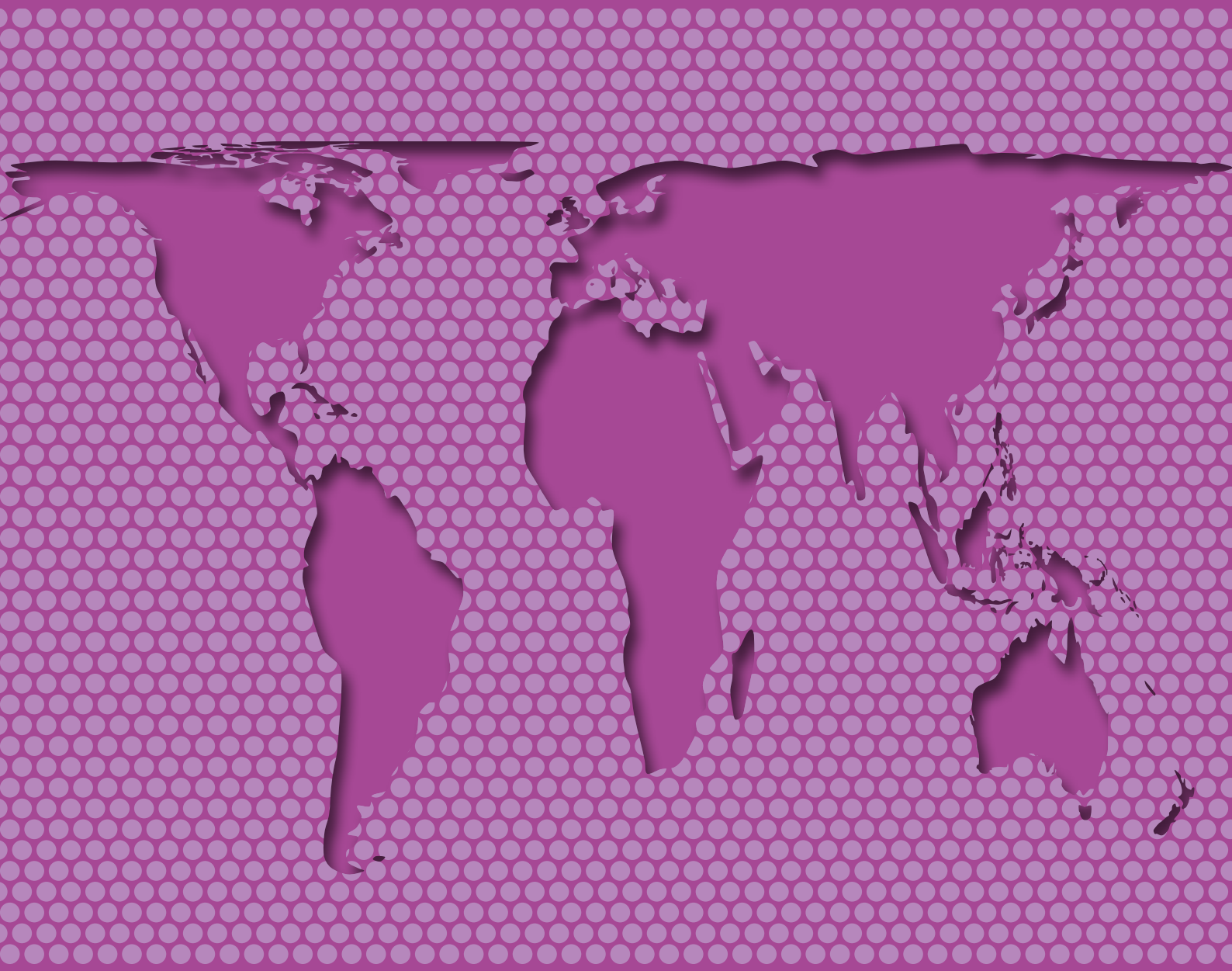


Multi-Academy Trust Framework

A knowledge rich curriculum rooted in East Anglia

An exemplification of a Religion and Worldviews Approach in RE

Nikki McGee

BIG QUESTIONS *in* CLASSROOMS
TEMPLETON WORLD CHARITY FOUNDATION
Westhill make things happen

Framework written by Nikki McGee

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This framework is an example of how the RE Council's Religion and Worldviews Project Handbook and its National Statement of Entitlement (NSE) have been interpreted and put into practice in particular contexts.

These frameworks were developed by three teams, selected for the quality of their proposals by the REC Board in an open tendering process, representing three distinct contexts. These frameworks and their accompanying reports, commentaries and units of work are offered as examples to promote thinking by curriculum developers as to processes they might use in their own situations.

The frameworks take the shared vision of the NSE and accompanied guidance, and express it in different ways in different contexts. They affirm the application of local autonomy in developing local curriculums on the basis of a shared national vision.

The RE Council Religion and Worldviews Approach to RE Curriculum Project resources, including the Handbook, frameworks and related materials can be found at **www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/RWApproach**

Foreword

It is my privilege and joy to write a Foreword to Nikki McGee's Framework which was developed as part of the Religious Education Council's *Religion and Worldviews Project*. This project sought to build on the Commission on RE's (CoRE) vision of a Religion and Worldviews approach by developing a Handbook for curriculum writers and then inviting bids from curriculum leaders in RE who would use this to illustrate how the approach might be interpreted and implemented in three different contexts. Nikki's framework is the third and final example, illustrating how she, as RE curriculum lead, undertook this in her multi-academy trust, *The Inspiration Trust*.

This Framework has been long in the making. Readers will discover that the main reason for this is that Nikki was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer soon after her bid was selected as one of the three winners. As she explains herself, much of this work was done in the chemotherapy chair. It is a tribute to Nikki's determination and resilience that she has produced such an impressive document under such challenging circumstances.

The aspiration of CoRE was that there would be a National Entitlement that would set the standard for the quality for RE across England but that would be interpreted in ways appropriate to the many different contexts in which RE is taught. Nikki's interpretation of the National Entitlement for the local Norfolk context of The Inspiration Trust is a wonderful exemplar of that aspiration working in practice. Others would have done the job differently. But that is the point; to achieve an appropriate balance between a national standard and local interpretation.

In addition, Nikki has shown how a subject specialist can interpret the academic debates about the nature and purpose of RE in a way that can be implemented by the mixed team of specialists and non-specialists across primary and secondary schools that she leads. In so doing she has drawn on:

1. The aspiration for a knowledge-rich curriculum.
2. The three forms of substantive, disciplinary, and personal knowledge advocated by Ofsted.
3. The ground-breaking theory of interpretation developed by Gadamer.
4. The critical realist understanding of knowledge.
5. The insights of narrative theology.
6. The worldview theory of Ann Taves.
7. Virtue theory in character education.
8. The historical legacy of faith and belief in Norfolk alongside the lived religion in the county.

Above all Nikki has sought to create a curriculum that means her Trust will produce scholars of Religion and Worldviews.

Finally, Nikki is honest about the challenges she has faced and is open about how her own worldview has influenced the process of curriculum development. The result is a wonderful complement to the Frameworks already published by Jen Jenkins and Gillian Georgiou.

Professor Trevor Cooling

Chair of the RE Council (2015-2021) and Project Director for the Religion and Worldviews Project.

Acknowledgements

This framework would not exist without the support of many people.

It builds on the original religious education (RE) curriculum that Richard Kueh wrote for Inspiration Trust. Throughout this work, I have been conscious of standing on the shoulders of a giant in RE, and I hope I have built on his foundation with the care it deserves.

My thanks go first to Gillian Georgiou and Jen Jenkins, my fellow framework writers, for their support and for encouraging me to feel the fear and do it anyway.

To Stephen Pett, Trevor Cooling and Sarah Lane Cawte: I am grateful for the patience and kindness they showed me as this project took twice as long as anyone expected, because, partway through, my life fell apart with a cancer diagnosis. Their understanding meant more than they know.

I would like to thank Matt Carnaby, who encouraged me in the very early stages of this project and helped me see that I had something to say about the development of RE; and Dave Morel, who listened to me witter, with enthusiasm if not always with clarity, about my vision for RE in our trust.

My thanks, too, to our writing team – Emma Trindall, Alana Chipperfield, John Semmens and Matthew Lane – who offered the expertise that I lacked, as well as enthusiasm about how RE in East Anglia can bring a sense of rebellion and strong identity to the RE world.

I am grateful to my fellow subject leads at Inspiration Trust, and especially to Ben Arscott, who patiently answered all my 'So, what exactly is knowledge-rich?' questions.

Finally, my thanks to the RE subject community at Inspiration Trust. In my own department, I want to single out Luanna Roberts, who helped me trial many of our units and has worked through a whirlwind of almost constant curriculum change; and Will Bauly, whose wisdom and challenging questions helped me refine my thinking. And to the teachers across the trust: working through curriculum change is demanding and exhausting, and you have made it feel like a joy.

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Introduction: Our Curriculum Vision at Inspiration Trust

At Inspiration Trust, we aim to create a religion and worldviews curriculum that equips students in East Anglia to make sense of the diverse perspectives and communities around them. Our primary goal is to nurture wise, thoughtful and respectful interpreters of the world. To achieve this, students need to know and understand a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews. For students to become wise interpreters of the world, they must be exposed to a broad range of views and authentic voices. We have actively sought to amplify voices that have historically been marginalised in RE classrooms, such as women and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Our goal is to include scholarship from the communities being studied, thereby preserving authenticity in our curriculum.

Additionally, our curriculum focuses on developing two key abilities in students:

1. Engaging in thoughtful dialogue with those they disagree with: Social media has made it easy to isolate ourselves in like-minded bubbles and vilify those with opposing views. We aim to counteract this unhealthy discourse by placing RE at the heart of modelling productive disagreement. Students are encouraged to understand the motivations and influences behind differing perspectives, rather than dismissing them. Intellectual humility is a central virtue in this approach. In my own department we talk about engaging in 'genuine curiosity', which means asking each other questions and listening carefully to the answers because we want to learn more about each other rather than wanting some kind of 'gotcha' moment.
2. Taking pride in the local community: We highlight diverse narratives from Norfolk and Suffolk, both past and present. Students explore the richness of perspectives within their local communities. For example, we feature local leaders, artists and changemakers who embody the values we aim to instil in our students.

Finally, data shows that academy chains face challenges in delivering high-quality RE. The recent Ofsted research review found that 34 per cent of academies reported no timetabled RE.[1] We hope this curriculum demonstrates how academy chains can offer a high-quality, knowledge-rich RE curriculum that embraces direct instruction and powerful knowledge. We also aim to show how academy chains can encourage schools to adapt the curriculum to suit their local context by drawing on local resources.

