

A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with dark curly hair, wearing a dark patterned dress, stands and speaks to a group of young students. The students, both boys and girls, are seated at white desks, some looking towards the teacher. The room has large windows in the background. A red square logo with the text 'ISRSA' is in the top right corner.

ISRSA

ISRSA REPORT

Religion and Worldviews (Weltanschauung)

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About ISRSA

The ISRSA affirms that Religious Studies, Theology and Philosophy are academically rigorous subject of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice.

We exist to support RS teachers in British independent schools, to provide networking and training opportunities.

We are also the voice for our teachers. We vigorously defend the value of our subject and present our views to educational decision makers.

We carry out cutting-edge research into our subject

We hold a a national annual conference and other smaller regional conferences

We are always keen to welcome new members to our organisation or our Council. Please contact us at admin@isrsa.co.uk if you would like to join.

Our patron is Liam Gearon, Associate Professor in Religious Education at Oxford University.

Religion and Worldviews (Weltanschauung)

This report has been prepared for Fiona Bruce MP and members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education. We have concerns about a proposal prepared by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to change the name and overall approach to the delivery of Religious Studies in the UK. We are the main voice for teachers of RS in UK independent schools and have a strong interest in maintaining an academic approach to our subject.

ISRSA recognises that the CoRE (2018) report

<https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

was a major initiative to address inadequacies in the World Religions approach to RS and commend it for:

1. Its comprehensive evidence-taking from all sectors with an interest in the subject
2. Its authoritative panel membership
3. Its grasp of the manifold inter-related issues needing addressing (for example, in ITE)
4. Seeking to address the presumptions which may be made about pupils.

Building on several previous reports on the state and purpose of RE, this Report was a major contribution.

The current trajectory is to translate the CoRE (2018) report into a 'new vision' for religious education/ Religious Studies. This includes renaming the subject 'Religion and Worldviews' and reframing the **National Statement of Entitlement** (NSE) to require the statutory teaching of humanism and atheism alongside religion, under the umbrella term: Religion and *Weltanschauung*.

The Theos report outlines this 'new vision'

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2020/10/21/worldviews-in-religious-education>

Comments from the ISRSA Council

1. Change of name and approach to Weltanschauung/Worldviews

The claim is that the term 'worldview', is an all-encompassing category into which religious and non-religious both belong. On this view it is claimed that *Religion and Worldviews* is a more helpful subject name than 'Religious Studies' or 'Religious Education' as it includes non-religious perspectives. ISRSA members have raised a number of salient queries concerning the very concept of 'worldviews' as a suitable approach, starting with the difficulty in pinning down what is meant by 'worldview'.

- Is 'a worldview' an individual cultural viewpoint, or is it a way of referring to one's own outlook or a set of shared customs and traditions?
- Is it about the way the world looks to you; or the way your world looks to outsiders? Is it the way you see yourself in relation to those around you; or the way you see yourself in relation to everything (ie. the universal claims you make about the structure of reality).
- Is it about ethos and morality, your style of life, or the distinctive answers you give to existential questions?
- Is it a negative term used to reinforce the otherness of other people and cultures? 'They don't think like us', 'they don't have the same view of reality as we do' so that there are no points of contact. Historically this has been used to justify genocide.

There is reservation regarding the proposed change of name to Religion and Worldviews. *Worldviews* is a contested and recondite concept, which does not strongly recommend it to members of ISRSA for the naming of a school-based academic subject. If a name change is desired, we recommend *Theology Philosophy and Religion (TPR)* - a term widely used in many schools (and universities) now.

2. ISRSA members have recognised some possible advantages to a worldviews/ Weltanschauung approach:

- a. There is a growing awareness of the fact that there is no neutral space to consider the major issues of religion. It may therefore aid understanding that non-religious views are not always objective, informed and scientific. Helping students to understand that religious views are not always subjective, ill-informed, non-scientific and mythological is the foundation of good religious studies. All too often secular non-religious ideas are expressed as if they were the norm and not a presumption – a *Weltanschauung* approach might help identify this.
- b. The notion of 'world-view' may also help students to see the relation between philosophy, religion, politics and the history of ideas as well as the way that philosophies inform one another in complex ways.
- c. It may also help students who think they are non-religious to reflect on their own assumptions, moral formation and moral life.

