

FAITH in the CLASSROOM

A report of the Sea of Faith Commission on Faith Schools



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We have pleasure in presenting *Faith in the Classroom*, the report of the Sea of Faith Commission on church schools. We believe that the three recommendations, unanimously agreed by all the members of the commission, present a way forward in the debate on faith schools.

Understandably, given the very diverse backgrounds of the members of the commission, we were not able to reach full agreement. One member of the commission, while whole-heartedly agreeing to the recommendations, feels that the report does not adequately express the secular/humanist position and does not address the serious political issues in sufficient depth.

We agree with him that this report is limited in its scope. Nonetheless we believe that it is significant that we were able to reach agreement in three key areas. To go beyond these agreements would require much greater time and resources than were available to us.

David Boulton
Stephen Mitchell

Preface

1. The Sea of Faith Commission on Faith Schools was set up to promote an informed discussion within the network and encourage its members to contribute to the public debate on faith schools.
2. The Sea of Faith Network is well placed to encourage such discussion as it attracts a wide variety of people from churches and other faith communities, as well as atheists, agnostics and those who have become disillusioned with religion.
3. The Sea of Faith Network was founded in 1989 to “explore and promote religious faith as a human creation.” The human and creative aspect of religious faith is a common starting point for discussion. All but the most fundamental of fundamentalists will recognise that faith, like art and all other aspects of human culture, springs from particular times and places.
4. From this common ground springs a variety of explorations. Those in the network who see faith as being “wholly of this world, wholly human and wholly our responsibility” may still see faith as being a valuable resource in their own lives and the life of the world. Others see faith as contributing to the divisions in the world and preventing solutions to the issues of the day. While some see their explorations as being a radical departure from traditional belief, others see continuity with orthodox expressions of faith.
5. While the diversity of network is its strength, the challenge for the network is to speak on contemporary issues with a united voice. This report represents only the views of the members of the commission. However it is offered to promote further discussion amongst network members and in the network’s local groups. It is also offered as a demonstration that even amongst those holding widely differing opinions, agreements can be reached.
6. The three members of the Commission are Stephen Mitchell (Anglican Minister and author of the report), Allan Hayes (Humanist), and David Boulton (Quaker and Humanist). This diversity of backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the network, made some disagreements inevitable. Our report therefore concentrates on specific areas where we concluded that a broad range of agreement on radical reform is possible. We did not consider it necessary that all three of us would endorse every line of argument in the final report. However, we are united in our wholehearted advocacy of three radical recommendations, which we offer to the wider public as a practical way forward in the current debate on faith in the classroom.
7. We look for a school system that it is owned by and valued by all: by those who belong to a religion and those who do not. A habit of regarding, valuing and drawing upon our diverse cultures and beliefs must be nurtured, but it must also be recognised that many will not base their approach to life on a religion. Rather than accepting division of our schools amongst religions we should start afresh by asking how our schools should be helping children grow

up as good human beings and responsible members of society, able to live well together. Religions have a responsibility to contribute to this.

8. Our three specific recommendations are a) that no school in the state sector should be its own admissions authority b) that collective worship should no longer be compulsory and c) that RE should become a National Curriculum subject.

Funding and Admissions

1. Education is important to society and the individual. Education passes on the skills needed for citizens to participate fully in society. It passes on what society considers to be of value and acceptable. Education enables society to pass on the state of knowledge and what is held to be true. For individuals, education enables them to discover and develop their abilities. It enables them to develop their critical and learning skills, so that they can assess their society, criticise it and change it.
2. Because of its importance to the individual and to society, discussion about education not only arouses great passion but is also highly political. All education contains an element of socialisation. No education or educational institution is value free. In many subjects a canon of work considered to be valuable to society is offered. Particular histories or views of history will be introduced to students. In all schools, standards of behaviour, and attitudes to life and others, are encouraged. To avoid the danger of indoctrination, socialisation needs to be balanced with the development and encouragement of the individual's critical thinking. We believe, therefore, that both approaches need to be combined.
3. Both these aspects may be the reason that faith communities involve themselves in education. Where the state fails to provide children with the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed for them to play a full part in society, faith communities may seek to make this provision. Believing that all children have abilities and talents, a faith community may wish to help identify and develop them. Faith communities may also involve themselves in education so that the learning takes place within the ethos of the faith. A faith community may also wish to nurture its children in the faith.
4. It has always been the right of parents in all four countries of the UK to determine how and where they wish their children to be educated. In England and Wales, education at home is permitted under section 7 of the 1996 education act that states:

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full time education suitable a) to his age ability and aptitude, and b) any special educational needs he may have, either by attendance at a school or otherwise.

5. There is no obligation for any parent educating their child at home to register their child or follow any prescribed course of study. There is no obligation on Local Authorities to monitor the child's education. Parents who have religious views and are educating their children at home will educate them within the ethos and values of their faith or view of life.
6. Independent schools are also legal within all countries in the UK. Schools that are not dependent upon government or Local Authority finance are free to

select their own pupils (subject to the general legislation against various forms of discrimination). An independent school has the freedom to set its own admission criteria. Independent schools do not have to follow the national curriculum. Many independent schools have been established by churches and other faith communities.

7. To call for an outright abolition or phasing out of all faith schools, would therefore have implications for home education and independent education. A state would have to have extremely strong arguments for taking away such a degree of individual freedom and the freedom of parents to choose the education of their children. Even if such strong arguments were to be found, it is doubtful whether such a radical revision of education in the UK would be politically achievable. The British Humanist Association in its publication *A Better Way Forward – BHA policy on religion and schools* calls for the phasing out of religious schools in the state sector. However it still envisages an independent sector of education which they could join.
8. Public concern regarding faith schools has mainly centred on schools within the state sector. It is argued that faith schools separate children by religion, select staff for religious acceptability, indoctrinate children, restrict access to good school for non-religious families and service the political purposes of their religious body.
9. These are big issues affecting the future of the country and community relations. The commission did not reach agreement regarding the long-term future of faith schools. The three members of the Commission were not agreed that faith schools are necessarily and intrinsically divisive. One view was that by appropriate regulation, particularly the abolition of their right to act as their own admissions authority, faith schools could continue to play a part in the system. The other view was that even with regulation and reform, faith schools would remain necessarily divisive, and the aim should be to phase them out.
10. We are agreed, however, that no school within the state sector should be its own admissions authority. At present there is no consistency of approach in the funding and admissions policies of schools. The history of schooling in the UK has led to a situation where faith schools, and particularly church schools, receive funding from the state. Voluntary Aided schools, for example, receive all the funding for the education of the pupils and are only required to find 10% of building and repair costs. For some it is outrageous that the state should fund any faith-based education. Others argue that as these schools do the work of the state in the teaching of the National Curriculum they may claim some justification for receiving state funding.
11. In some countries this argument is taken further. In Sweden, for example, there is a scheme under which any group of 50 parents can demand state funding for an independently run school. Something broadly similar operates in Australia, where state funding is provided to independent schools on a formula which pays more to disadvantaged areas. Such schemes have the

advantage that the state can withdraw such funding if it feels it acts in a discriminatory way or is not providing a satisfactory education.

