

# **Religion and Worldviews: The triumph of the secular in religious education**

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## Preface

As editor of *Religion and Worldviews: The triumph of the secular in religious education* I am delighted that so many prominent religious educators agreed to contribute essays: all invited were happy to contribute. This makes me think that there is a substantial body of opinion that does not agree with the current ‘direction of travel’ pursued by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) and the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. A well-funded ‘charm offensive’ by supporters of CoRE and the readiness of sympathetic grant-awarding charities, journal editors and official spokespersons for organisations concerned with religious education to commend (or possibly thwart criticism of) a worldviews approach to teachers is well under way and pressure to endorse the proposals of CoRE will no doubt grow. One can appreciate the readiness of some teachers to embrace CoRE, for how can so many ‘experts’ be wrong. Furthermore, repeating the rhetoric of CoRE that its proposals represent a new direction raises the possibility that the status of religious education among educators and the wider public will be raised and perhaps the perennial epithet of religious education as the ‘Cinderella subject’ of the curriculum will finally be overcome. But the ‘crisis’ in religious education and a longing for its resolution can precipitate lack of critical reflection and a rush to espouse ideas and solutions that will in time show themselves to further deepen the crisis rather than overcome it.

Ultimately, trust must be placed in Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and in classroom teachers to decide the direction religious education should take. There is much excellent teaching of religious education in schools; often by those who are prepared to develop their own ideas and implement their own strategies in contradiction of what is prescribed by ‘experts’. Not infrequently those charged with the training of teachers inculcate ideas, pedagogies and even disciplinary frameworks (paradigms), ostensibly advanced in the cause of inclusion and of challenging bigotry, but which ultimately erase difference and misrepresent diversity; instead a secularist agenda is advanced where inclusion means ‘all religions are equally true’ or ‘all are equally false’ and where bigotry means the failure to accept the deliverances of the ‘experts’ and their ideological mentors. Opposing such powerful educational currents requires courage and determination, and an independent mind.

Finally, thanks again to my wife Sandra, who has supported me and (in her words) ‘been my carer’ for the last three years. It is thanks to her (and others) that I remain enthusiastic about life and work, and marital love.

*St Andrew’s Day, 2021*

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## INTRODUCTION: FROM RELIGIONS TO WORLDVIEWS

L Philip Barnes

*It has been widely recognised for some time that English religious education is in a 'lamentable state'. Different responses to recognition of this have been developed, but by far the most vocal and influential has been the proposals of the Commission on Religious Education, established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. The Commission followed an initial 'review', again established by the RE Council, proposed a new 'national curriculum framework'. Its analysis and conclusions failed to gain support, for a variety of reasons and in response the RE Council embarked on a further review, which after an interim report in 2017, published its final report in 2018. It brought forward a new set of proposals that support reconfiguring religions as worldviews, extending the subject to incorporate secular worldviews and shifting the focus from religions unto the 'worldviews' of students. This 'introduction' traces these developments, identifies some of their implications and anticipates some of the criticisms that are raised in subsequent essays.*

Early in 2012 the Religious Education Council of England and Wales announced that it intended to conduct a review of religious education to complement the Government's review of the National Curriculum, which was initially planned in 2010. The government's rationale for not including religious education in its review is because there is local determination of its content, unlike other subjects whose content is nationally determined (as the name *National Curriculum* indicates). On this basis the distinction is often made between the 'basic' curriculum, which includes religious education, and the 'national' curriculum, which does not. In addition, although religious education is a statutory subject, parents enjoy a 'right' to withdraw their child from it, a right denied in the case of other subjects.<sup>1</sup> The government neither invited the RE Council, which is a charitable organisation representing groups concerned with religious education, to review the subject of religious education in school nor appointed official representatives to participate in or 'observe' the review process.

### **A review of religious education in England**



The chief findings of the RE Council Review, which were published on 23 October 2013, were presented in two separate sections of the document: ‘RE: a national curriculum framework’ (11-28) and ‘RE: the wider context’ (29-46). The Review (2013: 8) acknowledged that there was a ‘crisis’ in the subject: ‘The RE community has felt a sense of crisis despite government assurance’—which was only admitting what others had been saying (Chater 2012).<sup>2</sup> The Review proposed (and set out the main features of) a new non-statutory national framework to replace the existing 2004 (non-statutory) framework, which has been widely used as a template by Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) in their production of local agreed syllabuses. The Review also recommended that its proposed ‘National Curriculum Framework for RE’ should provide a new template for religious education in all schools, not just local authority schools, which are under a statutory obligation to follow an agreed syllabus (though legally they are not obliged to follow the recommendations of non-statutory documents), but also faith schools, academies and free schools. The fact that the proposed new framework aspired to provide a curriculum model for all schools revealed the aspiration of the RE Council to set the agenda for ‘reform’ and to control the subject in schools.