It would be wrong to view this short list as an encomium.

3. ISRSA members list their reservations below.

- a. It is questionable whether 'religion' sits inside the umbrella term, 'worldview'. Is religion really a subcategory of the term 'worldview'? The literature is clear that the way *Weltanschauung* is currently used is deliberately secular, and claims to be value free. By placing Religious Studies inside a secular category, the distinction between religious and non-religious is reduced to a mere 'conceptual boundary'. Religion is more than a worldview – it is a *way of life* which involves community, shared values and the sense of the transcendent. The suspicion is that the worldviews proposal is driven by a maximally secular agenda which sees all ideas as equal but in which the 'secular' is the 'most equal'. Members think the distinction between religious and non-religious is a valuable one which may risk being undermined by a worldviews approach.
- b. There is a danger of a colonialist and 'western' approach to the teaching of religions which subjects them to the descriptor 'worldview', which they would never use of themselves. The change may determine that religions are taught not in their own right having their own integrity and particularity but as a primitive expression of thought. The *Weltanschauung* approach is potentially deeply *phenomenological* and sociological in its conception of religion, where religion is seen only as a social and/or psychological construct. The worldviews approach readily falls prey to failing to recognise its own 'worldview' to speak of religion this way. Suspicion that the worldviews 'worldview' presumes, but does not acknowledge or evaluate, Feuerbach's influential maxim that when people talk about God, they are really talking about themselves.
- c. There are deep seated epistemological reservations which remain unresolved. How can the worldview of any culture be recognized, understood and shared? How can pupils inhabiting their own worldview interpret another? This threatens the internal coherence of the worldviews approach as an educational method – it is impossible to understand the social reality of another, to hold the jar of civilisation to the light and expect worldviews to separate like oil and water. Yet the Religion and Worldviews (*Weltanschauung*) proposal assumes that children, from the age of 5, can do just this.
- d. Religion & Worldviews entails a multi-disciplinary approach recommending a smörgåsbord of approaches - from psychology, sociology, history and philosophy to ethics, politics and psychology. Three fears that members have expressed are summarised here. **(a)** That this will prove unrealistically ambitious **(b)** That diverted by the pursuit of psychology, sociology etc. religious studies will be secularised, and students further disinherited from serious study of the sacred. Historically, western worldviews philosophy *has* excluded the transcendent or revealed, and attempted to devalue religious intellectual traditions. Fear that by this proposal, sociology, anthropology and psychology will effectively overwhelm the RS curriculum and exclude questions about the transcendent and the revealed. The study of the benefits of sacredness and what it confers on a human life insofar as it transforms perceptions, (for example the living of a life received and offered as a gift), is encountered by few outside the classroom. This makes RS a unique inquiry, and it has its own ancient and very respectable intellectual pedigree designed for the task. **(c)** That, in cutting across established disciplines, worldviews will adopt and discard piecemeal according to imperatives that have no academic rationale. We imagine a great tank ploughing through perfectly respectable disciplines carrying swarms of students behind it with little hope of forming an educated view of any of them or forming insight into sacred things. A worldviews approach to RS seems destined not only to reinforce a student's established 'worldview' but to convert their enthusiasm for it into expertise. This is to undo the effect of education.
- e. Will the worldviews approach reflect the fact that the religious traditions of Great Britain are, in the

main, Christian? There might well be a relativist presupposition underlying the proposal, in which every worldview is equal. If so, this approach will not preference Christianity and 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main, Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'. (Education Act (1996 Section 375 (3)) / School Standards and Framework Act (1998, Schedule 19, para.5)) The purpose of education is not just to act as a mirror but to form and shape the way we understand and interpret who we are as a community. The cultural heritage of Britain is Christian, and this is part of the glue of our society which helps promote a sense of British values, common purpose, and build a community resilience and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good. Christianity deserves a privileged place on the curriculum and a worldviews approach may threaten this.

