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Publicly funded religious schools: for what purposes, and with what effects? Connecting normative and empirical debates

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ABSTRACT

Debates about the public funding of religious schools (PFRSs) have tended to retain a theory-centric nature, remaining largely disconnected from available evidence. Responding to calls for greater cross-fertilisation between philosophical and empirical research, and drawing on a review of the literature, this paper aims to develop an understanding of how and under which conditions PFRSs facilitate or jeopardise the realisation of different values and educational goods. To this end, we parse out a series of claims that recur in debates around PFRSs and summarise existing empirical research related to each. Based on this, we identify three sets of contextual variables relevant to understanding PFRSs' contrasting outcomes: the formal and de facto status of different religious groups, the governance of religious schooling and religious education, and the heterogeneity of the religious-school category. The paper demonstrates the potential of a sociological perspective to facilitate an understanding of PFRSs more amenable to policy analysis and action.

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1. Introduction

Debates about the public funding of religious schools¹ have a perennial quality. Across Western countries, the question of whether non-state religious schools should receive public funds remains the object of a vibrant and often polarising debate. While most states subsidise faith-based education in some form, the legitimacy of such arrangements is routinely contested. Likewise, in contexts where religious schools largely remain unaided, new funding initiatives generate both dogged support and fierce resistance (D'Agostino and Grau I Callaizo 2022; Yoon et al. 2024).

The defence of publicly funded religious schools (PFRSs) is often premised on the notion that institutional differentiation is a necessary response to religious diversity in plural societies. Public funding for religious schools is thus often posited as an expression of the right to recognition, protection, accommodation or reproduction of religious groups (Burtonwood 2002; De Jong and Snik 2002; Fabretti 2011; Ferrero 2004). By contrast, others problematise

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religious-school provision, pointing to its incompatibility with a variety of principles and the realisation of different educational goods. Hence, various commentators caution against state support, contraposing PFRSs to a common-school ideal that accommodates heterogeneity and prevents social fragmentation. PFRSs are often framed by their critics as potentially endangering the realisation of the right to individual autonomy, as well as the transmission of civic dispositions and shared identity, ultimately compromising social cohesion (MacMullen 2018; Reich 2007).

While the issue of PFRSs has been well examined from a philosophical perspective, it has been less explored through a sociological, empirical lens (Hemming 2015). Indeed, discussions of public funding for religious schools have retained an abstract and theoretical quality. This cannot be disconnected from the marginal place that religious schools have occupied within education and sociological studies (Grace 2003, 2020; Martínez-Ariño and Teinturier 2019), leading to a lack of dialogue that limits our comprehension of factors affecting PFRSs' actual outcomes. Yet an understanding of how and under which circumstances PFRSs contribute to (or compromise) the production of different goods is necessary from a policy perspective concerned with the authorisation, funding and regulation of such schools. Following contextualist approaches, we suggest that such insights can equally further develop normative political theory, based on a more systematic understanding of empirical knowledge across diverse settings (Cooke 2000; Lægaard 2019; Modood and Thompson 2018).

Drawing on a review of relevant literature, this paper aims to facilitate this dialogue, responding to calls for greater cross-fertilisation between philosophical and empirical research (Brighouse and Swift 2022; Giesinger 2009; Schouten and Brighouse 2015; Wilson 2017). We begin by briefly summarising philosophical debates regarding the merits and risks of PFRSs, parsing out five key threads and highlighting the growing relevance of consequentialist claims relative to the production and distribution of educational goods. We then address each of these themes from a sociological perspective, summarising existing evidence about the outcomes of PFRSs. Based on the causal intuitions advanced by this literature, we proceed to identify three drivers of variation and related variables of interest that help explain the contrasting outcomes of PFRSs. We close by signalling implications for current academic and policy debates and future research.

2. Overview of recurring normative claims

In this section, we outline the case for and against the public funding of religious schools, identifying a series of normative claims that resurface and might benefit from rapprochement between philosophical reflection and empirical research.

PFRSs are often defended along pluralist considerations relative to the fundamental freedoms and rights of religious and cultural groups, with such schools being framed as appropriately recognising the different traditions, cultures and creeds coexisting in a society. Hence, by generating cultural continuity between students, their families and communities, such schools are expected to preserve the integrity, distinctiveness and dignity of different groups (Fabretti 2011; Feinberg 2006; Ferrero 2004; Halstead 1995; Macedo 2003; McLaughlin 1995; Reich 2007). Despite variations in emphasis, such arguments coincide in presenting PFRSs as an expression of the right to recognition, protection, accommodation or reproduction of different groups; and are often informed by a communitarian

preoccupation with group identity and cultural membership (Burtonwood 2002). Alongside such communitarian perspectives runs a further claim to the value of parental rights and autonomy – often in connection with broader debates on school choice (Boucher 2018; Ferrero 2004; Wilson 2017). Such line of argument defends PFRSs as an expression of individual choice and freedoms, often invoking political-liberalism considerations – albeit interpretations within the liberal tradition regarding the acceptability of PFRSs are notoriously heterogenous (Burtonwood 2002; Dagovitz 2004; De Jong and Snik 2002).

Such normative reasonings relative to the intrinsic value of PFRSs are increasingly complemented by arguments concerning PFRSs' extrinsic advantages – particularly the notion that religious schooling produces higher levels of educational attainment and that disadvantaged populations benefit from the specificities of religious schooling. Relatedly, some suggest that religious schools might be better prepared to transmit civic attitudes (Shakeel et al. 2024). Causal explanations underpinning such expectations include differences in social capital (i.e. the notion that religious schools constitute more cohesive communities), the religious and value-oriented mission of PFRSs (translating into a stronger commitment to achievement and inclusivity), and a greater value-congruence between schools and social communities (cf. Clayton et al. 2021; Dijkstra et al. 2025; Driessen et al. 2016).

