

Worldviews, with Caution

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ABSTRACT

A short personal reflection on discussions hosted by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales in 2020 around the reorienting of Religious Education around “worldviews”. I reflect on the scope this offers for overcoming the World Religions Paradigm and raise questions about its arbitrary limits, the challenges of representation and identity, and finally about the more fundamental confusion regarding the aims of Religious Education that cannot be resolved by a title change alone.

KEYWORDS

Worldview, Religion, Education

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Introduction

I was sceptical when I first heard that “worldviews” was being considered as a way of orienting RE away from essentialist notions of religion. Then, as a participant in discussions hosted by the RE Council and because of the insight and contributions from the other participants, I am now more favourable toward its possibilities. I’d like to thank Denise Cush for suggesting me for it.

I first came across the notion of worldviews in the work of Ninian Smart. He promoted the term as a way of including so-called secular worldviews, such as nationalisms and political systems. However, he admits, ‘The term worldview is not

the best. It suggests something too cerebral. But religions and comparable worldviews should be studied at least as much through their practices as through their beliefs' (1996, 2). I was also familiar with the concept in the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz where *world-view* represents 'cognitive and existential aspects', paired with *ethos*, 'the moral (and aesthetic) aspects of a given culture' (1957, 623).

A potential problem with the term, as indicated by Smart, is its emphasis on the cognitive element and it is thus still embedded in a western Protestant Christian paradigm based on "beliefs". Alone, this cognitive focus could overlook the study of religion altogether in favour of philosophical enquiry with an over-emphasis on subjectivity and the individual. The Commission acknowledges there's a difference between institutional and individual "worldviews", but this is not clear in the Religious Education aims focussing on "understanding the human quest for meaning".

Worldview could also be confused with "opinion", lacking in any academic engagement or rigour, which was one of the drawbacks that came up in our discussions hosted by the RE Council. It can put students on the spot and force them to state their "worldview" unreflectively, while a few seconds later they might realise that this was not their view at all. Thus a "worldview" can appear static, as if views are solid things that don't change.

Another thing that came up in discussion was whether it were possible to determine its limits – anything could be a "worldview". A few had tried to indicate the specialness of religion (e.g., toward a "transcendent") but this unravels under scrutiny. If we're talking about the way we view the world, then most people are not easily categorised as religious or non-religious but float in between and so one might be Sikh but not practising as such, as one participant in our discussions suggested.

However, this could be one of its strengths, especially for upper levels in RE, by studying constitutional statements and decisions in law where a "view" is debated as either religious, philosophical or a personal opinion. In the UK, the employment tribunal case considering Ethical Veganism as "Religion or Belief" raised these questions, and eventually won protection as a philosophical belief in 2020. There are many examples, such as whether yoga is religious or not, that are not so easy to categorise in law.

As part of the RE Council discussions, I was invited along with another participant to provide a "provocation" statement where I argued that one couldn't teach about "other religions" or even Christianity without addressing how they have been shaped by colonial and missionary agents. In the past I had also suggested that the "world religions" paradigm had had its day and we need to move on from it. Perhaps "worldviews" can nudge us a little further away from the dominant paradigm. It provides an opportunity to be more inclusive.

Because of the success and pervasiveness of the notion of "world religions", it will be difficult to dislodge it, even if RE is retitled "Religion and Worldviews". "World religions" has caused much damage by putting groups into discrete "religions" and producing a norm for each of these, e.g., Theravada over Mahayana, Sunni over Shia, and Brahmanism over the many varied Indian traditions. This distorts even

those it favours – a child in Sri Lanka would barely recognise the Buddhism that is taught because of the over-emphasis on the text. It also creates stereotypes and plays into the hands of fundamentalists. When I was training to teach RE, I saw how religions were often taught as ahistorical entities outlining a “Buddhist view”, a “Christian view”, etc., which were often presented as singular and unchanging.

There is a danger that “worldview” could also make these mistakes. Those designing curricula will need to reflect on issues of representation and identity: Who is representing a perspective? Is it a white male bishop representing “the Christian view”? Who gets to speak, or write about the tradition? As for identity – identifying the non-white person solely by religion overly-represents them as “religious” while there may also be ethnic, regional and other identities that are more significant. For example, what does it mean to be of Punjabi heritage in the UK, rather than being divided as Sikh, Hindu and Muslim?

There was some debate in the RE Council discussions about whether “worldview” and “religion” were two separate things, but most came to the conclusion that if “religion” were left out it would not be clear that the study of religion was a significant element of this subject. However, including “worldview” in the title could make RE more engaging for those who do not consider themselves religious, which in the UK is a significant proportion of the population. This was central to our discussions, especially as there were several participants who were specialists in researching non-religion and secularity.

Finally, when considering “worldview” we must also consider what Religious Education is for – what are we trying to develop in the person? Is it cultural awareness to learn more about society and people? Is it a kind of existential philosophy class, or is it for moral formation? RE has been all of these without a clear purpose. This will not be solved with a title change.

References

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