POLICYMONOGRAPHS
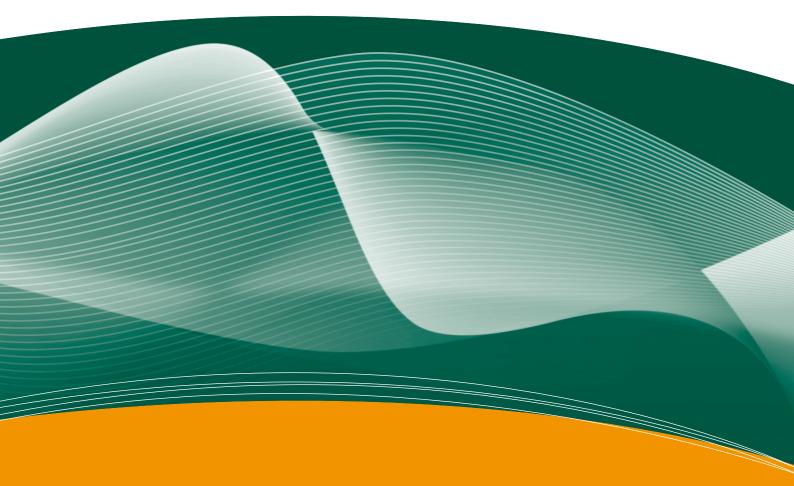
The Rise of Religious Schools

Jennifer Buckingham

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Contents

Definitions of different types of schools as used in this report

- **Government**: Schools that are owned and operated by state or territory governments. Also known as state schools or public schools.

- **Public**: Another term for government schools.

- **State**: Another term for government schools.

- **Non-government**: Schools that are owned and operated by a private or community organisation. All non-government schools are non-profit. The non-government sector includes the Catholic system and independent schools.

- **Private**: Another term for non-government schools.

- **Independent**: Usually refers to non-government schools that are not part of the Catholic system (However, some other non-Catholic, non-government schools form small systems).

- **Religious**: Schools that are affiliated with a religious group or established church. All religious schools are non-government schools.

Executive Summary

- More than 1.1 million students (out of a total student population of 3.4 million) attend non-government schools in Australia. More than 90% of these students are in religious schools.

- Although the Howard Coalition government (1996–2007) is commonly attributed with responsibility for the unprecedented growth in non-government schools, there were two periods in the last century when the growth rate was higher—the 1950s and the first half of the 1980s.

- The defining change in schooling over the last two decades has been the diversification of religious schools. Before the 1980s, close to 90% of students in the non-government sector attended schools associated with the two major denominations, Catholic and Anglican. In 2006, this proportion dropped to just over 70%, with the remaining students attending schools affiliated with a large array of minority faiths. The most substantive increases in enrolments have been in Islamic schools and new classifications of 'fundamentalist' Christian denominations.

- Previously unpublished Census data show that the distribution of children from religious families across school sectors also changed markedly between 1996 and 2006. Some religious groups—particularly Jewish and Catholic—have had traditionally high rates of enrolment in non-government schools, and this has changed little. However, other religious groups increased their enrolments in the non-government sector significantly, almost entirely in independent schools. In 1996, 9% of Muslim students attended independent schools, increasing to 21% in 2006. In 1996, 28% of fundamentalist Christian students attended independent schools, increasing to 40% in 2006.

- Although religious schools dominate the non-government school sector, numerous parent surveys indicate that religion is usually not the most important factor in choice of school. It is outweighed by discipline, educational quality, and the school's capacity to develop their child's potential.

- Schooling in Australia has had a long association with churches, but concerns have been voiced about the social impact of the segregation of students into religious and sometimes culturally homogeneous schools. It has been claimed that religious schools undermine social cohesion by reducing the opportunity for children from different backgrounds to interact and develop tolerance and appreciation of diversity, and that the teaching of religion is authoritarian and harmful to children.

- The available Australian and international evidence does not support this contention. Data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) finds that people who attended non-government schools (which are usually religious schools) do not express opinions that are less socially liberal or less tolerant of difference than people who attended government schools. On some issues, the opposite is the case. People who attended non-government schools actually have higher rates of civic participation than people who attended government schools. Furthermore, there is no evidence that attending a religious school increases religious commitment among students.

- Not all religious schools generate the same amount of community disquiet. Two types of school in particular receive the most media attention—Islamic schools and the Exclusive Brethren schools. Arguably, much unease about these schools stems from the lack of information and, in some cases, misinformation. There is no reason to believe that these schools are the source of problems either for students or for society.

- Likewise, there is no evidence that the increase in the number of enrolments and religious schools has exacerbated social tensions or created a sectarian divide. On the contrary, it can be argued that religious schools circumvent conflict by allowing free expression of different values and beliefs.

- Multicultural societies have to attempt a difficult and delicate balancing act between social cohesion and pluralism. Differences must be respected but a stable, free society requires that some core values are preserved. Aggressive secularism and heavy regulation of religious schools potentially undermine that process.

Introduction

One of the defining changes of the educational landscape in Australia over the last two decades is the growth in the number and variety of religious schools. Expansions in the non-government school sector have been driven mostly by the establishment of new religious schools.

Enrolments have increased in schools operated by the larger Christian denominations (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Uniting) with historical associations with schooling in Australia, but their rate of growth has been outpaced by Islamic schools and new classifications of Christian denominations.

As religious schools have become more numerous and more visible, they have also become more prominent in debates on education policy. The most contentious issue for the non-government sector generally has been public funding. However, with the emergence of religious schools that depart from the 'broad church' Western Judeo-Christian tradition, questions about the nature of these schools and their impact on society have come to the fore.

Concerns about religious schools fall into two main categories—the effects on the individual child and on the broader society, with most of the commentary focusing on the potential for religious schools to undermine social cohesion by creating sectarian and cultural divisions.

Some of the most strident critics of religious schools have described them as 'separated mono-cultural education environments' and insular ethnic or religious 'ghettoes' that breed bigotry and increase racial conflict.[1] These critics claim that public schools, in contrast, are 'the crucible within which democracy was formed and upon which a vibrant, socially cohesive future is dependent.'[2] Religious schools, according to this point of view, work against this goal.

Other commentators acknowledge the tensions between respect for cultural and religious diversity and the goal of a cohesive society but are less certain that the impact of religious schools is inevitably destructive. Some believe that religious schools can exacerbate these tensions but should be free to exist, while others argue that the freedom to choose a religious school actually ameliorates religious conflict.

Increased immigration from non-Christian countries, especially those without a democratic heritage, is creating a multicultural society unlike any experienced in Australian history. Diversity in religious beliefs is a critical element of a pluralist society but requires a delicate balancing act to maintain tolerance and social harmony. Religious schools, as transmitters of values and culture, play an important role in fostering diversity.

> **Diversity in religious beliefs is a critical element of a pluralist society but requires a delicate balancing act to maintain tolerance and social harmony.**

This report first documents the growth of religious schools between 1996 and 2007 under Prime Minister John Howard, who is widely credited (and condemned) for introducing school education policies that are held responsible for enabling the growth of religious schools. It then presents the evidence available to support or dispute these claims and critically examines the claims made about religious schools. Finally, it discusses the role of religious schools in a liberal democracy and presents policy responses for consideration.

The growth of non-government schools

A brief history

The first schools in Australia were Christian schools established by the Anglican Church (Church of England) in NSW in the early days of British settlement in the late 1700s. Free 'charity schools' run by other denominations gradually came into existence in the following decades. There were also some private commercial schools catering for middle-class boys and schools offering instruction in etiquette, art and 'polite accomplishments' for girls. These did not give religious instruction, which was assumed to be provided at home or in church.[3] An attempt in the 1820s to establish non-denominational National schools for all students was defeated by the Catholic and Anglican churches. Charity schools run by clergy remained the major providers of education until the 1840s, when a dual system of denominational and National schools was established.[4]

In 1872, Victoria became the first Australian state to pass an Education Act providing for free, secular public education; other states followed suit in the following two decades.

Some states withdrew funding to religious denominational schools as new public schools opened. The Catholic Church was the most vehemently opposed to secular public education and maintained its schools under great financial stress for almost a century. State aid was restored by the Menzies Liberal government in 1964, initially in the form of grants to upgrade science teaching. By the end of the 1960s, federal and state governments were providing some recurrent funding to non-government schools.[5]

> **In 1872, Victoria became the first Australian state to pass an Education Act providing for free, secular public education; other states followed suit in the following two decades.**

State aid, or public funding, of non-government schools has continued in various guises since then, with the Howard Coalition government (1996–2007) initiating two significant changes:

1. Abolishing the restrictive New Schools Policy in 1996, making it easier for new non-government schools to open.

2. Introducing a new non-government school funding system in 2001, making many schools eligible for large increases in funding.

These two reforms enabled the establishment of relatively low-fee non-government schools, mostly Islamic schools and Christian schools affiliated with newly popular Christian denominations. These schools were quickly filled by families who had previously not been able to afford non-government schools.

Growth in non-government schools

The number of students in non-government schools has been growing steadily over the last century, except during the World Wars when all school enrolments declined. As a proportion of all students, the non-government sector fluctuated in the first two-thirds of the 1900s but has been consistently growing since the late 1970s. Almost 1.2 million students—just over 34% of all students—were enrolled in non-government schools in 2009.

Figure 1 shows non-government school students as a percentage of all students from 1943 to 2009. Percentages could not be calculated for 1948 and 1949 because the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) yearbooks do not contain the relevant state school enrolment data.
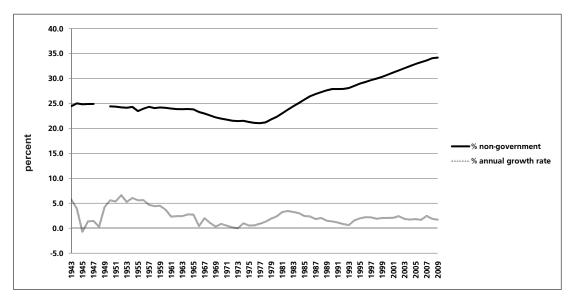
Figure 1. Non-government school students 1943–2009 as a proportion of all students and annual rate of increase in enrolments.

Source: ABS Yearbooks 1943–62 (ABS Cat. No. 1301.0); *Schools, Australia 1963–2009* (ABS Cat. No. 4221.0)

The Howard government is commonly believed to have presided over a historically large expansion in the non-government school sector.[6] This was not, in fact, the period when the non-government sector experienced the strongest growth. As Figure 1 shows, average annual growth in non-government school enrolments from 1996 to 2006 was only 2%—much lower than two post-WWII periods in which growth was stronger.

The first period was the post-WWII decade from 1950 to 1960, during which enrolments in non-government schools grew by an annual average of 5.2%. This growth was due to the post-War baby boom rather than a shift in enrolments to non-government schools; enrolments in government schools also grew strongly over that decade, with a 5.4% annual average increase.

