



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

An Ambitious Religion and Worldviews Curriculum for All

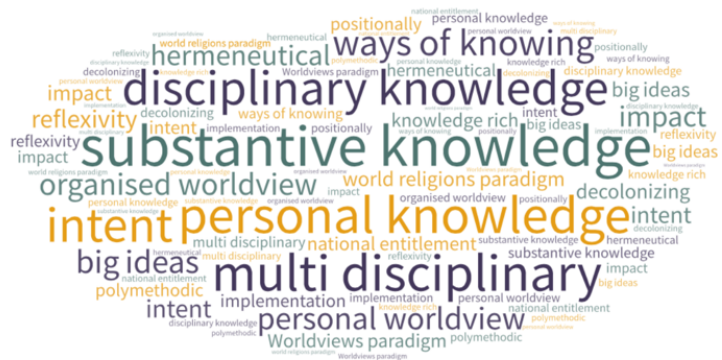
The following text is a transcript of a keynote I gave at an online conference in June 2021. I am sharing the full text to stimulate conversation and to provide an easy way of linking to the significant number of projects and resources I reference.

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Introduction

I wonder if you are a little bombarded by the array of language being used at the moment across the RE community....

- Multi Disciplinary
- Ways of knowing
- Personal knowledge
- Substantive knowledge
- Disciplinary knowledge
- Personal worldview
- Organised worldview
- Hermeneutical approaches
- World Religions Paradigm
- Worldviews Paradigm
- Big Ideas
- Intent
- Implementation
- Impact
- National Entitlement
- Decolonizing
- Knowledge-rich
- Polymethodic
- Reflexivity
- Positionality



How many have you come across?

I hope in the next 30-40 mins to help us begin to navigate some of this complexity and delve into some of these words. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I hope I may be able to provide a steer through this. I have been pondering recently that lots of this new language and input from many sources is a bit like being given multiple pots of playdough or lego to play with... but without any instructions or guidance about what it is we are to make, or which colour we are to use first, and whether we are required to use some tools to help shape the playdough or an instruction booklet for the lego to create something in particular. For some, this can be very creative, for others it can be rather daunting. So let's see if we can help the creativity to flow, and take away some of the perplexity.

The need for change

Firstly, I want to touch on why I think we need a change...what is this paradigm shift that many people are talking about?

A **paradigm** is a way of looking at something, in this case religious education. It is usually a distinct set of concepts and ideas which explain how a subject is understood. When we talk about a paradigm shift, we are changing the way we think about something. In RE, this means thinking differently about how we frame or approach content, and what we mean by knowledge.

A **world religions** paradigm is a way of classifying religious traditions. It is frequently associated with the 'Big Six' i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, and Humanism, although in recent years some new religious movements and indigenous traditions have been included. There is often a weighting towards religious worldviews which have texts, places of worship and founders.

By contrast, a **worldviews paradigm** reflects the complex, diverse, changing and plural nature of worldviews. It recognises diversity within and between organised worldview traditions, as well as influences upon personal worldviews. It explores the significance of doctrine and practice, as well as lived experience, and involves a multi-disciplinary approach to study. A key point made in the Commission on RE (2018) is that **everyone has a worldview**.

A world religions paradigm does have many positive elements, and many of the pioneers within this approach such as Michael Grimmitt and Bob Jackson have actually laid the foundations for a potential shift. I grew up with this approach and feel there is much we could learn from it. Clear curriculum frameworks have been produced to organise content based on this approach and many teachers are confident in this way of thinking about the subject. Politicians and the public understand the subject in these terms, particularly when we talk about the importance of religious literacy. In many ways it has served the RE community well up until this point, so if we change, we do need to learn from this. However, being comfortable with an approach does not mean it is the right one....

