

More than an educated guess: a Response to the British Humanist Association

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Theos is grateful to the BHA for providing such a detailed response to our report on the evidence pertaining to 'faith schools'. The following document seeks to address their critique.

Summary

The substantive criticisms appear to be the following:

- 1) That the report is not exhaustive, excluding some related issues.
- 2) That it does not include academies, foundation schools or free schools.
- 3) That it includes in the range of evidence summarised that which is put forward by groups who are not members of Accord, especially the Church of England and the Catholic Education Service, and that it misses a recent Fair Admissions Campaign project.

To respond to those in order:

- 1) The report, as it states in the introduction, was focused on a few key questions and did not set out to be exhaustive.
- 2) This report is a summary and analysis of existing evidence. The decision to exclude academies and free schools was taken, as stated, because no developed body of evidence exists in relation to them comparable to that around voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools. The report states that this area is expanding rapidly and hopes there will be enough research in the future.
- 3) One of the reasons we undertook this project was to provide a place where people could access research put forward by those on both sides of the debate. As is invariably the case, our study missed some research surveys, such as that of the Fair Admissions Campaign (of which BHA is a member) published this August, and also the polling by the Westminster Faith Debates, both of which were launched after the cut-off point necessary for production of the report. These omissions do not materially alter any of the conclusions drawn in the report, rather strengthening some of them.

Beyond these substantive points, the rest of the response is marked by repetition, point-scoring and *ad hominem* attacks. This is regrettable as it was precisely the kind of dialogue we have sought to avoid by publishing this report, which is at times critical of both parties in the debate. It does, however, underline our key point that some parties load this debate with more ideological weight than it can justly bear.

For the BHA to launch such a sustained attack on a report which seeks to fairly present research from across the spectrum and comes to some of the same conclusions as the BHA itself is proof of just how overheated this debate has become.

Introduction

- The BHA makes a number of points pertaining to the report's introduction, the key one being about the lack of focus on foundation schools, academies and Free Schools.
- This criticism makes our point for us. As the BHA admits, ("the point about research is reasonable") there is very limited research into these schools and you simply cannot present research that doesn't exist. A recent expansion of places in these schools does not mean there is any more research available on them.
- A similar point can be made with respect to the comment that this number would be even bigger "if we include schools proposed to become Academies/ Free Schools". We acknowledge the rapidly changing landscape – although given that the expansion is largely at secondary level and that the majority of 'faith schools' are at primary level, it is not actually that significant a point - but no summary of existing evidence can draw on evidence which does not yet exist.
- The next criticism repeats the last. The Theos report has already said it isn't focusing on Academies for reasons given, so to criticise it for using 'faith schools' in the report in the way it does (i.e. not to include Academies) is not really a criticism. The BHA acknowledges that 'faith school' has generally been used to mean "voluntary aided school", as we do. The fact that they themselves do not choose to do so is not relevant.
- The BHA lists a number of apparently "excluded factors", although this list amounts to little more than the criticism that this report is not one that the BHA would have chosen to have written. Specifically:
 - The decline of religious practice. This is of course absolutely central to everything the BHA does but at the risk of stating the obvious, this was a report about the evidence pertaining to 'faith schools', not about religious practice in Britain. Theos has published other reports on this subject.
 - Academies and Free Schools. This point repeats the accusation already made twice. See above.
 - Non-Christian 'faith schools'. This is "a growing sector already consisting of over 250 schools". As the BHA knows, many of these are academies, so this amounts to the same criticism made three times already. Excluding such schools on which there is little research, there are around 70 non-Christian 'faith schools', or roughly 1% of the total.
 - "The relationship between 'faith schools' and human rights and equality legislation": Once again, the report states quite clearly our reasons for not including this theme, while acknowledging there is work to be done in this area.
 - "Young people's rights to freedom of religion or belief, versus having their parents' beliefs imposed on them by a state school". For a refutation, see point above. It is worth noting as an aside that there is a somewhat sinister undertone to this point, namely that secularists know better what is good for children, and better placed to protect their human rights, than their own parents.
 - "The fact that 'faith' schools are usually legally able to discriminate against all teachers on the basis of faith, which is not only a problem in itself but may well also be a breach of the European Employment Directive." Yet again, this is not the focus of the report for the reasons stated.

