

Are faith schools educationally defensible?

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Abstract

Currently over a third of schools in Britain are faith schools, yet their place within the British education system remains a hotly contested issue, with advocates and opponents exchanging charge and counter-charge. With the current debate sparked by the Government's wish to establish more faith schools it is timely to explore some of the controversial issues involved. This article explores social division, intolerance and indoctrination as objections to faith schools and evaluates whether faith schools are educationally defensible.

Keywords: Inclusion; Democracy; Faith Schools

Introduction

Musical competencies

A faith school is an educational organisation with a distinct religious character. Historically, such schools were known as parochial schools, reflecting the Church of England heritage. Parochial schools were established and maintained by a religious body; their name was taken from the Latin *parochialis*, meaning 'of a parish'. Faith schools have always been part of the British education system. In the Middle Ages the Church was the sole provider of education in Britain (Parker-Jenkins 2002). Before the nineteenth century, education of children in England was considered to be the responsibility of the parents. Wealthy parents were able to employ private tutors or send their children to fee-paying schools, while the poor relied on schools run by charity organisations (Walford 2001). One such organisation was the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), founded in 1698 (Morrish

1970, cited in Walford 2001). Schools run by the SPCK were supported by churches and the aim was to instil religious morals and beliefs in the children. The government did not get involved in providing education for children, leaving the responsibility instead to the Church and other charitable organisations (Walford 2001). However, after the Industrial Revolution there was a 'major social and economical upheaval' that 'called for social policy enactment' (Parker-Jenkins 2002: 275). The state came to see education as a vital agent in helping the nation's economic endeavour and decided to get involved in providing public education.

Recent history of faith schools in England

In 2001, the New Labour government decided to increase the number of faith schools and provide funding for them (DfEE 2001, cited in Short 2002). Most of the faith schools in England are Christian schools, either Roman Catholic (RC) or Church of England (CE). There are approximately 4,700 CE schools and 2,100 RC schools (Meer 2007). Jewish faith schools funded by the state have also been around for some time, and there are currently 37 of these. More recently, other faith groups such as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs have opened faith schools. There are currently eight state-funded Muslim faith schools, two Sikh schools and one Hindu school (Berkeley & Vij 2008; East & Hammond 2006).

As of January 2011 there are:

- 631 secondary schools with a religious character (19 per cent of all secondary schools) educating 587,170 pupils (18 per cent of all secondary pupils)
- 6,203 primary schools with a religious character (37 per cent of all primary schools) educating 1,217,025 primary pupils (29 per cent of all primary pupils).

In November 2010, the names of the first 25 'free school' proposals approved to progress to the business case and plan stage were published. Of these, eight have a religious dimension, although they have not necessarily been proposed directly by religious groups. (BHA 2012)

New Labour's decision to expand faith schools and provide funding for them was welcomed by most religious communities, but opposed by others (Short 2002). Policies to expand faith schools were seen by the government as a way to increase choice and diversity in the education sector (Berkeley & Vij 2008). However, the decision to expand faith schools is treated with caution by the media and public. There is a fear that an increase in faith schools will cause ethnic segregation (Walford 2003) leading to 'parallel lives' (Berkeley and Vij, 2008). Although the government has encouraged faith schools since 2001, Ed Balls at one point distanced the government from the courting of faith schools when he said, 'We're not leading a drive for more faith schools' (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2008, cited in Berkeley & Vij 2008, p. 4).

The concept of 'parallel lives' came from the Cante Report which observed that an Asian person could go home after work and not see a single white person until the following day when returning to work. The same was said of a white man living in a mainly white council estate, that he never meets anyone who is not like him (Cante, 2001). However, it is worth noting that 'parallel lives' were not the result of faith schools. On the contrary, Short (2002) argues that the content of children's learning is what determines the extent of cohesion in a community. Arguing against faith schools, Romain (2001, cited in Short 2002) states that faith schools do not allow children from different backgrounds to mix with one another. This lack of interaction makes them ignorant of other cultures, resulting in hostility to others. Short (2002) counters this argument by stating that ignorance does not lead to hostility; rather the prejudice in circulation leads to hostility. Contact with other cultures is also insufficient in fostering community cohesion while prejudice is prevalent in societies (Short 2002). Peter Atkins (2001, cited in Short 2002) is another critic of faith schools. He asserts that religions promote intolerance and that therefore faith schools cause friction between religions. This intolerant attitude is then disseminated to future generations. Short (2002) rejects Atkins' claims, stating that there is no data to support them. Dunn (2000, cited in Short 2002) supports Short, stating that it is hard to find any evidence that suggests separate schooling causes conflict.

