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Should religion be part of education?

Sandra McNally

On 18 November, Mount Street Jesuit Centre and the Diocese of Westminster present the next Faith Matters Question Time event, which will address the question: 'Should religion be part of education?' Sandra McNally of the University of Surrey and Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, who will sit on the discussion panel, outlines the social, political and educational climate in which this question is so pertinent, and introduces some of the issues that may arise in the debate.

'Should religion be part of education?' The context in which we ask this question is a multicultural Britain in which fewer and fewer people claim to have religious belief, and in which the place of faith in the public square, and not least in our schools, is debated frequently. This short paper gives a brief overview of the background to our question and of some of the issues that may be raised in the Faith Matters Question Time debate that takes place at Farm Street Church on 18 November 2014.

One aspect of the question is whether, in multicultural Britain, it is appropriate to have so many 'faith schools' that are largely funded by the taxpayer. Proponents argue that they are a force for good in society and can help to transmit the 'British values' of tolerance and respect for others; opponents suggest they are divisive, a cause of segregation and give an unfair advantage to parents who subscribe to a religious belief. There is also the broader question of how *all* schools engage with religion. For example, should non-denominational schools continue with some form of compulsory 'collective worship'? Should there be a change in how Religious Education is taught in schools? We need to start, however, by thinking more broadly about religion in Britain today.

In April 2014, Prime Minister David Cameron's remark that the UK is a 'Christian country' prompted 50 prominent individuals to sign their names to a [letter](#) in the *Daily Telegraph* which argued, conversely, that the UK was largely a 'non-religious society'.¹ So,



is Britain a Christian country? One way to answer the question is to look at the 2011 census. The question 'What is your religion?' generated the response 'Christian' from 59% of respondents in England and Wales, 54% in Scotland and 83% in Northern Ireland. Although it is still the majority religion, the number of people self-identifying as Christian has declined markedly everywhere since the last Census (in 2001, 72% of people in England and

Wales described themselves as Christian). The number of people describing themselves as Muslim has increased, but from a very low base (from 3% to 5% of the population over 10 years). Many more people now describe themselves as having no religion (25% in 2011, 10 percentage points more than in 2001). The big switchover, then, has been from Christianity to 'no religion' and the change has happened mostly among the under 60s, suggesting that the days may be numbered in which *most* Britons describe themselves as Christian. This is the socio-religious context in which we ask whether religion should be part of education.

FAITH SCHOOLS

One of the most contentious issues in this debate is the role of 'faith schools'. These are schools with a denominational character. Most of them are in the state sector, and are mainly funded by the taxpayer with a relatively small contribution from the churches. They account for one third of state schools in England: 68% of them are affiliated to the Church of Engl-

and, while 30% are Roman Catholic. The questions voiced most often about faith schools concern who can access them and whether they are detrimental to social cohesion. We discuss each in turn.

Admissions

State schools are only allowed to reject admission applications if they are over-subscribed. If they are, then they can apply various 'over-subscriptions' criteria. The most common criterion is distance to the school: this gives parents an incentive to try to locate near 'good schools' and proximity to a desirable school adds an average of 3% on to the value of a home. This discriminates in favour of those who can afford to live near a good school, and therefore against those from a poor family background.

Instead of (or as well as) this condition, faith schools can apply a criterion that relates to the religious faith of a family – and often this goes beyond simply describing yourself as belonging to a Christian denomination or showing a baptismal certificate. It can mean demonstrating that you attend church regularly, and the widespread perception that many people attend church for a short time only to get their child into a faith school is a source of cynicism about faith schools in general. (While many of the population self-identify with Christianity, the number of those who attend church regularly is significantly fewer: for example, figures for the Church of England suggested that 800,000 people would have attended a service on a typical Sunday in 2012, a small fraction of those who described themselves as belonging to the Church in the 2011 Census.)

The double hurdle for acceptance – residence and religion – therefore disqualifies many applicants from admission to an oversubscribed faith school. What are the consequences of this for school intakes? When one looks at the data for state schools, it transpires that faith schools have fewer students from poor backgrounds (data from the 2013 schools census shows that 14% of children in faith schools were eligible to receive free school meals in England compared to 18% of children in other schools). What is not clear is whether this is because parents from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to faith schools, or because they do apply but are less successful in meeting the entry requirements.

Advocates of faith schools often claim that these schools have more success in exams as a result of their ethos. Although faith schools do perform better than other state schools in terms of examination results, the difference in school performance largely disappears once one takes into account the profile of young people who attend these schools (e.g socio-economic background, early achievement, whether the school was the parents' preferred school for their child)². This suggests that the superior academic performance of faith schools has more to do with the profile of their intake than their religious ethos.

School leaders are sometimes accused of turning a blind eye to the consequences of these admissions arrangements. After all, there are other legal alternatives available to schools – for example, they could apply a lottery among applicants if they are oversubscribed. Is conforming to the status quo an example of failing to remove social structures that contribute to poverty? On the other hand, is maintaining a given proportion of families in the school with (an apparent) commitment to the faith important to the fabric of a faith school?

