



Islam as educational knowledge: challenges and barriers to the development of a Religion and Worldviews approach to teaching Islam in schools

Kate Christopher & Lynn Revell

To cite this article: Kate Christopher & Lynn Revell (28 Feb 2024): Islam as educational knowledge: challenges and barriers to the development of a Religion and Worldviews approach to teaching Islam in schools, Journal of Beliefs & Values, DOI: [10.1080/13617672.2024.2315404](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2024.2315404)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2024.2315404>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 28 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 56



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Islam as educational knowledge: challenges and barriers to the development of a Religion and Worldviews approach to teaching Islam in schools

Kate Christopher^a and Lynn Revell ^b

^aCulham St Gabriel's, UK; ^bCanterbury Christ Church University, UK

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the way teachers in primary and secondary schools in England engaged with a project to develop a Worldviews approach to Islam in the RE classroom. The project identified challenges and barriers to the teaching of Worldviews that were demonstrated by some teachers' unwillingness to engage with knowledge and curriculum content that they believed to be illegitimate or controversial. The authors use Basil Bernstein's idea of educational knowledge to explore the way teachers made decisions about what pupils should be permitted to learn about and what should be ignored in relation to Islam.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 November 2023

Accepted 30 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Islam; essentialism; agreed syllabi; Religious Education

Introduction

This article explores the relationship between pedagogy and subject content in learning about Islam in English schools. Our discussion is based on findings from a two-year project funded by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust with teachers in secondary and primary schools. We have co-created resources for teaching about Islam in Religious Education lessons and through this process engaged closely with individual teachers' curricula and contexts. This article explores the challenges encountered as we work alongside teachers to develop a Religion and Worldviews approach in their teaching about Islam, and we set out why we judge that engaging with a Religion and Worldviews approach to be educationally valuable. Through this process, we have come to see the 'Islam' on school curricula as a specific form of educational knowledge and suggest how that in order to develop towards a Religion and Worldviews approach, Islam as a form of knowledge for the classroom bears examination. As Bernstein notes, '[h]ow society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control' (Bernstein 1975, 85). In the context of the project described in this article Islam is defined as a topic of study within the Religious Education. We show how Islam as 'educational knowledge' in the RE classroom fits Bernstein's description in the way that the boundaries of Islam as

CONTACT Lynn Revell  lynn.revell@canterbury.ac.uk  Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Rd., Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

'educational knowledge' are patrolled and the way insights and perspectives outside the given form of knowledge are understood as illegitimate for the classroom.

From the outset, we have sought to work alongside teachers in a dynamic of collaboration. We have explored ways of engaging with Islam that call into question current practices and reflected on not only the implications of a new approach for the classroom but the process of change itself. The project is divided into two parts. In phase 1, the two researchers met 28 teachers via online forums. The researchers presented a taught element offering an explanation of a Religion and Worldviews in RE, before exploring practical resources exemplifying this approach through the teaching of Islam. Teachers asked questions, discussed and reflected at all points of these online workshops. In phase 2, the researchers visited 10 schools and, together with teachers, researchers co-created practical teaching resources and information for the study of Islam following a Religion and Worldviews approach.

In our findings, we detect barriers to the move towards a Religion and Worldviews approach. Aside from practical matters like time and subject knowledge, the main barrier is the way teachers see Islam, or the type of knowledge they think Islam to be. We show that Islam as an essentialised form of knowledge in Agreed Syllabuses and textbooks (Panjwani 2005) is echoed in the way teachers approach Islam in their lesson and argue this is educationally limiting. Following Bernstein, we describe the information about Islam that is permitted in classrooms, curricula and textbooks as 'educational knowledge', that is knowledge, which is reductive and simplified, but which is also controlled; its boundaries patrolled. The limited nature of Islam as educational knowledge is reflected in teachers' anxieties about whether certain topics are 'allowed' to be taught or can be categorised as 'Islam' or 'proper RE'.

In a discussion exploring literature associated with Islam with undergraduates, Michael Sells reflects on the magical realist novella 'The Wedding of Zein', published in (1966) by the Sudanese author Teyeb Salih. In doing so, Sells illustrates the impoverished nature of Islam as educational knowledge. The story focuses on an unusual man, Zein, who is described as unattractive, an outsider of enormous uncontrolled appetite and a fool who repeatedly falls in love with many women. Nonetheless, Zein ends the story married to the most beautiful and most religious young woman in the village.