- Homophobia. The report references the Stonewall report that pupils in 'faith schools' are now no more likely than pupils in non-'faith schools' to report homophobic bullying. It then goes on to quote the report in a footnote saying that "faith schools are still less likely than schools in general to take steps to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying." (April Guasp, *The experiences of gay young people in Britain's schools in 2012* (Stonewall, 2012), p. 6). This does not constitute an omission.
- "the content of religious education and school curricula". Yet again, this was not a focus of this report.
- "the well-established fact that 'faith' schools take fewer pupils eligible for special educational needs than schools without a religious character". This is a fair point, in that limiting the report to the small number of most commonly expressed public questions meant this element does not feature.
- Beyond these alleged omissions, the introduction to the BHA document also makes further accusations.
 - The accusation against David Conway appears to be a straightforward *ad hominem*. Conway writes for Civitas. The statement "Conway is, in fact, religious, and approaches these issues from this angle" says rather more about the BHA than it does about Conway.
 - With regard to the question of educational 'neutrality' in schools, the BHA response claimed that no one is "seriously advocating a French or US-style model where there is no consideration of or education about religion or belief within schools." However, this is clearly not the issue. The BHA is right that no-one, or at least very few, question whether these should be "consideration of or education about" religion, aka 'religious education' in schools. That, however, has nothing to do with the point about neutrality, which is about whether a school's ethos or philosophy can ever be neutral. Theos believes it cannot and that schools are characterised by particular "religious, philosophical or cultural identities". This means that there is such a thing as a particular Christian (or religious) ethos and philosophy of education – just as there is an Islamic ethos, secularist ethos, etc. We would welcome the BHA's agreement with us on this point, and their agreement that the make-up of schools in Britain should reflect the make up of Britain.
 - The BHA and education. It seems strange that the BHA sees a distinction between its definition of humanism and its definition of a humanistic education. However, we would be happy to replace the existing quote with whatever the organisation thinks puts its best case forward.

Chapter 1: Facts and Figures

- The BHA complains that “the report re-writes history to give a very partial view of the nature of church initiatives in education”. Accordingly, they quote “the Church of England provided 17,000 public schools between 1811 and 1860 through the National Society, with the intention of providing education to the poor at the time the government was unwilling, and perhaps unable to do so.” They criticise this because they believe that the government may have wanted to fund it and were blocked from doing so by Church resistance. They further suggest that the Church may therefore have delayed comprehensive education. This is simply counter-factual history. There is no evidence that this would have happened and it doesn’t change the facts as presented in the report.
- BHA further notes that from 1833 the state funded *some* of these schools *in part* – up to 40% (a generous estimate). This still leaves 60% which the government was unwilling or unable to fund. If anything, this would appear to support the Theos report.
- The BHA complains about the statement “in 1902, the Education Act merged Church and State-based school systems to establish free, compulsory Christian education”. The 1902 Act does not establish Christian education they claim, which did not come in until 1944. This seems to be a deliberate misreading of ambiguous grammar. The 1902 Act established free, compulsory education, which was Christian. It did not establish “religious education”. The Theos report does not claim that the Act established any such thing. Again, it is not relevant to the substance of the report.
- BHA complains about the claim that “faith schools (at the time, solely Church schools) began with a mission of ameliorating poverty and inequality by providing education for all”. They put an unacceptable burden on the term “equality” here, interpreting it to mean that Theos is claiming these schools had a full commitment to changing social mobility. The sense of the original line is fairly clearly to do with assisting the poor and providing equal educational access, not anything more grandiose than that.
- Finally they list a series of trivial points. For example, they complain that Theos misrepresents the status of Citizenship on the National Curriculum. They are technically correct that citizenship is on the national curriculum (as a non-statutory requirement). They are incorrect that RE and PSHE do not appear if they are using that criteria, since both are also non-statutory elements of the current national curriculum. At any rate it is of no substantive importance to the overall argument.
- The point that “admissions to voluntary controlled schools are always, not ‘usually’, determined by the Local Authority” is trivial and, once again, does not change anything in the overall line of argument.

