CHAPTER TEN

THE THEOLOGICAL CASE FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND WALES: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE
LISTENING TO FEMALE ALUMNAE

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SUMMARY

The new independent Christian schools developed by parents and evangelical churches in the United Kingdom since the late 1960s remain controversial among both Christian and secular educators. This study begins by examining the two faces of the educational and theological controversies. In response to these controversies, the present study traced 135 women who had graduated from these schools between 1986 and 2003 and analysed their evaluation of the education they had received in these schools within four main themes: the quality of the education; the context of Christian and moral nurture; the quality of relationships among the pupils, with the teachers, and with the wider world; and the preparation received for life after leaving school. Although there were some issues of criticism, the balance of opinion among the former pupils within all four areas was largely supportive of the new independent Christian schools, which were generally perceived as having prepared them well for life.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian churches have exerted a very strong influence on the development of schools within England and Wales. Long before the 1870 Education Act (Rich, 1970) established machinery through which schools could be built directly by the state, church-related initiatives had inspired the creation of the National Society (Anglican), the British and Foreign School Society (Free Church) and the Catholic Poor School Committee (Roman Catholic) to provide a network of denominationally distinctive schools (Cruickshank, 1963; Murphý, 1971; Chadwick, 1997). When state money was first voted by parliament to support schools in 1833, these funds were deployed by means of distribution through
the voluntary church-based societies. Moreover, the establishment of Board Schools by the 1870 Education Act was intended to augment the denominational system, not to replace it.

The major restructuring of the educational system in England and Wales by the 1944 Education Act consolidated rather than threatened the partnership between the state and the churches in the provision of a national network of schools (Dent, 1947). There were two key components within this act of direct relevance to the future of Christian or church-related education. On the one hand, the place of church schools was protected by the creation of the two categories of voluntary controlled and voluntary aided status. In the controlled status, the state took over all ongoing financial responsibility in exchange for the churches relinquishing control over religious education and over staff appointments. In the aided status, the churches retained responsibility for a significant proportion of building and maintenance costs in return for retaining control over religious education and staff appointments. On the other hand, the churches were given a significant voice in determining the content of the religious education syllabuses for all state-maintained non-denominational and voluntary controlled schools, subject to the proviso that these syllabuses should not promote denominational teaching. As a consequence of the 1944 Education Act, the Free Churches largely withdrew from church schools, accepting that all state-maintained schools would promote appropriate religious education through the agreed syllabi; the Roman Catholic Church set about building more church schools, maintaining that only aided status would protect the future of the Catholic view of religious education; and the Anglican Church adopted different approaches in different dioceses, largely withdrawing from church schools in some areas, largely opting for controlled status in some areas, and largely striving for aided status in some areas (Francis, 1987). The 1988 Education Reform Act generally left unchanged the concordat agreed between the state and the churches in 1944 (Cox and Cairns, 1989).

In spite of the considerable investment of the churches in England and Wales in the state-maintained system of schools, there has been surprisingly little sustained theological reflection on why the churches are involved in schooling or on what they see as the goals of such involvement. The theology of education remains an under-developed and under-resourced discipline within England and Wales (Francis and Thatcher, 1990). From an Anglican point of view, the most sustained