

Should Your Tax Fund Faith Schools?

Should faith schools not be part of state education? The question was hotly discussed by invited specialists and a lively audience in a public debate held by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School on Tuesday 4th November. The chair was David Munro, Chairman of Surrey County Council.

The major concerns of speakers for the motion, and of the audience, were the admissions policies and practice of faith schools; how can education best mitigate against divisive religious, ethnic and economic segregation and how can the “British values”, recently defined by David Cameron, be promoted.

Arguing for faith schools were Canon Stephen Green, Principal of Christ's College, Guildford and Mrs Elizabeth Lutzeier, Head of All Hallows Catholic School. Both lead faith schools whose academic achievement record and the nurturing of values and character of their students is undoubted. Nationwide, Ofsted finds 35% of faith schools, as opposed to 26% of non-faith schools, outstanding. Those schools found at fault for indoctrinating fundamentalism were not faith schools. Mrs Lutzeier assured the audience that All Hallows is inclusive: 37% of students speak a different language at home and 20% are of ethnic minorities, which is twice the national average. However, at All Hallows Catholics are “first in line” for admission. Only the Head and the Chaplain have to be Catholic. In fact 50% of the staff are not Catholic. The school is not pre committed to give a narrow view.

Conon Green claimed that should all schools become secular, it would not put an end to indoctrination, and that all schools discriminate in some way. He expressed the opinion that including the godhead in education is to provide a benchmark for values. At Christ's College Christian values are “proclaimed”, and the pupils are free to adopt them or not.

Dr Robert Sykes, Head of Thornden School Chandlers Ford and speaking for the motion, considered that Government strategy with regards to faith schools is incoherent and inconstant. The current trend is for “Free Schools”, independent but state funded. Of the 331 opened, a third are faith schools. Many blatantly don't promote “British Values”. Some teach, for instance, that girls are inferior to boys, or the absolute truth of creationism, ignoring alternative views. He asked: is the best way to educate for an inclusive integrated society to have different schools for different faiths? The future attitudes of political parties in the UK to “Free Schools” are uncertain now that radicalisation is of major concern.

Mr Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Society and speaking for the motion, pointed out that in practice, in Britain, there is considerable exclusion of children from their local school because of their religious background. Also middle class families can more easily present the criteria acceptable to the admissions attitude of particular faith schools. Those schools are keen to select the brightest and most articulate children. The result is widespread ethnic and economic segregation as well as religious segregation. He said only 5% of parents choose a faith school because of the

religious element. They go for the results. The Christian think tank, Theos, in their recent report “More than an Educated Guess” concluded that “The research seems to support the claim that students in faith schools generally do fare better academically than their counterparts in non-faith schools. At the moment, the body of evidence appears to suggest this is probably primarily the outcome of the selection process.”

Mr Copson agreed that some faith schools do encourage open mindedness, but some don't. Some teach the tenants of one particular religion by rote. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children in education have the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds...” and be prepared for “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups...” He said segregating children by the religion of their parents, and teaching them that that religion is true and the others are false, doesn't respect a child's right to form their own beliefs, or to grow up knowing those different to themselves.

Most state Muslim, Hindu and Sikh schools in this country have no white British pupils at all, compared to a third of their local populations being white British. Most Jewish schools have no Arab pupils at all, compared to 12% locally. Catholic schools have 4.4% fewer Asian pupils than would be expected for schools located in their areas.

Mrs Lutzeier reminded the audience that when church schools arose they were the first to educate the poor. She suggested that to imagine teenagers are being indoctrinated in such schools is not to understand teenagers, or to realise how questioning they are. The values prominent in their minds, she claimed, are social, not religious. She also pointed out that the land and buildings of All Hallows is owned by the Church, as they are of many faith schools. The state simply could not afford to take them over.

The motion was carried by 76% voting in favour. Finally, David Munro thanked the panel for their participation. He also thanked the host Sir Andrew Carter, Head Teacher of South Farnham School. The amount raised through voluntary contributions was £261 for Plan: Because I'm a Girl.

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