



Opening up conversations about religion and worldviews

First published as a blog series on [RE:ONLINE](#) in collaboration with the RE Policy Unit, a partnership between NATRE, the RE Council and RE Today. It includes contributions from a wide range of teachers, those working in initial teacher education and researchers in this field.

Contents

Foreword Professor Trevor Cooling	2
The Commission on RE – A retrospective Dr Joyce Miller.....	3
How I... responded to an academic paper on Worldviews and Big Ideas Adam Robertson.....	6
What are worldviews? How should I teach about them? How is RE changing? Dr Kevin O’Grady.....	9
What has the idea of ‘worldview’ contributed to my curriculum thinking? Ben Wood	14
Worldviews from a Primary perspective: self-detectives Ruth Flanagan.....	17
Our journey to understanding ‘worldviews’ in school Katie Freeman	21
A worldviews approach doesn’t dilute RE, it gives the subject context and relevance Ed Pawson	24
Why Religion & Worldviews won’t dilute my passion for rigorous Religious Studies Dominic Kidney	27
Worldview Education, hermeneutics and teaching pupils how to know, not just what to know Professor Bob Bowie	29
An Interesting View of Worldviews Paul Smalley	32
Lesser asked questions for Religion and Worldviews (and their relationship with curriculum) Professor Bob Bowie	35
Epilogue	38

Foreword

Professor Trevor Cooling

The Commission on RE Final (CoRE) Report published in September 2018 sparked quite a debate about the title and purpose of RE. This series of blogs, commissioned by the RE Policy Unit (a joint venture of the National Association of RE Teachers, the Religious Education Council and RE Today Services), is a welcome addition to that conversation.

Some, however, ask whether we need all this discussion. “Surely, we should focus on celebrating and building on the achievements of RE teachers by disseminating these to schools where RE is not well taught? Getting lost in a debate about a new title for the subject is missing the point.” Actually, I have a lot of sympathy with this viewpoint. When I visit other countries, I am very proud of the stories and ideas I can share as a British RE teacher. There is a lot of hugely impressive work in our schools. But, there is a but; a big but.

I started my teaching career as a biology teacher before I converted (and I mean converted) to RE. In my biology training I was initiated into the Nuffield approach, which challenged what we called traditional biology. I loved the traditional approach; it was descriptive, gave pupils lots of fascinating information and evoked a love of animal and plant life. But it did not prepare pupils to be scientific thinkers and practitioners. Nuffield did not deny the strengths of the traditional approach, but it was a pedagogical leap forward that engaged pupils with scientific reasoning and modernised biology teaching. It reframed the subject. CoRE is, I suggest, the Nuffield of RE.

As Ben Wood epitomises in his blog, the mark of professionalism is to be prepared to reflect on practice and to develop in order to improve pupils’ experience of RE. This fascinating series of blogs from teachers, advisers, lecturers, and academics exemplify that spirit. Between them they point to the potential contribution that CoRE could make to strengthening RE.

Professor Trevor Cooling, Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales.

The Commission on RE – A retrospective

Dr Joyce Miller

10 July, 2020

Reflecting back on my time as a Commissioner and all the data we used in drawing up our final report (Commission on RE 2018), there are two further pieces of evidence which have convinced me that we were right to go for radical change and not simply aim to find more resources to shore up the present system. Both of these were from 2018 YouGov surveys. The first, of the general population, revealed that 55% of those surveyed thought that RE was ‘not very’ or ‘not at all important’ and RE was fourth from the bottom of the list. The second, of pupils, showed that RE was their least favourite subject, with the exception of Citizenship. I find these figures devastating. The title of the popular Facebook group ‘Save RE’ says it all: the subject needs to be saved and whether or not, or how far, you might agree with our recommendations, something needed to be done.

One of our main recommendations was that there should be a National Entitlement (not Curriculum) for all pupils in all schools. That’s pretty radical in itself. It is set out in tightly written prose and each of the subsections is worthy of careful study. As an example, let me take the first two areas that we say pupils must be taught about.

‘Matters of central importance to that worldview’. “Tick”, says the RE teacher and the Agreed Syllabus Conference member, “We do that”. I’d like to think that is the case, but I don’t think I did that, or did it very well, when I was a teacher. It is too easy to fit religions into our curriculum framework rather than the other way round. Take most RE textbook series: beautifully illustrated, packed with ‘knowledge’, learning activities and key questions but so many of them follow the same format, no matter which religion they’re looking at: worship, scriptures, rites of passage – as if these were all matters of ‘central importance’ to every worldview. They’re not. There might be a birth ceremony in Judaism but there’s not in Buddhism. Pilgrimage might be central to Islam but not to most Christians. The first element of the NE asks us to think again about what we are presenting to pupils and how we frame it.

The second is the one I like the best: pupils should be taught about ‘the key concepts including ‘religion’, ‘secularity’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘worldview’...’. Elsewhere in the report we call these our ‘over-arching categories’. This presents to me a helpful spatial metaphor: rather than not just ‘under-standing’ a religion, we also have ‘over-arching’, a rising above and looking down on the complex, fascinating and essentially important phenomena of worldviews, their complex, diverse and pluralistic nature, their changing patterns and their inter-connectedness.

Each of these four concepts is complex, each contested and each needs to be understood by pupils if they are to make any sense of the world in which they live, never mind continue to create their own worldview. ‘Religion’ is not synonymous with ‘the big six’ – the whole is more than its constituent parts. The zeitgeist of the western world is ‘secular’ and pupils need to understand its meaning, its development, its contested nature and its relevance to understanding ‘religion’ in the modern world. RE teachers often lay claim to ‘spirituality’ when, of course spiritual development is a whole-school responsibility. Religion and Worldviews does not just contribute to pupils’ spiritual development through the content of the subject but through the opportunity to provide an ‘objective, critical and pluralistic’ approach to understanding the term, its meaning and its manifestations in human life, including – but not only – religious interpretations of ‘spirituality’. It is the term ‘worldview’ that has aroused the most controversy, which isn’t unexpected, but, despite its contested nature, it is a widely-used, overarching term and the one that we decided was most fit for purpose. We knew that a great deal more work needs to be done and I’m delighted that the RE Council is currently leading on that.

