

The Worldview Project

Discussion Papers

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Religious Education Council (REC) set up the independent Commission on Religious Education in England¹. As Chair of the REC, my hope was that the Commission would be a “game-changer”, offering a new way forward for RE that would be fit for purpose for at least a decade. I cited the impact of the innocuously named Schools Council Working Paper 36, published in 1971, as the historical precedent. It catalysed the switch from confessional Christian, civic RE to the world religions approach that still defines the subject today. As in 1971, it is clear to me that we are at another point in the history of RE when new vitality is needed if our subject is to flourish.

After two years of extensive consultation, the Commission published its Final Report in September 2018². The Commission’s vision pointed towards a new way of looking at RE. It is revealed as a subject which explores how we all cope with, make sense of and make the best of our lives, and question where our ideas and attitudes come from through learning about religions and beliefs. In this way, it is directly relevant to all children and young people, whether or not they identify with a religion, or describe themselves as ‘religious.’ For pupils who do identify with a religious tradition, it enables them to recognise their experience of belonging to a religious community in a subject which acknowledges the diversity of these communities and the often messy, but always interesting, reality of belonging to them.

The Commission Report was widely welcomed, but also caused some controversy and was summarily dismissed by the then Secretary of State.

There were concerns about the recommendations for statutory change, including establishing a National Entitlement and moving away from legally -required, locally-determined syllabuses. Given the current external pressures on government, statutory change, however, seems unlikely in the near future³.

There was also extensive debate around the proposed use of the idea of worldview. Clearly this concept was used in different ways by different people. Furthermore, it was not always understood that it was being used in different senses in different contexts. However, there is a lot of interest amongst teachers and others in how the worldview idea might be a game-changer in opening up new ways of studying religion and belief in the classroom. The REC therefore established a project to examine the worldview idea at depth. It did this in partnership with TRS-UK, a member organisation of the REC that links together university departments of theology and

religious studies. These discussion papers are one outcome of that project.

To date, the Worldview Project has produced two outputs

1: ACADEMIC LITERATURE REVIEW⁴.

The language of worldview is not particularly familiar to the British RE community, yet there has been extensive discussion in the international academic literature. The REC therefore commissioned a literature review to give academics, teachers, students and others access to that international literature. Compiled and written by three university academics⁵, this review is a background resource to the Worldview Project. What it makes clear is the extensive worldwide discussion of the worldview idea in a range of academic disciplines.

2: DISCUSSION PAPERS

The Discussion Papers were produced through an innovative process designed to give expression to a wide range of opinion.

Thirteen leading academics and advisers working in a variety of fields relevant to RE were recruited by the REC and gathered for five online conversations in June 2020.

1 The REC provided the Secretariat for the Commission and raised the funds that financed its work, but the conclusions reached by the commissioners were not subject to REC agreement.

2 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

3 However, the RE Policy Unit, of which the REC is a partner, continues to work for change in the political arena.

4 Available at <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20-19438-REC-Worldview-Report-A4-v2.pdf>

5 Céline Benoit, Timothy Hutchings and Rachael Shillitoe.

They represented a wide range of views on the usefulness of the worldview idea, from enthusiasm to scepticism. Their task was to reflect on the potential implications of the literature review for RE in schools in England. The conversations were rich, despite the challenges of the online format. They moved between theory and practice, between shared assumptions and deep disagreements. Many of the group found their pre-understandings challenged and found themselves testing new ideas in ways which revealed the potential of the concept of worldview to open up exciting new vistas.

These discussions were facilitated by Amira Tharani, then a consultant from the National Council for Voluntary

Organisations, who was herself formerly an RE teacher. Amira then wrote a commentary on the online conversations to create four discussion papers. These papers, which follow in this document, are her take on the flavour of the conversations having carefully analysed the extensive recordings from the five events. They should not be taken as representing either the consensus of the group or the opinions of any of the individuals involved. Nor are they REC policy. Rather they are stimulus material provided by Amira working with the REC that will, we hope, support others in thinking through their response to the worldview idea.

I commend these discussion papers to you and encourage you to use them in supporting

the professional development of teachers and others involved in RE.

THE NEXT STEP

However, it is important not to stop here. In 2021, the REC is commencing a new project to develop support materials for those responsible for writing RE syllabuses. These materials will exemplify how different approaches to the worldview idea generate different types of syllabus appropriate for different contexts. This project will be led by Stephen Pett of RE Today Services.

Professor Trevor Cooling,
Chair, Religious Education
Council of England and Wales.

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The proceedings were observed by Dr Richard Kueh, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) and Subject Lead for Religious Education at Ofsted.

The steering group for the Worldview Project was:

Trevor Cooling – Emeritus Professor of Christian Education, Canterbury Christ Church University

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Rudolf Elliott Lockhart – Chief Executive Officer of REC (until June 2020)

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Discussion paper 1

The concept of 'worldview'

Worldview is a concept with a history and context, much of which is set out in the literature review. However, that history and context is only a partial guide to how 'worldview' can be used to guide the development of Religion and Worldviews. Rather, 'worldview' is a term that will gain further definition and content as it is developed in schools, by teachers and other stakeholders, in the future. There are tentative maps of what worldview is and might mean, which are set out in these papers, but these will be made and re-made, not necessarily following a pre-ordained route with clear edges and horizons.

These papers take seriously the historical uses of the concept of worldview, while not being constrained by past uses of the term. The discussions in June showed how important it was not to be held back by attempts to narrowly define the term that might shut down exploration or prevent us from taking seriously the diversity of lived experiences, practices and contexts of pupils and students and teachers in schools and teacher education.

There was considerable discussion about whether 'worldview' denotes new subject content or a new approach to the subject. The discussions ranged over both, and it was almost impossible to separate the two. In these papers, 'worldview' primarily denotes an approach to the subject content. However, content in Religion and Worldviews cannot

be separated from approach, and therefore a new approach leads to different questions and new ways of looking at and selecting subject content.

WHY IS A NEW CONCEPT NEEDED?

