

Briefing paper: Religion

NB: this briefing paper covers England, Wales, and Scotland. Northern Ireland will be dealt with in a separate briefing paper

Introduction

The history of religion in Britain since the Second World War is dominated by debates about secularisation. The headline figures of declining church attendance are indeed stark: in 1851 40-60% of the British population attended church, in 1900 30%, in 1979 12%, in 1989 10%, and in 1999 7.5% (Garnett, 2007). First introduced by sociologists in the 1960s, the idea that Britain was becoming increasingly secular and that Christianity was declining in importance has framed many social and cultural histories of postwar Britain.

Callum Brown's argument that Britain secularised quite suddenly in 1963 as a result of changing gender norms has stimulated significant further debate (Brown, 2001). His critics have pointed out that both secularisation and changes in women's lives were uneven processes. Jane Garnett and colleagues in Oxford argue that we should think about religion being in transformation, rather than decline (Garnett, 2007). Sociologist Grace Davie introduced the concept of Britons 'believing but not belonging' in the later twentieth century (Davie, 1994). This paradigm is now commonplace in describing the retreat of organised religion and the privatization and diversification of belief in a multi-faith society. A very recent quantitative evaluation of religion in 1960s Britain by Clive Field has shown that different indicators collected by the churches, the state, pollsters, and academics point to different episodes of change across demographic and class lines. Field finds that according to aggregate measures of 'belonging' the overall religious community in Britain in the 1960s 'was static in absolute terms but contracted relatively' (Field, 2017).

Education is an important feature of assessing the place of religion in British life since 1945 because two key pieces of legislation, the 1944 Butler Act and the 1988 Education Reform Act, contained mandatory religious provisions for (primary and secondary) schools. In addition, churches and other religious institutions are permitted to run state-funded schools in Britain. These facts are often cited as one of the paradoxes of religion in Britain since 1945. As the sociologist Harold Loukes pointed out in 1961, the prominent religious provisions in the 1944 Butler Act seem curious when society was 'becoming less religious' (Loukes, 1961). An understanding of how these provisions and organisational facts relate to the broader picture of postwar secondary education will help unlock this paradox (for example, the relationship between the endurance of church schools and the discourse of parental choice that has governed education policy).

Religion and state education before 1939

Before the twentieth century education was almost exclusively a religious affair. Most grammar schools had religious origins, although secularising impulses were emerging from

the eighteenth century. But, by the early nineteenth century, each Christian denomination had their own organisations running elementary-level schools designed to inculcate religious knowledge and moral behaviour. It was in relation to elementary education, the only form of mass education, that the state first developed relationships with the churches for educational provision. Disagreements always revolved around funding. Attempts were made from 1807 to obtain state funding to support Anglican parish schools. Through the 1820s and 1830s measures for toleration in relation to Nonconformists, Catholics, and Jews complicated the situation. The Church of England saw elementary education as the traditional tool of the social order. But each denomination fiercely objected to religious instruction counter to their own doctrine, so a system of separate schools emerged as the only practicable solution. In 1834 the state began to channel funding for elementary education through religious societies, notably the British and Foreign School Society. Some grants were extended to Catholics in 1847 and one to the first Jewish school in 1853 (Murphy, 1968).

Following the Newcastle Commission of 1861, which evaluated the national provision of popular education, the state increasingly demanded a rise in standards and efficiency in exchange for its funding. The 1870 Elementary Education Act made provision for a national system of elementary education overseen by elected School Boards. This created a substantial new network of board schools funded by local rates, which the pre-existing church schools continued to exist alongside. The church schools now ran on private subscriptions and a direct government grant that was capped at 50%. Scotland followed a broadly similar path with some key differences. The Church of Scotland controlled its elementary schools until the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, which bought all of these schools under local authority control and made them non-denominational. Catholic schools in Scotland were not put under state control until 1918, but they retained the privilege to control religious teaching and observance. This situation meant that almost all of the church schools in Scotland in the twentieth century were (and are) Catholic schools (Riddell et al, 2009).