And that’s another misconception: there’s much more going on than is evident to everyone. The authors of some of the most significant reports in recent times, all of which called for radical change – A New Settlement, RE for Real, the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, as well as the Commission on RE – are continuing to work and to collaborate. Others have taken the initiative and developed responses – primary teacher educators, for example, have developed Recommendation Six and their work is available on the Culham St Gabriel website

(see: <https://www.teachre.co.uk/itt-providers/primary-itt-tutor-toolkit/>). Many individual teachers I've met as I've travelled the country speaking about the Commission have expressed immense enthusiasm and I hope that will be translated into classroom practice. There's a long way to go but we'll get there in the end. We have to.

Dr Joyce Miller Member of the Commission on RE, 2016-8.

How I... responded to an academic paper on Worldviews and Big Ideas

Adam Robertson

14 July, 2020

As part of the CSTG Leadership Programme I have had the great fortune to be part of a reading group looking at articles relating to RE. Now, I must make a confession or two here. First, I love reading groups and am an enthusiastic member of another in my free time. There is something about reading groups that, I believe, makes me far more attentive to the text. Knowing that I am going to have to discuss it, I busily make notes and try to map out the drift of the author's thought. Secondly, I came late to teaching – and as a Primary school-based trainee – never had the background in academic pedagogy and theories of RE. So – the opportunity to read Rob Freathy and Helen John's '*Worldviews and Big Ideas: A Way forward for Religious Education?*' was one I grasped with both hands!

Ably marshalled by Kathryn Wright and – as always – kindly probed and challenged by the ever-wonderful Ed Pawson, we dissected the ideas set out in the article. Freathy and John begin with the Core Report (2018) and its recommendation to look wider than the 'big 6' to incorporate the teaching of worldviews. In what, all members commented, is an immensely readable paper, they canter through a brief literature review of the concept of worldviews in education – pausing awhile to graze on the thorny questions of 'personal' or 'institutional' worldviews chewed over by thinkers such as Hands and Van der Kooij. In a metaphor I personally rather liked, they muse on whether a Venn Diagram might enable these ideas to be drawn but conclude that this would need to be four dimensional and change over time! What was clear to all of us in discussion, was that this is an issue on which we all felt was not one with clearly drawn edges – that part of the 'fuzziness' and 'mess' of lifestyles meant that we live in a place of liminality – and very few people have clear lines. I recalled, whilst studying Theology and Religious Studies, one of my lecturers; the very distinguished Julius Lipner – describing himself as a 'Hindu Catholic' and describing

his interpretation of a Hindu worldview in terms of the banyan tree; with many branches that there is not one clear trunk.

Freathy and John move on to discuss whether the idea of a worldviews education would cause a 'necessary dilution' of the content of RE – as some institutional faith bodies fear it might, or that it would increase teacher workload as implied by Damien Hinds' (2018) response to the Commission report. However, they firmly reject this notion making analogies to other academic subjects, such as History and English and noting that they do not try to cover all of their subjects. It is the approach – rather than content selection – which is key to their argument. Questions of which worldviews may be chosen was an object of discussion – and this extended to the family dinner table – where my son, who is taking GCSE RS as a whole cohort (very much against his will!) questioned strongly whether agnosticism could be a coherent worldview in its own right? Ed Pawson suggested that a key worldview for many young people might be hedonism, and was this part of an enquiry that might take place in a classroom?

In setting out the 'Big Ideas', Freathy and John seek to unpack aspects of how a worldview-oriented education might work in reality. For me, two key themes leapt out. Firstly, in Big Idea 2 (BIA2) the extent to which a worldviews approach might enable a reflexive response for students – highlighting the 'particularity of their own lived experience and their own epistemological lenses'. I have a friend who teaches in a very successful secondary school as Head of Religious Studies, and she often remarks on how students (particularly from minority religions) do not recognise the religion taught in the GCSE spec. Could this approach enable all students to see how all worldviews– institutional and personal – might be inherently diverse, partial, fluid and dynamic?

A final thought concerns the real passion that both Freathy and John have (set out in Big Idea 3 and 4) to close the 'gap' between academic RS/Theology and the classroom – both in the wish to see teachers and students as 'co-researchers' , but also to see more interaction between departments and schools. The latter, we all felt,

is so important – and very much part of what Kathryn Wright is advocating in her new vision for CTSG – to make teachers ‘research aware, informed and active’. I think this group definitely made us feel we were ‘aware’ and becoming ‘active’. More of this, I think is vital for the health of RE – and a paper as well written and accessible as this – will definitely be on the agenda for one of my forthcoming Bristol Learn teach Lead RE Hubs. I may even invite Mr Pawson to bring his wisdom and humour to it!

<http://kau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1386095/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Adam Robertson, Primary teacher in Bristol, member of NATRE Executive and Schools Adviser for the Diocese of Bristol.

What are worldviews? How should I teach about them?

How is RE changing?

Dr Kevin O'Grady

17 July, 2020

Approaching two years on, we may be getting to grips with the significance of the final report of the Commission on Religious Education. [i] Some things are clear. To become Religion & Worldviews (R&W), religious education (RE) needs to embody the meaning of the new language of the Commission report. The Commission report never meant that the new subject should simply refer to religions as worldviews or add an extra set of content on non-religious philosophies or ways of life.

What are worldviews? How should we teach about them? How will RE change as we negotiate the transition to R&W? These are the big questions which cannot be settled quickly, but current research brings interesting suggestions into the mix: not easy suggestions, but that is because the transition is no easy matter. In this blog, I look at three current British Journal of Religious Education articles, all of which we have just reported on Research for RE in the hope that quick access to the key points will be helpful to readers.

Firstly, Trevor Cooling confirms that the Commission report proposes R&W as a 'significant reframing' of RE, 'understanding worldview as a shared human phenomenon, of which there are religious and non-religious manifestations'. [ii] When religions are viewed as fluid, complex, diverse worldviews, the subject changes; it moves away from 'sealed-box' presentations of religions. One key focus is on the lived experience of people and communities identifying with a particular institutional worldview: CORE, here, draws heavily on Robert Jackson's interpretive approach to RE. A second is on personal worldview, where the positive elements of the 'learning from religion' aspect of the world religious paradigm of RE are used – pupils should understand the varied influences on them as they form their own worldviews. [iii]

For Cooling, Anthony Thiselton's 'responsible hermeneutics' provides the disciplinary knowledge needed in R&W. It gives teachers three responsibilities. We need to promote rigorous knowledge of what is being taught; ensure reflection on the contemporary context and how it may influence both teacher's and pupils' perspectives; and enable reflection on the potential interaction between what is taught and our own perspectives, so that teacher and pupils benefit in their own self-understanding.