Many of the academics began with some frustration about how 'religions' are often conceptualised in the public sphere and in schools. Part of that frustration stems from the way that 'religions' and some non-religious worldviews are often treated as unitary and monolithic. Many of the academics were aware, through research or teaching experience, how alienating this can be for young people in the classroom. Imagine, for example, a young person from a Muslim community who is introduced to a version of 'Islam' in schools and, indeed, in the media, which

bears little resemblance to the tradition they have grown up with. Or indeed, a young person who describes themselves as 'non-religious' or 'nothing' and has been given the impression that the content of the subject bears no relevance to their own life, thought or history.

Both of these young people, and many others like them, may feel excluded and alienated from the public conversation about 'religion' when in reality they have every right to be part of and to contribute to it. For these young people, the potential is that 'worldview' can function like a 'can opener' concept, re-opening the study of religious and non-religious worldviews and their interplay, at organised and personal levels and in-between, so that every young person can see themselves as having something to learn and to contribute. This will be further discussed in the second discussion paper.

This does not mean studying less religion – rather, it means studying religious and non-religious worldviews in different ways, leading to a wiser and more rigorous engagement with our own and others' worldviews. Indeed, for those from religious

backgrounds as much as those from non-religious backgrounds, 'worldview' as a concept can open up fruitful and interesting questions about traditions that are so important today and richer ways to study them.

WORLDVIEW – SOME HELPFUL POSSIBLE ORIENTATIONS

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed that concepts could be approached along the lines of family resemblance. Not every use of a concept should denote exactly the same meaning and content to be valid. Thus, for example, the concept of 'game' has no common essence. It can validly denote a wide range of activities 'ranging from football to chess, and from a solitary child playing with (a) doll to the Olympic Games' (John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, p. 4). Instead, games have a 'family resemblance' – they are connected by a set of overlapping similarities, rather than one common feature. The concept of 'game' may have a centre, characterised by these overlapping similarities, but has extremely fuzzy edges. So it is also for the concept of 'worldview.'

In the discussions in June, the team explored the range and variety of 'family resemblances' that might be covered by the term 'worldview.' It was clear from the exploration that 'worldview' covered a vast range of ideas and themes. Some of

these were related to the content of worldviews, what might be included in one's worldview. Some referred to the types of mental states or dispositions that might be included. Finally, some referred to the features of worldviews and how they are experienced or expressed.

Worldview can include ideas about the cosmic order, the sacred, the transcendent, the nature of reality or realities. It may include classification systems and taxonomies. It may cover ideas about how we should live – the existential, the ethical and/or the political. It may denote the idea of orientation to the world or purpose in the world. It may include ideas about how an individual identifies with or belongs to a group or about who and what people are – the mind, brain, heart, soul and consciousness. This may suggest that worldview is generally about intellectual and cognitive ideas such as those put forward by systematic thinkers within different traditions, and these are certainly included. Most of the academics favoured a much wider understanding including the experiential, the emotional, actions and sense of identity as well as beliefs and ideas. Cognition, beliefs, interpretation and perception were included, as were other mental states including desires and attachments. Worldviews can be expressed through mundane actions as well as propositionally or through the creative arts.

Some of the group sought to emphasise the unconscious, unarticulated or 'taken for granted' aspects of worldview – unquestioned or unspoken, perhaps 'common sense' assumptions within a particular community, society, culture, time or place. Others emphasised the importance of wisdom and discernment as aspects of how worldviews are shaped.

Worldview can refer both to the official teachings, ethical expectations, approved practices, definitions of membership or views on contemporary issues of organised institutions, and to the approach to life of an individual who may or may not identify with an organised group and for whom religious or philosophical traditions may be one of many influences upon them. Individuals and communities may perceive their worldviews as fixed, unchanging and uniquely and propositionally true, or fluid, flexible and changing. They may see them as having nothing in common with other perspectives or as having porous boundaries.

Finally, some of the group emphasised the importance of power relationships and social and cultural situatedness in the development and expression of worldviews. Within this, for example, worldviews might belong to dominant or colonial groups, seeking to justify certain uses of power, or to marginalised groups seeking to resist or exercise power in a different way.

EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF 'WORLDVIEW'

In keeping with the use of 'worldview' as a 'can-opener' concept, re-opening lines of study and questioning about religion and non-religion alike, it makes sense to use 'worldview' as inclusively as possible. Some of the concerns about the CoRE report have been a result of narrow understandings of worldview. We describe these narrow understandings here, then identify ways of broadening out the concept to allay some of these concerns.

In some cases, 'worldview' has been used only of non-religious worldviews, rather than as a term that can be used of both religious and non-religious worldviews. The concern has been that this preserves, rather than softens, a rigid boundary between religion and non-religion.

The use of 'worldview' has sometimes privileged the institutional and organised over the personal (see literature review). Many of the academics were concerned about the risk that 'worldviews' end up being presented as reified and essentialised as 'religions' have been in the past, undermining the ability of the concept to open up the field of study.

'Worldview' has also tended to be used to refer mainly to belief systems and to the cognitive and intellectual aspects of individual and collective lives. It tends to be used to talk about how people think about or perceive the world, rather than about how they experience it or act in it. The 'view' of 'worldview' tends to privilege sight over the other senses, situating the subject at a distance from the

QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of the range of the concept of worldview as articulated in this paper stood out to you as particularly new, innovative or exciting?
1. Does using the idea of family resemblance rather than strict definition in thinking about worldview help in RE?
1. What are the implications for your organisation of having a broad, inclusive definition of 'worldview'? How might this be different in different school settings?

world that it sees or has a view on. Alternative terms such as 'worldsense' or 'existentiality' draw our attention back to the embodied, affective and more broadly existential dimensions of the object of study that might otherwise be obscured. Many of the academics in the group were keen to emphasise the non-cognitive, existential and even mundane dimensions of people's lives as important objects of study at both school and in higher education.