The findings of the Review proved controversial and were not well received. Prominent members of organisations and bodies that are affiliated to the RE Council claimed that their group did not have access to the document before publication and consequently could not endorse its recommendations and proposals, for example, this criticism was voiced by the then chair of the National Association of SACREs (see Barnes and Felderhof 2014). Criticism also focused on the new aims that were proposed. The Review abandoned the two attainment targets of ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’, which are widely used in earlier documents and in curricular resources, in favour of three new aims (see below for discussion). The original distinction between ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ in attainment targets had been introduced to make it clear that religious education is not just a matter of transmitting information about the different religious traditions but also that pupils should be encouraged to engage with religious beliefs and values and to consider their personal relevance.

Three new aims were put forward: For pupils to (i) ‘Know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews ...’; for them to (ii) ‘Express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions and worldviews ...’; and for them to (iii) ‘Gain

and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews ...' (2013: 14-15). These new aims are puzzling. One might have thought that 'expressing ideas and insights' was an intellectual skill already covered by 'gaining knowledge and understanding of religions'. It is also difficult to know how to interpret the further demand that ideas and insights should be expressed 'reasonably' and with 'increasing discernment': how does one express how religious 'ideas ... influence individuals and communities' reasonably? Is it that religious believers express some of their beliefs and ideas unreasonably and pupils should revise originally unreasonable beliefs and make them reasonable for educational purposes or is reasonableness a synonym for inoffensiveness! The second aim, in turn, is not readily differentiated from the third, just as 'expressing ideas' cannot be easily separated from the supposed skill of 'articulating beliefs', a phrase that is used to expand the third aim. It is also difficult to grasp how 'knowing about and understanding' can be achieved or demonstrated separately from 'expressing ideas' or thoughts. A response may be that the three aims cannot in practice be separated from each other. The difficulty is that such abstract aims provide no clear direction for teaching and learning: they fail to make clear that pupil learning in religious education involves not just knowledge and understanding of religions but how religions relate to human experience, in particular to the 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) of pupils. Without this orientation, from the perspective of pupils, the subject is of limited relevance and value.

The failure to relate aims to educational outcomes is further illustrated by attending to some of the things that are said about the purpose of religious education (which in the Review is distinguished from aims). Religious education is said to contribute to education by 'provoking challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, and these questions in turn 'develop in pupils an aptitude for dialogue' (2013: 14). But how does raising questions develop dialogue? Students might as easily develop an aptitude for nihilism, cynicism, and relativism unless one can be more positive about the value of studying religion. In 'enabling pupils to develop their ideas, values and identities', which is listed as a further purpose of religious education, can religious educators be indifferent as to which ideas, values and identities are formed by individual pupils? It appears that the perception of England as a plural and secular society has had the effect on those who drafted the Review document from being unable to identify how a student might develop or what character and qualities ultimately lead to an open, cohesive, tolerant and democratic society. If religious education is to contribute to the development of students and

of society as the overarching aim of education demands, one must specify what bearing these religious matters should have for students' lives and their contribution to communities.

Finally, the Review was criticised for laying too much stress on students' developing and expressing their own views and not enough on acquainting them with the beliefs and practices of religion and with bringing pupils' views into dialogue with religion and allowing them to be challenged by the beliefs, values and commitments of religion. There was an all-pervasive individualism in the proposed new framework which meant that the focus of religious education was being shifted from religious content to that of the experiencing individual 'self' (see Taylor 1997). Simply put, religion was presented as extrinsic to the aim of pupils' self-development. Religious education is not chiefly about religion but about the autonomous, disengaged self that expands its horizons through being exposed to a range of viewpoints (in the hope that this, in itself, will challenge intolerance and prejudice). The word 'own' was used 72 times in the Review: 'own ideas', (2013:13); 'own feelings and experiences' (16), 'own narratives' (16), 'own ... behaviour' (16), 'own needs' (16); 'own cultures' (16); 'own views' (18), etc. The intrusion of the word 'own' in contexts, where it would be more natural to state simply that pupils learn to express their views, their needs, and so on, suggests that everyone has his or her own view on things. What matters is that you have your own view and have the opportunity to express it. The implicit message is that religious truth is a subjective matter. The idea is not countenanced that there is objective truth in religion, things that are true for everyone, irrespective of particular responses, and that viewpoints may be expanded, complemented or challenged by reflecting on religious beliefs, values and practices. These are some of the reasons why the Review was not well received by religious educators.