Cooling recognises that a workable curriculum and resources are still to come. He also recognises that the need for teachers to reflect on our own worldviews warrants further attention, though in fact the issue is established in research. During my studies with secondary pupils in Sheffield, I found that the RE teacher's role should be to collaborate with them, modelling enquiry into religions and non-religious worldviews, emphasising interpretation. [iv] Cooling does cite Ruth Flanagan's research in this regard, and we now turn to it.

For Flanagan, teachers need to become conscious of their own worldviews. Otherwise, unconscious biases may be communicated to their pupils through what we teach, or how we teach it. Flanagan warns of a tendency for teachers to emphasise those parts of worldviews most amenable to our own views on what is rational, and, again, this is already established in prior research, the *Does RE Work?* data showing how teachers prefer to construct religion as 'safer' philosophy. [v] What can be done about this? She suggests that if teachers are supported to reflect on our own notions of a good life, we can guard against only emphasising those features of others' worldviews that we find palatable. [vi]

It is interesting that though Tuuli Lipiäinen, Anna Halafoff, Fethi Mansouri and Gary Bouma focus on Finland and Australia, they echo Trevor Cooling's thinking. They do report global trends, principally the decline in 'old-style' or 'packaged' religion where less and less people follow one religion's rules, beliefs, or ways. Instead, people's worldviews often comprise different elements from inside, between and outside religions, and (especially those of young people) they often change. The researchers

call for education on these processes, to help young people to understand themselves and others and to manage the 'superdiverse' religion and worldviews situation. [vii] Once more, these are not yet curricular plans or resources, but may help policy makers, curriculum developers and teachers to understand the direction of travel from RE to R&W.

Arguably, by my own reading of them, one need pointed to by all three sources is for the future subject to give increased attention to personal worldviews, with regard to how these are formed in relation to complex influences. This would apply to individuals who were studied as representatives of organised worldviews, as well to pupils themselves. There would be balances to seek. Worldviews at the organised or institutional level would need to form a permanent background to the study of personal worldviews. My use of 'background' is in no sense intended to suggest that organised worldviews should reduce in importance within the new subject. Of course, I would argue that the nature and influence of large-scale organised worldview movements are also necessary foci in their own right. That the various ways in which wider traditions and personal worldviews interact are hard to pin down offers the rich intellectual challenge of R&W, which – for all of the researchers whose ideas we have covered – is also a matter of self-awareness and readiness for twenty-first century life.

Returning for a moment to the interactions between wider tradition and personal worldview, and echoing Cooling's acknowledgement of the importance in this regard of Jackson's work, we might bear in mind Jackson's adaptation of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's two-level scheme to a three-level one. Cantwell Smith used the terms 'faith' (to denote the personal involvement of an individual in a tradition) and 'cumulative tradition' (to stand for the entire mass of data associated with the community in question, past and present).[viii] Jackson made several criticisms of this model and added the term 'membership group' in recognition that individual identities are also shaped by smaller groups – which could be based on peer, ethnic, family, gender or other relations – within broad traditions. [ix] This point adds ways to account for the complex influences on personal worldviews, especially because the range of

available membership groups has grown exponentially over the internet since 1997, when Jackson published the book which I have cited.

We eagerly anticipate further publications on worldviews, in the near future. The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) have commissioned a literature review on the concept of worldview, through the organisation Theology and Religious Studies UK (TRS-UK) which is due to be published soon. This has been funded by Culham St Gabriel's Trust. Culham St Gabriel's are also funding the dissemination of a Theos report on worldview, which is due in early Autumn 2020. For more details of these and other current Culham St Gabriel's grants, see <https://www.cstg.org.uk/grant-giving/grants/grants-awarded/>

Dr Kevin O'Grady, Lead Consultant for Research at Culham St Gabriel's Trust

[i] RE Council of England and Wales, "Commission on Religious Education Final Report: Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE," online material available at <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/>

[ii] Trevor Cooling (2020) Worldview in religious education: autobiographical reflections on The Commission on Religious Education in England final report, British Journal of Religious Education, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2020.176449, 4. See also https://researchforre.reonline.org.uk/research_report/what-does-the-shift-to-worldview-mean-for-teachers/

[iii] Cooling, Worldview in religious education: autobiographical reflections on The Commission on Religious Education in England final report, 6-7.

[iv] Kevin O'Grady, *Religious Education as a Dialogue with Difference: Fostering Democratic Citizenship through the Study of Religions in Schools* (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), e.g. 48.

[v] J.C. Conroy, D. Lundie, R.A. Davis, V. Baumfield, L.P. Barnes, T. Gallagher, K. Lowden, N. Bourque and K. J. Wenell, *Does Religious Education Work? A Multi-disciplinary Investigation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 88-89.

[vi] See https://researchforre.reonline.org.uk/research_report/teachers-need-to-become-conscious-of-their-own-worldviews/ and Ruth Flanagan (2019):

Implementing a Ricoeurian lens to examine the impact of individuals' worldviews on subject content knowledge in RE in England: a theoretical proposition, *British Journal of Religious Education*, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2019.1674779

[vii] See https://researchforre.reonline.org.uk/research_report/worldviews-education-in-finland-and-australia/ and Tuuli Lipiäinen, Anna Halafoff, Fethi Mansouri & Gary

Bouma (2020): Diverse worldviews education and social inclusion: a comparison between Finnish and Australian approaches to build intercultural and interreligious understanding, *British Journal of Religious Education*, DOI:

10.1080/01416200.2020.1737918

[viii] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor, 1962), 141.

[ix] Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 62 ff.

What has the idea of 'worldview' contributed to my curriculum thinking?