Chapter 2: Are 'faith schools' divisive?

- The BHA discusses the Runnymede Trust report at length but in a somewhat pedantic way which has no serious impact on the report's conclusions. They observe, for instance, "that Anglican schools as a whole recruit less than a proportionate number from minority groups except in KS3 and except for Black Caribbean and Black African pupils in KS4. Similarly, RC schools have more Black pupils and fewer Asian pupils, relatively than other schools nationally". Even on these terms, it is hard to argue that pupils from ethnic minorities are being systematically prevented from accessing 'faith schools'. Statistically, there are bound to be distributions around a mean. i.e., some will do better, some will do worse.
- Further, the BHA write about how "the fact that Catholic schools have more black pupils but fewer Asian pupils correlates strongly with the Church's religious makeup a point unacknowledged and unexplored." It is not clear what the salience of this point is. Pupils in these schools are selected according to faith based criteria, which we deal with separately. The argument here is that this does not result in the exacerbation of racial or ethnic divides.
- The BHA's own reading of the Runnymede report seems mistaken, quoting a section of the report, and arguing that existing good practice is premised on a broad intake of pupils. "Faith schools are much more effective at educating for a single vision than they are at opening dialogue about a shared vision. Where they do have some success it is often due to the opportunities afforded for young people of different backgrounds to mix – these spaces can be faith-based or secular. Faith schools should aim for a broader intake of pupils in order to enable interfaith and intercultural dialogue." Runnymede's observations are definitively not premised on a broader intake of pupils (i.e., "where they do have some success.") Rather, the conclusion is that they should aim for a broader intake of pupils on the basis that this would afford opportunities to mix.
- The BHA complains that we include a quote from the Runnymede report which is actually a submission from the Catholic Education Service: "Catholic schools, parishes and organisations provide a meeting place and important support in becoming fully integrated into society". We acknowledge here that the text could be clearer, but the references identify this as a submission from the CES. In the context of the Runnymede report, the CES's submission is reported neutrally.
- The BHA complains that our report suggests that "they [Runnymede] concluded that the experience of effective intervention by faith schools to promote race equality is as mixed as it is within the broader education system." We accept that this could have been strengthened by a direct reference.
- The BHA complains that the Theos report ignores Runnymede's key recommendations. Runnymede's recommendations – both those that are in favour of 'faith schools' or call for changes – aren't reported. However, our work is primarily addressing the question of what happens in 'faith schools', and thus draws on Runnymede's empirical investigation, rather than their policy positions drawn from there.
- The BHA complains that the report fails to consider the fact that religion and ethnicity often correlate, and the impact this has on explorations of ethnic diversity in 'faith schools'. We agree that race and religion often do correlate in very complex ways, but the argument

of the chapter is that these do not necessarily lead to a less good record on community cohesion or ethnic diversity.