The second period of high growth was between 1980 and 1985, when enrolments in non-government schools grew at an annual average of 3%.[7] But this time, the state school sector shrank by an annual average of 0.8%, indicating a preference for non-government schools rather than a general increase based on population growth.[8] This marked the beginning of a major shift in school education: the non-government sector continued to grow while the government sector remained static. In the 30-year period from 1979 to 2008, government schools experienced a negative annual average growth rate of -0.15%. Since the 1980s, not only has the size of the non-government sector relative to the government sector changed but the nature of schools within the non-government sector has also changed.

> The Howard government is commonly believed to have presided over a historically large expansion in the non-government school sector.

Table 1: Enrolments in Catholic, Anglican and 'other' schools, 1976–2006: number and percentage of all non-government school enrolments.

	Catholic		Anglican		Other		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
1976	498,583	80%	50,833	8%	75,403	12%	624,819
1986	581,023	73%	71,624	9%	140,941	18%	793,588
1996	615,572	67%	91,945	10%	213,941	23%	921,458
2006	679,408	60%	128,109	11%	319,497	28%	1,127,014

Table 1 shows that in 1976, Catholic and Anglican schools accounted for almost 90% of all non-government school enrolments. The students in 'other' non-government schools were a small proportion. By 2006, although Catholic and Anglican schools had grown substantially in absolute numbers, Catholic schools had decreased their share to nearly 60%, while Anglican schools had grown only marginally in their share of enrolments. The 'other' category grew from 12% to 28%. The overwhelming majority of non-government schools are still religious schools but represented by a larger array of minority religions and denominations.

Except for Catholic schools, no single source provides both the religious affiliation of students and the religious affiliation of their school (for example, Anglican students attending Anglican schools). So to build a detailed picture of enrolment trends in religious schools from 1996 to 2006, it is necessary to consult two separate sources: the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) and the ABS.

The Independent Schools Council of Australia publishes data on the religious affiliation of schools, providing the number of schools of each type and the number of enrolments each year. Table 2 contains the data on enrolments in 1998 and 2006. 'Christian schools' became a separate category in the non-government school census data for the first time in 1998.

> The overwhelming majority of non-government schools are still religious schools but represented by a larger array of minority religions and denominations.

Table 2: Religious affiliation of non-government schools, 1998 and 2006: number of students, proportion of all non-government students, and percentage change in enrolments

Affiliation	1998		2006		% Change 1998–2006
	No.	%	No.	%	
Anglican	98,909	10.3%	128,109	11.4%	30%
Assemblies of God	4,623	0.5%	6,370	0.6%	38%
Baptist	12,473	1.3%	16,269	1.4%	30%
Brethren	1,416	0.1%	4,736	0.4%	235%
Catholic, Other	946	0.1%	3,421	0.3%	262%
Catholic, Roman	86,111	8.9%	49,997	4.4%	-42%
Christian Schools	19,017	2.0%	43,841	3.9%	131%
Inter-Denominational	14,942	1.6%	17,779	1.6%	19%
Jewish	9,471	1.0%	9,038	0.8%	-5%
Lutheran	22,824	2.4%	32,133	2.9%	41%
Montessori School	2,200	0.2%	3,593	0.3%	63%
Islamic	6,316	0.7%	15,874	1.4%	151%
Non-Denominational	53,157	5.5%	64,941	5.8%	22%
Orthodox, Greek	3,710	0.4%	4,112	0.4%	11%
Orthodox, Other	954	0.1%	1,970	0.2%	106%
Other Religious Affiliation*	5,107	0.5%	4,288	0.4%	-16%
Other**	10,651	1.1%	14,231	1.3%	34%
Pentecostal	5,208	0.5%	6,746	0.6%	30%
Presbyterian	8,656	0.9%	9,572	0.8%	11%
Seventh Day Adventist	7,274	0.8%	10,110	0.9%	39%
Steiner School	5,258	0.5%	7,215	0.6%	37%
Uniting Church in Australia	41,479	4.3%	46,679	4.1%	13%
Total Independent	**420,700**	**43.7%**	**501,024**	**44.5%**	**19%**
Total Catholic systemic	**543,062**	**56.3%**	**625,990**	**55.5%**	**15%**
Total Non-Government	**963,762**	**100.0%**	**1,127,014**	**100.0%**	**17%**

Source: Independent Schools Council of Australia and the ABS[9]
* Other includes special schools, international schools, Indigenous schools, and community schools
** Other Religious includes Churches of Christ, Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, and Society of Friends

Table 2 shows that several categories of schools had substantial increases in enrolments from 1998 to 2006. Schools affiliated with the Brethren, 'Other Catholic' churches (which include the Eastern European Maronite, Melkite and Ukrainian Catholic churches), Christian schools, and Islamic schools have either doubled or almost tripled their enrolments. Enrolments in 'Other Catholic' and Brethren schools had a large proportional growth from a relatively low base. Islamic school enrolments increased by almost 10,000 students.

The following analysis of how enrolments of children from different religious groups have changed in each school sector is based on unpublished ABS Census data[10] from 1996 and 2006.

For the rest of this section, the term 'independent' will be used to describe those non-government schools that are not Catholic systemic schools. 'Independent' is used because it is a well-known term, albeit not entirely accurate (there are some small systems of schools in the non-Catholic non-government sector).

Table 3. Religious affiliation of students by school type attended, 1996 and 2006

For example, the number of Anglican children in government schools decreased by 21.8% from 446,570 in 1996 to 349,353 in 2006.

	Government			Catholic			Other non-government		
	1996	2006	% change	1996	2006	% change	1996	2006	% change
Anglican	446,570	349,353	-21.8	27,542	36,871	33.9	66,727	84,128	26.1
Baptist	37,056	31,700	-14.5	1,750	2,257	29.0	13,278	17,113	28.9
Brethren	3,440	2,776	-19.3	62	50	-19.4	1,291	2,272	76.0
Buddhist	28,252	44,675	58.1	3,730	7,485	100.7	2,410	5,005	107.7
Catholic	385,231	361,327	-6.2	458,104	453,509	-1.0	29,864	57,544	92.7
Fundamentalist Christian*	38,521	32,851	-14.7	2,181	3,221	47.7	15,930	24,335	52.8
Greek Orthodox	32,126	29,632	-7.8	9,990	11,409	14.2	7,080	10,447	47.6
Hinduism	9,783	15,861	62.1	1,420	2,497	75.8	1,650	2,933	77.8
Islam	42,078	52,581	25.0	1,646	2,079	26.3	4,274	14,253	233.5
Jehovah's Witness	16,077	10,612	-34.0	47	59	25.5	326	536	64.4
Judaism	4,266	3,804	-10.8	97	110	13.4	8,673	8,401	-3.1
Lutheran	27,001	21,732	-19.5	1,735	2,668	53.8	9,247	11,109	20.1
Mormon	9,417	9,852	4.6	345	544	57.7	570	864	51.6
Presbyterian	49,747	34,441	-30.8	2,558	2,919	14.1	7,314	8,740	19.5
Seventh Day Adventist	5,034	4,545	-9.7	155	250	61.3	4,106	3,933	-4.2
Uniting	187,406	115,846	-38.2	10,171	12,301	20.9	24,846	25,855	4.1
Atheist	285	1,707	498.9	9	148	1544.4	47	254	440.4
No religion	473,321	537,797	13.6	22,338	33,776	51.2	40,932	63,785	55.8

Source: ABS, unpublished Census data

Table 3 shows that between 1996 and 2006, some religions (Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam) increased their numbers in all school sectors, reflecting an increase in that religion's followers across the population. The largest proportional growth in all school sectors was actually anti-religion (atheism), although the number of students identifying as atheist is still very small—just over 2,100. The much larger group of students identifying as 'no religion' has also grown substantially, particularly in the non-government sector.

The religion with the greatest growth in the independent sector is Islam. From 1996 to 2006, the number of Muslim students in independent schools swelled from 4,274 to 14,253. While the Census data do not specify the proportion of Muslim vs. non-Muslim students in Islamic schools, it is reasonable to assume that despite most Islamic schools having an open enrolment policy, Muslim students are the large majority of the 15,874 students enrolled in 2006.

From 1996 to 2006, the number of Muslim students in independent schools swelled from 4,274 to 14,253.

The pattern is different among students belonging to other religions, particularly the various Christian denominations. The numbers of Christian students in independent and Catholic schools increased, but they decreased in government schools. For example, the increase in Presbyterian students in Catholic and independent schools (14% and 19% respectively) was accompanied by a 31% decrease in government schools, which was partly due to an overall drop in the number of Presbyterians in the community. Changes in other religious groups were due to both a growth in the population base and a shift in enrolment patterns. For example, the number of fundamentalist Christian students in government schools dropped by about 6,000 (15%) from 1996 to 2006 but grew by almost 10,000 (50%) in non-government schools.

Table 4 presents the Census data from another angle. While Table 3 shows the absolute change in numbers of students in each sector, it does not clearly show how students within each religious group are distributed among the school sectors. Table 4 shows the enrolment rates for different religious groups in non-government schools and the changes from 1996 to 2006.

Table 4: Type of school attended by students from each religious group, 1996 and 2006
For example, 82.6% of Anglican children attended government schools in 1996.

	1996			2006			PP Diff 1996–2006		
	Govt %	Catholic %	Independent %	Govt %	Catholic %	Independent %	Govt %	Catholic %	Independent %
Anglican	82.6	5.1	12.3	74.3	7.8	17.9	-8.3	2.7	5.5
Baptist	71.1	3.4	25.5	62.1	4.4	33.5	-9.1	1.1	8.0
Brethren	71.8	1.3	26.9	54.5	1.0	44.6	-17.3	-0.3	17.6
Buddhist	82.1	10.8	7.0	78.2	13.1	8.8	-4.0	2.2	1.7
Catholic	44.1	52.5	3.4	41.4	52.0	6.6	-2.7	-0.5	3.2
Fundamentalist Christian*	68.0	3.9	28.1	54.4	5.3	40.3	-13.6	1.4	12.2
Greek Orthodox	65.3	20.3	14.4	57.6	22.2	20.3	-7.8	1.9	5.9
Hinduism	76.1	11.0	12.8	74.5	11.7	13.8	-1.6	0.7	0.9
Islam	87.7	3.4	8.9	76.3	3.0	20.7	-11.4	-0.4	11.8
Jehovah's Witness	97.7	0.3	2.0	94.7	0.5	4.8	-3.0	0.2	2.8
Judaism	32.7	0.7	66.5	30.9	0.9	68.2	-1.8	0.1	1.7
Lutheran	71.1	4.6	24.3	61.2	7.5	31.3	-9.9	2.9	6.9
Mormon	91.1	3.3	5.5	87.5	4.8	7.7	-3.6	1.5	2.2
Presbyterian	83.4	4.3	12.3	74.7	6.3	19.0	-8.7	2.0	6.7
Seventh Day Adventist	54.2	1.7	44.2	52.1	2.9	45.1	-2.1	1.2	0.9
Uniting	84.3	4.6	11.2	75.2	8.0	16.8	-9.0	3.4	5.6
Atheist	83.5	2.6	13.8	80.9	7.0	12.0	-2.6	4.4	-1.7
No religion	88.2	4.2	7.6	84.6	5.3	10.0	-3.6	1.2	2.4

PP = percentage point

* Denominations that can be described as Pentecostal, Evangelical and Bible fundamentalist; include the following Census classifications: 2002; 2003; 2110; 2111; 2112; 2113; 2252; 2253; 2400; 2401; 2402; 2404; 2405; 2406; 2407; 2408; 2411; 2412; 2413; 2414; 2415; 2499; 2802; 2803; 2804; 2805; 2806; 2807; 2915.