1 Ofsted (2021), *Research Review Series: Religious Education*, **www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education**

The context of Inspiration Trust

Inspiration Trust is a chain of 17 academies in Norfolk and Suffolk, comprising a mix of primary and secondary schools. We have an aligned curriculum for RE from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3 to ensure that all students have access to the same knowledge. To support this, we provide teachers with anthologies for students to read in class, along with teacher guides that offer subject knowledge, an overview of how each unit links to others, key vocabulary and suggested teaching approaches. There is an expectation that all students read from the anthologies in most lessons, and for Key Stage 3 there are trust-wide assessments.

Despite the centralised resources, I would describe our curriculum as 'aligned', because our aim is for it to support teachers when needed while offering a platform for them to innovate and adapt as they feel able. We are fortunate that, at the secondary level, most of our RE departments are staffed with at least one specialist, if not more. When we do use teachers from other specialisms, they often come from the humanities, allowing them to draw on their own expertise within RE teaching. We also experience little turnover within our teaching teams, enabling teachers to develop a specialism over time.

As a Trust Lead and curriculum writer, I work with a team of other subject leads, which has allowed me to integrate links with other subjects, particularly English language, history and geography. For example, our students currently study Marx in RE, English and history, which means that when we use Marx in our curriculum the students already know who he is and his main ideas, so we simply need to check that the students have this knowledge and immediately link him with a study of religion. This interdisciplinary approach helps them build both broad and deep knowledge, as they constantly revisit historical periods, thinkers and ideas. The nineteenth century, a focus in both history and English, provides students with a foundation they can build on in RE, which is crucial given that RE often has less curriculum time than other subjects. Without these cross-curricular foundations, it would be challenging for students to access some of our RE units. As a head of department, in my own school I also benefit from a culture where heads of department talk to each other and create natural rather than forced links. This curriculum requires that kind of cross-curricular work.

We also have an in-house continuing professional development (CPD) programme for primary and secondary teachers, focused on both subject knowledge and pedagogy. Each year, the CPD offer has a theme and consists of an afternoon together on our trust conference day and three sessions led by me. In between these sessions, departments are working on 'follow on' tasks that allow them to implement the CPD in their context. This is supplemented by individual support that I provide to teachers or departments. Without these layers of support, it would be challenging for departments to deliver our curriculum effectively.

Parts of our existing curriculum date back to 2017, and it has been a work in progress ever since. It follows a multidisciplinary, knowledge-rich model. In the original iteration of our curriculum, there is clear influence from the 2018 Commission on Religious Education Final Report;[2] for example, the term 'worldviews' appears in the student anthologies and teaching materials, and we took a nuanced, multidisciplinary approach, as recommended in the Commission's report. In addition, our curriculum included both religious and non-religious worldviews, and addressed key concepts and questions suggested in the report.

2 Commission on Religious Education (2018), *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE*, **religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf**

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For example, it explored questions of meaning and purpose, how patterns of belief and expression may change over time, how worldviews interact with each other, and how people often draw from more than one tradition to shape their worldview, including considerations of power structures. With the release of the further curriculum guidance, I started to make further changes to our curriculum.

Our existing curriculum offered students the opportunity to engage with scholarly ideas and texts. However, we felt there was room for greater diversity of scholarship. For example, we have a Year 8 unit that asks whether the Dharmic traditions uphold existing power structures in society or instead challenge them. The original version of this unit included the theories of Durkheim and Marx on religion, and while I felt these scholars were important, I also felt a sense of unease about studying the Dharmic traditions through the lens of two European men. Therefore, we incorporated Sanjoy Chakravorty's[3] perspectives on colonialism, caste and *varna*.

Influenced by the 2021 Ofsted research review into RE[4] and the religion and worldviews *Handbook*,[5] we also wanted our students to have more planned opportunities to reflect on their personal knowledge as defined by Ofsted and how it interacts with the curriculum. We recognised that giving students opportunities to reflect on their own positionality often happened in a rather ad hoc manner and this was far from ideal, so we hoped that this project would prompt us to think about what we understood by personal knowledge, and that we might develop resources and strategies to help all teachers give our students those moments of self-reflection.

One of our first steps was to take seriously the idea in the *Handbook* that students were interpreters of our curriculum, and that they were both shaped by it and shaping it. This draws on the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer,[6] for whom understanding arises in a 'fusion of horizons' (*horizontverschmelzung*); the horizon of the learner, their prior experience, assumptions and questions meet the horizon of the content, and something new emerges that neither held alone. On this view, our students did not simply receive our curriculum; something genuinely new was created when their horizon met ours. This resonates with the *Handbook's* argument that knowledge in RE should be understood not simply as the acquisition of information but as the development of personal knowledge.

In this sense, a knowledge-rich curriculum is not one that treats pupils as passive recipients of content, but one that enables them to make increasingly informed and scholarly judgements as their own horizon encounters the content of the curriculum. A common criticism of the knowledge-rich movement is that, in prioritising substantive content, it reduces children to passive recipients, vessels into which knowledge is poured, in what Freire criticised as the 'banking concept of education'.[7] Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests this charge rests on a false dichotomy. For Gadamer, understanding is never passive reception. It is an event requiring the learner's active participation because meaning arises only when the learner brings their own horizon – their prior experience, assumptions and questions – into contact with the content. On this account a rich body of knowledge is not the enemy of active or engaged learning but its precondition; it is precisely what gives the student's interpretation something substantial to meet. Where content is slim, there is little with which the learner's horizon can engage, and understanding remains correspondingly thin. Far from producing passivity, a demanding curriculum is what makes the fusions of horizons possible.

I hoped this commitment would shape our classroom practice. I wanted the sequencing of our curriculum to build substantive knowledge precisely so that students have something rich to interpret. Influenced by the Critical RE approach,[8] we developed questionnaires that students completed at the beginning of a unit, giving their initial response to the unit's driving question. For example, the Year 7 wisdom questionnaire (Appendix 2) asked students to reflect on their ideas about wisdom. These initial thoughts on wisdom were the starting point for a piece of extended writing. As we moved through the unit, students were given the opportunity to amend their answers in light of the new thinkers they studied. At the end of the unit, they completed a piece of writing that mirrored their initial piece, this time reflecting on how their ideas about wisdom had changed over time in response to studying the unit.

We also sought to include more examples of contemporary lived religion, showing students how religious practice might look today. This felt particularly important after the Ofsted subject report suggested that RE often failed to prepare young people to navigate their way in an increasingly complex world.[9] We could not say that we were preparing our students for entry into the modern world if our curriculum did not include sufficient examples of contemporary religious practice.

Additionally, after teaching the curriculum, we realised that certain units had too much content, which we are working to streamline. This meant that there was essential work to be carried out on our curriculum, and therefore it felt like the right time to embrace the approach presented in the religion and worldviews *Handbook*. Sometimes this would mean writing whole new units, and at other times adapting those already in place.

Our writing team consisted of three teachers from within our trust and two teachers from local schools, one of whom was the chair of our local SACRE. Our trust maintains close links with the SACRE, and I viewed this project as building on the groundwork laid by the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus.[10] I was also mindful that, while I work with primary schools and teachers, I am not a primary specialist. For this reason, I aimed to ensure that our team had strong representation from the primary sector. It included an Early Years specialist with a theology degree, along with two additional primary teachers who were RE specialists. While we were creating materials for Inspiration Trust, I wanted to move beyond the echo chamber of our own trust. It was important to collaborate with individuals who were familiar with our schools, but also with others who could challenge our thinking and assumptions.

3 Chakravorty, S. (2017), *The Truth about Us: The Politics of Information from Manu to Modi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

4 Ofsted (2021).

5 RE Council (REC) (2024), *Developing a Religion and Worldviews Approach in Religious Education: A Handbook for Curriculum Writers*, **religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/24-25698-REC-Handbook-A4-DIGITAL-PAGES.pdf**

6 Gadamer, H.-G. (2013), *Truth and Method*, revised 2nd ed., translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic).

7 Freire, P. (1996), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin).

8 Wright, A. (2000), *Critical Religious Education, Multiculturalism, and the Pursuit of Truth* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press).

9 Ofsted (2024), *Deep and Meaningful? The Religious Education Subject Report* (Manchester: Ofsted).

10 Norfolk SACRE (2019), *Norfolk Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, **www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/media/13960/download/pdf/norfolk-religious-education-agreed-syllabus-2019.pdf**

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What is a worldview?

The religion and worldviews *Handbook* defines a worldview as 'the way in which a person encounters, interprets, understands and engages with the world'.[11] It then explores two ways of thinking about worldviews: the personal and the organised.

When discussing worldviews, it is important not to fall into the trap of creating a false binary between religious and non-religious perspectives. Many people draw on both types of influences in shaping how they see the world. One of the great strengths of the worldviews approach is its recognition of this fluidity and complexity.

The approach also encourages us to think about the interaction between different types of worldviews. Organised or institutional worldviews, like those held by the Roman Catholic Church or Humanists UK, are typically associated with communities or traditions. But within those communities are individuals, each with their own lived experience and personal worldview. A key part of this approach is exploring how the institutional and the individual interact and shape one another. Of course, our students bring their own worldviews into the classroom – personal, evolving, and shaped by what they see, feel and learn. Part of our job is to help them become more aware of their worldview and how it develops through RE and wider life experience.

There has been some debate about whether everyone has a worldview. I have certainly had students say in frustration, 'I don't have a worldview, Miss!' But in my experience, as a teacher, a parent and a person, I think we all do. It might be inconsistent or unexamined, but it is there. Helping students become reflective and self-aware about their worldview is something we can support and nurture in the RE classroom.

11 REC (2024), p. 13.

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An East-Anglian Context

The Norfolk context

The *Handbook*[12] describes the religion and worldviews approach as moving from collecting facts about world religions to gaining an understanding of how worldviews work, including their own. This seeking of understanding is also described as understanding themselves, and the world and how they might act in it. An explicitly stated outcome of the religion and worldviews approach is 'They learn how to be skilled navigators of the worldview diversity that they will encounter in school and in adult life.'[13] It struck me as sensible to begin this exploring of the world in our local context of East Anglia. This does not mean limiting our students to their East Anglian context, but taking seriously the importance of understanding it. This includes buildings, influential figures and the Census data, which shows that the city of Norwich is often one of the least religious cities in the UK, frequently swapping places with Brighton.

