

Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward?
Considerations from the study of religion, non-religion and classroom practice

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on *Worldview – A Multidisciplinary Report* (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020), a publication commissioned by the RE Council of England and Wales to outline the academic history of the study of worldviews. We focus on three particularly significant questions for the future of Religious Education (RE) / Religion and Worldviews (R&W) arising from our report. First, what is the relationship between worldview and religion? Second, does worldview present a valuable approach to the study of non-religion? And third, can worldview be deployed effectively in the classroom? We conclude with a call for greater attention to the voices of teachers and pupils in curriculum design in RE.

KEYWORDS

worldview(s); religious education; primary and secondary education; multidisciplinary pedagogy; study of religion(s); non-religion

Introduction: reflections on the new way forward

The final report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), published in 2018, put forward 'a new vision' for the teaching of Religious Education (RE) in primary and secondary schools, exploring 'the important role that religious and non-religious worldviews play in all human life' (2018, 1). This vision was intended to repurpose and 'rejuvenate' (1) RE as a subject relevant to every pupil, including those of no religious affiliation. According to the report's authors, 'everyone has a worldview' (28), so everyone needs to understand how worldviews form, function, and influence society (27). To reflect this new vision, the report proposed renaming the subject of RE. The new suggested name is announced boldly in the title of the report: 'Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward.'

This new subject name was not intended to establish a binary distinction between two separate categories. Instead, the report explains that "'worldviews" refers to the wide variety of religious and non-religious worldviews that can be studied as part of the subject.' The term 'religion' is preserved merely as a reminder that religion remains one 'crucial object of study, as are other conceptual categories like secular, spiritual and worldview' (2018, 31). In fact, the report declares, religious and non-religious worldviews have a lot in common, tackling the same 'existential questions' and 'questions of identity, belonging, commitment, behaviour and practice' (30). By studying the wider category of worldviews¹, students can learn to examine religion and non-religion as different, intersecting examples of the same phenomenon, different possible human responses to the same human challenges.

The CoRE report has prompted a heated and continuing debate among RE teachers, advisors and other stakeholders over the appropriateness of adopting a worldviews approach in RE classrooms (see for example Barnes, 2022 and the response by Cooling, 2022). The CoRE report's recommendations were swiftly rejected by the UK Secretary of State, following opposition from influential faith groups (Chater, 2022, 250). Nonetheless, the RE Council of England and Wales remains committed to the aim of reforming RE through the promotion of worldviews as a new paradigm for primary and secondary education and has continued to fund and commission projects to encourage teachers to adopt this pedagogical approach in their classrooms.

Debate over this proposed new vision among RE specialists and teachers has been extensive. We argue that researchers working in the study of religion should also pay close attention. In part, this is a matter of self-interest for anyone who teaches religious studies or theology courses in Higher Education, because changes in RE at primary and secondary levels are likely to have at least some impact on the number and the expectations of students who choose to apply for a university course in religious studies or TRS. This time of change has also created an opportunity for researchers working in the Study of Religion(s) to share their expertise, because many RE teachers and RE

¹ See Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe 2020 for a review of the concept of worldview across disciplines.

organisations are looking for professional development opportunities to help explore this new educational paradigm. More importantly, as this article will demonstrate, these debates over the future of RE address matters of central importance to the study of religion(s): these are debates about what “religion” is, what part religious and non-religious perspectives play in contemporary society, and what methods can legitimately be used to understand and teach religion in the classroom.

Proponents of the worldviews approach argue that ‘the RE classroom must be a place where pupils are immersed in a multidisciplinary experience’ (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 140), learning from sociology and religious studies as well as theology and philosophy. Opponents, however, have attacked social-scientific approaches as illegitimate interlopers with a secularising agenda. The Independent Schools Religious Studies Association, for example, published a report in 2022 that argues that ‘sociology, anthropology and psychology will effectively overwhelm the RS curriculum and exclude questions about the transcendent and the revealed’ (ISRSA, 2022, 5). There is work to be done on a national level to defend the intellectual and pedagogical value of the disciplines represented by BASR and this journal.