Ben Wood

21 July, 2020

I've long been an advocate of what might be labelled as academic, rigorous, systematic, knowledge-rich RE, one that teaches pupils the key beliefs, practices, concepts and values found within some of the major world religions. And I have long argued that this content should be taught in a progressive manner, by which pupils' comprehension gradually moves from simple to complex as they grow in their awareness of the diversity of expression and understanding found within and without religions.

However, the ideas contained in the Commission on RE (2018) report, and the subsequent thinking developing these ideas has provided me with both the opportunity and the stimulation to question the basis of these ideas about the curriculum. Here I set out some brief comments on just one part of my thinking that I have been questioning.

Is the 'essentialist' curriculum model the best one?

The term 'essentialism' is perceived in different ways in the RE community. Some argue that 'essentialism' narrows and limits understanding and fails to provide a realistic picture of the world and religion and belief. Others, myself included, accept this to a point, arguing that 'essentialism' may be limited, but it is a necessary part of the process of learning about religions in a progressive manner, in that what is learnt in this phase is essential for progress to more sophisticated learning.

I would still argue for the latter position, but the ideas found within the proposed National Entitlement statement, and the ongoing work to develop these ideas (e.g. Cooling 2020 [1]) have made me question what might be considered 'essential'. Let's consider an example, the Christian practice of going to church. The current approach would seem to suggest that we teach about the church, and what might be found in

the church, and what Christians do in the church, and then later on, we might start to consider types of church building, and different forms of worship. But what seems to be missed here is that for the vast majority of people in the UK who identify as Christian, going to church is something they never or very rarely do. [2] So why is a study of the church building considered essential? My concern is that rather than this being a progressive programme by which pupils move from simple to complex, it isn't progressive at all because it may actually hinder progress in understanding Christians. This approach would seem to make going to church normative for Christians when for many it isn't.

This is where a range of different disciplinary questions may help. If we place a social scientific approach alongside a theological approach, maybe we will avoid the problem of making normative something that isn't normal.

And this thought is leading me to consider how else we present that which we study. When we study Christianity (if there even is such a thing as Christianity) then which Christianity are we studying? Do we make normative a male, European, educated, white Christianity, and so 'other' different forms of Christianity?

What the idea of worldview has contributed to my thinking is that I need to pay much more attention to teaching students that what we teach is not all that there is, and that the most essential of all facts to teach about religious and non-religious worldviews is that they are diverse.

Ben Wood, Subject Leader for Religious Studies, Haslingden High School and Chair, National Association of Teachers of RE

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/RKMZYYPQMVINAXJPC2R4/full?target=10.1080%2F01416200.2020.1764497&>

² Figures for Christian affiliation vary depending on which survey you look at, but range upwards from 38% of the UK population, while figures for church attendance also vary, but are perhaps around 5% of the population

- https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf
- <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>

Worldviews from a Primary perspective: self-detectives

Ruth Flanagan

24 July, 2020

I recently attended an online event on 'Religion and Worldviews' and was struck by some of the concerns: Can worldviews be included at primary level? Is this not adding more to an already overburdened curriculum?

Yet, examining worldviews can be incredibly helpful. Many trainee teachers are concerned about teaching RE, particularly if they do not personally follow a religion. For some this contributes to the 'otherness', or exotic nature, of religion and they struggle to see where to begin with teaching about a religion. Examining personal worldviews can

- Bridge the gap
- Assist in identifying what new subject knowledge is key
- Increase confidence
- Help religion(s) seem less 'exotic'

Identifying

'Personal worldviews' are the assumptions and values individuals adhere to that are held consciously and subconsciously (Sire, 2004). Identifying personal worldviews faces challenges, not least in how to make the subconscious conscious. Various methods have been trialled to access these subconsciously held views yet each has flaws. Self-reflective writing is often employed but this may result in reflections that are 'too big and too vague' (Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995: 53), or produce over simplifications (Joram, 2007) that have often led to reinforcing bias rather than illuminating understanding. However, one research project employed photographs to elicit teacher-training students' preconceived ideas (Stockall and Davis, 2011) which proved insightful. Therefore, I decided to employ photographs with my ITE students as part of worldview identification.

Further assistance in identifying personal worldviews is experiencing 'disorientating dilemmas' (Mezirow, 2000), a situation where individuals come up against contrast – different views, practices, cultures or norms. For example, a teacher told me how annoyed she was that a pupil she was telling off would not look at her but stared at the ground, which she saw as disrespectful. Yet the pupil was from a cultural background where you show respect by looking down and to make eye contact is disrespectful. Personal worldviews were illuminated, and clashed, in this contrast. These occurrences in life, sometimes lead to conflict, but can be replicated, sensitively, in the classroom by providing opportunities for experiencing difference – examining images, optical illusions, watching video clips, and discussing ethical dilemmas which all challenge assumptions.

Tracing

As aspects of individuals' personal worldviews appear then we can examine where these have come from; not to judge or dispute but to see the evolutionary process of those views. This can be in a fun and investigative way – as **Self-detectives**.

Where does my view come from? Tracing these back for self and then in dialogue with peers can assist this process. The aim is not to attempt to decipher the entirety of someone's worldview but to examine a few aspects to illustrate the existence of personal worldviews and trace the factors that have impacted them.

For example, with a discussion on the word 'home' – my husband calls his parents' house 'home' even though he has not lived there for 30 years. For me home is wherever my family happen to be. Why this difference? This can be traced back to life experience. For my husband his parents still live in the house where he was born so he calls that home. My parents moved around during my childhood and, for me, my home is wherever my family are. This is a part of our worldviews of what home is and has evolved from our life experience.

Further practical ideas:

Alongside images, I have employed video clips to disorientate and prompt new reactions. One particularly effective clip was 'Radi-aid', a spoof charity video claiming

to be raising money to buy radiators for children in Norway, as 'the cold kills too'. The video written by the Norwegian Students' & Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) forms part of their annual campaigns. Their goal is 'to challenge the perceptions around issues of poverty and development, to change the way fundraising campaigns communicate and to break down dominating stereotypes' (SAIH,nd).

Another example is from the US Television drama 'The West Wing'. The light-hearted scene sees Cartographers for Social Justice discuss power and social injustice in the creation of maps of the world. HSBC also ran an advertising campaign concerning different cultural norms, which provides materials that could be used to aid discussions about worldviews.