To reflect our local context, it was necessary to look at the Census data for Norfolk and Norwich in 2011 and 2021 and make comparisons to national data. The table below shows data from the Census on religion for Norfolk, Norwich, and England and Wales. I have deliberately included the figures for Norfolk because it is too easy for us to look at a percentage such as 0.1 and forget that it represents hundreds of families whose children could be in our schools. The data is taken from the Office of National Statistics.[14]

12 REC (2024).

13 REC (2024), p. 14.

14 Office for National Statistics/Censusdata.uk (2021), 'Religion (detailed): Norfolk', **censusdata.uk/e10000020-norfolk/ts031-religion-detailed**

	No religion	Christian	Buddhist	Hindu	Jewish	Muslim	Sikh	Other religion
Norfolk number 2021	404947	430442	3414	3696	1180	8146	566	5295
Norfolk % 2021	44.2	47.0	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.6
Norwich % 2021	53.5	33.6	0.7	1.2	0.2	3.0	0.1	0.9
England & Wales % 2021	37.2	46.2	0.5	1.7	0.5	6.5	0.9	0.6
Norfolk % 2011	29.6	61.0	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.6	0.1	0.5
Norwich % 2011	42.5	44.9	0.7	0.8	0.2	2.0	0.1	0.7
England & Wales % 2011	25.2	59.3	0.4	1.5	0.5	4.9	0.8	0.4
Norfolk change 2011–21	14.6	-14.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.1
Norwich change 2011–21	11.0	-11.3	0.0	0.4	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.2
England and Wales change 2011–21	12.0	-13.1	0.1	0.2	0.0	1.6	0.1	0.2

The data above shows that in Norfolk, fewer than 50 per cent of respondents identified as Christian, and in Norwich this figure drops to just 34 per cent. Across Norfolk, the gap between those who say they have no religion and those who identify as Christian is narrowing to around 3 per cent. In Norwich, however, more than half of respondents reported having no religion, while only a third identified as Christian. If our curriculum is to reflect the context of our students, it is important to include non-religious worldviews. However, it is also worth noting that most of our students do not live in Norwich. Outside the city, nearly half the population still identifies as Christian. In fact, in areas such as King's Lynn and North Norfolk, just over 52 per cent of the population identifies as Christian. While Norfolk and Norwich are not as religiously diverse as the national picture, they are slowly becoming more diverse, particularly in Norwich. This data prompted reflection on the differences between rural, coastal and urban parts of Norfolk, and whether this is something our curriculum should explore.

In 2012, following the previous year's Census, Norwich was declared a 'godless city' in national press coverage,[15] having the highest percentage of people identifying with no religion ('nones') in the country. If our students are to develop an informed understanding of their context, it is important they are aware of these headlines and of Norwich's reputation as a city of the nones. This also needs to be balanced against the legislation that states that an RE syllabus should reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking into account the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.[16]

The Census not only became something our students study, it also became a tool in how we select content. A clear example is our Year 7 unit 'How Does the Landscape of East Anglia Shape Religion and Worldview?' When students examine the detailed Census write-in data, they discover that more people in Norfolk identify as Pagan (around 1,685) than as Jewish (1,180) or Sikh (566). Paganism remains a minority worldview, but it is one that is comparatively more visible here: while Norfolk often appears less religiously diverse than the national picture, Paganism bucks that trend, with a higher share of the population than across England as a whole. This is exactly the kind of pattern that is lost if we rely only on the headline categories, and it is too significant to ignore when it represents hundreds of local families. Drawing on the work of Linda Woodhead and Ronald Hutton[17], students go on to ask why this might be: why nature-based and alternative spiritualities have found fertile ground in a rural, historically nonconformist county, and what this reveals about how place and worldview shape one another.

Norfolk: a place of religious rebellion

During a tour of Norwich Cathedral, I was told that the fourteenth-century Flemish bronze lectern now proudly displayed in the cathedral was recovered from the bishop's garden in the nineteenth century. It was thought to have been thrown there when the cathedral was ransacked, during efforts to strip it of anything considered idolatrous. A fourteenth-century reredos was also discovered in the nineteenth century, having been repurposed as a table in an office. My guide suggested it may have been hidden away to protect it from iconoclasts. I was told a story of Norfolk being more than ready for the Reformation, perhaps because of its trade links, which made it feel closer to the continent than to London. This story of rebellion, combined with what I know from the Census data, made me wonder whether Norfolk has a deeper history of religious rebellion, and if this might be a context worth exploring in our curriculum.

I soon discovered that Norfolk indeed has a strong tradition of both religious and social dissent. From the mid-1500s, Norwich welcomed large numbers of Protestant refugees, known as the Strangers, fleeing persecution in what is now Belgium and the Netherlands. By 1571, one-third of Norwich's population was of Dutch or Walloon descent. Many of

15 Keenan, J. (2016), 'Where is the world's most "godless" city?', *The Guardian*, 7 December, **www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/dec/07/where-world-godless-city-religion-atheist**

16 UK Parliament (1996), *Education Act 1996, Section 375: Agreed Syllabuses of Religious Education*, **www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/375**

17 See Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), a study of religious and spiritual change in Kendal; and Ronald Hutton, The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; revised edition, 2019), which explores the historical and cultural development of modern Pagan witchcraft in Britain.

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these migrants were Reformed Calvinists, but some brought more radical ideas such as Anabaptism, Congregationalism and anti-clericalism. During the sixteenth century, Norfolk became a centre of Puritanism. In 1581, the separatist Robert Browne was arrested for establishing an independent church. It is likely he was drawn to Norwich because of the presence of the Strangers. By the early seventeenth century, Norwich had a reputation for radical preaching and anti-royalist sentiment. This is exemplified by William Bridge, an independent minister who, during the Civil War period, shouted at Queen Henrietta Maria in protest at her perceived Catholic sympathies. Bridge had been rector at two Norwich churches before being exiled due to conflict with the Bishop of Norwich. He later returned to Great Yarmouth and served as Minister at the Old Meeting House in Norwich, a church that still stands and describes itself as the city's 'best hidden church'.

The Quakers also have deep roots in Norfolk. From the seventeenth century, there were active Quaker communities in Norwich, Diss, Wymondham and King's Lynn. The Gurney family, including Elizabeth Fry, played a prominent role in Norwich Quaker life, and their commitment to education, healthcare, prison reform, and abolitionism shaped both local institutions and national policy.

From the eighteenth century onwards, the Unitarians have also made a lasting impact on religious life in Norwich. Rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, they emphasised reason, conscience and social justice. The Octagon Chapel, which still stands, became one of the most important centres of Unitarian thought outside London. The Martineaus, a prominent Unitarian family in Norwich, were known for their contributions to educational reform, philanthropy and literature, with Harriet Martineau becoming a famous social theorist.

Importantly, religious diversity and nonconformity in Norfolk have never been limited to Christianity. Medieval Norwich had one of the earliest Jewish communities in England. The Ihsan Mosque, established by a small group of British converts and Caribbean-origin Muslims, is recognised as one of the first mosques in Britain owned and led by British converts. It is also associated with Sufi Islam through one of its founders, Abdalqadir as-Sufi. Norfolk also has historical connections to Sikhism, primarily through Maharajah Duleep Singh, widely regarded as the first Sikh to settle in Britain. Today, Thetford hosts a Sikh heritage trail celebrating his legacy.

Religious diversity is not confined to urban centres. The small village of Surlingham in South Norfolk is home to the Padmaloka Buddhist Retreat Centre, one of the most significant Triratna Buddhist retreat centres in the UK and a key hub for men's ordination training across Europe.

Norfolk has also produced its share of secular thinkers and critics of religion. Thomas Paine, the Enlightenment philosopher and author of *The Age of Reason*, was born in Thetford. In addition to calling for American independence, he advocated for democracy, universal male suffrage, progressive taxation and early social welfare. In *The Age of Reason*, he offered a scathing critique of organised religion and defended deism. He is frequently cited by Humanists UK as an important figure in their tradition. In the twentieth century, Richard Robinson, a philosopher from Watton, became known for his book *An Atheist's Values*, which argues that morality can flourish without religion. More recently, Philip Pullman, born in Norwich, has been a vocal critic of religion, especially Christianity, through his fiction. He has consistently defended the role of imagination, conscience and human reason over religious dogma. Even today, Norfolk continues to contribute to secular thought: Stephen Fry, the Patron of Humanists UK and the voice behind many of the Understanding Humanism video resources, is from Norfolk.

Norfolk, the county of interesting women.

Building on earlier references to Elizabeth Fry and Harriet Martineau, it is clear that women have played a significant role in shaping both the religious and non-religious life of Norfolk. Perhaps because of the region's rebellious spirit, Norfolk women have often been at the forefront of its belief landscape.

Etheldreda, a seventh-century princess and saint, founded the monastery at Ely after leaving a royal marriage to pursue religious life. Revered for her chastity and leadership, she became abbess of a double monastery. Her shrine at Ely drew pilgrims from across East Anglia, including Norfolk, linking the region to early English Christianity.

Julian of Norwich was a medieval mystic and writer who lived as an anchoress at St Julian's Church in Norwich. Her *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first known book in English by a woman, offered a theology centred on God's love. Living through plague and unrest, Julian's hopeful message that 'all shall be well' remains influential today and even found a resurgence during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Margery Kempe, a mystic and pilgrim from King's Lynn, wrote *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography in English. A laywoman and mother of 14, she undertook daring pilgrimages and expressed her devotion through public weeping and ecstatic visions. Her life challenged medieval expectations of women and faith.

Anna Sewell, a nineteenth century writer born in Great Yarmouth, was raised in a Quaker family whose faith shaped her lifelong concern for compassion and justice. Disabled by an injury in her youth, she wrote *Black Beauty* (1877) in Old Catton, near Norwich, aiming to encourage kindness towards horses. The novel became a landmark in the animal welfare movement, and she is buried in the Quaker burial ground at Lamas, Norfolk.

Edith Cavell, a nurse from Swardeston, saved more than 200 Allied soldiers during World War I while working in Belgium. Guided by her Christian faith, she treated all wounded regardless of side. Her final words before her execution by the Germans, 'Patriotism is not enough', speak to her enduring legacy of compassion and courage.

Sophia and Catherine Duleep Singh, daughters of Maharaja Duleep Singh, were Sikh princesses raised in Norfolk. Sophia became a leading suffragette, campaigning for women's rights while holding on to her Sikh identity. She provides an inspiring example of faith and activism working together. Catherine would later shelter Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, showing compassion across religious boundaries.

