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## **Where Choice Matters: Liberal Democracy and Christian Schooling**

Mark Pike Ph.D  
School of Education  
University of Leeds  
LS2 9JT

[m.pike@education.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:m.pike@education.leeds.ac.uk)

0113 343 4529

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### **Where Choice Matters: Schooling in a Liberal Democracy**

At a time when there is a proliferation of groups providing schooling in the UK and the variety of providers is set to increase still further, it is important to consider the legitimate expectations a politically liberal society can have of the faith-based schooling its young citizens experience, whether in home-schooling contexts or in that provided within the public and private sectors contexts, the distinction between which is becoming increasingly blurred. Many schools in the UK are already run by religious organizations and around a third of the new academies have religious sponsors. Many more may follow suit and I shall argue here that a key test for any group running a school is how dissent concerning religious matters is tolerated.

I shall argue that the expression of religious views that are contrary to those of school leaders, or those in positions of authority within a schooling context, is important and valuable if schooling is to serve as a context for individual choice. If individuals are denied the opportunity to challenge the orthodox and accepted views within a group their freedom is necessarily limited. In schooling contexts, the freedom young people experience to express their views on religious matters, especially when these differ from those in authority, needs to be considered. The degree to which young people are free to articulate legitimate differences of opinion in religious matters is an indication of the extent to which personal choice is respected. Just as freedom of interpretation and freedom of speech are fundamental to a liberal society they should be fundamental to the schooling contexts (whether religious or secular, state-funded or independent) within such a society.

This paper takes its cue from ‘When Choice Does Not Matter: Political Liberalism, Religion and the Faith School Debate’ (Dagowitz, 2004) but, unlike Dagowitz, I argue that student choice and autonomy matters if schools are to prepare young people to thrive in a politically liberal democracy. Dagowitz acknowledges that the liberal support of faith schooling has traditionally been predicated upon ‘the condition that faith schooling should serve as a context for individual choice’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p. 166) which is why many philosophers and educationists have believed the liberal state may, subject to certain conditions, support ‘moderate’ faith schools but have difficulty supporting ‘strong’ schools. This is because it is assumed that the latter offer students less of a context for choice (as parents send their children to be taught by those whose religious beliefs are congruent with those of the home).

Dagowitz argues that political liberalism can support faith schools that do not serve as a context for individual choice ‘because the ability to choose is not necessarily a liberal value’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p.166) for ‘while the value of choice is essential to comprehensive liberalism, it is markedly absent from political liberalism’ (Dagowitz,

2004, p. 166). Asserting the ‘possible compatibility of personal autonomy with the inability to choose one’s religion’ Dagowitz claims to resolve the paradox of ‘how someone who did not choose her religion and views herself as incapable of changing it can still qualify as autonomous’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p.166) by arguing that ‘the ability to form and revise one’s conception of the good is not synonymous with the ability to choose or change one’s religion’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p. 167). Clearly this only works if one defines religion as a comprehensive doctrine and then neatly distinguishes between a comprehensive doctrine and one’s conception of the good. Dagowitz does this by arguing that conceptions of the good vary within the Christian faith and points out that even within a single congregation there are different conceptions of the good. What this analysis fails to acknowledge, however, is that many believers (and certainly many of those who believe in the necessity of having their own faith-based schools) have a comprehensively religious ‘worldview’ where their conception of the good cannot be separated from their faith. To note that believers within the same faith have different conceptions of the good (with some in favour of homosexual clergy and others against, for instance) seems to miss the point that a comprehensively religious worldview cannot be divided up in such a neat and straightforward way.

