

Faith Schools: Enrichment or Division?

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1. Introduction

Few present public policy issues in England today are more contentious than the question of what place, if any, its publicly-funded schools should accord to religion. On the one hand, secular humanists deny it has any rightful place in them. At most, they contend, schools should only teach about all the main religions currently practised there and elsewhere, and do so in a dispassionate and neutral way that accords no less respectful treatment of all the main alternative non-religious and anti-religious viewpoints such as theirs. On the other hand, many others are more inclined to the opinion voiced on this matter by William Temple in his first address to the National Society after being appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942. Temple said: ‘Education is only adequate and worthy when it is itself religious... There is no possibility of neutrality... To be neutral concerning God is the same thing as to ignore Him... If children are brought up to have an understanding of life in which, in fact, there is no reference *to* God, you cannot correct the effect of that by speaking *about* God for a certain period of the day. Therefore our ideal for the children of our country is the ideal for truly religious education.’²

Temple’s address marked the opening salvo in what proved an ultimately successful campaign of his to ensure that a committed form of religious education and daily acts of collective worship would be made compulsory in all the country’s publicly-maintained schools. They were made such by the 1944 Education Act whose provisions on the matter still technically remain in force today. At the time of its enactment, the country’s state-funded schools fell broadly into two groups. There were schools which had been established by religious foundations, typically churches, for the express purpose of nurturing their faith in their pupils. The other variety were those schools that had been or were about to be built and run by local education authorities. The provisions of the 1944 Act made religious education and daily collective acts of worship compulsory in both varieties of school. It allowed, however, indeed it demanded, that they be of a different type in the case of each. In schools established by religious foundations, their religious education classes and collective

acts of worship could be by means of ‘the formularies and catechisms’ specific to their denomination, as the 1944 Act put it, in words echoing those of the 1870 Education Act by means of whose enactment state-funded schooling in England was to become universal. In the case of *county schools*, as the second variety of state-funded schools were called at the time, religious education and assemblies could not be as specifically denominational. The non-denominational form that it had to assume in such schools, so the Act laid down, was to be determined at local level through a set of local advisory committees designed to represent and reflect the views of religious groups resident in the localities from which these schools drew their pupils.

Until the early 1960s, few schoolchildren in England and Wales came from any other religious background than a Christian one. Accordingly, the religious education and acts of worship provided by schools controlled by local authorities was almost invariably of a Christian, but non-denominational, kind. Increasingly since then, however, in response to the country’s growing diversity, plus ever diminishing regular religious observance in an increasing number of its households, the kind of religious education provided by these schools has tended to become of the non-committed variety that secular humanists are alone prepared to condone, but which was roundly condemned by William Temple. Likewise, their religious assemblies have tended to dispense with collective acts of worship. Instead, children attending the assemblies of *community schools*, as these schools are now known, are likely to be informed in them about current festivals of the faiths practised by the families of various pupils who may be invited to enact and talk about their associated rituals and ceremonies. Even some denominational schools, or *faith schools* as this variety of school has since become called, have begun to follow community schools in offering neutral non-committed forms of religious education and non-worshipful assemblies. They have begun to do so, as increasing numbers of their pupils have started to come from families in which some other faith is practised other than that for whose nurturance these schools were established.

Dissatisfied by the increasing desuetude into which the committed form of religious education was falling in the country’s state schools, a number of Christian peers led by Baroness Cox succeeded in introducing into the 1988 Education Reform Act a number of provisions designed to remind state schools of their still binding statutory

obligation to provide daily acts of collective worship, as well as the legislative machinery by which they could provide them, and appropriately committed forms of religious instruction, even when their pupil diversity had precluded them from being any longer able to make common provision for all their pupils. This latter-day legislative attempt to ensure the country's state-funded schools would provide a committed form of religious education proved far less successful than did Temple's. In no time, the provisions that had been introduced into the 1988 Act for that purpose became subject to a tendentious interpretation by a teacher-training profession that had grown hostile to such a form of it out of the conviction that, in a multicultural age such as they judged the present had become, the only form of religious education suitable in local authority controlled schools had to be of the non-committed kind favoured by secular humanists. In no time they succeeded in placing on these provisions in the Act an interpretation that made it seem that their purpose had been to require community schools to supply such a form of it.

The most notorious such provision was section 8.3 of the Act. This demanded that 'new locally agreed [religious education] syllabuses must reflect the fact that religious traditions in the country are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of other principal religions.'³ It quickly became the received opinion among the teacher-training fraternity and in Whitehall that this section required the religious education syllabi of community schools to teach about all six main faiths practised in the country somewhere, only acknowledging by devoting more time to Christianity, the fact that the country's religious traditions had in the main been Christian. That had not been at all what had been intended by this provision, as was clearly explained at the time its inclusion was debated in the Lords by the then Bishop of London Graham Leonard, also, at the time, chairman of the National Society. He said: 'It does not mean that there will be a percentage of Christian teaching spread throughout the country with a proportion of other faiths. It means that... in the main, looking at the country as a whole with its present multicultural composition, the bulk of it will be Christian. The norm will be Christian if one likes to put it that way. But there will be exceptions because of local areas and what is proper to them in the educational setting. That is what we mean by "mainly" – not mainly in the sense of two-thirds rice and one third tapioca or something like that.'⁴

In succeeding in introducing into the 1988 Act this and other related provisions, what those who did had wanted them to oblige community schools to provide by way of religious education has not come about. They had been fighting the *Zeitgeist*. Instead, what some unkindly have termed ‘multicultural mishmash’ has become the order of the day in the country’s community schools which have mostly also ceased to provide daily collective acts of worship. By 2003, Ofsted could report that they had ceased in 80 per cent of the country’s secondary schools.

