

ISLAMOPHOBIA, SOCIAL COHESION AND AUTONOMY: CHALLENGING THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST STATE FUNDED MUSLIM SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN

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Introduction

The public funding of Muslim schools in Britain has been a source of controversy and debate since the first bid to enter the state sector was made by Islamia Primary School in 1983. A fifteen year struggle ensued, which finally resulted in the first two Muslim schools becoming state funded in 1998. Those who had fought to achieve that result thought that their battle was finally won. They could not have predicted that Muslim schooling was only going to get more controversial, not less, in subsequent years. The riots in northern England in the summer of 2001 were blamed, at least in part on segregated schooling. Schools with a majority of Muslim pupils were termed 'Muslim schools' in official reports (Cantle, 2001), perpetuating popular fears that they are socially divisive. The attacks that took place on September 11th 2001 and July 7th 2005 have given rise to increased suspicion of Islam and Muslims, resulting in accusations that Muslim schools are breeding grounds for the terrorists of the future (*The Economist*, 2001, cited in Judge, 2001). In this paper I examine the critical arguments made against state funded Muslim schools, drawing on empirical research with the stakeholders involved in the debate.

Before examining these arguments, I wish to provide a brief account of how my personal opinion on this issue developed. When I embarked on this research, I did not have a fixed position on the state funding of Muslim schools in particular or faith schools in general. I remained undecided throughout the data collection phase, only coming down in favour of Muslim schools whilst analysing the arguments used for and against by the stakeholders involved. The argument presented in this paper is a direct result of this process. My aim is not only to report the arguments used by stakeholders against Muslim schools but also to highlight what I perceive as the shortcomings in these arguments in order to provide a defence of state funded Muslim schools.

I begin this paper by introducing relevant literature, reviewing the arguments used by academics to oppose faith schools and highlighting the anti-Muslim sentiment underlying some of these arguments. I then define and operationalise the concept of

Islamophobia, considering the strengths and weaknesses of the 1997 Runnymede Trust typology in order to justify its use in this research. Having described the design and conduct of this study I then report the resulting findings, providing empirical examples to illustrate the main arguments used to oppose state funded Muslim schools by the stakeholders involved in the debate. The arguments coalesce around three key issues: social cohesion, autonomy and Islamophobia. In the discussion section these categories of argument are examined in turn, highlighting their weaknesses and challenging their underlying assumptions.

Theoretical arguments against the state funding of Muslim schools

The composition of modern Britain has been characterised by Baumeister as a situation of ‘thick multiculturalism’, in which some groups find it genuinely difficult to understand and appreciate each other’s values, culture and perspective (2000). Determining how best to respond to this diversity raises challenging questions for minority communities, majority communities and the state. For example, how can society cohere in the face of cultural pluralism, what rights should be afforded to minority communities, and are there a minimum body of values which all groups should have to accept? These questions continue to be examined in depth by political philosophers (e.g.: Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000; Taylor, 1994), with a principal line of discussion being how to reconcile the liberal values of autonomy and universalism with the rise of cultural pluralism (Baumeister, 2000). This debate has been contested through discussions of faith schooling, with philosophers of education exploring the theoretical arguments that can be posed for and against state funded faith schools (e.g.: Burtonwood, 2003; Pring, 2005; Snik and De Jong, 2005). It is apparent from these academic debates that theorists opposed to the state funding of faith schools focus on the issues of social cohesion and autonomy, with some directing their concerns towards some faith schools more than others.

The impact of faith schools on social cohesion is a principal concern of academic opponents to faith schools. For example, Judge (2001) believes that the current state provision of faith schools in Britain is a product of unique historical circumstances. Extending this provision further and expanding it to include other faiths will, he believes, lead to an “unwelcome fragmentation of society” (p. 463). The concern that segregating children along religious lines will inhibit their ability to live in a culturally and religiously diverse society is shared by Will Kymlicka. He sees the central purpose of education as being to prepare the new generation for their responsibilities as citizens, and argues that this cannot be achieved by simply teaching them a series of facts about their roles and responsibilities as citizens. Rather “it requires cultivating the habit of civility, and the capacity for public reasonableness, in our interaction with others” (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 88). Kymlicka claims that faith schools cannot provide an adequate education in either civility or public reasonableness because pupils do not have the opportunity to be around those of different cultural backgrounds and religions from their own.

