

What hope for the faith school?

The Roman Catholic primary school with a 90 per cent Muslim intake raises questions about immigration and the future of our church schools.



Broad church: Fr Bernard Kelly, at the Rosary Primary School, in Birmingham, where 90 per cent of pupils are Muslim Photo: John Lawrence

‘We’ve only the one family who insist on taking their children out of RE lessons,’ says Father Bernard Kelly, the long-serving chairman of the governors at the Rosary School at Saltley in inner-city Birmingham.

Thirty years ago, its 400 pupils were all Catholics, many of them first or second-generation Irish. Now all but 10 per cent are Muslims, yet their parents are apparently happy for them to sit through lessons taught by a largely Christian staff and taken from a Catholic syllabus that includes subjects such as the Pope, the Virgin Mary, the Mass and Jesus.

‘What can I say?’ exclaims 72-year-old Fr Kelly. ‘It’s their choice. We make no imposition on them to change their religion.’

Saltley itself, he reports, has altered dramatically even in his 17 years in the parish ‘and now there are

certainly Muslim schools nearby that these children could go to. We're right next door to a local authority, non-denominational primary, but still Muslim parents keep choosing our Catholic school. It's a revelation to me."

He means it in the best possible sense of word – so much so that he insists that the 80-year-old Rosary School will be here "for another eight decades". Others, though, might use the same word in a different spirit. For this Catholic primary has been making headlines on account of its unusual intake, and has in the process reignited the fierce debate about immigration and the role and purpose of state-funded faith schools.

If these, critics ask, are to continue to be funded by the taxpayer to the tune of 100 per cent of their wage bills and 90 per cent of their capital costs (the other 10 per cent has to be raised by members of the church or denomination), then shouldn't the logic of the system be that Catholic schools cater for Catholic children, Jewish ones for Jewish children and so on? Why should the state pay the Catholic Church to educate Muslims?

The question takes on a greater urgency when we consider the first fruits of the 2011 census, which was unveiled last week. These show the largest growth in population in England and Wales (by 3.7 million) in any 10-year period since records began in 1810, with one principal cause being a rise in immigration.

That brings a new diversity to our population, in ethnic and religious terms, but also places fresh strains on the compact between government and churches, sealed by the 1944 Education Act, which allows for children in particular faith groups to attend taxpayer-funded "voluntary-controlled" and "voluntary-aided" schools, such as the Rosary Primary.

There are currently about 6,500 such primaries and secondaries in the state system – 65 per cent of them Anglican, 33 per cent Catholic, and smaller numbers of Jewish and Methodist. In recent years, Whitehall has extended this concession to other faiths. The most recent figures from the Department for Education list one Hindu, one Seventh Day Adventist, four Sikh and 11 Muslim voluntary-aided schools.

But numbers have not kept pace with our rapidly rising and diverse population, leading to anomalies such as that seen at the Rosary School. Indeed, the influx has been so fast that, as we can see from the Rosary School, some of society's institutions no longer explicitly reflect the communities they serve.

The response to this challenge has been attempts to agree an upper and lower cap on admissions from the sponsoring faith group to ensure that the school lives up to its own denominational mission and justifies the allocation of state funds. But there is little agreement on what those limits should be – or even if they are necessary.

The Rt Rev John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford, head of the Church of England's Education Board, caused headlines last year by suggesting his schools should admit only one in 10 Anglican church-goers because their "primary function" is "to serve the wider community". Otherwise, he

warned, C of E schools risked operating only to collect “nice Christians into safe places”.

As well as highlighting concerns about community cohesion, the bishop’s remarks were also interpreted as addressing the widespread perception that church schools too often attract ambitious but irreligious middle-class parents because of their better-than-average academic records.

Current practice in most Anglican schools is to admit about 50 per cent of churchgoers (real or otherwise). But the Church of England, as the Established Church, has a unique view of itself as serving everyone in local communities, regardless of their denominational attachment or absence of one. And so the balancing act it tries to pull off is to try to make its schools sufficiently different from their secular counterparts – without ever making them so Christian that they put off the godless and those of other faiths.