Source: ABS Census, unpublished data

Enrolment in non-government schools has been traditionally high in some religious groups such as Jewish and Catholic families, and this changed little from 1996 to 2006. More than 68% of Jewish students attend independent schools. Again, the available data cannot verify that they are all in Jewish schools, but as the number of Jewish students in independent schools in 2006 (8,401, Table 3) is similar to the number of enrolments in Jewish schools (9,038, Table 2), it is fairly safe to assume that there is considerable overlap.

Christian students in government schools dropped by about 6,000 (15%) from 1996 to 2006 but grew by almost 10,000 (50%) in non-government schools.

Around 60% of Catholic families attend non-government schools. The proportion of Catholic students in Catholic systemic schools was around 50% in both 1996 and 2006, but there was a small shift of Catholic students from government to independent schools.

Table 4 confirms and clarifies the trends identified in Table 3 for Muslim and fundamentalist Christian students. These religious groups, including the Exclusive Brethren, experienced the largest shifts to independent schools.

Increased demand for Islamic schools has been the result of both increased numbers of Muslims in the population (through a combination of immigration and high birth rates) and federal education policies that enabled the establishment of new schools.

The Census data in Table 4 quantify the change in enrolment patterns of Muslim students. While numbers of Muslim students have increased in both government and independent schools, they have shown a greater increase in the latter. More than 20% of Muslim students attended independent schools in 2006 compared to around 9% in 1996.

The Exclusive Brethren have been the focus of much media and public scrutiny over the last decade. Although they could be included with other denominations in the 'fundamentalist Christian' category, this report treats them as a separate group because they are an interesting case study. The majority of Brethren children still attended government schools in 2006, but this proportion was substantially reduced from 1996. There was a commensurate increase in the number of Brethren students in independent schools over the decade, from 27% to 45%.

> **The majority of Brethren children still attended government schools in 2006, but this proportion was substantially reduced from 1996.**

Likewise, children from other fundamentalist Christian groups substantially increased their rate of enrolment in independent schools—from 28% in 1996 to 40% in 2006—with a corresponding decline of enrolment in government schools.

Among the more mainstream Christian denominations—Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Uniting and Presbyterian—there were proportionally smaller but still notable declines in government school enrolments. However, these groups increased their enrolments in both Catholic and independent schools. The movement of Brethren and fundamentalist Christian and Muslim students, by comparison, was almost entirely into independent schools.

Why the non-government school sector has grown

Although causative links between government policies and trends in school enrolments cannot be proven, the relationships between them are apparent when viewed in historical context.

Figure 1 shows the 1950s, 1980–85 and 1996–2006 as the years of greatest growth in the non-government sector. Enrolments grew in all schools during the 1950s due to the post-WWII baby boom. State aid to non-government schools remained negligible.[11]

For the periods 1980–85 and 1996–2006, however, school funding seems to be a related factor. A review of Commonwealth government schools policies reveals that federal funding to non-government schools increased substantially during these years.

1980–85: Australia had two Prime Ministers in this period—the Coalition government led by Malcolm Fraser (1975–83) and the Labor government led by Bob Hawke (1983–91). Upon election, the Fraser government fulfilled its campaign promise to increase funding to the neediest non-government schools. It linked per capita recurrent grants for non-government schools to the average per capita costs of government schools and gradually raised entitlements. It also provided four years of establishment grants for new non-government schools and increased capital grants. This resulted in substantial increases in federal funding to non-government schools[12]—up to $333 million (equivalent to 32.5% of total federal funding to schools) in 1975–76; $442 million in 1979–80; and $646 million (equivalent to 51.5% of total federal funding to schools) by the end of the Fraser government's term.[13] In 1983, a Labor government led by Bob Hawke came into power and funding to non-government schools was stable for several years.

1996–2006: The Coalition government led by John Howard (1996–2007) oversaw large increases in federal funding to non-government schools, largely through the SES-based funding system introduced in 2001. Federal funding for non-government schools tripled from $1,903 million (equivalent to 56.9% of total federal funding to schools) in 1995–96 to $6,597 million in 2007–08 (equivalent to 65.1% of total federal funding to schools); funding to government schools more than doubled over the same period.[14] As noted above, another important policy change was the abolition of the New Schools Policy in 1997, resulting in a relaxation of the requirements for new non-government schools.

Andrew Dowling's analysis of the history of Commonwealth spending for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) confirms the link between funding increases and enrolment increases. Dowling's data show that the two points when federal funds to non-government schools relative to government schools jumped markedly—1979–82 and 2000–06—coincide with the years of highest enrolment growth in non-government schools.[15] Even so, it is not possible to differentiate the cause and effect. The reverse

scenario of enrolment growth precipitating funding increases is equally likely when funding is provided through per capita grants.

> **Government policies enable or facilitate the choice of a non-government school but parents make the final decision.**

However, policies on funding and regulation of the non-government sector only partly explain the growth in the independent school sector. Government policies enable or facilitate the choice of a non-government school but parents make the final decision. When an increasing number of parents actively choose a non-government school, at sometimes considerable personal financial cost, there must be other factors at play.

The possible reasons for the growth in non-government schools in Australia have been discussed at length by various researchers and academics. Anthony Potts, education lecturer at the University of Adelaide, outlines six factors that precipitated movement from state schools to non-government schools in the 1990s:

1. immigration created a culturally heterogeneous society in which all groups sought to preserve their culture and values

2. families with high academic aspirations did not find the egalitarian nature of state schooling appealing

3. industrial action by militant teachers' unions did not reflect well on state schools

4. a lack of local voice and responsiveness in the highly centralised state schools

5. enforcement of school 'enrolment zones' denied parents choice even among state schools; and

6. the opportunity to select peer groups by avoiding schools with difficult students.[16]

Education academics Colin Symes and Kalervo N. Gulson argue that additional factors are pertinent, proposing that the widespread adoption of progressive education in state schools from the 1980s estranged parents who favoured more traditional education models.[17] Education historian Alan Barcan also favours this explanation.

In the book *School Choice: How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia,* Craig Campbell, Helen Proctor, and Geoffrey Sherrington explain increases in non-government enrolments among the middle-classes as the result of a loss of faith in the effectiveness of many public institutions coupled with a new expectation among middle-class parents that they should take responsibility for their child's education, including carefully selecting a school for their child.[18]

These are the 'push' factors that turn parents away from public schools and towards seeking an alternative. They do not illuminate the 'pull' factors that attract parents to non-government schools.

Notably, none of the above suggests that religion was among the major factors directly influencing growth in non-government schools. Barcan proposes that 'values' were the drawcard rather than religion per se, arguing that the move to religious schools was precipitated when many government schools started moving away from an explicit commitment to 'character building'—a characteristic feature of state education up until the 1960s. As schools' commitment to inculcating values like self-discipline, respect for authority, and self-reliance declined, Barcan believes increasing numbers of parents started opting for religious schools where these values were still being taught.[19] Campbell, Proctor and Sherrington surmise that the attraction of religiously affiliated schools has more to do with safety, structure and tradition than religiosity.[20] Symes and Gulson attribute the recent increase in 'new' Christian denominational schools to the political tenor of the times, which they describe as the confluence of two approaches—neoliberalism and evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity.[21] [22]

The importance of religion in school choice

Australia has a relatively high concentration of religious schools by international standards: 94% of non-government schools have a religious affiliation. This is close to 30% of all schools.[23]

By comparison, religious schools comprise 68% of private schools in the United States (but less than 10% of all schools);[24] 13% of private schools in Sweden (less than 2% of all schools);[25] and 90% of private schools (60% of all schools) in the Netherlands.[26] In England, most religious or 'faith-based' schools are classified as government 'maintained' schools and comprise 33% of that sector—totalling more than 6,800 schools.[27] However, unlike in Australia, almost all religious schools in England are Roman Catholic or Anglican. Only 1% are classed as 'other.'[28]

The rising prevalence of religious schools in Australia is even more remarkable when seen against the wider social trend of declining religiousness. The proportion of people stating 'no religion' in the ABS Census was 18.7% in 2006, compared with 8.3% in 1976. At the same time, affiliation with Christian religions dropped from 79% to 63%.[29] Another indicator of religious connections is the proportion of marriages conducted by ministers of religion. In 2006, only 38.6% of marriages were conducted by ministers of religion (the rest were conducted by civil celebrants), down from 59.5% in 1986.[30]

> **The rising prevalence of religious schools in Australia is even more remarkable when seen against the wider social trend of declining religiousness.**

Against this trend is the rising number of Islamic schools coinciding with a significant 70% growth in the Muslim population from 200,885 in 1996 to 340,392 in 2006. As a proportion of the national population, Muslims still represent a very small group (1.7%) but are concentrated in a few suburbs in Sydney and Melbourne, making them highly visible as a community.

Likewise, the number of fundamentalist Christian schools between 1996 and 2006 coincides with a growing number of people (32%) affiliating themselves with those denominations in that decade. The Pentecostal and other fundamentalist Christian denominations are concentrated in Australia's major cities. The Catholic and Anglican churches are still dominant overall, but Catholics increased their numbers by only 7% while Anglicans declined by 5% from 1996 to 2006.[31]

Factors influencing choice of school

It is not clear which came first: changes in religious affiliation in the population or growth in new Christian schools. These schools, which often refer to themselves as Christian Community Schools because they are independent and locally-governed, often begin as very small schools drawing on a network of church families. However, it is not necessary for families choosing these schools to be practising Christians or regular churchgoers. A number of surveys show that while parents make a commitment to the school's Christian ethos and values to secure their child's enrolment, their primary reason is not the school's religious affiliation but other factors.

These are a few snapshots of the surveys conducted over the last decade on the factors influencing choice of school.