It is not enough simply to tell students that the majority of people in the world do not share their religion. So long as one is surrounded by people who share one’s faith, one may still succumb to the temptation

to think that everyone who rejects one's religion is somehow illogical or depraved. To learn public reasonableness, students must come to know and understand people who are reasonable and decent and humane, but who do not share their religion (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 89).

Kymlicka therefore claims that an adequate citizenship education can only be gained in a multifaith school.

A second common line of academic argument against state funded faith schools is that they undermine the autonomy of the individual child by imposing a particular religious belief on them. According to this viewpoint, parents and faith communities do not have the right to determine the beliefs of their children. Rather they should educate their children as objectively as possible and respect their freedom to decide on their own 'conception of the good life' (Snik and de Jong, 1995). One such theorist is Michael Hand, who argues that faith schools indoctrinate their pupils as they pass on religious beliefs that are not known to be true. By imparting potentially inaccurate information as if it were fact, he claims that faith schools are infringing on the autonomy of the child (Hand, 2003; 2004). This 'traditional liberal' concern with autonomy has been challenged by so-called 'diversity liberals' who, rather than prioritising individual autonomy, privilege the toleration of a diverse range of cultural communities (Galston, 1995). They state that parents and communities should be entitled to teach their children as they wish, including in ways that could be considered 'non-liberal', as long as they satisfy certain conditions. These range from giving pupils a 'meaningful right of exit' (Galston, 1995), restricting faith schooling to primary years (Snik and De Jong, 1995; Levinson, 1999), and splitting the school day so that faith school pupils spend some time in an institutional setting with children from other communities (Spinner-Halev, 1999).

Other 'diversity liberals' offer their support to 'moderate' faith schools but would deny state funding to 'strongly' religious schools which do not accept a liberal educational agenda (Williams, 1998). According to Williams (1998), 'non-liberal' minorities pose too great a threat to the value of autonomy, and should therefore not be offered the financial support of a liberal state. This highlights that concern about autonomy leads some theorists to defend faith schooling for some religious groups but not others. The same can be true of those who oppose faith schools on the grounds that they impact negatively on social cohesion. For example, Judge directs his opposition towards minority faith schools by referring to integration: "There are powerful and potentially dangerous tensions between the (publicly funded) nurturing of distinct cultural identities within a heterogeneous society, and an orderly process of integration" (2001, p. 469). Narrowing his focus further, he discusses the content of teaching in Muslim schools, questioning whether their view on the role of women in society is in line with the ethos of "a westernised (if post-Christian) state" (2001, p. 469). Concerns over the messages conveyed to children about the position of women are almost invariably directed at Muslim schools. This therefore raises the question of whether such concerns are disguising an underlying hostility towards Islam and Muslims. Judge is clearly aware of the potentially controversial nature of his comments as he tries to pre-empt this criticism, stating that "It is altogether too easy, and quite

unhelpful, to dismiss such questions as proof of Islamophobia” (2001, p. 469). The question of whether such opposition is evidence of Islamophobia is a primary concern of this paper. If we are to determine the influence of Islamophobia on arguments against Muslim schools, it is first necessary to define and operationalise the concept.

Define and operationalise Islamophobia

The term Islamophobia was first coined in the late 1980s (Brown, 2000), broadly coinciding with the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Following this incident many more Muslims in Britain came to perceive their marginalisation as a response to their religious identity, rather than as, for example, anti-Black, anti-Asian or anti-Pakistani prejudice (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006). Anti-Muslim sentiment has become increasingly widespread and naturalised over the past two decades (Runnymede Trust, 1997), with a growth in verbal and physical attacks on Muslims across Europe since the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent War on Terror (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Fekete, 2004). Despite this increase in anti-Muslim ideas and incidents, there remains disagreement about what ‘Islamophobia’ actually is. The most widely cited definition is that given by the Runnymede Trust Report, ‘Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All’: Islamophobia is an “unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs” (p. 4, 1997). While this definition is often cited, it has proved controversial and has received considerable academic criticism.