Critics of PFRSs have advanced objections to such a defence, disputing claims made by proponents as well as raising concerns linked to other principles and educational goods. A first critique concerns the very 'substance' of schooling – the skills, values and dispositions transmitted by educational institutions. Here, a main concern is the erosion of schooling's civic purpose if an emphasis on religious identity comes at the expense of transmitting certain values, with PFRSs potentially failing to socialise students into the political and social norms of democratic societies (Mason 2018; Mouritsen et al. 2023; Short 2002; Tuastad 2016; Wilson 2022). To different degrees, critics of religious schooling often assume tensions of this nature are inherent to religious schooling, even where schools do not deliberately question the importance of democratic and civic education (Grace 2003; MacMullen 2018).

A second critique concerns the student intakes of religious schools, seen as potentially insular or socially divisive, and their effect on social cohesion (Burtonwood 2003; Flint 2007; Halstead and McLaughlin 2004; Short 2002). The cultural compactness and religious affinity expected from religious schools is framed as sitting in tension with the presumed diversity of 'common schools' – public and secular schools deemed more favourable to social mixing (Fabretti 2011; Pring 2007). Indeed, a range of scholars warn of problematically homogeneous faith-school populations and the segregation dynamics they might trigger, framing heterogeneity as a means to foster intergroup contact and preserve social cohesion (Harel Ben Shahr 2019; Macedo 2007; Mouritsen et al. 2023; Pring 2007; Wilson 2017).

A third critique concerns the question of individual autonomy or, more generally, the tension between parental rights and children's self-determination. Different theorists comment on the risk of PFRSs operating as vehicles for indoctrination or hindering students' capacity for critical thinking or independent and autonomous action (Clayton et al. 2021; Ferrero 2004; Glenn 2018; MacMullen 2007; Tuastad 2016). Indeed, the existence of religious schools is oftentimes predicated on the right of parents and/or religious communities to affect students' religiosity and religious attitudes, therefore sitting in tension with comprehensive liberal theories (Burtonwood 2002; Dagovitz 2004).

As this overview suggests, the normative repertoire deployed by both proponents and critics of PFRSs features a combination of non-consequentialist and consequentialist arguments, relative to their intrinsic value and the extrinsic benefits they may potentially bring (Clayton, Mason, and Swift 2024). Non-consequentialist considerations about the inherent value of certain principles, including freedom, autonomy and diversity, have played a distinct role in shaping the PFRS debate. Indeed, debates around PFRSs have historically been dominated by considerations relative to the intrinsic desirability of PFRSs; accordingly, PFRSs have tended to be valued (or critiqued) as an expression of desirable principles and independently of their effects. However, more consequentialist considerations about the production and distribution of educational goods (see Brighouse et al. 2018) have been gaining ground. Hence, the state's obligations towards religious schools are increasingly discussed based on PFRSs' outcomes as providers of educational goods and based on their (expected) consequences. As discussed in the following section, this consequentialist turn makes cross-fertilisation between philosophical reflection and empirical research a particularly pertinent task.

3. Grounding the debate

Most scholars involved in normative deliberations over PFRSs concede the need to move beyond exclusively theoretical perspectives – yet ongoing debates remain theory-centric, engaging little with empirical evidence (Grace 2003; Hemming 2015; Macedo 2007; Reich 2007). Following contextualist approaches to political theory, we suggest that contextualised reflections drawn from empirical research offer a timely and valuable contribution for the benefit of both normative theory development and policy action (Cooke 2000; Lægaard 2019; Modood and Thompson 2018). The relationship between evidence and values is indeed a recurring theme within education policy studies, with many underscoring the inseparability of philosophical questions from empirically driven research or offering guidance for combining different modes of inquiry (Brighouse et al. 2018; Feinberg and Lubienski 2008; Schouten and Brighouse 2015; Wilson 2017). A core contention of such works is the need to identify the processes underpinning the phenomena we seek to affect in pursuit of certain values, enabling reflection on how certain interventions might work in specific circumstances (Brighouse and Swift 2022; Clayton et al. 2021).

This paper is premised on the notion that there is much to be gained from a better understanding of how and under which circumstances PFRSs contribute to or compromise the realisation of certain principles and the production of different goods. Accordingly, our objective is not to adjudicate among competing normative claims, but rather to understand how and under which conditions PFRSs facilitate or jeopardise the enactment of different values. A contextualised, sociologically informed approach is particularly relevant to such purposes (Fabretti 2015; Hemming 2015). Policy action on religious schools cannot be sought in a vacuum – it requires clarity on the values it seeks to preserve and an understanding of how things operate in context. However, 'context' is not a given, and variables of interest must be identified based on their explanatory potential. Thus, we seek not only to describe the current state of empirical knowledge about PFRSs' outcomes but also to identify analytical axes related to context for future investigation.

Thus, the remainder of the paper turns to existing empirical literature, summarising research on PFRSs' outcomes in relation to five core normative claims. To this end, we draw

on a comprehensive review of the literature informed by a corpus of 156 studies. In line with the purpose of the study, we focus on empirical studies and restrict our search to Western countries² to ensure comparability. Our review follows an interpretive logic and a generative purpose aimed at developing new understandings of the phenomena of interest. Specifically, the review allows us to (a) understand the processes set in motion by PFRSs that affect their compatibility with different values; and (b) identify key contextual factors underpinning the differential outcomes of PFRSs. Accordingly, it seeks to maximise diversity rather than secure exhaustivity.