- **Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (1998) survey:** Parents of children in independent schools were asked to rate the importance of various aspects of their school. 'An emphasis on religion' was ranked only 23 out 26 factors in the level of importance. 'Level of understanding of your culture or ethnic background' was ranked 24 out of 26. 'An emphasis on religion' was ranked 16 out of 24 by parents of children in Catholic schools.[32]

- **Association of Independent Schools of Queensland (AISQ) (1999):** Parents ranked religious affiliation 20 out of 30 reasons for choosing an independent school. However, religious affiliation was the most frequently given reason for choosing independent *primary* schools whereas the choice of *secondary* schools was based on 'better preparation to fulfil their child's potential' followed by 'strong academic reputation.'[33]

- *The Sydney Morning Herald* **(2004):** Overall, 34% of parents with children in public secondary schools said they would change to a non-government school if there was no additional cost. The top reasons were 'better discipline' (30.8%) and 'better education/

better teachers' (24.6%), with 'religious beliefs/learn values' (8.5%) ranked equal fifth with 'better results/higher achievement levels.' When parents of children in all school types were asked to rate their top reasons for school choice, around 75% of parents with children in Catholic schools and 65% of parents with children in independent schools said 'religious/moral values' of the school were 'quite important' or 'very important.'[34]

- **AISQ survey in Queensland (2006):** The findings of this survey were similar to the 1999 AISQ survey (see above). Overall, 23% of parents said religious affiliation was very important in their choice of school, ranking it 22 out of 37 factors. However, as in the 1999 survey, while other factors were considered more important, religious affiliation was still frequently cited as a factor: it was the 'single most important factor' for 8% of the parents, making it the third most frequently given response after 'preparation to fulfill potential' and 'appearance/behaviour of existing students.'[35]

- **Department of Education, Science and Training (2007):** This national survey found religion was an 'important' or 'very important' influence in choosing a non-government school for 45.5% of parents. Religion was ranked 10 out of 13 factors in level of importance. The top three factors for both government and non-government schools were security, teacher quality, and values.[36]

Although the religious affiliation of a school is an important factor in school choice, these surveys provide strong evidence that it is rarely the most important factor. Religious affiliation does feature strongly in some surveys, but for the most part it is outweighed by educational factors (such as a 'holistic' emphasis on children reaching their potential and teacher quality) and perceptions of the school's environment (such as values, discipline and security).

Perhaps part of the reason for religion being a less important factor in school choice is that almost all non-government schools are religious, so religion is a given to a large extent. By deciding to go for a non-government school, parents have already accepted its religious affiliation and can pay attention to other factors.

The reasons for choice of school are significant, if only to provide a strong indication that to some extent, the market for non-government school education is skewed away from what parents prefer. Since most parents prioritise the non-religious aspect of schools, it is curious that there are so few secular schools in the non-government school sector. (See page 4)

> **Since most parents prioritise the non-religious aspect of schools, it is curious that there are so few secular schools in the non-government school sector.**

Regardless of their own religious beliefs, growing numbers of parents are educating their children exclusively in religious schools. These schools are increasingly likely to be associated with smaller religious denominations holding strong 'fundamentalist' religious tenets rather than the 'broad church' traditions of the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations.

The scarcity of secular non-government schools

One way in which Australia differs from other countries is that policies facilitating school choice have not led to any discernible increase in the number or type of secular non-government schools. Perhaps the strongest theory for this is that religious organisations are the only social institutions with the financial and human capital to undergird the substantial investment of time and money required to establish a new school. Because funding levels for non-government schools are still low in comparison with public schools, independent schools have to raise the difference either via fundraising activities or fees.

This was a situation not predicted by Milton Friedman, economist and 'godfather' of the school 'voucher.' Friedman proposed that public funding for education should be provided to children on an individual basis to be used at the school of their choice. The level of funding would not differ according to the type of school a child attended, and all reputable schools would be eligible to accept the vouchers. This would create competition between schools to offer the best value for money and improve the quality of education.

In his 1955 essay 'The Role of Government in Education,' Friedman hypothesised that a consumer-driven market for schools may result in 'less rather than more parochial education' because private enterprise would be more efficient at providing a quality education than religious institutions.[37] US education policy expert John Brandl believes that Friedman failed to anticipate the success of religious schools because he didn't foresee the ability of these schools to 'educate children both in academic basics and for democratic citizenship.'[38]

Another possible reason for the low numbers of secular non-government schools is that there is no true market for education in Australia. Non-government schools are eligible for only a fraction of the funding entitlement of public schools, and the dominance of the public school system discourages the entry of new providers. Furthermore, without the profit motive there are no financial incentives for educational entrepreneurs to invest in school education.

When Sweden introduced its voucher system for schools in 1992, it included for-profit providers. This may have contributed to the much greater growth in secular independent schools relative to religious secular schools. The total number of independent schools in Sweden increased from 70 at the time of the choice reforms in 1992 to 800 in 2007, of which only 13% were religious schools. Swedish economist Michael Sandstrom surmises that the entry of large private for-profit corporations into the school sector accelerated the growth of independent schools. In Sweden, 'successful for-profit schools have expanded rapidly and established subsidiary schools, the non-profit schools instead tend to create waiting lists.'[39]

The experience of for-profit providers in the United States, however, has been more mixed. Because education relies intensively on human and intellectual capital, and the largest expense of schools is wages, there is a limited capacity to increase efficiency and make profits when operating on a small scale. Attempts by corporations such as Edison schools to achieve profitability by quickly scaling up the number of schools they operated were unsuccessful for three reasons: their per-pupil subsidies were often much lower than those for public schools; bureaucratic hurdles; and the number of years it takes for a school to become effective, especially after taking over a failing school.[40]

A final plausible explanation is that many public schools in Australia offer a satisfactory education and there is low demand for secular alternatives to the state school system. An *SMH*/Nielsen poll found that 53% of parents would not move their child from a state school to a non-government school even if there was no additional cost.[41]

Concerns about religious schools

The close relationship between churches and education in Western society goes back more than 800 years. School education as we know it today descends directly from the model of schooling established by the Anglican Church in England and transported to Australia in the early 1800s. Even after state-provided secular education became common in the mid-late 1800s, church schools remained widespread.[42] Although teachers no longer provide religious instruction, religion is present in state schools in the form of 'scripture' classes, school chaplains, and creeds making a commitment to 'the love of God.'[43]

> The close relationship between churches and education in Western society goes back more than 800 years.

Yet the role of religion in education is still highly contested and religious schools are constantly under fire, more so because of their access to public funding.

Concerns about religious schools for the well-being of individuals and society are two-fold: first, children attending a religious school might be 'indoctrinated' or receive an inferior standard of education; second, social cohesion might be threatened and democratic values undermined.

Effects on the child

An adequate standard of education is a legal right for all children: it enables them to participate socially and economically as autonomous adults in a free society. In Australia, all children have the right to 13 years of publicly-funded education. Indeed, it is compulsory for all children to attend school for at least 10 years, more in some states.

Lower standards of education

Critics of religious schools are not only concerned about the provision of religious instruction but also that religious schools might deliberately omit parts of the curriculum that do not fit with their beliefs on topics such as the origins of life and diversity in human sexuality, and children attending those schools might not receive an adequate standard of education.

The tension between religious beliefs and public education has played out very differently in Australia than in the United States. In the United States, where there are constitutional barriers to the direct funding of religious schools, there have been numerous court cases testing the limits of parental discretion and the extent to which education legislation will accommodate religious diversity. Perhaps the most famous is the 1972 *Wisconsin vs. Yoder* case, in which a group of Amish parents successfully sought an exemption from compulsory school attendance law for their children after they completed the eighth grade, on the basis that the values taught in high school were incompatible with Amish values and would destabilise their way of life.[44]

> **In terms of overall academic outcomes, the performance of non-government schools is rarely called into question.**

Due to the long association between churches, schools and governments in Australia, most parents have been able to send their children to a school that is a relatively close match to their belief systems. Religious freedom in education in Australia has largely been secured through political rather than legal action. A High Court challenge to government funding of non-government schools brought by the Council for the Defense of Government Schools (DOGS) was defeated 6–1 in 1981, in the only case of its kind in Australian history.[45] The major ongoing disputes have been about the level of aid provided to non-government schools.

In terms of overall academic outcomes, the performance of non-government schools is rarely called into question. All non-government schools have to be accredited by the state government and are required to use the same curriculum, submit to the same testing regime, and hire teachers with the same minimum credentials as government schools.

There are wide variations in quality within both the government and non-government sectors, but on the available indicators there is no evidence that non-government school education is inferior to government school education. Several studies have found that on average, non-government schools have higher literacy and numeracy outcomes and Year 12 results than government schools. Removing the effect of socio-economic status reduces the difference between the sectors in Year 12 results but it remains substantial. An interesting finding from the LSAY Research Report is that independent schools seem to obtain their advantage not just by channeling their efforts to high achievers but by improving the performance of students who were low achievers in Year 9.[46]

Likewise, graduates of non-government schools are no less employable or successful in tertiary education than government school graduates. Several studies have indicated that government school graduates do better in their first year at university than non-government school graduates with the same tertiary entrance score.[47] This can be interpreted as showing that students from non-government schools do not perform as well in the higher education environment. But it is equally plausible that government school students do not achieve at the levels they are actually capable of while at school and they catch up at university. Possibly it is a combination of the two effects. There is no research showing what happens after the first year in university, and Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) research shows no difference in university completion rates depending on the school sector attended.[48]

The particular curriculum areas that attract the most attention are not 'the three Rs' but a small set of sensitive topics. The main battle is over creationism and evolution, with the bottom line being not so much whether creationism should be taught in schools at all but whether schools should be allowed to discuss it in the science classroom. Even the Australian Academy of Science 'sees no objection to the teaching of creationism in schools' if it is taught as part of religious studies or other non-scientific context.[49]

An episode of the TV program *Insight* on SBS in 2008 sparked a renewed debate on this issue. Footage of a science class in a Christian school in which students were being taught the biblical

creationist theory of the origins of life prompted a complaint to the NSW Board of Studies. The board's investigation into the school cleared it of any breach of regulations, saying that schools need only to make sure that their students understand that creationism is not part of the mandatory science curriculum, cannot replace any part of the mandatory science curriculum, and will not be tested in the School Certificate science assessments.[50] NSW Greens MP John Kaye strongly criticised this decision, saying that teaching creationism in science class risks confusing students, leaving them 'unable to distinguish between science and belief.'[51]

It is difficult to see how increased regulation could resolve this issue to everyone's satisfaction. Arguably, it would only create in effectual attempts at enforcement. While it may be possible to place restrictions on what can be included in the formal, intended science curriculum, it is impossible to police the actual taught curriculum in every science classroom across the country. The approach of the NSW Board of Studies seems to be the most sensible one: As long as the scientific theory of evolution and all other mandatory parts of the syllabus are taught, other theories and the context in which they are taught are for the school and the parents to decide.

> **While it may be possible to place restrictions on what can be included in the formal, intended science curriculum, it is impossible to police the actual taught curriculum in every science classroom across the country.**

Other curriculum areas in which religious schools face scrutiny are sex and drug education. Most Christian (including Catholic) and Jewish schools teach that sex belongs in heterosexual, monogamous relationships and encourage abstinence until marriage. There is no requirement for non-government schools to teach students about contraception, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, or other 'safe sex' information. Likewise, there is no requirement for non-government schools to provide drug education.

