

Church of England Schools - a rationale

“Faith schools” are often attacked by some sections of the secular media and some high profile academics on the grounds that they are allegedly (i) divisive and (ii) socially selective. It may be helpful to consider the arguments for schools with a religious character.

First of all, education can never be a “secular”, values-free zone of human activity. By its very nature, education is concerned with the development of the human person and how each person develops a mature understanding of self, and discovers a sense of identity, in relation to other persons and (from the Christian perspective) in relation to God as Creator. In a sense, education, like the whole of life, is a process of becoming. This inevitably involves an exploration of personal and cultural identity. It is simply not possible to disaggregate values from a sphere of human activity so closely bound up with the identity of the individual.

Secondly, it’s important to note that, as the law stands, all schools must have a daily act of collective worship wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character (there is nevertheless a right of withdrawal). It is a false dichotomy to argue that there are, on the one hand, “faith schools” and, on the other, “secular” or “non-faith” schools. In a sense, all schools are “faith schools” because of the underpinning legal requirements in respect of collective worship.

Moving on specifically to the issue of Church of England schools:-

- Church of England schools are an integral part of the maintained system of schooling and not a separate constituency. Following the formation of the National Society in 1811, the Church established thousands of schools in the nineteenth century to provide elementary education for the masses at a time when the state did not. Other denominations followed suit. State provision of education only really began with the 1870 Education Act. This *supplemented* denominational provision; it did not *supplant* it. In our Church of England schools today, we maintain this proud tradition of serving the nation in the name of God.
- Church schools are popular with parents. It’s not simply that they have good results (although that is undoubtedly a factor in their popularity). More fundamentally, parents have confidence that Church schools provide a sound moral framework and a context in which the development of the whole child is nurtured. Parents welcome the fact that Church schools have a culture rooted explicitly in a clear set of values and principles. At a time when children and young people are facing enormous pressures to conform to a prevailing consumerist and media-driven construct of “success”, many parents want schools that are able to impart to children a sense of human dignity and a clear moral compass.

- Church of England schools are both distinctively Christian and inclusive institutions. Our schools have a tradition, derived from our history, of serving the whole of the community and neighbourhood in which they are located. Our schools are therefore serving not only children from Christian families, but also children from all backgrounds and faiths, and those of no faith. We are simply not engaged in a separatist or sectarian endeavour.
- It is sometimes alleged that Church schools are engaged in a covert process of social selection, “creaming off” the best pupils. This is an argument (or prejudice) often perpetuated in the media. The reality is that, as inclusive institutions, Church schools will reflect the communities in which they are located. Very many of our schools are serving areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage, whether in urban or rural areas. Church of England schools were established in the nineteenth century “to educate the poor”, and we continue that honourable tradition by maintaining our institutional presence in some of the most difficult areas in society. The allegations of social selection overlook the fact that, nationally, half of Church of England primary schools (and in the Diocese of Lichfield three quarters of our schools) are “Voluntary Controlled” schools, in which the Local Authority is the admissions authority. Voluntary Aided schools also serve their local communities, as they are required to do by their Trust Deeds. It must also be observed that the Church of England is itself a very diverse and varied organisation, with links into many communities. Assertions that the Church of England is a mono-cultural organisation are not borne out by the reality of our national presence. That diversity is reflected in Church of England schools.
- In a Church school, pupils can experience what it is to be part of a community based on religious principles. This gives them a practical awareness and understanding of religion, so that they have a sound and informed basis for deciding for themselves whether they wish to make a religious commitment. This experience also gives them a language and vocabulary for understanding faith – arguably a very significant intellectual asset in a world where religion is often in the headlines.
- In a Church school, children will not only learn from and about Christianity, but they will learn about other faith traditions, too. Church schools are popular with other faith communities precisely because they are places where the name of God is spoken and honoured. By encouraging awareness and understanding of faith, our schools are promoting community cohesion in a significant way.
- It is sometimes argued that “faith schools” will necessarily inculcate narrow, doctrinaire and divisive attitudes to others. On the contrary, they can help to build up respect and understanding for different faiths and cultures, precisely through giving pupils a sense of security in a context of faith and cultural identity. A position of uncommitted and equidistant neutrality is not the only, or best, starting point in which to engage in society where people do still live according to different commitments and identities.

- In the popularity of Church of England schools, many parents see something that “adds value” to their children’s education. Giving children a sense of their divine origin and of human purpose gives them a particular sense of self-respect and respect for others and of individual worth. That sense of values is a strong foundation for learning and for contributing to the well being of society.

Ultimately, the argument about Church (or “faith”) schools resolves itself into a discussion about the kind of society we wish to be. Do we want to be a society in which religion is regarded as a purely private matter and relegated to the margins of public life and discourse (in which case it has the capacity to be a divisive force)? Or do we want to be a society in which religious expression is afforded an institutional involvement and presence within prescribed limits that are generally considered acceptable? The latter represents pre-eminently the Anglican settlement, which has served our nation so well. As the Established Church, within our educational role, we have the opportunity – and indeed the duty – to contribute to the well being of society. Historically, Church of England schools have been part of the national landscape, and they express the Church’s concern for the whole of society. The vision of the founders of the National Society, in offering education to the whole nation, is still at the heart of our purposes in education today.

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