In my view, there are serious issues with a world religions approach. Content selection has become unmanageable and is often prone to essentialism. This is the belief that religions

have a set of characteristics which make them what they are. This might include a doctrinal or textual basis for example. As a result, there is a tendency to present a canonical or 'normalised' view of some worldviews, thus not appreciating diversity, divergence, and change. This issue of content selection has been highlighted in the recent Ofsted Research Review (2021). In addition, the emphasis has been on which worldviews to cover and a sense of 'competition' has developed about how much time is spent on different ones. Alongside this, the world religions approach was developed during the late Victorian era and is based on a largely Western Christian colonial understanding of religion. There is often reference to 'Eastern' and 'Western' religions, potentially reinforcing stereotypes. And this approach raises for me a more fundamental question...

What sort of curriculum do we need to enable children and young people to make sense of and navigate the world around them? Or as Ofsted have put it, what sort of RE do we need to prepare pupils to engage in a diverse and complex multi-religious and multi-secular society. What is our intent? What do they need to know and why? What methods /skills/tools do they need?

What would an R&W curriculum look like that enables pupils to:

- make sense of religion and worldviews around them and begin to understand the complex world in which they live.
- become free thinking, critical participants of public discourse
- make academically informed judgements about important matters of religion and belief which shape the global landscape?

(Norfolk Agreed Syllabus, 2019)

To help with this navigation I want to turn to a summary of the Commission on RE proposed **National Entitlement** (2018). I'm choosing this summary because it has had input from a range of people across the RE Eco-System including the RE Council Education Committee and the RE Policy Unit. It has been wrestled with and debated by advisers, teachers and academics in these settings. Here is the summary, and it is available on the NATRE website <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Additional%20Documents/A%20National%20Plan%20for%20RE%20-CoRE%20summary%20final.pdf> However, I should stress it is provisional.

Pupils are entitled to be taught, by well qualified and resourced teachers, knowledge and understanding about:

1. what religion is and worldviews are, and how they are studied;
2. the impact of religion and worldviews on individuals, communities and societies;
3. the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews in society;
4. the concepts, language and ways of knowing that help us organise and make sense of our knowledge and understanding of religion and worldviews;
5. the human quest for meaning, so that they are prepared for life in a diverse world and have space to recognise, reflect on and take responsibility for the development of their own personal worldview

For me, this summary maps quite well onto the three types of knowledge which Ofsted's Lead for RE, Richard Kueh, has referred to. I don't think it is an exact match, but I think it might help in our navigation.... So I have mapped these into the three areas using a weaving analogy I hope is helpful.



No image or diagram is perfect, but this might help us as we think more about these three types of knowledge. I have blogged about this analogy in more detail, and this is available here: <https://www.reonline.org.uk/2021/05/25/weaving-a-knowledge-tapestry/>

Disciplinary Knowledge

Christine Counsell has described disciplinary knowledge as the organising structures of the discipline. A discipline is widely understood to have an intellectual history, a body of knowledge founded on core concepts and theories, an object of investigation which might be shared across disciplines, specific terminology and language, particular methods of enquiry and particular grounds on which valid truth claims are made.

Disciplinary knowledge in R&W is about understanding the different ways of knowing in our subject such as theology, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and so on. It is about intentionally enabling pupils to participate in and understand discourse around this. Some argue, like Professor Denise Cush (Bath Spa University), that our subject encompasses these different disciplinary fields so is one discipline – often referred to as Religious Studies at Higher Education level, others say that the subject in schools is multi-disciplinary. One thing is clear...

We make intentional choices about the questions we ask, based on which discipline or foci we are asking through. We should ensure there is a balance of disciplines across a key stage to ensure that pupils are equipped with a range of methods. For example, we may use a theological method such as looking for internal consistency or coherency in texts, but then use a more sociological method such as analysing empirical data in the census. Many years ago Professor Ninian Smart called this polymethodic, and Richard Kueh has referred to this in recent Ofsted presentations. Having knowledge or well-established methods, processes and tools of scholarship that are used to study religion and worldviews, as well as having knowledge of the types of scholarly conversations that academic communities have is highlighted in the recent Ofsted Research Review.