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Developing Our Curriculum

Weaving these stories into our curriculum

Dr Kate Christopher and Professor Lyn Revell have described the religion and worldviews approach as being 'about people and not buildings'.[18] As our curriculum continues to move away from the world religions paradigm, we want to use case studies that never claim to represent everyone from a faith, but instead highlight what this person or community believes at this moment in time.

This story-based approach aligns well with the pedagogical principles behind the knowledge-rich movement, which places an emphasis on teaching so that students remember. In Why Don't Students Like School?,[19] Daniel Willingham writes, 'The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories.' This means that a curriculum built around stories is a curriculum that sticks, especially important in our context, where students often have only one hour a week of RE. These stories become even more memorable when they are rooted in places familiar to our students – streets they have walked, buildings they know – thereby giving them something concrete to hang new knowledge on. This is a key feature of a cognitive science-informed, knowledge-rich approach. But our reliance on story is theological as well as cognitive. Narrative theology holds that we do not come to a worldview primarily through abstract propositions, but by locating ourselves within a story. The question 'How should we live?' is inseparable from 'Whose story do we understand ourselves to be part of?' For Stanley Hauerwas,[20] the community is 'story-formed', its character shaped by the narratives it inhabits, a claim he draws from Alasdair MacIntyre's[21] account of the self as something we can only understand once we can say, 'Of what story do I find myself a part?' This gives our story-led design a theological rationale alongside the cognitive one.

18 Christopher, K., and Revell, L. (2021), 'Islam as a worldview: what does a worldviews approach look like in practice?', RE:ONLINE Research of the Month, **www.reonline.org.uk/research/research-of-the-month/islam-as-a-worldview/**

19 Willingham, D.T. (2009), *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), pp. 66–67.

20 Hauerwas, S. (1981), *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).

21 MacIntyre, A. (2007), *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).

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A curriculum of dialogue across time

As we developed the curriculum, we gradually became aware that we had developed a distinctive 'house style' for approaching religion and worldviews. One recurring pattern was moving deliberately between historical figures, texts or stories, and contemporary examples of lived belief and practice. We found that this helped students see that ideas do not remain fixed in the past but continue to shape the way people understand and engage with the world today.

For example, when studying Aristotle's ideas about persuasion and rhetoric, students later encountered the environmental campaigner Sunita Narain and considered how persuasive communication continues to be used to influence public understanding and action. Similarly, discussions of Plato's allegory of the cave were connected to reflections on social media and the internet by Sean Radcliffe[22] and Simon Critchley[23], encouraging students to think about contemporary questions of truth, appearance and reality. In our Year 7 study of the Abrahamic faiths, the story of God's promise to Abraham is revisited through contemporary case studies, including communities living on kibbutzim in Israel, enabling students to explore how ancient narratives continue to shape identity, values and relationships with the land.

Over time we found that this movement between past and present helped students understand worldviews as living and dynamic rather than as collections of historical facts. It also reinforced one of the central messages of our curriculum: that ideas matter because they continue to influence how individuals and communities make sense of the world today.

Worldviews in context

We are using stories to tell the story of worldviews in Norfolk, gradually unpacking a local history of rebellion and nonconformity. This is most explicit in an Upper Key Stage 2 unit that asks, 'What does religious rebellion look like in Norfolk?' It begins with the 2021 Census data and the apparent contradiction between Norwich being packed with churches and yet known nationally as a centre of 'the nones'. The unit explores Norfolk's religious history through the Reformation; the rise of Puritanism, Unitarianism and Calvinism; the arrival of the Strangers; and the contributions of figures like the Martineau family and the Society of the United Friars.

Writing in the Worldviews Project's *Discussion Papers*, Amira Tharani describes worldviews as 'fluid, changing, diverse and plural with open, porous boundaries rather than fixed ones'.[24] She also points out that *religious* and *non-religious* are not binary opposites but categories that often feed into each other. Many of the stories we use in our curriculum reflect this fluidity. Harriet Martineau and Abdalqadir as-Sufi are two Norfolk-linked figures whose lives illustrate profound shifts in worldview. Martineau, raised in a Unitarian household

22 Winner of the 2023 Irish Young Philosopher Awards

23 Seán Radcliffe, "Plato's Cave & Social Media," Philosophy Now, Issue 165 (2024), compares social media to Plato's cave; Hongjing Huang and Simon Critchley, "Philosophical and Worldly Portrait: A Conversation with Simon Critchley," Rerum Causae 14, no. 1 (2025), in which Critchley argues that people become prisoners of the stories they tell about themselves, including on social media: "Philosopher Simon Critchley on Social Media and the Self," Nour Foundation, YouTube video, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVUACMYGrsU**, in which Critchley argues that social media enables collective action and social change, but warns against being drawn into delusion at the expense of meeting people in person.

24 Tharani, A. (2020), 'Discussion papers: the Worldview Project', REC, **religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resource/discussion-papers/**, p. 7.

in Norwich, moved over time toward a secular and Humanist outlook, shaped by science and rationalism. In contrast, as-Sufi began life in a largely secular Western context and later embraced Islam through Sufism, becoming a key figure in the British Muslim convert community and helping to establish the Ihsan Mosque in Norwich. Their lives remind us that worldviews are not fixed; they change, often dramatically, in response to experience, reflection and encounter. These stories also connect directly to the National Statement of Entitlement (NSE) as set out in the *Handbook*,[25] particularly Strand A: Nature/Formation/Expression of Worldviews. Martineau's story is included in our Upper Key Stage 2 unit on religious rebellion in Norfolk, while as-Sufi's appears in our Key Stage 1 unit on the Ihsan Mosque.

Our use of stories also helps students explore the dynamic nature of worldviews and the interplay between personal belief and institutional religion. Julian of Norwich's use of feminine imagery for God, especially her portrayal of Jesus as a mother, offers a radical challenge to the Church's male-dominated theology. From her cell in Norwich, Julian wrote about a God who nurtures, comforts and feeds like a mother. At a time when institutional religion was defined by hierarchy and patriarchy, Julian's theology offered something different. Her work did not trigger institutional reform overnight, but it opened space to imagine God differently. Her thinking helped lay the groundwork for later feminist theology. Our Lower Key Stage 2 unit on the Trinity through the ideas of Julian of Norwich introduces students to how Julian's ideas were radical for her time but would later influence feminist theology.

Stories also allow us to explore how context shapes worldviews, drawing on Strand C of the NSE: Contexts. Both Julian of Norwich and Harriet Martineau were deeply shaped by the times they lived in. Julian wrote in the aftermath of the Black Death, a time of social upheaval, war and intense religious anxiety. Her message that 'all shall be well' offered theological reassurance and a counter to prevailing narratives of judgement. Martineau, centuries later, wrote in Enlightenment-era Norwich. Her Unitarian roots gave her a moral framework, but the wider context of industrialisation, political reform and scientific discovery led her to question traditional belief and explore secular morality. Our Key Stage 2 unit on Julian explores how she responded to her context, but also how her ideas were revived during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, our Lower Key Stage 2 unit on religious rebellion shows how Martineau was shaped by her parents' Unitarianism, her travels to America and reading Enlightenment thinkers.

At Key Stage 3, our unit that asks whether the world provides evidence for God's existence also explicitly examines how context shapes philosophical thinking. Students encounter mini biographies of philosophers, using these to understand their context and to use the power of narrative to remember their ideas. We set Aquinas in the context of rich interfaith intellectual exchange, showing how even in times of religious conflict, Islamic, Jewish and Christian thinkers influenced one another. This unit builds on Year 7 work on Plato and Aristotle by showing how Aquinas helped shift Christian theology from a Platonic framework to a more Aristotelian one. When students study William Paley, we take time to explore his context: the Industrial Revolution, Newtonian science, and a world newly obsessed with design and order. Paley's argument about design becomes more meaningful when placed in a world of pocket watches, factories and natural laws, helping students see that ideas do not exist in a vacuum.

25 See REC (2024), Section A6.

Using the Revised Statement of Entitlement

Our starting point for creating a worldviews curriculum was the NSE, which forms part of the RE Council's National Content Standard for RE in England and is set out in full in the 2024 *Handbook*.[26] We used the content strands as our foundation when selecting materials and as a final check to ensure we were meeting the expectations outlined in the Statement.

The content strands of the Revised Statement of Entitlement are:

a. Nature/Formation/Expression
b. Organised/Individual
c. Contexts
d. Meaning and Purpose
e. Values, Commitments and Morality
f. Influence and Power

Over time, we found that strands A and B were more implicitly embedded in our curriculum, rather than acting as the drivers of specific units. That said, Strand B proved particularly helpful when reflecting on the balance between organised and individual worldviews and their interactions. For example, in a Key Stage 2 unit we explore the individual perspective of Julian of Norwich and connect it with more organised worldviews, such as feminist theology. We also have a Key Stage 3 unit that asks how a landscape can shape a worldview. In this unit we look at Linda Woodhead's research into alternative spiritualities[27] that can thrive in rural or semi-rural communities. This enables our students to think about how beliefs are formed and expressed, but also explore what we mean by 'organised' and 'individual' worldviews.

Strand C: Contexts has been central to our work. One of our key aims is to root the curriculum in the local context of the East of England, while also showing students that ideas do not emerge in a vacuum; they are shaped by geographical, cultural and historical forces. For example, we have a Key Stage 2 unit on religious rebellion in Norwich across different historical periods, and a Key Stage 3 unit exploring the historical context of arguments for the existence of God. Our Key Stage 3 unit on how a landscape can shape a worldview starts with an analysis of local Census data before students thinks about why religion and non-religion look the way they do in East Anglia and Norwich.

Many of our curriculum writers have a background in philosophy, so strands D and E (Meaning and Purpose, and Values, Commitments and Morality, respectively) felt like a natural fit. In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), children begin exploring big questions like 'What is real?' This theme develops through Key Stage 1, where they ask how their senses help them understand reality, and into Key Stage 3, where they consider, 'What does it mean to be wise?' Similarly, in EYFS, children explore questions like 'What is my goal?', which leads to Key Stage 2 units on moral philosophers such as Bentham and Singer, alongside lessons on religious ethics from traditions like Quakerism. This culminates in our Year 9 ethics unit. However, my background in theology encouraged us to use stories to ask questions about commitment, meaning and purpose. A Year 7 unit that asks how a belief in covenant shapes the way that people live begins by looking at the stories of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants and how the commitments made in these covenants

26 REC (2024).
27 Heelas, P., and Woodhead, L. (2005), *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell).

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shape identity and the way people live. This unit is an example of pupils doing covenant theology, working from within a tradition to ask how a story of promise and obligation forms a people and patterns in their daily life. It draws together strands D and E by showing pupils that a community's sense of who it is and how it should live flows from the covenant it understands itself to be part of – the narrative theology question made concrete.