### **The Commission on Religious Education**

Probably on account of criticism, within a few years of the publication of the original Review, the RE Council established a Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) and embarked on what was effectively a second 'review'; something not anticipated in the original Review. Why write a new National Framework and then immediately seek through a further review to 'overhaul religious education in schools' (quoting from CoRE's press release)?<sup>3</sup> The hope was presumably entertained that a revised panel of 'experts' (again solely appointed by the RE Council) would produce proposals that would attract more attention and have greater influence than the first set of proposals. We are told that the CoRE

was ‘established to review the legal, education, and policy frameworks for religious education (RE)... [The] review will be a wide-ranging, inclusive and evidence-based process designed to inform policy makers’.<sup>4</sup> (The reference to ‘evidence-based process’ is interesting because it is precisely the lack of engagement with research and the omission of reference to the research that influenced the decisions of the commissioners that have attracted criticism; see Schweitzer 2018.) An Interim Report, entitled ‘Religious Education for all’, was published in September 2017 and the final report, ‘Religion and Worldviews: The way Forward’, was published in September 2018, with much ‘pomp and ceremony’, alongside the claim that it provided ‘a new vision for the subject’.<sup>5</sup> Much remains of the original Review in the final Commission Report, for example, the expansion of religious education to include a study of secular worldviews at all key stages and the emphasis on the personal views and values of students, which is further expanded by CoRE into ‘personal worldviews’ and given even greater emphasis. Much, however, is also changed, for example, the Review presents itself as bringing forward proposals to enhance the work of SACREs in their production of local agreed syllabuses, whereas CoRE effectively ‘disbands’ SACREs, by relieving them of the production of agreed syllabuses; instead ‘local advisory networks for religion and worldviews’ are to be established with the purpose of ‘providing information about sources of support’ for religious education and with ‘connect[ing] schools with local faith and belief communities and other groups that support the study of Religion and Worldviews in schools’ (CoRE 2018: 16). It would be an illuminating exercise to trace the similarities and differences between the original Review, the Interim Report of CoRE and its Final Report, though this is not a matter that will be pursued here.

A number of organisations have thrown their weight behind the latest review and the RE Council has embarked on a well-funded (private) campaign to convince the ‘religious education community’, particularly religious education teachers, of the strength of CoRE’s suggested ‘reforms’. Getting the support of teachers is crucially important, for although the central plank in the strategy of the RE Council was originally to convince the government that a new legal settlement is required to give statutory force to its proposed reforms (thus ensuring implementation in all maintained schools), the government has already indicated that new legislation on religious education is not on its parliamentary educational agenda. In a ‘open’ letter to The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, Chair of the Commission on Religious Education, the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds MP, concluded that ‘now is not the time to begin these reforms’.

This would commit the government to radical changes which requires primary legislation; requires the development of new programmes of study for ‘RE and Worldviews’; and leads to all schools having to implement a long-standing subject in our schools in a new way.<sup>6</sup>

(letter dated, 6 December 2018)

Two weeks later in the House of Lords, Lord Agnew, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System, reaffirmed the Government’s position ‘not to make further changes to the curriculum’. He added, ‘we must decline to take forward the commission’s vision for the future of RE in England’ (Hansard, 17 December 2018).<sup>7</sup> At this stage it was clear that legislation along the lines CoRE proposed was not going to happen and that alternative strategies would have to be employed.