The Church School of the Future, published in March under the auspices of Bishop Pritchard, addressed this conundrum directly. It advocated no softening of the commitment to the teaching of RE or to a collective act of Christian worship, but also promoted “distinctiveness within an inclusive community framework”.

Worthy sentiments, but hardly a blueprint for headteachers on how to proceed day to day. The reality is that in most schools they make their own decisions. Some, for example, allow Muslim pupils to wear veils or skullcaps, others don’t. At the Rosary, it is permitted, but Fr Kelly reports that most choose to wear the standard uniform instead. Some schools insist all attend acts of worship, others don’t. Again, it is optional at the Rosary. And some allow children to finish early to attend faith-formation classes at their local temple or mosque. Others don’t.

Michael Gove has often spoken of his admiration for faith schools. But the Secretary of State’s views on the question of a cap may be judged by a leaked letter he wrote earlier this year concerning a planned Catholic comprehensive in Richmond. A high-profile local campaign group, claiming that non-Catholics in the area faced religious discrimination by being excluded from the school, had been pressing for only half of the places at the new school to be reserved for Catholics. In his letter, Mr Gove described this suggestion as seeming “very sensible to me”.

This 50 per cent mark seems to represent the direction of travel for Whitehall and Westminster in the wider debate. But it is fiercely resisted by those running long-standing denominational schools. The Catholic bishops, for instance, defeated a 2008 proposal from the Labour government to impose a 25 per cent non-Catholic intake.

With hindsight, it feels like a curious victory. While some of the most popular and high-achieving Catholic schools can happily fill their classes with Mass-goers, overall figures produced by the Catholic Education Service in 2011 show that nationwide the level of Catholic pupils in Catholic schools stands at 70 per cent – that is, lower than the Labour government had proposed. In Catholic sixth forms, the figure falls to 50 per cent.

However, there seems little appetite right now to revisit the issue, but cases such as the Rosary Primary continue to highlight the apparent absurdities of the present policy of muddling through. The Catholic weekly, the Tablet, reported in 2011 that there were about 25 other schools in similar situations –

mainly in the North West and the Midlands, and specifically areas that once had large immigrant Catholic populations, but where the next generation had moved out to be replaced by Muslim families.

The situation varies around the country. In some large cities, the recent influx of Poles and other eastern Europeans has seen Catholic parishes and schools rejuvenated and filled to the limit. And so different dioceses adopt different approaches.

In Salford diocese – which serves Catholics in the Manchester region – the bishop decided in September 2010 to close Sacred Heart Primary in Blackburn when the percentage of Catholics fell to 3 per cent, and to sell the premises to the local education authority. Among those keen to take it over was the local mosque that wanted to run it as a Muslim voluntary-aided school.

“We want to make sure the educational needs of the community are met,” said the diocesan director of education, Geraldine Bradbury, at the time. “We would not be serving the local community by insisting that we run the school. It means having a Catholic headteacher [all Catholic schools must have a Catholic head] and 10 per cent of the timetable on RE. It would be very wrong of us.”

In Birmingham, by contrast, faced by similar statistics at the Rosary School, there is a commitment to keep it open as long as local parents want it. Fr Kelly insists that the work it is doing today in its classrooms with its 90 per cent Muslim intake is “living the gospel in a wider context” and therefore absolutely central to the “witness” of the Church in a multicultural society.

In the space between his unbridled enthusiasm, the Anglican Bishop of Oxford’s controversial talk of distinctiveness and inclusion, and Bradbury’s straightforward pragmatism lies the heart of an unresolved debate about the direction of faith schools funded by the public purse. In an age where immigration is profoundly changing the very fabric of our society, is it whom these schools serve in the denominational sense or how they go about it that justifies their continued existence?

Peter Stanford - The Telegraph