However, it is possible to use the terms 'worldview' and 'worldviews' in such a way as to avoid these problems, particularly if we see the concept as denoting family resemblances rather than having a narrow definition. The literature review also shows that academic writing on worldviews includes the unconscious, 'common sense,' mythological, enacted and embodied dimensions. Understanding and paying attention to the interplay between personal and organised worldviews may also help to avoid reifying worldviews.

There was some divergence in the ways the academics understood the concept of worldview, but overall the group inclined towards a broader and more inclusive use of worldview, which:

- **includes both religious and non-religious worldviews**, rather than only being used for non-religious worldviews
- **includes affective, embodied, existential and practical dimensions** in addition to cognitive and intellectual dimensions
- **includes individuals and small communities**, not only organised traditions

includes worldviews that are unreflective, unconscious and implicit as well as those that are consciously held, and therefore may be understood through interpreting actions as well as articulations **points towards worldviews being fluid, changing, diverse and plural** with open, porous boundaries rather than fixed ones.

There have been concerns that this dilutes the religious content of the subject, but this is not the intention – it is, rather, to enhance it. This does not mean leaving the concept so open and fluid that 'worldview' could mean almost anything. The next discussion paper attempts to illustrate some ways in which a broad understanding of 'worldview' offers a tool that will enrich a number of different approaches to RE in different school settings.

Discussion paper 2

Fruitful understandings of worldview in the classroom

This paper builds on paper 1 to further explore how the concept of ‘worldview’ creates fruitful directions for RE as a school subject, opening up new avenues and questions that bring the subject closer into line with both academic concerns and the range of individual and collective experiences that are the intended objects of study.

While the group of academics resisted defining ‘worldview’ too tightly, they collectively could see some ways in which the use of ‘worldview’ helps teachers and other stakeholders to move beyond narrow views which hold us back in the RE classroom. Many good teachers will already be exploring some of these questions and taking some of these approaches. However, they do so often in resistance to a wider system, in schools and in the public sphere, which tends to flatten out the presentation of religions, obscuring their rich diversity. The shift to a worldview approach, backed by the National Entitlement, is intended to open up this diversity and make it easier for teachers in a wide range of settings to support pupils and students in building a richer and more nuanced understanding of their own and others’ worldviews and of how worldview works in human life.

The examples given in this paper illustrate potential end-points or outcomes – the types of things that young people can be expected to understand by the end of their school careers. Careful curriculum development will be needed to ensure that primary and secondary curriculums build towards these more complex and nuanced ideas. At the same time, some complexity can be introduced at very young ages, and children will bring this complexity into the classroom with them as part of their own personal worldviews or lived experiences in relation to organised worldviews. This is a work in progress to which REC members can, and we hope will, make a vital contribution. There are already exciting examples of this work beginning in schools.

This paper also explores the question of content selection. The potential field of study for Religion and Worldviews

is vast, and the question most often asked by teachers is how to effectively select content that will ensure progression in the subject and provide the right balance of substantive, disciplinary and personal knowledge¹ and of breadth and depth. This is not a problem unique to Religion and Worldviews – History, Geography and English also face similar content selection issues, for example.

There has been some concern that re-orienting to Religion and Worldviews entails adding yet more content to an already crowded curriculum. Understandably, this has raised concerns among teachers and teacher educators as well as curriculum developers. In the discussions, the academics were keen to ensure that taking a worldview approach would not lead to what they described as ‘religious tourism’ where pupils receive a smattering of superficial knowledge about a range of organised worldviews which may or may not be of interest to them. There is a clear need for an overarching, coherent structure so that pupils

¹ ‘Substantive knowledge’ is the content of the subject – in this case knowledge about organised worldviews and key concepts in the subject. ‘Disciplinary knowledge’ is knowledge about the methods, conventions and principles that guide the study of worldviews. Personal knowledge is understanding the positionality of oneself and others. Richard Kueh introduced these ideas at the RExChange conference on 3rd October 2020 and will be speaking about them in his plenary address at the SRGM on 10th November 2020.

can organise their knowledge and build to a deeper, richer understanding of worldviews and how they operate.

THE NATIONAL ENTITLEMENT AS A STARTING POINT

The National Entitlement developed by the Commission on Religious Education was seen to be a useful starting point for designing an overarching coherent curriculum structure.

The National Entitlement outlines nine key areas that pupils 'must be taught':

1. about matters of central importance to the worldviews studied, how these can form coherent accounts for adherents, and how these matters are interpreted in different times, cultures and places
2. about key concepts including 'religion' 'secularity' 'spirituality' and 'worldview,' and that worldviews are complex, diverse and plural
3. the ways in which patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews, locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times
4. the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other, have some shared beliefs and practices as well as differences, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition
5. the role of religious and non-religious ritual and practices, foundational texts, and of the arts, in both the formation and communication of experience, beliefs, values, identities and commitments
6. how worldviews may offer responses to fundamental

questions of meaning and purpose raised by human experience, and the different roles that worldviews play in providing people with ways of making sense of their lives

7. the different roles played by worldviews in the lives of individuals and societies, including their influence on moral behaviour and social norms
8. how worldviews have power and influence in societies and cultures, appealing to various sources of authority, including foundational texts
9. the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines and through direct encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these worldviews.

During the discussions, some suggested that the National Entitlement, as useful as it is, may be missing ideas of the sacred, the transcendent and revelation. However, these could be included in 'matters of central importance' as they are absolutely of central importance within some organised and personal worldviews. There is also ongoing debate about how to present the relationship between continuity/uniformity and change/diversity within particular organised worldviews.

The National Entitlement can serve as an important arbiter of the perennial question about which content is worthy of study and why one content area should be chosen over another. The curriculum can therefore be freed from views about which organised or personal worldviews are inherently the most worthy of study. Instead, selection can be based on how a particular example, drawn from organised or personal

worldviews, illustrates one or more of the statements in the National Entitlement. This frees up schools in different settings to draw on the worldviews most relevant to their context. It also gives teachers freedom to bring in examples taken from their own interest, expertise or indeed lived experience. Having said that, there will need to be careful curriculum development so that children have enough background knowledge about particular traditions to understand the examples selected by teachers to illustrate particular points and to appreciate the real worldview diversity in today's world. The proposed REC project currently under consideration by a funder will tackle such issues.