Strand F: Influence and Power is a thread that runs through the curriculum. In Key Stage 3, for instance, we revisit familiar stories from earlier units and ask, 'Who owns a story?' and 'How can stories challenge power structures?' This work draws on the ideas of thinkers such as Marx and Durkheim.

Strands G to I of the Revised Statement of Entitlement fall under the category of engagement:

a. Ways of Knowing

b. Lived Experience

c. Dialogue and Interpretation

Our curriculum writing team sought to build on the work of the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus[28] and take a disciplinary approach to curriculum design. To do this, we have drawn on theology, social sciences and philosophy as our core disciplines. In addition, history plays such a significant role in our curriculum that it deserves its own explicit mention. Our enquiry questions are rooted in these disciplines. A theological question might be 'What is God like?' or 'How does God want us to act?' A philosophical question might explore the nature of reality or what it means to live well, while social sciences help us understand how people live and practise their beliefs. Theology functions in our curriculum not only as a body of content but as a distinct way of knowing.

Pupils learn to ask questions from within a tradition's own frame of reference, and what a community believes about God (or what an individual believes, such as Julian of Norwich in our Key Stage 2 unit), what a community understands to have been revealed and how it believes God calls people to live. Our pupils are learning to work with scripture, doctrine, tradition and interpretation as the discipline of theology does. We also make the different styles of theology explicit to the students, so they recognise what kind of theological thinking they are doing. In our Year 8 philosophy unit 'Does the World Prove that God Exists?', we introduce students to natural theology, the attempt to reason towards God from observation of the world rather than from revelation. They trace this tradition from Aristotle's empiricism and through Aquinas and Paley. Naming natural theology in this way lets pupils see it as a distinct and developing mode of enquiry and enables them to contrast it later with revealed theology.

Philosophy operates as a different way of knowing again; pupils step outside any single tradition to ask whether beliefs are true, coherent and well-reasoned, weighing arguments and evidence and learning the discernment to hold their own views lightly while testing the views of others. The social sciences offer a third way of knowing, studying religion and worldviews from the outside: pupils ask how belief functions in people's lives and communities using tools such as Census data, fieldwork and sociological theory. For example, they can consider the contrasting accounts of Durkheim and Marx to understand how worldviews are lived, transmitted and shaped by power.

28 Norfolk SACRE (2019).

History functions as a fourth way of knowing, and it runs through the curriculum as deeply as the others. Pupils learn to situate beliefs and thinkers in time, asking how worldviews change and persist, what causes them to shift and how ideas are shaped by the periods that produce them. They work with primary sources and historical context: tracing Norfolk's religious rebellion across the Reformation, the arrival of the Strangers and the rise of nonconformity; setting Aquinas within the interfaith exchange of the medieval world; and reading Paley against the Industrial Revolution and Newtonian science. This historical thinking underpins our 'dialogue across time' house style, in which pupils move deliberately between past and present to see worldviews as living and dynamic rather than fixed.

The Norfolk Agreed Syllabus concepts of believing, living and thinking have been especially useful. This disciplinary model has helped us move away from trying to cover 'everything you need to know about a religion in 12 rushed lessons' to asking precise, thoughtful questions about both religious and non-religious worldviews. For example, instead of asking, 'Who was Julian of Norwich?', which might prompt a biographical response, we ask, 'What does Julian of Norwich believe about God, and how does this influence different Christians today?' This disciplinary approach also helps classroom teachers set clear boundaries for RE and communicate the unique contribution our subject makes to the wider curriculum. Where else do students engage with theology and philosophy? High-quality RE is essential, and data from the RE Council, National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) and RE Today[29] shows that, especially in academy trusts, we need to actively advocate for its place on the timetable.

How progression is mapped

Progression within the curriculum is achieved through the careful sequencing of substantive knowledge, disciplinary knowledge and increasingly sophisticated engagement with questions. Pupils revisit recurring themes such as reality, wisdom, covenant, authority, identity and morality at multiple points throughout their school career. For example, the question 'What is real?' is introduced in EYFS, developed in Key Stage 1 through an enquiry into how the senses help us understand reality and revisited at Key Stage 3, where pupils ask what it means to be wise and weigh the reliability of perception against reason. Each time the thread reappears it carries the same Taves symbol (see below for further discussion), so pupils can see a familiar question being picked up and taken further, rather than meeting it as something new.

The same pattern can be traced through other strands. In Origins, pupils begin in EYFS simply by telling stories about beginnings; in Key Stage 1 and 2 they meet and compare a range of creation accounts: Christian, Muslim and Jewish narratives of how the world began, the disagreement between religious and Humanist views of where human beings come from, and scientific accounts of the origins of life. By Key Stage 3 the question turns back on itself: pupils ask not only what different worldviews say, but why human beings tell origin stories at all, and why some accounts endure. The thread moves deliberately from telling stories to analysing them.

The Path strand follows the same shape: the question 'How can I be a good person?' introduced in EYFS is developed through a sequence of concrete examples: how the Christmas story inspires generosity, how Buddhists at the Padmaloka centre follow a path to live well and how the Good Samaritan widens the question of who counts as a neighbour.

29 REC, NATRE and RE Today (2017), *The State of the Nation: A Report on Religious Education Provision within Secondary Schools in England*, **religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/State-of-the-Nation-Report-2017.pdf**

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As pupils move through the key stages, the demand increases: they consider diversity of practice within a single tradition and finally weigh the tension between a moral ideal and the difficulty of living it out. Each step asks something conceptually harder of pupils than the last, rather than simply substituting one tradition for another.

This is why the same story can recur across several years without becoming repetitive. Each return asks something the previous one did not. A narrative that pupils first simply retell, they later interpret and later still interrogate for whose interests it serves. The familiarity is precisely what makes the harder question possible, so that what progresses is not the content, but the demand placed on pupils' thinking.

These threads are framed by Ann Taves' universal questions and the NSE content strands, which together give the curriculum coherence across phases. Progression is made visible to pupils through the recurring symbols and enquiry questions, and supported is provided for teachers through curriculum maps, anthologies, and teacher guides that identify prior knowledge and future learning. Beginning- and end-of-unit reflection tasks also allow pupils to recognise changes in their own understanding over time.

Principles for writing units

As we developed the curriculum, we found ourselves returning to a common set of design principles when writing units of work. These principles helped ensure coherence across phases and maintained alignment with both the religion and worldviews approach and our commitment to a knowledge-rich curriculum.

First, units begin with a rich enquiry question. Rather than attempting to teach everything about a religion or worldview, each unit focuses on a carefully selected question that can be explored through disciplinary lenses. Questions such as 'What does religious rebellion look like in Norfolk?' and 'How does a belief in covenant shape the way that the Abrahamic faiths live today?' allow pupils to engage deeply with a particular aspect of religion and worldviews. This holds across all phases: in Year 3, pupils ask, 'How do Christians, Muslims and Jews tell the story of how the world began?'; in Year 4, 'What does the Good Samaritan teach Christians about who is my neighbour?'; and at Key Stage 3, 'How does a belief in covenant shape the way that the Abrahamic faiths live today?'

Second, we use stories as a vehicle for learning. Drawing on both cognitive science and narrative theology, we recognise that stories are memorable and help pupils connect abstract concepts to people, communities and lived experiences. Stories also allow us to explore diversity within traditions and avoid presenting religious communities as monolithic. In Year 5, for instance, pupils ask, 'How do different Sikhs put Guru Nanak's teaching into practice today?', learning that a single tradition is lived in many ways.

Because we use stories, we can also reuse them. A story pupils already hold in memory can be returned to in a later unit to do something more demanding, and this lets us increase the challenge without increasing the load. The familiarity frees pupils' attention for a harder disciplinary move, such as interpreting the story, weighing it, or asking who controls it and how it might be challenged. Progression therefore comes from deepening the thinking we ask of a familiar story, not from constantly supplying new ones.

Third, wherever possible, we connect historical ideas with contemporary examples. We want pupils to see that worldviews are living and dynamic rather than relics of the past. Ancient texts, thinkers, and stories are therefore frequently revisited through contemporary case studies and examples of lived religion.

Fourth, we seek to root learning in the local context of East Anglia while simultaneously broadening pupils' understanding of the wider world. Local stories, communities, Census data and places of significance help pupils develop a sense of belonging, while recognising that their local experience forms part of a larger national and global story. This begins in the primary phase: in Year 2, pupils explore the Ihsan Mosque in Norwich, and in Year 6 they study Sophia Duleep Singh, the Norfolk-raised Sikh princess and suffragette, before these local threads are revisited with greater complexity at Key Stage 3.

Fifth, we draw deliberately on theology, philosophy, history and the social sciences. These disciplinary lenses help pupils understand not only what people believe, but also how knowledge about religion and worldviews is constructed, interpreted and debated. Disciplinary thinking begins early: in Year 4, pupils take a theological and scientific lens to ask why Christians and Humanists disagree about where human beings come from, and in Year 6 they consider, through Margery Kempe, whether God can be known through experience.

Sixth, we seek authentic voices and diverse scholarship. Wherever possible, we include scholarship from within the traditions being studied and avoid relying solely on external interpretations. We also seek to represent diversity within traditions, recognising that religious and non-religious worldviews are complex, contested and internally diverse.

Finally, units are designed to encourage reflexivity and intellectual humility. We want pupils to become increasingly aware of their own developing worldview while engaging respectfully with the worldviews of others. Opportunities for reflection, dialogue and revisiting prior thinking are therefore embedded throughout the curriculum.

Together, these principles provide a consistent approach to curriculum design while allowing individual units to respond to particular questions, contexts and communities.

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The Ideas and Scholarship Informing Our Curriculum

Ann Taves

Ann Taves' research into universal questions, such as 'What is real?' and 'What is my goal?',[30] offers a helpful starting point for exploring both religious and non-religious worldviews. Her work aligns well with the religion and worldviews approach, which begins with the idea that students are meaning-makers who want to make sense of the world they are living in. These kinds of big, open-ended questions provide a natural framework for enquiry, allowing pupils to explore diverse responses across traditions and individuals, while also reflecting on their own evolving worldview. For us, building a curriculum around these universal questions feels like both a pedagogical and philosophical fit, it gives structure without being rigid, and it encourages curiosity, dialogue and depth.