4. Revisiting the normative debate around PFRSs: insights from empirical research

This section probes each of the normative claims recurrently mobilised in the PFRS debate. We prioritise areas of sustained scholarly interest with an emphasis on consequentialist considerations relative to the production and distribution of educational goods more directly benefitting from further engagement with empirical research. We synthesise findings from the reviewed literature, signalling areas of consensus and divergence and reflecting on the empirical status of these different research streams. When possible, we provide a summary of the causal intuitions³ mobilised by the reviewed studies – that is, their insights as to the forces and factors underlying the outcomes of PFRSs.

4.1. Accommodating pluralism

As discussed above, the pluralist defence of PFRSs has tended to emphasise the rights of individuals, groups and communities to educate young people according to their own beliefs while approaching the recognition of diversity as intrinsically valuable. Despite the non-consequentialist quality of such arguments, they prompt the question of whose rights, and what forms of diversity, are effectively honoured by PFRS arrangements. Efforts to measure pluralism are notoriously nascent and undermined by terminological and conceptual inconsistencies, data limitations and measurement challenges (D'Agostino 2024; D'Agostino and Grau I Callizo 2022). Nonetheless, given that expectations of cultural continuity and religious transmission underpin the defence of PFRSs, these questions merit attention.

Drawing on PISA data, D'Agostino and Grau I Callizo (2022) propose combining autonomy measures (i.e. the latitude given to non-state schools) and access measures (i.e. the market share of non-state schools and the public funding available to them) to estimate pluralism. This focus on the state/non-state divide, however, leaves many critical questions unaddressed – including the internal heterogeneity of both state and non-state supply, and the relative alignment between supply and parental demands. Indeed, literature suggests that the association between non-state provision and diversity cannot be presumed, with limited work addressing the internal diversity of the private sector (Carrasco and Gutiérrez 2024). Hence, it is not possible to determine the extent to which existing religious diversity is honoured, leaving the unresolved issue of 'what to do about homogeneously religious systems' (D'Agostino and Grau I Callizo 2022, 282). The issue is partially addressed by Wodon's (2021) proposal of a normalised education pluralism index. By estimating the market share of public, private non-Catholic and Catholic education, this index is presented

as a better proxy for existing heterogeneity. However, the author notes that further considerations are required as to ‘what levels of pluralism could be considered sufficient in various countries taking into account the diversity of faith affiliations’ (p. 108).

Country-specific work suggests that access to recognition and/or funding for faith-based schools varies greatly across religious groups. Focusing on England and Wales, for instance, Hemming and Hailwood (2020) find that the religious profile of schools does not match that of the general population: Christian schools are overrepresented and access to PFRSs is geographically uneven, reflecting ‘an unequal landscape of schooling, where certain groups have more access to faith-based education than others’ (p. 263). Literature suggests that such variation results not only from formal dispositions but also from different degrees of resources, knowledge and familiarity with the education system. Also importantly, attempts to diversify the existing offer, either State-led or bottom-up, can face obstacles derived from institutional legacies as well as a shifting public opinion regarding PFRSs – including resistance to the public funding of schools associated with minority faiths (e.g. Bourget 2019; Kamphuis and Bertram-Troost 2023; Muslih 2021; Rougier and Honohan 2015; Tinker 2009).

4.2. Academic achievement

Research on the academic returns of PFRSs owes much to work on the so-called Catholic school effect that flourished in the US through the 1980s and 1990s (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). While primarily concerned with the differential effects of *Catholic* schools on school attainment, this research cemented a wider interest in the impact of a (variously defined) religious-school specificity on student outcomes, inspiring debate on the direction and magnitude of observed differences, as well as competing explanations for religious schools’ premium or penalty (Dronkers 2004; Jeynes 2012; Sikking and Hill 2006). While extensive, this line of research has remained mainly confined to the religious sector in the US (McKendrick and Walker 2020), which, being largely unaided, provides limited insight into PFRSs.

Work comparing the cognitive outcomes of PFRSs to other school modalities in other contexts garners a range of inconclusive results. For some countries, research consistently points towards a lack of a distinctive PFRS effect on learning outcomes. Research from England, for instance, indicates that no net differences can be identified between PFRSs and their public (or secular private) counterparts – with observed differences being largely attributable to student composition (Allen and West 2009, 2011; Andrews and Johnes 2016; Gibbons and Silva 2011; McKendrick and Walker 2020). In other contexts with a relatively rich body of evidence, results appear more mixed. This would be the case of the Netherlands and Flanders, two contexts for which a relatively rich body of research exists, and where findings are notoriously mixed (Opdenakker 2020). Similarly, in Australia, some studies find relevant differences among public, Catholic and independent schools (Drew, Kortt, and Bec 2019; Mahuteau and Mavromaras 2014), while others find no significant differences (Rodgers, Neri, and Moran 2016). A recent study by Tomaszewski, Xiang, and Huang (2024) explores such inconsistencies while addressing the underlying causal mechanisms, finding that cross-sectoral differences exist and can be attributed to distinct student engagement and school climate patterns. Complementarily, other studies draw attention to denominational variation in PFRSs’ learning outcomes, thus adding another layer of complexity.