The CoRE report states that the study of worldviews must remain ‘academically rigorous’ (2018, 1), and this question of academic standards has remained a key concern for critics (Barnes, 2022, 95; ISRSA, 2022, 6). After the report was published, academic scholars of religion, theology and religious education were invited to participate in discussions to help build and evaluate this rigorous foundation. The three authors of this article came together as a team to bid to the RE Council for the commission to write a multidisciplinary literature review of worldview studies (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020), which was published online as an open-access resource. This review then became the starting point for a series of conversations organised by the RE Council between 13 leading academics and RE advisors, leading to the publication of a set of four discussion papers (Tharani, 2020).² The 13 participants included six education researchers and specialists in RE, six academic scholars working in the study of religion and one academic Christian theologian (Tharani, 2020, 4). This set of discussion papers was then used as the foundation for the next stage of the RE Council’s worldview project, which has begun with the publication in 2022 of a new draft resource for curriculum developers developed by Stephen Pett and funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation (Pett, 2022).

Our assigned task as authors of the literature review (Benoit *et al.*, 2020) was to survey uses of the word worldview across academic disciplines relevant to RE, highlighting points of agreement or contention but refraining from putting forward our own position. We therefore traced the term from its origins in philosophy to its later uses in sociology, anthropology, religious studies, Christian theology, biblical studies, and among scholars

² <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/rec-discussion-papers-on-worldviews/>

of religious education, before raising a few questions at the very end (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 30).

The current article allows us to explore some of these questions in more detail, and we have selected three that are particularly significant to current debates on teaching Religion and Worldviews (R&W) in schools.³ First, what is the relationship between worldview and religion? Second, does worldview present a useful approach to the study of non-religion? And third, can worldview be deployed effectively in the classroom?

Worldviews and the Study of Religion

The quest to relocate religious education and religious studies within the study of worldviews is a long one, and we can see the CoRE report as just the latest innovation in a debate that stretches back into 18th-century philosophy (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 8). In recent decades, advocates of an academic shift to worldview studies have argued that this change of focus will broaden the scope of the field of religious studies to include perspectives not usually characterised as religious (Smart, 1983, 2) while escaping from debates over the definition of religion and religiosity (Taves, 2019, 139). This proposal raises some important questions for scholars of religion, who have reason to be cautious of this proposed reframing. It is not self-evident that the study of religion is primarily engaged in the study of worldviews, nor that a religion can be defined as a kind of worldview.

Worldview studies – as befitting its origins in philosophy – has at times over-emphasised the philosophical and theological dimensions of religion, at the expense of everything else. In Taves’s formulation (2019, 138), for example, a worldview is an explicit or implicit set of answers to six big questions (of the nature of reality, its origins, epistemology, who we are, our goal and the path to reach that goal). Taves recommends using these questions in undergraduate teaching as a framework to compare different religions and worldviews. Van der Kooij proposes a somewhat broader definition, arguing that worldview should be understood as ‘a view on life, the world and humanity’, with four key features: it answers existential questions, provides moral values, has a significant impact on a person’s life, and gives meaning to that life (van der Kooij, 2013, 214). Van der Kooij also suggests that practices might be included in the definition of worldview (213). Smart’s approach is much more expansive, identifying seven dimensions (Smart, 1998, 13) that are shared by religious and secular worldviews: ritual, experiential, narrative, doctrinal, ethical, social and material. Taves’ and van der Kooij’s proposed definitions address only two of these dimensions, which suggests that something of importance to the study of religion is being left out. Taves critiques Smart’s approach, arguing that he ‘derived the characteristic features of “worlds” from religious studies’ (Taves, 2019, 141) and therefore generated an

³ Our use of the acronym R&W in this article refers to Religion and Worldviews as an approach or paradigm for Religious Education. The debate over the most suitable title for the subject is a separate question, not discussed here.

approach that privileges religion over other worldviews. This criticism has merit, but further demonstrates that the dimensions that are of interest to religious studies are not fully contained within the proposed remit of worldview studies.

On the other hand, while Smart's list encompasses more of what scholars of religion study, it offers a much less coherent definition of what a worldview actually is. What, for example, is the relationship between a worldview and a material object? Smart's own discussion describes materiality both as a 'dimension of religion' and as 'expressions of a religion' (1998, 21), situating the material at once inside and outside of religion/worldview.

The CoRE report displays some of the same uncertainties, threatening at times to limit the definition of religion to theology, and at other times blurring the coherence of its definition of worldview. At the outset, the report proposes the following definition:

A worldview is a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world. It can be described as a philosophy of life or an approach to life. This includes how a person understands the nature of reality and their own place in the world. A person's worldview is likely to influence and be influenced by their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments. (2018, 4)

This definition primarily locates worldview in 'philosophy of life', but already some contradictions seem to appear. Are ideas, experiences and actions parts of a worldview (as stated in the first sentence), or are they separate from the worldview, related to it through a cycle of mutual influences (as stated in the last sentence)?