Despite all these concessions to diversity and to secular modernity, secular humanists remain dissatisfied by the place religion still occupies in the country’s state-funded schools. They consider many still far too accommodating of it. Their chief grievances have been three. First, they claim, publicly-funded faith schools are socially divisive and subvert community cohesion. They do so, these critics say, by segregating schoolchildren along lines of religion, and, since religion so often correlates with ethnicity, on those of ethnicity too. Second, they urge, faith schools give rise to a further no less pernicious form of segregation among schoolchildren, one that they claim is especially prejudicial to those who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and attend community schools. This is the segregation of schoolchildren on lines of social class. Faith schools are said to generate such social segmentation between schools by their selective admissions policies which allow them, when over-subscribed, to accord priority to applicants whose parents can give them evidence of adhering to the faith of their sponsoring bodies. These admissions policies have been found to result in faith schools admitting a much higher proportion of children of middle-class background than do community schools.

In testimony to a Commons Select Committee in March 2008, Rebecca Allen of the London Institute of Education, one of the country’s two principal researchers in this field along with Anne West of the LSE, explained what they had found to be the scale of the difference in the social class composition of pupils attending these two varieties of school. Allen said: ‘If we take a community school and a voluntary-aided religious school, both located in a neighbourhood with exactly the same levels of deprivation, the community school is likely to have about 50 % more free school meals children than the voluntary-aided school.’⁵ A year later, she elaborated on the difference so:

‘Faith schools tend to sit at the top of their local school hierarchy of pupil background characteristics, with fewer free school meal eligible pupils and greater numbers of high ability pupils. The presence of faith schools is also associated with greater stratification of local schools in the social background of their pupil intake.’⁶

Secular humanists, and some others, consider such social segregation not only contravenes the comprehensive ideal, but is also unfair to those children from less advantaged backgrounds who, as a result of the selective admissions policies of faith schools, attend community schools in disproportionate number.⁷ Such socially segmented schooling is considered unfair to them because of the so-called ‘peer effect’ children are known to have on each other’s learning when taught together. Children have been found to learn more readily in proportion as those alongside whom they are taught are easy to educate. Since the family life of children from more advantaged background tends to be more stable and settled than that of children who come from less advantaged homes, the former children tend to be more easily educated than the latter. Consequently, an educational premium attaches to learning alongside a large proportion of them. The selective admissions policies of faith schools have been found to lead to the more easily educable children being disproportionately concentrated together at them. This boosts their educational performance, while depressing that of their less advantaged counterparts who have indirectly been led by the selective policies of faith schools to be disproportionately concentrated at community schools. Hence, the more socio-economically advantaged pupils of faith schools tend to do better in public school-leaving examinations than these less advantaged community school pupils. Hence, the more advantaged faith school pupils tend to obtain disproportionately more places at more prestigious universities, and, in consequence, more interesting and better-paid jobs, with all the attendant superior life-chances that flow from them. Not only, therefore, in the eyes of their critics, do faith schools foster undue social segregation, as well as religious and ethnic, segregation of schoolchildren, they also are considered unfair to the less advantaged children who go to community schools by impeding their social mobility.

The third complaint secular humanists level against faith schools arises less from whom they teach than what. The complaint is one that applies with equal force to the country’s few remaining community schools which continue to provide a committed

form of religious education and daily acts of collective worship. All such classes and assemblies are condemned by their secular humanist critics as counter-educational. They are so considered on account of the following two features of religious convictions. The first is their essential indemonstrability. The second is the uncritical manner in which they may be implanted and nurtured in children by committed forms of religious education and by daily acts of collective worship. To illustrate what the concerns of secular humanists are about these religiously committed forms of pedagogy, consider what several prominent ones have written about them.

In his 2003 book, *Life, Sex, and Ideas: The Good Life Without God*, the philosopher A.C.Grayling writes that: ‘in schools all over the country... antipathetic [religious] “truths” are being force-fed to different groups of pupils, none of whom is in a position to assess their credibility or worth. This is a serious form of child abuse... There is no greater social evil than religion. It is the cancer in the body of humanity.’⁸ Likewise, in his 2006 book *The God Delusion*, biologist Richard Dawkins declared: ‘Our society, including the non-religious sector, has accepted the preposterous idea that it is normal and right to indoctrinate tiny children in the religion of their parents... Let children learn about different faiths, let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions about the consequences of that incompatibility. As for whether any are “valid”, let them make up their own minds when they are old enough to do so.’⁹

I shall now attempt to appraise these several complaints against faith schools and the committed teaching and practice of religion in these and some other state-funded schools. I shall argue that none hold water. I shall then offer several reasons why, or so I will argue, the committed teaching and practice of religion should be restored to all the country’s state-funded schools, allowing, of course, for the parents of their pupils to withdraw them from all of these activities on conscientious grounds.