Catholic education authorities are apprehensive that this might change with the introduction of the national curriculum, which will include sex and drug education as part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum.[52] It has not yet been decided whether schools will be permitted to omit topics they don't want to teach. While some people argue that all schools should be required to teach a national standard of sex education, such as Liberal MP Mal Washer, who likened sex education to literacy and numeracy,[53] others believe that sex education should be at the discretion of parents and sensitive to religious or other values.[54] There is a similar range of views on drug education.

Christian Schools Association chief executive Stephen O'Doherty has said one of the main reasons people choose Christian schools is because of their 'ethical and moral view' on sex education.[55] This may be true, but given the evidence that religion is not the main reason parents give for choosing non-government schools, it is more likely that rather than actively seeking rigidly literal and biblical teachings on sex and drugs, most parents are simply trying to avoid the liberal and explicit approach to sex education in public schools.

Again, it comes back to the question of who should decide what is taught to children. Conventional wisdom is that the vast majority of parents are well-meaning and better placed than remote public servants or politicians to act in the best interests of their children. Indeed, this principle is held to excessively by child protection authorities, with children repeatedly left in the care of parents who are either irresponsible or cruel. This is, of course, unacceptable but it demonstrates that respect for parental rights is a feature of our society. Tightening the parameters of parental decision-making in regards to education, while failing to enforce the much wider parameters of basic love and care, makes little sense.

Religious indoctrination

Arguments against religious schools are often framed in terms of the potential for such schools to prevent the development of children into autonomous individuals by indoctrinating them into a narrow worldview.

At one extreme of this argument is US philosopher James Dwyer, who believes that almost all religious schools are harmful to children and those who attend them 'suffer a relative

educational deprivation.'[56] Questioning the legitimacy of parental rights, Dwyer argues the state should override parental preference for religious schools in favour of a secular education in the child's long-term interests or, at the very least, strongly regulate religious schools.[57]

In a strong critique of these arguments, US education academic John Covaleskie points out that by imposing a framework of secular values on religion, Dwyer is simply replacing one sort of orthodoxy with another to protect 'his preferred version of the good life.' Covaleskie observes that outlawing religious views of which one disapproves is a counterintuitive way to achieve a tolerant society; the real question is who should decide in which religious tradition (if any) a child should be raised and educated: parents or the state.[58]

> **For non-religious people, the idea that the 'public' education elements can be separated from the 'private' spiritual elements in schools makes complete sense, but it is not as straightforward for the devout.**

This is not a new question. In *On Liberty*, first published in 1859, John Stuart Mill explained the folly of entrusting the education of children to governments hoping to avoid indoctrination. Mill wrote that a 'general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government … in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to over one's body.'

Various writers on this issue, including Rosemary Salomone, Harry Brighouse, and Adam Swift, discuss the idea of competing versions of 'the good life.' Different parents have different conceptions of what this means: for some, it means commitment to a particular religious faith. Brighouse and Swift suggest that the challenge for pluralist liberal societies is achieving the correct balance between respecting the autonomy of parents to pursue their version of the good life for their families and protecting the autonomy of children and their future well-being.

This necessarily includes education. Brighouse and Swift put it this way:

> Education of children is not, and palpably cannot be a neutral activity—it typically embodies and is justified by substantive views about what is good in human life. Deprived of these foundations, education might seem vapid, even pointless.[59]

Salomone argues that public schools are as prone to bias as any other type of school:

> [Although] school officials might like to think they develop in children the critical thinking skills to form their own opinions, the curriculum unavoidably leads them to those opinions espoused by the educational establishment, the school, and its teachers.[60]

While some people oppose all types of religious schools as a matter of principle, others are prepared to accept schools run by religious organisations as long as they are not too religious. British philosopher Stephen Law, for example, says that schools should only be allowed to teach religion in an objective, critical way. He argues that 'any school that insists its religion should be a given and never challenged should no longer be tolerated, let alone receive government funding.'[61] Schools should teach religion as just another subject, not their *raison d'etre*.

In their book *The Stupid Country*, Chris Bonnor and Jane Caro endorse this view, saying it is not anti-religious but anti-authoritarian.[62] Public schools are identified as 'children of the enlightenment'[63] in contrast with religious schools, which are beholden to an 'external, imposed Authority.'[64] Bonnor and Caro do not seem to think the latter description might also apply to governments, and lament the 'blurring of the line between church and state when it comes to basic issues such as government funding for church schools.'[65] By this, they are referring to what they see as an undue influence of religious organisations on what should be a government-regulated matter. As Baptist minister Tim Costello says, the separation of church and state was originally devised as way of protecting churches from state interference. If one believes in the importance of church-state separation, the protection has to work both ways.

For non-religious people, the idea that the 'public' education elements can be separated from the 'private' spiritual elements in schools makes complete sense, but it is not as straight-forward for the devout. According to Melbourne University academic Fida Sanjakdar, Muslims consider education to be an act of worship. 'For Muslims, education and knowledge cannot be separated from faith. Education without an awareness of Allah (God) is meaningless.'[66] Likewise, for many Christian schools, education does not have a distinct secular purpose. It is primarily a means to become a better servant of God. Schooling is not an academic exercise with a side-serving of faith. Writing on the Christian perspective, Matthew Etherington, researcher at the University of Notre Dame, says that for the devout, education is 'profoundly spiritual,' and it would be 'incomprehensible' to compartmentalise spirituality into a 'private sphere,' separate from public life.[67]

Brighouse and Swift argue that the ideal of liberal education to empower and enable is not necessarily contingent on the removal of religion from the curriculum. They agree that the interests of the child are paramount to preserving a liberal society, but conclude that 'religious schools are entirely permissible from a liberal perspective' given that the school does not impede children's development into autonomous adults.[68]

This is, of course, a mostly subjective judgment and raises the question: is it feasible to use anti-authoritarianism as the rationale to restrict religious practices with which one disagrees?

Do religious schools make people more religious?

Much of the debate about the potential for religious schools to 'indoctrinate' children into a particular religious belief system and worldview occurs at a theoretical level. There is little evidence to support the contention that attendance at a religious school has an effect over and above the influence of the religious beliefs and activities of parents.

Research by Hans Mol published in 1985 looked at the religious commitment of people who had attended Catholic schools. Mol found that after controlling for parents' church attendance, there was no significant difference in the religious commitment of former Catholic school students and people who had attended other schools.[69] In 1990, in a summary of research on the connection between Catholic school attendance and strength of religious beliefs, Don S. Anderson concluded there was no evidence that non-Catholic independent schools influence the religious beliefs of their students and only weak evidence that Catholic schools cause religious belief independently of parents' beliefs.[70]

> **There is little evidence to support the contention that attendance at a religious school has an effect over and above the influence of the religious beliefs and activities of parents.**

More recently, Andrew Norton's analysis of data from the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) shows that 25% of respondents who had been to Catholic schools attend church weekly or more often, compared with 12% of government school and 17% of independent school graduates. Of those who went to Catholic schools, 18% never attend church, compared to the 32% who went to non-Catholic non-government schools and the 40% who went to government schools. The proportions of people who left their religion were similar—32% for Catholic school graduates and 28% for government and independent school graduates.[71]

These statistics show higher rates of church attendance for people who had attended a non-government school, particularly Catholic schools, but they do not isolate the effect of their schooling from the influence of family background. Based on the findings of the previous studies, it is likely that the religious activity could be explained by parental influence rather than indoctrination at a religious school. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of studies on this question in the last decade.

Effects on society

Education is essential for effective democracy. In *Education and Democracy*, John Dewey wrote that education is vital because well-functioning democracies are dynamic and require

people to be independent, informed and rational.[72] Education is, as Dewey pointed out, the way societies reproduce. People are not born knowing their culture, their history, and the skills required to participate in their society. Education provides them with this knowledge, which they then pass on through the same process to the next generation.

Another reason that education has always been considered important is because it is the vehicle for improving quality of life by helping achieve social and economic success. A society that provides a good education to all its citizens is more likely to be prosperous and healthy.

That appropriate attitudes and values are essential to democracy and civil society is indisputable.

The combination of globalisation and immigration has created societies with a variety of cultures, making social cohesion and tolerance essential. Some people are worried that religious schools segregate students into homogeneous groups and are not allowed to learn to tolerate and appreciate different beliefs and cultures; society will become fragmented. For example, Terry Lane warns that 'as long as our society permits, accredits and funds religiously exclusive schools, we must expect that the by-product of such schools will be intolerance of difference and delusions of chosenness.'[73]

Social cohesion

Most unease about the growth of religious schools stems from fears that they will undermine social stability and cohesion. Social cohesion is a term widely used but rarely defined. Murdoch University education researcher Laura B. Perry describes it an 'overarching concept that includes notions of integration, solidarity, identity, membership, trust and inclusion. It is essentially about the relationships among individuals, groups, and the state. Cohesion is the glue that holds individuals together as a greater whole—community, group or nation.'[74]

One view is that tolerance and social cohesion can be achieved by all children sharing a common, secular schooling experience. There is an associated belief that the values and virtues of good citizens are intrinsically associated with public schools.

> **The combination of globalisation and immigration has created societies with a variety of cultures, making social cohesion and tolerance essential.**

Andrew Jakubowicz contends that successful integration of post-WWII immigrants occurred because their children attended public schools, moving between 'their communities of origin and the wider world with seamless ease.' He laments the creation of 'ethnic ghettos' where students mix only with other students like themselves. Others have described religious schools as 'balkanising' and 'sectarian.'

Proponents of universal attendance at public schools often subscribe to what Ken Gannicott calls the 'nirvana fallacy'—the mistaken notion that if all children went to their local public schools, each school would be a reflection of the wider society, where children of all creeds and colours formed friendships and learned together.[75] In reality, this would almost never be the case. Public schools attended by all local children would be 'microcosms of the communities in which they exist'[76] and reflect the social and ethnic composition of their surroundings.

> [Because of] 'significant differences in the composition of the population (between urban and rural areas, and from one city neighbourhood to another) it is often not possible for the schools to reflect anything like the diversity of social groups in the society at large.'[77]

To create culturally and socially heterogeneous 'common schools,' students would have to be allocated and 'bussed' to schools large enough to accommodate a comprehensive mixture of social groups. This practice, while achieving the socio-cultural mixing agenda, would be highly discriminatory and coercive as children would be selected to attend particular schools based on their economic and ethnic characteristics, a bit like sorting Smarties into multi-coloured boxes. Not only that, it would destroy any special connection between a school and its community.