Aldridge (2006) points out that to speak of a phobia may be misleading, as it suggests something beyond the control of the individuals afflicted with it; for example, arachnophobes are not seen as prejudiced against spiders but as innocent victims of an irrational fear. Furthermore, people suffering from a phobia do not tend to attack or persecute the source of their fear, but rather avoid or flee from it. Halliday (1999) claims that Islamophobia conceptualises Islam as undifferentiated and static, detracting from the cultural diversity within and between Muslim communities and from the dynamic nature of the faith. This concern is also held by Afshar *et al.* (2005), who state that in attempting to accommodate Islamophobia, some authors have tended to “conflate all Muslims as belonging to a single nation and aspiring to a single political aim” (p. 262). The label Islamophobia has also been argued to misrepresent the primary target of attack, which is not Islam as a faith but Muslims as a people. Halliday (1999) therefore proposes the alternative term ‘anti-Muslimism’. Modood (2005) similarly rejects the label Islamophobia, arguing that ‘differential’ or ‘cultural racism’ is a preferable descriptor as it situates prejudice against Muslims within the discourse of racial equality.

Modood’s concern relates to a more fundamental criticism of ‘Islamophobia’, namely whether anti-Muslim racism should have a distinct label at all. By proposing the descriptors ‘cultural racism’, ‘anti-Muslimism’ and ‘Islamophobia’, theorists are subscribing to the view that there are different forms of racism. This perception has been rejected by those who claim that there is just one racism which adapts to disguise itself beneath whatever is the publicly acceptable discourse at the time, whether that is anti-Black, anti-Asian or anti-Muslim.

Werbner (2005) examines this proposal through a threefold typology of folk devils in which she distinguishes between anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. She characterises these forms of prejudice as three archetypal demonic figures: 'the Slave', 'the Witch' and 'the Grand Inquisitor'. Using these conceptualisations, she argues that Islamophobia, or fear of the Grand Inquisitor, is uniquely threatening in post-modern societies. Fear of a sexually unbound Slave, which she likens to anti-Black racism, has lost much of its threat in today's sexually permissive society. Similarly, the Witch as an icon of greed and consumption, often directed at Jewish merchants, is less frightening in an age which celebrates self-gratification. In contrast, the Grand Inquisitor, exemplified by Muslim religious fanatics, clashes with the trends of relativism and anti-essentialism, thereby representing a threat to the core values of post-modern societies. According to Werbner, this leads Muslims to face hostility from "intellectual elites and consumerist masses, as well as 'real' violent racists" (Werbner, 2005, p. 8), as is illustrated in Meer's (2006) analysis of Islamophobia amongst public intellectuals. While Werbner's article has received some criticism (Street, 2005; Benthall, 2005), it does cogently argue that Islamophobia differs from other forms of racism, thereby supporting claims that we need a distinct term to describe this phenomenon.

For the purposes of this research, the particular term used to refer to prejudice against Islam and Muslims is not as important as identifying its various manifestations. It is therefore necessary to develop a series of indicators through which what will be termed Islamophobia can be identified. Allen (2003) has challenged this suggestion, questioning why it is necessary to have a typology for identifying Islamophobia when similar frameworks are not required for anti-Semitism, sexism or racism. I would argue that such a typology is necessary because, as Allen (2003) himself points out, Islamophobia has become increasingly naturalised and implicit, making the challenge of identifying it all the more difficult. It is precisely because of this growing complexity that a detailed typology is necessary if Islamophobia is to be identified in its more subtle, insidious forms. The principal attempt at operationalising Islamophobia is that contained in the 1997 Runnymede Trust Report, which distinguishes between 'open' and 'closed' views of Islam and Muslims. Open views are said to be based on appreciation and respect of Islam, but can also include legitimate disagreement with and criticism of Islam and Muslims. Closed views are Islamophobic, and eight forms are identified:

1. Islam is undifferentiated, monolithic and static
2. Islam is 'the other', separate to and different from the non-Muslim world
3. Islam is primitive, oppressive, sexist and inferior to the West
4. Islam is violent, aggressive, threatening and supportive of terrorism.
5. Islam is a political ideology, used to gain military or political advantage
6. Muslim criticisms of the West are rejected out of hand
7. Discriminatory practices towards Islam and Muslims are defended
8. Anti-Muslim discourse is natural and normal

While the Runnymede typology has been subject to widespread academic criticism, no other attempts have been made to provide a detailed break down of the various forms that Islamophobia can take. Meer and Noorani (forthcoming) suggest the

beginnings of what could be an interesting alternative when they outline the various ways in which Jews and Muslims are presented in public and media discourse. However, as they themselves state, this typology would require considerable development before it can be used to identify Islamophobia and/or anti-Semitism in all of their various manifestations. In the absence of a viable alternative, I will use the Runnymede typology to determine whether Islamophobic arguments are being employed by stakeholders to oppose an increase in state funded Muslim schools. But before doing so, it is first necessary to outline the research methods used in this study.