Driessen et al. (2016), for instance, find that neither Catholic nor Protestant schools in the Netherlands perform better than secular public schools, but that net differences are found for Islamic schools. The authors propose explanatory hypotheses including school climate, teacher–student relationships and the attention given to students’ cultural background. On balance, the evidence indicates no consistent academic premium for PFRSs, though academic returns may arise under specific contextual conditions, which remain poorly understood.

4.3. Civic and democratic transmission

Over the last two decades, the impact of religious schooling on a range of non-cognitive dimensions has inspired a robust body of research, with questions of norm transmission and civic socialisation receiving the most sustained focus.⁴ Research on the civic returns of PFRSs is heavily indebted to works on the academic advantage of religious schools reviewed above, which would eventually spark interest in religious schools’ impacts on civic participation and tolerance. Accordingly, such research has remained largely confined to the US and entangled with a broader debate on the merits and risks of private education (e.g. Campbell 2008; Wolf 2007), two facets limiting their informative potential for the PFRS debate. In any case, it is worth signalling that such literature yields mixed results, with no consistent patterns identified for the Catholic or Protestant sectors (e.g. Dee 2005; Fleming, Mitchell, and McNally 2014; Godwin, Godwin, and Martinez-Ebers 2004; Hill and den Dulk 2013; Sikking and Hill 2006).

More recently, this line of inquiry has expanded to other contexts, with different studies considering the political and democratic socialisation function played by PFRSs, and their role in the internalisation of social norms and civic dispositions. While this corpus of research remains inconclusive and fragmentary, it tends to refute assumptions of PFRSs’ detrimental effect on civic competence and democratic values. It also suggests that, in some circumstances and for some dimensions, religiously affiliated schools might exhibit differential civic returns, albeit evidence is mixed as to the direction of the effect, and the causal dynamics underpinning such impacts remain underexplored.

The Netherlands represents one of the few countries where a corpus of research on PFRSs’ civic and other non-cognitive impacts has accumulated. On average, such studies report no evidence of substantial differences between denominational and non-denominational schools, including Catholic, Protestant and Muslim schools (Dijkstra et al. 2025; Dijkstra and Veenstra 2001; Driessen et al. 2016; Merry and Driessen 2016). An exception to such patterns are those PFRSs with a particularly marked religious identity (i.e. orthodox Protestant schools, in contrast to Catholic or Protestant schools with a less pronounced religious orientation). In a rare attempt to address the chain of causality connecting PFRSs and non-cognitive outcomes, Dijkstra et al. (2025) find support for school-related mechanisms, as opposed to student characteristics or value-congruence between schools and communities. Hence, the differential effects of orthodox Protestant schools appear to be the product of a distinctive ethos and moral view translating into shared beliefs.

Albeit more fragmentary, evidence from other contexts suggests that, where net differences exist, these are small in magnitude and limited to a few dimensions of citizenship and political engagement rather than a consistent effect. Saha (2021) finds that, in the Australian context, students in Catholic schools score higher in a few indicators of political

and civic engagement; while Mouritsen et al. (2023) find that across a range of civic dimensions, children in Danish Muslim schools do not exhibit significant differences compared with public sector students with similar backgrounds – but that small differences exist in some specific domains. The authors venture some explanations for the absence of more significant differences, including a regulatory environment and school management teams keen to demonstrate the compatibility between minority schooling and democratic transmission, as well as the ‘protective’ effects of Muslim schools that shield students from negative identity competition in settings where their faith is heavily stigmatised. Finally, other studies find a positive relationship between PFRSs and various democratic and civic dispositions but warn of the lack of clarity as to the causal mechanisms underpinning such a connection, and difficulties in disentangling these differential effects from other school features (e.g. Galais 2018, on Catholic schools’ positive association with the development of a sense of duty to vote).

4.4. Social mixing and cohesion

To examine PFRSs’ impacts on social cohesion, two separate issues, addressed by separate research streams, merit attention: one concerns PFRSs’ intersection with school segregation and stratification along religious, ethnic and social lines; and the other concerns the consequences of limited intergroup contact for cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and recognition.

Regarding the former, evidence varies considerably in both availability and quality across countries. England represents one of the education systems where the impact of PFRSs on student distribution has been more systematically addressed. A rich body of evidence indicates that PFRSs tend to have more advantaged student intakes than their public, non-religious counterparts, often featuring lower shares of socially and academically disadvantaged students and minority students (Allen and Vignoles 2016; Allen and West 2009, 2011; Andrews and Johnes 2016; Bolton and Gillie 2009; Campbell 2024). Likewise, PFRSs appear to be less religiously and ethnically diverse than their public counterparts, such diversity nonetheless varying by denomination (Gao 2025; Hemming and Roberts 2018; Pennell, West, and Hind 2007; West 2023). Such patterns are often discussed in connection with the specific student admission policies and criteria used by these schools, although the use of faith-based criteria varies considerably across geography and denominations, and has been subject to fluctuating regulation.

In many other countries, evidence is comparatively limited and patterns are less readily discernible. In Australia, subsidised Catholic schools have been found to over-represent middle socioeconomic status (SES) students and operate as a key driver of segregation, albeit the internal diversity of the sector is often noted (Connors and McMorro 2015; Sciffer 2025; Sciffer, Perry, and McConney 2023). In France, Catholic schools feature a much higher proportion of high-SES students than the public sector, their existence thus being repeatedly identified as a critical source of school segregation (Boutchenik, Givord, and Monso 2021; Merle 2022). In both countries, however, Catholic schools do not appear to be more socially selective than their non-Catholic subsidised counterparts. PFRSs’ social intake is indeed conventionally associated with their reliance on tuition fees (given limited government subsidies) as well as with their greater discretion over admission policies – two features common to all subsidised private schools.

