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## **Multiculturalism and the promotion of faith schools – steps backwards in education?**

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The debate around faith schools in the UK is by no means a new one, but recent events have pushed it to the forefront of educational policy-making. The riots in northern mill towns during summer 2001 showed a deep sense of resentment felt by young Asians living in deprived areas. The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> raised concerns about the global growth of religious fundamentalism amongst young Muslims, whilst the terrorist bombings of 7<sup>th</sup> July in London brought home the realisation that such anti-western attitudes were partly 'home grown'.

These events have added a sense of urgency to the issue of faith schools, and more broadly, the role of cultural identity and religion in education. On both sides of the debate, there are strong arguments for the importance of faith schooling as a way to deal with the alienation of young Muslims and as a tool to promote social cohesion. Advocates are keen to show that faith schools can help integrate young Muslims and help them to feel valued in society, whereas those against would assert that such schools exacerbate tensions and segregate children. The increasing influence of Muslim lobby groups and their concerns about Islamophobia in the wake of the Iraq war has added another political dimension to the debate. All the mainstream political parties have expressed a commitment to supporting faith schools, undoubtedly aware that the issue is one that speaks to the heart of the Muslim population.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the debate around faith schools solely as a knee-jerk reaction to contemporary events. The grounds for discussion have, in fact, been laid out over the previous two decades through broader shifts in educational policy and attitudes towards the dissemination of knowledge. The origins for the rise of faith schools are as much to do with the loss of faith in the comprehensive school system amongst educationalists and policy-makers, as they are to do with terrorist attacks of recent years.

The Swann Report in 1985 set out a new multicultural approach to education which acknowledged for the first time the importance of cultural identity in a child's education. The report marked a shift in attitudes towards more 'child-centred' learning strategies that stressed the socialising aspects of education and, arguably, underrated the importance of the dissemination of knowledge. The notion of 'knowledge' itself was being challenged at the time in relativistic educational theory, as theoreticians began to ask 'whose' knowledge was being taught. As the goals of self-esteem and personal development became paramount, knowledge itself became subservient. The comprehensive system was attacked for being a 'one size fits all' approach that ignored individual needs and abilities. The universal aspiration that all children should receive the same -and therefore, equal - opportunities for learning, was no longer acceptable. The loss of faith in the comprehensive school system mirrored a celebration of diversity, in particular, 'cultural diversity'. The official policy in the past twenty years has been reoriented towards recognising and affirming the 'different' needs of parents and children, in order to make them feel valued.

It is in the context of these changes – towards schooling based on individual self-esteem and identity, rather than the teaching of knowledge – that we can understand the current interest in faith schools and their perceived role in affirming 'difference'. At the same time, faith schools are also valued for their sense of 'ethos' and core values. As the comprehensive system appears increasingly ill-disciplined and unable to motivate staff, the faith school system looks like a viable alternative. Faith schools – of all denominations - are envied by policy-makers for their 'ethos'. They have a special character and self-belief which comprehensive schools struggle to develop. (Indeed, one of the explicit motivations behind New Labour's Specialist Schools initiative was to give individual schools their own unique character to be proud of, whether it was excellence in science or excellence in sport).

But is it the case that the majority of Muslim parents would like their children to attend faith schools? I would argue that it is the exhaustion of the comprehensive system that motivates the demand for faith schools, more than a resurgent interest in religion. Research suggests

that Muslim parents are mostly keen on particular aspects of schooling that are not faith-based at all. One of the main reasons cited in surveys for parental support of faith schools is single-sex education (a factor which is certainly not exclusive to Muslim parents, as non-faith private girls schools demonstrate). Also important is the belief that faith schools will have better discipline and educational attainment rates. Certainly, there are many Muslim parents who would like their children to learn about their cultural heritage and religion, but this can be catered for in out-of-school institutions such as mosques and local language classes run by the voluntary sector. By and large, the demands of Muslim parents can be understood in terms of wanting a better education for their children, not a faith-based education.

However, the demands for better education are distorted by the official policy framework of multiculturalism. This means that genuine parental demands are more likely to be heard if they are couched in terms of 'cultural diversity' and ethnic minority rights. This also raises the question of who is demanding faith schools. We should be conscious of the political influence of Muslim lobby groups who claim to speak on behalf of the majority Muslim parents, yet have no democratic accountability.

There is much talk in education today about the importance of teaching values. In the light of the terrorist attacks and the home grown bombers, we are conscious of the fact that young people grow up in Britain lacking a sense of belonging in society. They do not identify with the values on offer in mainstream British institutions and, in the case of religious extremists, look for values in nihilistic ideologies. The turn to faith schools however, misses the point. Too often we fear upsetting students and damaging their fragile sense of cultural identity, but it is precisely this process that makes them robust individuals who are capable of thinking for themselves, and may even prevent the 'brainwashing' carried out by ideologues. The values of education – knowledge, truth, critical thinking, and understanding society - perhaps in order to one day change it – can still be at the centre of our school system. By promoting these values, we do not denigrate people's self-esteem but help them forge a meaningful relationship with society, whereby they can make sense of the problems they confront and the injustices they see. Similarly, faith schools are not the cause of terrorism and their clear value systems can remind us of the importance of an ethos in the school system.

If knowledge could be truly restored to the heart of the education system, the problems of headscarves, religious requirements for the canteen, and other issues of cultural difference could be resolved with more confidence, as teachers will be less anxious about the identity and self-esteem of their students. More importantly, the teaching of religion would also have its rightful place – as part of the sum total of human knowledge – to be interrogated and understood as any other part of human experience.

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