At the root of Dagowitz’s argument seems to be the unwarranted assumption that ‘moral autonomy is not a political value, whereas political autonomy is’ (Rawls, 1999, p. 146) and it is necessary to be aware that seeking to separate political autonomy from moral autonomy with regard to the schools of a liberal democracy is somewhat unrealistic. It is also, perhaps, insufficient to argue that belonging is as important to some as autonomy is to others (Burtonwood, 2006) without acknowledging that an individual must desire to belong (and therefore exercise a choice in the matter) in order to belong to a group that respects the freedom of those who do not wish to belong. The freedom to engage in dialogue concerning the customary beliefs and practices of one’s group, whether secular or religious, is a hallmark of life in a liberal democracy. It is especially important that ‘discursive status’ (Stables, 2006, p. 130) is attained in the schools of liberal democracies. We should be aware, however, that a common school can have less discursive status than a faith school if the common school as an interpretive community operates on the assumption of the neutrality of liberalism and the faith school encourages children to be aware of their ‘bias’ or the lens through which they ‘read’ religious and secular values. It is untenable to argue that, ‘Schools do not need to serve as a context for choice to receive the support of political liberalism; they need only serve as a context for teaching liberal values’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p. 178) because choice is a fundamental liberal value and the freedom to choose one’s religion must be protected.

### **Where Choice Matters: ‘Strong’ Christian Schools**

Many philosophers and educationists believe the liberal state may, subject to certain conditions, support ‘moderate’ faith schools but that the ‘real challenge for liberals lies in dealing with the strong version of cultural identity schooling’ (Burtonwood, 2006, p. 85). A ‘strong’ identity school has been defined as one which seeks ‘to foster a separate education of extensive scope and duration that is meant to ensure that children adhere to a distinct ancestral identity throughout their lives’ and a feature of such schools is that ‘they seek to restrict membership to individuals from a particular cultural, racial, ethnic, national or linguistic group’ and ‘seek to advance a separate education affirming and reinforcing the identity of the group in question’ (McDonough, 1998, p. 464). It is generally assumed that ‘strong schools’ believe they

have ‘a right to reproduce themselves – that is, to do whatever they think necessary to pass on their way of life to their children’ (Walzer, 2003, p. 464). A characteristic of a ‘strong’ faith school is also that it ‘denies a division between the sacred and the secular’ or the possibility of ‘compartmentalizing knowledge’ (Burtonwood, 2006, p. 80).

It is often thought that ‘strong’ faith-based schools provide less of a context for individual choice than more ‘moderate’ or more cosmopolitan and less religiously homogenous schools but I shall argue here that this is an unwarranted assumption. Indeed, I shall contend that the two ‘strong’ Christian schools in which I recently conducted research, are likely to provide young people with *more* not *less* of a context for choice than many pervasively secular community schools which avoid discussion of the sources of, or justification for, beliefs. Education in secular schools is often mistakenly assumed to be neutral but such schools can perpetuate assumptions and beliefs that are secular, materialist and humanist in orientation and this has even been described as ‘the most serious concern about the suitability of secular schools to cultivate children’s autonomy’ (MacMullen, 2007, p. 146-7). While it has been argued that those who ‘believe in the tenets of “secular humanism” and are convinced it is right and proper ‘that secular schools should promote this ethical doctrine’ are ‘essentially no different from religious believers who want to see their faith taught in schools’ (MacMullen, 2007, p. 141) there may, in fact, be quite an important difference. If schools ‘promote the adoption of secular core values on the basis that they constitute a common denominator, to which religious and secular people alike can subscribe’ but fail to grasp that if values are limited to the secular ‘they are in practice anti-religious since they leave religion out’ (Copley, 2005, p. 109-10) this necessarily results in intolerance of religious perspectives but tolerance of secular perspectives (Pike, 2009).

Schools with a pervasive secular ethos, that ‘maintain a deafening silence about spiritual or anti-materialist values’ (Brighouse, 2005, p. 85), are not a neutral alternative to ‘strong’ Christian schools; neither are they best placed to foster students’ autonomy. Arguably, indoctrination ‘is not uncommon in public schools’ (Peshkin, 1986, p. 284) and we should consider the following scenario:

Raised by atheists, in a neighborhood in which few people openly discuss what religious commitments they have, and in a public culture which privatizes religious commitments and practices, how are they going to learn about spiritual life in a way that is sufficiently meaningful that embracing it autonomously could be a real possibility for them?