One of the reasons we found Taves' work so useful is that her questions give equal regard to religious and non-religious perspectives. She uses the analogy of fruit to explain this: instead of asking, 'Is this an apple or an orange?', we begin by asking, 'Is this a fruit?'[31] This approach shifts the focus away from labelling worldviews as religious or not, and instead encourages us to consider what kinds of meaning-making are taking place. For curriculum design, this means we start with the shared human impulse to understand reality, purpose and values, building a framework that is inclusive, rigorous and rooted in lived experience.

30 Taves, A. (2020), 'From religious studies to worldview studies', *Religion*, 50 (1), 137–47, **doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681124**

31 Taves (2020).

Below are Taves' questions with a symbol for each question that is used in each student anthology or teacher guide.

Big Question	
	**What is reality?** (Ontology)
	**Where do we come from?** (Cosmology)
	**How do we know what we know?** (Epistemology)
	**What is our situation?** (Anthropology)
	**What is the goal of life?** (Axiology)
	**What path should we follow?** (Praxeology)

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It was important that we could align Taves' questions with the content strands of the NSE. This did originally cause us some problems, and it meant that our curriculum felt disjointed because it was being driven by competing things. Stephen Pett helped me link the two, and we mapped Taves' questions against the NSE content as outlined below.

NSE content strand	Taves' question(s)	Explanation
A: Nature/Formation/ Expression	• Where do we come from and what is our situation?	This question explores the fundamental beliefs that shape how worldviews are formed and expressed through rituals, texts, stories and practices.
B: Organised/Individual	• How do I learn (or know)?	This invites analysis of how individuals, schools of thought and institutions develop knowledge, including different sources of authority, reason, tradition, revelation, etc.
C: Contexts	• Where do we come from and what is our situation?	This question prompts exploration of how geography, history and culture shape worldview formation, highlighting that beliefs are always rooted in a context.
D: Meaning and Purpose	• What is real? • What is the goal of life?	These questions address existential meaning, what people believe about the nature of reality, and the ultimate purpose or end goal of life.
E: Values, Commitments and Morality	• What is the goal of life? • What path should we follow?	These questions are central to ethical enquiry, exploring how worldviews shape ideas about right and wrong, duty, virtue and how to live a good life.
F: Influence and Power	• What path should we follow?	This encourages students to consider how power operates within and across worldviews, who sets moral norms, and how stories or teachings can uphold or challenge power.

Intellectual humility

Intellectual humility is an excellent fit for the religion and worldviews approach because both are grounded in openness, curiosity and the willingness to hold our ideas lightly while we learn. One of the key aims of this approach is to move away from simple or stereotypical portrayals of religion, and instead explore the diversity, complexity and lived reality of worldviews. That only works if students (and teachers) are willing to say, 'I might not know everything about this yet', and be open to having their thinking challenged.

In a religion and worldviews curriculum, we are not asking students to blindly accept or quickly reject what they hear. Instead, we are asking them to take ideas seriously, to think carefully about why people believe what they do and to reflect on their own views in light of that. Intellectual humility helps create the space for that kind of learning. It means being open to the idea that others might see the world differently for good reason, and that we can grow by engaging with those differences. It also supports respectful dialogue in the classroom. When students practise intellectual humility, they are more likely to listen well, ask thoughtful questions and avoid rushing to judgement. At its best, this approach helps students become wiser, more reflective interpreters of the world around them, and that starts with being humble about what we know and curious about what we do not.

We explicitly teach the concept of intellectual humility in our opening Key Stage 3 unit that asks, 'What did the ancient Greeks believe about wisdom and are their ideas relevant today?' We use Socrates as our starting point, showing that wisdom begins with asking good questions, not having all the answers. His famous line 'I only know that I know nothing' becomes a foundation for students to reflect on what it really means to be wise. We then bring this into a modern context by exploring the work of bell hooks, who we present as a contemporary gadfly, someone who asks tough questions and challenges norms. Her refusal to capitalise her name becomes a powerful, visual expression of intellectual humility. From there, we explore Heraclitus and the idea that in a world of constant change, our knowledge is always provisional – another reason humility is essential. When we reach Plato's allegory of the cave, we use it to revisit the fragility of empirical knowledge and highlight how the prisoners represent the opposite of intellectual humility: clinging to illusions rather than seeking truth. The unit also reintroduces ethics into the discussion of wisdom, gently setting the stage for virtue ethics in later years. We draw on modern thinkers like Simon Critchley, who encourages students to think about how we can be wise and ethical users of social media, and Sunita Narain, whose moral integrity enhances her persuasiveness.

In Year 8, we build on this foundation by encouraging students not just to critique figures like Paley, but to recognise their influence. It is important that students do not dismiss a major thinker after only a few lessons of RE. We want them to critique with understanding and humility, not just confidence.

What do we mean by 'knowledge-rich'?

Both E.D. Hirsch[32] and Michael Young[33] are key voices in the conversation around knowledge-rich education, and their ideas have shaped the Inspiration Trust approach to curriculum design. Hirsch argues that having a strong, shared body of knowledge, which he calls cultural literacy[34], is essential if we want all students to access and understand the world around them. Without that background knowledge, students can struggle to make sense of what they are reading or learning, especially if they come from less advantaged backgrounds.

Michael Young takes a slightly different but related angle. He talks about the idea of 'powerful knowledge', the kind of knowledge that takes students beyond their everyday experiences and gives them access to new ways of thinking. Both agree that knowledge is not just about remembering facts; it is about giving students the tools they need to participate fully.

Christine Counsell,[35] who participated in the design of the original Inspiration Trust Curriculum, reminds us that being knowledge-rich is not just about cramming in more facts; it is about combining content with disciplinary thinking. She talks about the risk of 'knowledge-rich gone wrong', where lessons become all surface and no depth, with students memorising things without really understanding how knowledge works in a subject. Michael Fordham[36] (also from Inspiration Trust) builds on this by stressing that powerful knowledge should take students beyond their everyday experience, helping them to think in ways they could not without access to subject-specific ideas and ways of knowing. Clare Sealy[37] brings a cognitive science lens to the conversation: she talks about how sequencing and memory really matter, and says that if we want students to retain and use knowledge, we need to plan carefully so we are not overloading them.

Summer Turner[38] adds another important dimension to this conversation. She reminds us that a knowledge-rich curriculum is not just about packing in facts; it is about creating something with spark. For her, curriculum is where inspiration lives. She encourages teachers to map backwards from the big ideas we want students to grasp by the end of their school journey, making sure everything we teach builds towards that. She is also clear that assessment should serve the curriculum, not the other way round – if it is not helping students learn, it does not belong. What I particularly take from her is the idea that curriculum design is messy and complex, and that is okay. She reminds us that the gaps, tensions and imperfections in our work are often where the deepest learning happens, for both teachers and students.

32 Hirsch, E.D., Jr. (2016), *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Education Theories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press).),

33 Young, M.D. (2014), *Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice* (London: Bloomsbury).

34 Hirsch, E.D., Jr. (1987) Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin)

35 Counsell, C. (2023), 'Laughing Muppets, lost memories, and lethal mutations: rescuing assessment from "knowledge-rich gone wrong"', Teaching History, 193, 8–25.

36 Fordham, M. (2016), 'Genericism and the crisis of curriculum', Clio et Cetera blog, 18 June, **clioetcetera.com/2016/06/18/genericism-and-the-crisis-of-curriculum/**

37 Sealy, C. (2017), 'Memory not memories: teaching for long term learning', Primary Timery, 16 September, **primarytimery.com/2017/09/16/memory-not-memories-teaching-for-long-term-learning/**

38 Turner, S. (2016), 'That's how the light gets in', Ragazza Inglese blog, 19 November, **ragazzainglese.wordpress.com/2016/11/19/thats-how-the-light-gets-in/**

Crucially, this approach applies to all our pupils, not just the most academic. At its heart is this question: how do we educate so that students can think and act for themselves? Not just to tick a box on a GCSE paper or secure a college place (though those things matter, of course), but to truly encounter the subject and grow through it. It means asking: what are the overarching ideas that students need to know to think in our subject? What are the concepts that, once grasped, change how you see the world? And if we are serious about that kind of teaching, then we also need to be serious about supporting it. This reflects Lawrence Stenhouse's insight that there can be no curriculum development without teacher development; the two are inseparable.[39] That is where subject-specific CPD comes in. If curriculum and assessment really matter in a school, then time, resources and space for teachers to think deeply together are not optional extras – they are essential. An INSET day focused on curriculum should not be just about compliance or quick wins, but a genuine opportunity for departments to reflect on purpose, wrestle with powerful knowledge and shape the curriculum with the care it deserves.

Summing up the knowledge-rich approach

This approach:

- builds strong, shared knowledge so all students can access complex ideas and texts
- gives students cultural and conceptual literacy – the background knowledge needed to understand the world
- is carefully sequenced, so new learning builds on prior knowledge without overloading students
- values depth over coverage, focusing on meaningful understanding rather than rushing through content
- includes powerful vocabulary that is taught explicitly and revisited over time
- combines substantive knowledge with disciplinary thinking, helping students learn how knowledge is created and used in each subject
- levels the playing field, giving all students, not just the advantaged, access to the ideas that shape society

What does knowledge-rich RE look like?

In my context, working within the Inspiration Trust, it is important that I bring together the religion and worldviews approach with a knowledge-rich model. These are not two separate ideas; they work together when done thoughtfully and with purpose. A knowledge-rich RE curriculum provides students with the depth and breadth they need to encounter complex ideas, but it also respects the richness and diversity of lived experience that the worldviews approach foregrounds.

For us, a knowledge-rich approach to RE means building a curriculum that gives students access to powerful knowledge about both religious and non-religious worldviews, sequenced deliberately, and rooted in the disciplinary lenses of theology, philosophy, history and the social sciences. It is not about cramming in facts, ticking off a list of festivals, or giving a vague overview of 'world religions'. Instead, it is about giving students the conceptual tools, vocabulary and stories that help them make sense of how people

39 Stenhouse, L. (1975), *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (London: Heinemann).

understand and live out their worldviews. This includes big ideas like authority, belief, ritual, ethics and interpretation, revisited across key stages in increasingly complex ways.

Summer Turner reminds us that curriculum is not just about coverage; it is about spark. She challenges us to ask: what are the threshold concepts that open up the subject and make it meaningful? What ideas change how students see the world once they have grasped them? In RE, this might be the idea that beliefs are not fixed categories, but living and evolving responses to questions of meaning and purpose. A knowledge-rich RE curriculum needs to embrace that complexity, while still being clear and structured enough to build memory and understanding over time.