Further useful tools include Question Cards on worldviews. A range of statements or questions can be written on cards and then discussed in pairs or larger groups. Questions, such as 'Is it ever OK to lie?', can assist in revealing differences between individuals, their accepted norms and what they hold as most important: truth, politeness etc.

I see worldviews, not as an add on but, as a starting point to provide a frame for pupils to develop a greater understanding of their personal worldviews and the worldviews of others, whether religious or not.

Ruth Flanagan FHEA, Lecturer in Education, Subject Lead for Primary Humanities,
University of Exeter

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Websites:

<https://www.radiaid.com/>

The Radi-aid clip can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJLqyuxm96k>

The West Wing clip on maps of the world with Cartographers for Social Justice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLqC3FNNOaI>

Our journey to understanding ‘worldviews’ in school

Katie Freeman

28 July, 2020

The Commission on RE (2018) was an eagerly awaited report by many in the RE world. One of the highlights of this report was the way in which the commissioners carried out their investigations into RE. My previous school was lucky enough to be a part of this process. Juliet Lyal, one of the commissioners, came to visit us to talk about what the children thought RE was and should be. I remember part of this discussion was about ‘worldviews’. At the time, we had been using language such as ‘non-religious worldview’. Juliet and I talked about how the term ‘worldview’ could be, and was potentially, confusing for our children in school as it could lead them to thinking only about beliefs that were not related to religion. Later that evening, Juliet came to talk to our Plymouth Hub about the commission’s work and, again, we realised that there was some confusion amongst teachers over the use of ‘worldviews’.

Many people have written in the past about the purpose of RE and it seems that there is still confusion about this in the RE community. There have also been many arguments about changing the name of RE to Religion and Worldviews. I have no problem with changing the name of the subject but my concern is that, if we have pupils and teachers who aren’t sure what we mean by the name of the subject or the reasoning behind using ‘worldviews’, how can we ever really move forward as a subject community?

After moving schools eighteen months ago, I was in the very fortunate position of being able to work alongside the rest of the Senior Leadership Team to redesign our RE curriculum. This also coincided with Devon SACRE launching the new Agreed Syllabus, a perfect time to consider change. It was initially tempting to change the name of the subject straight away, especially as I was hearing that many talented colleagues in our subject community had already done this. As a teacher and subject lead, I was eager for the children to take ownership of this journey towards ‘Religion

and Worldviews', so that they really understood the vocabulary that we were using and also the subject that we were teaching.

A few years ago, I attended 'Strictly RE' and listened to Stephen Pett (RE Today Services) talk about where we stand when we enter the RE classroom as professionals. Although I had always been aware of this when I was teaching RE, Stephen's seminar had a huge impact upon my thinking. I have repeatedly thought back to this seminar and the way in which it clearly explained what we do as professionals. This got me thinking not only about where we as professionals stand but also where the children stand when they enter the RE classroom. I felt that this was a clear way to start explaining the term 'worldview' with even our youngest children at our school. I started by asking the children questions like, 'Are there people in the world that influence the way that you think about things (we linked this to celebrities and sports personalities)? Do you have thoughts and ideas about the beyond? Do you talk about what we have studied after our RE lessons and do these discussions change your mind about the things that we have learnt?

We were then able to link these discussions with the [Andrew Ricketts' Spirituality grids](#) (The Diocese of Salisbury 2015). The children used these grids with their class teacher to consider big questions linked to themselves, the world, the beyond and creation. These ideas are all recorded in class that move with the children through the school so we reference these as being the development of understanding their own worldviews.

During our RE lessons we are careful to talk in-depth about diversity within religion and belief even with our very young children. This helps pupils to understand that even within religion there is a diversity within an organised worldview and although two people may follow a belief they can have a different worldview. We have invited visitors into school to discuss their worldviews within our RE lessons and most recently hosted a debate about science and creation with two Christians from different denominations and a Buddhist. This enabled our children to see diversity first-hand between one worldview but also how people with different worldviews talk, share, debate, discuss and learn from each other.

Our next steps are to continue to develop children's understanding of what 'worldview' means and what it means for RE. These next steps will include having some pupil voice discussions about whether we change the name of our subject. As a school, we want to ensure that the children understand the concept of a worldview and also use key vocabulary to share their understanding of this in relation to their study of RE.

In my opinion, changing the name is only right if we know and understand the reasons for doing so. We also need to ensure that the children have ownership and understanding of it; this needs to be a journey because otherwise the children won't understand what the subject is about. This will result in us coming full circle back to debating the purpose of RE and changing the name of the subject .

Katie Freeman, Bickleigh Down CofE Primary School

A worldviews approach doesn't dilute RE, it gives the subject context and relevance

Ed Pawson

31 July, 2020

Death knell?

In December 2018 the then Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, wrote to Dr John Hall (Chair of the Commission on RE) expressing significant reservations about the findings of the Commission's report. In particular Hinds questioned its central focus, which advocates a shift to a worldviews approach, stating that 'the inclusion of 'worldviews' risks diluting the teaching of RE'. For many this sounded the death knell for the report.

Here I explain how I believe that Hinds' judgement betrayed a significant misreading of the roll worldviews can play in RE. I would argue that, rather than diluting the subject, the inclusion of worldviews enables young people to connect with religion(s) in a much more profound and inclusive way.

New vision

As teachers of RE, our aim is to help pupils explore what people believe and what difference this makes to how they live. Culturally we are witnessing a significant shift in the way individuals express their personal beliefs and values, with fewer people identifying their own worldview as 'Christian', a growing number of 'nones' and an increasing attraction towards ethical and lifestyle movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and veganism.

The Commission report offered a new vision for the subject, identifying the study of worldviews as a 'critical gateway' to our understanding of religious and non-religious perspectives (p27). To facilitate this shift the REC's Worldview Project (to be published and consulted on in the autumn) aims to provide a robust academic underpinning for using a worldviews approach to RE[1].

Dilution?

