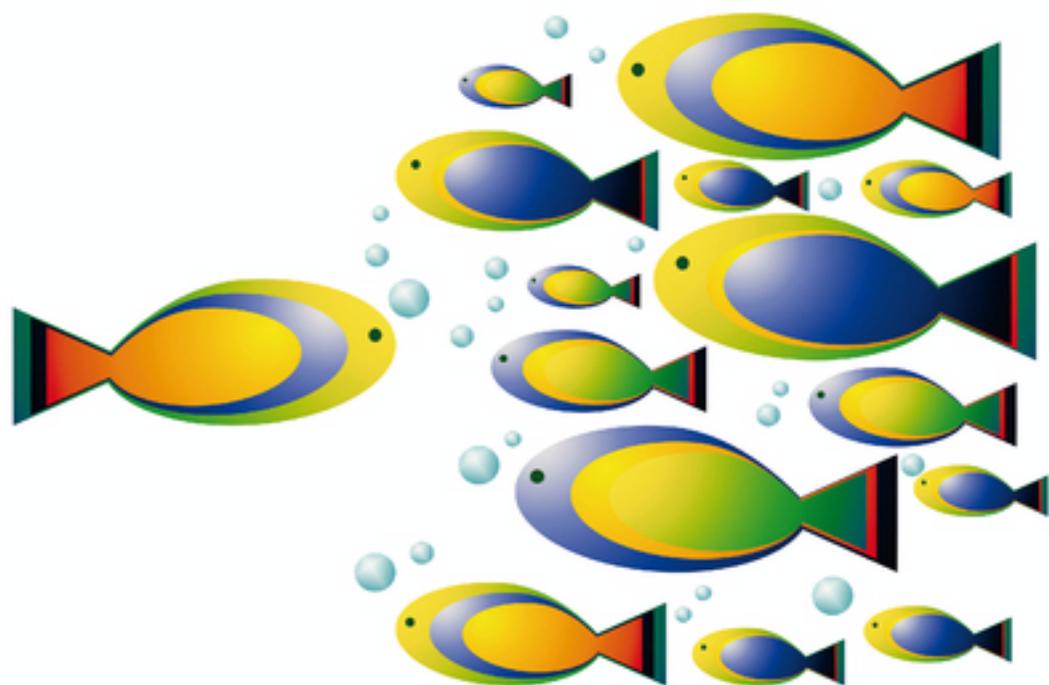


Swimming Against the Tide

The New Independent Christian Schools
and their Teenage Pupils

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Introduction

The ‘new Christian schools’, a network of small independent schools operating in the UK in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, are probably unknown to most British citizens. These strongly religious and strongly ideological schools claim that they do not simply serve middle-class families, that they have more than their fair share of ‘problem’ children, and that they are often operating on extremely low budgets. At the same time, they openly admit that they are ‘swimming against the tide’ of much of the culture that appears to constitute modern Britain. Indeed, they would claim that that is the very reason for their existence. If these claims are true, the schools constitute a research population which can genuinely inform a debate currently raging in British society: are ‘faith schools’ a good or a bad thing? Do they produce brainwashed, bigoted, anti-science, reactionary young adults who would be better placed in the seventeenth century? Should creationism be banned from the science classroom? Should it be banned altogether? Would the environment be safe in the hands of graduates of schools like these? Does religion itself constitute a threat to modern Britain? These are enormous questions which are often debated by those with strongly held views on each side. What is often lacking in such debates is the citation of any empirical evidence which could help to decide the issues. This book provides just such evidence.

The small independent schools known as ‘the new Christian schools’ have now been in existence for up to forty years. They form a loose network and are easy to identify. However one might define a ‘faith school’ (and that in itself is an issue), these schools are at the extreme end of the spectrum. Amid the strident voices calling for either the banning or the expansion of schools like these, something is conspicuous by its absence, namely empirical evidence that properly establishes what these schools are actually achieving. Are they producing indoctrinated, poorly educated, divisive elements in society, as their various critics would claim? If these

charges have any truth in them, the situation is serious. It is therefore of great importance that these schools, and others like them, should be investigated in a manner which contributes hard empirical evidence to the controversy which surrounds them.