Similarly complex patterns can be observed in the Netherlands, where denominational schools are less clearly associated with different social strata, albeit religious background remains a key predictor of school-choice decisions (Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers 2005; Karsten et al. 2006; Merry and Driessen 2012; Vedder 2006). Likewise, in Canada, a cross-provincial study suggests there is no evidence of a mechanical correspondence between subsidised Catholic enrolment and segregation (Chmielewski and Maharaj 2022); while other studies draw attention to the sorting effects associated with Catholic schooling. Yoon (2024), for instance, finds that Catholic school choice in Toronto is a key force behind spatial inequities; however, Davies (2013) finds that while Catholic schools in Ontario feature a more socially advantaged population, differences appear to be small in magnitude. As in the case of the Netherlands, such patterns are often discussed in connection with the absence of tuition fees and the relative equivalence in terms of resources, curriculum and organisation.

Ultimately, such dynamics suggest that the association between PFRSs and segregation appears to be decisively affected by the institutional configurations governing these schools, as such regulations shape the structures of opportunity allowing for different behaviours on the part of both providers and parents. Of particular relevance are the varying levels of school autonomy over admission and fees, which lead to different degrees and forms of student selection; and varying degrees of freedom of school choice and institutional differentiation, which might be more or less conducive to differentiated patterns of school choice and self-segregating behaviours among both majority and minority groups.

However, an understanding of PFRSs' contribution to segregation also requires examining how the very religious ethos of PFRSs affects incentives and preferences shaping the actions of both schools and parents. As to the supply side, research on England suggests that while school autonomy over student admission plays a critical role in sorting dynamics, it is unclear that PFRSs' distinct composition is exclusively the result of a religiously motivated selection. Covert forms of social selection, facilitated by their formal and informal capacity to affect admissions, appear also to be at play (Allen and Vignoles 2016; Bolton and Gillie 2009; Burgess et al. 2023; Gibbons and Silva 2011; Noden, West, and Hind 2014; Pennell, West, and Hind 2007; West and Ingram 2001; West, Hind, and Pennell 2004).

Turning to the demand side, there is a certain consensus that, while the preference for PFRSs is unevenly distributed (and therefore socially mediated), and PFRSs are associated with self-segregation behaviours among ethnoreligious communities and social groups, such practices are not necessarily religiously motivated. Specifically, literature suggests that, in the European context, parental religiosity plays a limited (or non-central) role in school choice. Hence, secular goods theory (according to which demand for religious schools comes from a religiously diverse group interested in advantages un- or indirectly related to religion) appears to hold more explanatory potential than social identity theory (according to which religious schools are selected as a vehicle for cultural and religious transmission) (see Pelz and den Dulk 2018). While faith considerations might guide a minority actively opting for religious schooling, other school features (e.g. academic reputation, school climate, social and ethnic composition, convenience) are consistently found to play an equal or larger role in the choice of PFRSs, especially for the growing share of religiously non-affiliated families and those adhering to faiths other than that of the selected school (Agirdag, Driessen, and Merry 2017; Allen and Vignoles 2016; Butler and Hamnett 2012;

Dearden, Ryan, and Sibieta 2011; Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers 2005; Ferrara 2018; Hemming and Roberts 2018; Kristen 2008; Maddox 2011; Scheunpflug 2015; Sissing and Boterman 2023).

Minority-faith schools represent a critical exception to these dynamics. There is growing evidence that, for families adhering to minority or stigmatised faiths, the religious character of the school (and the associated social milieu) plays a more determining role in school-choice decisions. Such decisions are motivated by an active attempt to minimise marginalisation and discrimination, and to foster contact with religious peers as part of a broader enculturation strategy (see Mchitarjan and Reizenzein 2014) in a minority context (Beider 2025; Lewis 2014; Merry and Driessen 2012; Mohme 2017; Sai 2018; Samson 2020). Conversely, religious transmission does not necessarily play a critical role – with the exception of those families identified as orthodox (Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers 2005; Miller, Pomson, and Hacohen Wolf 2016).

Literature investigating the effects of such dynamics on social cohesion is considerably sparser.⁵ Most commonly concentrated in (post)conflict settings (Loader and Hughes 2017), different studies find that religious schools limit social mixing to the detriment of social cohesion and that integrated schools facilitate the development of more tolerant attitudes (see Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds 2013; Hughes et al. 2013; Manzoni and Rolfe 2019; Stringer et al. 2009 on Northern Ireland's denominational schools). Conversely, other studies find no significant differences between religious and non-religious schools in levels of racism, tolerance or attitudes towards religious diversity attributable to their composition (Francis and Village 2014) or report on the limited effectiveness of attempts at ethnoreligious mixing, finding that segregation may persist within the classroom or social networks (McKeown, Stringer, and Cairns 2016).

Ultimately, emerging evidence points to the complex association between religious separation (or integration) and social cohesion. Such complex interlinkages are often discussed in the light of so-called contact hypothesis, which posits that intergroup contact contributes to reduced prejudice (by increasing knowledge about others and favouring emotional investment in their welfare) but that the outcomes of intergroup contact are ultimately dependent on conditions such as settings of equal status, common goals and institutional support (see Hewstone et al. 2018; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Hence, without such conditions in place, social heterogeneity and desegregation efforts might prove ineffective at affecting social cohesion – or even counterproductive, exacerbating antagonisms and exclusion (Mendoza 2019).⁶

4.5. Children's autonomy

The impact of PFRSs on child autonomy is the object of a distinctly modest and fragmentary corpus of research (Tuastad 2016), being addressed in a piecemeal or tangential fashion. A first relevant strand of scholarship encompasses religious transmission, the religious socialisation of children and young people, and the role played by PFRSs therein. While only indirectly addressing the autonomy debate, questions of religious identity development foreground the complex relationship between PFRSs and freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as children's agency and well-being (Hemming 2018).