The 1902 Education Act abolished the School Boards in England and Wales and introduced LEAs, centralised administration under the Board of Education, and officially bought church schools into a national system of education by funding them through local rates. These funding changes formally consolidated the 'dual system' of voluntary (church) and LEA schools, which had existed since 1870. The voluntary schools made up more than half of all elementary schools and were by the early twentieth century mainly Catholic and Anglican, very few Methodist and Jewish schools had survived. From 1902 they could still choose their own religious instruction and appoint their own teachers, but they were managed and funded by the LEAs. This upset local Anglican ratepayers who felt their money was funding schools of a different denomination in areas where the population was only large enough to merit one school. The Labour movement also campaigned against the dual system because it entrenched inequality. This unhappy arrangement lasted throughout the interwar period (Simon, 1991). Many voluntary schools struggled to maintain themselves or modernise under existing funding arrangements and the pressure to provide secondary provision after 1926 made this even more challenging. As animosity between the churches subsided, in 1936

LEAs were cautiously permitted to make larger grants to voluntary schools for new building programmes.

The 1944 Butler Act

The optimism for postwar educational reconstruction prompted many reformers to campaign vocally for the abolition of the dual system from 1942. This did not happen. The Bill was published in December 1943 and, after three readings, received Royal Assent on 3 August 1944. For many on the left, the survival of the dual system and private education were the twin disappointments of the 1944 Butler Act (Simon, 1991).

Religious settlement for the voluntary schools

R. A. Butler, Conservative Education Minister and author of the Act, worked behind the scenes with the churches to hash out a religious settlement in relation to the voluntary schools. This was first announced in the White Paper Educational Reconstruction, a precursor to the 1944 Education Act published in July 1943. The settlement categorised voluntary schools into three categories: voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, and special agreement (see 'Glossary'). These new terms bought the voluntary schools under greater LEA control in exchange for increased funding. The LEAs had almost complete control over the voluntary controlled schools because they provided all the funding, whereas the churches retained slightly more governing power over the voluntary aided schools because the religious foundation retained some financial responsibilities. One third of the Anglican schools (majority primary) and all Catholic and Jewish schools opted for voluntary aided status.

Religious instruction and collective worship

Both the 1944 Act for England and Wales and the 1945 Education (Scotland) Act contained provisions that embedded religion into the everyday life of the school. These rules applied to both the LEA and voluntary schools (although the latter had more control over the content of religious teaching) and were the only mandatory curricular stipulations in the Act.

1944 Education Act (England and Wales), Section 25

- A daily act of collective worship to start the school day
- Religious instruction provided in all schools, that should be given as part of an Agreed Syllabus suitable for the school
- Parents have the right to withdraw pupils from the above and make other arrangements for religious instruction of their children according to their wishes (aka 'conscience clause')
- Teaching staff in schools should include 'reserved teachers' selected for their competence to provide religious instruction
- LEAs have power to constitute a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education to advise on the Agreed Syllabus of religious instruction adopted in schools, methods of teaching, choice of books, and provision of lectures for teachers

- Teachers should not be discriminated against because of their religious opinions
1945 Education (Scotland) Act
- **Section 4** - The section of the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act which placed limits on the time when religious observance could be practiced or religious instruction given cease to have effect
- **Section 5** - Safeguards for religious belief that give parents the right to have children attend worship or receive religious instruction according to their wishes
- **Section 53** - Affirms that it is not the duty of inspectors to inquire into instruction in religious subjects or to examine any pupil in religious knowledge or in any religious subject or book

Although the 1944 Act did not include the word ‘Christian’ (unlike the 1988 Education Reform Act, see below), during the second reading of the Bill in the House of Commons in January 1944 Butler expressed his hopes that children would: ‘gain knowledge of the common Christian faith held by their fathers for nearly 2,000 years’, and ‘seek for themselves in Christianity principles which give a purpose to life and a guide to all its problems’. He reminded the churches of their role outside of school, and noted that the state could never have absolute authority in this regard. Rob Freathy and Stephen Parker have stated that the religious provisions in the 1944 Act gave the welfare state ‘responsibility for Christian nurture’ (Freathy and Parker, 2013).

The voluntary sector and faith schools since 1945

Throughout the period since the Second World War, despite other indicators suggesting secularisation, schools run by religious foundations have not only survived but thrived in the United Kingdom. Importantly, parents have been largely behind voluntary schools because church secondary schools, especially Catholic schools, have been associated with high standards and tradition whilst still fitting into ordinary people’s ideal of ‘acceptable religiosity’ (Davie, 1994). Similar to independent schools, the shift to a discourse of parental choice in secondary education in the 1970s amidst the tide of comprehensivisation re-legitimatised voluntary schools at just the moment when the relevance of religion in society was fading away.