Social cohesion

Perhaps a more fundamental question is whether faith schools should exist at all in a multicultural society because of the risk that they create or reinforce segregation: is social cohesion made more difficult by the existence of schools that facilitate separate education according to religious affiliation? One would imagine this depends on many local factors: To what extent is there religious diversity in the community? Does diversity lead to division in the community? And does a faith school contribute to any division on religious grounds (in practice many faith schools accommodate students of other faiths and none)? The extent to which a faith school contributes to or prevents social cohesion must surely depend on what goes on inside each school (for example, their teaching about other communities) and whether they actively promote links with other groups, rather than on the very existence of the school.

In the current institutional structure in England, one could argue that it would make no difference to social cohesion if state faith schools were abolished. Most secondary schools (and an increasing number of

primary schools) are now academies. They do not have to apply the National Curriculum, and the academy's sponsor (which can be a religious institution) has a great deal of influence in the running of a school. Thus, even if state faith schools were abolished overnight, this would not mean that all schools would automatically subscribe to one, non-denominational model. The scope for autonomy at school level (including in how Religious Education is taught) has increased dramatically. Furthermore, the potential problems of segregation do not apply exclusively to faith schools. For example, none of the 21 schools that were part of the recent 'Trojan Horse' controversy in Birmingham was a faith school;³ however, the scandal has prompted discussion about how religion is treated in schools generally.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Most families who describe themselves as Christian do not send their children to faith schools. We can tell this by looking at the numbers: in England in 2013, 25% of school-age children attended faith schools.⁴ For those children going to a non-denominational school, their exposure to religion will be via an act of 'collective worship' and study of the subject 'Religious Education'; and to the extent that religion is brought into discussions about moral and ethical issues elsewhere in their schooling.

A recent report by the Schools Inspectorate (Ofsted 2013)⁵ says of the study of Religious Education (RE) that it:

...makes a significant contribution to pupils' academic and personal development. It plays a key role in promoting social cohesion and the virtues of respect and empathy, which are important in our diverse society. However, the potential of RE was not being realised fully in the majority of schools surveyed for this report.

While noting the improvements in RE over the last ten years, the report goes on to criticise severely the way in which the subject is taught in schools, as many pupils leave school with 'scant subject knowledge and understanding'. Inspectors highlight teaching about Christianity as one of the weakest aspects of RE provision. They have a whole litany of concerns: low standards, weak teaching, problems in developing a curriculum, confusion about the purpose of the

subject, weak leadership and management, weaknesses in exam provision, gaps in training, and the impact of recent changes in education policy. The latter includes the reduction of teacher training places for RE and (in 2013) the withdrawal of bursaries for trainee RE teachers. The findings about poor access to training and support for teachers of RE are reflected in the conclusions of a 2013 report of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Education⁶, which estimated that in 40% of schools RE teachers have inadequate access to continuing professional development. The report concluded:

RE has been the unintended victim of a combination of major policy changes rather than the subject of a deliberate attack. Nevertheless the combined impact of so many severe setbacks in such a short time has been to convey the message that even though it is a statutory subject, RE is of less value than other subjects.

The sample of schools surveyed for the APPG report did not include voluntary aided schools or academies with a religious designation; however, a recent report by the Church of England suggests that the problems in the teaching of RE are not confined to schools without a religious ethos. Their report on Church of England schools⁷ found that about 60% of primary schools surveyed were delivering poor quality RE lessons that give pupils little more than a superficial grounding in the subject. However, the same study found that standards were higher in secondary schools.

So, should religion be part of education? This question will no doubt make for a lively debate as we consider the issues raised above, and others. Could it be said that religious groups have a disproportionate influence on education through 'faith schools'? Or, if concerns are justified about RE being a weak part of the curriculum – even in faith schools – does that mean that RE should receive *more* focus and funding, in order to better inform the children of multicultural Britain on matters of religion? There are no easy answers, but we look forward to discussing the question in all its complexity.

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Faith Matters Question Time takes place on Tuesday 18 November 2014 at 7pm, at 114 Mount Street, London. Booking is essential. Find out more at: <http://www.jesuit.org.uk/faith-matters-question-time>

On the panel will be **Jonathan Bartley** (Founding Director of Ekklesia, the Christian Political Think Tank), **Francis Campbell** (Vice-Chancellor, St Mary's University College & former Ambassador to the Holy See & Pakistan), Professor **Sandra McNally** (Director of the Education Programme, Centre for Economic Performance at the LSE), and **Andrew Copson** (Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association). The debate will be chaired by Fr **Dominic Robinson SJ**.

Faith Matters is a programme of the Mount Street Jesuit Centre and the Agency for Evangelisation.

¹ See the BBC News Magazine for arguments for and against this assertion.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27111146>

² Gibbons, S. and Silva, O., 'Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils?', *Journal of Labor Economics*, 29(3): 589-635, July 2011.

³ This was an organised attempt by a number of associated individuals to introduce an Islamist ethos into several schools.

⁴ 2013 schools census

⁵ OfSTED, *Religious education: realising the potential*. October 2013: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/religious-education-realising-potential>

⁶ The All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, *RE: The Truth Unmasked – the supply of and support for Religious Education teachers*, March 2013:

<http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/appg/news/2013-03-18/appg-re-final-report-the-truth-unmasked>

⁷ Church of England Archbishops' Council Education Division (2014). *Making a Difference? A Review of Religious Education in Church of England Schools*. September 2014.