2. Faith Schools, Religious Segregation and Community Cohesion

Since the riots by young Muslim men of South Asian extraction in the former mill towns of Burnley, Bradford and Oldham in the summer of 2001, concern has often been voiced about the potential of faith schools to exacerbate and prolong tensions

and divisions between faith groups and ethnicities on account of segregating their children in school on lines of faith. Unless these children can all be brought together in common schools, many contend, they will be liable to develop hostile attitudes towards each other at the expense of community cohesion at local and national level. Despite the prevalence of this view, it is seriously open to question. The grounds for contesting it are several.

First, there is no guarantee that children of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds will form any closer and friendlier relations than they otherwise would by being jointly schooled. Studies of the relations between black and white schoolchildren in America since the end of racially segregated schooling there in 1957 offer little evidence that common schooling has fostered any closer or more positive relations between them than had previously obtained or would otherwise be likely to. Forty years after it ended, the Canadian political scientist H.D. Forbes undertook a comprehensive meta-study of all the many academic studies that had since been conducted into the effects that common schooling in America had had on the racial attitudes of black and white schoolchildren who had undergone it. Contrary to the prior expectations of advocates of school desegregation, Forbes found: ‘The effects of desegregation have not been as positive as many social scientists were once confident they would be. Children thrown together in desegregated schools, it seemed reasonable to expect, would naturally form interracial friendships... and these friendships would inoculate them against groundless stereotypes and racist superstitions of their elders... Generally speaking, empirical research since the 1950s has not justified these expectations.’¹⁰

Forbes disclosed these findings in a book published in 1997. Ten years later, relations between black and white students at the same American public schools showed little sign of having become any closer. In 2006, to mark the half century anniversary of the end of segregated schooling there, two former pupils of the Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, spent a year at it filming a television documentary on the relations between its black and white students. Their school had become emblematic of school desegregation in America, since it was forcibly imposed on it by the US Army acting on presidential order, after the Arkansas state governor had ordered the National Guard to block entry to it on the first day of the school year in September

1957 of nine black children. The school's two former pupils found little by way of any close relations between its black and white students. 'They found the division exists in and out of class... [B]lack students... and white students... eat separately at lunch and they often play different sports after school... The school principal... said it's an uphill struggle to get the students to mix... She said: "I've talked to principals all over the United States and it's a universal problem."' ¹¹ What that Arkansas high school principal claimed about the ubiquity of the self-segregation of black and white children attending the same public schools in America was borne out by the results of a survey published in 2009 of the behaviour and attitudes of 757 children at elementary schools scattered across the state of Illinois. It found that: 'black kids who self-segregate – who hang out with other black kids – are more popular than black kids who have white friends... [T]his dynamic interplay between popularity and self-segregation didn't disappear when black kids were in the majority – in fact it increased... Black children were rewarded socially for avoiding white kids.' ¹²

There is little reason to think that, should schoolchildren of different faith and ethnic background in England all be made to attend common schools, there would be any less self-segregation on their part than has been found typical of American public schools. Certainly, tension between children of different backgrounds attending common schools in England appears to be running at an alarmingly high level. Very high rates of bullying are currently being reported in them, much motivated by the racial and religious differences between their pupils. In 2008, the British Council published the results of a Europe-wide survey of 3,500 secondary school-age children attending 47 schools across the region, chosen for their mix of backgrounds, and who included 1500 British schoolchildren. Bullying in school was found to be worse in England than in the rest of Europe. Nearly half of the English secondary school pupils surveyed considered bullying at their school to be a problem and caused by language difficulties, skin colour and the religion of their pupils. More than a quarter reported being made fun of at school because of their religion. ¹³

It is partly to protect their children from being bullied at school on account of their faith or ethnicity that so many Jewish and now Muslim parents in recent years have sought to place them in faith schools catering for children of their own faith background. Ample studies attest that Jewish and Christian schools have not

prevented their pupils from being able to develop positive attitudes towards and close relations with those of other backgrounds.¹⁴ There are, perhaps, special factors in the case of children of Muslim background growing up in England today that might militate against them forming quite as close and friendly relations with those of other backgrounds as these others have who attended faith schools there. First, Muslim children in England tend to be residentially concentrated in areas where many parents of school-age children continue to be recently settled non-English speaking first-generation immigrants who have come from the Indian sub-continent after having contracted a trans-continental arranged marriage with a spouse resident in England. Second, there is propagandist pressure from peers, the internet, and sometimes, although very rarely, from their local mosque. The integration of an immigrant minority does not happen overnight. Nor is it helped when English is not the first language spoken at home, which it seldom is, when one adult is a first-generation immigrant from a non-Anglophonic country.

Some have claimed that these factors make any proliferation of Muslim faith schools, in response to current parental demand for them, much too potentially divisive or even dangerous to be allowed. Since it would no less divisive and inflammatory to deny only Muslims new faith schools but to allow them to other faith groups, those of this view cite this alleged fact as reason why no new faith schools of any kind should be opened.