Much of this literature has tended to concentrate on the US, where available evidence suggests that the impact of religious schools on religious identity and attitudes cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, evidence on the 'religious effects' of faith-based schools yields

contradictory findings and suggests that there are important differences across denominations (Barrett et al. 2007; Gunnoe and Moore 2002; Perl and Gray 2007; Sander 2001; Uecker 2009; Vaidyanathan 2011; Van Pelt et al. 2012; Wadsworth and Walker 2017). To our knowledge, the few studies addressing the connection between religious schools and religious attitudes outside the US have tended to focus on English faith schools. While most such studies date back to the eighties and nineties and are highly uneven in quality, it is worth noting that they have tended to yield contradictory findings and suggest important differences according to school status (e.g. voluntary-aided vs. voluntary-controlled schools) (Francis and Village 2020). The question has been examined more recently by McKendrick and Walker (2020), who find a positive relationship between faith school attendance and future religious belief.

A second area of research connected to children's autonomy and self-determination concerns the management of gender and sexuality diversity and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students. While emergent and fragmentary in nature, this line of inquiry provides evidence of instances where PFRSs fail to enact legal and policy protections afforded to gender and sexual minority groups or inhibit the expression of students' sexual and gender identity. These works are primarily qualitative, focusing on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in PFRSs and pointing to conflict between the recognition and inclusion of diverse sexual identities and the doctrinal stances of some schools (Bailey 2017; Callaghan 2016, 2018; Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman, and O'Leary 2017). While these qualitative studies cannot be used to estimate the prevalence of these phenomena, a recent series of quantitative studies in Australia found that students in religiously affiliated schools are more likely to be exposed to conversion ideology and anti-LGBTQ+ messages and policies (Jones 2023) and had lower perceptions of schools as safe sites (e.g. limited exposure to homophobia and transphobia) (Mann et al. 2025). Such discriminatory practices are often discussed in connection with exemptions for religious education institutions from certain anti-discrimination laws and protections (Jones 2023).

Equally, other studies have highlighted that PFRSs differ greatly in their approach to gender and sexual diversity, with both schools and individual educators often dissenting from the heteronormativity conventionally associated with a range of religious traditions. Such heterogeneity reflects the evolving positionings and internal conflict exhibited by different religious institutions, as well as the changing attitudes and religiosity of staff working in PFRSs (Ezzy 2024; Henry 2022; McDonough 2020; Taylor and Cuthbert 2019). Ultimately, such findings suggest the need to interrogate the relationship between official doctrinal stances and PFRSs' educational practices.

5. Understanding variation

It follows from the above that PFRSs' outcomes vary widely across contexts. Looking across reviewed evidence, and based on the causal intuitions advanced by the literature, this section identifies three drivers of variation that appear relevant to explaining the heterogeneous and contingent outcomes of PFRSs across different settings and outlines a series of analytical considerations relevant to each.

5.1. *Formal and de facto status of religious groups*

Within ethnically and religiously diverse societies, differences in the *de jure* and *de facto* status enjoyed by different groups critically shape the outcomes of PFRSs. Indeed,

countries vary significantly in their interweaving of the majority denomination and the state and, perhaps more critically, in terms of government favouritism of religion, understood as the preferential treatment of one (or a few) denominations, which benefit from special privileges, support, or favourable sanctions (Fox 2008; Grim and Finke 2006). Mirroring variation in church–state relations, political ideology and the resources available to different groups, approaches to the accommodation of religious minorities also vary significantly (Fetzer and Soper 2003, 2005; Grier, Martínez-Ariño, and García-Romeral 2014; Tatari 2009). These factors give rise to unequal structures of opportunity for different religious groups – for instance relative to their capacity to secure public funding for the establishment and operation of religious schools (Grier 2007; Sarrouh 2021) or religious education (RE) accommodations. Capturing this variety of arrangements is critical to understanding which groups might effectively experience the pluralist promise of PFRSs.

The uneven status and social standing of different religious groups are equally relevant, particularly when religious diversification connects to migration trends, as in the case of many Western countries (Guveli and Platt 2023). The notion of ethnic hierarchy, capturing ‘consensual and cumulative rankings of exclusion of [...] ethnic and religious outgroups’ (Gesthuizen, Savelkoul, and Scheepers 2021, 13) highlights the routine perception of certain ethnoreligious minorities as potentially problematic and subject to stigmatizing representations. Such perceptions, in turn, affect public opinion and policy preferences, including varying levels of public support for the accommodation of religious minorities on education matters and the creation of (minority) faith schools (e.g. Blinder, Ford, and Ivarsflaten 2019; Clements 2018). The diverging statuses of different religious groups shape opportunities and motivations for creating and enrolling in PFRSs, producing different sorting dynamics and different cultural-continuity outcomes.

5.2. Governance of religious schooling and RE

PFRSs are typically funded through systems of public subsidies for private schools notionally open to other private schooling modalities, which may or may not contemplate particular prerogatives for religious establishments. Substantial variation can be observed in both facets across Western countries, which differ greatly in the generosity and conditionality of such subsidies, as well as in the regulatory and monitoring arrangements to which religious schools are specifically subject (Avram and Dronkers 2013; Fabretti 2011; Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2024; Macedo and Wolf 2004; Maussen and Bader 2015).

