

Interview on BBC Radio Sheffield with Ken Walze (Christian Family Schools Limited) and Richy Thompson (British Humanist Association) on proposed Sheffield Christian Free School, 15th November 2011

Host, Rony Robinson: The British Humanist Association is concerned over plans for a new Free School in Sheffield with a creationist curriculum. 'Sheffield Christian Free School' is to be run by Christian Family Schools Limited, which already runs private schools in Sheffield including the Bethany School. They've got plans for a total of 10 sites for the new Free School. Ken Walze joins me from Christian Family Schools; I'm also joined by Richy Thompson from the British Humanist Association – thank you both for joining me. Ken, do you want to explain briefly what your plan is?

Ken Walze: We've had a small school in Sheffield for the past 25 years – it's our anniversary this year – a group of parents set it up in 1987 basically to try and provide a school with a Christian curriculum for their own children. That's grown and developed, and we've set up a second school that's not part of this application – they're an autonomous school, they're not involved with the proposal to become a Free School. It's Bethany School that's putting this forward, and what we want to try and do is make what we've got more widely available for people in the city. We've got a successful school – parents give it a high rating; pupils have a high rating; Ofsted have given us extremely good ratings – and we want to share what we've got to make it more widely available in the city. The Free Schools initiative will allow that to happen.

Host: And if it succeeds – the application goes in for May; the details are decided by August; the school would open the year after – it would be a fully funded state school. But in fact it would be a series of smaller schools around the city, a hundred strong in various areas?

Ken Walze: That's our model of education. The government have invited parent groups, faith and community groups, teachers, parents, and people to put in ideas for education. They've also invited existing independent schools to apply for Free School status; we seem to tick a lot of those boxes. It's been on our heart to try and extend what we've got throughout the city for some time – it's not something new to us, we're just offering it to Michael Gove and seeing if it's something he wants. It's an innovative idea – it involves parents, it involves communities. It's a Christian school, so it involves Christian education. It's a family scale school, so it's a very different model, but it seems to be a model that works.

Host: And that model – and I suppose this moves us to the heart of what I think we're going to be talking about this morning – part of that Christian education will be the teaching of creationism. Would you like to say what that means to you?

Ken Walze: Creationism isn't a distinct subject. We're a Christian school – we represent perhaps 20 different churches in the city – and Christianity has a distinctive creation story, a story of origins that is obviously centuries old. It's not something new and innovative. And we have just included our faith in our curriculum; as we study art, history, design and technology, science, French – whatever it might be – we come from a perspective that is biblical. And that does include our creation story.

Host: Thank you. I'm joined now by Richy Thompson from the British Humanist Association – thanks for joining us. So what's wrong with that?

Richy Thompson: This school is very clear that creationism – or creation – is right at the centre of its entire curriculum. If you look at the curriculum pages on its website, it states at the top that it's broadly based on the 9 themes found in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. If you go on to

look at their science curriculum, even, it states that it teaches about the human body as god's wonderful creation. So there's creationism throughout, and the problem is very simple: that creationism and intelligent design are not valid scientific theories. There's no scientific evidence for them, and as a result they should not be taught as science.

Host: But you'd be happy for them to be taught elsewhere in the curriculum of such a school?

Richy Thompson: Well, we have issues with 'faith' schools that teach religious education in a confessional manner – saying a certain religion is true and others are false. But, that said, we wouldn't have a problem with the creation narrative being taught as part of an education on Christianity, in RE, in a non-confessional manner – but that's about it really.

Host: Part two of our discussion after this.

<BREAK>

Host: We're halfway through a conversation about the proposals in Sheffield for a new Free School with several buildings, which will teach Christianity to the pupils – including a view of evolution; a view of creationism; a view of the way the world started that's making some humanists rather...upset? Angry? Worried? Richy Thomson, what word would you use for your stance?

Richy Thompson: Well I wouldn't say it's just us. Even the government has repeatedly said that creationism is not science. In fact, last year Everyday Champions Church down in Nottinghamshire bid to set up a Free School, and when its proposal was rejected, the Secretary of State said that he was 'unable to accept that an organisation with creationist views' – and I'm quoting here – 'could prevent these from being reflected in the teaching of the school,' and that it was his 'firm view that the teaching of creationist views as a potentially valid alternative theory is not acceptable in a 21st century state.'

Host: So it sounds like the Sheffield school is not going to get its money anyway?