I believe that this is not the way forward for community cohesion in this country, but that, on the contrary, state-funded Muslim faith schools should be welcomed, provided that they are sufficiently rigorously regulated and inspected by the state. When considering how conducive or otherwise to community cohesion any future proliferation of Muslim schools might be in England, their appropriate comparators are not faith schools there that cater to children of the country's other faith groups. They are, rather, those schools that children of Muslim background might otherwise attend did they not attend a state-funded Muslim school. They would either attend private Muslim schools or community schools. The former are subject to far less state oversight and regulation than are state-funded schools, so any proliferation in their number ought to be considered especially worrisome by anyone concerned about how potentially divisive any proliferation in the number of state-funded Muslim schools

might be. As to the country's community schools, they have had a dismal track-record to date in integrating their Muslim pupils. None of the four London tube-train suicide bombers, of whom all had received their schooling in England, attended a Muslim school. More importantly, of all factors known to assist in integrating young persons from an ethnic or religious minority, none does so more effectively than their gaining steady employment upon completing their education. Nothing more effectively contributes to that than does their having previously gained good educational qualifications while at school. To date, schoolchildren of Bangladeshi and Pakistani extraction in England, especially boys, have tended to do very badly in school-leaving examinations comparatively speaking, and their rates of post-school employment have been correspondingly low. In 2001, for example, the rate of unemployment among Bangladeshi and Pakistani males was 20 per cent.¹⁵ What it must now be in the midst of a steep recession does not bear thinking about, or, rather, it demands the most urgent and deepest attention.

Whether it is their greater freedom from bullying, the more inspiring role models that their teachers provide, or their distinctive religious ethos, such publicly-funded Muslim schools to have opened in England since 1997 have had outstandingly good academic track-records, comparatively speaking. In 2007/08, for example, whereas only 40 per cent of children of Pakistani background and 45 per cent of children of Bangladeshi background obtained 5 or more GCSEs that included English and mathematics at grades A* to C, by contrast, the percentage of those who did who had attended a Muslim school in England was 70.4 per cent, as against a national average of 48.2 per cent.¹⁶ Insofar as their favourable results have led these Muslim school pupils to gain higher levels of employment than they otherwise would, such schools can be regarded as having made, and being likely to continue to make, an overall positive net contribution to community cohesion. They would do so, even should many of their pupils, for reasons indicated earlier, have yet to develop towards those of other background quite such favourable attitudes and close relations as typically these children of other backgrounds have done who have attended the country's other varieties of faith school.

That faith schools might be better able than community schools to promote community cohesion is also suggested by the results of a study conducted by David

Jesson of York University in 2009.¹⁷ He surveyed how well Ofsted had reported different types of publicly-funded school in England to have discharged their statutory duty to promote it that they all have had since September 2007. Analysing the reports of 700 primary schools and 400 secondary schools, Jesson found that, while there was little difference between faith and community schools at the primary level, at the secondary level faith schools were consistently reported to have discharged that duty far more effectively and rigorously than had community schools.

3. Faith Schools, Social Segregation and Social Mobility

Faith schools, therefore, would seem to be no less able than community schools to promote community cohesion, despite educating children of different faith background separately. Perhaps because the fact they can do so is starting to become better known, of late the charge that these schools are divisive has increasingly started to be based on the social segmentation to which their selective admissions policies have been found to give rise. Critics claim their generally more middle-class composition violates the comprehensive ideal and is unfair to children of less advantaged background concentrated more heavily in community schools as an indirect result of these policies.

For purposes of appraising the validity of this complaint, let us assume that children attending state schools should always enjoy equally as good schooling and favourable life-chances, no matter their class background. Let us also, for the moment, set aside concern with how well or badly selective faith schools embody the comprehensive ideal. Let us simply focus upon comparing the levels of academic attainment of their pupils with that of community school pupils. Suppose we concede that the proportion of the pupils at selective faith schools who come from an advantaged background is larger than the proportion of such children who attend community schools. Let us also suppose that being taught alongside such children has a beneficial peer effect on the learning of those who are, while being taught alongside children of less advantaged background has a correspondingly adverse peer effect upon the learning of those who are. Must it follow that faith schools exert a deleterious effect upon the educational performance of community school pupils? Not necessarily.

To see why not, suppose that, should faith schools pass into local authority control or be forbidden from selecting their pupils by reference to their faith background, the proportion of their pupils eligible for free school meals would rapidly become the same as that of community schools, or, more realistically, the same as that of children who were eligible for them resident in the localities in which these faith schools were situated. Would the level of academic attainment and consequent life-chances of these less advantaged children now necessarily improve as a result of the more even distribution between schools of more advantaged children? The answer is not necessarily, for several reasons.

First, undoubtedly some community schools would now contain larger proportions of more advantaged children than they otherwise would. Their increased proportion in these schools need not necessarily have any beneficial peer effect upon the academic performance of these schools' less advantaged pupils, absolutely or relative to that of more advantaged children. This is because, next to prior level of achievement, nothing affects a child's academic performance more than does their socio-economic background. It has recently been reported that: 'By the time they start school, research shows that a middle class child will have heard six times as many words of encouragement as reprimands. A working-class child will have heard only twice as many, while a child on welfare will have been criticised twice for every word of praise.'¹⁸ Children from more socially advantaged backgrounds, therefore, would still be likely to do better in school than their less socio-economically advantaged peers, even should they all attend the same schools.

As well as it being unlikely that the relative academic performance of less advantaged children would improve by their schools acquiring a larger proportion of more advantaged children, it is also unlikely that their absolute academic performance would improve either. The reason has partly to do, again, with the powerful influence on a child's educational performance of their socio-economic background. It has also to do with the relative efficacy of different ways in which schools might group their pupils for the purposes of teaching them. In consequence of faith schools no longer being able to select pupils by faith background, those schools that would now contain a larger proportion of more advantaged children would either have to go in for setting, streaming or for mixed-ability teaching. Should these schools opt for either of the

first two ways of organising their teaching, the same social class segregation that had previously existed between them and faith schools would now be liable to reappear between their own different sets or streams. This is because of the influence that the socio-economic background of their pupils would have on the test results used to place them in sets or streams. Those from more advantaged background would become disproportionately concentrated in the upper ability ones. Alternatively, should these schools opt for mixed-ability teaching, then any positive contribution that their more even spread among all classes might possibly make to the educational performance of less advantaged pupils would be more than likely to be offset by the deleterious effect that mixed ability teaching is known to have upon the educational performance of children of all ability levels, save by those ideologically blinded on this issue.