- The BHA complains that we only make passing references to the work of Professor Ted Cattle, particularly the claim that ‘faith schools’ with religious admission requirements were ‘automatically a source of division’ in the towns that he studied. We have cited many similar claims in the report from both academic and non-academic sources – there is no need to pile them up.
- Regarding the section discussing bonding and bridging social capital, the BHA lodge two complaints. First, that we have failed to give a full account of research cited; second, that the section concludes that “even if religiously selective schools harm integration (i.e. bridging social capital), they have a positive effect on social mobility of minority groups by instead building bonding social capital”. In making this claim, we allegedly provide no evidence “to suggest that integrated schools are worse at fostering social mobility for minority groups”.
 - In response to the first complaint, we have cited research appropriately specifically to highlight the benefits of diverse ethnic composition. In this case, the paper’s conclusions (which advise against single ‘faith schools’) are reported in an endnote.
 - In response to the second, the BHA has failed to understand that this section of the report is a discussion of models of bonding and bridging social capital. The report suggests that different ‘faith schools’ approach the task of integration in different ways, including by building confidence and helping minority groups explore their multiple religious, national and cultural identities (i.e., by building bonding social capital). The section does not mention ‘social mobility’, and does not therefore claim that integrated schools are worse at fostering social mobility. Overall, the BHA response is a confused reading of the section – for instance, it is odd to suggest that building bonding social capital “harms integration”.
 - Arguably, we should have afforded a longer discussion on the relationship between bonding and bridging capital. This would not, however, have materially altered the argument that there are diverse approaches in the sector, and in fact that most ‘faith schools’ would seek to build bridging social capital.
- The BHA complains that the Theos report states that faith ‘schools were simultaneously represented as recruiting grounds for terrorists and religious extremists’ – but cites a publication that argues that ‘faith schools’ were increasingly vulnerable to extremist influence, not that they had been hijacked by them. Our description of the Policy Exchange Report is too general, and no specific reference is given in the notes.
- The BHA complains about the report’s exploration of research from the Church of England and the Centre for Christian Education (looking at Catholic schools) as having ‘separately conducted research examining Ofsted inspection findings on schools and social cohesion.’, and queries the usefulness of the Ofsted inspection criteria. We have reported this research accurately, and further report Accord/BHA’s concern with the Ofsted inspection criteria in the following paragraph.

Chapter 3: Are 'faith schools' exclusive and elitist?

- BHA complains that while the Theos report presents a “strictly true” statement that there is legislation which prevents admission decisions that discriminate on the basis of socio-economic criteria, it fails to recognise that the evidence shows that this has not stopped in practice. This represents a fundamentally dishonest appraisal of the chapter, which clearly concludes that ‘faith schools’ do appear to have an issue with socio-economic sorting. It would have been remiss not to cite that relevant legislation does exist, even if such problems remain.
- The BHA complains that the Theos report quotes extensively from the 2009 Code rather than the 2012 Code. The complaint is immaterial, however, as there is no substantive difference between the codes that would warrant a re-appraisal of this section of the report.
- BHA is correct to note that Free School Meals are the preferred measurement of the government when it comes to allocating resources. However, that, while true, hardly proves that it isn't a blunt instrument. That a strong correlation exists between underachievement and FSM eligibility doesn't detract from the point the report is making.
- The BSA has a fair point that *stigma* shouldn't be an issue when looking at eligibility for FSM, rather than uptake. However, taken in the context of the report, this aside is presented as a piece by the Catholic schools to provide balance to earlier material with which the BHA agrees anyway. Taken out of that context it's a reasonable point about the difference between eligibility and take up. In fact, the BHA complain about the whole paragraph for failing to present data accurately – when in fact it reaches the same conclusion that the BHA thinks it should and provides the defences of the CofE and Catholic churches simply to provide some balance.
- It's a fair comment that the Theos report does not mention the research published in August by the Fair Admissions Campaign. This, along with several other pieces of research such as the Westminster Faith Debates polling which we would have wanted to include was published after our necessary cut-off for production. Otherwise both would have been included. That recognised, neither study undermines the report's overall conclusions. The Fair Admissions campaign research supports the overall conclusion about the ability to act as one's own admissions authority being problematic and leading to socio-economic sorting.
- The criticism that Theos used independent and grammar schools as a point of comparison with 'faith schools' acting as their own admissions authority, as they are beyond what the scope of the report, is unfair. While not putting those other schools “within the scope of the report”, it would be odd not to provide a note of comparison when such a note exists. It makes no difference to the report findings overall, but does simply provide a helpful word of caution.
- The BHA complains that a note on the clarity of admissions procedures is misguided when, some years earlier many schools were found to be in breach of these criteria. It is, at best, unclear whether the examples are even comparable when they occurred years apart after a change in the admissions code. However, even if the examples are comparable it does not change the fact that there is a difference between the claim made in the report (that complaints over clarity are rare) and unsubstantiated speculation that many schools may

still be in breach of the admissions criteria. The original claim – that complaints are rare – is evidently true.