Research design and practice

The findings reported in this paper are part of a doctoral research project that examined the arguments for and against the state funding of Muslim schools employed by those directly involved in the debate. Four groups of key stakeholders were identified: politicians from leading political parties; representatives of Muslim, Christian and secular/humanist organisations; head teachers at Muslim and non-Muslim schools, both state funded and independent; and Muslim parents who send their children to these various types of school. A total of 36 semi-structured interviews were undertaken, all of which lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in a setting chosen by the respondent (usually their home or place of work). In order to canvass the broad range of opinions held and arguments used in the Muslim schools debate, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted. Interviewees were selected because, in their role as parent, head teacher, politician or organisational representative, they offered a particular perspective. My primary focus was not whether they supported or opposed the state funding of Muslim schools, but rather that they were members of a certain stakeholder group. An outcome of this selection process is that only a small number of interviewees opposed state funded Muslim schools. While some others had doubts about particular aspects of state funding, only the two representatives of secular/humanist groups were explicitly against all faith schools. The quotes used in this paper are therefore drawn primarily, although not entirely, from these two interviews. Consequently, the data should not be considered representative of the views of all opponents, but rather as an empirical example of some commonly used arguments against Muslim schools. These are used as a vehicle through which to highlight what I perceive as the weaknesses in these arguments, focussing in particular on the influence of Islamophobia.

The content of the interviews varied between stakeholder groups, but centred on their opinion surrounding the state funding of faith schools in general and Muslim schools in particular. All of the interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using a cross-sectional, constant-comparative approach (Silverman, 2000; Mason, 1996; Spencer, Ritchie & O'Connor, 2003). An initial list of key themes was developed from a sample of interviews and applied to subsequent data using NVivo (a qualitative analysis software package), expanding and compressing the coding frame as necessary. A cross-sectional analysis was undertaken to identify which themes appeared in each interview, exploring the areas of commonality and divergence between the stakeholder groups. A key ethical issue raised by this research design was confidentiality. With so few state funded Muslim schools in Britain, and a limited number of stakeholder organisations, there was a risk that some respondents may be identifiable. This limit on confidentiality was discussed with those interviewees with

whom this could be an issue, and it was agreed that all possible measures would be taken to protect individual participants. In accordance with this agreement and the general principle of protecting the privacy of all respondents, quotations are anonymised and descriptors chosen carefully to try to ensure that respondents cannot be identified.

Arguments used to oppose Muslim schools

I will now describe and provide empirical examples of six arguments used by stakeholders to oppose the state funding of Muslim schools.

1. Power held by Muslim leaders
2. Role of women in Islam
3. Religious segregation threatens social cohesion
4. Segregation beyond belief
5. Autonomy of the child
6. Role of the state

1. Power held by Muslim leaders

A representative of a secular/humanist organisation opposed Muslim schools because of concern about the level of power wielded by Muslim leaders. They claimed that the people who would be likely to run Muslim schools have a ‘hyper-authoritarian agenda’, and would force less religious parents and children to attend a Muslim school against their wishes.

... I’m sure it’s the kind of hard liners who generally speaking get their hands on these kinds of organisations, who want to press for the school because it will consolidate their own power base within the community. ‘You’ve got to come to my school, you’ve got to pray’, all this kind of thing. [...] So these poor kids who are gonna be just pulled into that and they’re gonna get brow-beaten. And you come across examples of where kids are actually physically punished [...] for not being able to rote learn the Qur’ān.

This quote also illustrates the respondent’s perception of the style of teaching and form of discipline used in Muslim schools. Rote learning and physical punishment are believed to be used in teaching the Qur’ān, which the respondent fears will impact negatively on pupils.

2. Role of women in Islam

A second argument employed to justify opposition to the state funding of Muslim schools concerns the role of women in Islam. Two respondents supported their arguments by claiming that Muslim schools treat boys better than they treat girls. The first interviewee was aware of the sensitive nature of the issue, and requested that it be ‘off the record’, which we agreed to mean that any quotes used would not be attributable.