Even should improvement be seen in the absolute educational performance of children from less advantaged background by their being taught alongside a larger proportion of more advantaged children, their relative performance would still be liable to lag behind them because of the differential impact on their educational performances of their respective socio-economic backgrounds. And it is their relative performance that is most decisive in determining their post-school educational and career prospects. The relative performance of less advantaged children would now be especially liable to lag behind that of their more advantaged counterparts, as the aspirant parents of these latter children would now have every incentive to focus upon ways of boosting it by out of school means such as private tuition.¹⁹ Overall, therefore, the life-chances of children from less privileged socio-economic background might not improve through their schools coming to contain a larger proportion of more socio-economically advantaged children as a result of faith schools not being able to employ selective admissions policies.

Rather than suppose that it is merely malice that lies behind concern about the social segmentation caused by the selective admissions policies of faith schools, let us suppose that what does is genuine desire to see absolute and relative improvement in the educational performance, and consequent life-chances, of children from less advantaged backgrounds. If so, there would appear to be a much more promising alternative way in which to set about improving it than by abolishing faith schools or

forbidding them from selecting pupils on grounds of their faith background. Assume that, on the whole, the optimum condition in which children learn at school is when the children alongside whom they are taught are of a similar level of ability. Assume also that there is a rough positive correlation between children's level of ability and their socio-economic background. In such circumstances, rather than insist on making the social class composition of all state-funded schools the same as each other or that of the neighbourhoods in which they are situated, the state might set about improving the absolute and relative educational performance of less advantaged schoolchildren by giving to their schools extra resources with which to educate them. This is what the present government has signalled its intention of doing by introducing the so-called 'pupil premium'. This is an extra monetary payment that schools are to receive in future for each pupil eligible for free school meals. Schools are to be given it for the express purpose of improving the absolute and relative performance of these particular children. They are to be left free to experiment on how best to spend the extra money, and will be periodically monitored to see how well their experiments have fared.

Some, however, are still liable to complain that any residual social segmentation between schools that arises from the selective admissions policies of faith schools would continue to fall foul of the comprehensive ideal. Advocates of this ideal favour it because they see value in children from different class backgrounds mixing as equals. Doubtless there is, provided that it can be arranged without sacrificing any other desiderata such as their freedom to associate with whom they want in school. For reasons similar to those already mentioned when discussing the claim that faith schools unduly segregate children along lines of religion and ethnicity, I doubt whether creating more socially mixed schooling by not allowing faith schools to select their pupils would do much, if anything, to foster the mixing at school of children from different social classes, any more than desegregated schooling in America has done to foster there the mixing of its black and white schoolchildren.

Pupil self-segregation along lines of social class is no less real and ubiquitous a phenomenon than their tendency to self-segregate on lines of religion and ethnicity, as attested by a study whose results were published in February 2008. This 30-month long study tracked the educational progress of 124 children sent by their middle-class

and mostly university educated ‘progressive’ parents to their local comprehensive school in London and two other cities in England to be exposed to diversity. These children were invariably found to have done well in their end-of-school public examinations, with very high numbers going on to university and a disproportionate number to Oxbridge. However, it was also found they had at school tended to mix only with children of a similar class background to theirs. One of the three researchers involved in the study was quoted as saying: ‘Our research found segregation within schools with white middle-class children clustered in top sets... with little interaction with children from other backgrounds... The children rarely had working-class friends and their few minority ethnic friends were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds.’²⁰

In view of how apparently limited the ability of common schooling is to promote the mixing of children of different class or faith background, to promote community cohesion or social mobility, it is legitimately open to question whether selective faith schools stand justly open to the accusation of being quite as divisive and unfair as their secular humanist critics claim them to be.

5. Faith Schools, Indoctrination and Autonomy

We now turn to the objections secular humanists raise against all attempts by any kinds of state-funded school to nurture religious beliefs in their pupils by offering any committed forms of religious education and collective acts of worship. As we have seen, these secular humanist critics claim that all such attempts to nurture religious belief in schoolchildren are tantamount to child abuse, since children lack the wherewithal to decide for themselves whether these beliefs merit their adoption.

In order to appraise the validity of this complaint, it is worth distinguishing two different possible grounds on which it might be made. One relates to the uncritical manner in which these forms of pedagogy implant and nurture religious beliefs in children. The other relates to the indemonstrable and empirically unverifiable status of the beliefs they are designed to nurture, plus the certain falsity of the vast majority of them given their mutual incompatibility. How, their secular humanist critics ask, can the state possibly be justified in assisting schools to implant and nurture such beliefs

in their pupils uncritically, when most of these beliefs cannot but be false and none can possibly be shown to be true?

In relation to the uncritical manner by which schools implant and nurture religious beliefs in pupils by means of religiously committed forms of pedagogy, there is a brief reply to those who consider it renders their use unwarrantably counter-educational. The reply is simply that there is no other way in which schools can instil practically any of the beliefs that they do in their pupils other than by securing the pupils' uncritical acceptance of them on the strength of the authority of their teachers. In particular, it is unavoidable for children to absorb most of their early beliefs in an as uncritical a manner as children do who acquire religious beliefs by being subjected to religiously committed forms of pedagogy in their schooling.