Faith schools as a source of social division and intolerance?

An explicit assumption made by some critics of faith schools is that mixing of children from diverse backgrounds is an effective antidote to racism and intolerance. This assumption, known to psychologists as 'the contact hypothesis' (Short 2002), may nevertheless be seen as incompatible with a body of research that has exposed racist and intolerant activity in mixed primary schools in general (Troyna and Hatcher 1992) and has documented particularly extreme cases of it. A key reference point is an incident at Burnage School in Manchester, where in 1986 Ahmed Ullah, an Asian teenager, was murdered by a white racist pupil. Evidence of this kind demonstrates that contact per se cannot be relied upon to diminish prejudice, a lesson that has been available to educationalists and policy makers since Horowitz's (1936) pioneering studies of children and race in the United States. He found that sixth grade white boys attending an all-white school in New York showed the same level of prejudice as those attending an integrated school in the city despite, presumably, fewer opportunities for interracial contact. This and other research has prompted psychologists over the past half-century to condemn the early version of the contact hypothesis as naive and misleading. Consequently, Ashraf (1990) and Short (2002) have been seen as advocates of Gordon Allport's (1954) groundbreaking work on the social psychology of racism, discovering that one of the most effective ways to impart knowledge about people different from oneself is through academic teaching in schools rather than the naive *laissez-faire* approach which assumes that mere exposure and contact with 'difference' will resolve prejudices. As one way forward, Shabir Akhtar (1992) has encouraged a type of 'delayed assimilation' which states that:

'A minority struggling to maintain its identity often welcomes a limited amount of isolation that might enable it to gain the confidence and security it needs in the early days of its establishment. That confidence, once achieved, might later help in its attempts to assimilate on its own terms.' (p. 43)

Indoctrination rather than education?

Another criticism directed at faith schools comes from secularists who believe that all schools should be free from religion. They argue that schools and even parents have no right to indoctrinate children into any religion (East & Hammond 2006). This claim prompts the question, are faith schools really indoctrinated rather

than educating? Are faith schools at variance with the liberal education ethic? By liberal education we refer to the commonly held understanding of this as embodying such aims as the fostering of personal autonomy, intellectual and emotional maturity and well-being.

From a liberal educational perspective, Callon (1997) examines the argument that the common school operates as a vehicle of civic education to perpetuate the ideal of 'deliberative democracy', which encourages 'open discussion in which diverse views are voiced and collectively evaluated, make, apply, and revise the norms by which their community lives' (p. 24). Callon argues that religious schools, despite inculcating positive values, are not able to provide the approach required for a good civic education and therefore cannot provide a good liberal citizenry. Yet it can be argued that mainstream public schools also impose a singular moral hegemonic viewpoint based on secularism and Eurocentrism. For example, Zine (2007) argues that secular Eurocentric approaches to knowledge masquerade as universal ways of knowing but are culturally situated viewpoints that are in opposition to faith-centred world views and also involve fidelity to a particular partisan world view or view of 'the good life'.

McLaughlin (1992) argues that for various reasons the common school may not meet the needs of all students (whether on religious, cultural or special needs grounds) and that, from a social justice perspective, there can be a view that supports separate schools from within a liberal framework, providing they are able to satisfy the conditions of developing critical rationality and independence. He argues that there can be a plurality of legitimate forms of liberal education and schooling that can be starting point for a child's journey toward autonomy and liberal citizenship, and that these may start from a particular world view or cultural identity. Spinner-Halev (1997) calls this 'moderate separatism', where early childhood and elementary education in religiously based schools can actually encourage greater knowledge of self without compromising the knowledge of others and that this knowledge of others may occur in sites other than schools or through transition to common schooling in higher grades. Consequently, it can be argued that even from a liberal educational perspective, faith schools are a good idea and educationally defensible.