Interestingly, in his letter Damian Hinds MP referred to media coverage and correspondence that ‘make it clear ... that some stakeholders have concerns that making statutory the inclusion of “worldviews” risks diluting the teaching of RE ...’.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that this statement reflected influential opinion, for example, that of the Board of [Jewish] Deputies’ and that of the Catholic Education Service. The Board of Deputies spoke of the Report as ‘fundamentally flawed’; stating that it, ‘might be seen as an attempt by those hostile to faith to push their agenda of undermining rigour in religious education at a time when faith literacy could not be more important’.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Education Service agrees and concludes that the quality of religious education is not improved by teaching less religion. It states that ‘the scope of the subject’ will become ‘so wide and nondescript’ that it will ‘potentially lose all academic value and integrity’.<sup>10</sup> In quoting this extract from the Catholic Education Service, Lord Alton of Liverpool in the House of Lords Debate on the Commission Report added that it will also ‘potentially depress religious literacy and understanding at a time when persecution of religious freedom has increased globally’ (Hansard, 17 December 2018).<sup>11</sup> Few would deny this last point, for example, in all probability about 10,000 Christians worldwide are killed each year as a result of persecution and the number is increasing<sup>12</sup>; adherents of other religions and religious traditions are similarly persecuted, albeit not to the same extent.

The failure of CoRE to have its ‘reforms’ forced on schools through legislation is probably a good thing, both politically and educationally. If the reforms had been enacted, it would have been the first time in the history of education in England that one particular form of religious education would be given statutory force for all pupils, i.e. pupils in all types of schools. The law on religious education traditionally has allowed some degree of diversity of provision in religious education, for example, voluntary aided schools, which are mainly Catholic, and academies with a religious designation have at present the right to provide religious education in accordance with the provisions of the trust deed relating to the school or, where there is no provision in the trust deed, with the religion or denomination mentioned in the order designating the school as having a religious character. The concession is granted by CoRE (2018: 11) that alongside the proposed religion and worldviews curriculum schools can also satisfy the requirements of their trust deed, though given what CoRE requires to be covered, most commentators regard this as unrealistic, given the limited time usually allocated to religious education.

The CoRE proposals, if legally required, would also have had major implications for the role of representatives of local religious groups on Agreed Syllabuses Committees, which give their members the opportunity to shape religious education according to local traditions and religious constituencies through the production processes. CoRE (2018: 11) called for Section 375 of the 1996 Education Act to be amended to remove the requirement for local authorities to follow their locally agreed syllabus and to remove the requirement for them to appoint Agreed Syllabus Conferences. Current syllabus conferences would then have been reconstituted as ‘Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews’, tasked with servicing the new centrally imposed curriculum (‘National Entitlement’). The Networks will ‘facilitate the implementation of the National Entitlement to the study of Religion and Worldviews in all schools within the local authority boundaries by providing information about sources of support available, and must connect schools with local faith and belief communities and other groups that support the study of Religion and Worldviews in schools’ (2018: 55). The requirement that the Local Advisory Networks must limit their ‘connection’ to groups that support the new ‘national entitlement’ seems unnecessarily defensive and exclusionary. What does connection mean here and with which specific groups does CoRE believe Local Advisory Networks should not make connections? These collective measures would have undermined one element of local democracy, which is expressed through the formal challenge of bringing representatives of different religious groups and individuals

together to negotiate and finally to produce an ‘agreed’ syllabus. There are political advantages in members of different religious and non-religious groups meeting together and then agreeing upon the form of religious education to be followed by schools in the local authority area. As was acknowledged in the original Review (2013: 35): ‘There is a strongly held view [among ‘contributors’ to the Review] that local determination is good in principle. SACREs and agreed syllabus conferences (ASCs) continue to provide unique opportunities for local stakeholders, from many walks of life, to become actively involved in RE’. The occasion is potentially created for positive inter-religious encounters that may encourage wider encounters between ‘ordinary’ members of religious communities.

A serious educational disadvantage of removing the local production of syllabuses and appointing a small select body of national ‘experts’, proposed by CoRE (2018: 14), to determine the form and content of religious education would have been that the most important historical ‘engine’ of reform in the last fifty years would be lost. The transition from confessional to non-confessional, multifaith religious education was effected through the innovative work of Agreed Syllabus Conferences and teachers that took advantage of the freedom provided by legislation to introduce new ideas and innovative practices. Other examples could be cited—the City of Birmingham’s innovative syllabuses of 2007 and 2021 that aligned religious education more closely with values and the moral development of pupils (see Barnes 2008). Imposed ‘top-down’ uniformity, however well-intentioned by its supporters, stifles innovation and ultimately compromises quality. The thrust of CoRE’s proposed nationally mandated ‘Entitlement’, even if allowing for a degree of curriculum diversity, would still impose strict limits on innovation, as CoRE maintains that only what is consistent with its proposals and vision are appropriate for religious education in all schools. Syllabus diversity and diversity of provision have historically been shown to be the chief sources of positive reform and renewal in religious education.