Nor does the fact that, unlike other varieties of belief, religious ones admit of neither proof nor empirical verification undermine the legitimacy of their early implantation and nurturance in children by their schools, so long as it is carried out in good faith (and without the parental objection), and provided these beliefs are not detrimental to those in whom they are nurtured or to others. There is no evidence that any religious beliefs that any of England's state-funded schools would ever knowingly be authorised to nurture -- or at least should be authorised to nurture -- would fall into either of these categories.

Nor is the legitimacy of their implantation and nurturance by religiously committed forms of pedagogy invalidated by the certain falsity of most religious beliefs, given their mutual incompatibility. Their implantation and nurturance could still be justified, provided they all contained valuable insights and forms of understanding in which those would always be deficient who remained forever devoid of all religious belief. I believe that all the world's main religions do contain such forms of insight and understanding insofar as each goes beyond a purely materialistic and scientific understanding of the world. Of course, I cannot prove to the satisfaction of all that they do, but by the same token neither can secular humanists prove to everyone's equal satisfaction that they do not, or at least that none does. In face of such epistemic deadlock, I cannot see why their nurturance by the country's state-funded schools cannot be regarded as every bit as much warranted as the nurturance in their pupils is

of beliefs which do admit of mathematical proof or empirical verification. Of course, the only forms of religious belief that schools would ever be warranted in nurturing must be ones to whose nurturance the parents of their pupils had no conscientious objection, and they must also pass the test of not being detrimental either to these children or third parties. I am confident that, provided the schools inspectorate and other relevant bodies remained vigilant as to which sorts of religious belief schools were endeavouring to nurture, it would be easily possible for them to ensure that all state-funded schools in England fulfilled these conditions.

I am equally as confident that many today will find intellectually and morally abhorrent the notion that, in this day and age, state-funded schools should encourage their pupils to believe in supernatural occurrences. I do not believe that any schools actually need do in order to be able to provide suitably committed forms of religious education. Nor, perhaps, surprisingly for some, did William Temple. It is worth noting some pertinent remarks contained in a Church of England report published in 1938 entitled *Doctrine in the Church of England* that was produced by a group of which he was the chair. They run:

It is felt by many that miracle has special value, in that it is a striking demonstration of the subordination of the natural order to spiritual ends, and affords particular points at which God's activity is manifested with special clarity and directness... On the other hand it has to be recognised that many others feel it to be more congruous with the wisdom and majesty of God that the regularities, such as men of science observe in nature and call the Laws of Nature, should serve His purpose without any need for exceptions on the physical plane. It is important to notice that the motives leading to this view are not exclusively scientific, but that a religious interest is involved... It is impossible in the present state of knowledge to make the same evidential use of narratives of miracles... which appeared possible in the past. This is a religious gain, inasmuch as the use of miracles to force belief appears to have been deliberately rejected by our Lord.²¹

In his chairman's introduction, Temple added to these remarks that he 'fully recognise[d] the position of those who sincerely affirm the reality of our Lord's

Incarnation without accepting... [either the Virgin birth or the Resurrection] as actual historical occurrences, regarding the records rather as parable than as history, a presentation of spiritual truth in narrative form'.²² This is a remarkable admission in terms of what it licenses schools to provide by way of a committed form of religious education. It suggests that qualms about it necessarily involving nurturing beliefs in any supernatural occurrences might be misplaced.

6. Conclusion

Far from being detrimental either to those in whom they would be nurtured or to third parties, I believe that there is considerable empirical evidence to show that the only sorts of religious beliefs that any state-funded schools in England today might ever be authorised to nurture -- or, at least, should be authorised to do -- are ones from which those in whom they would be nurtured would benefit from acquiring, as would, indirectly, others. These benefits are so great and so diffuse as to warrant, I maintain, their nurturance by all the country's state-funded schools through their providing some committed form of religious education, rather than the non-committed variety that has latterly become so prevalent in them.

First, religious beliefs have been found to have a markedly beneficial effect on the academic performance of children in whom they have nurtured, especially if growing up in urban environments where the distractions from study can otherwise be liable to prove as alluring as they are damaging. In 2003, the results were published of a study undertaken in the United States into the effects of such beliefs upon the academic performance of students. The educational performance and religious commitments of just under 19,000 students were correlated who had supplied the relevant data by participating in the U.S. National Education Longitudinal Survey in 1992. The students were all given questionnaires, as were their parents and teachers. They were also subjected to a battery of tests designed to measure their levels of academic attainment. Knowledge of their religious commitment had been earlier gleaned from questionnaires they had completed in 1988 and 1990. It found that: 'Very religious students, from both urban and non-urban schools, outperformed less religious students in academic achievement.'²³ It also found that: 'Whether students attended a private school... the effects of individual religious commitment on academic achievement

also remained... The relationship exists within schools and is not explained by the fact many religiously committed students attend religious private schools.²⁴

Similarly, a study of information obtained by a major survey of European-wide households, whose results were published in 2005, found: ‘considerable evidence that religion makes a difference to people’s lives: it provides social networks, favourably affects physical and mental health school attendance and reduces deviant activity... There is psychological evidence that religion can be particularly helpful for those facing stressful life events.’²⁵

