



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

ISRSA Keynote Address

22.3.22

This is a transcript of an address I gave to the ISRSA Conference on 22nd March 2022. I provided a context for Professor Trevor Cooling to share his presentation on knowledge in RE.

There are a lot of concepts, words and ideas being shared in the religious studies community at the current time... here are a few...

- Multi-Disciplinary, ways of knowing, personal knowledge
- Substantive knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, personal worldview
- Organised worldview, hermeneutical approaches, world religions paradigm
- Worldviews paradigm, big ideas, epistemic literacy,
- Intent, implementation, impact, National Entitlement
- De-colonizing, knowledge-rich, reflexivity,

So...Where to begin? In particular, why are we tending to talk about religion and worldviews and not religious studies? Is it just a name change or something much deeper?

Firstly, I want to touch on why I believe there is a need for change, and why many of these words and concepts are important.

A paradigm is a way of looking at something, in this case religious studies. 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 RS, this means thinking differently about how we frame or approach content, and what we mean by knowledge. It is not about a name, but a whole new way of conceiving something.

As you will know, 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 and founders. This is a very simplistic explanation so forgive me!

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 Dr Michael Grimmitt and Prof 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 us 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. 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. 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 is based on a largely Western Christian colonial understanding of religion. And this approach raises for me a more fundamental question...

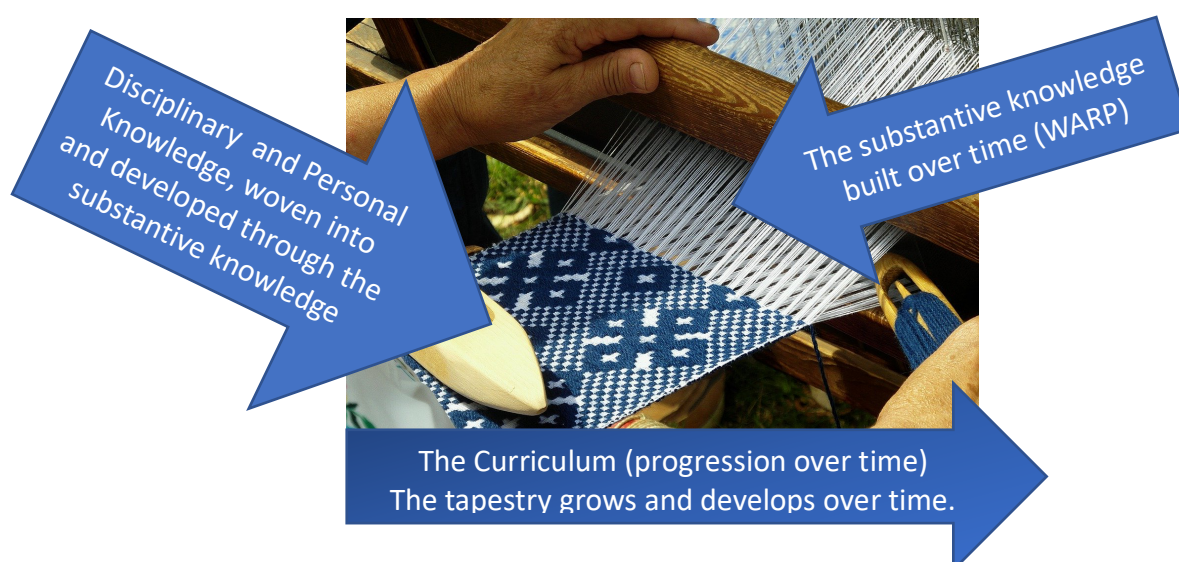
What sort of curriculum do we need to enable children and young people to make sense of and navigate the world around them?

What would the curriculum look like if it enabled pupils to become free thinking, critical participants of public discourse about religion and worldviews?

I am not convinced that a world religions approach offers a good solution to this question...

So, what might a religion and worldviews approach look like?

Let me begin with an analogy. A tapestry.



Disciplinary Knowledge or 'ways of knowing'

Disciplinary knowledge in R&W is about understanding the different ways of knowing in our subject. It is about intentionally enabling pupils to participate in and understand discourse around this.

We make intentional choices about the questions we ask, based on which discipline or foci we are asking through. I believe we should ensure there is a balance of disciplines across a key stage to enable pupils to be 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. Having knowledge of 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. We also need to be self-aware. This disciplinarity is rooted in our own westernized view. It is important that we decolonise the ways of knowing, as well as the 'content' or 'stuff'. E.g. **how** is a Christian worldview studied in Africa, not just studying how people practice their Christian faith in Africa.

I don't think that this is that new... I just think we need to be much more intentional about it. 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 developing disciplinary knowledge, that I was engaging with and in scholarly discourse.

Dr Jo Pearce and Alexis Stones from UCL argue for the importance of epistemic literacy. 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.

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 advocated by the Commission on RE (2018) helps.