Thinking philosophically about faith schools

The word autonomy has been mentioned a few times and is clearly of seminal importance to the notion of liberal education. So what is it? The concept revolves around definitions of self-knowledge, independence of thought, self-sufficiency, a responsibility for one's own actions, individual freedom and the worth of the individual as an individual. There are also nuances here of originality and independence of thought and action (Rawls 2001; Meer 2007). Additionally, there exists an important historical element, for as an educational aim autonomy is seen as a key element of progress within the development of educational practice and theory, as opposed to a perception of indoctrination within the educational aims of the past, either through religious or class domination.

One of the most commonly shared views about education is that it should encourage the development of rational and moral autonomy which, in the recent liberal tradition, is characterised by the work of Ronald Dworkin (1985), Amy Guttmann (1995) and Joseph Raz (1986) among others. This position opposes all forms of faith schooling and strenuously argues that all societies that support autonomy must protect children from 'believers who wish to impose on them a non-autonomous conception of the good life' (White 1990, p. 105). This is a central argument contained within the Humanist Philosophers' Group's (HPG) influential pamphlet, *Religious schools: the case against* (HPG 2001). The HPG begins by charging faith schooling with 'indoctrination' – which they characterise as limiting the autonomy of a child by implanting beliefs that neither empirical evidence nor rational argument might change. They then state that:

'given the importance of fundamental religious and value commitments to a person's life, such commitments should be entered into only subject to all the normal requirements for valid consent: in particular, competence, full information and voluntariness. Religious schools... are likely to violate these requirements, partly because of (younger) children's lack of autonomy and partly because of the nature of such schools' missions' (2001, p. 10).

According to this perspective, young people in religious schools are denied both the option and opportunity to develop competencies in making informed choices, specifically because such schools are predisposed to indoctrinate rather than foster autonomy.

However, considering the above definition of autonomy, can the desire to pursue the ideal of autonomy have any flaws? Presumably to be autonomous one must develop a critical faculty, the ability to question what one is told and hence not be vulnerable to indoctrination. Indeed, developing this type of questioning is a cornerstone of liberal education. No stone is unturned in the pursuit of truth or at least one's perception of truth. Constant doubt is essential to maintain a critical attitude, for unless doubt is constant we allow the possibility of accepting from others unquestioningly, or accepting things perceived by the senses simply on face value.

To talk of educational aims in the context of constant doubt renders such aims somewhat meaningless. We aim to establish good citizenship? And this means respecting others? Is it relevant if others do not share the definition of respect? What relevance does respect have in a meaningless universe? Meaningless because if as a group we agree what good citizenship values are and that they are worthwhile, we are just as aware that we can either be wrong or that other bodies of people could be directly opposed to our values – is it not futile to establish such aims if they are not shared in a wider sense? Peters (1965) argues in 'Education as initiation' that the educational criterion should be 'that something of value should be passed on'. Surely it could be argued that the element of constant doubt and the resulting over-reliance upon materiality is not a value worthy of being passed on. Again as Peters says:

'to be 'educated' implies (a) caring about what is worthwhile and (b) being brought to care about it and to possess the relevant knowledge or skill in a way that involves at least a minimum of understanding and voluntariness' (1965, p. 97).

The introduction of doubt, which permeates the thinking of the developed world, is challenged as to whether it is a worthwhile thing. The debate asks if it is possible to establish 'worthiness' in our present thinking climate. Peters argues that:

'It implies, first of all, that the individual who is educated shall come to care about the valuable things involved, that he shall want to achieve the relevant standards. We would not call a man 'educated' who knew about science and yet cared nothing for truth or who regarded it as a means to getting hot water and hot dogs' (1965, p. 96).

How does one care and commit oneself to truth when an inculcated and overriding sense of doubt prevents one from accepting truth even if one should happen to perceive it? The following statement sums up this attitude:

"Men were made for higher things, one can't help wanting to say, even though one knows that men weren't made for anything, but are the products of evolution by natural selection' (Smart & Williams 1973, pp. 18–19).

Based on the above discussion, it could be argued that children attending a non-faith school are also being indoctrinated, but into a secular way of thinking (Grace 2002, cited in Meer 2007). This accords with the statement of John Stuart Mill (1969 [1859]) that 'Every education system makes use of indoctrination'.