Such institutional variation represents a key factor underpinning PFRSs’ divergent outcomes. Indeed, the particulars of subsidy systems for private schools have long been identified as a factor critically shaping segregation and stratification dynamics (Boeskens 2016). However, it is also necessary to consider those regulatory particularities to which PFRSs’ might be de facto or formally subjected. These include the possibility of religious criteria for selecting students and staff (and relative autonomy on matters of student admission) and curricular autonomy on religious grounds documented in various contexts (e.g. Maussen and Vermeulen 2015; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2016; Wareham 2022). Such relative latitude critically conditions their impacts on social cohesion, as well as on democratic transmission and children’s autonomy. Conditions of entry to the public funding system further drive institutional variation and, combined with historical legacies and other policy

arrangements, produce important differences in the degree of pluralism effectively accommodated by PFRSs.

The role afforded to religion and RE in non-religious schools is a further source of variance. As documented by Cohen-Zada and Justman (2022), the regulation of religious instruction and the place of religion within non-religiously affiliated schools vary greatly. In some countries, nominally non-religious state schools exhibit a noticeable affinity to a national religion, whereas in other contexts, expectations of religious neutrality may be substantial. It is also worth noting that the RE landscape has become increasingly complex within the Western world. While the confessional/non-confessional dichotomy has been abandoned in favour of more complex distinctions (e.g. learning in/about/from religions; integrative vs. separative RE, etc.), such labels do not capture the context-specificity of existing approaches and complex enactment dynamics (Fabretti 2015; Fancourt 2015; Jackson 2013). Finally, education systems also differ in how they recognise diversity of religion and belief in non-religious schools. Indeed, accommodation of the spiritual and religious needs of different religious groups (e.g. prayer, dietary requirements and dress codes) varies greatly (Collet and Bang 2018; Hemming and Hailwood 2020). These factors shape both families' motivations for choosing PFRSs and the expectations placed on PFRSs as sites of religious socialisation. These, in turn, influence the curricular and organisational choices of PFRSs – including a varying emphasis on and approaches to religious identity which, as seen in the empirical literature, have important consequences for both civic outcomes and children's autonomy.

5.3. Heterogeneity of religious schools

Undoubtedly the least well explored of the three presented dimensions, the internal heterogeneity of the PFRS population has important consequences for outcomes. Indeed, the very concept of 'religious school' conceals an important degree of variance often glossed over in debates and even sociological studies (MacMullen 2018; Martínez-Ariño and Teinturier 2019). Likewise, scholarship on school choice has tended to approach religious identity as a fixed and highly visible attribute, central to schools' ethos and image (Fontdevila, Zancajo, and Verger 2024).

Efforts at unpacking religiosity in the education sector are therefore limited. It is increasingly recognised that schools negotiate their religious identities in response to contextual specificities, including market dynamics, local patterns of religiosity, internal secularisation and student beliefs (Bertram-Troost et al. 2015; Dallavis 2024; Fancourt and Ipgrave 2020; Fontdevila, Zancajo, and Verger 2024; Ipgrave 2012; Martínez-Ariño and Lefebvre 2016). Likewise, religious schools vary in their strategies for accommodating religious diversity within and beyond schools – from the reinforcement of religious and intercultural education to a recalibration of their religious identity (De Wolff, Miedema, and Ruyter 2002; Martínez-Ariño and Teinturier 2019; Rybanská and Spalová 2022). There is also considerable variation in the emphasis placed on faith criteria as part of student and staff recruitment strategies and in schools' admissions policies (Allen and West 2009; Butler and Hamnett 2012), as well as in the relationship between religious communities and PFRSs. This continuum spans from schools run by denominational organisations to schools simply associated with (or adjacent to) religious communities, to schools organised on an ethnoreligious basis (Pusztai et al. 2024).

Given the country-specific and highly idiographic nature of such studies, the identification of key analytical variables corresponding to sources of variation relevant *across contexts* remains a challenging task. It is therefore useful to look at broader sociological literature concerned with faith-based organisations (FBOs) delivering public services. Such scholarship finds a certain consensus on the lack of a mechanical correspondence between the religiosity of FBOs and the services they deliver, and on the multidimensional nature of FBOs' religiosity. Accordingly, numerous indicators of FBO religiosity have been proposed (Fu, Cooper, and Shumate 2021). Broadly speaking, these can be grouped into two categories, namely: (a) organisational attributes, capturing the relative autonomy of the FBO vis-à-vis religious groups in terms of staff, resources, power distribution and governance structures; and (b) identity and purpose attributes, capturing how religious considerations shape organisational goals, ethos and public image (see Ebaugh et al. 2003; Sider and Unruh 2004; Smith and Sosin 2001). This literature therefore points to two variables of interest when analysing PFRSs: first, the relative centrality and visibility of religiosity in the educational services provided by schools; and second, the institutional proximity between PFRSs and religious communities (considering both symbolic and material elements). These variables appear to decisively shape all outcomes of interest in the PFRS debate, given they condition the religious ethos pursued by schools, expressed through organisational and curricular choices, and ultimately affecting a wide range of experiences and outcomes for students.