The examples in this paper are also just that – early-stage, illustrative examples of the explanatory power that the concept of worldview might have. They are neither intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive, or to signal that one particular worldview is more worthy of study than another.

It will require skilled curriculum development to ensure that the National Entitlement statements can be understood at an age-appropriate level. Several curriculum projects, including **Understanding Christianity**, the **Big Ideas in RE** project and the **RE-searchers project**, have begun to illustrate the level of depth that can be achieved in the primary and secondary classroom. While these may not be explicitly aligned to the National Entitlement, they all cover key elements of it and, more importantly, illustrate what is possible at different levels.

TRANSCENDING THE 'WORLD RELIGIONS PARADIGM'

Curriculum resources for Religious Education are often framed within what has been called the 'world religions paradigm.'

The 'world religions paradigm' tended to construct religions along the model of Protestant Christianity: with founders, sacred texts, specific places of worship, churchlike organisational structures and systems of doctrine. It gave rise to assumptions that there are a fixed number of important 'religions'; that each is unitary and separate; and that each conform to the same pattern. The study of religions at both university and school level in the last 50 years has generally been framed within this paradigm. However, it has also been problematised both by academics and in classroom practice.

It may be difficult to see beyond the world religions paradigm if our own study of religions has been framed and shaped by it. However, it is perhaps time for a paradigm shift, moving beyond this paradigm to a more nuanced study of worldviews, while not losing what has been good about the previous approach.

Several current challenges in RE may be the result of the hidden influence of the world religions paradigm.

These include:

- Religions are often presented as ahistorical and monolithic, obscuring their internal diversity and historical development.
- There is sometimes an implied hierarchy of 'religions' – that Christianity is the archetypal

religion and other religions are more or less worthy of study depending on how closely their features are matched to Christianity. Indigenous or sub-Saharan African religions are often not even considered as 'religions' or as worthy of study.

- Curricula are often constructed as if all organised worldviews have similar features and can be studied through the same categories: founders, sacred texts, spaces of worship, key beliefs, practices, and so on. This means that organised worldviews are not always understood on their own terms, but rather re-organised to fit a particular paradigm.
- Linked to this, there can sometimes be an excessive focus on founders, sacred texts, 'orthodoxy' and certain types of religious authority, at the expense of understanding how people believe, belong and live their lives. This can lead to an incorrect assumption that the truest form of a religious worldview is to be found among its most literate adherents.
- The boundary between religion and non-religion is often presented as more rigid than it is in practice, which can lead to a questionable narrative of progress from the religious to the 'secular,' 'scientific' and capitalist.
- Important over-arching concepts like belief, secular and religion are not covered.

In their discussions, the academics explored the ways in which taking a worldview approach can help to address these challenges. In addressing them, the idea of 'worldview' functions as a 'can-opener' to open up deeper and more fruitful questions about religious and non-religious worldviews, both organised and personal. This paper focuses on how a worldview approach can respond to four key challenges.

1. Opening up the rigid boundary between religion and non-religion
2. Opening up the interplay between continuity and change, challenging perceptions of religions as ahistorical
3. Opening up the interplay between organised and personal worldviews, challenging perceptions of religions as monolithic
4. Opening up historical and contemporary issues within specific worldviews, challenging the tendency to see worldviews within a fixed categorisation rather than on their own terms in particular contexts.

OPENING UP BOUNDARIES BETWEEN RELIGION AND NON-RELIGION

One of the challenges that frustrated some of the group was that, as a result of prevailing views about 'religions' that treats them as being unitary, fixed and distinct, the boundary between 'religion' and 'non-religion' is constructed as being more rigid and fixed than is the case in practice. Using the concept of 'worldview' as a can-opener can help to break down this rigid binary, to demonstrate that both 'religious' and 'non-religious' are far more complex categories that they might appear, and that they influence each other. The term 'worldview' can apply to both the religious and the non-religious, and hence be employed to illustrate what may be common to both.

The problems of a rigid binary are clear when exploring groups or individuals who identify, for example, as 'secular Sikhs,' 'ex-Muslims,' 'cultural Christians' or 'Christian atheists.' Taking a worldview approach may enable teachers to include these groups within the purview of the

subject as potentially illuminating a whole range of issues about the interplays between organised and personal worldviews and exploring questions like the relationship between 'religion' and 'culture.'

The rigid binary between religious and non-religious also obscures the ways in which the non-religious is also culturally and historically constituted and enables important concepts like 'secular' and 'secularism' to be explored. The types of non-religious worldviews and understandings of secularism to be found in English-speaking countries are not the same as those to be found in Russia or China, for example. A worldview approach can enable teachers to bring Anglo-American liberal secular views into the classroom as objects of study, as something to be examined rather than being the background which is simply assumed.

The influence of wider cultural phenomena, such as capitalism and commercialisation, on both religious and non-religious worldviews, can also be explored, again blurring the rigid boundary between religion and non-religion. This might be used to explore, for example, how practices such as yoga and mindfulness have become commercialised. The suggestion here is not to examine 'commercialism' as a 'worldview' in and of itself, but rather to examine the influence of commercialism as a cultural phenomenon on organised and personal worldviews.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: OPENING UP NEW QUESTIONS

The concept of 'worldview' may help to correct perceptions of 'religion' and 'religions' as ahistorical, monolithic and unchanging.

‘Worldview’ as a concept can be used to draw attention to the historical development of ideas or paradigms, opening up questions about continuity and change. It also opens up the range of ways in which an individual’s worldview can be influenced, not just by ‘religions’ but by a variety of social, cultural, intellectual and historical factors. Thus, it creates more space for understanding a range of diversities within historical and contemporary religious experience.

