

Introduction to Part I: Religion and Worldviews

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The curriculum subject of Religious Education (RE), though legally compulsory in schools in England and Wales, has been undermined by policy developments including the introduction of performance measures that exclude RE and the growth of academisation with different inspection arrangements. These developments are rooted in the neoliberal fragmentation of the education system. In 2018 the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education reported that 28% of secondary schools gave no dedicated curriculum time to RE (NATRE 2018, 5). In 2022, there is some cause for optimism because of a slight upturn in A-level numbers, though this is after a sustained period of decline. RE's problems are not wholly attributable to collateral damage from governmental policies, however. They also issue from inbuilt confusions, not only over purpose, aims and pedagogy, but also over the construal of the subject matter; confusions that have only deepened over the three plus decades since the subject received any significant legislative attention, in the Education Reform Act of 1988.

In 2018 an independent Commission for Religious Education undertook extensive consultation and drafted a set of proposals for reform which included a change in the title of the subject, to Religion and Worldviews. The general direction of travel indicated by these proposals have been met with broad support in study of religions fields, though questions remain about essentialisms still operating in the terms of the debate. At the 2020 BASR conference I chaired panel titled 'Worldviews in RS and RE'. Rudi Elliott Lockhart (former CEO of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales), Paul-François Tremlett (Open University), Suzanne Owen (Leeds Trinity University) and Malory Nye (Independent Academic affiliated to University of Glasgow) were the panellists. In this edition of the JBASR, we have two of the pieces offered to the panel (those by Owen and Tremlett) plus a co-authored article by three scholars who have been engaging in the theoretical discussion about worldviews

while also undertaking extensive and valuable work at the interface of academia and schools over the last three or four years: Tim Hutchings, Céline Benoit and Rachael Shillitoe.

In the first of these articles, 'Worldviews, with caution', Suzanne Owen offers a personal reflection as one of the thirteen academics who participated in formal discussions following the publication of the CoRE report. The field owes Owen a debt of gratitude for the 2011 article 'The World Religions Paradigm Time for a Change', an article that drew together critiques of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) and threw down the gauntlet to British RE. This article went on to inspire more extensive engagements with the paradigm, at different levels, in the works of Cotter & Robertson (2016) and others. In 'Worldviews, with caution', Owen argues that the introduction of the worldviews concept offers an opportunity to 'nudge us a little further away from the dominant paradigm' and 'to be more inclusive', but cautions against the idea that a change of title will solve all the subject's problems, not least because the term worldview does nothing to overcome the problem of assuming that there is a singular view amongst those who might be categorised as belonging to the same 'worldview.'

In their article, Hutchings, Benoit and Shillitoe probe this further, evaluating some of the responses to this problem that have already emerged, finding them for the most part at least partially unsatisfactory, and calling for constant critical vigilance around the tendency towards homogenisation and reification of content around familiar concepts. Additionally, Hutchings, Benoit and Shillitoe examine the difficulties that emerge when 'religion and worldviews' becomes a placeholder for 'religion and non-religion', a binary which figures the 'nones' in terms of what they 'lack', and risks failing to bring out the ways in which worldviews can reflect both religious and non-religious positions at the same time. As well as raising these and other deconstructive critiques, Hutchings, Benoit and Shillitoe make a constructive recommendation to bring the views of young people more firmly into the debate. While the Commission achieved this admirably in their pre-report consultation process, the voices of young people are not being heard in the current efforts to instantiate RE's new direction. They argue that there is an opportunity here to democratise the vision for the curriculum and acknowledge young people as constructors of culture themselves, not just learning about it.

Paul-François Tremlett's piece raises a powerful critique of the worldviews work thus far by showing why it is such a problem that the political is almost entirely erased. The CoRE report itemises (Tremlett uses the language of 'boundary policing') what might be included as a worldview for the purposes of school-based study. A striking exclusion in the CoRE report is 'capitalism.' This is a problem because worldviews are presented in the report as a menu of (equivalent) options from which young people may be selecting their own perspectives. Tremlett says: 'The exclusion of global capitalism ensures that the report's own ontological and epistemological foundations – and those of the global capitalist system within which we all live, and which are clearly reflected in the idea of equivalent worldviews about which choices must be made – remain beyond critical scrutiny' (p. 31, in this volume). Tremlett's critique is patterned similarly to that of Malory Nye who spoke at the panel on the

racist formation of our categories of religion and worldviews. Our categories cannot be understood separately from the political power-dynamics in which they are forged, so in rendering them irrelevant to the study potentially undermines the whole enterprise.

Tremlett makes a case for a strongly postmodern (Deleuzian) rendering of the subject matter that eschews categories in favour of flows and relations. He draws on his own extensive fieldwork in the Philippines which instantiates his reasoning. This resonates with the perspective of the older scholarship on Japanese (Reader, 1991) and Panjabi traditions (Oberoi, 1994); which has long made clear that the academic categories with which we operate in the West are at best blunt tools and at worst forms of intellectual imperialism.

It is inevitable and right that study of religions scholars mount critiques of the new language of worldviews. The pieces published here are immensely valuable in that regard. Policy makers and curriculum developers must (and I know will) engage with the challenges laid down here. However, the new direction of travel laid out in the CoRE report does in my view represent the most substantial re-envisioning of the subject since the 1988 legislation. A worldviews approach, for all its flaws and limitations, is driven by a desire for greater inclusivity and relevance. It does put children in classrooms, in all their diversity, at the centre of its vision. It is informed by a decolonial lens, alive to the ways in which knowledge has historically been constructed, even if the outworking of the implications of this may need work. It does legitimise existential experiences and perspectives that do not fall under the banner 'religious'. Because of these factors, I think it offers the best hope that we have seen to date of retrieving the subject from charges of irrelevance, that no matter how ill-informed, threaten the place of the subject on the curriculum. It also offers the best hope of securing the subject from agendas seeking to use the subject to promote so-called "British Values" and to instrumentalise it for Christian nurture (ISRSA, 2022; Dossett, 2022).

References

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