Proponents of freedom in education recognise the powerful socialising role of schools. Milton Friedman began his 1955 essay on school vouchers by stating that:

> [A] stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens.[78]

Upon this, almost everyone agrees. The point of contention is whether common educational standards require a common schooling experience and whether the pursuit of social cohesion is the highest societal priority. Economist Mark Harrison asks if the benefits of social cohesion are worth the costs, which include interference with freedom of choice, parental rights, religious freedom, and suppression of diversity.[79]

The other view of school choice and society is that allowing parents to freely choose a school for their child is the most democratic form of education provision. Not only is the simple act of choosing democratic but it liberates schools to reflect the real needs and desires of the people they serve. It symbolically and practically validates the existence of minority cultures and faiths, and acts as an 'escape valve' for multicultural tensions in public schools (See page 25). Furthermore, schools of choice generate social capital by creating networks of active voluntary associations.[80]

Attempting to achieve social harmony and prevent intolerance by denying people's freedom to choose a school is unquestionably authoritarian and anti-democratic. It is highly unlikely that public schools could ever meet the ideal of a social and cultural 'melting pot' without sacrificing other core liberal principles.

Acknowledging this, Salomone, Crittenden and others propose the concept of a common education rather than a common school. They argue that as long as all schools undertake to encourage their students to develop views that support a stable society, there should be no reason that parents cannot choose from different types of schools, including religious schools. In the United Kingdom, where a similar debate about religious schools is taking place, a House of Commons report on social cohesion states that 'there are many schools whose students do not reflect the range of cultural groups in their locality and so do not help to promote social cohesion.'[81] While the report does not suggest curtailing parents' choice of faith schools, it does recommend that faith schools commit to a 'multi-cultural agenda.'

Tolerance

The difficulty with the concept of the common school is that it is grounded in a strong assumption that contact with a variety of people will lead to tolerance and understanding. This theory underpinned the creation of the earliest public schools and still endures.[82] Alan Reid writes that 'appreciation and empathy for people from different backgrounds and cultures is best achieved through the experience of interacting and mixing on a regular basis.'

However, the development of tolerance is not straightforward. There is little research evidence, partly because tolerance is a construct that can be defined in a number of ways. Tolerance can be defined as applying only to people's actions and not their attitudes or beliefs (endurance without interference). So a person can be tolerant but still be prejudiced. Other definitions of tolerance relate to acceptance and the absence of prejudice.

Research psychologist Rivka Witenberg is among the few to have studied tolerance in school students, finding that personal experiences influence students' attitudes and beliefs about students from other cultures but not always in the expected way. She tentatively concludes that contact does not necessarily promote tolerance and acceptance; rather, it may entrench existing attitudes. Witenberg cautions that the relationship between interpersonal contact and the reduction of prejudice is complex.[83] Her research with Trang Thomas,

> **It is highly unlikely that public schools could ever meet the ideal of a social and cultural 'melting pot' without sacrificing other core liberal principles.**

> **There is no good evidence that mixing with students from different backgrounds in the school setting is the key to creating tolerance and respect.**

psychology professor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, also shows that boys become more racially intolerant as they get older, going against the theory that a combination of cognitive development and personal experience with diversity tempers racial prejudice.[84] Laura B. Perry's analysis of the literature indicates that the integration of students from different backgrounds has not been extensively researched; existing evidence only suggests that interaction 'may increase tolerance and respect among groups.'[85]

Without extreme levels of manipulation of school enrolments, no school can ever be an accurate reflection of the cultural and class mix of the wider society. And even if they could, there is no good evidence that mixing with students from different backgrounds in the school setting is the key to creating tolerance and respect. A number of factors—families, wider communities, and traditional and new social media—influence people's attitudes and values.

Do religious schools create good citizens?

Good citizens in a liberal democracy are not born that way. The values, virtues and knowledge required for a harmonious and stable society are learned through socialisation and education in the home, in the community, and at school.

Public schools have been variously described as 'the incubators of civic values,'[86] 'the bedrock of democracy,'[87] 'the crucible within which Australian democracy was formed,'[88] a 'democratising force,'[89] and as producing the 'children of the enlightenment.'[90]

> **Survey data of adults allow the comparison of attitudes, beliefs and political/civic activities of people by the type of school they attended.**

There is some research from the United States investigating the notion that public schools are superior in generating good citizens. In 2001, Jay P. Greene compared public and private school students on measures such as political participation, political tolerance, and volunteerism. Greene concluded that private schools enhance adherence to these democratic values.[91] Patrick J. Wolfe's 2007 analysis of 21 studies showed that in most cases, private schools had a positive or neutral effect on political tolerance, volunteerism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, and civic skills compared with public schools. Public school students scored higher on patriotism.[92]

Few studies look at religious schools specifically and of those that do, most study only Catholic schools. These studies show that Catholic school students score higher than both public school and secular private school students on democratic and civic values.[93] Thomas S. Dee found that people who had attended Catholic schools were as likely to volunteer in their community as people who had attended public schools and were more likely to vote.[94] Two small studies found that political tolerance is lower among evangelical/fundamentalist Protestant school students than public and Catholic school students.[95]

Even in the Netherlands, where religious schools have been publicly funded for nearly a century, researchers AnneBert Dijskstra and Rene Veenstra remark on the paucity of studies on non-cognitive outcomes of different types of religious schools. Previous studies gave mixed results on the social attitudes and behaviours of students of different denominational schools. Dijskstra and Veenstra's research found after adjusting for family characteristics, attendance at a religious school did not have strong differential effects on students adopting traditional values.[96]

There are no similar studies of school students in Australia. However, survey data of adults allow the comparison of attitudes, beliefs and political/civic activities of people by the type of school they attended.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) has been conducted biennially since 2003. It is conducted by mail and has approximately 4,000 adult respondents. The most recent comprehensive dataset is from the 2005 survey. AuSSA responses allow comparison of three school types—government, Catholic and other non-government. The 'other non-government' category is not broken down into religious and non-religious schools, but because more than 85% of other non-government schools are religious, we can assume that the religious school sector is dominant in this sample. Analyses of some of these data by Andrew Norton over the last few years provide evidence against the theory that religious schools generate prejudice and intolerance.

Table 6: Social attitudes and civic participation, 2005: responses of adults by type of school attended.

For example, 34.9% of people who had attended a government school agreed that gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to marry.

	Type of school attended		
	Government %	Catholic %	Independent %
Socially liberal attitudes			
Agree that gay/lesbian couples should be able to get married	34.9	38.6	40.6
Agree that abortion should be a woman's choice	82.2	66.8	84.8
Agree that unmarried women should have same right to IVF as married women	38	37.7	44
Believe it is very important to help people in Australia who are less well off	39.8	45.3	38.8
Believe it is very important to help people in other countries who are less well off	21	28.3	27.1
Tolerance			
Believe it is very important to try to understand other people's opinions	43.1	48.4	43.6
Believe it is very important for governments to respect and protect minority rights	54.8	59.9	54.2
Believe it is very important for governments treat everybody equally	75	77.9	72
Believe it is very important to demonstrate tolerance for people you strongly disagree with	16.2	16.9	17.7
Think religious extremists probably/definitely should be allowed to hold public meetings	25.3	32.3	33.7
Think there is some/a lot of tension between people born in Australia and migrants	75.7	74.8	71.4
Think that immigration to Australia should be reduced a lot	20.4	13.4	10.4
Civic participation			
Participated in protest, march or demonstration in last two years	10.6	13.9	18
Ever attended a political meeting or rally	20.4	26.5	29.4
Ever donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity	41.1	45.9	52.7
Member of lobby group to change specific government policies	3.2	4.6	4
Member of group that promotes rights	4.1	6.2	8.5
Member of an environmental group	6.8	10.1	13.6
Member of an aid organisation	9.6	16	21.1

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) (2005), Australian Social Science Data Archive[97]

Table 5 includes pertinent questions from AuSSA and lists the responses according to type of school attended. For the purposes of this report, the questions have been divided into three sections: socially liberal attitudes, tolerance, and civic participation. 'Other non-government' has been changed to 'independent' for simplicity. Where the term 'non-government schools' is used, it refers to the systemic Catholic and independent school sectors together.

1. **Socially liberal attitudes**: On gay and lesbian marriage, abortion, and access to reproductive technology, government school graduates did not have more liberal attitudes than non-government school graduates. The only clear difference in responses was on abortion rights: government and independent school graduates provided similar responses, while Catholic school students were much less likely to agree. Compassion for the less fortunate in Australia was also similar among the three groups but highest among the Catholic school graduates. Non-government school graduates were more likely to believe in the importance of helping the needy in other countries.

2. **Tolerance:** There is no clear pattern of one type of school being strongly associated with more tolerant attitudes on issues relating to different beliefs, cultures and races. Responses among the three groups were fairly similar on the importance of understanding the opinions of others, protecting minority rights, ensuring equal treatment by government, and demonstrating tolerance. Non-government school graduates were slightly more likely to be tolerant of free speech by religious extremists, while government school graduates were more likely to be in favour of reducing immigration to Australia (but this was still very much a minority view).

3. **Civic participation:** Unlike the previous two categories, the responses to questions about civic participation are substantially different between the school sectors. Membership of socially active groups and participation in community and political activities is substantially higher among people who attended non-government schools. Independent school graduates were around two times more likely than government school graduates to be a member of an aid organisation, an environmental group, or a group promoting rights.

> **There is no clear pattern of one type of school being strongly associated with more tolerant attitudes on issues relating to different beliefs, cultures and races.**

These data can be applied to religious schools only broadly and do not provide any information of the effect of particular types of religious schools on social attitudes and civic behaviour.

Some additional evidence comes from a recent survey conducted for the Foundation for Young Australians on young people's experiences of racism. The survey included students from 12 government schools and three Catholic schools. The most common setting for an experience of racism reported by all students was their school, but Catholic school students were 1.7 times less likely than government school students to report an experience of racism.[98] This evidence, although not conclusive, suggests little support for the idea that government schools have a stronger claim to delivering civic and democratic virtues and values. Indeed, if any pattern can be discerned, it is the opposite.

Secularism and religious diversity

There is no evidence that religious schools make their students less tolerant of difference. However, the notion of tolerance remains at the heart of the religious schools controversy. Why shouldn't a liberal, democratic society that truly embraces cultural diversity and values freedom extend the same principles to choice of schools?

A notable characteristic of the debate over religious schools is the contradiction inherent in the expressed values of the opponents of religious schools and their explicit attitudes towards people who have different beliefs.

In the early days of this conflict, the churches were more likely to make derisive comments about public schools. Catholic Archbishop Roger Vaughan famously called public schools 'seed plots of future immorality, infidelity and lawlessness.'[99] The tables have turned, with the secularists now most often offering judgment on the practices of religious schools.

Not all religious schools attract the same amount of criticism and scrutiny. Catholic and Jewish schools are generally accepted in the Australian community and invite little explicit criticism, at least in the mainstream media; however, Jewish schools employ levels of security that suggest a high level of perceived threat.

Most of the criticism is focused on two types of religious schools—fundamentalist Christian, particularly the Exclusive Brethren, and Muslim schools because they each exemplify the main concerns about religious schools. The Exclusive Brethren, being a closed religious group, exemplify concerns about the effects of religious schools on children. Islamic schools, as arms of an expansionary religion, exemplify concerns about the effects of religious schools on the broader society.

