The existence of faith schools (as they have come to be more generically titled) in the U.K. context remains contentious to those educationalists who would prefer children, whatever their background, to be schooled together. Because these schools are thought to be socially divisive (a form of “voluntary apartheid”), indoctrinatory and likely to promote religious fundamentalism, such august mainstream organs as *The Times Educational Supplement* have taken a critical, almost aggressive, line towards such schools in recent editorials and reporting, despite governmental and cross-Christian denominational support for their expansion. It is because of the trenchant ideological opposition to faith schools, one rarely supported by real data and with the various issues debated in one volume, that this book by Parker-Jenkins, Hartas and Irving is particularly welcome.

In this relatively slim volume, the authors manage to bring a number of issues together whilst accumulating the most recent research in the area, and they succeed in doing so with sensitivity to the range of claims and experiences of the religious communities in question. First, the authors outline the history of Church and Jewish schools, and the background of more recent calls on the part of minority religious communities (in particular, Muslim, Sikh and Greek Orthodox communities) to the right to substantial state funding—ninety percent—1 and a degree of autonomy in governance and over the content of the religious education curriculum. Then the book sketches the various legal, accountability, curricular and pedagogical issues, primarily the needs of children with special needs in religious schools. Finally, the authors examine the topical questions of whether faith schools in fact lead to increasing social divisiveness and whether minority religious communities should be given the right to receive funding on a par with the historic one accorded to Church schools (or whether their exclusion from funding would be unjust). It is, I think, in the penultimate chapter which deals with these issues that the authors do most to move the debate on. It is here that they assert that each application for funding

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1. Voluntary aided schools receive 90% of their funding from the national government. (14)
needs to be dealt with on its own merits, not simply endorsed on grounds of equal treatment with specific safeguards put into place:

  [I]t would be easy to conclude simply that faith-based schools have a right to exist in a pluralist society. . . . [T]he key question to be addressed by all faith-based schools is how far they will use their interpretation of religion and culture to generate open minds and open opportunities for both sexes. . . . We suggest that the focus should . . . [be] on ensuring that such schools can provide education that is socially just. By displaying an openness about ways in which particular religious beliefs impact on the ethos of the school, admissions procedures, curriculum content, social learning and engagement with the wider community, faith-based schools may go some way to alleviating concerns that they will simply become repositories for religious dogma. (188-189)

However, whilst applauding the authors’ recognition that we are not dealing with the same kind of situation in one faith school as in another, and supporting their cautions as to the explicit ways in which faith schools (as with many other types of school) might exclude or disadvantage some children, I think they are repeating a common error in the faith schools debate; they too assume that faith schools generally, and the kind of religious education practiced in them, tend to foster intolerance. Presumably by “open minds,” the authors mean a willingness of the educated child to listen to and sympathize with views other than their own. If so, why are faith schools to be singled out as nurturing intolerance? Why in this debate is it still assumed that nurturing commitment to, or sympathy with, a particular worldview (usually one which is congruent with the child’s home culture) is necessarily going to mean that the child will grow up intolerant? The prevailing argument here is that mixed, apparently inclusive, community schools are the only educational environments in which neutrality and openness of education can be cultivated. Surely it is time to test the veracity of this criticism of faith schools by finding clear evidence of its legitimacy one way or another. Unfortunately, the book does not do this.

Amongst the themes of the concluding chapter of this book is one which, I believe, strikes to the heart of the matter, that of race, culture and religious identity. British identity is in a particular state of flux at present; the nature of the multicultural ideal, the value of esteeming of all cultures, is in practice in somewhat of a crisis. The key question for the present is how a diverse society can remain stable if loyalties are fragmented and identities formed in isolation. As minority religions and
cultures grow in self-confidence, so parents in these groupings are (rightly) asserting dissatisfaction with community schools which appear to fail their children both academically and spiritually, and are demanding the right to educate their children separately. In human rights terms, parental claims to educate their children as they so desire are strong, but what if these claims for separate schools clash with the good of the (autonomous) child or evolution of society as a whole? The authors believe that it is necessary to manage the claims of minority groups, perhaps by segregated worship and special religious education within a more sensitively styled common school so as to achieve the best of both worlds: unity in diversity. Is this pragmatism or a conclusion born of the persistent argument mentioned above?

This book is a sound antidote to British governmental enthusiasm for widespread diversity in educational provision (specialist schools and city academies amongst them), questioning as it does the degree to which a fragmented society might result long term. What it fails to achieve, however, is a real sympathy, for the kind of educational ethos and religious education in which acceptance and toleration of difference might be based upon a secure and profound understanding of one’s own religion.

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