So, really, and the other objection that I have, and we're still off the record, is the, I don't feel comfortable about the treatment of girls versus boys [T]he culture of women being, having a very uneven power relative to men and having their movements restricted and all that kind of thing that goes with a lot of the packages with a lot of these religions, is something that I think that they will find very much more difficult to resist if they are effectively pushed into a minority ethnic religious school.

This interviewee objects to 'minority ethnic religious schools' on the grounds that gender inequality may be enforced on children, although they do not refer specifically to Muslims or Islam but rather to 'a lot of these religions'. A second example of this form of opposition can be seen in the following quote from the head teacher of a state funded Church of England school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils.

I think there might be an assumption that there are some things that girls don't do. Whereas because of our western values and general attitude the girls can do anything.

She is concerned that the opportunities available to girls would be restricted in a Muslim school because of adherence to 'non-western values'.

3. Religious segregation threatens social cohesion

One of the most common arguments against faith-based schools is that they segregate communities, fragmenting society along religious lines. This is evident in the following quote from a representative of a secular/humanist group:

... with the possibility of new groups getting their own schools is real social concerns about the effects on society of minority groups disappearing into their own little schools and isolating themselves and their children from the rest of society. I don't think, however hostile one might feel about Anglican schools, that one could ever have particularly felt that Anglicans were separating themselves from the rest of society. Whereas Muslim schools, Sikh schools, Jewish schools, I think that is a genuine worry.

This respondent believes that an increase in faith schooling will impact negatively on wider society, by isolating minority faith children, parents and communities. Muslim, Sikh and Jewish schools are seen by this respondent as posing a greater threat to social cohesion than Anglican schools.

4. Segregation beyond belief

Interviewees also opposed faith schooling on the grounds that segregating children along religious lines can result in 'racial', 'ethnic' or 'cultural' segregation. This concern is evident in the following quote from a representative of a secular/humanist organisation:

Well I suppose the theory is that a child, particularly a child growing up in certain, you know, geographical areas could live, go to school from five to eighteen and never move out of their ghetto basically. Never meet people of different faiths, possibly never meet people or be friendly with people who are of a different race, you know, that's, it's the racial divisiveness and separatism that worries us about these new schools.

This interviewee fears that a lack of geographic mobility combined with attending a faith school may prevent children from coming into contact with 'different people', which appears to be judged according to faith and 'race'. A Muslim father whose child attends a non-faith community school voiced a similar concern, but expressed it in terms of culture. He is concerned that a Muslim school might fail to prepare children for life in a multicultural society .

... I don't think people should be cut off from each other. That's where segregation starts. [...] I mean I wouldn't send my daughters to a Muslim school. I don't have any issues with people who do that. I don't mean just Muslim schools, I mean any religious school. If you live in a multicultural society then everything should be multicultural.

Both of these interviewees are concerned that religious segregation effectively amounts to racial, cultural or ethnic segregation, which they perceive as socially divisive.

5. Autonomy of the child

Opponents of faith schools questioned whether parents and faith communities have the right to inflict their religious beliefs on their children. They argued that children should be free to determine their own faith rather than have it imposed on them in a faith school. A representative of a secular/humanist organisation stated:

[... M]any of the parents want to inflict their views on their children. And that's why the education system and even the European human rights legislation does give effectively the power for parents to inflict their views on their children. Whatever we think it's going to continue to happen, but I think you don't. ... you're not born a Catholic child ...

This interviewee perceives children as entering the world without a faith, and criticises human rights legislation and the education system for allowing parents to impose a particular faith on their child.

6. Role of the state

The final argument used to oppose faith schools relates to the question raised above of who, if anyone, has responsibility for instilling faith in children. Representatives of secular/humanist organisations argued that the role of the state should not be to reinforce people's faith:

And I can see that a Muslim school would be validating for their faith, but I don't think that's the job of the state, to be honest, to pass on faith, to validate people's faith positions, you know, that's the job of the family, the community.

This respondent argued that, in the face of what they perceive as declining religious belief and practice, the state should not use tax payer's money to fund proselytisation. Instead, this task should be left to the family or faith community.

