

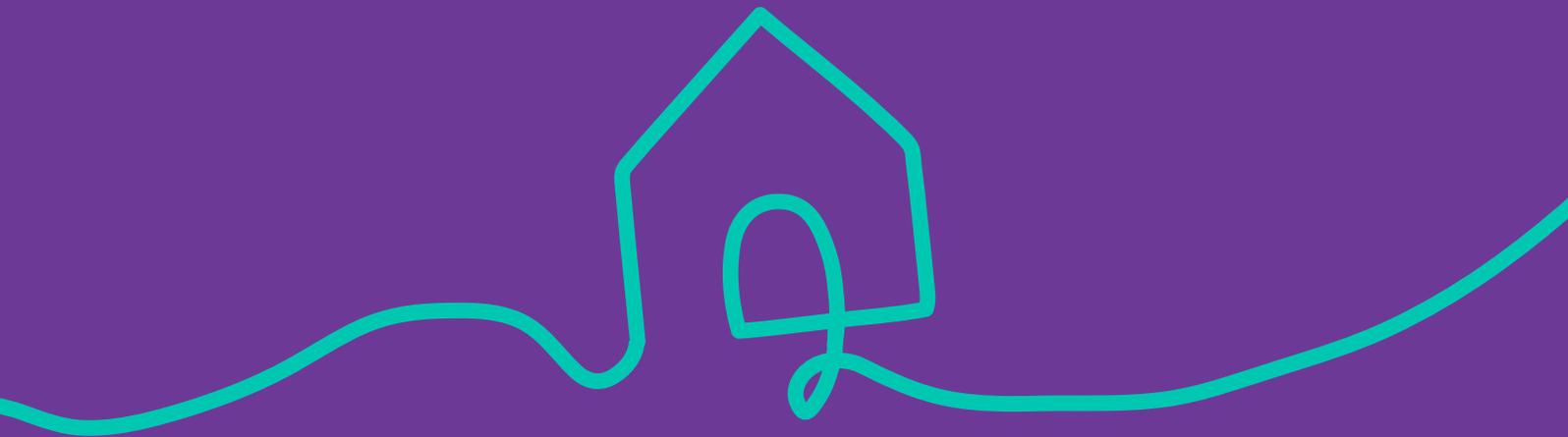


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# NO ROOM AT THE INN

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Exclusive admissions policies in  
Church of England secondary schools





**No Room At the Inn** was written by Jay Harman, Faith Schools Campaigner for Humanists UK.

At Humanists UK, we advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. Our work brings non-religious people together to develop their own views, helping people be happier and more fulfilled in the one life we have.

Layout and design by Liam Whitton.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## A sorry state of affairs

In England, as in other parts of the UK, state-funded faith schools are permitted to discriminate against prospective pupils on the basis of religion in setting their admission arrangements. Schools can, in other words, turn children away on the grounds that they, or more often their parents, are deemed to be of the 'wrong' religion, or of no religion. In permitting such religious selection, the UK sits on a list of only four countries identified by the OECD that allow state schools to religiously discriminate against children in admissions at all.<sup>1</sup>

The extent to which different religious groups employ religious selection in the admissions policies of their state-funded schools varies considerably. Previous research has found, for instance, that almost every state Catholic school in England discriminates in allocating all of their places on the basis of religious selection, and in fact the Catholic Education Service continues to resist any and all attempts by government to oblige its religious schools to open their gates to children from other backgrounds. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of Jewish schools. However, at generically Christian schools (that is, schools that have a Christian ethos but which are not wedded to any particular denomination), just 11% of places were found in 2013 to be subject to a religious test.

Clearly, therefore, some religious groups can claim to be more inclusive and outward-looking in their approach to school admissions than can others. But what of this country's largest provider of state faith schools, the Church of England?

The Church has long claimed that its schools fall into the inclusive camp, and has sought to build the perception that Church of England schools operate admissions policies that are 'wide open to the communities they serve'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, its official vision statement is entitled 'An education system where no passports are required'.<sup>3</sup> And where religious selection does occur, the Church has long maintained, in the words of the present Archbishop of Canterbury, that 'There's a steady move away from faith-based entry tests'.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The others are the Republic of Ireland, Israel, and Estonia.