Unpacking indoctrination and the concept of 'choice'

'Indoctrination is difficult to define, as the grounds upon which it is based are vague: to some extent, it can be argued that all education is indoctrination insofar as it informs and initiates the child into the doctrines and beliefs within which s/he is placed (Gatchel 1972; Thiessen 1993). The concept of indoctrination can only be perceived as in effect on differing levels. Is any institution or human interaction free of indoctrination? A sharper definition within an educational context is provided by Atkinson (1965) who sees the distinction as one between teaching 'about' morals and teaching in morals, or teaching 'that' as opposed to teaching 'how'. To illuminate this further, teaching 'how' involves, as Atkinson puts it, 'providing adequate support, by way of proofs, reasons, evidence, whatever may be appropriate to the field in question, for the conclusions it has sought to impart. Indoctrination does not require this, it seeks only conviction and assent and any teaching procedure is acceptable in the pursuit of these aims' (p. 172). There is also a distinction between treating someone as an end in themselves or simply as a means.

Faith schools could be questioned as to whether children are provided with 'choice' as Dearden (1984) stipulated. In other words, are the pupils exposed to theories and ideas that may be contrary to the school's religious ethic? I think that it could be argued that they are inevitably exposed to these alternatives by the methodology employed wherein dialogue between all members of the school community is promoted. Inherent in this is the understanding that

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criticism or questioning of one's views helps to clarify one's views. A condition of no criticism, no debate in the teacher–pupil relationship is probably indicative of indoctrination. But perhaps more importantly children are exposed to alternatives to their own cultures and beliefs simply by being a minority within the host community.

Many faith schools, for example Muslim and Christian schools within the British state system, do adhere to the principles of teaching 'about' morals both in a universal sense and for their relevance within the Quranic and Biblical worldview, and teach *how and why* things occur rather than dictate and instruct (Wright 2003). Teaching in Muslim and Christian schools uses 'adequate support... proofs, reasons, evidence, whatever may be appropriate to the field in question, for the conclusions it has sought to impart' (Wright 2003?).[[above this quote is ascribed to Atkinson, p. 172]] Admittedly these will not always be conclusive proofs because of the nature of some of the subject matter, nor do we think that is what Atkinson (1965) had in mind. On the other hand, evolution is taught within the state system as if it is a confirmed scientific fact. The aim is not to affirm or dispute evolutionary theory but rather to point out that at this stage it is only a theory or conjecture and yet within many schools it is taught as actual fact. The point is made effectively by Evan Shute (1961) in *his Flaws in the theory of evolution* which consists of a series of essays written by evolutionists themselves.

We emphasise, this is not to say that indoctrination does not take place within faith schools but rather to question the degree to which and the intention with which it is carried out. Is the child or student used to preserve a cultural ideal as a means to an end or is each of them perceived as an individual, an end in themselves? Hence, once again, this prompts the question, are government-run schools any the less indoctrinating?

In *The theory and practice of autonomy*, Gerald Dworkin (1988) conducts an interesting and balanced exploration of moral authority vs personal autonomy. He examines the nature and the value of autonomy and uses it to analyse the distinction between paternalism, indoctrination and autonomy. Aiken's (1962) definition of autonomy is also quoted by Dworkin and used to establish criteria to distinguish between indoctrination and personal autonomy:

'A person is morally autonomous only if he cannot accept without independent consideration the judgement of others as to what he should do. If

he relies on the judgement of others he must be prepared to advance independent reasoning for thinking their judgement likely to be correct.'

Based on this definition, Dworkin then proceeds to examine specific examples of indoctrination which in turn highlight those particular areas where conflict between a faith school and mainstream education may lie.

To cite the example of a Muslim school, the Quranic text is considered to be the word of God, and the Quranic paradigm and world view based on this text constitutes the Islamic perspective. Education within a Muslim school is based on the complete acceptance of the statement 'principles are acceptable because they are the word of God' (Hermansen 2003), which in relation to Dworkin's criteria can admittedly only be seen as indoctrination.

Nevertheless, the opposing statement, something along the lines of 'These principles are unacceptable for we do not know whether God really exists', provides no more of a foundation. Is there anything less doctrinal than the first statement? On what basis is the second statement considered superior when it can be argued that there is proof of neither God's existence nor inexistence. Can reasoned proof be acceptable to that which claims suprasensibility or the metaphysical? It can be argued that to present doubt or negation as being the normal and neutral attitude and thereby escape the obligation to furnish a proof in one's turn, is to adopt an arbitrary position. Consequently, in an environment in which the majority professes a belief in the divine, it would clearly be atheism that would stand out as an affirmation to be proved.