The Wedding of Zein is mostly a tale of relationships and how change can affect everyday life but it is also a tale where the sacred and the secular are interwoven. Sells reports that his students enjoy the story in itself but struggle to identify the general controversies within Islamic thinking found in the story. In fact, the story contains questions around knowledge, authority and sanctity, but Sells' students, while enjoying the local, cultural interest of the story, do not easily detect questions universal to all Islamic communities, or indeed any community living in the context of divinely revealed guidance (Sells 2003).

In terms of RE in English schools, we suggest that 'Islam' is currently understood as a form of knowledge that is not explored in the local, but only at a general level. However, without exploring big ideas where they are found in a specific context, the general is simply essentialised, and this limits the way students can engage with Islam. A culturally and geographically located story such as the *Wedding of Zein* would be as unfamiliar on English RE curricula as it is to Sells' undergraduates. Our work with teachers of Religious Education in English schools aimed to go beyond essentialism in the teaching about Islam as a religious worldview tradition so that pupils in schools can move between the local and the general.

Literature – Islam and education

A review of how Islam is presented in different types of publications reveals striking differences in the way the relationship between education and Islam is formulated. There is very little research on the teaching of Islam in English schools. And where there is academic literature on the teaching of Islam, the focus is usually around the nature of Islamic Education or on education in Islamic schools. The debates around the nature of Islamic education are often wide ranging, but the discussion in academic journals of the teaching of Islam in community schools (non-faith) is far smaller and also narrower. Where discussions about Islam as it is taught in schools occur, it is more likely to focus on the teaching of Islam and ‘controversial issues’ such as homosexuality, gender, Islamophobia (Zembylas 2023) and more recently extremism, counter-terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Islam is rarely considered as part of a wider discussion on plurality and diversity within classrooms, but in most cases, teaching Islam in schools is considered in the context of problems or controversial issues.

In publications for teachers (as opposed to peer-reviewed journals) most authors offer a positive engagement with Islam in the classroom, and only rarely acknowledge the challenges around Islam in the curriculum (Berglund and Gent 2017). Teaching about Islam and Muslims is presented as an opportunity to celebrate and appreciate the religion and people and the positive portrayal of teaching about Islam in professional publications is reflected in local policy and popular teaching resources. As one of the ‘six world religions’, Islam features widely on the curriculum. In England the curriculum for Religious Education in schools is decided by a series of locally organised councils called SACRES which produce the ‘locally agreed syllabuses’. In the professional literature, teaching materials and syllabuses created for teachers, ‘Islam’ is presented as uncontroversial, valid, interesting and positive.

Yet the positive presentation of Islam in professional publications and resources is not without problems. In many ways, the representation of Islam in professional publications echoes an observation by the scholar of Islam Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that ‘religion’ as defined within Religious Studies captures neither the variety or dynamism of Muslim cultures and communities (W. C. Smith 1991). This conceptualisation of Islam is narrowly conceived as a singular, monolithic, viewed with the assumption that it is defined by beliefs (Berglund and Gent 2017) and presented ahistorically, rather than as a developing tradition (Thobani 2010). A case study of five Agreed Syllabuses and a selection of commonly used text books and resources found that Islam was presented in ways that privileged certain models of Islam, those that were literalist, historically limited and monolithic. This form of knowledge not only privileges one type of Islam (Sunni) at the expense of other Muslim voices (Shia, Sufi, etc.) but there is a ‘huge divergence between what is presented in syllabi and textbooks . . . and what is in fact the history and current reality of Muslims (Panjwani 2005, 384). In this case, ‘Islam’ is understood through a particular ontological prism; as without context, history, diversity or interpretation (Panjwani and Revell 2018). Islam is conceptualised as an entity that is only legitimate when it is essentialised in such a way that it conforms to an acceptable for expression of religiosity (Hughes 2015; Stenberg and Wood 2022). This ontological conformity insists that there is only one way of knowing Islam. Other ways of knowing Islam are either precluded or complicated by the domination of an approach that both essentialises and contains pupil engagement with Islam within a single lens (Revell 2015). This decontextualised presentation

of Islam is reinforced through textbooks, teaching materials and literature for teachers, meaning that no alternative way of engaging with Islam is made available to teachers (Conroy et al. 2013; McLoughlin 2006).