This problem becomes more serious when the report moves on to discuss religions. Worldview is divided into two categories:

We use the term 'institutional worldview' to describe organised worldviews shared among particular groups and sometimes embedded in institutions. These include what we describe as religions as well as non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, Secularism or Atheism. We use the term 'personal worldview' for an individual's own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews. (2018, 4)

This approach is close to that of van der Kooij, who also divides worldviews into two categories, "organised" and "personal" (van der Kooij, 2013, 212) - a terminology also preferred by Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani (2020, 41). Van der Kooij claims that 'every religion is an organised worldview', which she defines as 'a view on life that has developed over time as a more or less coherent and established system with certain (written and unwritten) sources, traditions, values, rituals, ideals, or dogmas' (2013, 212). A personal worldview is an individual's 'norms, values and ideals' (2013, 213), which for some people – but not everyone – will be related to an organised worldview.

This idea of institutional or organised worldviews is subject to the concerns expressed above regarding the adequacy and coherence of a worldviews approach to religion.

This definition implies that each religion proposes one single, coherent vision of reality, and that this vision is the most important thing about it. As van der Kooij puts it, 'if a person calls himself a Christian, his personal worldview will be more or less based on the organised worldview Christianity' (2013, 213). The CoRE report tries to weaken this implication by emphasising that worldviews are 'complex, diverse and plural' (2018, 6), 'adapting to new times and cultures' (72) rather than remaining static, but this recognition of complexity is not consistent. Elsewhere, for example, the report describes Catholicism as 'one institutional worldview' that has 'very different political outworkings in different global contexts' (28), as if Catholic communities in different times and places somehow share the exact same 'approach to life' (4) and differ only in their understanding of what to do about it.

Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, who support the worldview paradigm shift, argue that it 'seeks to replace the current world religions paradigm by reframing the way that content should be taught' (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 33). They recognise that this reframing is only possible if schools can avoid presenting worldviews as 'discrete, sealed-box systems' (41), an approach that would simply replace the world religions paradigm with an equally static and reductionistic alternative. They recommend using the language of organised rather than institutional worldview, to avoid the 'possible implication of one monolithic expression determined by centralised authorities' (43). However, if each religion is made up of multiple complex, diverse, plural, adaptive worldviews, as both Cooling and the CoRE report acknowledge, then it seems unhelpful to describe a religion as an organised or institutional worldview at all. Whether it is described as organised or institutional, such a definition still invites teachers and pupils to understand religions as monolithic sets of beliefs – such as 'the organised worldview Christianity' (van der Kooij, 2013, 213) – even while the more nuanced language of the CoRE report urges resistance to such an understanding. The language of organised or institutional worldview risks undermining the transformative intention of the worldviews shift by retaining a simplistic, reductionistic, static notion of religion at the heart of the discipline, despite the CoRE report's assertions to the contrary.

There is at least one hint of a more productive and interesting approach to religion in the CoRE report. In the second appendix, institutional or organised worldviews are described as 'systems of making meaning and structuring how one sees the world' (2018, 72). This phrase suggests seeing religions not as worldviews, but as systems that attempt to generate and control worldviews. If this insight were developed further, the shift of emphasis would be subtle but significant. If a religion is understood not as a worldview but a system for making and structuring meaning, then the relationship between the religion and the personal worldview of its adherents is easier to grasp. The same system can perform many social functions for participants, including but not limited to the generation and maintenance of worldviews. Theology and philosophy are returned back to their proper place among the many dimensions of religion and its study, and the concept of worldview is not compelled to stretch to cover everything that a scholar of religion – or an RE teacher – might want to explore.

It is also essential to remember that worldview is a term with a very specific Western and Christian history. Initially developed in German philosophy, the term was taken up by Dutch politician Abraham Kuyper at the end of the 19th century (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 20), who argued that society was locked in conflict between the irreconcilable life systems of Christianity and modernism. Kuyper's call for a Christian worldview that would transform every aspect of culture has remained influential in Reformed Protestant Christianity in Europe and North America into the 21st century, guiding understandings of global missionary work (Hiebert, 2008), Christian approaches to education (Esqueda, 2014) and attempts to measure 'how much have other worldviews crept into Christians' perspectives' (Barna, 2017). This Christian history does not mean, of course, that a worldview paradigm is inappropriate for use in RE education. Instead, we argue that a Religion and Worldviews (R&W) curriculum must analyse worldview critically as a theological concept and encourage students to discuss how the concept of worldview has been used for political purposes.