Here we are dealing with nothing less than the conflict generated by the competing claims of science and religion to explain the fundamental principles which govern our lives. Stephen J. Gould (2001) proposes that the magisteriums (a coherent body of teaching or discipline which operates consistently according to its own coherent rules) of science and religion are not competent to encroach upon or make judgements about the regulated body of arguments which constitute any other magisterium. In short, he believes that neither should presume to legislate concerning the other's beliefs.

Nevertheless, given the cultural predominance of the atheist view, it can be argued that autonomous rationalism is worthy of criticism for claiming to embark upon thought without the hindrance of any

initial dogma while itself starting from a dogma that nothing exists except that which we perceive by reason and the senses. All thought is based on some initial premise, the latter no less than the former.

For Heidegger (1996), modern thought, derived from the Western metaphysical tradition, has mistakenly located the essence of ground in a fundamental principle. A principle is what stands first in a series of propositions, which derive their origin from that principle. But he perceives the problems as lying in the very nature of its formality as a first and general principle. As a 'principle' it must be the fundament of other propositions. To come to a full understanding of this we must clarify the definition of, the fundamental meaning of or the grounds for understanding the word 'principle'. In fact the same would apply to the words and concepts 'ground' and 'fundamental'. The difficulty here is, where are we to find a definition for such words except within the '*principio rationis*'? As already stated, a principle is defined as that which contains a fundamental reason for another. While the '*principio rationis*' may be the ground for all other principles, what grounds of definition is it based on? It is arguable that this proposition is itself 'something' in relation to 'nothing' and is without reason and ground. Hence, according to its own definition it too must have a grounding but as it claims to be 'the first principle' nothing should come before it and so it thereby denies itself. The alternative would be an infinite regress, for each progressive grounding for a ground would require a ground itself. What is hereby revealed is that every beginning, every first principle is nothing of the kind but involves some kind of initial arbitrary assumption.

Does an education's being based upon a primordial belief in the divine and concerned with an area of human development automatically render it indoctrinating and inauthentic? Such an understanding of the believer and faith is too simplistic. Clearly there does exist the aspect of deciding for the ethical possibilities given within a religious tradition, in the sense of passing from a conventionalistic affirmation of values to 'owning' them, to internalising them rather than simply following external influences. Ironically this has been a traditional ideal of Western education and can also be expressed in terms of Heidegger's general dynamic of authenticity, as a coming to one's own decision in the midst of finite world involvements, and in terms of temporality, as a bringing to presence of future possibilities in the midst of an appropriated past. We referred to this above when discussing Heidegger's view of both accepting our place in the world and our finiteness as 'poignanting'. In relation to this authenticity it should be understood in terms

of the tension between socialisation and individuation, rather than a severance from society and tradition.

Finally, upon critical examination of some of the basic precepts of liberal education (including personal autonomy) as practised in state-maintained education (non-faith schools), our view is that they are no less indoctrinating than faith schools.

Conclusion

Two reasons have been advanced for suggesting that non-denominational schools may be no more likely than faith schools to foster ethnic and religious harmony (Short 2002). The first is that the prerequisite of successful contact cannot be guaranteed and, even if it could be, the benefits, seemingly, are of limited value, for changes in attitude tend not to be generalised outside of the original contact situation. Second, it has been argued that, in any case, the relevant consideration is not contact, even under ideal conditions, but anti-racist and tolerant education which can, in principle, be undertaken as effectively in a faith school as in a non-denominational one.

The challenge for both public and faith schools is to develop ways to have a complementary coexistence as parallel systems, and interactive curricula that implicate one another. A system that engenders cooperation and interaction between the various religious and secular public schools would provide a mutual opportunity for growth and learning. Secular Eurocentric schooling in the UK can no longer masquerade as an ideologically neutral space when it affirms particular identities and discourses and marginalises others. By recognising religious pluralism as a positive and intrinsic aspect of society, a truly inclusive school system centring the knowledge and experience of communities on the margins would weather well the challenges of social division and foster racial and religious tolerance.

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