

**Transcript of Keynote given to the EFTRE Conference
Thursday 24th August 2023**

Being Bridges: Navigating the complex world of religious education

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Thanks so much Norman. It is a real pleasure to be with you even if it is from afar. I would love to have been with you in person, but when I was asked to speak I had already agreed to host an exhibition stand about Culham St Gabriel's work at the Greenbelt Festival. Having therefore chosen a tent near Kettering, I couldn't be in Rome!!

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In this presentation I will be focusing on examples from the UK, particularly England. However, I hope that as I move through you will find aspects that resonate with your own context, perhaps aspects that challenge you, and I am sure there will be areas of disagreement too. I look forward to some lively debate in 45 mins!

So firstly, I want to give a little bit of context to my talk as this frames the work of CSTG and what I will go on to share more about. What are the challenges that we face, particularly in the UK at the moment, and more specifically in England?

Firstly, whilst it is a statutory requirement to be taught religious education in English schools, there are huge discrepancies in what is taught, and how much time pupils have to learn. We call it a postcode lottery. It depends on the school, type of school, where it is located, whether there are any specialist teachers, whether the senior leaders value the subject and so on. Many children and young people are leaving school without adequate religious literacy.

There have been recruitment issues for RE for many years, we have under recruited in nine of the last ten years. This year looks particularly awful. Less trained teachers means that either non-specialists teach the subject, or the subject is no longer taught. It is not quite an existential crisis, but I'd say we are not far off.

Alongside this the subject has suffered from a lack of government funding in England. There has been no funding for ITE bursaries, retention, CPD and so on. It is not a very positive picture I'm afraid. Meanwhile in the devolved nation of Wales, there has been some funding as the new subject of RVE is launched in schools – religion, values and ethics. This means though that the four nations -England, Scotland, Wales and NI - all have different ways of talking about the subject, different structures and different laws. Wales is probably unique, although I am not an expert, in thinking about how existing structures could work in new ways. But in England academization means that the standards of RE expected in Agreed Syllabuses do not apply, meaning there is no common standard or benchmark for RE in academies in England; existing structures are not really working...

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Meanwhile, there are continuing debates about the nature of the subject itself. This is nothing new!! In England, there is much, often animated debate about the nature of

religious education in schools. This has been driven primarily by the Commission on RE (2018) and subsequent research projects which have sought to articulate and clarify a reimagining of the subject as religion and worldviews. The summary table here provides my interpretation of this new paradigm. To clarify, particularly for those of you not working within the English system... Key to a 'religion and worldviews approach' **is** the study of religion, some who have written about this recently seem to have misunderstood this and suggested that religion is being side-lined! Far from it! This approach explores religion as a concept; the nature of religion itself. Alongside this, contrasting the concept of religion with, for example, the concept of worldview, or spirituality or a belief system, examining the different ways in which these complex categories are understood and interpreted. Using examples from religions (plural) to exemplify and illustrate.

So, my understanding of the shifting paradigm is that it has both a **pedagogical and curriculum turn**. In pedagogical terms, my understanding is that a religion and worldviews approach focuses on hermeneutics, humility, dialogue, positionality, critical interpretation. This means building on the work of people such as Bob Jackson, and more recently Martha Shaw. Shaw talks about interpretability, reflexivity, and transformational encounter as the key foci for a religion and worldviews approach. My own PhD thesis (2018) puts forward a very similar approach to pedagogy which I will expound more on later.

In curriculum terms, a religion and worldviews approach takes seriously lived, authentic experience, diversity of belief and practice, continuity, change and context. Underpinning these two aspects is a robust disciplinary framing shaped around theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences. At its core, a religion and worldviews approach centres around how religious and non-religious people encounter, interpret, understand and engage with the world. This approach is comfortable with ideas of pluralism, better reflecting the complex societies in which individuals live and therefore more likely to be able to provide positive and accurate information about different faith and belief communities. This is important for the wider work Culham St Gabriel's is involved with, in particular, promoting and protecting Freedom of religion or belief on the national and international stage which I will say more about later.

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This contextual framing is important, as this is the world in which Culham St Gabriel's operates. Within this broad context there are also two very positive things to highlight. We commissioned two nationally representative surveys about public perception through Savanta in 2021 and 2022, one was for the general public, the other focused on parents. Both surveys showed an overwhelmingly positive view of the importance of RE in schools, and its value in terms of promoting understanding, respect and openness, but also skills that are useful for in the workplace – as you can see on this slide. Alongside this, we have seen increasing awareness of the importance of religious literacy in the workplace. In particular in relation to religion as a protected characteristic, but also in terms of wider diversity, equity and inclusion awareness. As an organization we have connected with business organizations such as Dial Global and Employers Network for Equity and Inclusion (ENEI) as well as through the Interfaith Network and Faith and Belief Forum. The approach I will talk about in terms of building bridges and taking a hospitable approach seems to resonate within these contexts

too, and this provides some weight to our arguments regarding the value of RE in schools and beyond.