It also helps us avoid the fallacy that ‘religions’ are things in their own right with independent agency in the world (for example, that ‘Islam says...’ or ‘Judaism says’). It is clear that worldviews are held by people – sometimes individually, sometimes collectively or as part of long-standing institutions – and therefore a worldview has no independent agency to say or do anything. People – individually or collectively as part of organisations or communities – say or do things (partly) because of worldviews they hold. In doing so, they may draw from traditional sources, textual and otherwise, and indeed may wish to see themselves as fitting in with an existing tradition.

The National Entitlement for Religion and Worldviews specifically calls for a greater focus on historical change and on interactions between worldviews.

Using the concept of worldview can help teachers to open up deeper and more interesting questions about continuity and change in teachings or practices. Rather than assuming that these have always been understood in the same way, we can explicitly call that assumption into question. We can ask whether a text would have been understood in the same way in earlier times and different places to how we understand it today, perhaps drawing on historical and contemporary source material (including the visual arts as well as texts) where

relevant. Attention can also be drawn to areas where the continuity of traditions has been remarkable, such as the efforts made to obtain and preserve accurately written and oral texts for thousands of years, rituals current today with a similar pedigree, or advice on how to live our lives and treat other people that retain contemporary relevance.

Looking more deeply at organised traditions, the concept of

‘worldview’ might help to explain beliefs or practices that do not fit a simplistic or monolithic idea of religion, going beyond the idea of different denominations to trace a range of historical, cultural and intellectual influences. Tracing influences in this way can build up students’ skills so that they can explain, for example, why

Pupils should be taught about:

- **the ways in which patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews, locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times**
- **the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other, have some shared beliefs and practices as well as differences, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition.**

some South Asian Muslims in Britain believe in reincarnation and whether that has changed as new influences from the Arab world have become more popular.

At the personal level, the concept of ‘worldview’ helps to explain the influence of specific life experiences on an individual’s understanding of certain texts or interpretation of doctrines. This could breathe new life into commonly used life stories such as that of Farid Esack or C S Lewis. Over time, students could also explore the importance of conversation – whether in person or through texts – in refining and changing people’s understandings. This might be explored through pupils’ own experience (possible at primary as well as at secondary) as well as studying organised traditions such as Rabbinic Judaism or Tibetan Buddhism which have long-standing practices of conversation and debate.

Taking a worldview approach may therefore help to particularise beliefs and practices as rooted in their historical and geographical contexts, rather than always being treated as universal across all times and places. Far from diluting the religious content of the subject, a worldview approach would enhance it. At the same time, these concepts will need to be developed over the course of a pupil’s school career, balancing simplicity and complexity in an age-appropriate way.

INTERPLAYS BETWEEN ORGANISED AND PERSONAL WORLDVIEWS

Taking a worldview approach can also open up the interplay between organised and personal worldviews. We all inhabit and were born into a range of overlapping worldviews, perhaps

including being part of organised religious or other communities. Some of these may be formally articulated, while others may be less conscious, articulate and formal. These worldviews fundamentally shape our gaze and engagement whether we are conscious of them or not. With this as a starting point, one of the aims of Religion and Worldviews is that young people understand their own worldviews and those of others in order to inhabit them more consciously, responsibly and responsively. Understanding the interplay between personal and organised worldviews is crucial to this task.

The shift in emphasis to a balance between personal and organised worldviews may help to open up a wider range of questions – both about the history of ideas, and about existential matters. A worldview approach also helps to explain the ways individuals and communities relate to this range of overlapping worldviews. For example, taking a worldview approach might help explain why some Muslims in Britain turn to wisdom from popularised Buddhist traditions in seeking to explain or deepen their spiritual practice – or indeed why some Buddhist communities in Britain draw on Sufi poetry and ideas. A worldview approach can open up questions about how individuals within these communities might draw on such ideas both in their everyday lives and to cope with difficult circumstances when they arise.

A worldview approach can also help to explain how institutional or organised worldviews come to change their positions, and how this might be influenced by key individuals changing their views, in conversation with both their historical religious traditions and the contemporary moment. For example, if we were to trace the change in

the Church of England's official view on women priests, a worldview approach might lead students to explore how key individuals interpreted Biblical or theological sources and how they responded to the changing political and cultural climate. Students might then seek to explain how and why the Church of England's official position changed and how individuals and groups have responded, as well as the impact of this on women priests and women and girls in the Church.

This does not mean understanding how every single individual relates to the organised traditions that they may identify with, but rather developing a deeper conceptual understanding, informed by several disciplines, of how individuals interact with traditions and how ideas are shaped. This can be done effectively, if simply, at primary as well as secondary².

REAL CONVERSATIONS AND REAL DEBATES

One potential consequence of freeing teachers from an over-reliance on teaching 'religions' as a series of 'isms' framed by the world religions paradigm is that it opens up space for pupils to be introduced to the real conversations and debates taking place within contemporary and historical communities about meaning, truth, purpose, the value of rituals, the inter-relationships between religion, morals, culture and politics, to name but a few examples. Crucially, a worldview approach may help to free teachers from the assumption, often exacerbated by the structure of public examinations, that all religions are constructed in the same way and with the same features.

For example, a recent GCSE examination paper asked students to evaluate the statement 'For Jews, Shabbat is more important than any other festival.' This does not map on to historical or contemporary debates within Jewish traditions about Shabbat. Rather than assuming that 'X is more important than Y' is how debates are constructed within all communities, pupils could be introduced to how debates are actually constructed within a range of communities.

Continuing the example of Shabbat, pupils at GCSE level could be introduced to the historical debates on whether doctors were allowed to practise on Shabbat and under what circumstances, or the contemporary debates about the use of Zoom and other digital technologies on Shabbat during the 2020 lockdown period. They could explore the sources that different individuals and groups drew on and the methods of reasoning they used, as well as the social and cultural factors that might have influenced people to have different views. Rather than forcing Judaism into a paradigm that does not fit, for the purposes of an examination, this would enable young people to engage with Jewish thought as it is experienced by Jewish people in a range of contexts. As with other examples in this paper, this example describes the end-point of a course of study, and curriculum developers will need to consider how to build up to this through primary and lower secondary. The proposed forthcoming REC project will contribute to that task.