I don't think that this is actually that new... I just think we need to be much more intentional about it, acknowledging what our subject really is. When I was studying A level RS in the early 1990s I was basically doing theology and history. I studied John's gospel, and the history of the church in Great Britain from 1870-1970. When I look back now I can see we used methods akin to each discipline. We used theological methods such as testing for reliability and authority of the text, as well as critical interpretation. We then used case studies, transcripts of interviews, newspaper reports and empirical data in a far more sociological and historical way. What I didn't realise as a pupil was that I was actually developing disciplinary knowledge, that I was engaging with and in scholarly discourse.

So where can we find good examples of people taking this approach now?

- **RE-searchers Project**- this approach encourages the use of a variety of methodologies to approach the study of religious and non-religious worldviews. <https://www.reonline.org.uk/research/the-re-searchers-approach-critical-dialogic-and-inquiry-led-re-for-the-primary-school/>
- **Norfolk Agreed Syllabus** – this uses questions from three disciplinary fields to frame the curriculum. The syllabus is publicly available, including an outline curriculum from EYFS to KS3. <https://www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/teaching-and-learning/religious-education-agreed-syllabus>
- **Curriculum Planning Document on REONLINE** – Olivia Seymour, Gillian Georgiou and myself created a tool to help plan using a disciplinary approach. <https://www.reonline.org.uk/teaching-resources/re-in-a-broad-and-balanced-curriculum-a-practical-tool/>
- **Making Every RE Lesson Count by Louise Hutton and Dawn Cox** – the authors use a multi-disciplinary approach to frame content selection, types of questioning and feedback. It is a pragmatic approach, but rooted in evidence.
- **Epistemic Insight and the work of Jo Pearce and Alexis Stones** – argue for the importance of epistemic literacy i.e. how knowledge works. This means enabling students to reflect on the discipline (s) they are using, including the power, relevance and limitations of these disciplines. They say:
Where RE is concerned, knowledge of high epistemic quality recognises that beliefs, practices, adherents, non-adherents, places, politics, arguments, evidence, questions, answers, etc. (the list goes on) are multifarious and dynamic, and can be considered through a range of lenses. An educated, or epistemically literate, 18-year-old should

recognise that there are different lenses and know how to apply at least some of them appropriately. She should have the potential to develop a greater understanding of the distinct natures and purposes of the lenses, as well as to develop a more in-depth and sophisticated knowledge in terms of their application. In the end, whether she decides to do that is up to her – a purpose of RE is to make that a viable option.

- **RE Today Services, Big Questions, Big Answers (Primary) Series and Challenging Knowledge in RE (secondary) Series.** Take two different disciplinary approaches to particular themes e.g., ‘studying God’ uses theological and psychological lenses. They provide an accessible way into disciplinary research.
- **OARS Project and the work of Nigel Fancourt and Liam Guilfoyle** in relation to argumentation in RE. <https://oarseducation.com>

In taking a more intentional disciplinary approach, I believe rooting our subject in up-to-date, current research becomes vital. Teachers need, if they are not already, to be taking a scholarly approach. This is after all a requirement of the professional standards. We need to be aware of the growing body of disciplinary knowledge for ourselves, so that we can apply this to the classroom context. I believe this is already leading to a deeper professionalisation of the Religion and Worldviews teacher. The REONLINE website is working hard to bring you up to date research which is relevant to the classroom. Do check it out, including our new research of the month feature. www.reonline.org.uk

Substantive Knowledge

This is the content that teachers teach. This is the knowledge that is produced by the academic subject, by the different disciplines. The list of substantive knowledge is vast, for all subjects, not just Religion and Worldviews, and must be sequenced over time. So where do we begin? How do we frame this content? This is where I think the proposed National Entitlement helps.

