

# Keeping faith in schools, whatever your belief system



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COLUMNIST



➤ **Rab Butler's Act** helped him to get the churches inside

**W**HEN I was 18 and told my grandfather that I would like him to meet my girlfriend, he only asked one question. The question wasn't about her parental background, where she lived or if she was black or white. The question was: 'Is she a Catholic?'

To a working-class man brought up in a Pennine Dales village, this was a very important consideration. The Catholic Church was almost alien in its strange rituals and traditions. At the same time, my grandmother, a committed Wesleyan Methodist, was also having issues with the Primitive Methodists within the village.

For nearly two decades my granddad had supported the sweeping changes that one of his heroes, Richard Austen Butler, or Rab to my granddad, had introduced in the 1944 Education Act. He could go along with Rab's main proposals, including all maintained schooling to be free and the three-tier selective secondary state schooling system.

However, as an atheist, my granddad had grave concerns about Butler's introduction of the statutory requirement for collective worship. His simple view was that 'God doesn't belong in school.'

When Butler introduced the 1944 Act, the toughest problem of all was ensuring the support of the Churches. Butler knew that if he fell out with the Anglicans or the Catholics, it would scupper everything. Butler's answer was to promise that religious education and religious worship would be at the centre of state schooling.

The Butler Act required all maintained schools in England and Wales to provide a daily act of collective worship for their pupils. In community schools, the law stated that worship must be "wholly or mainly of a Christian character". Anglicans and Catholics would be able to determine the nature of the school's daily act of worship but parents could choose to opt their child out of it. Religious education would be required in every school in the country.

Butler then reached a deal with the churches over capital funding – the state would pay for their schools, including helping to repair the many

inadequate buildings. Butler's formula had been that churches should provide 50 per cent of the capital costs to acquire 'assisted' status. If they could not do so, the schools became 'controlled' and lost their managerial autonomy to the local education authorities (LEAs).

In the decades following the Second World War, the trend would be clearly towards the incorporation of Catholic and Anglican schools into the new state system. Before the 1950 election, the Catholic and Anglican churches requested government funding under the 'aided' status to be raised to 75 per cent. This fitted well with the Conservatives' drive for educational expansion at the time, so the Education Act of 1959 incorporated these provisions.

After 1964, under the Labour government, policy was aimed at allowing the denominational schools to join the developing comprehensive schools. The Education Act of 1967 increased the grant for new 'aided' schools to 80 per cent. The Education Act of 1975, under a later Labour government, raised the grant to 85 per cent.

From the start of my teaching career, the relationship between religion and education intertwined with my daily attempts to be a teacher.

In my first school, I was given the task of supervising a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses who did not attend the morning religious assembly. While this was the choice of the Jehovah's Witness parents, I always felt this aspect of my job sat uncomfortably with my core belief in an inclusive comprehensive education. I was also required to take morning prayers, lead religious assemblies and teach religious education lessons.

In the 1960s and 70s, new programmes were introduced into schools which attempted to address religious and social divisions. Nevertheless, the faith divisions continued.

In the 1980s, I would have numerous meetings with the neighbouring Catholic school deputy head to deal with the constant battles between our children and the 'Catholic kids'

After one prearranged fight on neutral ground between the schools, I confiscated an air rifle from one of my students. "It's for shooting sparrows and Catholics," he admitted. His defence was that the birds didn't mind and he would only shoot the Catholics in the bum.

Today, the concern about 'faith schools' is no longer so focused on Catholic and Anglican churches. The focus now is on less established faith organisations and Muslim schools. The conspiracy theory applied to the Catholic Church by my grandfather is now being unfairly applied to the Muslim community.

In 2014, Birmingham City Council commissioned my associate, Ian Kershaw, together with colleagues within Northern Education, to investigate the 'Trojan Horse Affair'. Ian found that there was "no evidence" of a conspiracy to impose an Islamist ethos in some schools.

Religion has always been one of the most contentious aspects of our education system. In 2015, a former Education Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, argued that schools should end religious instruction, abolish mandatory worship and teach morality instead.

Passing on the morals and beliefs of society from one generation to the next within schools is one of the most important duties of an education system. Most people would agree that there is still a place in schools for the type of religious education that reflects the multi-cultural realities of modern Britain.

We have come a long way from the time of my grandfather and his views of religious education. Today, faith schools are a critical part of an inclusive education system. In my view, they enrich our education system, often being at the forefront of education advancement.

I am now a grandfather. My own grandfather would be surprised to know that all my five grandchildren are baptised Catholics. If one day my granddaughter visits me and asks me to meet her boyfriend, I do not expect my first question to be: "Is he a Primitive Methodist?"

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.