Religion in Schools: Introduction

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I went to three schools, all a bit quirky, and all ‘faith schools’ in their own way – though that idea didn’t cross my mind at the time.

The first was a very old-fashioned Anglican primary school in rural Somerset. We had no idea it was in any sense a Christian school, though we sang ‘All things Bright and Beautiful’, went to church on Harvest Festival, and said ‘Thank you for the food I eat’ before meals.

The second was a Catholic convent school which took middle class girls from non-religious backgrounds like me in order to subsidise the working-class Catholic pupils. It was intensely religious in a pre-Vatican II way, all bells and smells, and for a short while my friends and I determined to become nuns and save the world.

Then at age 13 I was tipped out into the local comprehensive school which was a brand new experiment led by an very earnest and secular headmaster who believed with a passion in egalité, fraternité, solidarité and that all must have prizes – even for the most absurd things like ‘most improved record of turning up at school almost on time’. Even at the time this struck me as the most ideological of the schools, its socialist faith pouring from the headmaster’s earnest endeavours.

I recount this odd educational record in order to point out, first, that faith schools were for most of our history in this country the norm and not the exception and second, there are lots of different sorts of faith, both secular and religious. And I suppose there’s a third point too, which is that however strong their so-called indoctrination, school kids don’t necessarily take it all on board – even in those days we took much with a large pinch of salt.

That’s not to say that the way we do religion and belief in our schools doesn’t matter. I think it matters hugely, and on that point if no other all our speakers agree.

Before I hand over to them, a quick bit of history and some basic facts and figures to set our debate in context. An initial word of caution is that we need to distinguish between the educational systems in England and Wales (my experience was in England), and in Northern Ireland and in Scotland, which are separate and different.

The attempt to systematise and unify educational provision under the umbrella of the state and forge the system we know dates from 1944 and is part and parcel of the whole welfare state project. When RAB Butler brought it all into being, and if we exclude the public schools, around half the schools in England and Wales at that time were church schools (most Church of England and about a fifth Catholic).

Today closer to a third of our state schools have a religious character. That includes 19% of all secondary schools, and 37% of all primary schools.

Most of these schools are the so-called ‘voluntary’ schools (a term which dates from their incorporation under Butler), some voluntary aided and some voluntary controlled. Voluntary Controlled schools have to use the local agreed syllabus and are entirely state funded. Voluntary Aided schools can have their own syllabus, often (but not necessarily) a Diocesan one, and the church(es) put money into buildings and maintenance (confused yet?).

Recently these voluntary schools have been joined by some ‘Academies’ which have a religious character, some of which are old voluntary schools which have taken Academy status, and some are new foundations.

All state schools are required to teach RE and to have daily acts of collective worship. RE changed character after the 1960s from being Christian instruction (RI) to something more broadly based and pluralistic. This change was recognised legally in the 1988 Education Reform Act, and is reinforced in the National Framework for Religious Education (2004). RE’s aims now balance learning *about* religions with providing opportunities for reflection and *learning from* them. However, a withdrawal (‘opt out’) clause is still available for all parents should they wish to use it.

Faith schools may give priority to applicants who are of the faith of the schools, but admit other applicants if they are undersubscribed.

The range of faith schools has been broadening recently, but they are still predominantly Christian.
Around 68% are Anglican and 30% Catholic
Of the remaining 2% there are 38 Jewish schools, 11 Muslim, 3 Sikh, 1 Hindu, and some free church and ecumenical.

One final statistic: about 15 million people alive today went to a Cof E school, although it should be noted that one study found that whilst Catholic schools are pretty good at nurturing the Catholic faith, more Anglicans leave CofE schools as non-Christians than went in!

We begin with Robert Jackson, who is Professor of Education at the University of Warwick and director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, as well as being professor at the European Wergeland Centre, a Council of Europe related centre based in Oslo, which specialises in intercultural and human rights education.

Our second speaker is Professor James Conroy, who is Professor of Religious and Philosophical Education at the University of Glasgow.