- f. Given the potential for future wars of religion there is a place in education to teach students about the nature and character of religion *in its own right*. Given that the dominant cultural perspective of the UK is generally humanist/atheistic most students have a good grasp of what these points of view entail and they are already included in well taught RS classes as a critique of religion and vice-versa. Perhaps what is needed is more lessons like this, where non-religious positions are not taught in their own right, but as atheist critiques. This would not require any change to the curriculum.
- g. The big metaphysical questions about the ultimate nature of reality are critical to the study of religion. The worldviews approach has historically resulted in the rejection of metaphysics and a critique of religion (Freud, Durkheim, Marx, Feuerbach, James et al) fuelling atheism and secularism. It is questionable whether an approach which has historically rejected metaphysics is an appropriate philosophical and pedagogical driver for the teaching of religion. Religions are connected to one another in historical and conceptual ways and this connec-

tion is often accounted for in terms of the metaphysical. The rejection of metaphysics post Hume, is now being strongly questioned by philosophers.

- h. There is a general fear that a shift to worldviews, rather than improve academic standards, will not prepare students for GCSE/GCE RS, even less philosophy and/or theology at university level. Approximately 50% of schools must teach according to an Agreed Syllabus up to KS4. In order to retain academic standards, the worldviews approach is unlikely to be adopted by academic schools. University colleagues have voiced particular concern over progression paths from school to Higher Education should a religion and worldviews/*Weltanschauung* model be adopted.

ISRSA share the desire of the commission on religious education to improve how well the subject is taught and to ensure provision is met. We endorse the fact that the low percentage of specialist teachers (in RS three times more lessons are taught by non-specialists than history), lack of adequate training and a general failure at government level to support the subject is responsible for the poor delivery of the subject, but not an inherent failure of the subject itself. There is no reason to believe that additional specialist teachers will be provided or that decisions such as the exclusion of short course GCSE Religious Studies from school performance measures, the omission of RS from the EBacc and the rejection of RS as a facilitating subject by the Russell Group, will change as a result of a move towards a worldviews approach. We regard these facts as a jointly sufficient explanation for the decline of RS in the UK. There is a real risk that a shift to worldviews, rather than alleviate the problem, will divert people from it.

We are unconvinced that the introduction of a worldviews approach is a solution to the problems faced by our subject area and believe that it will quite possibly work to further undermine it.

Conclusion

Until very recently Religious Studies was a growth area in most schools in the UK with teachers leading large thriving departments. We have experienced a sudden decline in uptake which we do not believe will be reversed by the religion and worldviews proposal for the following reasons:

- ISRSA members are unconvinced that the *World Religions* model, which it is argued needs to be replaced, is the core curriculum approach in most schools (theology, philosophy and ethics dominate the curriculum, not world religions).
- We do not feel invested in proposals to rename the subject 'Religion and Worldviews' and we suggest *Theology Philosophy and Religion (TPR)* is already mainstream and would find wider acceptance.
- We have particular concern about the general worldviews approach which struggles to find an academic footing.
- We do not agree that it is desirable to teach humanism and atheism alongside RS, under the umbrella term Religion and *Weltanschauung*. We have detailed above our particular concerns about this, including questions relating to the provenance of the term 'worldviews' (*Weltanschauung*) and the core unexamined philosophical assumptions beneath the surface.

We have prepared this report to share our fear that replacing RS with Religion and *Weltanschauung* will weaken the academic respectability of our subject and further undermine it.



Recommendation

Before progressing with proposals to change the name of the subject we recommend:

- Perusal of other possible names for Religious Studies to avoid something as recondite as 'worldviews'
- Gather evidence from across all types of school to substantiate the claim that the 'world religions' approach is 1. mainstream and 2. problematic

To ensure that future changes will have a positive effect on the subject we recommend a review of factors we believe have impacted negatively on RS:

- An assessment of the impact of high percentage of non-specialist teachers on delivery
- The exclusion of short course GCSE RS from school performance measures
- The omission of RS from the EBacc
- The rejection of RS as a facilitating subject by the Russell Group
- The impact of GCSE AS and A level reforms





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