### **The Worldviews Project**

The only response available to CoRE, once it became clear that the government would not act to give statutory form to its proposals, is to convince ‘the religious education community’ that their adoption will improve the status and quality of religious education. Since its publication in 2018, CoRE, supported by the RE Council, has embarked on a well-funded campaign through meetings with interested bodies, training events, conferences, reporting survey results, commissioning research, and the production of classroom materials to win

over the ‘hearts and minds’ of religious educators and those concerned with religious education. The RE Council (in part, in conjunction with TRS-UK, the ‘professional association for Departments, Units and Subject Associations for the Study of Religion and Theology in the UK’) has also initiated ‘The Worldview Project’, which is ‘to support conversations in the RE community exploring the concepts of Worldviews in religious education’.<sup>13</sup> Phase one of the Worldview Project was to commission an independent academic literature review on the concept of ‘worldview’ in Religious Studies, Theology and cognate disciplines (Benoit et al. 2020). Phase two was a series of five online conversations in which religious education advisors, experts in religious education and academics from other relevant disciplines reflected on the academic international literature on worldviews. These conversations were written up by Amira Tharani as four short discussion papers (Tharani 2020). Phase three, which is now under way, will see the production of support materials for those responsible for writing religious education syllabuses. According to Professor Cooling ‘[t]hese materials will exemplify how different approaches to the worldview idea generate different types of syllabus appropriate for different contexts’ (Cooling in Tharani 2021: 4).

This last comment by Cooling is noteworthy for it draws attention to what he regards as the ‘open-ended’ nature of CoRE’s proposals for the curriculum. The root idea is that CoRE’s vision can be instantiated in different ways—CoRE does not aim to establish a prescriptive curriculum (it even refuses to speak of its proposals as a ‘framework’):<sup>14</sup> it may talk of a *National Entitlement*, but this entitlement is open to different interpretations. The comment by Cooling draws attention to the diversity of provision that is consistent, he believes, with the proposals of CoRE: *different* approaches (unspecified by Cooling), *different* interpretations of the meaning of worldview, generating *different* types of syllabuses, which are appropriate for *different* contexts. At this point he may claim support from CoRE’s statement (2018: 32) that it provides ‘a set of organising principles which form (*sic*) the basis for developing programmes of study’. CoRE also makes proposals about content. It provides a list of worldviews that are appropriate for study in schools and it excludes what some regard as worldviews that should be included on the list for possible study, global capitalism, Communism and nationalism (2018: 75), for example. In other words, CoRE is not solely concerned with curriculum principles.



Leaving this aside, there are issues raised by the open-ended interpretation of what CoRE proposes for schools, and which Cooling expands upon. There is the matter of content and coherence. There isn't any specified common content or requirement for there to be common content: the programmes of study that make up a syllabus *can* differ (entirely) from other syllabuses; and according to Cooling the approaches to representing worldviews within programmes of study and syllabuses can also differ. But what then of coherence and progression? The first RE Council Review (2013: 37, 45) made much of 'securing coherence and progression': 'lack of coherence' is linked to 'confusion' and 'a lack of coherence' between agreed syllabuses is listed as one of the 'key issues that face[s] RE' (2013: 31 and 32). The Review praises the 2004 Non-statutory National Framework for its 'attempt to provide coherence for the subject at a national level' (2013: 49). Why has the principle of coherence been jettisoned and is this a positive educational development? By providing an extensive list of worldviews that may be studied (while acknowledged that the list is not exhaustive), CoRE has effectively evaded and neglected to answer one of the most difficult and controversial questions in religious education, that of the selection of content: do all worldviews have equal educational value and relevance? Of course CoRE's decision not to prescribe content beyond its support for a study of worldviews has apologetic appeal for its supporters: if it were to prescribe content or particular worldviews to be studied, contrary voices would be raised, better to abdicate responsibility for content selection to others (or as I anticipate, in the third phase of 'The Worldviews Project' to produce *illustrative* material only, again by-passing difficult questions about the relation of content to educational relevance).