(Brighouse, 2008, p.22)

Elmer Thiessen in *Teaching for Commitment* (1993) considers Christian nurture to necessarily involve teaching children how to live and what to believe:

Christian parents and teachers (and religious parents and teachers generally) who frankly admit that they want their children to grow up to become Christians are perhaps more honest than most. After all, how would a liberal agnostic parent really feel if his or her child autonomously chose to become a committed Christian? And how about the atheistic parents who, in the interest of a liberal upbringing, faithfully take their children to Sunday school (but

never enter a church door themselves) so that the children can choose for themselves? What message do the children really get? We all know that actions speak louder than words. What are the real intentions of these parents, particularly from a child's perspective? I would suggest that there is a certain "evangelistic" intent in all forms of upbringing and teaching. It is just that religious parents are a little more honest about their intentions. (Thiessen, 1993, p. 140)

On this view 'strong' Christian schools, and home-schooling environments, are no less likely than secular environments to facilitate individual choice by giving children 'an initial and stable conception of the good as a starting point for autonomous reflection' (De Jong and Snik, 2002, p. 583). We can, however, go further than this and contend that such schools may well be *more* likely to provide a context for autonomous reflection than many community schools. It is because 'strong' identity Christian schools go against the flow of a secular society and are not part of the ideological mainstream that they are so much more aware of their 'bias', the lens through which they see the world. On this basis, I shall argue that the two 'strong' schools described in this paper can be supported by liberals not, as Dagowitz believes, because choice does not matter, but rather *because* it matters so much.

The two schools referred to in this paper are Jacobus Fruytier Scholengemeenschap in Apeldoorn in The Netherlands and Bradford Christian School in Bradford, England. Interestingly, the two schools have links and fourteen-year old students participate in an annual exchange. Both schools see themselves as 'strong' but problematize the definitions of 'strong' (Burtonwood, 2006; McDonough, 1998; Walzer, 2003) in relation to their practice. About a week was spent in each school observing lessons, interviewing parents, students, teachers and undertaking a short survey. Jacobus Fruytier Scholengemeenschap (JF) and Bradford Christian School (BC) were both instigated or founded in the 1980s by Christian parents who were dissatisfied with secular education. When I interviewed parents at Bradford Christian and asked why they had chosen this particular school for their children it was quite clear that congruence of Christian nurture between home and school was the primary motivation:

I know that what my husband and I are starting at home with our children (the education and the nurturing in the ways of God that we are endeavouring to bring our children up in at home) that that continues in the classroom.

(Interview 2)

I've always wanted my children to have this relationship with God and so therefore I decided when I heard about the Christian school, so I wanted my children to attend obviously.

(Interview 3)

Our Christian beliefs are very important to us, and the chance to send [our children] to a Christian school where there's a Christian emphasis, a consistency that carried on from home into school.... Christianity is all about your whole life, not just about Sunday

(Interview 6)

The children are brought up in the way of the Bible...they learn the English, Maths and Science at this school as well but it gets taught in a Christian way

with the Christian ethic behind it, and I don't think you get the same sort of rounded education that the children get here in a normal state school.

(Interview 11)

Integrating Christian perspectives into the curriculum is referred to as a sign of a 'strong' rather than 'moderate' faith school (McDonough, 1998) and explicit reference is made to this in Bradford Christian School's prospectus:

We feel that a Christian worldview has important contributions to make in all curriculum areas. Although the existence of God is not necessarily denied, we feel that the present secular climate is failing children in their education for life, because it communicates the message that God has nothing relevant to say about the way the world is or about how we should live... our research for curriculum design will draw on a wide range of Christian scholarship...

