

Zoe Williams - a follow-up

by Neil Richardson



Zoe Williams

Several people approached me following the publication in November Magna of a Guardian newspaper article by Zoe Williams in which she attacks RE teaching in Church of England Primary schools as “inculcating nonsense.” The questions people have asked me concern what motives I thought Zoe Williams had in writing this outrageous slur on good teachers throughout the country, where was she coming from and where does the anger comes from.

First, there is the strange and repeated reference to “getting up early on a Sunday morning” coupled with “not drinking on a Saturday.” The feeling I get is that Zoe hasn’t been to church for many years and she has therefore lost touch with modern church people and thinks we are how it was 40 years ago. Sheer laziness of thought here, I am afraid. Can I suggest that she gets down to a local church and then gets some evidence to look at asap!

Philosopher, mathematician, and writer, Bertrand Russell once said, "The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts."

Secondly, if a journalist is going to attack a church or religious organization, why choose the dear old C of E with its inclusive and welcoming Primary Schools with pupils from all religions and all continents? They are models of a cohesive and welcoming society. There are other religious groups and schools around with exclusive policies and rigorous rules which would make much better targets. However, Zoe is canny. She knew full well that attacking C of E schools would fail to make the Archbishop of Canterbury

put out a fatwa against her and there would be no angry demonstrators outside her house all next week, demanding an apology. It is so much easier to attack a soft target when all the time we know that the vehemence is much more appropriate to other institutions. So she has worked off her anger at more difficult targets by attacking a soft one. This looks like the action of a bully, picking on the kid least likely to fight back. Zoe wants to attack religious nonsense - fair enough - but C of E Primary schools? Wrong target, I am afraid!

Thirdly, Zoe correctly assesses that Church of England schools are “not privately funded” but fails to give the full picture. The funding arrangements of Church schools requires that 10% of all improvements and new developments as well as some repairs are paid for by the school Governors. Whilst that might not seem a lot to you and me, in fact it represents a huge saving for central Government. So there is a cost to Governors and eventually parents in being part of an Aided school. That is why parents are informed of the extra costs before they join Church schools and so may choose to go elsewhere.



The Betham Clock School, 1878

Finally, Zoe suggests that atheists could run schools much more effectively than religious people. In fact, as any selection of school staff will tell you, in London especially, there are a lot of schools where lip-service only is paid to RE and which are in effect secular schools run by atheists. These are often the very schools which Mr and Mrs Agnostic wish to avoid like the plague. There is nothing better and more conducive to good education than a good dose of the C of E.

You should try it, Zoe. You might be pleasantly surprised? 9.30am on Sundays, or is that too early?