Recently, Emma Salter (2021: 4) has attempted to defend CoRE from criticism, or more accurately, she believes criticism should be held in abeyance until we see the ways in which CoRE's 'National Entitlement influences curriculum design'. In her view to criticise at this point is to 'put the cart before the horse': the criticism is directed to Friedrich Schweitzer (2018) and myself (Barnes 2021). According to her, we do not yet know what a 'curriculum' (her term) faithful to CoRE's vision will look like; it is premature to criticise. Criticism at this juncture is inappropriate. This is because

The National Entitlement as set out in the report is not a prescriptive curriculum framework or list of topics to be included, but rather 'a set of organising principles which form the basis for developing programmes of study'.

(Salter 2021; incorporating quotation from CoRE 2018: 32)

But we do know a lot about the proposed content that the National Entitlement envisages. It is pedantic to say we do not know ‘the topics’, for we do know the religious and non-religious worldviews that are believed to be appropriate for study. CoRE lists twenty-four of them; and if we know the worldviews, we can with little imagination identify essential topics within particular worldviews, though no topic (or worldview) is prescribed. We do know that CoRE’s ‘set of organising principles’, for example, justifies the study of paganism, existentialism and secularism (which is distinguished from agnosticism and atheism), alongside familiar and more numerically larger religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. We also know *how* these ‘traditions’ will be conceptualised and represented to pupils—they will be configured according to a worldview matrix, for this is what CoRE tells us is one of its central organising and innovative principles.

We also have a broad understanding of what a religion conceptualised as a worldview will look like, for the idea of a religion as a worldview has been around for a long time (see Naugle 2002)—it has particular appeal for philosophically inclined evangelicals (often following Bavinck 2019 [1904]), and it appeals to recent educators that want to include Humanism in the religious education curriculum.

... worldview refers to the cluster of beliefs a person holds about the most significant issues of life, such as God, the cosmos, knowledge, values, humanity, and history.... thinking of a worldview in terms of a basic conceptual system is critical.

(Samples 2017: 688)

The literature on worldviews typically focuses on propositional beliefs ‘about the nature of reality (metaphysics), the nature of knowledge and the method of attaining it (epistemology), and the nature of goodness and of a good life (ethics)’ (Peterson et al. 2009: 64). The doxastic focus of worldviews is somewhat lost in CoRE’s (2018: 4) definition.

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.

It is further stated that institutional worldviews (in contrast to personal worldviews) are

... complex and dynamic. They may refer back to sacred texts or founding narratives and at the same time be fluid, adapting to new times and cultures. They *are made up* of practices, rituals, narratives, experiences, interactions, social norms, doctrines, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression, and should not be reduced simply to belief and practice but understood in all their complexity. Sometimes these may be expressed through complex institutional structures, while in other cases there may be much looser forms of identification.<sup>15</sup>

(CoRE 2018: 72, my emphasis)

The description of what formal worldviews ‘are made up of’, while correct, does not fully capture what the study of worldview means and requires, which in educational terms is *study of the central beliefs and values* that give meaning to ‘practices, rituals, narratives, experiences’, and so on. Doctrines, as beliefs, are foundational to a worldview (or religion), unless CoRE has adopted an idiosyncratic interpretation of a worldview that excludes doctrines from being beliefs or that denies them the status of propositional attitudes. Consequently, it would be more accurate to say that the rituals, practices, narratives, and experiences of lived religions or of non-religious worldviews *express* their beliefs and doctrines. A worldviews approach to religious education, if it is to be faithful to its usual interpretation, should focus on the beliefs and the doctrines that give meaning and significance to the non-doctrinal aspects of a religion and consequently it is most naturally described as exemplifying an intellectual, philosophical approach (which is indicated by the title of some studies concerned with worldviews, for example, Hendrik M. Vroom’s *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World*, 2006).