(BCS Prospectus, 'Curriculum' p.6)

The Headteacher of Bradford Christian School explained, 'we are quite clear that we are working from a biblical worldview throughout the curriculum'. The inclusion of a 'spiritual concept' in lessons is a feature of some Christian schools and Bradford Christian School fits the description of a 'strong' faith school in that it 'denies a division between the sacred and the secular' or the possibility of 'compartmentalizing knowledge' (Burtonwood, 2006, p. 80). At Bradford Christian School the integration of Christian perspectives across the curriculum is an important aspect of the school's identity. For instance, the youngest children in the school do not embark upon the usual secular topic 'Me, Myself and I' when they write (and draw) their first autobiographical pieces of work. Instead, they work on 'The Potter and the Clay' (Jeremiah 18) and write or draw about the mummy, garden, bedroom, house, cat and so on that God has given them. At this school, writing about one's identity without reference to God is considered to implicitly teach the children the fundamental lesson that God is irrelevant to their lives.

The Headteacher of Bradford Christian School was quite right to point out that schooling seeks to answer fundamental questions about the human condition and that the approach at the school was declared, open and coherent and was founded upon a 'biblical understanding of reality':

My observation is that no education is neutral. Schools represent the values of the people that are in them and that holds true for individual teachers in individual classes... and so we're just being...honest about our worldview and where it comes from, what our values are, and we feel that the curriculum with it's 15,000 hours... we really want to engage with our children during all of those hours and have them really look at the epistemological questions that all education seeks to answer...

(BCS Headteacher interview)

The two schools certainly exemplify many of the features of 'strong' schools although the admission policy at JF is stricter than that at BCS as only students from a particular Reformed denomination are admitted to JF whereas the students attending BCS come from over thirty different local churches as well as from non-Christian homes. Given the discussion in the first part of this paper it is important to consider the religious freedom experienced by students and to evaluate how dissent is

tolerated. When I asked a senior teacher what might happen at JF if a student was to express a view contrary to the Reformed position in a lesson, and if the student were to say ‘We’re not really sinners, human beings are quite good people’, I was told:

Definitely we approach our students respectfully and I would be very thankful for the openness of asking this kind of question in this way, because it makes clear that they think critically and I’m also sure that our teacher will ask further questions “Why do you think so?” so to make him realise that, ‘Is it only something you think or do you also have a foundation for this?’... We don’t say “You must think in our way” but we say “This is how we think and we have a clear understanding of why we think in the way we think”. So it’s not a sort of... it’s not a totalitarian regime of our identity so to say

When asked whether he considered Jacobus Fruytier to be a ‘strong identity’ school in McDonough’s (1993) terms this senior teacher explained:

We hope that their [students’] education will affirm and reinforce the identity of the group of course, because we are Christians and want them to see the value of it themselves... I’m not sure Jacobus Fruytier fits the description of either ‘moderate’ or ‘strong’ schools – it certainly is not moderate. The Christian message of believing Christ and acknowledging his reign over every aspect of (a personal) life is presented through RE (largely Christian and known as PTE) and assemblies as the only Way for the best life thinkable. In other lessons there is reference to core values of the Bible. Students are mostly conservative Calvinistic. Nevertheless we also thoroughly teach them other worldviews. Considering the normal developments of our teenagers there is a period in their lives that they take their decisions themselves about following in the footsteps of the Christian worldview of their parents / school or accepting other worldviews e.g. the liberal faith. We help them and pray for them to take their own and to take the best decisions. It is striking that their Christian education results very often into becoming very appreciated constructive (Christian) citizens in a mostly liberal society.

The acceptance of such schooling within Dutch liberal democratic society is well known and the seven Bible-based Reformed schools of which Jacobus Fruytier is one educate 22,500 students in 22 locations and are state funded. Liberal concerns about ‘strong’ identity schools are normally that students’ autonomy may not be nurtured sufficiently and that the young people educated in such schools will be insufficiently critical. When this was put to the senior teacher at JF he explained:

That doesn’t mean that we are uncritical at all, we are critical as well and want them [students] to consider things for themselves, to be honest with themselves but we hope of course, and we are very clear in our purposes as a Christian school and we pray that it might be in that way that they follow Jesus... I encourage them to be critical ... I also point at a way to be critical without becoming skeptical; I point them at the way I found answers... We are critical and belief doesn’t mean that you... live without doubts and without being critical.