Discussion

As was stated previously, it was through analysing these opposition arguments that I reached the conclusion that I am in favour of state funded Muslim schools. In the following discussion I will attempt to justify and defend this decision by highlighting the areas of weakness in these arguments against Muslim schools. The six arguments outlined above coalesce around three of the key issues underlying the Muslim schools debate: Islamophobia, social cohesion and autonomy.

Islamophobia

Two of the arguments used by stakeholders against the state funding of Muslim schools are based on negative views of Islam and Muslims: (1) Power held by Muslim leaders, and (2) Role of women in Islam. In order to challenge these arguments I will demonstrate that they can be considered Islamophobic. This will be achieved by relating them to the Runnymede Trust's eightfold typology of Islamophobia outlined previously.

It is not necessarily Islamophobic to raise concerns about the power held by some Muslim leaders or question the treatment of women in some Muslim countries or communities. On the contrary, it is important that such empirical questions be raised, which they frequently are both within and outside of the Muslim community. It is Islamophobic, however, to portray Islam as threatening, manipulative, sexist and inferior to the West, as was evident in the quotes in arguments 1 and 2. When discussing the power held by Muslim leaders the respondent described them as 'hard liners' and suggested that they would use their control of Muslim schools to further their own ends. This implies that Islam is threatening and Muslim leaders are manipulative in line with the fourth and fifth types of closed views identified by the Runnymede typology. Concern about the position of women in Islam was used to oppose the state funding of Muslim schools, through the suggestion that, unlike non-Muslim schools, they would restrict their female pupils. This portrays Islam as sexist, oppressive and inferior to other religions and to the West, in line with the third form of Islamophobia in the Runnymede Report.

One of the quotes in argument 2 did not directly mention Muslim schools or Islam, instead it referred to 'minority ethnic religious schools', making it questionable whether it can be considered Islamophobic. This uncertainty also applies to argument 3, which suggested that Muslim, Sikh and Jewish schools pose a greater threat to the cohesion of British society than Anglican schools. The concern that faith schools damage social cohesion should apply equally to schools of all faiths, as the potential negative consequences of a child interacting only with children who share their beliefs

remain the same regardless of the faith of that child. However, this argument is often directed at minority faith schools. This was the finding of a MORI poll conducted for the *Times Educational Supplement* (2001), which reported that 21 per cent of respondents opposed the expansion of faith based schools in general, but this number increased to 43 per cent when asked the same question with reference to Muslim, Sikh and Greek Orthodox schools (cited in Parker-Jenkins *et al.*, 2005). According to the Runnymede typology these arguments cannot be considered Islamophobic as they are not directed specifically at Islam and Muslims. It is at least feasible, however, that in the context of an interview where respondents were being asked specifically about their views on Muslim schools, opposition to minority faith schools in general was, at times, used to disguise or justify opposition to Muslim schools.

If these stakeholders had directed their concern about the impact of faith schools on social cohesion specifically at Muslim schools this would have been Islamophobic. Such an argument was used by David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools, in a speech to the Hansard Society in January 2005. He singled out Muslim schools as posing a challenge to the coherence of British society by failing to teach children about other cultures and faiths. Before schools can acquire full independent status they must satisfy Regulation 2e of The Education (Independent Schools Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, which requires schools to “assist pupils to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures, in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions”. David Bell stated that many Muslim schools are failing to meet this requirement. In fact, the Ofsted report on which Bell’s comments were based actually found that independent Evangelical Christian schools are less successful at teaching tolerance and respect of other faiths and cultures than Muslim schools: 36% of Muslim schools failed to reach the target compared with 42.5% of Evangelical Christian schools. But in his speech David Bell singled out Muslim schools as being a cause for concern, making no mention of Evangelical Christian schools. I would suggest that this argument is implicitly Islamophobic as it presents Muslim schools as posing a greater threat to social cohesion than those of other faiths. To relate this to the Runnymede typology, it attempts to defend hostility towards Muslims and justify discriminating against them by denying them the educational provision given to other faith groups, in line with the seventh type of ‘closed view’. Given that arguments which oppose Muslim schools but not those of other faiths can be considered Islamophobic, I would argue that they do not constitute valid grounds for denying state funding to Muslim schools. Concern about the impact of faith schools on social cohesion is not always directed at minority faith or Muslim schools; it can be used to oppose faith schools in general, as will be examined in the following section.