The bullet points in the entitlement are inspired by the work of Barbara Wintersgill’s Big Ideas. It is these big ideas which can potentially frame the substantive content. So rather than thinking I must cover these beliefs of Christianity or thinking this aspect of Hinduism is essential... rather we consider what the big ideas are that will help pupils navigate a complex world. We start with the big ideas which are most fundamental and helpful in enabling pupils to make sense of Religion and Worldviews. Ofsted’s Research Review talked about ‘collectively enough’ substantive knowledge to enable pupils to recognise the diverse and changing religious and non-religious traditions of the world. They argue that it is perfectly possible for pupils to get better at RE without knowing all of the different ways that people express religion or non-religion in their lives.

So, for example.... one of the bullet points in the proposed national entitlement is about the concept of change - the fact that beliefs, expression and belonging change across and within worldviews, and that this has happened in history as well as in contemporary society.

From a young age, pupils might learn from a theological perspective that beliefs can change. In primary school they might learn about the life of a well-known member of a

religious/non-religious community and how their beliefs changed over time. They might learn about how stories are passed down generations and how these can stay the same as well as sometimes change. They might learn about the way persecution shaped early Christian beliefs (e.g. ichthus symbol), the story of Abraham's journey of faith from polytheism to monotheism, beliefs of different groups expressed through diverse music or art, or the impact of the events of the protestant reformation... In KS3 pupils might consider liberation theology as a response to justice, the impact of the holocaust on Jewish beliefs, the impact of secularism and post- modernism, divergence within the Sunni and Shia traditions....

Exemplars may be chosen from a range of organised worldviews to illustrate this concept and are carefully sequenced to help pupils deepen their understanding of the concept of change. It is important too that we consider depth, as well as breadth when exploring particularly organised worldviews. So there is a deepening of understanding of the content as well as the concept. We move away from the notion that we must 'cover everything' to develop schemata that enable pupils to develop a coherent understanding of the concept of change in religious and non-religious worldviews, rather than having a set of facts about particular worldviews. Progression is seen in the pupils growing depth of understanding of this concept through well sequenced content.

This is where I believe a worldviews approach reimagines the curriculum. It takes a different starting point. It takes the big ideas or concepts which are fundamental to understanding the subject and considers the depth and breadth of study intentionally. This is not a 'thematic' approach, it is about developing schemata that enable pupils to build knowledge over time that makes sense coherently and meaningfully.

I believe there is still much work to be done in this area. However, some have begun to think about it such as:

New REONLINE essays on the Hindu and Buddhist Worldview Traditions- the way in which knowledge is set out is considered under big idea themes power, diversity, good life, change and so on. <https://www.reonline.org.uk/knowledge/buddhist-worldview-traditions/>
<https://www.reonline.org.uk/knowledge/hindu-worldview-traditions/>

Canterbury Christchurch University project on Teaching Islam as a worldview- Kate Christopher and Lynn Revell have asked what big ideas need to be taught in terms of Islam as a worldview. <https://www.cstg.org.uk/grants/projects/grants-awarded/> For example At KS 1 pupils have fun with dragons. Through looking at dragons from Turkey, Mongolia and Persia, pupils are introduced to the huge geographical spread of Islam. A poem by Rumi about a dragon opens up all sorts of thinking. At KS2 and 3 pupils learn about Muhammad Ali, a famous Muslim. However, they start with boxing. As pupils find out more about Ali they explore Nation of Islam, Ali's journey to Sufism, as well as his activism against racism and the war in Vietnam.

New project from University of Strathclyde- exploring this very issue! Working with teachers and researchers across Europe to grapple with these questions. Watch this space. <https://www.cstg.org.uk/grants/projects/grants-awarded/>

Big Ideas Key Stage 4 Curriculum (for GCSE) created by Kate Christopher with an academy Trust available on REONLINE. This takes five big ideas – beliefs, diversity, context, ethics and philosophy. <https://www.reonline.org.uk/teaching-resources/big-ideas-curriculum/>

Innovative RE: Case Studies – The examples from Bickleigh Down school and Aylesford School illustrates engagement with the concept of diversity/plurality of beliefs and practices.

