

Religion, Education and Tolerance

November 2011

[Richard Harris](#) , [Rania Hafez](#) , [Dennis Hayes](#) and [Charles Brickdale](#) introduced a discussion to ask why religious education and faith schools cause such frisson today.□



It is over a hundred and twenty five years since **Friedrich Nietzsche** popularised the slogan ‘**God is dead!**

’ in

Also sprach Zarathustra

, so in our secular world the current attacks on religion by Dawkins and others are just not news. To the religious and particularly to Muslims and Christians, the new militant atheism can be explained as a response to the revival of belief. It is not only traditional religions that people appear to be turning to, as there is a big increase in new age beliefs, such as paganism, witchcraft, and spirituality.



Outside of these philosophical debates more and more parents want to send their children to faith schools and as many oppose them. Whether you love them as bastions of a traditional education and discipline, or loathe them as peddlers of homophobia and sexism, faith schools regularly occupy the headlines. Opponents call for their abolition in the name of integrating different cultures rather than allowing educational ghettoisation, equal access to state-funded institutions, and educational openness rather than indoctrination. Defenders of faith schools point to their excellent academic record, and argue that institutions must be free to set their own rules based on their beliefs, noting that the right of free association is not worth much without the right **not** to associate with some people. Should this argument be allowed to stand, however, when children are being taught values with which much of society now takes issue?



Parents do ask, though, don't they have a right to determine what kind of education their children should have? In what some see as an increasingly value-lite society, it might also be asked: just what's so wrong with being brought up to believe in something? Are children really so deferential to adult authority that none of them will kick against the pricks? Even some humanists prefer overt religious doctrine, which young people can take or leave, to the apparently value-neutral but contentious messages often put forward in the secular curriculum, not least when it comes to the question of tolerance itself - and intolerance of intolerance.



But opponents protest that faith schools apparently get the best of both worlds: running costs covered by the state, but exemption from the obligation to treat everyone equally. Is it fair that faith schools are allowed to operate a form of selection, with middle-class parents feigning religious belief to shun the profanity of local comprehensives? Should we continue to tolerate faith schools? Do they have any place in a secular society?

Is this a re-run of the 19th century battle between religion and secularism, or is there a more contemporary explanation? Is the current militant atheism not about religion at all, but rather do these attacks on religion show that it's not belief in god but belief in humanity that is dead? Is it a sign of our value-lite times that religion appeals to people today, and isn't that what atheists fear the most?

Some background readings

[Does Heaven Exist?](#) with Kate Smuthwaite from National Secular Society

[Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster](#) website lampooning religious belief

[Covenant Christian School](#) in Stockport

[The curious rise of anti-religious hysteria](#) , Frank Furedi, 23 January 2006

[Right to Divide?](#) A Runnymede Trust Report Summary on Faith Schools and Community Cohesion, December 2008

[Meekness in the face of the great big unknown](#) , by Ciaran Guilfoyle, Culture Wars, 04 December 2009

[Faith Schools: inspiration or indoctrination?](#) Listen to session audio from Battle of Ideas festival, 31 October 2010

[An Islamic education for all?](#) by Rania Hafez as Battle in Print, 05 November 2010

[An Islamic education for all?](#) by Rania Hafez, Independent Blogs, 23 November 2010

[Why I'm proud to be a Christian and a socialist](#) by Kevin McKenna Observer 18 September 2011

[The women defying France's full-face veil ban](#) , by Christian Fraser, BBC News 22 September 2011

[It is time that we reclaimed liberalism](#) by Brendan O'Neill, spiked review of books, September 2011

[Independednt report by Lord Carlile of Berriew Q. C](#) ... into matters relating to Ealing Abbey and St Benedict's School 07 November 2011

[Islamaphobia: why we have to get over our fears](#) by Rania Hafez, Independent Blogs, 07 November 2011

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Speakers' introductions - click on the Play button: {mp3}religion-education-tolerance-speakers{/mp3}

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