This means that curriculum developers may need to move beyond well-travelled paths and well-known sources to find illustrations, stories and debates which clarify concepts or aspects of the National Entitlement. It also means that teachers with particular areas of interest or specialism should be able to use these as depth studies, also aligned to the National Entitlement.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the concept of worldview, as outlined here, open up new and interesting questions for the traditions that you are familiar with?
1. How might different organisations within the RE community support the development of curriculum resources that explore the interplays between organised and personal worldviews?
1. What real conversations and real debates would you like to see young people focus on, that might not fit into the current paradigm but would fit into a worldview approach?
1. How might REC members contribute to developing and enhancing this approach to worldviews?

² RE Online's blog series, [Opening up conversations about Religion and Worldviews](#), and the [Reforming RE blogspace](#) both provide illustrations of worldview approaches in classroom practice.

Discussion paper 3

Academic rigour and disciplinary knowledge

One of the enduring themes of the discussions was how to ensure that Religion and Worldviews remains an academically rigorous subject. Religious Education has sometimes been characterised as a subject which lacks such rigour, leaving pupils thinking that “it’s all a matter of opinion”. Yet the examples already discussed in the previous papers illustrate how taking a ‘Worldview’ approach can build on the three forms of knowledge of the subject identified by Richard Kueh to achieve real challenge and promote academically rigorous work.¹

The distinction between substantive and disciplinary knowledge was seen to be essential. Substantive knowledge is the content of a subject. By contrast, disciplinary knowledge refers to the methods and principles of the subject, sometimes called the ways of knowing. It can include pupils’ understanding of forms of discourse by which scholars past and present have decided what counts as knowledge or truth within a particular tradition of enquiry. The academic rigour of a subject depends as much on the quality of disciplinary knowledge that pupils are introduced to within that subject as on the amount of substantive knowledge that students retain.

Religion and Worldviews was understood to be

multidisciplinary by the academics. This adds a further challenge to the existing challenge of content selection – it’s not just about selecting the substantive content but also the disciplinary approach that is appropriate. The challenge for curriculum development is to build pupils’ skills within all the key disciplines related to Religion and Worldviews.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLINE?

Like ‘religion’ and ‘worldview’, a ‘discipline’ is seen by many as a human construct. Human life and the natural world are not inherently divided up into subject disciplines. Rather, disciplines are created and sustained by human activity – particularly in universities. In some ways, disciplines are

themselves worldviews – or at least create and sustain worldviews – in so far as they are traditions of understanding as to what counts as knowledge, truth and evidence and using specific tools and practices to produce knowledge, as well as functioning as communities with shared languages and cultures. Different societies and cultures value the various disciplines differently.

One way to think about a discipline is that suggested by Richard Kueh, now the subject lead for RE at Ofsted, who talks about a discipline as a particular type of discourse, ‘what makes a subject distinctive’ and ‘the sum total of the tools, norms, methods, and *modus operandi* of the way in which humans go about exploring a field of knowledge that has its own conventions’ (Kueh, 2019:57).

Understanding the disciplines that might be brought to bear on the study of worldviews and what counts as disciplinary knowledge is an essential aspect of the study of worldviews, as stated in the CoRE National Entitlement.

¹ In a plenary lecture given at the RExChange conference on 3rd October 2020

WHICH DISCIPLINES?

With such varied content, the selection of disciplines is itself a challenge. Some participants in the discussion argued that Religious Studies is itself a discipline, which employs multiple methods, and that Religious Education in schools is a distinctive subject that should draw on Religious Studies.

Although as in all disciplines the following are contested, Religious Studies (or Study of Religions) tends to be characterised by:

- **'methodological agnosticism'**: that is, that the discipline steers a middle way between those disciplines that tend to support the claims and behaviour of the worldviews studied, and those that attempt to 'explain them away'. The agnosticism is methodological in that you do not have to be agnostic in your personal worldview, but adopt this approach for the purposes of study
- **'informed empathy'**: that is, the starting point of enquiry should be the attempt to respect the adherent and see things as they see them, rather than through one's own existing presuppositions
- **'reflexivity'**: that is, the attempt to recognise what these presuppositions might be, and prevent them interfering with scholarly accuracy, as well as allowing our own assumptions

to be challenged by the perspectives of the adherents

- **'epistemological humility'**: that is the recognition that one's own knowledge and understanding is limited, and that the results of one's study will be partial and flawed
- a critical approach which is not afraid to question or evaluate the perspectives of adherents, once the above attempts and recognitions have been made. In particular, in recent decades, critiques from the perspectives of feminist, queer and postcolonial theories have featured, though there have always been ethical ones more generally.

Within this overall approach, scholars of Religious Studies draw on methods and tools from a vast array of disciplines including literary criticism, philosophy, theology, sociology, anthropology, history, media studies, psychology and political science.

Others did not see Religious Studies as a discipline in its own right, but argued that the study of worldviews is inherently multi-disciplinary. If so, then there needs to be some selection of disciplines. Some writers in recent years have argued that the most important disciplines are theology (itself multidisciplinary), philosophy and the 'human and social sciences' with others adding

history to this list. History and its methods are perhaps a useful corrective to the problem, identified in earlier papers, that 'religions' tend to be presented as ahistorical. Other disciplines within the Humanities, including the study of literature, are considered by some to be central to the study of worldviews, especially in so far as it involves the study of religious and other texts.

Either way, it is crucial that we do not reproduce assumptions about 'ourselves' and 'others' in our choice of disciplines and methods. For example, there is a risk that the choice of methods might reinforce stereotypes about certain 'others' being less rational or logical. This impression might be given if some worldviews are studied via philosophy and theology and others via sociology and anthropology. Care needs to be taken to ensure a balance between approaches that focus on how worldviews are lived out, and approaches that focus on how worldviews are articulated and thought through.