Nonetheless, both opponents and defenders of the teaching of worldviews are sometimes insufficiently sensitive to the religious context of the material they are using. For example, Barnes argues that 'the study of worldviews, as commonly interpreted, is a highly ramified, intellectual and abstract philosophical form of study' (2022, 97) that focuses on beliefs and doctrines and is too complex for school children to understand. In support of this claim, Barnes cites what he describes as four 'typical examples' of worldview studies: Bartholomew and Goheen (2013), Moreland and Craig (2017), Sire (2009) and Werther and Linville (2012). In rebuttal, Cooling points out that this is just one possibility and recommends the more 'open definition' offered by James Sire:

A commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of propositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being (Sire, 2015, 141; quoted in Cooling, 2022, 114).

What neither author mentions is that every one of these citations is a work of Christian theology or philosophy written from a Reformed Protestant perspective. Indeed, this quotation from Sire ends with a biblical quotation from the New Testament book of Acts. These are not 'typical examples' (Barnes, 2022, 97) of worldview studies but very specific examples of Evangelical Christian apologetics. Our argument here is not, of course, that Christian theology has no place in the RE classroom. Rather, we call on RE teachers and their advisors to recognise when theology is at work and to seek out alternative visions of human experience, so that Christian assumptions do not sit unmarked and unacknowledged at the heart of the curriculum.

Worldviews and Non-religion

The CoRE report proposes that its new vision for RE is needed to make the subject relevant to all pupils, keeping pace with ‘societal and demographic changes’ by reflecting ‘children’s lived experience of religious and non-religious perspectives’ (2018, 4). Given the growing proportion of those identifying as nones⁴, this invitation to the study of non-religion could not be more timely or pertinent (Woodhead, 2017). Any reframing of the subject of Religious Education today necessarily demands attention to the nones. Recognition of this has generated increasing focus on the study and teaching of non-religion at both primary and secondary level in the UK (e.g. Taves, 2018; Taves, 2019; Bråten, 2021). A landmark court judgement in the UK has ruled that non-religious worldviews have to be part of the religious education syllabus with the judge deciding that ‘the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs’ (Humanists UK, 2015). In this section of our discussion, we evaluate whether the CoRE report’s proposals are an effective and appropriate way to achieve this important goal.

The CoRE report’s proposed reframing of the subject to include worldviews signals an important move to broaden the subject beyond the teaching of religion and towards a focus on the diversity of practices, beliefs and values in everyday life. At the same time, this shift poses conceptual issues in terms of the relationship between worldview, religion and non-religion. Can the concept of worldview aid the development of religious education into a subject that is more inclusive of non-religion? Can we use worldview(s) to move past non-religion being simply equated with the absence of religion? What would the teaching of a non-religious worldview look like, if it is not to create an essentialised, caricatured depiction of what it means to be non-religious?

Throughout the CoRE report, worldview is consistently described as ‘religious and non-religious’ (CoRE, 2018, 4). As Freathy and John (2019) argue, separating religious from non-religious worldviews in this way creates an artificial binary, one that is not helpful for the progression of the subject, and must therefore be avoided. Instead, Freathy and John argue, an approach to the teaching of religion(s) and worldview(s) would be enhanced by having an explicit focus on the hermeneutical, epistemological and methodological multiplicities to be found in the subject. In this way, the authors argue that we could move beyond some of the conceptual stumbling blocks that inevitably arise when entering this debate. Taking a reflexive approach to the study of religions and worldviews would therefore intentionally open up the discussion into what we mean by these concepts, therefore highlighting their cultural, historical and geographical contingency and ultimately going some way to diminishing the binary opposition that is initially framed. The authors argue that attending to the study of religions and worldviews means being sensitive to the ‘dynamism, negations and contestation’ apparent within them (Freathy and John, 2019, 34).

⁴ Nones: those who would identify as ‘none’ or ‘non-religious’ on surveys.