2 ['An education where no passports are required'](#), Nigel Genders, February 2017

3 *ibid.*

4 ['Church in 'move away' from school selection'](#), The Times, November 2013.

In fact, as this report demonstrates, the Church is falling some way short of practicing what it preaches. This research finds:

- 1. 69% of Church of England state secondary schools have policies that religiously discriminate in their admission arrangements to some extent.**
- 2. This figure increases to 75% when current and former voluntary controlled schools, which do not or have not had control over their own admission arrangements, are excluded.**
- 3. 25% of Church of England state secondary schools use religious selection criteria in allocating all of their places.**
- 4. Nearly half (45%) of Church of England state secondary schools select a majority of their pupils with reference to religion.**
- 5. One in four Church of England state secondary schools prioritise children from religious families other than the Church over children from non-religious families.**
- 6. In the last five years, the number of religiously selected places at Church of England secondary schools has increased.**

The extent of religious discrimination in Church school admissions policies runs counter not only to the official statements of the Church, but to the views of the vast majority of Anglicans too. A 2016 poll conducted by Populus last year found that 69% of Anglicans do not support the use of any religious selection in school admissions.<sup>5</sup> Earlier this year a poll published by the Accord Coalition found that 79% of Anglicans oppose plans to extend the freedom of religious schools in England to use faith-based criteria in their admission arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

**This Christmas, at a time when many Christians turn their minds to a mother for whom there was no room at the inn, a more modern case of injustice stands in need of resolution. Church authorities are denying children access to their local state school because of their parents' beliefs.**

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<sup>5</sup> [Faith schools survey](#), Populus, November 2016

<sup>6</sup> [Religious schools survey](#), Populus, May 2017

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# CONTEXT

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## Religious selection

In England, schools with a religious character (faith schools) account for 34% of all state-funded schools. However, not all faith schools use religious selection criteria in their admission arrangements.

In **voluntary controlled schools**, admission arrangements are determined by the local authority. As a result, such schools are generally not permitted to religiously select, though around one quarter of local authorities do allow some voluntary controlled schools to do so. In **voluntary aided and foundation schools**, admission arrangements are set by the governing body, who are free to use religious criteria in allocating 100% of their places, and frequently do so. In **academies** that have replaced pre-existing state faith schools, admission arrangements are also set by the governing body and can be kept at the same level as it was prior to conversion, or it can be increased or reduced. This is true even in academies that have converted from voluntary controlled schools, which can even start religiously selecting having not done so before. **Free schools**, which is the name given to academies that haven't replaced pre-existing state schools, many only religiously select for 50% of their places, though this rule is currently under review.

The effect of this is an admissions system that is both incredibly diverse and, for the most part, incredibly permissive of the whims of different religious groups. As is alluded to above, the way in which these different groups choose to use their freedom over admissions is useful in revealing the nature of their educational outlook.

For a more detailed overview of the impact of religious selection and related issues, see <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/FACoverview>.

## Church of England inclusivity claims

The Church of England and its spokespeople have, for some time now, tried to portray the outlook of Church of England schools as broadly inclusive and tending towards a rejection of discrimination in their admission arrangements.

This claim was formally made in the Church of England's most recent 'vision for education', published in February 2017 and entitled *An education where no passports are required*. The vision statement claims that despite 'offering an education that is deeply Christian', Church of England schools are 'wide open to the

communities they serve'. It also notes that 'some still seem surprised when they hear of Church of England schools serving people of other faiths'.<sup>7</sup> This is a line that has been taken consistently by the Church in recent years.

In 2011, for instance, the Church's then head of education Rev John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford, signalled his intent by saying, 'I'm really

committed to our schools being as

open as they can be... Ultimately I hope we can get the number of reserved places right down to 10 per cent.'<sup>8</sup> In 2013 the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby

announced that 'What you are seeing in the Church schools is a deeper and deeper commitment to the common good... There's a steady move away from faith-based

entry tests'.<sup>9</sup> And in September 2016 the Revd Nigel Genders, Director of the National Society, said, 'Our schools are not faith schools for the faithful, they are church schools for the community. We don't propose to change that.'<sup>10</sup>

Most recently, in December 2017, the Archbishop of Canterbury said during a debate on education in the House of Lords that 'the Church of England's educational offer to our nation is Church schools that, in its own words, are deeply Christian, nurturing the whole child spiritually, emotionally, mentally, as well as academically, yet welcoming the whole community.'<sup>11</sup>

It is the veracity of this phrase, 'welcoming the whole community', that our research set out to test. Clearly, schools that are effectively closed to local families who are of the wrong religion or who are not religious cannot be said to welcome 'the whole community'.