This is where the religion and worldviews approach strengthens rather than complicates things. It reminds us that students arrive with their own evolving worldviews, and a strong curriculum should meet them there, giving them new perspectives while honouring the lens through which they are seeing the material. That means not just teaching about doctrines or practices in isolation, but showing how beliefs and values are lived, contested, shaped by context and interpreted differently within traditions.

Finally, knowledge-rich RE is not just for the most confident or curious students. It is about equity. When planned well, it ensures that every student, regardless of their background, has access to the ideas that help them understand others, reflect on themselves, and participate fully in our shared cultural and intellectual life. It is rigorous, yes, but also humane and generous. That is the sweet spot where knowledge-rich meets religion and worldviews.

Trevor Cooling[40] offers a complementary perspective from within RE. While he agrees that a knowledge-rich curriculum requires careful sequencing and access to powerful knowledge, he argues that knowledge in RE is more than the accumulation of information. Drawing on Michael Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge, Cooling suggests that pupils develop understanding through the interaction of substantive content and personal interpretation. A knowledge-rich RE curriculum therefore equips people not only with the knowledge of religious and non-religious worldviews, but also with the capacity to make informed, reasoned and scholarly judgements about them. This requires the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as epistemic humility, openness to evidence and willingness to revise one's views in light of new understanding.

Critical realism

Critical realism starts with the idea that there is a real world, including real beliefs, texts, practices and experiences, but that our understanding of that world is always shaped by interpretation.[41] We never approach a worldview from a completely neutral standpoint; we always bring our own background, assumptions and questions with us. This means that while we take knowledge seriously, we also recognise that it is complex, partial and open to revision.

One of the most valuable things that critical realism brings to RE is the idea of discernment. In a subject where we are constantly dealing with different truth claims, ethical systems and interpretations, discernment is the skill of weighing things up carefully. It means asking, 'How do I know this? What is the source? What might someone else say?' and being willing to hold your own views lightly while exploring others. It is not about sitting on the fence; it is about developing thoughtful, reflective judgement.

40 Cooling, T. (2025), 'Knowledge in a religion and worldviews approach in English schools", British *Journal of Religious Education*, 47 (2), 130-139, **www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01416200.2024.2304693**

41 Bhaskar, R. (1975), *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso); Wright (2000).

At Inspiration Trust, we have found critical realism useful in helping us hold together the knowledge-rich and religion and worldviews approaches. A knowledge-rich curriculum gives students the powerful knowledge they need to understand complex worldviews; the worldviews approach ensures that this knowledge is always taught in context, with attention to diversity and lived experience. Critical realism allows us to do both. It gives us the confidence to teach substantive content, rituals, doctrines and texts with rigour, while also creating space for interpretation, debate and reflection. It keeps us grounded, but open.

For students, this means that learning about religion is not about just memorising facts or taking sides, but about becoming wise, curious and humble interpreters of the world. The critical realist approach, as presented by Christina Easton and her colleagues,[42] has been a considerable influence on our pedagogy. One way we have brought this into the classroom is using questionnaires to help students surface their initial thinking. At the start of a unit, we invite them to complete a short reflective task based on these questionnaires, which they then return to at the end of the unit, this time weaving in their new knowledge and insights. For example, in our Year 7 Greek philosophy unit, students complete a questionnaire on the nature of wisdom. They are asked to rate how far they agree with statements like 'Wisdom is about reading books' or 'Wisdom is about knowing lots of facts.' This initial reflection forms the basis of a short piece of writing that captures their early thoughts. As the unit progresses, students revisit the questionnaire, reflect on whether their views have changed and begin linking the statements to the philosophers they have studied. At the end of the unit, they write again, this time exploring how their thinking has shifted and what influenced that shift. It is a simple but powerful way of showing students that their ideas evolve, and that is part of what learning is all about.

The religion and worldviews *Handbook*[43] describes this process as 'reflexivity'. Reflexivity involves becoming aware of how our own worldview shapes the way we encounter and interpret the world. In a religion and worldviews approach, pupils are not simply learning about the beliefs and practices of others; they are also becoming more conscious of their own assumptions, experiences and commitments. The questionnaires we use at the beginning and end of units are designed to support this process. By making their initial thinking visible and then revisiting it in the light of new knowledge, pupils are encouraged to reflect on how their understanding has developed. In this sense, reflexivity is not an additional activity but a central feature of the curriculum. It helps pupils recognise themselves as interpreters of knowledge whose own worldview is continually being shaped through encounters with others.

42 Easton, C., Goodman, A., Wright, A., and Wright, A. (2019), *Critical Religious Education in Practice: A Teacher's Guide for the Secondary Classroom* (London: Routledge).

43 REC (2024).

Reflections on Implementation

Early reflections on curriculum implementation

As Trust Lead, I am fortunate to see the units we create come to life in classrooms across a range of schools, not just my own. This has been one of the most valuable parts of the project. While curriculum design often takes place behind a desk, seeing pupils engage with the materials and listening to feedback from teachers has allowed us to refine and improve our approach.

One area of feedback from our primary colleagues concerned the amount of content and some of the language used in our Year 2 unit 'What Do My Senses Tell Me about What is Real?' While we wanted to expose pupils to rich vocabulary and ambitious concepts, teachers rightly questioned whether some of the terminology was creating unnecessary barriers. This prompted me to revisit the materials and ask a simple but important question: is being able to use this word essential to understanding the concept? In some cases, we simplified language while retaining the intellectual ambition of the unit.

The local dimension of the curriculum proved particularly popular with our primary schools. Teachers reported high levels of engagement when pupils encountered places, communities and stories that felt familiar. However, I also had to remind myself that Inspiration Trust is not simply a Norwich-based trust. As the project developed, I became increasingly aware that local links needed to reflect the whole trust community rather than just the places I happened to know best. This led us to widen our range of examples, and ensure that schools across Norfolk and Suffolk could see their own communities reflected in the curriculum.

We also realised that local links did more than build engagement; they fostered a sense of belonging. Children were often excited and proud to see a place they had visited, or even their own community, featured in the materials. This reinforced our belief that a religion and worldviews curriculum should help pupils understand the wider world while also helping them understand the place they call home; in a geographical trust, this is especially important.

At Key Stage 3, one of the most significant changes came through the inclusion of local case studies. In our Year 7 unit on the Abrahamic faiths, we incorporated examples from local evangelical churches. This meant that many pupils encountered forms of Christianity that were familiar from their own experience, rather than only studying expressions of Christianity that felt distant or historical. In turn, this made our curriculum less centralised, as schools began weaving in their own local examples and communities.

The use of local data also generated fascinating discussions about identity and belonging. In one of our Norwich secondary schools, pupils reflected on the fact that they attended school in what is often described as the city of the 'nones', yet they felt that their school had a strong religious presence. This led to rich conversations about how experiences of religion can vary within the same city, and whether city centres, suburbs and rural communities can develop distinct religious identities. The Census data became more than statistics; it became a lens through which pupils could interpret their own experience.

Within my own classroom, I have noticed a shift in the tone of discussion. By studying religions and worldviews together and explicitly being taught intellectual humility, pupils seem more willing to listen to one another and more curious about difference. Rather than focusing on whether beliefs are right or wrong, they increasingly ask why people understand things differently. This shift reflects something close to what Kathryn Wright, in her doctoral thesis on a theology of hospitality, calls a pedagogy of embrace: creating space, encountering others and listening for wisdom. It feels fitting that a curriculum so rooted in East Anglia should draw on the work of an East Anglian scholar.[44] In our classrooms, this looks like pupils making room for one another's views and listening for understanding rather than rushing to judgement.

One area where this has been particularly noticeable is in discussions about stories and interpretation. Pupils are often fascinated by the way different religious traditions understand the same narrative. For example, when studying Abraham and the covenant, students were intrigued by the similarities and differences between Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretations. These conversations often move beyond simply identifying differences and towards asking why communities understand the same story in different ways.

We have seen a similar shift when exploring religious practices. After studying the Haredi Jewish community of Stamford Hill, pupils initiated a thoughtful discussion comparing ideas about modest dress in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Rather than treating these practices as strange or unfamiliar, they were keen to explore the values and beliefs that underpin them. This willingness to compare, question and understand has led to richer classroom dialogue and a greater appreciation of both diversity and commonality across traditions.

The inclusion of contemporary case studies has also encouraged pupils to contribute their own knowledge and experiences, and in some cases this has shaped the curriculum itself. During a lesson on a kibbutz in Israel, one student shared that their parents had worked on a kibbutz that was far more urban than the one featured in our case study. This led to a discussion about the diversity of kibbutzim, and how different understandings of life in the Promised Land might shape community priorities and practices. Moments like these have reminded us that pupils are not simply recipients of the curriculum. They are interpreters of it, bringing their own experiences and perspectives into dialogue with the knowledge we present.

Challenges we have faced

One of the challenges we have faced has been trying to balance the strands of the NSE with Ann Taves' universal questions. At times, we found ourselves at risk of losing sight of the NSE altogether, especially when we became too focused on trying to fit everything neatly into tidy boxes. There is a certain irony in that using an approach that was designed to avoid putting religious believers into rigid categories, I found myself doing exactly that with our curriculum design. It was a reminder that real understanding, whether of people or of content, does not always follow a neat template.

44 Wright, K. (2017), *A Pedagogy of Embrace: A Theology of Hospitality as a Pedagogical Framework for Religious Education in Church of England Schools*, PhD thesis, University of East Anglia.

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We also realised that some of our students did not have the contextual knowledge needed to fully engage with certain material. For example, when exploring the work of bell hooks, many did not fully grasp the specific challenges faced by Black women, which made it harder for them to connect with her ideas. Building background knowledge is always going to be a challenge in a subject like RE, especially when we only have one hour a week. One possible way to mitigate this is by making better use of the context students are building in other subjects, drawing on what they have already learned in English, geography or history to help them make connections and deepen their understanding in RE.

Another issue we have encountered, particularly in our philosophy units, is how to balance context with engagement. While it is important to give students the background knowledge they need, we realised that in our first draft of the curriculum, we were so focused on intellectual humility that we did not ask students whether thinkers like Aquinas or Paley were convincing. Will Bauly, a colleague from Inspiration Trust, summed it up perfectly when he said, 'It's like learning about Beethoven but never actually listening to his music.' That comment stuck with me. As a result, we are now reviewing that unit to make sure we are giving students the opportunity to not just understand these ideas, but respond to them in a meaningful way.