- Also in this chapter BHA concedes that there is not enough real evidence to substantiate a claim that those of more privileged backgrounds manipulate existing criteria. However, they take issue with the fact that this ignores “individual cases”. Given that the report presents an assessment of evidence, not supposition based on individual cases, this does not seem a fair criticism of the report’s methodology. As to the BHA counter-claims that wealthier parents are statistically more likely to send their children to ‘faith schools’, this only further supports the Theos conclusions on the dangers of economic sorting when schools set their own admissions criteria.
- A final point is made about the disparity between the proportion of the population attending church weekly versus the number of ‘faith school’ places. This is only really tangential to the discussions of the report and could provide the basis for a whole new report on the correlation between religious affiliation and the appeal of ‘faith schools’. However, it is not what is being discussed and is an extremely problematic criterion by which to attempt to assess anything.

Chapter 4: Is there a 'faith school' effect?

- The BHA criticisms of chapter 4 are confusing. They quote several studies which conclude that, in Ofsted's words, that "[No conclusions can be drawn with confidence]. 'Faith schools' tend to perform relatively well in terms of raw attainment. However, studies that examine whether this is due to the composition of 'faith school' intakes or to something that 'faith schools' are doing do not come to a consensus higher academic attainment in faith schools."
- The Theos report clearly concludes that more research is needed in this area because conclusions cannot be drawn with confidence (indeed, it says so repeatedly: "the impact of ethos on academic attainment has not been systematically explored... more research on 'ethos' is again required to substantiate this claim").
- However, the chapter concludes that "the body of evidence appears to suggest this is probably primarily the outcome of selection processes". In other words, the Theos report concurs with the evidence that the BHA cite and we are in agreement on this issue.
- This was precisely the kind of discussion and agreement we were aiming for with this report, so it is disappointing that the BHA have chosen to see this point, and other points of agreement, in oppositional terms.
- It is disappointing that their critique here chooses to make another *ad hominem* attack, this time on Andrew Morris (of the National Centre for Christian Education) whose research the report did draw on, alongside all the other research it drew on.

Chapter 5: Do 'faith schools' offer a distinctive education experience?

- The BHA is concerned that we unduly dismiss survey evidence which suggests that parents' priority for their children's education is quality, as well as other factors, above religiosity. It states that we immediately dismiss the first survey as 'fail[ing] to grapple in a meaningful and nuanced way with the enduring appeal of 'faith schools' – without providing any justification for this statement.
- The BHA here are wilfully ignoring that the chapter is an exploration of the concept of 'faith school' ethos, and that this is often treated as being important for parents alongside other factors. The justification for the statement is the following sentence: "In particular, do faith schools offer a distinctive education experience? Is there something about a faith school's ethos, which promotes higher academic attainment and the development of character (or virtue?)?"
- The BHA goes on to complain that research cited is subjective in nature. Specifically Andrew Morris's research suggests that higher academic performance is linked to a school's ethos rather than other socio-economic determinants.' But no such evidence is presented in the report. This is a reference to comments made on pages 41 and 44 of the report. The research is presented in a peer reviewed paper in a mainstream education journal.
- The BHA refers to the Learning for Life project, observing that this is funded by the Templeton Foundation which, "of course, [has] its own strong agenda on religion and education". They ask how we could draw the conclusion that "faith schools have the potential to meet these needs in a unique way ought not to be understated" on the basis of the project. It is fair to say that Learning for Life does not focus on 'faith schools', but on character education more broadly. Rather, it is our claim – although an uncontroversial one – that 'faith schools' will look to deliver character education in unique ways. By implication, the BHA's suggestion that the project has been unduly influenced by the priority of the funders in regard to religious education is misplaced and defensive.
- The *ad hominem* attack on the Templeton Foundation, as well as subsequent paragraphs which question the commitments of particular academics to honestly develop an evidence base on 'faith school' ethos, only serve to illustrate the wider argument of the report that campaign groups are liable to filter or question evidence which they may not find amenable to their case.