The overall range of disciplines that are relevant to a worldview approach are much the same as those already used to study religion, but the specific ways they are deployed and the emphasis given to them may vary, depending on the specifics of the approach taken and the concepts being explored. For example, there may be greater emphasis given to history, and to hermeneutical approaches within theology, philosophy

and the human and social sciences. It was clear during the discussions that a disciplinary approach is essential to Religion and Worldviews even if the selection of disciplines is still up for discussion.²

THE BENEFITS OF DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

Taking a disciplinary approach, whether this is interpreted as the discipline of Religious Studies, or a multidisciplinary approach, to the study of worldviews might solve several potential problems of teaching Religion and Worldviews identified during the discussions.

First, it might address the variety of types of questions being asked and answered in the classroom. Without a disciplinary approach, this variety can collapse into ‘it’s all a matter of opinion’ or lead to muddled and confused thinking. Within a disciplinary approach, pupils can recognise which types of questions belong to which disciplines and therefore what types of answers might be appropriate, and which methods and what sort of evidence can be used to reach them.

Second, it can alert teachers to the status of ‘factual’ material presented in resources as having been arrived at through processes which reflect the methods of particular disciplines or assumptions of particular scholars.

Third, it might address the problem that some people assume that worldviews that lead to harm are less authentic expressions of either religious or non-religious worldviews. The temptation is then to sanitise them by presenting only the ‘nice’ versions – usually from the best of motives on the part of teachers. For example, Buddhist monks involved in the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims may be considered to adhere to a false or corrupted version of Buddhism, because ‘true’ Buddhists would not do this. There are reasons why members of organised worldviews, and authorities within them, may consider that this is not the ‘real’ version of the tradition, but following this belief in the classroom can lead to an impoverished understanding of the complexities of such judgements.

Simplifying this issue might be appropriate when working with younger children, or presenting a tradition for the first time to an audience that has preconceived negative assumptions to start with. However, with older students at least, and sometimes with younger ones, it is legitimate, even essential, to raise contentious issues and expose the harm that can be caused by individuals or groups who adhere to particular organised worldviews. Taking a critical disciplinary approach can enable young people to understand how power operates within the context of religious and non-religious worldviews by opening up such issues as areas of study in their own right.

EXISTING DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES IN RE

Recent curriculum thinking has given more prominence to disciplinary approaches and to the methods by which worldviews are studied. There are several examples of this, including the [RE-searchers approach](#) developed by Rob Freathy and colleagues, the [Big Questions in Classrooms project funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation](#) and the [Big Ideas](#) approach developed by Barbara Wintersgill and colleagues (which draws on ideas from a range of disciplines while not taking an explicitly disciplinary approach). There is not space to explore them in detail here but introductory materials on each can be found at the links above. They may need to be adapted for different settings, but they illustrate what is possible at a range of age-groups if a disciplinary approach is taken.

These different experiments in curriculum thinking all offer ways to interrogate the disciplines themselves as well as the object of study. In the light of what has been written above in relation to the world religions paradigm, pupils and teachers need to be able to reflect on how disciplines and methods are constructed and selected to apply to particular questions or areas of knowledge.

Equally crucially, these disciplinary approaches are applied in age-appropriate ways through Primary and Secondary, illustrating how disciplinary knowledge can be included even from an early age.

² RE Today will be producing resources in 2021 for its subscribers that model a disciplinary approach. The RE-searchers project at the University of Exeter is another model.

THE CENTRALITY OF REFLEXIVITY

Given the contested history of each of the disciplines mentioned above (religious studies, the 'human and social sciences', theology, philosophy, history and others) that we might bring to bear on the study of worldviews, it is important that children and young people develop some sense of this contested history and of the debates within these disciplines, particularly discussions on the positioning of the researcher. Even in philosophy, historically the least reflexive of the disciplines about its own situatedness, the idea of philosophers as situated in time, space, culture and geography, and the impact of this on their philosophical positions, is gaining currency (see, for example, the work of Amia Srinivasan).

Reflexivity is therefore a crucial element of the disciplinary knowledge that we hope young people will gain through studying worldviews. While the precise understanding and boundaries of reflexivity are different in the different disciplines, the idea of reflexivity – understanding the subject

QUESTIONS

1. What are the benefits of taking a disciplinary approach to the study of Religion and Worldviews?
2. Which combination of disciplines would you consider to be most important, and for what reasons?
3. How can teachers support students to develop reflexivity?
4. What contribution can our organisation make to supporting pupils in gaining disciplinary knowledge.

positioning of the researcher and how this impacts what is studied and how – is central. This can be done very simply, by supporting children and young people to understand their own positioning – how their own ideas, background, experiences and worldview influence how they understand and interpret what they see. Teachers can also support children and young people to understand that this is also the case for authorities of all kinds, including of course teachers themselves! This is an important element of what Richard Kueh has described as personal knowledge.³

This does not mean returning to an over-simplified understanding of 'learning from

religion' but rather bringing children and young people into an ongoing academic conversation about how they engage with people and 'texts'⁴ of all sorts, and in particular how they represent individuals and groups ('us' and 'others' and all the complexities in between). It also means supporting them to question the conceptual categories that they and others have used in these representations. It is this concept of reflexivity that brings together the disciplines that we might use to study worldviews.

Further work on how these ways of knowing play out in the classroom will be pursued in the proposed, forthcoming REC project.

3 In his plenary lecture at the RExChange conference on 3rd October 2020.

4 'Texts' might refer to written texts, but also visual arts or film and media texts, which can be analysed using similar methods.

Discussion paper 4

Worldviews and power – key issues

One of the most exciting aspects of the concept of ‘worldview’ is how it opens up the question of power and influence as an area of study in the school classroom, at undergraduate levels and in teacher education. Power and authority are key concepts in understanding organised worldviews. The question of who has the power to define an institutional position and what influence is needed to ensure that that position is upheld is essential to understanding how worldviews operate. So too is the question of how and why people resist and challenge institutional positions and how these positions change.

POWER AND KNOWLEDGE – WHO DECIDES WHAT IS TAUGHT?