CoRE and Cooling are acutely aware that a worldviews approach, with its inherent philosophical orientation, may not have wide educational appeal and it is probably not an approach well suited to religious education in primary schools (and probably beyond). Both therefore also urge giving attention to ‘the lived experiences of adherents’ (CoRE 2018: 76; Cooling 2020: 407), to ‘the role of religious and non-religious ritual and practices,

foundational texts, and of religious media, in both the formation and communication of experience, beliefs, values, identities and commitments....’ (CoRE 2018: 34). Such requirements, however, detract from (undermines even) CoRE’s stated position that its proposals constitute a new worldviews approach to religious education. The study of worldviews, as currently practised, is not the study of ‘everyday’ lived religion or of religious texts, or of rituals and practices or of the influence of religions on the arts, and so on. CoRE could conceivably respond along with Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty: ‘When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less’. At the very least there is a tension between a worldviews approach and giving attention to ‘lived religion’ and the wider range of subjects that CoRE expects to be studied. Challenges emerge: too much focus on worldviews’ beliefs and doctrines threaten to over-intellectualise religious education and make the subject uninteresting and inaccessible to the young; too little focus on worldviews compromises any suggestion of newness, which one of CoRE’s central claims.

A further problem is that if emphasis is placed on ‘non-doctrinal’ aspects of worldviews, as is inappropriate to a worldviews approach, alongside the doctrinal, conceptual aspects, say the ritual, the experiential, or the social, this will effectively reinstate Ninian Smart’s (1966 and 1968) seven-fold (originally six-fold) dimensional account of religion, which enjoyed significant influence in the 70s and 80s, to centre stage again in religious education (see Barnes 2000 and 2014: 65-78). Support for this interpretation is also found in CoRE’s (2018: 37) claim that ‘[a]t school level, the study of worldviews is inherently multidisciplinary and should draw from as many of the ... disciplines as possible; in the same paragraph the disciplines relevant to religious education are identified as anthropology, area studies, hermeneutics, history, other human and social sciences, philosophy, religious studies and theology (it is doubtful whether all of these are strictly disciplines). Smart (1968) always insisted that the study of religion/religious studies was not a discipline, rather it was a ‘field of study’ that draws on different disciplines; he carried this conviction over into religious education. A good case can be made for the conclusion that CoRE is re-framing religious education according to the original vision of Ninian Smart. This prompts the question how much is original in CoRE’s proposals?

One final comment to add to these observations. We will have to wait to see the support materials produced for schools under Phase three of ‘The Worldviews Project’ before we can ascertain if it provides further evidence for interpreting CoRE’s central commitments

as representing a retrieval of the position of Ninian Smart. Nevertheless, in Mark Chater's edited collection, *Reforming RE: Power and Knowledge in a worldviews curriculum* (2020), there is evidence to support this contention. Under Chater's direction some religious educators have anticipated the form of curriculum design and classroom material that they believe exemplifies what CoRE requires. Topics that are mentioned as appropriate for students to study include creation, reincarnation, sacred space (as reflected in sacred texts or teaching), prayer, fasting and Hajj in Islam (in the last case attention is to be given to the distinction between 'mythical and historical thinking', clearly echoing two of Smart's dimensions). There are some excellent suggestions for lessons and some insightful comments. It is almost impossible, however, to find any content or perspective that is novel and follows uniquely from a worldviews approach or any content that cannot be conceptualised using Ninian Smart's dimensional account of religion and its use to frame and plan lessons. Furthermore, there is a critical, philosophical element in many of the suggestions; again this reflects the position of Smart, at least in his early writings on religious education. In *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968), he argued that descriptive, historical studies of religion require to be supplemented by 'parahistorical' studies that focus upon the truth asserting nature of religion and provide students with opportunities to develop the necessary skills to evaluate religious beliefs and practices. It is acknowledged that the suggestions for classroom lessons in Chater's edited collection were not produced or endorsed by CoRE, though it does show what supporters of CoRE take to be required by materials to instantiate its proposals in the classroom and again underlines the challenge CoRE faces in fulfilling its claims to newness.

The essays that follow consider different aspects of CoRE's proposed worldviews approach to religious education, offering analysis and criticism. Chapter 1 by Anthony Towey provides an 'insider's' account of the work of the Commission and why it 'may be that the subject [of religious education after CoRE] occupies a more contested space than ever'. Chapter 2 by Marius Felderhof challenges the idea that legislative change can 'fix' the problems of religious education. He argues that the existing 1944 Settlement is much more liberal and suitable for our secular, religiously plural society than the various proposals that have been forthcoming in recent reports, including that of the CoRE Report. Chapter 3, by Penny Thompson, considers how CoRE uses the word 'professional' and its proposal that nine professionals appointed by the Religious Education Council should oversee and