6. Concluding remarks

Despite their persistent and often polarising quality, debates around PFRSs have retained a theory-centric nature. This is all the more striking given that consequentialist claims relative to PFRSs' contribution to the production and distribution of educational goods have been gaining prominence in public debate. Motivated by that disconnect, this paper has sought to connect philosophical inquiry with empirical research, bringing a sociological perspective to the fore. To this end, we have parsed out a series of normative claims that recur in debates around PFRSs and summarised the existing empirical evidence related to each. Based on this, we have identified three sets of contextual variables relevant to advancing a situated understanding of PFRSs and their contrasting outcomes.

As such, the paper demonstrates the potential of a sociological perspective to deepen our understanding of what has proven a complex topic. Specifically, this perspective signals both a need to account for the broader context in which PFRSs operate and a need to generate a more granular conception of the faith-based school category. Combined, these two analytical moves facilitate a more nuanced understanding of PFRSs and, critically, one more amenable to policy analysis and action.

From a policy perspective, a first advantage concerns the possibility of discerning those policy levers capable of affecting PFRSs' outcomes. Indeed, most scholars implicated in the PFRS debate endorse some form of regulation for PFRSs, conditioning funding on the basis of adherence to a public-service ethos (Boucher 2018; Clayton, Mason, and Swift 2024; De Jong and Snik 2002; Macedo 2007; MacMullen 2018). However, such assertions leave considerable room for interpretation in public policy terms, and the ultimate impact of different regulatory proposals is often presumed rather than demonstrated. The reviewed literature points to a series of policy dimensions that appear more critical in

shaping PFRSs' contribution to different educational goods. At the same time, it foregrounds the complex interaction between regulatory dispositions and the broader context, as well as their heterogeneous effects on different PFRSs – highlighting the limits of regulatory action as well as potential trade-offs. Thus, cross-fertilisation between the normative and the empirical offers tangible guidance to policy action, while signalling the need for further research on the relative efficacy of different policy options. Indeed, this review demonstrates that our understanding of the causal pathways connecting PFRSs with their varied outcomes is fragmentary and nascent, representing a fundamental obstacle to policy action.

An empirical approach to appraising PFRSs also cautions against insufficiently informed attempts at cross-national policy learning. While there is much to be gained from dialogue between different educational systems, an insufficient engagement with PFRSs' contextual specificities poses important risks. Policy-learning efforts need to account for the highly varied status of different religious groups, and varying structures of incentives shaping both demand and supply of religious schooling. However, such informed comparisons are hampered by the absence of well-defined and context-invariant analytical categories relative to the governance of religious schooling and instruction. Indeed, as noted by D'Agostino (2024) in relation to debates around educational pluralism, these appear to be hindered by inconsistent terminology and limited conceptual precision. Developing and refining existing comparative frameworks represents a critical step to facilitating cross-national learning and avoiding the uninformed importing of policy debates and solutions.

Finally, while this paper attends primarily to the consequentialist considerations driving the PFRS debate and associated empirical scholarship, this approach does not render non-consequentialist considerations and principled arguments any less relevant. Yet, while our situated approach cannot adjudicate among competing principles, it can offer clarity as to what extent and under which circumstances such principles might be reconciled – while also identifying those areas and contexts where trade-offs are most likely to appear. With these tools in hand, we can work towards those (necessarily imperfect) policy arrangements that enhance PFRSs' compatibility with collectively agreed system-level goals.

Notes

1. Following Maussen and Bader (2015), we use *religious* and *faith-based schools* interchangeably in reference to 'all schools that have a distinct religious character, playing a role in the way the school operates' (p. 3). We use *PFRSs* in reference to the subset of publicly funded *private* religious schools, i.e. self-governing entities affiliated with or adjacent to religious communities. The notion of *private* is thus used analytically, as the formal status of such schools vary considerably across countries (see Agasisti, Queiroz E Melo, and Maranto 2023).
2. Specifically, we focused on Western Europe, North America and Australia. This choice was motivated by three different considerations, including the fact that: (a) political and public debates around the role of PFRSs appear distinctively prominent in these contexts (Yoon et al. 2024); (b) with the partial exception of the US, most Western democracies feature a (variously sized) subset of PFRSs and/or broader school-choice arrangements rooted in political and social conflicts relative to religion (Glenn 2018; Neave 1985); and (c) similarities in the religious demography of these countries, with those identifying as Christians and the religiously unaffiliated remaining predominant, and minority religions gaining relevance over recent decades (Hackett et al. 2025).

3. We refer to such explanations as *causal intuitions* given that not all studies are explicitly designed to test causal relationships, yet most still advance hypotheses or illustrative evidence pointing towards such mechanisms.
4. While not the object of this paper, it is worth noting that PFRSS' impacts on soft skills (e.g. self-confidence, creativity, critical thinking), risk behaviours, school climate and student well-being also attract growing interest.
5. The consequences of segregation and/or reduced social mixing go far beyond the question of social cohesion. Indeed, school segregation has often been problematised with a focus on educational inequalities given its impact on academic performance and attainment (Charoussat, Monnet, and Souidi 2023; Pourtois 2023). While such questions also feature in PFRS debates, along with growing consideration of segregation's impact on personal autonomy and student well-being (Clayton et al. 2021; Merry 2018; Thijs, Hornstra, and Charki 2018), the question of social cohesion and democratic integration has attracted the most sustained attention within the normative debate.
6. Beyond social-cohesion considerations, it similarly follows from this that the benefits of integration for stigmatised minorities (e.g. in terms of student well-being and achievement) appear to be highly contingent and require further empirical interrogation (Hussain and Read 2015; Merry and Agirdag 2023).
7. The sources considered under the literature review (informing Sections 4 and 5) are listed in Online Appendix 1.

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