12. If the state were to justify the funding of religious-based schools on the basis that they are providing education on behalf of the state, then all independent schools could seek similar funding. In this country, however, independence from state funding gains the right to control admission to the school. But here too there are inconsistencies. Most independent schools have admission tests or use a common entrance examination. This enables them to select pupils on the basis of academic achievement. However Voluntary Aided schools, while not being able to select pupils on academic achievement, are able to admit pupils on the basis of their faith commitment.
13. Since state funding is not available to all schools then we believe that education in the state sector should be offered to all who wish to apply for it. No school in the state sector should be its own admissions authority. The right to select pupils should be given to those who are independent of the state sector. We believe to make an exception within the state sector for the selection of pupils on faith grounds, as opposed to academic grounds or some other grounds, is arbitrary and unjustified.
14. Such a change would demand clarity within the churches and faith communities. For example, the Church of England's report *The Way Ahead: Church of England Schools in the new millennium* published in 2001, arose from a General Synod resolution that stated that "Church schools were at the centre of the churches' mission to the nation." The report argued that church schools should be distinctively Christian and inclusive institutions. If the mission of the church were to provide good inclusive educational establishments with a Christian ethos, the expectation would be that the church would wish to offer such education to all. As the report states "the Church created schools in huge numbers in the nineteenth century to offer basic education to the poor at a time when the state did not." (1.12) The Church may feel today that it is able to offer an education within an ethos that is particularly helpful for learning and the pastoral care of students. If this were its sole aim then in the same way that it might offer food to all hungry people and healing to all sick people, it would offer this education to all young people. The Church would not wish to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians in deciding who should be fed and healed, nor would we expect it to in the case of education.
15. However the report states that Church of England schools should offer their education first and foremost to children of church going parents. The justification for extending its provision and committing the Church's limited resources to schools "must be because that engagement with children and young people in schools will, in the words of Lord Runcie when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, enable the church to nourish those of the faith, encourage those of other faiths, and challenge those who have none." (1.13) The church sees no dichotomy between these "service" and "nurture" purposes of the Church in education. Developing distinctive schools maybe

acceptable within the state sector. For the church to offer an education intended to nurture its own young people first and foremost goes, we believe, beyond that for which funding in the state sector should be given.

Recommendation

We recommend that faith schools within the state sector should not select pupils. Our recommendation is that no school within the state sector should be its own admissions authority.

School Worship

1. All maintained state schools in the UK must provide collective worship for every child, every day. Parents have the right withdraw their children from the collective worship. The headteacher is responsible for arranging the daily collective worship after consulting with the governing body. Daily collective worship must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character. In this sense all state schools in the UK are faith schools.
2. There may be cases, however, where, in view of the family background of some or all pupils, the headteacher and governing body feel that a broadly Christian act of worship is not suitable. In these circumstances, the head teacher can apply to the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to have the Christian content requirement lifted. Before doing so, the governing body should consult the parents of pupils at the school. Collective worship can take place at any time in the school day and the whole school does not need to get together at the same time. Collective worship can be organised into form groups or year groups or whatever is appropriate for the school. It cannot be organised in faith groups unless a determination has been sought and granted by the local SACRE.
3. Collective worship in foundation schools with a religious character and voluntary schools will be in accordance with the school's trust deed. Where provision is not made by a trust deed, the worship should be in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified for the school.
4. Teachers cannot be required to lead or attend collective worship except where the law provides otherwise. This would normally only happen in a maintained school with a religious designation.
5. A report by OFSTED published in 1998 revealed that 70% of secondary schools were not complying with the law. This fact alone demonstrates that the law is unworkable. Either it is impractical to keep the law or there is an unwillingness to comply with the law.
6. Many would argue that it is appropriate to hold a regular assembly that aimed to promote the values of the school and contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the pupils. What they find inappropriate is holding an act of worship.
7. Those in favour of collective worship argue that the law is more flexible than is often thought. It is argued that the law calls for collective worship and not corporate worship. That is, there is no expectancy, as there would be with an act of corporate worship, that all those assembled together will necessarily participate in the act of worship.
8. Those in favour of collective worship will argue that it should also be recognised that worship is a not single act. Worship is a name given to a whole collection of acts. When taken individually, these actions may be seen

to be appropriate in promoting the school's values or contributing the moral and spiritual development of the pupils. For example, within an act of worship there may be times of meditation, reflection, even times of what might be called confession - a time to remember things we regret or are sorry for. There will times when a sense of wonder or mystery is created.