Social cohesion

Two of the arguments used by stakeholders to oppose Muslim schools relate to the impact of faith schools in general on social cohesion: (3) Religious segregation damages social cohesion; and (4) Segregation beyond belief. I will first challenge the notion that segregating children along religious lines damages social cohesion. This argument against faith schools is based on the assumption that having a pupil population composed of many different faiths reduces or even eliminates prejudice between faith groups. It presupposes that by attending a mainstream state school as

opposed to a faith school, pupil's prejudices against other ethnic or religious groups will be challenged. I would argue that this impression of mainstream state schools is often inaccurate. Such schools are rarely as integrated and harmonious as opponents of faith schools would have us believe. Pupils from religious minorities can suffer numerous difficulties in mainstream state schools, ranging from the inappropriate content of the curriculum to encountering prejudice from both pupils and teachers (Abbas, 2004; Basit, 1997; Halstead, 1992). Discrimination from fellow pupils can lead children to mix mainly with others who share their ethnic origin and/or religious belief (Elsea & Mukhtar, 2000). Schools comprised of a variety of different faith groups therefore do not necessarily promote social cohesion.

Church of England and Catholic schools are often perceived as less socially divisive than Muslim and other minority faith schools, as was illustrated in the quote in argument 3. One possible explanation for this was discussed above, namely the influence of Islamophobia and prejudice against minority faiths. An alternative or additional explanation could be that many Church of England and Catholic schools admit a proportion of children whose parents do not subscribe to that faith. They are therefore sometimes perceived to pose less of a threat to social cohesion because they do not prevent their pupils from interacting with children of other faiths. At the time when this research was conducted the five state funded Muslim schools in Britain did not include any pupils who were not Muslim. When interviewed, the head teachers of several of these schools said that they would very much like to admit non-Muslim pupils, but were unable to do so because they were heavily over-subscribed and felt it would be inappropriate to give their limited places to non-Muslim pupils. It is likely that an increase in the number of state funded Muslim schools in Britain would reduce the level of competition for a place in a Muslim school, making it possible for them to admit some non-Muslim pupils. By enabling their pupils to interact with children of other faiths and no faith, this may help to challenge the perception that Muslim schools are more socially divisive than Church of England or Catholic schools.

I will now consider the second social cohesion based argument against faith schools: (4) Segregation beyond belief. This argument is based on two questionable assumptions: firstly that religious segregation amounts to ethnic or cultural segregation, and secondly that segregation on these grounds is socially divisive. As the quotes in argument 4 illustrate, some opponents of faith schools erroneously assume that faith schools are mono-cultural and mainstream state schools are multicultural. In some areas of Britain, particularly in northern towns and cities, there are Church of England and non-faith community schools that contain only Muslim pupils. Furthermore, the pupil population can be entirely from a particular country, or even a particular region. Conversely some Muslim schools, particularly in London, have pupils of many different nationalities, languages, ethnicities and cultures, brought together only by their belief in Islam. For example, when I visited Islamia Primary School in 2003 it contained pupils of 23 different nationalities. The suggestion that faith schools fail to prepare their pupils for life in a multicultural society is therefore based on an inaccurate perception of both faith and mainstream state schools.

The second stage of argument 4 is that segregating children on ethnic or cultural grounds damages social cohesion. In fact it is equally possible that the opposite could

be true. Being educated with pupils who share their ethnic origins and/or religious beliefs can help children to develop a sense of confidence in their particularised identity. This can enable them, on leaving school, to interact freely with those of different ethnicities or religions, without fearing that their identity will be under threat. This is an example of what Barbara Lal terms 'the ethnicity paradox': equipping ethnic minorities with a strong sense of communal identity can facilitate rather than impede integration by leading to more self-assured interaction with mainstream society (Lal, 1990). Opponents of faith schools might claim that this is merely a question of scale: while educating a small proportion of Muslim children in separate schools may not be problematic, segregating all Muslim children would prevent Muslims and non-Muslims from learning to interact with one another as part of a common civic body. However, research by Short (2002) suggests that mixing with children of different religious and ethnic backgrounds does not necessarily prevent prejudice and racism. He points to the long history of Anglican, Catholic and Jewish schooling in England, arguing that there is no evidence to suggest that pupils attending faith schools are any more prone than those at non-faith schools to develop feelings of animosity towards adherents of other faiths and no faith. Similarly, having contact with children of other ethnicities and religions does not necessarily eliminate prejudice, as is illustrated by the fact that many mixed schools have a high degree of racism and prejudice amongst pupils (Elsea and Mukhtar, 2000). The assumption that ethnic or religiously segregated education is socially divisive is therefore open to question.

