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Secular vs plural in Scotland's schools

A debate on the surface about 'privilege' is in reality about much more...

As Scotland's schoolchildren head off on their half term holidays this week they could be forgiven their ignorance. Ignorance that in their midst, whilst they get on with growing up, wild Christian groups operate unchecked, seeking to proselytise at every turn. For not realising they were being subjected to 'compulsory prayer' and that their assemblies were in fact closet church services. For not realising that the nice chaplain in the corner from the church down the road, was actually a ravenous wolf in disguise, seeking to infiltrate their minds with stories of spaghetti monsters and sky fairies.

Such would be the perception from recent stories in the press about Christian input in Scottish schools. There have been 'exposes' of churches and organisations, petitions to parliament and Freedom of Information requests sent to local authorities to get to the bottom of 'the problem'. If you read nothing else it would be easy to think Scotland was drowning itself under the weight of its own theocracy.

Of course the alarmist rhetoric rarely matches the truth and this is especially true in the case of Christian involvement in schools. Christian groups have always taken an involvement in Scottish education, indeed it was John Knox who famously came up with the notion of a school in every parish. Ever since this time Christians have taken seriously the call to help support and nurture children for the common good, in the same way they have done so with feeding the hungry, treating the sick and giving shelter to the homeless. Look anywhere in the world where there is no state provision, and more often than not it will be the church providing the schools.

Thankfully in Scotland we have well funded public provision and so the role nowadays is more of support to the learning community. This includes (usually free) pastoral care and chaplaincy services for pupils and staff of all faiths and none, clubs and activities for pupils (of all faiths and none), appropriate RE input for pupils (of all faiths and none), and assemblies for pupils (of all faiths and none). All of course, within a well regulated framework and included within the school inspection regime. It may have been expected that if there were any major problems with any of these areas the inspectors would have picked them up by now. To date this does not appear to have happened.

That is not to say of course that examples of bad practice should be tolerated. Indeed it does the church great harm where some who claim the name of Christ have abused any position within a school community (or indeed any community). Thankfully however these examples are rare and the majority of cases Head teachers value the community input from churches, just as they would any other civic or community group. For our part we do not defend Christian community involvement in schools because it benefits churches, we defend it because it benefits the schools.

Nor is this about supposed privilege. As the Evangelical Alliance we take no position on issues of church and state. Rather we defend freedom and the rights of all groups to be heard in a plural public space – including faith groups. We welcome the discussion of worldview, vision and values and believe that our children should have the right to engage with all the pluralistic worldviews of modern Scotland, as is currently the case in well delivered Religious Observance (RO) and RE contexts. We believe that to deny our children that opportunity would be to deny them education in the fullest sense of the word.

Unfortunately those pushing the 'secular' agenda do not favour this tolerance of views. For them the school system they favour would involve no faith groups involved in any way supporting their local school. All would be welcome except those of faith. It is a prospect that would greatly diminish Scotland's education system and we would all be the poorer for it.

Ultimately then this whole debate comes down to two different visions of education – secular vs plural. A system where all are welcome or a system where only some are invited. A system where all community groups are encouraged to support the life of their school or where some are barred by virtue of their faith. A system that currently encourages community involvement or a system that would actually take thousands of hours of supportive involvement (at no cost to the taxpayer) out of Scotland's schools every year. This is the debate we are now in for the future of Scottish education.

As evangelicals we know where we stand. It is now time to make that case for Christian involvement in Scotland's schools.

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