

## Atheists, stop groveling, by Zoe Williams

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If non-believers set up schools of their own, they'd soon knock faith primaries off their perch



The Church of England has announced that at least a quarter of places in any new Anglican school will be offered to non-Christian families. This is a "proportion" rather than a "quota", which means "we'll still do, basically, what we like". The church stresses that other faiths shouldn't feel obliged to do the same, since their very existence is a "sign of inclusion and promotes community cohesion" - which is absolute tripe, but let's leave that for another day.

What are the motivating factors here? To stump the middle classes, apparently, who are over-represented in faith schools due to the practice widely known as "quick, darling, let's pretend we're Christians". This involves getting up unusually early every Sunday, putting in "face time" wherever a vicar might see you, and probably not drinking on a Saturday (or at least not to the degree that you might over-sing at hymn time) - a lot like being pregnant again, only this time both of you have to do it.

This charade suits the middle classes. They do tacit rules better than the rest of society; better, indeed, than they do regular rules. And while I would generally be against any system that privileged pushy middle-class people, in this instance I cannot believe how these parents are now being told that an accommodation must be made to offset their grabby natures.

These middle classes are often berated for wanting a school in their own image but not wanting to pay for it: at primary level, this means pretending to be C of E; at secondary level, it means moving into the chosen comp's catchment area - sending house prices soaring, which prices the poor out of the area and so makes the school even more middle class. I have reservations about the catchment debate, since for every family who bought its way into a good school, there are 10 who made the school good in the first place, in tiny increments, with activism or baking; and where do you draw the line? Is that yet more nefarious middle-class nest-feathering, or is it civic duty?

The faith argument is even more insulting, however - a family that is basically atheistic and busts its way into a faith school makes the following compromises. There is the getting up early and making friends with the vicar, but there is also having to see your child inculcated with nonsense as a byproduct of being competently taught to read. And yet these schools are not privately funded; an atheist pays as much towards them as a Christian does. So Mr and Mrs Agnostic make the massive concession to this belief structure that they're prepared to pay for its promotion without making a fuss, and they do so on the understanding that it would be churlish to demur, given that these schools tend to be above average. The schools' quality is not based on the message of Jesus, though - it's based on decades of sanctioned selectivity.

The mystery is, why don't atheists and agnostics stick up for themselves a bit more? Why don't unbelieving parents demand funding for schools of their own, to be run in accordance with the principles of environmentalism, or humanism? Man, they could run those C of E primaries off the league tables in a generation, in a decade, given the same resources and the same freedom to decide who is in and who is out. There seems to be a lingering embarrassment whenever atheism comes face to face with Christianity. It is assumed that the faithful command the authority, and deserve it. What kind of a group do non-believers constitute? Who would entrust them with a school budget? You might as well give it to anarchists. Well no, not really. There's nothing childishly rebellious or intellectually slothful about agnosticism. And there is nothing inherently morally superior about getting up early on a Sunday.