By 1950 84% of secondary schools (not including the extant all-age schools) in England and Wales were LEA schools and 16% were in the voluntary sector. Most of the voluntary schools at this point were Anglican (c. 5%) or Catholic (c. 3%) (Education 1900-1950, 1951). The Church of England’s stake was much larger in (especially rural) primary schools, and over the postwar period Anglican influence on secondary education declined, whilst the Catholic church became the main provider of voluntary secondary schools. At the end of 1960 there were 9437 voluntary schools in England and Wales (compared to 11231 in 1950). 4823 of these were voluntary aided, 120 special agreement and 4483 voluntary controlled (but note these figures are not broken down into primary and secondary as the 1950 figures are) (Education in 1960, 1961).

The numbers stayed more stable from this point. By 1976 just under a third of all maintained schools were in the voluntary sector. This was 9000 voluntary schools educating 2 million pupils in England and Wales, still almost exclusively Anglican and Catholic apart from a handful of Jewish schools ([Taylor Report, 1977](#)). In 1975 there were 11000 students in full-time Jewish education, this figure had risen to 22800 in 2001, accounting for half of the Jewish children in England (Rogers Berner, 2007). By the early 1990s voluntary schools still educated nearly one quarter of all pupils in the state system (Davie, 1994). In 2000 faith schools made up 16% of all state-funded secondary schools in England, and this had risen to 19% by 2017. The highest proportion of these schools are now found in the North West (31%) and inner London (26%) (Long and Bolton, 2017). From the 1960s to the 1990s (before the introduction of academies, see below) the nature of the state's relationship with the voluntary sector continued to revolve around funding, especially adjusting the voluntary funding formula to pay for new school buildings. Successive governments saw that the voluntary sector was sufficiently large enough that leaving it to its own devices would impact overall standards, and the Catholic church especially fought hard for the retention of its dominion over its schools and for state funding (Murphy, 1968). One third of all Direct Grant grammar schools after the 1944 Act were Catholic schools, and the majority of these chose to become state-maintained during comprehensive reorganisation in the 1970s.

Considering Wales in isolation, its voluntary sector faced a much sharper decline after 1944 than the combined English and Welsh picture suggests. In 1935 51% of elementary schools in Wales were denominational, the overwhelming majority Church of England. But very few of these existing schools could survive on the new funding agreement after 1944 and most were simply absorbed into the system as LEA schools. Welsh LEAs actively fought attempts by both the Anglican and Catholic churches to establish new secondary schools and such new schools were only established in one or two areas (Jones and Roderick, 2003). As previously mentioned, the voluntary sector in Scotland was exclusively Catholic. Catholic secondary schools were mostly located in west central Scotland, particularly in Glasgow (Riddell et al, 2009). Pupils tended not to stay on at school for as long and these Catholic schools were not as well staffed and resourced as the non-denominational schools (a situation paralleled and much amplified in Northern Ireland). This disadvantage was highlighted when Scottish Catholic secondary schools were specifically monitored for the impact of ROSLA in 1972 ([Education in Scotland, 1974](#)).

The relationship between religion and secondary education has become more complicated since the mid-1990s. New rules were introduced with the creation of academies in 1997 and free schools in 2010, which give more freedom to these types of schools when managed by churches or other religious institutions. In 2017, faith schools are allowed to have different admissions criteria (only when oversubscribed) and staffing policies to ordinary state schools, although anyone can apply for a place. Faith schools still have to follow the National Curriculum, but they can choose what they teach in religious studies. Conversely, faith academies do not have to teach the National Curriculum and have their own admissions processes. In England, the first Muslim state school opened in 1998, the first Sikh school opened in 1999, and the first Hindu school opened in 2008 (Long and Bolton, 2017). These

schools were a result of long-term campaigning by faith groups to have the same rights as the Jewish and Christian churches have enjoyed for historic reasons. However, Muslim schools have become a source of anxiety amidst fears of Islamic radicalisation. This was illustrated by the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham schools in 2014. There are currently no Muslim faith schools in Scotland but the Scottish government has expressed its support for campaigns for a state-sponsored Islamic faith primary school (Riddell et al, 2009).