Dr. and Mrs. S, medical professionals whose children attended Bradford Christian School, expressed similar views:

Dr S: It is very important to us that our children have their own faith and make up their own minds about what they do and they don't believe, but we are very much of the conviction that there is no neutral place and by them being in a state school they're actually in a place where effectively they're being fed secular... well most often, fed some sort of forms of secular humanism, as we see it .... Nevertheless, we understand the importance of them knowing the different arguments for and against the things that we believe and that is something we are very pleased with about BCS. Our impression is that people and the children are being taught what other people believe ... in their ethics classes they hear arguments for and against certain issues

Mrs S: I think ultimately, you know, Christianity is actually a faith that puts the onus on the individual with God, and therefore you can't actually sort of... you cannot be a Christian, a true Bible believing Christian, unless it is your own faith ... and so a parent can't indoctrinate a child into real faith because then it's not real faith, it has to be a living relationship of your own for it to be a real true Christian ... faith. What I'm trying to say is I think ultimately a child from a Christian home that decides that they want to continue in that faith has at some point to make a decision for themselves, whether they go to a Christian school or not

Parents and teachers indicated that these 'strong' schools were not 'meant to *ensure*' children graduate as Christians for they have no power to 'ensure' faith when freewill decisions are vital. Instead, these schools stated that their aim was to nurture young people in the Christian faith because they knew that students must use their freewill and critical faculties in order to autonomously choose faith in Christ. The Headteacher of Bradford Christian School explained his commitment to promoting 'autonomy via faith' (McLaughlin, 1984, p.79) as part of Christian nurture:

We do respect the autonomy of each child to make their own decisions, in fact I would really avoid seeking any glib or trite profession of faith...we just give them the opportunity to think, to listen, to hear, to discuss and debate and then make their own choices... A lot of the textbooks of course are available to them would not reflect a Christian worldview because they are not written from that perspective by the authors. (Headteacher interview)

This 'opportunity to think, to listen, to hear, to discuss and debate' was appreciated by the group of fourteen-year-olds interviewed (with no teachers present) about their perceptions of the environment at Bradford Christian School. The focus group felt strongly that their Christian school offered them more freedom than schools where comprehensively liberal and secular values formed an orthodoxy that they did not feel able to challenge. One student explained:

People say that you can't express your opinion in a Christian school because they force Christian views on you, but that's not true because... *it's the other way around*, this school kind of encourages you to express your opinion and that's the main thing of the school and my old primary school they kept saying

things like, “We all know evolution is true, we all know this is ok, we all know that that’s okay” and I was like: “Well, I don’t think...” and everyone was kind of agreeing... and you didn’t have the opportunity to like say, “No I don’t think that” (*italic for emphasis in the audio recording*)

When asked what it was like to be in such an environment, students indicated that they felt unable to challenge a secular, liberal orthodoxy and clearly believed they were denied a voice because liberal beliefs were presented as incontrovertible facts:

You felt forced to keep your head down and just keep your mouth shut... It made you feel stupid... you know they kind of put it across as a fact ... it’s almost like saying, “We all know that this is wood” [tapping bench]... they kind of just said it like that and you didn’t have an opportunity to express your opinion, which is completely different to this school, which is one of the reasons why I like it (BCS) so much.

In this context where there was the freedom to express religious allegiances and worldviews, young people appeared to be free to make up their own minds about religious matters.

