

Atheists, get your facts straight, by Neil Richardson

in response to Zoe Williams' article in The Guardian

When I read the views of Zoe Williams published in a column marked "Opinion" I felt annoyed. This was admittedly opinion, and we are all entitled to our opinion, but before you arrive at an opinion a rational person needs to be properly informed. What Zoe Williams has written clearly demonstrates ignorance. I mean ignorance in the technical sense, not the pejorative sense. She has clearly not made the effort to study what a Religious Education syllabus looks like in a Church of England Primary School, otherwise she would not traduce the work of such schools as "Inculcating nonsense." It is a shame that a reputable newspaper decided to publish an opinion which is so grossly uninformed.



I wrote a letter to the Editor in response to Zoe Williams, but it was not published. I emailed Zoe herself to try and make a connection and discuss, but my effort was ignored. I think she now knows she has been found out and would like the matter to go away. OK, it can go away, but first I feel the need to defend R.E. in Church of England Primary Schools, and in every school, as a vital part of a holistic curriculum.

The reason for my particular interest in this matter stems from my experience in and commitments to RE. I have been involved with charring school Governing Bodies since 1977. Since 1987, I have been a member and for 12 years, Chair, of the body which oversees Religious Education in Ealing Borough, the Standing Council for Religious Education (SACRE). In this time, I have taken a role in preparing three new RE Syllabuses for Community schools, and I have always been keen to ensure that the work prepared for pupils contained the broadest outlook possible and when in a position to do so, I always insisted that we had a Humanist representative on the SACRE alongside representatives of the faiths.

In fact, Zoe, Religious Education plays a vital role in preparing children for the real world where they will meet and engage with people of many different religious persuasions and none. What RE does is to give them the knowledge and experience of different faiths so that ignorance is minimised and so understanding maximised. It inculcates respect for different religious traditions, rather than inculcating nonsense. In this way, RE makes a strong contribution to community cohesion. On the way it helps children to respond to the ideas and values in faith communities and their practices, using their skills of constructive criticism. In addition to its role in creating the conditions for good community relations, RE is in fact an academic discipline in exactly the same manner as Maths, Science, Languages, etc. Zoe Williams seems to suggest that in a school run by atheists, religion would not be a feature of the curriculum. This would, of course, be illegal and Ofsted would rightly condemn the school for failing its pupils.

Having got that off my chest, and hopefully on to Zoe Williams' chest, let us turn to her attitude to what she describes as "Mr and Mrs Agnostic" who "make the massive concession to this belief structure that they're prepared to pay for its promotion without making a fuss..." Zoe, the point is that in our country the ethos of all education stems from faith in Jesus Christ whose teaching ministry inspired the development of schools up and down the land. Mr and Mrs Agnostic may not want to join in religious institutions but even so, they are the direct beneficiaries of Christianity's desire to emulate Jesus Christ and teach young and old alike. In Greenford, we only need to say the words Edward Betham to see the reality of this. The Revd. Edward Betham, my predecessor from 1780, founded a Charity School and left a legacy of money to maintain it. Some 226 years later, the school is still doing a brilliant job for local children of all faiths and none.

The liberal democracy which we enjoy in our country is under direct threat from the sloppy thinking of people like Zoe Williams who are deliberately blind to the benefits of 2000 years of the Christian tradition and want to undermine it and pooh-pooh it as often as possible. The end result of this could be very dangerous indeed. Get real, Zoe. You may not share the tenets of the Christian faith, but you sure do benefit from its inheritance, so give it a little more respect, please. Even better, some support would be helpful.