There is, then, a considerable body of empirical evidence that harbouring religious beliefs confers benefits upon those who do and indirect benefits upon third parties. The benefits in question are educational, moral, and health benefits. I am here obviously confining my remarks to non-fanatical forms of religious belief that do not license, in the eyes of those who harbour them, acts of terror in the name of their religion. Mercifully, this latter variety of religious belief is not one we need yet worry about any schools in England ever being knowingly authorised to teach, at least in the foreseeable future. The demonstrable educational, moral and psychological benefits that the nurturance of the non-fanatical varieties, if all schools were to provide a committed form of religious education, are so palpable and widespread, I believe, as to warrant some form of it being provided in all state-funded schools in England. The provisions contained in the 1988 Education Reform Act for religious education were designed to make it possible for schools to provide such forms of it, even when their pupil rolls had become so diverse as to preclude any single form any longer being suitable for all of them. Only a hostile teacher-training profession, plus a colluding civil-service, conspired to place on these provisions such a tendentious interpretation as has led to their being taken to authorise, if not mandate, the neutral non-committed form of religious education that has replaced the committed variety in so many of the country’s schools.

I should like to end by identifying a further civic benefit that, I believe, would be conferred upon the inhabitants of this country by these schools providing a committed form of religious education, even if they should harbour no variety of it themselves. I was recently put in mind of that civic benefit by watching the ceremony and subsequent public celebrations that followed the wedding last April in Westminster

Abbey of the country's second-in-line to the throne. At the time, many remarked on how powerful a binding and politically stabilising force was the evident affection in which the so many inhabitants of this country held its royal family. While the inhabitants of other countries assembled in the centres of their capitals to protest against and call for the departure of their rulers, those in England are periodically given over to assembling there join with their country's notional ruler in celebrating his or her family occasions. What struck me in witnessing that ceremony and subsequent celebrations was how much of that affection was ultimately owing to so many of the inhabitants of this country continuing to share the common Christian faith they did with the royal family and each other, no matter how moribund and inconspicuous it might usually be in most. I was further struck by how much their having come to share that common faith must have been due to the country's state-funded schools for so long having provided the grounding in it they all once did by providing a committed form of religious education and worshipful assemblies. My final contention is that, not only would the entire population of England lose much, but so too would that of the rest of the world, were such committed religious education to entirely disappear from England's state-funded schools out of ostensible deference to the country's present diversity.

I was especially put in mind of exactly what those civic benefits were of that common religious faith by the sight of the two Spitfires and Vulcan bomber that flew over Buckingham Palace after the newly wed royal couple appeared on its balcony to cheering crowds below, immediately following the ceremony. I was particularly struck by the symbolism contained in the sight of the country's future king, his younger brother and best man, their father, and grandfather, all decked out in ceremonial military attire, salute those planes in recognition of what they and the entire nation owed to those who had flown them in earnest during the Second World War, as well as those today who remain willing to lay down their lives for their country in military combat.

We often hear today that nation-states have become obsolete and that the sooner this country takes its place inside a fully federal Europe and its place within a wider system of global governance the better. I am not so sure and the sight of that fly-past put me in mind of why not. There is, it seems to me, an enduring need of those forms

of political self-determination and sovereignty that can only nation states can adequately supply, especially those of the liberal variety that England has for so long been. The reason was well put by the observation of the American political philosopher Lenn Goodman that: ‘in a world state, the discomfited and the disaccommodated, the dissatisfied, the neglected, abused, or oppressed, would have nowhere else to go.’²⁶ As long as England remains a sovereign nation and retains its longstanding traditions of individual liberty and tolerance, not only will *all* its inhabitants be better off, so too will those of the rest of the world. The common national Christian faith that so many of its inhabitants continue to share, it seems to me, is an abiding vital condition of their country remaining the strongly united liberal nation that it has been for so many centuries and whose sovereignty continues to serve as a force for good in the world from which ultimately everyone benefits, including that small vocal minority of secular humanists who seek to do away with it.

I shall end with a quotation that beautifully explains what a force for national cohesion and good the country’s state-funded schools could once again become, should they again all start to provide a committed form of religious education that they all easily could without any threat to any of the country’s religious minorities or to community cohesion. The quotation comes from a lecture delivered by the Cambridge political philosopher Ernest Barker in 1927 and entitled ‘Christianity and Nationality’. In it, Barker declared:

[A] nation which draws into itself continuously, and not merely in its first beginnings, the inspiration of a religious faith and a religious purpose will increase its own vitality... Our own nation... has been inspired by a not ignoble notion of national duty to aid the oppressed – the persecuted Vaudois, the suffering slave, the oppressed nationality – and it has been most characteristically national when it has most felt such inspiration... We offend against the essence of the [English] nation if we emphasise its secularity, or regard it as merely an earthly unit for earthly purposes. Its tradition began its life at the breast of Christianity; and its development in time, through the centuries... has not been utterly way from its nursing mother... [I]n England our national tradition has been opposed to the idea of a merely secular society for secular purposes standing over against a separate

religious society for religious purposes. Our practice has been in the main that of the single society, which if national is also religious, making public profession of Christianity in its solemn acts, and recognising religious instruction as part of its scheme of education.²⁷

Insofar as this country's unique willingness to stand up to brutal dictatorship in 1939 and since has been due, not least in part, to the spirit that has been infused into the majority of its inhabitants by their common Christian faith, which I would unhesitatingly assert to be the case, then the broadly Christian type of committed religious education for whose instatement in all the country's state-funded schools William Temple had been calling in his 1942 address is one from which all its inhabitants would benefit, as indeed would the rest of the world. They all would, provided schools there made due allowance for alternative committed forms of religious education classes and assemblies and even separate faith schools, for children of minority faiths for all which alternative varieties of committed religious education the 1988 Education Reform Act made ample provision.