Yet the real issue is that Freathy and John's approach is still working *from* a conceptual binary of religion and non-religion *in the first instance*. Any discussion hereafter will always be framed in reference to or moving away from this binary construction. In other words, how can we begin to move beyond this binary when the very notion of religion and non-religion is constructed from the outset as being oppositional in nature? This binary relationship then governs the debate from the beginning.

Taves (2019) suggests that the term worldview can be used in a different way to overcome this binary. Taves argues that the whole subject should be called 'Worldview Studies', with religious studies becoming a subset of the larger field. Taves (2019) argues that although the study of non-religion is necessary and overdue, simply including this into the existing subject of religious education is a mistake. Taves states that 'we cannot assume that self-described non-religious people are simply marking an absence or standing in opposition to religion' (2019, 138). We should therefore be studying non-religion in a way that takes seriously the content and substance of what it means to be non-religious, avoiding reductionist approaches. Taves acknowledges the limitations of Worldview Studies, but suggests that these are outweighed by the opportunity to examine the interplay between worldviews within everyday life.

However, identifying the comparison between religion and non-religion as an explicit and foundational feature of the proposed Worldviews Studies could still run the risk of creating essentialised categories of religion and non-religion, treating the two as though they are separate units which can easily be compared and contrasted. This is not to suggest that a comparative position should not be taken when investigating worldviews, but to make this comparison a central focus leaves open too many possibilities for reducing them to essentialised concepts.

Over the past 20 years, the study of non-religion has demonstrated the importance of attending to the varieties and diversity of what it means to be non-religious. This field of research has begun to expand the categories we use to explain and describe the non-religious. Even within this field, however, a recurring limitation is that non-religion is often treated as religion's 'other'. Non-religion is simply defined as all that which is not religion. Rather than viewing the non-religious as a homogenous group, whose identity is solely based on an absence or rejection of religion, social scientific research has demonstrated the diversity of the lived experience of being non-religious (e.g. Catto and Eccles, 2013; LeDrew, 2013; Bullock, 2017; Bullivant, Farias, Lanman and Lee, 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020). Criticising the oversimplification of non-religious classifications, Lee (2014) demonstrates the positive reasons people choose to define themselves as non-religious and how they identify their non-religiosity in substantive terms (i.e. defining non-religion in terms of what it is rather than what it is not). Recognising the diversity of those who ascribe themselves a generic non-religious identity can reveal a wide range of classifications and positions. This negative and insubstantive position of 'non-religion' has been discussed and considered at length by Lee (2015), who calls for a relational approach to non-religion. Approaching non-religion

through a relational vocabulary demonstrates how non-religion is ‘characterised, at least in the first place, by its relation to religion but nevertheless distinct from it’ (Lee, 2015, 32). Lee then goes to define non-religion in this way as ‘any phenomena – position, perspective or practice - that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious’ (2015, 32). By adopting this relational approach, Lee (2015) argues that this reveals the presence rather than absence of something and re-centres our attention on what non-religion is rather than what it is not.

Lee (2015) also argues that one way in which we can understand the beliefs of the non-religious is through examining the existential cultures that run through non-religion. Lee contends that rather than only looking at the secular domains for alternatives to religious cultures in the lives of the non-religious, we could also explore:

incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death—what have been called ‘ultimate questions’ in the literature before now. These existential beliefs are bound up with distinctive notions of meaning and purpose in life, as well as with epistemological theories about how it is that humans are able to take a stance on existential matters. (Lee, 2015, 159-160)

These existential cultures can be also seen in religious and spiritual cultures, so examining belief through a lens of existentialism could be another way in which to overcome this religious and non-religious binary. Existential cultures are also bound up with particular ethical orientations and could also be a way in which we examine values and ethics across religious and non-religious worldviews. As Lee argues, this could provide a more ‘inclusive approach’ to the study of religion (2015, 159).

Rather than trying to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between religion and non-religion, attention should instead be focused on learning about beliefs, values and practices across religious and non-religious worldviews and more broadly, the relationship between the two, acknowledging the differences, divergences and complexity to be found both within and between religion and non-religion. We therefore need to be attentive with regards to the renaming of RE to R&W in order to avoid the risk of creating another binary whereby ‘worldview’ becomes a placeholder for all that is not religious. One approach, which could support this change and help refocus our attention away from this seemingly inevitable binary, would be to take a relational approach to non-religion (Quack, 2014; Lee, 2015).