Rather than thinking I must cover these particular beliefs of Christianity or thinking this aspect of Hinduism is essential... instead we consider what the big ideas or concepts 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 talks about ‘collectively enough’ substantive knowledge to enable pupils to recognise the diverse and changing religious and non-religious traditions of the world. It is not about doing everything, it is about having a clear rationale for how we construct a curriculum. Here is an example for the concept of change, explored through different disciplines:

CHANGE: Beliefs, expression and belonging change across and within worldviews			
EYFS	KS1	KS2	KS3
Some example questions across a key stage			
<p>Theology: What does the word ‘God’ mean?</p> <p>Philosophy: What is real?</p> <p>Social Science: How do people celebrate?</p>	<p>Theology: Is there really a donkey in the Christian nativity story?</p> <p>Philosophy: Why do people’s ideas about God change?</p> <p>Social Science: How has our local religious and non-religious worldview community changed over time?</p>	<p>Theology: How have events in history shaped Jewish beliefs?</p> <p>Philosophy: Can life experiences change one’s worldview? (e.g. suffering)</p> <p>Social Science: How have expressions of the Sikhi worldview changed over time/in different cultures?</p>	<p>Theology: Whose theology? Why are there so many interpretations of Christianity?</p> <p>Philosophy: How and why have ethical theories changed across time and cultures?</p> <p>Social Science: To what extent are religious worldviews reflections or reactions to society?</p>

(Based on Norfolk Agreed Syllabus 2019)

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 to consider depth, as well as breadth when exploring organised worldviews. 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. Progression is seen in the pupils’ growing depth of understanding of this concept.

And here is a more detailed example for a specific human/social science focus:

CHANGE: Beliefs, expression and belonging change across and within worldviews

Local Area Study Focus – social/human science focus

EYFS	KS1	Lower KS2	Upper KS2	KS3
<p>Invite in speakers to talk to the children about their worldviews. Asking questions such as 'have you always done that? Have you always believed that? <i>Our beliefs and expression of our worldview can change.</i></p>	<p>Take a festival such as Christmas. Look at the way it is celebrated today in the local community. Ask children to talk to parents/carers and grandparents about the ways in which it has changed (or not). Talk about the stories/traditions which have been passed down and about those which have changed. <i>The way people celebrate can change over time.</i></p>	<p>Linking to local history.... Explore the local places of worship (including where buildings have changed their purpose) their history, how they may have changed (e.g. function, role in community, the people who attend etc). Consider reasons for changes to local places of worship in general, as well as for specific traditions. <i>People's worldviews can change or stay the same over time and this is reflected/not reflected in our local area.</i></p>	<p>Linking to local history... The impact of various invasions on the worldviews of the local/regional area. E.g. Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Norman... Compare to the predominant worldviews of contemporary society. Consider the influence of culture on worldview adherence. <i>Contextual factors can influence worldviews in our local area.</i></p>	<p>Look at the census data on religious affiliation for the local/regional area and compare to previous data over e.g. 50 or 100 years. Consider the impact of secularization and post-modernism on affiliation (and/or other factors depending on locality). Undertake some qualitative research (e.g. interviews) with local people to understand the changes that may have taken place and why. <i>Analyzing the impact of contextual factors which can influence beliefs, expression and belonging over time within and across worldviews.</i></p>

I should stress, this is one way of approaching curriculum design. However, you can see that I believe a worldviews approach 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.

Personal Knowledge

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. 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. I think it is vital because it means we acknowledge our own perspective and assumptions and understand how these perspectives, assumptions and identity are often socially constructed. As a recent Theos animation about the concept of worldviews says, Nobody Stands Nowhere. <https://www.reonline.org.uk/resources/telling-my-worldview-story/>

So a religion and worldviews approach, for me, brings together these three types of knowledge.

It is challenging, and there are some misconceptions out there too. This might be because we don't have all the pieces of the jigsaw yet, or can't yet see the big picture...it is worth just spending a few minutes touching on these.

Here are some misconceptions I have encountered.

- *It's really just a name change.* I hope I have shown that it is not about the name, it is about a new reimagined approach. Changing the name can make us feel like we are doing something, like we are making a shift, when in fact we are doing exactly the same as before! You could in fact keep the name RS and be doing a religion and worldviews approach!
- *It is about including non-religious worldviews.* Well yes it is, but again this misses the point. Non-religious worldviews have been included in many curricula for a very long time now. This new approach is not about adding non-religious worldviews, rather it is about thinking differently about **ALL** religious and non-religious worldviews in the curriculum.
- *I just need to add some diversity into my curriculum.* This is a good starting point, but it is not really a worldviews approach. Increasing the diversity of an organised worldview experienced by pupils is something that I'd encourage wholeheartedly, but this means you are just changing the substantive content. Substantive content does need to change, but to do that well we need a clear rationale for the entire curriculum which is based on the new paradigm.
- *This new approach is not academically robust enough.* I hope that I have dispelled this myth, but I think Trevor will also help to explain why a religion and worldviews approach is definitively academically rigorous!

Lastly, something which is less a misconception and more a question of 'where do we begin?'

- *There is too much content, help!* This is a challenge, because we don't seem to have criteria to help us yet. I have suggested we begin with the proposed Statement of Entitlement or the work on Big Ideas by Wintersgill. There are also funded projects working on this very question, so we may have to be a bit patient. For example, <https://www.cstg.org.uk/grants-awarded/current-projects/> and

<https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/rec-announce-exciting-opportunity/>

I shall now hand over to Professor Trevor Cooling who will unpack further why this paradigm shift can be so challenging, and that takes us back to how we understand knowledge.

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