In their paper *Worldviews and Big Ideas*[2], Rob Freathy and Helen John set out a number of arguments which refute the claim that a worldviews approach dilutes the subject. They explain that religions are not discrete entities, distant and separate from their surroundings. To understand religions and beliefs fully they need to be studied in the context of other perspectives and life stances. Religious traditions are fluid and porous; they shift and grow through the influence of social and cultural factors; beliefs intersect, cross-fertilise and conflict with other cultural dynamics. As far back as the 1970s, the late John Hull advocated the inclusion of worldviews into RE (he used the phrase 'stances for living'[3]), in order to aid our understanding of religion(s). In his view, the study of such alternative perspectives serve a valuable purpose in shedding light onto the subject.

By adding the term worldviews, we are reframing the study to emphasise a more far-reaching programme. Far from watering down or weakening RE, this approach gives added depth and relevance to the subject, helping pupils make vital connections and setting topics in a context which enhances the way they are understood.

Don't exceptionalise religions

There is a danger that a predominant focus on the 'Big Six' religions, can lead to the exceptionalising and essentialising of religion, as if other forms of belief are less coherent or of lesser value. It is important for teachers of RE to represent the fact that religions are themselves worldviews, not fixed and boundaried, but with diverse forms and expressions. If they are studied in separation from other ways of seeing the world, we risk making them stand out as isolated oddities, idealised or objectified, disconnected from everyday experiences and concerns.

Connecting the concepts

From my perspective as a teacher and educator, I find the notion of including worldviews into the subject a powerful teaching tool. For example, by giving pupils a brief introduction into the worldviews of hedonism (do whatever makes you happy) and existentialism (we are free to make our own choices), we equip them much more fully to understand religious concepts like sacredness, duty, commitment and divine guidance.

One of the few moments of direct insight I can clearly remember experiencing at university was in making the realisation that for learning to be truly embedded it has to have context. According to Piaget we form meaning through connecting new ideas to our own experiences and patterns of thinking, assimilating them into existing frames of reference. A worldviews approach enables pupils to explore and gain ownership of their own perspectives, fitting new understanding into their existing mental framework. We learn about religion and beliefs through connecting and contrasting them with our own way of seeing the world. There is no true form of any religion, separated from other competing worldviews. All human beings construct their belief systems through a mixture of personal and institutional perspectives. It's just that some people identify more closely to established descriptions and designations they like to call 'religion', and others do not.

Worldviews: a foundation for classroom practice

Damian Hinds' response was far from a death knell. Since the report's publication, nearly two years ago, it has become apparent that in practice, teachers are finding a worldviews approach attractive[4], and work is continuing apace to establish a firm academic foundation, enabling this approach to become embedded into classroom practice.

Ed Pawson, RE adviser and consultant. Twitter: @ed_pawson

[1] <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/coreupdate/>

[2] Worldviews and Big Ideas <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/40513>

[3] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10567224.1985.11487887?journalCode=urel19>

[4] <https://www.reonline.org.uk/blog/worldviews-from-a-primary-perspective-self-detectives/>

Why Religion & Worldviews won't dilute my passion for rigorous Religious Studies

Dominic Kidney

04 August, 2020

As I enter my fourth year of teaching, Religious Education continues to be at the forefront of curriculum debates and media coverage, which arguably, more than ever, demonstrates the need for our subject to be rigorous and detailed in its delivery to young people across the UK.

During the last three years after graduating from Edge Hill University in Secondary Religious Education with QTS, I have had the privilege to teach within a rural independent school setting and now a Church of England Academy, with the continued benefit of 'Religious Studies' being highly regarded as an academic subject. With this, Religious Studies has also had a pastoral element to nurture young people and their values, which I view as crucial. When reading through the Final Report of the Commission on RE for the first time, the push for entitlement and quality in the teaching of religion and worldviews is what resonated with me the most. I viewed this commission as not concerned with changing RE from the core basis of 'learning about and learning from religion'[1], but instead as highlighting the need for the statutory entitlement of RE to be enforced in all schools regardless of status, excellent practice through specialist teaching and clarification on the purposes of RE as an academic subject.

As a teacher I have been fortunate enough to train and work in schools where 'good RE' was and is being purposed and taught, which was neither over-complicated or 'diluted' in the curriculum through the incorporation of other subjects or irregular timetabling. Personally, this has shaped my view on RE to rely heavily on three things to succeed; specialist teaching, reasonable/regular curriculum time and senior leadership support. Through these simple structures, I have seen first-hand how RE can enrich young people to learn not only about the 'big six', but also other religious and non-religious worldviews that have and continue to shape the UK and beyond. I

think 'worldviews' can often be mistaken as 'more content', although I believe that it is having the time to first acknowledge (which through no fault of the teacher is often forgotten through curriculum time pressures) and then teach about the varying religious and worldviews in their own right and in application to the ethical/moral issues that feature heavily in various RE curriculums from Key Stages 3-5. In consequence, I believe this can create well-rounded young people who are able to understand each other and the world around them. As an educator, I believe 'good RE' not only educates young people on religion, belief and worldviews, but also shapes their outlook to flourish in the diversity we are so fortunate to have.

Regardless of the name it is assigned, RE is learning about what people believe and do, which is what makes our subject so unique and diverse. The task we have as RE educators is therefore of paramount importance, as we are the ones teaching young people about their fellow members of society, which in turn will shape views towards one another. This is why a clarified vision, and supporting colleagues across the nation in pushing for the statutory requirement to be enforced without 'diluting' RE, for me, is indeed welcomed. I certainly am no expert, I am just passionate about RE being taught and viewed as an academic and rigorous subject, which can offer opportunities for conversations about beliefs and the world, whilst also nurturing young people to be happy and understand each other with a value for Religious Education (directly and/or indirectly!).

Dominic Kidney, Teacher of Religious Studies at a Church of England Academy in Liverpool.

[1]Geoff Teece (2010) Is it learning about and from religions, religion or religious education? And is it any wonder some teachers don't get it?, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 32:2, 93-103, DOI: [10.1080/01416200903537399](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200903537399)

Worldview Education, hermeneutics and teaching pupils how to know, not just what to know Professor Bob Bowie

07 August, 2020

The Commission for RE final report definition of Worldview, emphasises the way of understanding, what I sometimes call 'knowing' meaning the way of making sense of things that goes on in a worldview.

"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." (on page 4 and 26 where it is unpacked and then it is further unpacked on page 72).