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This is an image of a bridge that we drove across as a family this summer. It is the Rion-Antirion Bridge in Greece. I have to say it is really quite stunning! It connects two areas of mainland Greece. This bridge is widely considered to be an engineering masterpiece, owing to several solutions applied to span the difficult site.

Bridges make connections. Usually, they connect two places which previously may not have been connected because of, as in this case, a large expanse of water... or perhaps a canyon, or valley... in this particular case I worked out that if you had to 'drive round' to get across it would take you the best part of 4-5 hours. So bridges not only connect physically, they 'make a way easier or smoother'. They bring communities together too, in days gone by bridges were built to increase trade for example.

Bridges may also help to avoid danger. For example, having to swim across or use a boat in the past would have been thwart with dangers. If any of you have read the Ken Follet historical novels of the Kingsbridge series, you will know how the bridge from its inception in Anglo-Saxon times features in every book and how it has its own 'story'... one example is how the foundations of the bridge are specially designed in the Middle Ages and set into the river to prevent the bridge from collapse. So firm foundations for any bridges being built are key. The Greek bridge here has a unique engineering design for its foundations in the seabed to help it withstand movement of tectonic plates.

Using this metaphor of being bridges I want to show how our religion and worldviews community can provide firm foundations and pathways, be networkers or connectors and bridge divides within this complex context in which we are working, and show that at the heart of this lies each of us.

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So, a clear message when building bridges is the requirement for strong foundations. Religious education has a strong tradition across Europe. Yes, there is diversity across the nations, but the value and importance of understanding religion and belief is in many cases rooted in history. We need to draw on these strong foundations, but also be agile and respond to our changing contexts. This means building the foundations, but seeking new ways of doing things, new approaches so that we and our children can navigate the complex world in which we live. This is why I am keen to promote a religion and worldviews approach as I believe it is rooted in firm foundations drawing on the best of what has gone before, particularly the work of Bob Jackson, but also exploring what this means in 2023 and beyond.

The examples on the screen I believe draw on the past, our firm foundation, but also seek to be bridges to a new future. Prof David Lewin, University of Strathclyde, is leading a project which seeks to imagine religious education in different terms. The project attempts to think about the educational representation of religion(s) in the context of rising forms of 'non-religion', post-secularism, and recent debates about the place of Religious Education in England and Wales. The project will also explore larger pedagogical questions of educational

representation of religion(s), that include representation in schools, but also the media, museums, and other sites of public education. Stephen Pett from RE Today Services is leading a project on behalf of the RE Council of England and Wales exploring the nature of an education in religion and worldviews in terms of curricula. This is funded by TWCF. The aim of this project is to produce resources that can support syllabus writers. If you read the draft resource you will see that it builds on the strong foundations of our subject, drawing on different disciplinary areas, yet reimagining them in what I would argue is a new paradigm.

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I think we would all say that our research in the field of religion and worldviews is important. CSTG have worked hard over the last few years to facilitate knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners, particularly teachers. In my experience, teachers of RE were less engaged with research than say history colleagues. This is not a criticism, rather I think it is just how things were for the subject. Research was taking place, but for some reason teachers were not engaging with it, or the subject was not seen as one which should or perhaps, dare I say, could be research informed! There were definitely 'pockets' of research, but it was not widespread. In 2020, and then in 2022 CSTG hosted RExChange– an online conference with the aim of bringing research to the teacher, and also to bring the teacher to researchers. Hence 'Exchange'. In this sense we were perhaps 'conduits of research'. However, the big game changer in relation to research was I think the Ofsted Research Review in 2021. This brought research to the forefront and talked about scholarly approaches to the subject perhaps for the first time.

CSTG host a research of the month feature which aims to distil some research for teachers to engage with and discuss in their own context. We have hosted online conversations with researchers where teachers can ask questions about current research. However, we can potentially all do this. We can all be mindful of how our research connects with those working in classrooms, and how it may connect with the lives of young people today. This means intentionally being a bridge, we must think about how we 'translate' our research, how we ensure it is accessible and utilise networks and opportunities to share. If you'd like to share your research in this way through our networks do get in touch! There is still much work to be done, and we need to see more bridges being made.

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This next point builds on the last point. Bridges connect people. CSTG is currently funding several projects which bring teachers and researchers together – thus enabling bridges to be built. Each of these projects connects teachers with researchers in different ways – some through workshops, others through residencies, but all through seeing each other as experts. I believe that the third one is being presented on as part of this conference. Happy to chat more about these in the discussion later.