The purpose and nature of Religious Education has been the source of many debates, but more recently these discussions have been animated by an awareness that, as a subject in schools, Religious Education is not secure. The Religious Education Council's (REC) 2018 commissioned report into the state of Religious Education explores threats and opportunities both external to and internal to the subject (Commission on Religious Education 2018). Noteworthy is the acknowledgement that the increasingly diverse and also less religious world of modern Britain is not reflected in RE syllabuses, which are locally determined. Also of concern is the variable quality of Religious Education lessons and a significant decrease in students choosing the subject at GCSE and A 'level (Cooling 2020b). The report's authors argue that RE must be 'fit for purpose' for a world in which religion and beliefs are complex and sometimes controversial. The report makes 11 recommendations for change, the most eye-catching of which is a name change to 'Religion and Worldviews' to denote this paradigm shift. The report has generated a lively debate around the definition of 'worldviews', the perceived reduction of what is seen as 'core', or essential, content about religious traditions, and the pros and cons of centralised curriculum design (Barnes 2022; Hannam and Biesta 2019). Our contribution to this debate is in describing the knowledge about Islam (and other religious traditions) found in the World Religions approach as essentialised and limited, or as 'educational knowledge'. Whatever new approach to RE takes shape in the years to come, we propose that the current presentation of religion in RE increasingly does not reflect the dynamic, rooted, messy and pluralistic reality of lived worldviews, and has to evolve in order to help young people make sense of the world.

We engage with the Religion and Worldviews approach because it enables a way of thinking that allows religion to be investigated in provisional and complicated forms, taking various contexts into account. We see Religion and Worldviews not as an add-on to the existing World Religions approach, but as a new paradigm and way of working, a refreshed relationship between pedagogy and subject content. In the spirit of the debate around Worldviews captured in the Worldview Project Discussion papers, our approach is that worldviews is a 'can-opener concept' that can reopen 'lines of study and questioning about religion and non-religion alike' (Tharani 2020, 7). As such, we welcome the move to Worldviews as a move away from an essentialised and limited conceptualisation of religiosity as found in the current World Religions model. The CoRE report suggests Worldviews embrace more than just beliefs and practices, but emotional, affiliative and behavioural dimensions (REC 2018, 72). There is anxiety among some in the field that Worldviews represents an addition to the already crowded curriculum, or that the inclusion of non-religious worldviews such as Humanism would detract from the proper focus of RE, that of religion (Cooling 2020a). Not only do we not share this anxiety, and see a Worldviews approach as of educational value, but, moreover, we see the current approach as a limited worldview in itself that promotes a particular agenda.

In the process of working with teachers to adopt a Religion and Worldviews approach in their curricula, we have arrived at two guiding principles to employ worldviews in practice: (1) worldviews starts with people, and (2) pupils need to engage with different notions of knowledge. Firstly, teachers' planning should start with people rather than abstract concepts. Grounding the beliefs and practices of people, their contexts, communities and cultures,

guards against essentialisation and a tendency to portray groups as monolithic and unchanging. If we start with people that live in particular geographies, in specific times and a place we are less likely to consider their lives as defined by abstract concepts. The second principle is that all knowledge is contested including the definition and understanding of what constitutes religion. Rather than promote a singular understanding of 'religion', we encourage teachers to explore questions informed by multiple disciplines, and allow time and space for pupils to make sense of the subject knowledge for themselves. Following these two principles we seek to enable teachers to break down the boundaries of Islam as educational knowledge. The use of disciplinary questions to expand the parameters of what may be explored in the RE classroom is a prevailing theme in the debates about Worldviews.