On p. 29 the report relates "way of understanding" directly to disciplinarity and it mentions sacred texts scholarship:

"The explicit, academic study of worldviews provides an opportunity to develop a range of specific and general transferable skills. Skills that are intrinsic to the disciplines involved in the study of worldviews include analysing a range of primary and secondary sources, understanding symbolic language, using technical terminology effectively, interpreting meaning and significance, empathy, respectful critique of beliefs and positions, recognizing bias and stereotype, and representing views other than one's own with accuracy." (p.29)

And this is central to the understanding of diversity. On p.30, the link between this and making sense of how different communities of interpretation are possible is underscored

"There is now greater recognition that within each major tradition there are different communities of interpretation and different theological and philosophical approaches." (p.30)

So there is an explicit interest in the way of knowing that goes on in a worldview, not just a list of facts about ‘what they do and what they believe’. An advisor to the Texts and Teachers’ project, Professor Towey, Director of the Aquinas Centre, at St Mary’s University, who was one of the Commissioners, reminded us that the approach to interpreting sacred texts was often key to unlocking the self-understanding and practice of different denominations today. The report continues that in the subject there needs to be significant rebalancing of the ‘how’ of worldview with the ‘what’ of worldview.

“how worldviews work in practice, is as important as knowing the content of particular worldviews.” (p,31)

The proposition of the commission contains within it a hermeneutical turn for the subject. This is how and why hermeneutics is central to worldviews. Religion and Worldviews cannot simply transfer propositional knowledge, without also introducing pupils to the structure of those propositions and in that structuring we see the worldview that has shaped the discipline. Here an observation of Liam Gearon is important. In his book ***On Holy Ground***, he identified how the rise of social sciences were in part a rejection of role of religion in making sense – disciplines are themselves perforated by worldviews. Disciplines are part of a historical and cultural development which is why philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Julian Baggini argue for an understanding of the place (and time) from which an attempt at an objective view may be sought. Philosophy, often loved in our subject, is itself a space of contested worldviews. I recommend Julian Baggini’s book, ***How the World Thinks***, which I know some RE teachers have been reading thanks to **#REBookClub**. Baggini sheds light on the importance of learning to be able to operate through multiple ways of making meaning.

Religion and worldviews must not be a mish mash of propositional facts, thrown together without rationale. A worldview education means introducing pupils to the way things are organised, the grammar, the ways of knowing practiced from a place, a community, and how meaning is made. I find the analogy of language learning helpful. Our subject is where we teach children to read their own language of

meaning making. Everyone, by virtue of actually having a first language has this as language itself, the shaper of our expressions, is soaked in worldview, indicated through the metaphors which our sentences are riddled with. In our subject we must seek for our pupils to recognise their own metaphorical landscape, the worldviews that shape their perception, as well as becoming bilingual in (I suggest) two traditions' ways of making meaning. To bring about this transformation we have work to do. We need to translate the grammars of knowing found in worldviews into progression structures of the kinds of activities that will tease out concepts and ways of making sense in those traditions. The questions we ask and the things we value in answers given will need to be keyed into these progression structures and the ways of meaning/ grammars of knowing practiced by traditions, rather than bolted on as an afterthought. In this way we might be able to teach pupils *how* to know, not just *what* to know.

Professor Bob Bowie, Canterbury Christ Church University

@bobbowie, bob.bowie@canterbury.ac.uk, www.bobbowie.com

An Interesting View of Worldviews

Paul Smalley

11 August, 2020

OK. I admit it. I'll come clean: I think religion is inherently interesting.

Personally, I am intrigued by some of the ways people carry out their deeply held beliefs. I am impressed by the way that many people find comfort in doing seemingly strange things or by having faith in apparently unfathomable beliefs. I love the stories that they tell – and those they ignore – and the different ways people interpret, reinterpret, and misinterpret their own sources of wisdom and authority. I enjoy doing what's called reception criticism, studying the way that these texts have been interpreted by popular culture in different times and how popular culture has reciprocally influenced the perceived understanding of the texts. I'm interested in how people who don't want to belong (to a religion) do have beliefs, and how some people do want to belong to groups with which they share very little beliefs. So, for example what many Roman Catholics believe is often different to what the Catholic Church teaches, but that doesn't seem to affect many people's 'being Catholic'. And I'm fascinated by the fact we use language like 'belonging', 'being' and 'believing'.... What do these really mean? I'm amused (not in a funny way) that asking a person, 'Are you religious?', 'Do you have a faith?' 'Are you a member of a religion?', 'Do you have a religion?' or 'Do you belong to a religion?' might result in very different answers.

I'm not very interested in shopping, although I seem to do quite a lot of it. One of the arguments for a new vision for RE is that the study of religions is no longer relevant to young people as most of them don't belong to a religion. I don't really buy that argument (do you see what I did there... shopping... buy! Oh, never mind...). I don't think the majority of (young) people are ethical vegans, or Humanists, or liberal Anglicans, or Buddhists, or Muslims. And even if they were, I don't think we should be teaching just what most people think they are (that was possibly a mistake of the

RE of the latter decades of the last century). I think that the majority of people in the west have a consumerist capitalist worldview underpinned by a sort of selfish rationalism. For many of us the purpose of life is to accrue apparently attractive property and wealth in order to 'feel good' in a quasi-hedonistic way. And that's fair enough. If I were more interested in studying that, I would be a sociologist, and I'm not. In RE we should probably be teaching what is most interesting, or most useful in helping people make sense of the world, what is most ... relevant.

So, I have no desire to study shopping, and I'm not a sociologist. I'm not much of a historian or a theologian, either, although I understand that these disciplinary lenses can be useful in pursuing our aims. Ah! – but what are these aims? ...Well, John Hall in the Foreword to the CoRE report suggests, "*The subject should explore the role that religious and non-religious worldviews play in all human life.*" Which is lovely, but possibly a little vague. (As an aside, I've been wondering recently why the phrase "religious and non-religious" has been adopted. I dislike defining something by what it is not. Wouldn't "secular and sacred worldviews" be a better phraseology?). The CoRE report, has another stab at the aims of the subject, tucked away in Appendix 1: "It is about understanding the human quest for meaning, being prepared for life in a diverse world and having space to reflect on one's own worldview" (CoRE: 73)

Now that's something that does interest me, what the best RE teachers have been doing for years, and a vision I think I can get behind: pupils should study the ways secular and sacred worldviews have used narrative, questions, symbols and praxis [1] to try to make sense of the world, both through history and in contemporary society. If pupils understand the ways that these secular and sacred worldviews relate and inform the fluid worldviews of individuals in society, causing people to believe or behave in certain ways, it will prepare them for the contemporary liquid modernity [2] which they inhabit. And through all this learning, if given space for personal reflection, pupils will have opportunity to engage in epistemic cognition [3] and develop their own emerging personal *Weltbild* [4]. This is the sort of RE that I have encouraged those beginning RE teachers who have trained with us at Edge Hill to explore. I hope their pupils find it interesting and relevant.