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/current-projects/reforreal/case-studies/>

The last thing to say here, is that we need to consider the possibility that what we have been doing up until now, may not be the best things going forward. This is hard. It means taking time to reimagine and rethink what we have done before.

Substantive content is only one part of the jigsaw though, and we must balance change in this area with an understanding of the disciplinary, and personal knowledge which I will come on to now.

Personal Knowledge

The relationship between the pupil and the subject matter is not really addressed by the Commission on RE report. For me, as with any curriculum subject, we bring ourselves to what it is we are learning. For me, life itself is hermeneutical, it is one of interpretation. Everything is basically inert until we engage with it. This is why I like the work of Antony Thiselton, a theologian, who talks about responsible hermeneutics. Thiselton argues that we should all be aware of our own pre-understanding, or what is often referred to as our positionality to whatever it is we are learning. In terms of Religion and Worldviews, this means we all approach our learning from within our own worldview, no one is 'neutral'. This means reflexivity is vital- the reflection on and examination of one's own beliefs, judgements and practices and how these may be influenced or changed as the result of study. Personally I don't believe this is unique to Religion and Worldviews. However, I do think it is vital because it means we acknowledge our own assumptions and understand how these perspectives and our identity are often socially constructed. As a recent animation about the concept of worldviews says, Nobody Stands Nowhere.

<https://www.reonline.org.uk/resources/telling-my-worldview-story/>

The work of **Ruth Flannagan, University of Exeter**, is worth highlighting here. Ruth has done much work in helping those entering the teaching profession to reflect upon their own worldview, and to make them aware that pupils in classrooms need to do the same. Ruth has supported the development of a free self-study course available for all primary beginner teachers through REONLINE.

A resource which aims to use a hermeneutical approach is **Understanding Christianity**. It uses the term virtuous readers to help pupils consider their own positionality and the relationship of this with the text they are investigating- in this case usually the bible.

<http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk>

Another resource which explicitly takes this on board is **'Who is Jesus?'** produced by the University of Exeter. Who is Jesus? provides an innovative examination of the figure of Jesus through a variety of different cultural, religious, and disciplinary lenses. A team of fictional scholars, each with a different set of interpretations, methodologies and methods, guide students in their encounters with artistic, visually impaired, Muslim, feminist, and cross-cultural perspectives of Jesus. The aim is not to promote a particular approach to studying Jesus, but to introduce pupils to some of the diverse ways in which the title question – Who is Jesus? – can be answered.

[https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/education/research/groupsandnetworks/reandspiritualitynetwork/Who is Jesus.pdf](https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/education/research/groupsandnetworks/reandspiritualitynetwork/Who%20is%20Jesus.pdf)

Conclusions

At the moment, I am not really aware of anyone who has brought all three of these elements together. I am aware of projects which have developed one or two, but not as an overall curriculum or coherent R&W approach. This is not really very surprising!!! If we go back to the playdough analogy, then if we were given one pot with some instructions that would be one thing, but we have been given multiple pots all at once without really any instructions! It is Ok to be a little overwhelmed. However, people across the RE Community are working on this... they are researching, writing, grappling.... As the Ofsted Research Review says, RE is an under-theorised subject in terms of thinking about types of knowledge pupils build in the subject. However, we have a vibrant and energetic community to develop this theorising. The RE Council Worldviews project is one attempt to do this, and I am sure there will be others.

So what do we do now.... We engage!! We read.... We read more.... We think.... We think more.... We try out.... We try out again.... we share.... We learn.... We debate.... but we also acknowledge that at the moment what we have is not a finished product.... In fact... is a curriculum ever a finished product....? No, not really... and this is what I think is exciting about our subject and ensuring that we are ambitious for all our pupils, all of the time, now and into the future. And I hope I have helped you to begin to navigate things just a little more clearly!!!

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