All would stand to benefit from such committed forms of religious education in the country's state-funded schools, not simply because it would be likely to improve the educational performance, behaviour and well-being of the nation's schoolchildren. They would also all benefit because, I believe, only by continuing to provide it can this country be assured of remaining the independent and united liberal polity that it has for so long been and from whose continuing to be such all its diverse inhabitants would derive benefit, even those who do not share that faith or any other.

NOTES

- ¹ Paper delivered to the London Society for the Study of Religion on 7th June 2011.
- ² Temple, W., Speech to the National Society (1942), quoted in Iremonger, F.A., *William Temple: Archbishop of Canterbury. His Life and Letters* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 571.
- ³ Education Reform Act (1988) section 8.3.
- ⁴ Hansard H.L., 21 June 1988, col. 717; quoted in Thompson, P., *Whatever Happened to Religious Education* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2004), p. 113.
- ⁵ Minutes of Evidence taken before the Children, Schools and Families Committee of the House of Commons on Diversity in Schools: Faith Schools, 12 March 2008; <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsch/c311-iii/c31102.htm>
- ⁶ Allen, R., 'School standards cannot improve by faith alone', *Guardian*, 23 April 2009.
- ⁷ I owe my appreciation of the significance of this issue, and also of the way in which I propose it might be satisfactorily resolved without forcing faith schools to relinquish their selective admission policies to Brighouse, H., 'Educational Justice and Socio-Economic Segregation in Schools' in Halstead, M. and Haydon, G. (eds.), *The Common School and the Comprehensive Ideal* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 72-87.
- ⁸ Grayling, A.C., *Life, Sex and Ideas: The Good Life Without God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 35-36.
- ⁹ Dawkins, R., *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2006), pp. 382-383.
- ¹⁰ Forbes, H.D., *Ethnic Conflict: Commerce, Culture and the Contact Hypothesis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 58-60 *passim*.
- ¹¹ Harris, D., Hendry, K and Konghaug, N., 'Lessons of Little Rock: Fifty Years after desegregation, Central High School remains divided', *ABC News*, 23 September 2007.
- ¹² Bronson, P. and Merryman, A., 'By Third Grade, Black Students Who Self Segregate Are More Popular', *Newsweek*, 10 September 2009.
- ¹³ Lipset, A., 'UK schools worst in Europe for bullying', *Education Guardian*, 29 February 2008.
- ¹⁴ See, for example: Greer, J., 'Viewing "the other side" in Northern Ireland' in Francis, L. and Lankshear, D. (eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Church Schools*, Leominster: Gracewing Books, 1993); and Short, G., 'Faith Schools and Social Cohesion: Opening Up the Debate', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 2003, 25:2, 129-141.
- ¹⁵ 2001 Samples of Anonymised Records, quoted in Clark, K. and Drinkwater, S. *Ethnic Minorities in the Labour market: Dynamic and Diversity* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), p.4.
- ¹⁶ Figures from: Bolton, P. and Gillie, C., 'Faith schools: admissions and performances', House of Commons Library, 10 March 2009, p. 7; and Department for Children, Schools and Families, 'GCSE Attainment by Pupil Characteristic in England in 2008/09', 15 December 2009.
- ¹⁷ Jesson, D., 'Community Schools and Faith Schools (notably CofE Schools)', University of York, 2009; http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1180094/community_cohesion_and_faith_schools_2009.doc
- ¹⁸ Russell, J., 'Let's put character above exam results', *Sunday Times*, 5 June 2011.
- ¹⁹ I owe this point to James Tooley. See Tooley, J., 'From Adam Swift to Adam Smith: How the "Invisible Hand" Overcomes Middle Class Hypocrisy' in Schools' in Halstead, M. and Haydon, G. (eds.), *The Common School and the Comprehensive Ideal* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 24-237.
- ²⁰ Clark, L., 'Middle-class pupils snub "chavs" in comprehensives', *Mail*, 21 February 2008.
- ²¹ Quoted in Acland, R., *We Teach Them Wrong* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), pp. 86-89 *passim*.
- ²² *Op cit.*, p. 93.
- ²³ Jeynes, W.H., 'The Effects of Religious Commitment on the Academic Achievement of Urban and Other Children', *Education and Urban Society*, 36, 1, 2003, 44-62, pp.55-56.
- ²⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp.57-58.
- ²⁵ Clark, A. and Lelkes, O., 'Deliver Us from Evil: Religion as Insurance' (December 2005), 1-37, pp. 3-5 *passim*. <http://www.pse.ens.fr/clark/DeliverDec05.pdf>
- ²⁶ Goodman, L.E., 'The Rights and Wrongs of Nations' in Goodman, E.L., *Judaism, Human Rights and Human Values* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137-161, p.161.
- ²⁷ Barker, E., 'Christianity and Nationality', the Burge Memorial Lecture (1927) in Barker, E., *Church, State and Study: Essays* (London: Methuen, 1930), 131-150, pp. 147-148.