determine the structure and content of the proposed new ‘National Entitlement’. In Chapter 4 Philip Barnes challenges the apologetic refrain by supporters of CoRE (and Trevor Cooling) that it provides a new paradigm for religious education—a worldviews approach is neither new nor should be regarded as a paradigm, and as such offers limited prospects of overcoming the systemic weaknesses of English religious education. In Chapter 5 Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam identify philosophical, theological and educational objections to a worldviews approach to religious education and develop an alternative proposal that seeks to take religion seriously in relation to itself and to the aims of education. Chapter 6, by Roger Trigg, traces the effect of prevailing philosophical assumptions on religious education since the 1950s, which has resulted in CoRE ‘reducing’ religion to a worldview that is indeterminate, fluid and highly personal. In Chapter 7 Daniel Moulin-Stožek considers the subject of pedagogy, setting his observations in the context of theoretical and empirical inquiries about religious education pedagogy stretching back to the 1960s. His critical analysis suggests that rather than solving pedagogical problems, CoRE’s proposed new paradigm offers little in the way of new solutions to familiar challenges, while potentially putting the coherence and integrity of the subject at risk. Chapter 8, by Michael Reiss, reviews the role of worldviews in science education, and while not uncritical, takes a more sanguine view of the role of worldviews in religious education. The final essay, Chapter 9, brings a German perspective to bear on CoRE’s proposals. Friedrich Schweitzer questions the shift the focus of religious education from religions to worldviews. Two main critical questions are raised, the first concerns the concept of worldviews, the second concerns the relationship between the state and religion.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A similar right of withdrawal applies to the Sex Education component within the broader subject of Relationship and Sex Education (DfE 2019: 11-12), though this is not taken as compromising the basic/national distinction which underlines the unique position of religious education in the school curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> Originally available at [www.reonline.org.uk/news/whats-worth-fighting-for-in-re](http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/whats-worth-fighting-for-in-re).

<sup>3</sup> [www.commissiononre.org.uk/commission-on-re-press-release/](http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/commission-on-re-press-release/) (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>4</sup> [www.commissiononre.org.uk/about-the-commission-on-religious-education/](http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/about-the-commission-on-religious-education/) (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>5</sup> [/www.commissiononre.org.uk/commission-on-re-press-release/](http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/commission-on-re-press-release/) (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>6</sup> [www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-2.jpg](http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-2.jpg) (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>7</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2018-12-17/debates/A497B8C8-9BE9-4975-95E3-91F4748A98AC/ReligiousEducation> (accessed 2 December 2021).

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- <sup>8</sup> [www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-1.jpg](http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-1.jpg) (accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>9</sup> [www.bod.org.uk/bod-news/commission-on-re-report-is-fundamentally-flawed/](http://www.bod.org.uk/bod-news/commission-on-re-report-is-fundamentally-flawed/) (accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> [www.catholiceducation.org.uk/component/k2/item/1003658-catholic-education-service-response-to-the-commission-on-religious-education-report](http://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/component/k2/item/1003658-catholic-education-service-response-to-the-commission-on-religious-education-report) (accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>11</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2018-12-17/debates/A497B8C8-9BE9-4975-95E3-91F4748A98AC/ReligiousEducation> (accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>12</sup> Christian History Institute, Persecuted Christians Today, [christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecuted-christians-today](http://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecuted-christians-today); see also The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 'How many Christians are killed each year because of their faith?', [appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/how-many-christians-are-killed-each-year-because-of-their-faith/](http://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/how-many-christians-are-killed-each-year-because-of-their-faith/) (both accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>13</sup> [www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/rec-discussion-papers-on-worldviews/](http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/rec-discussion-papers-on-worldviews/) (accessed 2 December 2021).
- <sup>14</sup> The term 'framework' is used but only to refer to the principles governing religious education. CoRE (2018: 35) and Cooling confine the term curriculum to the collective subjects taught in schools; in its terminology the new subject of 'Religion and Worldview' is a core component of the broader curriculum. There are no compelling reasons for others to adopt this narrowing of usage: the term 'curriculum' can be properly used with different meanings in different contexts; the context should make clear the range of its application. Other writers have happily used the term 'curriculum' in supporting the proposals of CoRE (see Chater 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> This account would serve better as a description of a religion rather than a worldview (see what follows below).

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