9. For some the decisive argument against collective worship is that all the things done under the name of worship are done before God. Here too there may be a greater flexibility of interpretation. While few would think that God is an old man with a beard in the sky, few would also acknowledge that there is a whole variety of ways of understanding God even within the Christian tradition.
10. Some organisations are calling for provision to be made for different faiths within a school. The National Union of Teachers argues that state schools should allow children to practise their faith by inviting preachers such as imams in to the school and introducing prayer rooms. Schools, they argue, should make arrangements for pupils to be given instruction in their own religion during the normal school day and have the right to pray and worship instead of attending regular assemblies. The National Union of Teachers argues that requiring schools to cater for all religions would limit demand for faith schools and bring children of different backgrounds together.
11. We believe the daily act of worship should no longer be compulsory. We believe, however, that there is great value in having regular assemblies which promote the values of the school and encourage the moral and spiritual development of the students. We believe that such a whole school approach is better than making a school a multi-faith institution. We believe that the content of such assemblies will not be very different from the acts of collective worship that take place in many schools already. We agree, therefore, with the British Humanist Association in supporting the educational value of school assemblies and their role in building shared. We too would call for inclusive school assemblies that contribute to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils, not least in building shared values and a sense of community.
12. We believe that getting rid of the compulsory act of worship will for the first time allow for genuinely non-faith-based schools in the UK. One member of the commission felt that faith schools would no doubt wish to continue to hold acts of collective worship and would thereby become more distinctive in holding a daily act of collective worship. Another member felt that all state schools should hold daily assemblies.

Recommendation

We recommend the ending of compulsory school worship. We do believe strongly that there should be a regular assembly promoting the values of the school and the social, moral, cultural and spiritual development of students.

Religions Education

1. Religious Education must be provided for all registered pupils in maintained schools, including those in reception classes and sixth forms. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from Religious Education and this right should be identified in the school prospectus. Religious Education, as part of the curriculum should promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils.
2. Uniquely however, although RE is a statutory subject, it is not part of the National Curriculum. RE is different from national curriculum subjects in that the syllabus is compiled and agreed locally, rather than nationally. Religious Education in voluntary aided and foundation schools must be provided in accordance with the Trust Deed of the school and the wishes of the Governing Body. Other schools must provide RE according to the locally agreed syllabus.
3. The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education or SACRE is the local body charged with the responsibility of supporting and advising the Local Authority on school worship and religious education. Since 1988, Local Authorities have been required to have such councils. Every SACRE must have an Agreed Syllabus Conference to compile and revise the local agreed syllabus.
4. The Agreed Syllabus should “reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain”. The Agreed Syllabus “must not be designed to convert pupils, or to urge a particular religion or religious belief on pupils”. A Local Authority must review its agreed syllabus every five years.
5. In 2004, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority published a non-statutory national framework for religious education. In it Christianity is still the main religion featured. However, it recommends studying the tenets of the other five main religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism - across the school years up to the age of 14.
6. In June 2007, Ofsted published a report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabuses entitled *Making Sense of Religion*. The report stated that

The past few years have seen an overall improvement in RE. Much greater consensus exists about the nature and purpose of the subject, reflected in the publication of the Framework in 2004. Fewer schools fail to meet the statutory requirement to teach RE and in many schools the profile of RE is positive.

At its best, RE equips pupils very well to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and religious understanding. It contributes

significantly to pupils' academic progress and their personal development. This is one reason why pupils' attitudes towards the subject have improved. Older pupils, in particular, believe that RE provides opportunities to discuss issues which matter to them and encourages them to respect differences of opinion and belief.