Autonomy

The final two arguments used by stakeholders against faith schools relate to the question of who, if anyone, should be responsible for instilling religious belief in children: (5) Autonomy of the child; and (6) Role of the state. In argument 5, the respondent opposes faith schools on the grounds that parents and faith communities should not be allowed to inflict their beliefs on their children. He argues that all children should be free to choose their own faith. The role of education should therefore be to objectively inform children about the various belief systems, allowing them to determine which, if any, appeals to them. The problems with this argument are threefold. Firstly, while it is often presented as neutral, this aim conflicts entirely with the view of education held by some traditional religious communities, who perceive the role of education as the transfer of knowledge and the inculcation of children into the faith (Halstead, 1995). Secondly, this argument is based on the fear that faith schools indoctrinate their pupils and teach intolerance of other beliefs which, I would argue, is not in line with the reality of state funded faith schooling. All schools, faith based or not, should promote religious tolerance and knowledge about other religions, and strict regulatory constraints, such as the national curriculum and regular Ofsted inspections, are in place to ensure that they do so. A third problem with this argument is that it is often directed towards minority faith schools, as was discussed above. Muslim schools in particular are often assumed to take their religious aims more seriously and be more likely to indoctrinate their pupils than other faith schools, arguably showing elements of Islamophobia.

The second autonomy based argument used by opponents of faith schools concerns the role of the state. As was seen in argument 6, they argue that instilling a religious belief in children should not be the responsibility of the state, therefore

publicly funded faith schools should be abolished. This proposal is often supported by claims that levels of religious belief and practice are declining in Britain. While theorists such as Bryan Wilson (2001) and Steve Bruce (2002) have claimed that we are witnessing a process of secularisation, others have argued the opposite: that religion is of continuing or even increasing significance as a source of group solidarity and individual meaning (Berger, 1999; Karner and Aldridge, 2004). The ongoing commitment by the British government to increase the number and variety of state funded faith schools could be perceived as evidence of the continuing significance of religion in political and public life. However, it could also be interpreted as recognition by the government that, if it is to be seen to treat all its citizens equally regardless of faith, it has little choice but to fund minority faith schools. The established position of the Church of England and the historical involvement of the Church in the education system mean that the government would find it extremely difficult to abolish faith schools even if it wanted to. Consequently, if equality is to be done, and to be seen to be done, then state funding must be available to all major faith groups that wish to establish their own schools.

Aside from the fact that abolishing faith schools altogether is unfeasible, there are also strong philosophical arguments against this proposal. Contrary to the views of humanists such as Mason (2003; 2005), introducing a secular system of education in Britain would not be neutral or impartial. Secularism is arguably a belief system like any other, therefore an entirely secular system of education would be no more 'neutral' than an entirely Christian one. This can be witnessed in France, where children are now required to restrict their faith to their private lives, removing the hijab and other obvious symbols of religious affiliation at the school gate. This radically secular approach to education has created a deep division between the public and the private spheres for those children who hold a strong religious conviction (Modood, 2005). In my view, such a system therefore can not be considered 'neutral' as it prioritises the needs of those who share the school's secular vision, discriminating against children of faith.

Conclusion

Muslims are the second largest faith group in Britain, but there are currently only 8 state funded Muslim schools, compared with 4,646 Church of England and 2,041 Roman Catholic schools (DfES, 2006). The main arguments used by stakeholders against an increase in this number are based on Islamophobia, fears about social cohesion and concerns about children's autonomy. Over the course of this research I reached the conclusion that these arguments are, in my opinion, unpersuasive. Muslims have as much right to faith schools as other religious groups, therefore opposing Muslim schools but not those of other faiths is implicitly Islamophobic. Fears that faith schools are socially divisive are based on the often inaccurate impression that mainstream state schools eliminate prejudice and faith schools are ethnically homogenous. Concern that faith schools undermine autonomy is often used to defend an entirely secular education system, which would in practice serve to exclude and disadvantage religious pupils. Given these significant weaknesses in the arguments against Muslim schools, I suggest that the current imbalance in Britain's faith school provision needs to be urgently rectified through a substantial increase in the number of state funded Muslim schools.

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