Paul Smalley Senior Lecturer in RE at Edge Hill University.

[1] Hella, Elina. 2009. "Developing Students' Worldview Literacy through Variation: Pedagogical Prospects of Critical Religious Education and the Variation Theory of Learning for Further Education." *Journal of Chaplaincy in Further Education* 5 (1): 4–12.

[2] Bauman, Z. 2000, *Liquid modernity*, Polity, Oxford.

[3] Fetz, R.L. & Reich, K.H. 1989, "World Views and Religions Development", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 46-60

[4] *Weltbild* is one of two German words for worldview, this one having the idea of a personal image of the workings of the universe was favoured by Heidegger. *Weltanschauung* tends have more of the feel of an all encompassing meta-narrative. I am sure this will be much more comprehensively covered in the REC's forthcoming 'Worldviews Project'

Lesser asked questions for Religion and Worldviews (and their relationship with curriculum)

Professor Bob Bowie

14 August, 2020

Some questions don't seem to get asked in religious education as much as others. Here are three examples designed to pose questions about the relationship between questions and curriculum and what we think an education in religion and worldviews might be for.

Question One

Explain how a common response to poverty can be reached from people who hold different religious and non-religious worldviews.

In your answer show:

- *how a point of consensus can be reached from different theological and or philosophical principles, and*
- *refer to hypothetical or actual case studies.*

Two observations about question one: We tend to prefer questions that are about difference leading to disagreement, rather than difference leading to overlapping consensus. Should RE consider having structured questions designed to test out the possible range of areas where difference might still lead to cooperation or consensus? We don't explicitly ask for case studies (although students can use them in their reasoning). As case studies are interesting way of thinking about communities in context, might this be a useful tool for RE?

Question Two (designed to follow from a longer sacred text extract)

Read the extract from a sacred text. Identify and explain different ways this text is engaged within religious traditions. In your answer refer to each of:

- *communal ritual or private prayer/meditation/reflection*
- *scholarly debate or public moral discussion*

- *communities / individuals living in contrasting contexts (poverty and wealth or peace and war)*

This question is designed to show diverse ways of 'knowing' and 'engaging' in religions and worldviews. It is also about the importance of context in textual interpretation and in the way religious life develops. This goes further in explicitly acknowledging different kinds of dialogue that the subject should entertain: scholarly and public.

Question Three

Should voluntary assisted dying be permitted?

Explore this question and two different settings in which it might be answered. First consider a political debate in the media. Second consider a hospital chaplain asked to counsel a family faced with a request from a terminally ill relative. Identify any differences or similarities in the way the question might be engaged.

This question illuminates the kind of classroom experience we want to have happening and the sort of argumentation there might be. Should RE help students win arguments? Should it help them be good listeners and pastoral helpers of others in times of personal crisis?

A few things might jump out from these questions. First, the question structure will 'beg' for different kinds of content shaped in different kinds of ways in any curriculum that prepares the students for this question. Second, distinct social aims are apparent. Question one requires the idea of consensus being reached from different starting points to be structured into the exploration of the content. Question two requires blocks of texts to have been explored through multiple types of engagement and multiple contexts (it is multidimensional and contextual in character). Question three requires an explicit treatment of different settings for discussion: one that speaks to a pastoral context, the other that speaks to a more traditional debating context. I think all of these are interesting, and all of them should have space in a religion and worldviews classroom.

Now it is possible that my suggestions are not the 'right questions to ask'. Indeed, some of these might not work very well in practice – they could surely be improved. However, they do reveal the relationship between question and curriculum, the way knowledge is organised, and the kinds of skills developed in association with that content. They reveal something of the possible character of learning in religion and worldviews classrooms and they focus on the 'how' of the subject, as well as the 'what', something highlighted by the Commission for RE (2018) report.

Professor Bob Bowie, Canterbury Christ Church University

@bobbowie, bob.bowie@canterbury.ac.uk, www.bobbowie.com,

This blog is linked to a piece of work written by me in a book currently in press. 'The implicit knowledge structure preferred by questions in English Religious Studies public exams'. The book, edited by Gert Biesta and Pat Hannam is *Religion and education: The forgotten dimensions of religious education?* Leiden: Brill | Sense. It also links to the Texts and Teachers research project (www.nicer.org.uk).

Epilogue

CoRE was not simply about a new title for RE or the addition of extra content in its use of the term worldview. Rather, like a stone thrown into a pond, it has created waves that are coursing through the RE community. We see this in these blogs. We are alerted to the fuzziness of our subject matter (Robertson) and the ease with which we create fixed stereotypes (Wood). We are reminded how our backgrounds shape our understanding and of the importance of understanding our own worldview (Flanagan). We have seen how a primary school takes up the challenge of worldview-focused teaching (Freeman). We are alerted to how question-setting in secondary schools can itself mask hidden worldview assumptions (Bowie). We have had our attention focused on four key concepts (Miller) and have been shown how the language we use can be constantly improved (Smalley). And that is just some of the many gems in these blogs

This feast of thinking demonstrates the real significance of CoRE. It was never intended as a tablet of stone sent down from the mountain top. Rather it was a plea for our subject to become more inclusive. It wants RE to help all pupils understand the importance of worldview in every human life and to reflect on how we live well together despite the inevitable differences between us. It wanted all pupils to find RE fascinating, relevant and challenging. This blog series shows it has succeeded in getting our community buzzing. Thank you to all the contributors.

Professor Trevor Cooling, Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales.

August 2020.