The project

The project has two phases. Firstly, between 2020 and 2022, we brought 18 Primary and Secondary teachers from community, academies and faith schools together for half a day's workshop which for us served as focus groups. These were online due to Covid. After taught content about the background thinking to the Religion and Worldviews approach, we explored the ideas through practical resources designed for this purpose. These are presented below. Secondly, between 2022 and 2023 we visited 10 teachers in their schools and spent time discussing their curriculum and what aspect they would like to develop following the Religion and Worldviews approach. We conducted research on these topics and created 'moodboards' for each school, presenting the new subject knowledge and suggesting many practical teaching ideas.

We recruited teachers for the two phases through adverts in national newsletters for RE teachers. We also sent adverts to RE advisers to share with their networks. Most phase 1 teachers were known to us already, being well engaged in the RE world as either teachers or advisers. Only two of the phase 2 teachers were already known to us. Phase 2 teachers tended not to be involved with RE forums and were less likely to know about current discussions around the development of a Worldviews approach or to be aware of some of the critiques of contemporary practices in RE. Most phase 2 teachers made contact after we recorded an episode of the 'RE Podcast' (<https://www.therepodcast.co.uk/>) and asked for participants for the second phase.

First phase

The workshop for teachers introduced the idea of a Religion and Worldviews approach by contrasting it with a World Religions model. We showed the level of abstraction in teaching resources about the mosque, and then presented our own teaching material on 'the mosque', which is richly contextual and raises questions about freedom of speech, gender and feminism, change and diversity.

We presented these resources to teachers, consisting of information for teachers, lesson plans and resources for the classroom:

Dragons

For Lower- Upper Primary

Muhammad Ali

For Upper Primary- Middle Secondary

Mosques

For Middle- Upper Secondary

Malala Yousafzai

For Upper Secondary

Rumi

Whirling Dervishes
The Silk Road

Nation of Islam

The war in Vietnam
The Atlantic Slave Trade
Civil Rights movementThe Egyptian Mosque Movement
The idea of the First Mosque
Finsbury Park Mosque

The Taliban

Education and Islam
Muslim lives among the Pashtuns

Second phase

In the second phase, we engaged teachers in the development of a Worldviews approach at a far earlier stage of the process. Rather than present teachers with well-developed resources, as in phase 1, we started with teachers' own ideas and aims. We reviewed their current curriculum, whether it was based on a Locally Agreed Syllabus or another source, and discussed the approaches, frameworks and resources commonly used in the school. In this way, we engaged in conversations about how and where a Religion and Worldviews approach might fit into their existing curriculum from the outset. Three teachers were unaware of the debate around Worldviews, the CoRE Report and the Religion and Worldviews approach.

The resulting 'moodboards' created for each school present subject content and pedagogies that could be used to develop Worldviews in the classroom. With this format, we hoped to present resources that teachers could engage with in a variety of ways or adapt entirely. The particular areas of focus for each moodboard were chosen in collaboration with teachers as part of a discussion about how aspects of Muslim lives and experiences could be situated in the curriculum. The moodboards present researched information on the topic, summarised to suit busy teachers without losing key information, as well as videos, images, articles and other sources of information. Suggestions for teaching are given, such as starter, group and research tasks and questions to consider with pupils, drawn from different disciplinary areas. We found in the first phase that fully resourced lesson plans did not offer an easy purchase for teachers' critical engagement. Although invited to robustly critique the resources, teachers were rather polite! We suspect the resources give an air of completion and are not provisional enough for teachers to deconstruct into constituent parts. In conversation teachers could not see how to go beyond the resources to connect to their own knowledge or where the new material would fit into their existing curricula. We hope the moodboards represent not a finished product but a fluid set of suggestions, ready to be adapted into any context, to connect with teacher's own knowledge, existing curriculum and teaching styles. At the time of writing, the project is ongoing. We have produced these topics so far:

Birmingham and Islam	Cricket Post Second World War Immigration The invention of the Balti Curry
Submission and the Muslim Artist	Jinns and Angels Free will and submission Contemporary art and Muslim artists
Diversity within Islam through literature	Tayla Said A handful of Dates The Wedding of Zein Other Words for Home (Jasmine Warga)

Findings

The project has revealed both opportunities and challenges involved in the shift to Religion and Worldviews. Although teachers raised practical challenges, underlying these is a conceptualisation of Islam as a particular type of knowledge which can only be explored using certain pedagogies. Phase 1 conversations between teachers and researchers were wide-ranging. Teachers contributed to the group discussion by drawing on their own classroom experience and professional knowledge, but also sharing ideas, listening to others' suggestions and raising further questions and analyses. Phase 2 conversations were more focused on specific questions around curriculum development in one context. These different settings revealed different types of questions raised about teaching Islam and a Worldviews approach.

