not many of the cultural values of worth have been derived from that biblical perspective. Lord Melvyn Bragg on his Radio 4 programme 'In Our Time' recently described William Wilberforce as '...the politician who has had the greatest moral influence in our history.' Biblical Christianity has served this society well and this message needs to be proclaimed.

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