Religious instruction and religious education in secondary schools since 1945

Despite the fact that the 1944 and 1945 Acts mandated that religious instruction must be provided for in all schools (LEA and voluntary), most historians and commentators have argued that religious education became a tool of secularisation in the postwar period (Field, 2017). Rogers Berner argues that in England secularisation had its roots in the dominance of psychology, rather than philosophy or theology, in pre-1944 teacher-training methods and programmes (Rogers Berner, 2007). From the 1960s, religious instruction came under attack from secularists and humanists and there was an increased demand for qualified teachers who could deliver meaningful comparative religious content in the larger comprehensive schools. As society became more outwardly secular and more religiously and racially diverse in some areas through the 1970s, this gave rise to a ‘phenomenological non-confessional multi-faith RE’ (Freathy and Parker, 2013). This decentred Christian Biblical teaching from religious instruction as it had been imagined in 1944, but by the early 1970s was already endorsed by the Church of England. Religious instruction transformed into the more professionalised subject of religious education. Religious education was also more compatible with and was part of the shift to multicultural educational policies following the publication of the Swann Report (1985). At the same time, there remained a strong tradition in British Muslim communities to provide Islamic cultural and religious education in mosques, youth centres, and within the Muslim business community (Hackett, 2016).

Since 1944 an Agreed Syllabus for religious instruction in schools was to be worked out by each LEA. This allowed for adaptations to local circumstances. In Scotland religious education curricula were also worked out locally, but after a review in the early 1970s the central Consultative Committee on the Curriculum took over responsibility for curriculum development in religious education in Scotland. In its investigations into 13-16 education for pupils of average or lower than average ability the Newsom Report (1963) found a variety of religious instruction in practice in LEA schools. It ranged from Biblical commentary, to ancient history, to progressive attempts to guide children to their own individual philosophical positions. The latter was favoured, especially for pupils of lower ability, but finding teachers who could deliver such teaching was more difficult than finding those who could perform straight Bible teaching. Newsom recommended that LEAs review their syllabuses to ensure they were adequate for lower ability pupils, a renewed teacher recruitment drive, and endorsed a conservative moral role for religious instruction in schools as ‘a firm basis for sexual morality based on chastity before marriage and fidelity within it’ (Newsom Report, 1963).

Advocates of progressive education attempted to adapt religious instruction to the challenges of the modern classroom. In his 1961 study Teenage Religion Quaker sociologist Harold Loukes studied religious instruction in secondary modern schools. He was optimistic that progressive methods, such as classroom debate rather than didacticism, could be used to make religion relevant to everyday life. He found that amongst 14 year olds religious education was a good outlet for discussing problems of self-belief, identity, and socialisation. Loukes recommended that as pupils got older religious instruction should become more fixed on real life situations and problems: a four-year course where the first three years were spent on Bible study and the final year, for leavers, focused on the application of religious thinking to contemporary situations (Loukes, 1961).

However, most of the literature on religious instruction and education is based not on work with students in the classroom but on an analysis of syllabuses and teaching discourse. By the 1970s this discourse suggested religious education was in crisis and was having to rapidly adapt to new pupil demands and demographics (Freathy and Parker, 2012). Likewise, there is almost nothing written in the secondary literature about collective worship in schools, the other mandatory religious provision of the 1944 Education Act. Successive government reports in the 1960s and 1970s endorsed the daily act of collective worship as an expression of school unity and the corporate life of the school, but it seems likely that it was more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

As with voluntary schools, most evidence suggests that parental opinion was in favour of religious instruction in schools for most of our period (Freathy and Parker, 2013; May and Johnston, 1968). Surveys also suggested that anything too fervently religious or evangelising was strongly disliked by parents, but they viewed religious education positively as a ‘carrier of tradition’ (Davie, 1994). In his recent book on quantitative indicators, Field dedicates discussion to the position of Sunday Schools in 1960s Britain. He shows that Sunday Schools, once a major conduit of intergenerational religious transmission, were ‘in freefall’ well before Brown’s 1963 watershed moment. But he notes that parents still showed support for sending their children to Sunday school if they wanted to go, but not for compulsion (Field, 2017). This reflects increasingly child-centric attitudes, with parents seeking educational services tailored and attentive to the individual child.