### **Conclusion**

It is because choice matters so much that *all* schooling in our society must provide young people with the freedom to choose their own religious readings and interpretations. This brings us to the question of how commitments come to be held. To argue that beliefs are not ‘the sort of things one chooses’ because, ‘we are very much at the mercy of what the world is actually like’ (Hand, 2006, p. 544) does not perhaps recognize the extent to which some people interpret ‘what the world is actually like’ as a result of presuppositions which are informed by readings of religious texts within a particular community of interpretation. Nor does it sufficiently acknowledge that when someone ‘knows what is best for him or her to do, but none the less does not act accordingly’ this may be due to ‘some imperfection in the education and disciplining of the passions’ (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 156). For Augustine, ‘the will is governed by what it loves: love determines will, and will in turn... governs interpretation’ (Jacobs, 2001, p. 45).

The choices of many believers are informed by an interpretation of sacred texts that they have chosen to believe are authoritative for living. This is not to imply religious believers are irrational but does recognize that reason can be informed by a faith that acknowledges the importance of the will. Arguably this is not exclusive to religious believers, however, for human reasoning is always informed by beliefs and commitments. The assertion (following Kant) that a person, ‘is only truly autonomous when her decisions are not affected by wants or like or cares about, but are determined by pure practical reason alone’ (Hand, 2006, p. 541) will be considered inadequate by many religious believers, as well as many secular citizens, for whom ‘wants or likes or cares’ are not to be eschewed (in favour of reason) but disciplined and it has been pointed out that, ‘commitments are held by individuals who are not entirely rational and emotionless any more than they are completely solitary and autonomous’ (Pike, 2009, p. 140). It is certainly unreasonable to reject all faith schooling on the basis that the rationality of faith-based beliefs is contested (Hand, 2002). It is a justifiable (and rational) educational aim for young people to learn that

they are free to make choices, to adopt beliefs and act ethically. For a Christian school to teach children that they have the option to live a Christian life in a secular society, to give them good reasons for doing so and to teach them to love their neighbours as themselves is an entirely rational educational aim.

A paradox of the Christian faith is that people do not only exercise ‘autonomy via faith’ (McLaughlin, 1984, p.79) but they also come to ‘faith via autonomy’. Certainly, the view that ‘parents often want faith schools to restrict the choice of their students’ (Dagowitz, 2004, p.166) is insufficiently discriminating both on philosophical grounds and in the light of the evidence from the two schools reported here. Certainly only those schools recognizing the inherent autonomy of its students in religious matters, should receive the support of the liberal state. The schools referred to here do appear, however, to have a particular appreciation that ‘autonomous action is not so much an *aim* as a *presupposition* of educational endeavour’ (Hand, 2006, p. 541) and would seem to teach students that to choose faith in Christ on the basis of another person’s ‘testimony’ (Hand, 2003, p. 98) is inadequate. While evaluating a school on the basis of some sort of ‘autonomy-test’ of its students may be necessary, it is also insufficient.

It has previously been suggested that to seek to justify faith schools by focusing on parental rights or academic results is inadequate (Pring, 2005) and this paper (which follows good advice rather than exercising complete autonomy) has therefore sought to address, ‘disagreements over liberal education - its aims, its underlying notion of rationality, the significance attached to autonomy and the concern over indoctrination’ (Pring, 2005, p. 56). Yet this might also be considered insufficient for such an emphasis is upon gauging the degree to which faith schools meet the requirements of liberals rather than vice versa. Of course, addressing liberal concerns is absolutely necessary we also need to consider key issues in the faith schools debate from the perspective of those situated within the schools themselves. If any parental organization, claiming adherence to any faith, wished to run a school we would need to know whether the freedom of students in matters of faith would be respected but we would also need to know more than this. We would want to know if students were encouraged to make ethical choices and the extent to which they would be encouraged to choose to be tolerant of others. Self-determination may be a foundational value of liberal democracy and also a central doctrine of the Christian faith but this, on its own, is not sufficient to cultivate a cohesive society. The ‘autonomy’ of students should not be considered apart from the ethics of the choices they make. Decisions about which schools should be supported in a liberal democracy need to take into account whether students’ autonomy is respected but also the values they choose.

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