The Exclusive Brethren

Over the last several years, schools run by the Exclusive Brethren have come under intense media scrutiny, fuelled by a very public conflict between the Greens party and the Brethren assembly. The Factiva database and a general internet search reveal that since 2006, articles about Brethren schools have been appearing in the print and broadcast media on an average of once a month. This doesn't include frequent articles on other aspects of Brethren activities, such as their political campaigning or family disputes.

Articles on Brethren schools are implicitly, if not explicitly, critical of their funding entitlements and educational policies, and imply the questionable nature of their funding.[100]

Many of the practices of the Brethren are incompatible with mainstream social mores—such as not allowing members to marry outside the religion, not socialising or eating with people outside the religion, and discouraging tertiary education—but these do not appear to affect the operation of the schools or the quality of education they provide.

There is much misinformation propagated in the media. For example, it has been repeatedly reported that Brethren schools do not have computers or other technologies; that they are closed to non-Brethren children; that they do not provide an adequate education, especially in life sciences; and that they infuse the entire curriculum with religious teachings.

According to the Brethren, none of these allegations is true. By their own admission, the Brethren are 'cautious' about adopting new technologies, not because they are ideologically or spiritually averse but to ensure the educational merits of the technology. They now employ technologies to allow virtual connections between school campuses. Students can use the internet at school but have access only to 'white-listed' websites so that the school can maintain control over the content to which students have access.

Like all non-government schools, Brethren schools must adhere to the state curriculum or syllabus, which they say is not difficult as the state syllabus is already quite conservative. Although Brethren families do not encourage children to read fiction or watch TV and films at home, children study all of the required texts and content at school.

The Brethren maintain that their schools have an open enrolment policy, but even so only a few of their students are non-Brethren. Their observation is that parents who have approached one of their schools but have decided not to enrol their children are often seeking a school that is *more* religious. While this might seem an unbelievable claim, it is supported by the fact that all teachers at Exclusive Brethren schools are non-Brethren. Only the principal and administration staff are members of the church. Teachers are not questioned about their faith; they are required only to respect the ethos of the school and the beliefs and lifestyles of the families. Religious instruction is limited to one hour a week (that is, the same amount of religious instruction as in public schools) and is provided by church members.

> **Although Brethren families do not encourage children to read fiction or watch TV and films at home, children study all of the required texts and content at school.**

This author made an unplanned visit to a Brethren school as part of research for this report and saw children creating PowerPoint presentations in a well-equipped computer room and watching a documentary on the Vietnam War in another room. Students were engaged and lively, and the teachers were welcoming and open to conversation and questions.

While it is confronting for those of us with a liberal education and outlook to consider a life without unlimited access to novels, film, television, art, music and information, these families are making a rational choice to do so. Indeed, there is strong evidence for

the adverse effects of the unconstrained sights and sounds bombarding young people in mainstream society daily.[101] Although the large majority of parents would not go to the same lengths to insulate their children from the world, at least some would be sympathetic with the aims. Furthermore, it would be difficult to prove that these lifestyle decisions of Brethren families have a negative effect on the quality of education provided in their schools. Literacy and numeracy results of Brethren schools are either close to or above the average for schools with similar socio-economic characteristics.[102]

Islamic schools

Unease about the growing presence of Muslim schools is widespread. There have been several high profile battles over proposals to establish new Muslim schools, with most proposals being turned down ostensibly on 'planning' grounds rather than cultural or religious intolerance.[103]

A minority of people with undeniably racist motives oppose Muslim schools, but most concerns are about social cohesion. As noted above, such arguments can equally be applied to all religious schools, but in the case of Muslim schools they are reinforced by a perception that the teachings of Islam are not compatible with the values of mainstream Australia. These perceptions are fuelled by ongoing global tensions created by Islamist terrorist attacks on Western countries.

> **A minority of people with undeniably racist motives oppose Muslim schools, but most concerns are about social cohesion.**

A survey by Kevin Dunn and James Forrest found that more than one in four Australians said that Muslim and Middle Eastern people were cultural groups that do not fit into Australian society, a larger proportion than any other group.[104] And in 2003, then federal education minister Brendan Nelson felt compelled to ask state education ministers to reassure him that Muslim schools were providing a suitable quality of education, apparently due to a large amount of correspondence to his office implying they were not.

In theory, Islamic schools are just like any other religious school. Many Islamic schools have open enrolment policies, but in practice enrol very few non-Muslim students. Like all non-government schools, Islamic schools must teach the state-mandated curriculum. However, also like all non-government schools, what they teach beyond the curriculum is largely unregulated. Islam shares with Catholicism, fundamentalist Protestant Christianity, and Judaism a theistic rejection of homosexuality and a belief in the sanctity of marriage and fidelity. These doctrines, along with an adherence to creationism, place Muslim schools in the firing line for opponents of religious schools in general. Publicity over extremist anti-Western lectures and reading materials in a number of Islamic schools have heightened community disquiet.[105]

In an interview in *Policy* magazine, Chester E. Finn, Jr. said that the emergence of Muslim schools should be viewed in the context of history and compared to the disquiet about the growth of Catholic schools in the distant past.

> The fundamentalist, typically Protestant, religions but sometimes Islamic or others, are the newest manifestations of an anxiety which 100 years ago would have been about Catholic schools and Jewish schools and Lutheran schools for parallel reasons.[106]

Duncan McInnes, president of the NSW Parents Council, echoes this sentiment:

> Let's not get paranoid about this. Islamic families wish to choose a school the same way a Catholic family chooses a Catholic school.[107]

At the heart of the problem is that most people have little or no first-hand knowledge of Islam and the Koran. Ameer Ali, former President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, has argued that Islamic values fit within the spectrum of values found across all people in Australia. When it was suggested to him in a radio interview that there are some issues on

which Australian and Islamic values cannot easily be reconciled, Ali countered by saying that not all Australians have liberal attitudes to sexuality and not all Muslims think that men and women should not mix.[108]

Nonetheless, concerns that Islamic schools might teach, or at least allow the development of, anti-Western attitudes can't be dismissed without discussion. The potential certainly exists, so the question is the degree of risk and how to approach it.

Finn argues that schools should not be singled out for special legislation.

> If you are worried about social cohesion and potential social disorder the right way to think about schools is that they are one of many cultural institutions [which] at some point might step over the line from free speech to inciting violence. At that point you have to have a different set of rules, but I don't think they are education rules.

John Gray is less circumspect, stating that although it may be difficult to achieve a national consensus on values in multicultural and pluralist democracies, 'schools that teach hatred … or which make any religious or ethnic group a potential target of violence, should be put out of business.'[109]

It is indisputable that any school that incites hatred, civil disruption, or worse should be dealt with harshly. However, it is worth noting that there is no demonstrable pattern of anti-Western or antisocial behaviour associated with students from Muslim schools. Indeed, it can be argued that Islamic schools, by virtue of their superior educational quality, are a positive force.

In Australia, the larger Islamic schools tend to have very strong academic outcomes, with a focus on self discipline and community involvement. An Islamic school visited by this author prides itself on its relentless focus on educational quality, with all Year 12 graduates—boys and girls—securing places in university courses, most of them in medical, biological or physical sciences. This is balanced by civic participation. Many students volunteer in the local community and all school fundraising is directed to secular charities, not the school or religious organisations. The school's main objective is for all graduates to be productive and respected members of society.

Cultural pluralism has been embraced wholeheartedly in education. Appreciation of different cultures can be seen in every school, every syllabus, and every policy document.

On the other hand, Muslims have much higher rates of unemployment and lower socio-economic status than non-Muslims as a population. Riaz Hassan argues that marginalisation and a sense of relative deprivation creates 'breeding grounds of religious and non-religious radicalism,' suggesting that problems are more likely to arise among disenfranchised and disadvantaged Muslim people rather than the well-educated, high achieving, ambitious graduates of Islamic schools.[110]

School choice, pluralism and social harmony

Australia is a multicultural society. This obvious statement belies a complicated reality. The question facing all multicultural societies is how much they value pluralism—the ability of the members a society to live by fundamentally different beliefs and values. Laura B. Perry asserts that pluralism is 'a defining characteristic and indeed requirement of democracy' and extends to all social institutions, including education.[111] And, as Brian Crittenden points out, a society cannot respect pluralism and at the same time try to prevent people's different beliefs and values by playing a decisive role in education.[112]

Cultural pluralism has been embraced wholeheartedly in education. Appreciation of different cultures can be seen in every school, every syllabus, and every policy document. But when religious freedom comes into the equation, the pluralism challenge becomes fraught. It is especially difficult when culture and religion are entangled, as seen in the debates over whether public schools should prohibit young Muslim girls from wearing headscarves to school.

It is extremely important for the public education system to remain secular. No child should be required to receive theistic religious instruction against the wishes of his or her parents, and no religion should be privileged over any other in a public school. This is central to the role of the public school system. However, the nature of secularism has changed markedly since the advent of public schools. Secular public education was originally conceived to be neutral and inclusive with regard to religion. All religions were respected equally. Over time, the term 'secular' has acquired an anti-religious flavour—it now disparages all religions equally.

Aggressive secularism is strongly at odds with tolerance. Rosemary Salomone explains that tolerance has to be a two-way street between minority and majority values, 'where the bottom-line is set at mutuality and non-coercion.'[113] Therefore, if religious authorities should not be able to influence what is taught in public schools, then secular organisations should not be allowed to influence religious schools.

> **While few public schools are intolerant of religion in practice, a sense of anti-religiousness is palpable in the debate at the national level.**

Aggressive secularism and intolerance of religious beliefs and practices may well have contributed to the growth in religious schools. While few public schools are intolerant of religion in practice, a sense of anti-religiousness is palpable in the debate at the national level. People with a religious faith could easily feel alienated from public schools. To use the example of the Muslim headscarf again, preventing Muslim women from wearing the headscarf to public schools may indeed force their families to choose Islamic schools.[114] If non-government school fees are beyond the means of their family, the unfortunate consequence may be that girls' education is truncated.

School choice and religious sectarianism

What would happen if, as some suggest, religious schools were subject to greater control over the form and content of their religious instruction? Or, taken to the other extreme, what if public funding was withdrawn on the pretext that religious schools are anti-democratic?