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However, there are other ways of connecting our community with research as well as with teachers specifically. Jasjit Singh is in the early stages of his project with the Sikhi community, but we hope it will lead to both better understanding and ways of bringing schools and religious communities together. The Diocese of Lincoln are working with a cohort of artists, schools, community development facilitators and individuals from a range

of religious and non-religious worldviews, offering participants the opportunity to explore and share how their lived experiences relate to a wider national context. The project is working in five locations across England – Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, Bristol and Birmingham. A series of eight podcasts will be created and co-produced by each participating school and local community. Working with a local school and individuals from a range of religious and non-religious worldviews, the project sees students welcoming community representatives to their school before observing their practices, and participating in traditional celebrations and festivals. The Religion Media Centre are leading a project specially aimed at creating connections. Bringing together researchers, teachers, communities, journalists and so on is vital if we are going to help children and young people, as well as adults navigate our world today. There are five events around the country this autumn and I do encourage UK colleagues to engage!!

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However, one of the key ways in which we can bring about be bridges is in relation to policy, and in particular bridging policy-practice divides. I am sure we are all aware of policy – practice divides that exist in each of our nations. One such area CSTG is interested in, as well as wider religion and worldview literacy, is freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Following involvement at an International Ministerial event last year, the Trust has been working with other civil society groups and in discussion with the FCDO about FoRB and education. As a result of this we have funded a small-scale action research project to look at ways of introducing FoRB principles in primary schools. (aged 4-11). The project is working with four different schools in England to introduce the principles of FoRB, including using picture books with very young children. The research team created a progression model to evaluate outcomes and impact. The report of the first phase is currently being written. This project bridges the policy-practice divide. Fiona Bruce MP, PM special envoy for FoRB has visited one of the schools and is exploring ways to secure the promotion and protection of FoRB in schools with our support. There is also a hope that some of the pedagogies and strategies used may be transferable into different, possibly international, contexts. The report on this project will be available soon, but at the moment you can read our briefing paper on FoRB and education on our website.

Alongside this, The London School of Economics Faith Centre has been awarded a grant for their Religious Imaginations Educational Video Series to build deeper literacy of religious traditions as civilisational imaginations that shape contemporary geopolitics. They plan to produce a series of short films introducing the main world religions and worldviews in an imaginative accessible format, suitable for a 16 to adult audience. They aim to increase literacy across religious and non-religious worldviews in a way that enhances knowledge and expands imaginative empathy of other perspectives as well as highlighting the points of connection between world religions and contemporary political, cultural and social discourses in daily life and global affairs. They plan to broaden this cross-cultural religious literacy provision beyond LSE students and towards wider publics and institutions, both governmental and non-governmental.

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In all of these examples of building bridges, the **approach** that is taken is vital. The best way to build bridges is when both 'sides' agree; when both see the value of the connection. It is

not imposed, both sides want the bridge to be made. Each project highlighted here has their own way of doing this.

For me, the notion of hospitality lies at the heart of this. This was at the heart of my own doctoral thesis where I developed pedagogical principles based on a Christian theology of hospitality. For me there are five key elements of a hospitable approach which I think are applicable in terms of being bridges in our community.

Hospitality is about being. In this case it is about being the teacher or researcher. It is about who we are, what we bring to the table...we celebrate what each has to offer. Both sides of the bridge are important, we need to acknowledge each. Whether that be teacher, researcher, community group, policy makers... be 'who we are'.

Hospitality, in the way I understand it, seeks to intentionally include those on the margins; listening and engaging with voices of those often unheard. This resonates with de-colonising and with a focus on lived experiences of worldview communities. Connecting with those who are not usually connected with is an important part of 'being a bridge'.

Hospitality is relational. Being pro- active in terms of nurturing and fostering relationships is a key part of 'being a bridge'. Looking out for opportunities to network and build bridges, perhaps in particular where relationships have been broken.

Hospitality is participatory. We can't stand on the side lines. A hospitable approach means being involved, but in particular from a position of humility. Being intellectually open to listen to perspectives of others as well as offer one's own. Being a bridge is an active stance to take. It is not a passive one. We have to take action, be involved.

Taking a hospitable approach may be a useful way of thinking about **how** we are to be bridges.

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When we think about being bridges, we are thinking about how we create and build on firm foundations, how we connect with others particularly with new or emerging communities, how we create pathways for research engagement, and how we bridge the policy- practice divide.

I have been particularly inspired by the work of Miroslav Volf, a Protestant Theologian. His analogy of an embrace I have found so powerful in many different contexts. However, we might say the same for bridges... bridges are a sign of openness, wanting to seek out others, they are an invitation. They are also about connecting different places, and different identities and contexts. This enriches us. When a bridge is built nothing stays the same. There is now a connection, a new relationship, a new opportunity...

So I invite you to be bridges. Take a hospitable approach. Be inclusive, be relational, be humble, be involved. Make connections and seek new opportunities to build on the firm foundations that already exist. And perhaps, if we can all be bridges, then perhaps some of the challenges I shared at the start can be overcome. Our children and young people can **all**

have a broad-based, critical, and reflective education in religion and worldviews wherever they go to school, they can be taught by well qualified teachers and a reimagined approach to the subject can inspire future generations.

Thankyou.

Kathryn Wright
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