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'welcoming the whole community'  
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7 ['An education where no passports are required'](#), Nigel Genders, February 2017

8 ['Limit believers to 10pc of pupils in CoE schools, urges bishop'](#), The Telegraph, April 2011

9 ['Church in 'move away' from school selection'](#), The Times, November 2013.

10 ['Faith schools welcome 100 per cent faith-based admissions'](#), Schools Week, September 2016

11 [Role of education in building a flourishing and skilled society](#), House of Lords, December 2017

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# SURVEY

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This report details the results of a survey of the admissions policies of the 210 Church of England secondary schools listed on and drawn from the Government's register of schools in England.<sup>12</sup> Of these 149 are academies or free schools, 3 are foundation schools, 43 are voluntary aided, and 15 are voluntary controlled. This means that through its local dioceses, and the governing bodies it controls, the Church of England is responsible for setting the admission arrangements for 92% of Church schools. The remaining 8% of their schools (the voluntary controlled schools) have their admission arrangements set by the local authority.

To conduct our survey we examined the most recently published admission arrangements for each school to assess the extent to which religious selection was employed in each case. For the majority of schools this meant examining their published admission arrangements for the 2018/2019 academic year, though in a few cases the most recently available arrangements were for the current 2017/2018 year.

In each case we set out to answer two principal research questions:

- **Does the school use religious selection criteria to any extent?**
- **If so, what proportion of places can be allocated on grounds of religion?**

In addition, where schools did religiously select, we identified which schools used religious criteria to prioritise only those who shared the religion of the school, and which schools went a step further in using religious criteria to prioritise children from *any* religious background, over all children from non-religious backgrounds.

All of this repeats an exercise that the Fair Admissions Campaign carried out for all secondary schools in 2013. The results of that survey can be seen at [fairadmissions.org.uk/map/](http://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/). It is possible to compare those results to these and see if any progress has been made over the last five years, and if the claim of a 'steady move away' from discriminatory admissions is valid.

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<sup>12</sup> This includes all-through and middle deemed secondary schools. It doesn't include schools that are jointly designated as CofE and another Christian denomination.

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# FINDINGS

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The results of the survey are as follows:

**69% of Church of England state secondary schools religiously discriminate in their admission arrangements to some extent.**

The survey found the overwhelming majority of Church secondaries (145 out of 210) religiously select to some degree in their admissions policies. This is almost unchanged from the 70% that religiously selected five years earlier.

As we explain below, not all of these schools are selective for all of their places, and some religiously select only a small proportion of places. However, the fact that just 31% of Church secondaries are equally open to families of all religions and none demonstrates the essential untruth at the heart of the Church's claims. The Church of England does not operate a network of secondary schools that are 'wide open to the communities they serve'. Rather, while some of its schools are fully open, the vast majority seek to discriminate against non-Christians, and are therefore in principle inaccessible to the majority of families in their communities.

**This figure increases to 75% when current and former voluntary controlled schools, which do not or have not had control over their admission arrangements, are excluded.**

Of the 15 voluntary controlled schools surveyed, just three (20%) religiously select. However, of the 22 former voluntary controlled schools (that have converted to academies), 12 (55%) religiously select. And of those schools that have never been voluntary controlled schools, some 75% select.

The significance of this is clear. *Left to their own devices* Church of England schools are more likely to religiously select, a reality at odds with the Church's own presentation of its approach.

**25% of Church of England state secondary schools use religious selection criteria in allocating all of their places.**

More than one in four Church secondaries seek to admit only children from Anglican families, entirely segregating them during their schooling from children from different backgrounds. It is no wonder, then, that 'some still seem surprised when they hear of Church of England schools serving people of other faiths'.