The concept of worldview can certainly help reframe RE towards something which indicates that this subject looks beyond religion. This would be a welcome, timely and much needed move. But care must be taken to ensure that the shift to religion and worldview does not in turn create another unhelpful binary. Other proposed titles for the subject face the same challenge, because pluralising worldviews or including other concepts such ‘ethics’, ‘values’ or ‘beliefs’ could still result in binaries and the emergence of essentialised categories of religion and non-religion. Instead, attention

should be paid to the varieties and complexities of both religion and non-religion while acknowledging the relationality between them while avoiding worldviews or non-religion being simply treated as 'religion's other'. Demonstrating how the concept of worldviews can be inclusive of both religious and non-religious positions is imperative. Therefore, it is crucial that we clearly articulate from the outset the scope and breadth of the concept and framing of worldviews in a way that is inclusive of religion and non-religion while also being explicit about interrelations and distinctions between the two.

Worldviews and the Classroom

Having reflected on conceptual issues, we now turn our attention to practical questions. What might R&W look like in the classroom? Is the worldview(s) concept responsive to the experiences of pupils? And does it meet the needs of teachers?

The CoRE report emphasises the novelty of its approach, promising 'a new and richer vision of the subject' (2018, 3). At the same time, it admits that 'the best RE in schools' (*ibid*, 30) was already teaching many of its proposed core components. Good teachers had already abandoned a focus on reified "world religions" and begun to teach a more personal, diverse approach to worldviews, including the experiences of people with multiple religious affiliations and those who identify as non-religious.

Despite this acknowledgement of continuity, Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani argue that the CoRE report heralds a 'fundamental paradigm shift' (2020, 24) in thinking about the subject matter and purpose of RE. The authors argue that Religious Education has moved since the Second World War from a paradigm emphasising Christian religious instruction, to knowledge about "world religions" as discrete belief systems, to personal engagement with spirituality or philosophical questions. They claim that each paradigm has run into difficulty: the contemporary landscape of religion and belief in Britain is much more diverse than Christianity or "world religions"; pupils have increasingly lost interest in religious institutions; and personal, spiritual and philosophical approaches to the subject have resulted in teaching that has 'lost touch with religion' altogether (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 24). In response, the CoRE report calls for a new paradigm in which 'the idea of worldview is central but a clear focus on religion is maintained' (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 25). R&W offers the opportunity to rethink RE by moving away from the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) that has informed RE syllabuses and RE teaching for the last five decades without abandoning the teaching of 'knowledge about religion' (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 26).

The WRP has been the object of criticism – especially from post-colonial scholars – for being entrenched in Western Christianity (Smith, 1964; Cox, 2016; Masuzawa, 2005). A number of ethnographic studies have also shown that when RE is taught through the lens of the WRP, the subject often leads to restrictive and normative discursive constructions of reified "world religions", and fails to equip learners with the tools to

navigate our diverse societies (Benoit, 2020; 2021). The CoRE report agrees with this critique:

The presentation of religious worldviews in schools has not always placed enough emphasis on their diverse and plural nature and the ways that they have changed over time. While many teachers and subject experts do present diversity within religions, this can often be reduced to crude differences between denominations. RE has sometimes inadvertently reinforced stereotypes about religions, rather than challenging them (CoRE, 2018, 5).

The report thus recommends a new vision, one that enables pupils 'to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldviews' (2018, 5). This new vision is intended to allow pupils to learn more about diversity and fluidity between and within religious and non-religious worldviews. What the report does not state, however, is how R&W should be implemented in the classroom. It also does not state what the aims of R&W should be (Benoit *et al.*, 2018). Is it about religious literacy? Are the aims of R&W intrinsic, instrumental, or both? These questions relate to dominant debates in RE: should the subject be about intrinsic academic enquiry, or should it be about social and personal instrumental aims? The lack of pedagogical direction poses a challenge going forward, one that the RE Council of England and Wales is trying to address (Pett 2022).

