

Faith Schools

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the side issues of multiculturalism is that it encourages religious, or as some prefer, "faith-based" education which is socially divisive. In truth there were "faith-based" schools in many European countries long before multiculturalism was an issue. It was seen as an issue of choice.

In principle, as a confirmed believer in separating state from religion, I do not believe states should support religious or denominational schools directly.

If groups want to have their own form of education, they should pay for it, either directly or through their communities. I favor the idea of vouchers so that all parents have choices in a freer market and if they want to use vouchers for religious schools that would be their choice. It does after all save the State money by going elsewhere.

There are arguments against private and separate schools, altogether. In Northern Ireland and Scotland, separate Catholic and Protestant schools that refused to have anything to do with each other, stoked antagonism. But then, this happens with rival football teams too.

I am convinced by my own experience that going to a separate school does not prevent one from integrating into society. Whether at university or at work, how one relates to others is a matter of attitude. It may be true that culturally or religiously likeminded people tend to live and socialize amongst their own, but that does not mean they cannot contribute positively to society or get on with others, whether they live in a mansion or a slum.

Where separate schools do exist, they have to be monitored to ensure they do not preach hatred, teach their children to undermine the state, or fail to provide basic education that would enable their graduates to make their way in life. The fact is that in all these areas most Western States are failing.

In Britain, originally the Government funded three streams of compulsory education. There were state (non-denominational but with religious instruction and prayers that one could opt out of), and denominational Anglican and Catholic schools (and one Jewish school, the JFS). Other schools were allowed to exist outside of state educational control, so long as they met safety and other civil regulations. Many ultra-Orthodox institutions flourished in this category; so too did Muslim madrassas. Now more Jewish and Muslim schools are getting official state funding.

Over the past thirty years the number of Jewish schools has mushroomed, both with and without state aid. It has had little to do with campaigning. The recent exponents of Jewish education in Britain are certainly no more articulate than the late Rabbis Solomon Schonfeld or Kopul Rosen fifty years ago. But in those bad old days, they had to struggle to convince Anglo-Jewry, both because at the time its mood was assimilationist and because it was

feared that Jewish education would hold youngsters back in life and hamper success. Jewish education was still identified with poor immigrants. Besides there were still very good, selective state schools around.

During the 1960's the Labor Party introduced radical changes and state schools became a byword for inferior education and violence. Suddenly Jewish schools became fashionable. A more open multiracial society and Jewish pride led to more confidence and assertiveness and, finally, to greater wealth and more successful Jewish entrepreneurs. All helped the new mood that now sees well over half of Anglo-Jewish children receive a Jewish schooling.

But the situation is imperfect. Many Jewish schools are insular. Some that receive state aid only pay lip service to state values; others actively undermine them. This is an example of the failure of state will, in the face of the increasing political power of minorities. The same may be said of Israel, where state funding supposedly carries with it government inspection but with regard to ultra-Orthodox schools this is emasculated for political reasons. Even in the USA, schools such as the Saudi Islamic Academy of Fairfax County flout the law by having textbooks that preach hate, specifically of Jews.

Yet for all this, I still believe religious schools are beneficial. They give their pupils a feeling of belonging, security, and pride. They reinforce identity, though they are certainly no guarantee against assimilation. Schools cannot always be expected to combat the prevailing attitudes of parents and society!

The real issue is one of culture and agenda. Is the culture of the school inward or outward looking, tolerant or intolerant? When I was principal of Carmel College, I was happy to have some non-Jewish pupils in the school. They had to conform, of course, and we insisted on respect for them, as we did for the non-Jewish staff and their opinions. There was a lot of sporting and cultural exchange with non-Jewish schools. And the school taught respect for state institutions. There was Jewish pride but not isolationism.

It is this which is sorely lacking in too many faith schools nowadays. A lot depends, of course, on the attitude of the teachers. But it is also up to the state to fight for its values. This once again is the root of the current problem of multiculturalism that is not achieving the desired results. It is not the system that is at fault, but its application.