

Faith should be brought into the state sector – Dr Mary Bousted
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The recent story of Colin Cook, the whistle-blowing teacher awarded £70,000 by an employment tribunal after winning his case for unfair dismissal against The King Fahad Academy, has highlighted highly controversial issues of practice within faith schools, particularly those operating outside the state sector.

His depiction of an environment where books containing hate-filled views (likening Jews and Christians to “monkeys” and “pigs”) were used to teach pupils, where education is replaced by indoctrination is shocking. It challenges us to define what schools should be for and to ensure that no more pupils receive this kind of ‘education’.

Schools are for educating children and young people. Sounds like a simple enough statement but the plethora of schools currently jostling for position in the ‘choice’ arena attest to the many different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of education. The portrayal of The King Fahad Academy is a stark reminder of just how far these interpretations can go. In the world of independent faith schools, the National Curriculum is not present to provide a broad framework of entitlement or to dictate the taught curriculum. The DCSF is currently considering the creation of specialist inspectorates for independent faith schools, despite the risks of reinforcing divisions between faith and non-faith schools.

When such divisions are enshrined in legislation, where is one to draw the line between what is to be respected as part of a religious belief and what is to be challenged as something which may cause division, distrust and hatred. And who is to draw that line?

ATL believes that the advent of independent faith schools into the state sector, with appropriate support, is part of the answer, increasing their accountability and lessening the risks of inappropriate instruction or indoctrination. However, the special arrangements granted to state-maintained faith schools are not without their own difficulties, continuing to raise questions of parity of access, curriculum coverage and concerns around community cohesion. They may discriminate on the basis of religion or belief in pupil admissions and staff recruitment and have separate arrangements regarding the RE syllabus they teach and its inspection. A sharp rise in the number of faith schools will undoubtedly cause further division between religious groups.

The current faith schools debate is bedevilled by the inequity in the current state faith schools’ system: not all faith groups have had equal opportunities to establish faith schools. This inequity is unacceptable. However, there is the need to weigh the need for all faiths to be treated equally against the need for balance in school provision.

ATL members believe that the discussion around faith schools needs to be based on principles of community cohesion and the aim of all schools to educate pupils as responsible and compassionate global citizens with the skills and knowledge to question and understand the world around them and to respect the beliefs, cultures and opinions of others. The preferential arrangements for faith schools, allowing divisive admissions, employment and curriculum practices are not helpful to this aim; we need a school system which embraces the diversity of individuals within our community and not a diversity of institutions dividing pupils and staff on religious grounds.