Religion and the 1988 Education Reform Act

The shift to multi-faith, multicultural religious education since the 1970s emerged as a point of tension in broader debates about national identity surrounding the 1988 Education Reform Act. The original Bill contained almost nothing on religious education. But religion became the focal point during debates in the House of Lords led by traditionalists and Tories on the right. The Bishop of London mediated discussions with other faith groups and the government to help reach a compromise for the Act (Simon, 1991, Davie, 1994). Notable changes since the 1944 Act include the fact that Christianity was specifically mentioned (‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’) and that LEAs were now compelled to constitute Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education. Critics of the Act saw these

provisions as regressive responses to the multiculturalism of the 1980s and detrimental to non-Christian communities, despite the safeguards in place (the parental ‘conscience clause’).

1988 Education Reform Act

- **Section 2** - The curriculum for every maintained school shall comprise a basic curriculum which includes (a) provision for religious education for all registered pupils at the school; and (b) a curriculum for all registered pupils at the school of compulsory school age (‘the National Curriculum’)
- **Sections 6-13** - All pupils on each day of school take part in act of collective worship. In county schools this act of worship shall be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character (reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination). Religious education - any Agreed Syllabus shall reflect that religious traditions in Great Britain are mainly Christian whilst taking into account teaching and practices of other principal religious represented in Great Britain. Parents may excuse or withdraw their children. Every LEA has a duty to constitute a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education to review Agreed Syllabuses and will publish an annual report. The Council also considers any appeals for exemption from collective workshop made by head teachers

The 1988 Education Reform Act implemented a National Curriculum and in doing so brought in new frameworks within which school subjects were to be taught and assessed. National Curriculum subjects had to have attainment targets and programmes of study. The Act set up the National Curriculum Council (NCC) to help give guidance to LEAs on this. In the case of religious education, not a National Curriculum subject but a compulsory one nonetheless, the NCC worked with Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education to give advice on how attainment targets and programmes of study may be nonetheless developed to improve religious education teaching. As a result, religious education became more structured and aligned with other core subjects, such as English and History, in the 1990s (NCC, 1991).

The 1988 Act also had implications beyond the teaching of religious education. As in 1944, nurturing ‘spiritual and moral development’ had been stipulated as a responsibility of schools in the 1988 Act, and in 1993 the NCC issued a discussion paper on the topic particularly targeted at ‘maintained schools without a religious foundation’ (NCC, 1993). The paper suggested that schools should develop an official school policy of values, such as telling the truth and keeping promises, instilling an ethos across all areas of school life. The language harked back to the corporate life of ‘traditional’ public and grammar schools, concurrent with the Major government’s ‘Back to Basics’ campaign. The NCC paper also reiterated the role of collective worship in the school day to ‘explore and share beliefs’ and ‘re-affirm, interpret and put into practice the values of the school’. Although teachers were counselled not to attempt to assess pupils’ spiritual and moral development, from 1993 OFSTED did evaluate schools’ provision in this area and its impact on pupils (NCC, 1993).

Glossary

Three categories of voluntary school created by the 1944 Education Act, as defined in the Taylor Report (1977):

- **Voluntary aided school** - the providing foundation has certain continuing financial responsibilities: the managing or governing body of an aided school is responsible for providing the site and school buildings, including any significant enlargements that may be needed, and for keeping the exterior of the building in good repair. 85% of their approved expenditure in carrying out these responsibilities is met by the Secretary of State. All other costs are borne by the LEA. It has a governing body of whose members two thirds (the 'foundation' governors) are appointed by the providing body and one third (the 'representative' governors) by the LEA. The governing body of such a school has statutory responsibility for appointing the head and teachers (subject to some safeguards as regards dismissals), for controlling the religious - and also, in the case of a secondary school, the secular - instruction given to the pupils, and (subject to some limited powers conferred on the local education authority) for the occupation and use of the school premises
- **Voluntary controlled school** - in respect of which the foundation has no continuing financial responsibility, has a governing body of whose members two thirds are appointed by the LEA and one third by the foundation. The governing body of such a school has a statutory duty to provide a limited amount of denominational religious instruction at parents' request, certain functions in relation to the appointment of religious education teachers; and limited powers to determine the use of school premises
- **Special agreement school** - in respect of which the financial responsibilities of the foundation are similar to those relating to an aided school, has a governing body similarly constituted. Its governing body has powers similar to those of an aided school's in respect of religious education and the use of the school premises

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