In the past the Church has claimed that, where religious selection is used, it is used

as a means to ensure both ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in schools that would otherwise admit pupils from an undiverse, middle-class catchment area. But previous research has indicated that the more religiously selective Church of England schools are, the more ethnically and socio-economically selective they also are.<sup>13</sup> In any case, it is difficult to see any nuanced, strategic use of religious selection reflected in the blanket discrimination practiced by so high a proportion of Church schools.

### **Nearly half (45%) of Church of England state secondary schools select at least half of their pupils with reference to religion.**

This finding is particularly important in light of assertions recently made by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the House of Lords. Speaking during a debate on education, the Archbishop said that 'less than 25% of our schools fill more than 50% of their places on the basis of faith criteria'.<sup>14</sup> As this survey demonstrates, as far as the policies of Church secondary schools go, that is simply not true.

Of course, it may be the case that some of these schools are not currently oversubscribed, and therefore the religious selection criteria does not take effect. But rather than absolve the Church, this only serves to emphasise its schools' entrenched support for religious selection - even where faith-based criteria serve no purpose, they are still loathe to drop them.

### **One in four Church of England state secondary schools prioritise children from different faiths over children from non-religious families.**

One in four Church of England secondaries do not just prioritise children from Anglican families, they prioritise children from any religious background over all children from non-religious families.

**Such selection is also potentially unlawful, simply because of how unfair it is.**

This is discriminatory, unwarranted, and suggestive of an offensive attitude to non-religious people

specifically. In a country where 53% of the population do not identify as religious (a number even higher among those of parental age), it is damaging to suggest that religious people and non-religious people are so different in the values that they hold that they should experience a different form of education, and deserve unequal treatment.

Such selection is also potentially unlawful, simply because of how unfair it is. Church of England schools in England are designated with a specific religious character.

13 See <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/FACoverview>

14 [Role of education in building a flourishing and skilled society](#), House of Lords, December 2017

They are not designated with a vague, intangible religious ethos. Their freedom to religiously select should therefore be applied with comparable specificity. Even in its own terms, it should no more be used by Church schools to discriminate against non-religious families vis a vis the religious than it should be to discriminate against Muslims, say, vis a vis other religious families. This is an issue that, if prompted, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator would do well to clarify.

### **In the last five years, the number of religiously selected places at Church of England secondary schools has increased**

In 2013 the Fair Admissions Campaign examined the admissions policies of every secondary school in England in order to establish the extent to which they religiously selected. The research found that 49.7% of places at Church of England secondary schools were subject to religious selection criteria. That figure is now 48.1%. By any measure, this progress is marginal, and certainly does not live up to the Church's claims of 'a steady move away from faith-based entry tests'.

In fact it is more than offset when one considers that five years ago there were 188,000 places in Church secondaries, compared to 198,000 now. So the number of religiously selected places has in fact gone up, from 93,000 to 95,000.

**By any measure, this progress is marginal and certainly does not live up to the Church's claims of a 'steady move away from faith-based entry tests'.**

This is a particularly shocking figure given the general decline in the number of those belonging to the Church of England, which has fallen from 21% of the population to 15% over the same five years.<sup>15</sup> Average weekly Church attendance has dropped from 2% to 1.7% of the English population over the same period, a much larger proportional fall.<sup>16</sup>

15 <http://www.britsocat.com>

16 <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/research-and-statistics/key-areas-research#church-attendance-statistics>

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# CONCLUSION

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The religious discrimination and segregation present in our state education system has long been a source of national shame. Indeed, if it were not so shameful, the Church of England would presumably feel no need to go to such great lengths in downplaying the extent to which they practice it.

They are assisted in this by Government support and a tendency on the part of media to take the Church's rhetoric at face value and accept the word of its representatives, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, rather than expose them to the same scrutiny as other politicians or state-funded service providers.

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But while the Church of England may claim that its schools are inclusive and serve all the families in their communities, the evidence to the contrary is now all too clear. In both policy and practice, Church schools continue to discriminate along religious lines, and a great many do so to the exclusion of all other religions and beliefs. Such discrimination, state-sanctioned and state-funded, is as unpopular with parents as it is damaging to the children involved.

At the very least the Church ought to do away with its hypocrisy, and speak honestly about its motivation for discriminating against non-Christians.

But if the Church truly cares about the people it claims to serve, it will do away with its discriminatory admission arrangements altogether. If Government cares about the public's rights and access to public services, it would require them to do so.



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