7. We welcome these improvements and the introduction of a non-statutory framework for RE.
8. In 2007 the Religious Education Council of England and Wales published a *National Strategy for Religious Education*. Its proposals were presented to the Parliamentary under-secretary of State with responsibility for Religious Education, Lord Adonis. We agree with many of their proposals and therefore quote them at some length. It argued that "RE should be aligned more closely with other related developments in education, particularly citizenship, personal social health education with its significance for moral education, diversity and community cohesion, and the personalisation of learning, to ensure a synergetic approach to the contribution of education to social and community issues".
9. It also argued that "The Department should also establish a national RE review body to consider whether the current statutory arrangements and structure for RE in England are fit for purpose. The review should consider (a) the merits of different options for the statutory basis of the RE curriculum in all maintained schools in relation to the National Curriculum, and (b) whether the statutory arrangements for RE post-16 are sufficiently comprehensive to meet the needs of the whole range of young people in education and of a diverse society. As and when it is then appropriate the QCA should look at the effectiveness and impact of the current Framework and prepare for a review of it alongside any further developments of the National Curriculum".
10. It proposed that there should be "a) a review of the status of humanists in relation to RE, (b) a review of the role of SACREs to enable them to work with all schools and colleges, including FE colleges, in their area, (c) a review of the right of withdrawal in relation to the duties on schools to promote community cohesion, and combat racism"
11. The report also thought that "the Department should work with its partners to increase the effectiveness of SACREs locally, particularly in relation to community cohesion, diversity and citizenship, and specifically (a) to ensure minority faith community and humanist representation is fully recognised and effective, (b) to promote better training, support and advice for members, (c) to ensure liaison and effective working relationships with local inter-faith, citizenship and other local authority community cohesion groups, and (d) to arrange access to existing and new data on standards in RE."
12. In 2007 the DfES published the *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review*. This report highlighted important implications for RE. RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for

secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. We agree with the report that it has been unusual to find questions about religion's role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion and society.

13. RE cannot ignore its role in fostering community cohesion and in educating for diversity. This goal has never been far from good RE teaching but the current changes in society give this renewed urgency. Pupils have opinions, attitudes, feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. Developing respect for the commitments of others while retaining the right to question, criticise and evaluate different viewpoints is not just an academic exercise: it involves creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints. They need to grasp how powerful religion is in people's lives. RE should engage pupils' feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect.
14. We would wish to encourage the evolution of Religious Education in this way. As the Diversity report argues "RE lessons, well taught, have the power to engage pupils in discussing the human condition: 'Who am I?', 'Where did I come from?', 'Where am I going?', 'Does my life have any significance?' It is an ideal vehicle for exploring questions about identity and belonging, which are addressed by all religions but are also important for pupils without faith"
15. We would recommend that RE is developed in such a way that it is owned by and valued by all: those who belong to a religion and those who do not. A habit of regarding, valuing and drawing upon our diverse cultures and beliefs must be nurtured, but it must also be recognised that many will not base their approach to life on a religion. Rather than starting from given religions it should start from asking how our schools should be helping children grow up as good human beings and responsible members of society, able to live well together. Religions will contribute significantly to this.
16. We believe that this subject as it develops, embracing religious, cultural, philosophical and human life studies, should become a National Curriculum subject. We believe that there should be some options within the curriculum for particular schools to study some aspect of their culture in depth.

Recommendation

We welcome recent reports and proposals on RE and Diversity and Citizenship. We agree that RE needs to become a much broader subject embracing aspects of the human condition and the study of the changing role of religion in society. We recommend that these studies should be given great prominence and importance by making them a National Curriculum subject.

Summary of Recommendations

- 1. We recommend that no school within the state sector, including faith schools, should be its own admissions authority. Faith schools receiving state funding should therefore lose the right to select pupils on religious grounds.**
- 2. We recommend that the requirement for compulsory school worship be abolished. All schools should be encouraged to hold regular assemblies promoting the values of the school and the social, moral, cultural and spiritual development of students. Faith-based schools would be free to include an act of collective worship as at present. This would make for a clear demarcation between non-faith-based and faith-based schools.**
- 3. We recommend that the current system whereby the syllabus for religious education in state schools is set by local advisory councils (SACREs) be abolished and replaced by making RE a National Curriculum subject.**

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