Phase 1 teachers were more likely to raise questions about subject content and pedagogy, for example:

- Is not the choice of subject knowledge in a Religion and Worldviews approach too random?
- Who gets to choose what to leave out?
- What are the most important facts that children should learn about Islam?
- What is the status of Muslims themselves in deciding the content of the curriculum?
- How should the content of the curriculum be approached in pedagogical terms?
- Is it legitimate to encourage or support critical questions about Islam?

Phase 2 teachers tended to ask questions about the feasibility and structural challenges of moving towards a Religion and Worldviews app, for example:

- How can unfamiliar content about Islam be incorporated into existing programmes of study?
- How can a Worldviews approach and a Locally Agreed Syllabus be reconciled?
- Is it possible to teach a Worldviews approach to Islam alongside an existing Agreed Syllabus?
- What are the limits and boundaries of what can be considered Islam?
- How can teaching about Islam through Worldviews be used to support other areas of the curriculum?

In both phases, teachers were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about exploring a Worldviews approach to teaching Islam. The lack of clarity around what constitutes worldviews was raised as a concern by 60% of teachers in the first project, but this did not dilute their excitement about adopting a new approach to teaching Islam. In all focus groups and the four workshops, we began by asking teachers why they were participating and what they hoped to gain from their involvement. All teachers said they hoped to find out more about Worldviews but the majority also hoped to refresh their teaching and to introduce topics and pedagogies that were more challenging and more engaging than their current resources.

The agreed syllabus and subject content

Discussion with teachers in phase 1 highlights several challenges to moving to a Religion and Worldviews approach from the current approach. In this first phase, a recurring issue was the status and legitimacy of the core content as it is found in the Locally Agreed Syllabus. A common response was that Worldviews provided an interesting and valuable way to engage pupils in learning about Islam but only if it ran alongside the existing Agreed Syllabus content or which conformed to a World Religions approach. In one workshop, teachers discussed how the lessons about the Egyptian Mosque movement could be used to initiate debates about the role of women in Islam, the way that communities used their mosques differently or the concept of Muslim feminism. One teacher offered that she believed her pupils would ‘really, really love this’ but then asked for advice about how she could ‘cover the basics, like what Muslims feel about a mosque and what the inside of a mosque looks like because it’s really important that they (pupils) know that stuff as well’. The question of who identifies ‘core’ learning content was raised in three of the focus groups and in each case prompted a lively discussion around teachers’ authority to decide learning content for themselves. Despite seeing potential in the new Islam as a Worldview teaching material, a lingering concern was voiced by 50% of teachers in each group, that the variety of foci was too ‘scattergun’ or ‘just up to the whim of the teacher’, reflecting the belief that a sanctioned, official, prior set of essential information about Islam exists and has validity.

Another concern among phase 1 teachers arose from their own perceived lack of subject knowledge and time to develop new materials. Phase 1 attendees were a self-selecting group who acknowledged the value of a critical and engaging exploration of Islam. However, they did not express confidence that teachers could create such resources for themselves.

Conversations with individual teachers in phase 2 have raised a different set of issues. We did not start with phase 2 teachers’ Agreed Syllabuses, but rather what they would like their pupils to learn about Islam, an open question that has led to a wide variety of content and approaches in the resulting moodboards. Despite this offer of bespoke planning, teachers remained anxious that the new materials would take them too far away from their Agreed Syllabus. Some because they believed the school had paid for the Agreed Syllabus and should therefore use it, and others due to a general sense of not having permission to stray too far from a sanctioned form of Islam. Suggested new content such as Muslim artists, design, architecture or stories raised concerns that the new learning would somehow ‘not be RE’ anymore, and therefore illegitimate for study.