In order to investigate the impact and influence of the new Christian school movement, or any other movement of the same nature, it will be necessary to discover the educational philosophy which underlies their practice and to evaluate their curricula and teaching methods. However, far more important, more illuminating, than all of these would be an assessment of the effects of the education offered by the schools in the lives of the pupils, both while they are receiving their education and subsequently. Those participating in the debate need to know what the pupils are actually learning, not just what the teachers claim to be teaching. They need to know what kind of people are emerging from the schools; only then can the controversy be resolved. By the time they reach their teenage years, many of the pupils will have been receiving their education in the new Christian schools for about nine years. What do these young people believe and think? How do they behave? What kind of people are they? What kind of citizens will they become? This is what the Government needs to know; it is what the churches need to know. Supremely, it is what the parents and teachers involved in the schools need to know. This book provides evidence which will help to answer such important questions.

Chapter 1 describes the 'faith schools' controversy as it now stands as revealed by the published literature, together with a description of the parallel debate within the Christian community. It provides the rationale for the in-depth examination of the new Christian schools and for the survey of their current pupils which will follow.

Chapter 2 contributes a detailed description of the schools. It describes their roots, their history and their nature, focusing on those aspects which make them uniquely 'Christian' and highlighting differences between them. Chapter 3 focuses on the reasons why the schools were founded. It emphasizes those aspects, particularly in terms of ethos and curriculum, which might be expected to produce measurable outcomes in the lives of their pupils, outcomes which might conceivably be different from those produced by mainstream secular education. Chapter 4 describes the political

engagement, some of it unexpected, which the schools have experienced over the past thirty years, and records changes in the law which have directly affected them. The historical and descriptive narrative provided by Chapters 2, 3 and 4 is important. It highlights the unusual nature of the schools and emphasizes their reasons for existing. In addition, it reveals some ways in which the gap between them and the current norms of secular education has widened over the years.

Chapter 5 introduces the major survey which is the subject of the rest of the book. It describes the context and methodology for an extensive survey of the teenage population of the new Christian schools. It describes how the survey investigated a wide spectrum of the beliefs, views, values, opinions and concerns of these pupils. It also provides an initial introduction to the young people themselves.

Chapters 6 to 11 present the results of the survey. Chapter 6 describes the religious beliefs of the pupils; where possible, these responses are compared with those of the wider teenage population. Chapter 7 is a specialist chapter. It investigates the beliefs of the pupils in connection with one important aspect of their religious position, that of their beliefs about creation and evolution and the relationship between science and religion. Chapter 8 reports on the worries and concerns of the pupils while Chapter 9 focuses on the perception that they themselves have of the unusual education that they are receiving. Chapter 10 describes the views and values held by the teenagers in connection with a range of moral issues, some of them controversial.

Included in Chapters 8 to 10 are the results obtained when some key internal comparisons were made, making visible differences which might be hidden within the overall data. Thus, the views of the girl pupils are compared with those of the boys, and those of the older pupils with those of the younger. Chapter 11 then considers the outlook on life held by the pupils who describe themselves as Christians when compared with those who say they have no religion. In each case, these comparisons might be expected to reveal significant differences, but has that proved to be the case?

Chapter 12 discusses the wider implications of the research findings for four groups of people, parents, teachers, church leaders and the Government, before final conclusions are reached.

On a personal level, I have been involved with the new Christian schools since 1978. In that year Trinity School, Stalybridge, Greater Manchester opened. I was a founder of the school, a member of the parent body for fifteen years and a teacher within the school for twenty-six years. For fifteen of those teaching years my position was co-headteacher. From 2003 until the present, I have been part of the Core Team which co-ordinates the activities of the Christian Schools Trust, a body which links and serves some of the schools. This direct involvement with the new Christian schools movement places me high on the list of those who keenly desire to know what the overall outcome of the past forty years of education provided by the schools has been. Have they, or have they not, earned the right for a continued existence, as they swim against the increasingly turbulent tide of secular culture?