At several points during the discussions, the question of who decides what is taught in classrooms naturally arose. If a new approach is needed, then those who decide what is taught and how it is taught have tremendous influence in whether and how that new approach makes its way into the classroom.

In Religion and Worldviews, a much wider range of stakeholders have influence on what is taught than in any other subject as a result of the Agreed Syllabus model. Examination boards also consult religion and belief groups when developing examination specifications and questions. Textbook writers often do the same. In many

religious character schools the foundation has control. Religion and belief communities produce what they believe are definitive materials. Despite this, the way that religious and non-religious worldviews are represented in the classroom is not always recognisable by those who adhere to or participate in them, for the reasons outlined in previous papers.

In order to move beyond this, organisations that publish curriculum resources, and those involved in assessment, may need to expand the range of voices within the curriculum. These need not be exhaustive, so long as the approach taken makes it plain that any representation is inherently limited. There is an opportunity here to broaden the range of individuals and groups that ‘represent’ particular worldviews, including

those who might have more complex relationships with the traditions that they have inherited. This links back to the interplay between organised and personal worldviews. As important as it is to have a clear understanding of the official positions and practices within organised traditions, it is also important to have a plurality of voices articulating personal relationships with those traditions, including voices that might take critical stances within those traditions.

WORLDVIEWS AND DECOLONISATION

In our discussion, we explored calls for decolonising the curriculum and the extent to which the concept of ‘worldview’ can create space for this decolonisation. Some of the academics in the group were directly involved in academic work on colonialism and decolonisation and it was their expertise from which we drew. It was clear that this is currently an important discussion in higher education.

The idea of decolonisation draws its meaning from the idea of colonisation – in particular, the political colonisation of

QUESTIONS

1. How can curriculum developers be introduced to new voices to enrich the presentation of personal and organised worldviews?
2. What would taking a decolonial, worldview-influenced approach mean within your organisation or school setting?

large parts of Asia, Africa and South America by European and North American powers. Decolonisation was the political movement by which these territories gained political sovereignty and independence. However, many scholars, including some in the group of academics, argue that forms of colonisation continue in contemporary relations between the Global North and the Global South, for example through industries such as mining, through interventions to generate 'regime change' and, arguably, through the international development industry.

Calls for decolonisation of the curriculum also recognise that political colonisation came with a colonisation of mindsets or indeed knowledge. Political colonisation brought with it ideas about modernity, knowledge, authority, expertise and civilisation that were variously internalised and resisted by colonised populations. There are some who argue, with some justification, that Religious Studies as a discipline is itself a colonial invention which served the needs of political colonisation, particularly in South Asia. They argue that the invention of 'religion' as a category contributed to the portrayal of certain groups as 'backward' and needing to be civilised, and to the perception of colonisation as a civilising mission. These perceptions were both internalised and resisted by those who were

colonised. This could be illustrated by the history of Muslim modernist movements, for example. Decolonisation, on this view, is also about tracing and challenging the mindsets associated with colonialism.

Religion and Worldviews, along with History, Geography and related subjects, is an important space in the curriculum to explore colonisation and decolonisation, particularly given that many of the worldviews studied originated in the Global South and were directly affected by colonialism whether as colonisers or colonised. How, then, can this be done, and how does the concept of 'worldview' support approaches to the curriculum which interrogate and transcend colonial assumptions?

First, a worldview approach, as has been mentioned in previous papers, provides space for pupils and teachers alike to interrogate their own positions and how these have been influenced – and there are already examples of this interrogation taking place in **Primary**. This can lead, over time, to interrogating approaches and representations that have been influenced by colonialist ways of thinking and interrogating the power dynamics that created the models we now take for granted.

The emphasis on historicity and change, and on the interplay between personal and organised worldviews may also help – this may support pupils, and more importantly teachers, to question which perspectives are being

privileged and which ones are being silenced, and why, and how power might be operating to silence some perspectives.

A worldview approach may also be useful in discussions about representation. If we move beyond reifying traditions or communities, then arguments about how much curriculum time is spent on this or that tradition become less salient. Deeper issues about representation can then be explored – interrogating, for example, questions of power and privilege, of who speaks for particular groups.

In part, decolonisation is about highlighting perspectives that have historically been silenced, for example those of women, minority groups and rural populations. Again, curriculum developers may need to explore beyond tried-and-tested sources to find and value such perspectives as legitimate.

Ultimately, using the idea of 'worldviews' to decolonise the curriculum should support pupils to develop not just functional religious literacy but a critical-historical religious literacy, so that they understand more fully the impact of colonialism and modernity on our worldviews and on the ways that we think about and study religion and worldviews.

This may need careful curriculum and pedagogical thinking to be effective in the Primary and Secondary classroom. However, a decolonising approach could easily and readily be taken in undergraduate studies and, crucially, in teacher education and development. Again the proposed, forthcoming REC project will need to offer exemplifications of planning that embraces this topic.

GLOSSARY

Taxonomy, taxonomies: systems of classification eg of objects, animals and plants

Existential: relating to existence, questions of existence, the meaning of life

Reify: to make something abstract into a material or concrete thing

Essentialise: to characterise certain traits as fundamental or essential to a particular type of person or thing

Affective: concerned with feelings and emotions

Paradigm: a framework for looking at a phenomenon that has unwritten rules and directs actions, for example, a scientific paradigm would direct the selection of research questions and methods.

World Religions Paradigm: a paradigm governing Religious Studies in the late 20th Century – a particular way of thinking about religions which organises them into a set of discrete traditions.

Ahistorical: literally ‘without a history’ – lacking a historical perspective or context

Monolithic: from the word ‘monolith’ meaning a massive single block of stone. In the context of religion and worldviews, a ‘monolithic’ approach is one that treats worldviews as indivisible and lacking in internal diversity.

Discipline: a branch of knowledge or area of study, with its own conventions, methods and community.

Hermeneutics: the study and practice of interpretation, both of texts and in everyday life. Also, the philosophical discipline concerned with analysing the conditions for understanding including the role of culture, language and history.