One of the benefits (and drawbacks) of public funding is that it provides government with some leverage and allows it (and the public) to monitor school activities. If schools are excised from the funding and accountability ties of government, the potential for extremism and poor quality education may grow rather than abate. The Western Australian government's closure of the independent Muslim Ladies College in Perth due to its lack of attention to the academic curriculum and financial misappropriation is an example of public funds enabling effective oversight.[115]

Fethi Mansouri, an expert in Middle Eastern studies and immigration from Deakin University, says that cutting off funding to Islamic schools could force schools into 'remote corners of society where there [will be] no scrutiny or accountability.'[116] Mansouri believes it is preferable for religious schools to ratify a set of agreed principles based on which they would receive funding. The Australian Council for Islamic Education in Schools has voluntarily developed for its member schools a statement of 11 values and principles, including a commitment to 'teach the children in our schools to be proud Australians, model citizens and to participate positively in building a prosperous, harmonious and safe society in Australia' and to 'stand against those who preach violence and hatred.'[117]

Government oversight is, however, a two-edged sword. Boston University's Charles L. Glenn has been a staunch defender of the independence of religious schools, warning that too much regulation of what religious schools can and cannot teach destroys their distinctive character. Government funding, and the demands that inevitably follow, can have the effect of homogenising schools and expunging what makes them unique.[118] Catholic schools were integrated into the state school system in New Zealand in 1975, receiving increased government funding in exchange for accepting some restrictions on their operation by the national government. Some observers see this as a positive development and favour a similar step for Australia,[119] but others say government oversight has somewhat diminished the very qualities that had made these schools a successful and popular alternative to public schools.[120]

We can only speculate about what might happen if funding were to be withdrawn from religious schools with the intent of curtailing their numbers. However, there are valuable insights in the reverse situation—the result of increased funding to religious schools and policies that have allowed their proliferation. Have these policies, as predicted by *The Age* columnist Kenneth Davidson in 1996, resurrected the 'sectarian divide that blighted Australia for most of its history until the 1970s'?[121]

If the battles waged against the non-government school sector by public school advocates such as the Australian Education Union are considered a sectarian divide, then perhaps yes. But that is a one-sided battle. Non-government schools have no desire to see funding reduced or withdrawn from public schools because their own funding is already indexed to public school funding levels.

There is unarguably no sectarian divide between religious schools. Rather than creating blocs of religious schools that are antagonistic towards each other, increased funding and reduced barriers to new schools have helped diversify the non-government school sector (See page 5). The Catholic school system prefers to deal with government as a system, but all other non-government schools are individually allocated funding in a transparent way that reduces the opportunity for political haggling.

Public schools in a centralised system struggle to provide for the needs of all parents. When public schools are the only option, and the values and beliefs of parents about what is best for children are at odds with those of the public school system, parents can only seek resolution by attempting to change the whole system or by seeking an exemption from certain aspects of it. On the other hand, alternative options such as religious schools can minimise such disputes.

Neil McCluskey, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute in the United States, says that a monolithic public school system can be the source of social conflict in diverse society: 'Different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups have no choice but to enter the political melee it they want to see their values taught and desires met by the public schools.'[122] McCluskey corroborates his argument by listing dozens of encounters between parents and school systems over conflicting ideas about education, many of which were pursued through the courts at great cost to taxpayers and other students. Not only were few of these cases resolved to anyone's satisfaction but other students were indirectly affected by the consequences of successful actions by a minority of parents, such as book bans. Many of these conflicts might have been avoided if parents had the option of withdrawing to a school more compatible with their views.

There is also a line of reasoning that through diversification and expansion, many religious schools have been become less dogmatic. As larger numbers of children enrolled in religious schools, many of whom were not from devout families, schools have had to accommodate a broader range of beliefs and lifestyles. David Sikkink, professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, contends that the competition created by increasing numbers of Christian schools in the United States has also had a diluting effect: 'Market forces have created diversity in Christian schools and forced them to moderate the role of religion and create a more democratic governance.'[123] Furthermore, Sikkink claims that religious schools have had a positive impact on the academic curriculum and pedagogy by providing environments where different teaching models can be used. For example, few Christian schools adopted whole language literacy instruction when it became popular in the public school system.

> **As larger numbers of children enrolled in religious schools, many of whom were not from devout families, schools have had to accommodate a broader range of beliefs and lifestyles.**

Indeed, atrophy in the religious character of schools is a real problem facing Catholic schools in Australia. The number of non-Catholic families in Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT increased from 9% in 1986 to 20% in 2006, and the Catholic education system is struggling to remain true to its cause.[124] Catholic schools have always given preference to Catholic families when they are over-subscribed, but due to the necessity of charging fees, the poorest Catholic families have gradually been replaced by higher income non-Catholic families—a situation that sits uncomfortably with the Church's pastoral mission.

A 2007 letter from the Catholic Bishops of NSW and the ACT says that because of demographic and social changes, Catholic schools 'now have a different mix of students and less support for their specifically religious mission from outside the school than they had in the past.'[125] The proposed solution—to strengthen the Catholic nature of the schools by requiring teachers to make a statement of faith—proved to be highly controversial, demonstrating the degree of pressure on religious organisations to accommodate the views of secular society.[126]

This evidence shows that increases in enrolments and the number of religious schools have not exacerbated social tensions; in fact, the majority of religious schools have become compelled to modernise and adjust to the expectations of a liberal society. The surveys described above that show that religion is not highly important to the majority of parents suggest that schools that try to be 'too religious' will do so against the wishes of parents and lose students. While this evidence does not offer any certainty, it strongly suggests that further expansion of religious schools would maintain the trend towards moderation and diversity.

The challenge for policy: defining the public obligations of non-government schools

How much freedom is too much? How do we balance the need for common social values while guarding against indoctrination and the loss of freedom of thought and belief? As Friedman wrote, 'Here is another of those vague boundaries it is easier to mention than to define.'[127]

Various writers have recommended that to be eligible for public funding, religious schools should be required to meet a set of public obligations, including:

1. teach a course on civics and government[128]

2. sign up to a set of values and principles such as respect for human rights and individual liberty[129]

3. teach religion objectively and critically rather than as the truth,[130] and

4. follow open enrolment and hiring policies in selecting students and teachers.[131]

This sort of government intervention has popular appeal. The first two requirements are reasonable. Children should certainly be taught about civics and government as part of the academic curriculum, and it is not onerous to expect that schools commit to instilling the values that underpin a peaceful, democratic and free society. In fact, most make this commitment voluntarily.

> **How do we balance the need for common social values while guarding against indoctrination and the loss of freedom of thought and belief?**

At present, it seems premature and unnecessary to put limitations on religious instruction and hiring and enrolment practices. There already exists a variety of practices among religious schools. Catholic schools can and usually do hire Catholic teachers and give Catholic families preference in enrolments. Many Christian community schools do the same. Contrary to media reports, Exclusive Brethren schools do not select their teachers on the basis of faith, and have open enrolment policies. Even within religious schools, there are differences between religions. Orthodox Jewish schools tend to hire Jewish teachers, while Jewish schools in the less observant tradition hire teachers on professional merit rather than faith. Some Jewish schools accept only Jewish students, others have open enrolment.

The fact that religious schools are schools of choice is crucial. If parents think that educational standards in a school are compromised by the school's practice of hiring teachers on their religious faith rather than educational merit, they will not send their children there. If a school only enrols children of a particular faith, it is presumably because religion plays a major part in the school, and children of a different faith may find it difficult to fit in. Parents who do not subscribe to that faith would not find this appealing anyway.

The largest barrier to access to religious schools is the cost, not enrolment policies, so it makes more sense to provide additional funding for children who cannot afford private school fees than to withdraw funding from these schools so that fewer children can attend.

The dangers of excessive state intervention in the operations of religious schools have been canvassed already, but a further point has been made by Ian MacMullen, a political scientist from Washington University. MacMullen argues that if religious schools are not deemed eligible institutions for public funding because they do not accord with secular social values, then they should not be allowed to exist as schools at all. By withdrawing their public funding but allowing them to operate privately, the ability to enrol in religious schools will be determined 'by the size of the parents' bank balance' rather than the school's 'legitimate educational value.'[132]

At the moment, there is no good reason to believe that religious schools are having an adverse impact on Australian society. However, community concerns are very real.

One possible way to allay fears about religious schools is to create a schools inspectorate, an idea that received a favourable response from the Rudd government. The inspectorate could conduct regular inspections of all schools, respond to any allegations of serious misconduct within individual schools and recommend a course of action. An example of this is the schools inspectorate within the UK Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). Reports on the investigations could be published on the My Schools website for public perusal. In most cases, the threat of public scrutiny will be sufficient for schools to stay within the bounds of accepted standards. Those that do not would warrant either closure or significant reconstitution.

Conclusion

The debate over religious schools, especially those affiliated with religions with fundamentalist theist views, and how much freedom they should have, tends to be underpinned by a number of common assumptions, not all of which pass the test of objective evaluation.

For example, it is often claimed that the Howard government is responsible for the unprecedented growth in the non-government school sector, yet enrolment statistics recorded by the ABS since the early 1900s reveal that the biggest increases in non-government school enrolments occurred in the 1950s and the 1980s.

The most significant change in the non-government school sector under the Howard government was the diversification of religious schools. Due to a combination of government policy and demographic changes, a large variety of religious schools are now serving minority faiths.

Even though religious schools comprise more than 90% of the non-government sector, parent surveys indicate that religion is a minor factor in their choice of school. Parents tend to nominate discipline, quality of education and preparation for life as stronger factors. The underrepresentation of secular schools in the non-government sector is an important question from a policy perspective, about which we can only speculate.

Perhaps the biggest assumption about religious schools is that because they allow students to segregate into more homogeneous groups, and because religious instruction may have strict stances on morality and behaviour, they create intolerance and undermine social harmony. According to this position, religious schools produce inferior citizens.

Aggressive secularism that attempts to impose its version of truth on all people is the antithesis of democracy and tolerance.

Although research testing this assumption is scarce, existing evidence suggests that this is not the case. People who have attended non-government schools (which are usually religious schools) do not express opinions that are less socially liberal or less tolerant of difference than students who have attended government schools. On some issues, the opposite is the case. People who attended non-government schools actually have higher rates of civic participation than people who attended government schools.

Likewise, there is no reason to accept the claim that school choice is a direct route to social fragmentation. Due to the relationship between the family characteristics of public schools and their surrounding area (entrenched by school zoning policies), public schools are unlikely to be socially and culturally diverse.

It can equally be argued that school choice facilitates social harmony in a pluralist society by giving people free expression of their values and beliefs (within reasonable limits).

School choice, including the choice of a religious school, depoliticises schooling. It circumvents the conflicts that arise when parents' idea of what is best for their child is at odds with that of the government of the time. Finally, there is no evidence that religious schools provide a lower quality of academic instruction or produce lesser educational outcomes.

Of course, schools cannot do whatever they want. Schools have a powerful role in society and should assume responsibility not just for scholastic learning but also for moulding good citizens. That is, after all, why education is publicly funded—it advances the public good. However, care has to be taken when defining what religious schools can and can't teach their students. Religious schools exist because parents want them and value what they offer. Aggressive secularism that attempts to impose its version of truth on all people is the antithesis of democracy and tolerance.

Freedom is messy. There is no simple way to find a balance between respecting people's different beliefs and lifestyles and creating a common understanding of the values that underpin a cohesive society, but there is no evidence that religious schools undermine this process. Indeed, religious schools play a valid role, and their contribution is best achieved through public accountability and cooperation, not coercion.

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>   Let the rooms be full of contentment,
>   Let love abide here—
>   Love of learning, love of one another, Love of mankind, love of life itself, and love of God.
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>   So many hearts make a school.
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