Difficulties are likely to arise as teachers are not necessarily equipped to use worldview(s) as a pedagogical concept in the classroom. In her research, Everington (2019) shows that teachers can encounter difficulties when attempting to explain non-religious worldview in the context of the RE classroom, especially when it comes to non-religious 'institutional' worldviews. If worldview is too complex a concept to grasp, the risk is that teachers will codify institutional worldview(s) 'alongside the same normative discourses as religion(s), which are entrenched in [...] colonial, Western, Christianised constructions' (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 28), and that R&W subsequently remains taught through the lens of the WRP. This would result in teachers adding more *-isms* to their teaching in order to include non-religious worldviews, rather than rethinking RE. Cush and Robinson warn against the dangers of creating 'a series of separate monolithic "isms"' (2021, 56): if teachers simply add Humanism, atheism, agnosticism, secularism, and/or any other *-ism* alongside six or more 'world religions', RE/R&W is unlikely to move away from reductionism. Rather than moving away from the binary religious/non-religious, it will also exacerbate it. Ongoing concerns over the secularisation of RE (Barnes, 2015; Felderhof, 2015) demonstrate that the risk of misunderstanding the worldview(s) concept in the R&W classroom is real.

Although 'institutional' worldviews are key to the teaching of RE/R&W, the CoRE report aims for personal lived experiences to be foregrounded in the classroom: '[t]he shift in language from "religion" to "worldview" signifies the greater attention that needs to be paid to individual lived experiences' (CoRE, 2018, 30). While there is a lack of empirical

data on how teachers interpret and use the concept of individual worldview(s) in the classroom, Everington's (2019) findings suggest that teachers can find it difficult to (re)present personal worldviews, especially non-religious ones, 'because of the diversity and messiness of views' (2019, 20). One of the risks of focusing on the individual and ignoring other factors is that teachers might feel overwhelmed by the 'messiness', and that they fall into the trap of post-modern relativism, which assumes that all worldviews are equally valid, and fails to take the diversity and plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews seriously (Hella and Wright, 2009). Research shows that this is already an issue, as teachers feel more comfortable teaching about 'world religions' and worldviews 'which adhere to their own sense of a "good life", such as the golden rule, but ignor[e] aspects of religion(s) with which they disagree' (Flanagan, 2020, 12-13). Benoit's (2020) research also shows that teachers are more likely to focus on religious and non-religious philosophical convictions that promote a 'good life', and avoid 'destructive spiritualities'.⁵

By emphasising lived experiences and seeking 'to understand how worldview works in human life', the CoRE report's 'proposed worldview paradigm seeks to replace the current world religions paradigm' (Cooling *et al.*, 2020, 39). While a pedagogical reframing of RE is needed, for the reasons aforementioned, we must be careful not to ignore the existence of the WRP altogether. Doing so would be a disservice to children and young people given that Western societies have assimilated the WRP as a major system of classification. Instead, learners should be given the opportunity to critically engage with it, in order to 'recognise how real people actually construct their world' (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 8). R&W syllabuses should provide pupils with opportunities to engage in conversations about the WRP and distribution of power in society. By actively engaging in discussions about power dynamics, hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, and the discriminatory practices and actions that may result towards othered religions, R&W could contribute to a decolonised and anti-racist curriculum (Brown, 2021).⁶

Unfortunately, due to a lack of empirical data, it is difficult to predict how teachers are going to use the worldview(s) concept in the classroom. We therefore strongly recommend that teachers' voices be actively sought and taken into consideration as syllabuses are being (re)designed to include worldview(s). Teachers' voices are not the only ones currently missing from discussions about the inclusion of worldview(s) in the classroom. Pupils' voices are also sorely missing. While over fifty schools responded to the consultation launched by the commissioners of the CoRE report, and pupils were invited to share their views on RE, they have not been actively involved in decision-

⁵ McGuire (2008, p.116) defines 'destructive spiritualities' in opposition to 'creative spiritualities': '[J]ust as there are creative spiritualities, there may also be destructive spiritualities. Just as some people may seek spiritual practices that bring their lives into a greater sense of harmony, beauty, peace, and compassion, others may engage in practices that develop a purer hatred of the Other and that literally, as well as figuratively, embody violence and aggression.'

⁶ Brown, A. (2021). *Writing towards an Anti-Racist RE Curriculum*. [Video]. Available from: <https://www.reonline.org.uk/research/in-conversation/>

making, and have not yet contributed to curriculum development. Pupils, however, have shown on many occasions that they have relevant and important contributions to make when it comes to discussing the role and place of religion in education (Benoit, 2020; 2021; Hemming, 2011; 2015; 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Smith, 2005; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019).

Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani (2020) speak of worldview as a paradigm shift. However, by excluding children and young people from decision-making, implementation plans, and pedagogical debates, the proponents of the worldview paradigm are failing to take the opportunity to genuinely rethink the way RE/R&W is taught. As we state in our report, '[t]oo often, curriculum change happens without seeking to actively include children's and young people's perspectives' (Benoit *et al.*, 2020, 30).

The 'new' sociology of childhood recognises that children are fully active social agents who enter the classroom with valuable knowledge and skills: '[c]hildren are active agents who construct their own cultures and contribute to the production of the adult world, and childhood is a structural form or part of society' (Corsaro, 2015, 4). New pedagogies, anchored in philosophical hermeneutics, seem well suited to the teaching of R&W. This is the case of Freathy and John's (2019) "REsearchers" approach, which gives pupils the opportunity to adopt a more active role in the study of R&W. This is an inquiry-based approach to the curriculum, whereby pupils become 'nascent members of the communities of academic inquiry' (2019, 36). The pedagogical approach reflects 'a preference for critical, dialogical and methodologically/hermeneutically-oriented RE' (2019, 38). Yet, while the pedagogy adopts child-centred activities, the curriculum is rarely child-led, especially in secondary schools.

Strhan and Shillitoe (2022) contend that listening to the perspectives of children with regards to their experiences of religious and non-religious belief is also a question of social justice. Building on the work of Fricker (2007), Strhan and Shillitoe (forthcoming) argue that not attending to the perspectives and experiences of non-religious children in RE is also a form of 'epistemic injustice' as they are excluded from opportunities to learn and reflect upon their own beliefs and worldviews in the classroom. By foregrounding lived experiences of religion and non-religion, R&W could represent the opportunity to adopt a more participatory, democratic curriculum.

Research projects that look at 'how RE is being re-imagined in schools', such as Dinham and Shaw (2021), have started to emerge. While these represent an opportunity to foreground teachers' and pupils' voices, we need to ensure that the findings are used to inform educationalists, RE professionals, and policymakers. We also recommend that the views of children and young people are actively sought when it comes to shaping the worldview(s) concept for usage in the RE/R&W classroom. What do they think about worldview(s)? What do they think it means? Is the concept of any

help/relevance to them? How would they like RE/R&W classes to be organised, and why?

Conclusion

This article has addressed three different concerns about the proposed shift to Religion and Worldviews education in English schools. The first two are conceptual, challenging curriculum developers to think much more clearly and carefully about the relationship between worldview, religion and non-religion. We have questioned the use of phrases like “organised worldview”, “institutional worldview” and “religious and non-religious worldviews”, which appear in literature advocating for the worldviews shift but have not yet been adequately defined or conceptualised. Our third concern is more practical, asking how the R&W paradigm can be taught effectively in classrooms as a move beyond the limitations of the dominant World Religions Paradigm.

In each case, our response has been the same. An effective R&W curriculum must identify issues like these and call them out explicitly for discussion. Students should be taught about the theological and political implications of worldview thinking, about the contexts in which different religious systems try to institutionalise specific ideas and name them as worldviews, about how and why people come to classify themselves as religious or non-religious, and about the origins, biases and consequences of the World Religions Paradigm. Challenging and moving beyond the WRP means teaching students about the constructedness of religions, world religions, religiousness, non-religiousness – and the constructedness of worldviews, too. We have called for teachers and pupils to be involved in these discussions as valuable contributors to curriculum decisions, and future research is needed to find out more about what barriers or opportunities are perceived by teachers and pupils as they consider the future of worldviews education.

Finally, this article is also intended as a reminder of the need for academics to involve themselves with RE teaching and curriculum development. RE teachers, networks and support organisations are open to conversation with academic experts in the study of religion, and such partnerships can be of considerable mutual benefit. The teaching of religion across the UK is in transition at school and university level, with student numbers under pressure and the subject as a whole considering major changes to its focus and curriculum. There is great interest among RE teachers in finding ways to engage with the serious academic study of worldviews, to help develop classroom resources, build teacher expertise, and shape the curriculum in fruitful directions. At the same time, university TRS and religious studies departments are recognising the need to build better relationships with schools and support student recruitment at all levels, because declining student numbers at any level of education will eventually have disastrous consequences for the future viability of university teaching of religion as well. The proposed shift to teaching religion and worldviews creates an opportunity for the

study of religion to influence teaching at a national level, with important consequences both for the public understanding of religion and for the future of our academic discipline.

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