A related challenge emerged from our commitment to narrative. While stories proved highly effective in helping students remember content, we sometimes found that students remembered the story but not the disciplinary point it was intended to illuminate. For example, in our Key Stage 3 unit 'Does the World Prove that God Exists?', students could often describe Aquinas's childhood, family background and education in considerable detail and with genuine enthusiasm. However, they were less confident when explaining how this context shaped his engagement with Aristotle or influenced the development of his arguments about God. In these cases, the story became memorable but had not always functioned as a vehicle for the substantive knowledge we intended to teach. This prompted us to reflect more carefully on the relationship between narrative and disciplinary thinking. Stories remain an important part of our curriculum design, but we have become increasingly conscious of the need to make the conceptual significance of those stories explicit, helping students to see not only what happened in a thinker's life but why that life matters for understanding their ideas. This reminded us that memorable stories are not themselves powerful knowledge; rather, they should serve as a bridge to the concepts, arguments and disciplinary thinking that we want students to retain over time.

Another challenge I faced, on a more personal level, was finding the confidence to assert my voice within a group of RE teachers I deeply respected. I was hugely aware that I was secondary-trained but leading on primary materials, and that awareness fed a creeping sense of imposter syndrome. I often found myself second-guessing ideas or holding back in discussions, even when I had a clear sense of what was needed. What we ended up with in those early drafts was a curriculum shaped by competing voices, thoughtful and well-meaning but lacking cohesion. This was all happening while I was undergoing treatment for cancer, and the waves of anxiety and doubt that came with that only amplified the sense that I was out of my depth. Eventually, I had to step back and take some time alone to really clarify what my vision was. Once I could see it clearly, I came back to the group with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to shape the work collaboratively from a place of direction rather than hesitation. Nobody wants to hear that the work they have done is not quite right, but that process of refining, redrafting and sometimes having difficult conversations turned out to be a valuable learning experience in both curriculum design and leadership.

We also noticed that the very idea of a worldview can pull you towards something more mental, philosophical and abstract. And because our curriculum writing team was dominated by philosophers, we ended up leaning heavily in that direction. There was a strong focus on belief and big ideas, but much less on the lived, embodied aspects of religion. When we returned to the NSE and looked again at the expanded statements in the *Handbook*, we realised we were neglecting key parts of content strand A: things like rituals, practices, the creative arts, and everyday experiences and interactions. That gap became clear, and it prompted us to make some significant changes, including the addition of a new unit on pilgrimage to better represent the full range of how worldviews are formed, expressed and lived.

Finally, we have been reflecting on how we explain the term 'worldview' itself. For some of our students with a strong personal faith, particularly those from an Islamic background, 'worldview' did not really capture the depth and centrality of their religion. For them, their faith is not just a way of seeing the world. That has prompted us to think more carefully about how we introduce and define the concept in class, making sure it is meaningful and inclusive for everyone.

Final reflections on my worldview and the curriculum-making process

The worldviews approach acknowledges that the learner's worldview shapes how they encounter the curriculum. For example, during our Year 8 unit on arguments for the existence of God, we want students to see that their prior assumptions and experiences shape the way they respond to the arguments for God we study. When we study the Genesis creation accounts, many students approach the text with the assumption that religion and science are in conflict, and that all Christians are creationists. Their prior assumptions inevitably shape their interpretations. And in the same way, as a curriculum writer I cannot fully step outside of my own worldview either. It is important to be honest about that, and to reflect on the ways my own perspective has shaped the curriculum I have produced.

In 2020, I moved to Norfolk to start a position with Inspiration Trust, and I still have something of the zeal of a convert to the East of England. What my neighbours might take for granted, I am still discovering and constantly fascinated by. So, it is not surprising that this curriculum has become, in many ways, a love letter to the region. From Boudica to Etheldreda, from Thomas Paine to Norwich Cathedral and Cambridge Central Mosque, from the Quakers to the Ihsan community, I am drawn to the rich history and diversity of the East, and I want our students to see the stories in the landscape they walk every day.

My own religious beliefs are complicated and messy. I was raised Roman Catholic, and while I now identify as agnostic, much of that Catholic heritage remains with me. I went to confession long after I stopped believing in God, because, honestly, it felt like free therapy. Until recently, we were still eating fish on Fridays. I feel at home in churches – the higher, the better – and I have never lost my love for incense, bells and genuflecting.

My cancer diagnoses in 2017 deeply challenged my faith; the problem of evil became painfully real. And yet, I still read my Bible for comfort. As a family, we go to church on high days and holidays. It makes sense, then, that I have been drawn to the worldviews approach, which takes seriously the interplay between belief and non-belief, and between the personal and the institutional.

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More recently, I have found meaning in both Quakerism and the Humanist Association, both of which feature prominently in our curriculum. Of course, there are many worldviews in the curriculum that I do not personally connect with, but I have tried to approach all of them with respect and curiosity.

I have always been left-leaning, politically active and shaped by the kind of faith that sits alongside a commitment to social justice. Liberation theology and feminist interpretations of scripture resonate deeply with me. I am particularly mindful of the need to centre women's voices, because for too long, the male voice has been the default. I hope our curriculum helps to correct that. I make no apologies for ensuring that female perspectives are visible and valued in what we teach.

Being aware of my own worldview has, I hope, helped me maintain a sense of balance, but there is no doubt that my perspective has left its mark. Just a few months into working on this project, I had to start dealing with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Much of the reading and writing for this curriculum happened in a chemotherapy chair. That raw experience has undoubtedly shaped my worldview, and, by extension, this curriculum. Perhaps the clearest example of that influence is the inclusion of Julian of Norwich's words: 'All will be well.' It is a line I have returned to often.

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Appendix 1 Curriculum Overview

The tables below provide an overview of our religion and worldviews curriculum from EYFS to Year 9, split by key stage. Each row is one of the six worldview strands (after Ann Taves): Reality, Origins, Epistemology, Situation, Goal and Path; each column shows the enquiry question studied in that year group.

Across the curriculum as a whole, Christianity is the tradition pupils encounter most frequently and study in greatest depth. As the tables below show, it recurs in every key stage and features in around half of all units, in keeping with the expectation that RE be 'in the main Christian'. Our religion and worldviews approach situates this alongside Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism and non-religious worldviews, so that pupils come to understand Christianity not in isolation but in dialogue with the diverse communities of modern Norfolk and Britain.

EYFS and Key Stage 1

Strand	EYFS	Y1	Y2
Reality	Is it real?	–	What do my senses tell me about what is real?
Origins	What stories do we tell about beginnings?	–	What do creation stories reveal about humans for different Christians and Muslims?
Epistemology	What are the different ways I learn?	How do Christians learn about God through the Easter story?	How do Christians know what to believe? (The Bible, church and tradition)
Situation	Who am I? What is important to me?	What is it like being a Christian at Ely Cathedral?	What does the Ihsan Mosque in Norwich and Cambridge Central Mosque tell me about being a Muslim?
Goal	What are my goals?	How do Humanists want to live?	What do different Christians mean when they say they want to be saved?
Path	How can I be a good person?	How does the Christmas story inspire Christians to give and welcome others?	What do Edith Cavell, Etheldreda and Anna Sewell teach us about living a good life?

Key Stage 2

Strand	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Reality	Why do people disagree about whether God exists?	What did Julian of Norwich believe about God? How does this influence different Christians today?	How do different Christians answer the question 'Are we just physical beings?'	How do different Hindus answer the question 'What is real?'
Origins	How do Christians, Muslims and Jews tell the story of how the world began?	Why do Christians and Humanists disagree about where humans come from?	How do Humanists explain where life comes from?	Why do so many worldviews have a story about where the world came from?
Epistemology	How do Muslims learn about God? Do they all agree?	How has the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant shaped different Hindu ideas about truth?	How did the Gurus shape the Sikhi faith for Sikhs in England and the Punjab?	Can you know God through experience? Margery Kempe and the mystics
Situation	What do people in the UK and Norfolk believe? (Census data)	What did Thomas Paine believe, and how did it shape the world he wanted?	What does religious rebellion look like in Norfolk?	Sophia Duleep Singh: who am I when I belong to two worlds?
Goal	Why do people go on pilgrimages?	What is the goal of life for different Hindus? How does this affect the way they live?	What do Quakers mean by 'that of God in everyone'?	What shaped Jeremy Bentham's and Peter Singer's ideas about what our goal in life should be?
Path	How do Buddhists at Padmaloka follow a path to live well?	What does the Good Samaritan teach Christians about who is my neighbour?	How do different Sikhs put Guru Nanak's teaching into practice today?	What does the story of Rama and Sita teach Hindus about duty, and is it always easy to follow?

Key Stage 3

Strand	Y7	Y8	Y9
Reality	–	Who was Jesus, and why have Christians disagreed?	–
Origins	–	–	Why do we tell origin stories, and why do they stick?
Epistemology	What did the ancient Greeks believe about wisdom and are their ideas relevant today?	Does the world prove that God exists?	–
Situation	How does the landscape of East Anglia shape religion and worldview?	How is society ordered, and who can challenge it?	–
Goal	–	–	How do we decide what is right and wrong?
Path	How does a belief in covenant shape the way that the Abrahamic faiths live today?	–	How do different paths shape the way Hindus live?

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Appendix 2

Year 7 Wisdom Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to help you think about what wisdom means to you. You will have a chance to revisit your answers and change them later. You will also explore how these ideas connect to the philosophers and activists we study.

Wisdom is about …	Agree strongly = A Uncertain, Unsure = C Disagree strongly = E					Who would agree?	Who would disagree?
1 Knowing lots of facts.	A	B	C	D	E		
2 Asking lots of questions.	A	B	C	D	E		
3 Reading lots of books.	A	B	C	D	E		
4 Looking for evidence before accepting things as true.	A	B	C	D	E		
5 Believing that there is more to the world than what we can experience with our senses.	A	B	C	D	E		
6 Being humble about your knowledge and aware that there is a lot you do not know.	A	B	C	D	E		
7 Speaking the truth, even if it makes others angry.	A	B	C	D	E		

Wisdom is about …	Agree strongly = A Uncertain, Unsure = C Disagree strongly = E					Who would agree?	Who would disagree?
8 Knowing yourself and being aware of your strengths and weaknesses.	A	B	C	D	E		
9 Making decisions that do not harm others.	A	B	C	D	E		
10 Making decisions that help you be the best version of yourself.	A	B	C	D	E		
11 Acting in ways that protect the planet for future generations.	A	B	C	D	E		
12 Learning from your life experiences, meaning older people are more likely to be wise.	A	B	C	D	E		
13 Working with others to achieve justice and equality.	A	B	C	D	E		