Richy Thompson: Well I wonder if Ken can explain how he hopes to get past this barrier?

Ken Walze: We're just offering the model that we've got. As I said, we do tick a lot of the boxes about how Free Schools can be set up. We do, obviously, very clearly have creation as part of our curriculum. I think that statement from Michael Gove on the Everyday Champions School is a little misleading. It does say that you can't avoid teaching according to your beliefs, and I think that's absolutely true. And I think all schools – all secular schools, all church schools – have a set of beliefs that they teach their curriculum based upon. We're no different from that – we're just very, very open in that. We're hoping that Michael Gove, as he begins to investigate this a little bit further, will start to see that we're providing very good schools: our science results are 80% A* to Cs. There's nothing to fear from creationism, it's a valid part of our society. Millions have a faith, and believe the Christian story and way of life. It's something I'm hoping Michael Gove – as he gets more and more applications from schools like ours – will begin to investigate a bit further.

Host: Can I ask you, Richy Thompson, about the principle of the way in which religious education is taught in schools, and that there are religious schools. Why shouldn't parents have their children brought up with the beliefs that they themselves have? What is wrong with that in a free society?

Richy Thompson: Well, we think that all state funded schools should be secular schools. We think that they should all be inclusive and that everybody – regardless of their religious or non-religious

beliefs – should be educated together. It leads to a more harmonious society. It's important that children are educated about religions other than their own in an equal manner, and grow up knowing one another. And as a result we don't think there should be 'faith' schools; we don't think that there should be schools that teach that their particular religion is true. We think that RE should only be taught in a comparative manner, and should also include non-religious beliefs such as humanism.

Host: Do your children get non-religious beliefs taught as well as religious beliefs?

Ken Walze: All our children know the phrase very well: 'some people think differently.' Or 'some Christians think differently.' We use that phrase as well.

Host: Do you then *explain* what they believe?

Ken Walze: Well, exactly. We're fully committed to making sure our children know other ways of thinking about the world than the Christian view. It's very clear that that's our responsibility as teachers. That's what education's about – you are opening up the children. And rather than saying there are bits of society... bits of life... faith, which you can't be taught about in school, we're saying there are loads of different beliefs out there and you have to be able to have the tools to analyse them all.

Host: Let me ask you this then. Your website – the Free Schools website – boasts that just 7% of the pupils agree with the statement 'I believe in evolution creating all things over millions of years.' What would you say if a pupil came up to you and said that there is no evidence that God exists, and there's a lot of evidence that the world developed without him?

Ken Walze: Yeah, that's some research that's been done through Warwick University as part of a national survey, where schools like ours did come up as a statistical blip. Our children did seem very optimistic about life –

Host: But my question to you is if a kid comes up to you and says, I don't believe it – I don't believe what you believe?

Ken Walze: Well again, same part of that research shows that people with non-creationist views in Christian schools feel very at ease, very settled, very happy – they don't feel threatened. Whereas people, perhaps, with creationist views in the secular schools feel very –

Host: A child is encouraged to disagree with you? To disbelieve what you believe?

Ken Walze: We've got families in our school that are not involved in any church, they have no open religious belief, they're here because of other things. We have family education –

Host: Let me interrupt, because it's so interesting: do you believe that Genesis is true?

Ken Walze: Yeah.

Host: The world was created in 6 days?

Ken Walze: The Bible's a pretty special book as far as I'm concerned.

Host: But *literally*, god created man and all the rest in 6 days?

Ken Walze: I think if, depending on what view you have of God –

Host: I'm asking you, really.

Ken Walze: My view of God, as I read about him in the Bible, is that he's more than capable of doing that. Infinite, eternal, unchangeable in all –

Host: But, fossils and dinosaurs, and all the other things that have rolled out – you believe that God created the world in 6 days, 6000 years ago? Do you believe that?

Ken Walze: Yeah, I don't find a problem with that.

Host: It's completely at odds with all the evidence.

Ken Walze: Well, yeah, again. We study the evidence; we look at the assumptions behind the evidence; we look at the interpretations. We're using science to inform our view of God. It gives us a greater wonder about what God is like. As you look through a microscope, or a telescope, it shows you more about what his world is like. And actually it strengthens my faith. So science, in a sense, is used to strengthen what I believe in, because it tells me God is more than capable of doing what he said he did in 6 days.

Host: Thank you. I'm going to have to leave it there, it's very interesting, thank you both very much indeed, Richy Thompson and Ken Walze.