Essentialisation

In conversation with both phase 1 and 2 teachers, a sense of Islam as an essentialised phenomenon often seemed to lie behind their comments and questions. Teachers expressed reluctance to bring an exploration of complexity in Muslim lives to their pupils, even if they found the topic in question very interesting themselves. The cause of these concerns seemed to be deviation from an accepted idea of what ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ are. In a phase 1 session, six teachers considered lessons plans for primary-age pupils on the Persian poet Rumi. There was consensus that the work of Rumi is a valuable part of the Muslim canon and that the themes in his work speak universally across cultures. However, three teachers expressed concerns about Rumi standing as an example of an Islamic worldview, as his mystical Sufism is not representative of the dominant form of Sunni Islam in the UK today. The concern stemmed not from Rumi and Sufism’s irrelevance, but from the fear that Muslims who identify as Sunni might object to the object of study. Four teachers also queried if Rumi’s life was a suitable topic for the classroom due to his attitudes to sexuality, the sensuality in his poems and his development of mystical practices, all of which could be seen to challenge conventional norms. Teachers felt Rumi could ‘be confusing for pupils’ or learning about him ‘could muddy the waters’, referring to the challenge of knowing about different groups within Islam, including the Sufi path. A phase 1 primary teacher noted,

I do know that, it’s really important that they (pupils) understand that all Muslims are not the same, it’s important that they know that they know they (Muslims) don’t all believe exactly the same thing, but we have so little time, where we would we have the time to any of that, to be able to explain what Rumi really believed, it would just be too much. Maybe in secondary, that’s the place to do it.

An essentialised notion of Islam was also evident in conversation with phase 2 teacher. Some teachers were concerned that subject content which diverges from, and even challenges, an essentialised model of Islam was not appropriate content for the classroom. One teacher solved the ‘problem’ that a contextual, historically rooted, exploration of Muslim lives would not be seen as legitimate for the RE classroom, by presenting the teaching materials as a cross-curricular collaboration with Geography. With the protective label of Geography, a study of Muslim lives covering immigration from South Asia, migration within the UK, Islamophobia, changes to British Muslim cultures, the impact of housing, schooling and sport and the evolution of South Asian food and contemporary Muslim communities in Birmingham was possible. This solution was arrived at during a discussion where questions such as ‘is this religion?’, ‘is this Islam’ and is ‘this RE?’ were raised repeatedly. All teachers’ baseline understanding of ‘Islam’ is grounded in the World Religions approach, as found in Locally Agreed Syllabuses and textbooks, where religions all possess a sacred book, key beliefs, special places, important people and so on. Outside these parameters, anxieties about legitimacy and propriety are raised. We suggest these anxieties reflect an essentialised form of Islam that is perceived to be ‘correct’, raising concerns when diverse Muslim lives and contexts or different groups within Islam come into view.

Controversial issues

Only a minority of teachers in both phases were initially prepared to consider teaching issues they considered to be controversial. All teachers engaged positively with a Religion

and Worldviews approach but within a wider context of concerns about controversy and offence. Phase 1 resources were developed in advance, and all but six of the teachers expressed reluctance to utilise those which they believed might cause offence because they differed from or challenged orthodox Muslim narratives or principles. Potentially offensive issues cited were Islamic fundamentalism, female genital mutilation, extremism, homosexuality and women's dress.

A number of issues were raised that are not controversial in themselves but which teachers believed might be offensive to Muslim pupils or their parents. For example, the resources on 'the Mosque' cover alternative narratives about the dating and geography of the earliest mosques. All but three of phase 1 teachers expressed reservations about suggestions that the Quran could be interpreted in different ways or that there are different schools of thought in relation to the Qur'an's historicity. Teachers' most common reservations were related to any view that differed from an orthodox narrative, either fearing this would be confusing for pupils, or that offering alternative perspectives would offend some Muslim pupils.

A minority of teachers explicitly stated that they were concerned that the content used in a worldviews approach to Islam might be critical of Muslim practices or expect teachers to teach lessons where negative interpretations of particular Muslims or Muslim communities were expressed. The fear of offending Muslims was often coupled with the caveat that it was more important that pupils 'learn the basics'

Islam as educational knowledge

We have outlined areas of challenge to the implementation of a Religion and Worldviews approach to the teaching of Islam. The biggest challenge is not about practicalities or teachers' capacity, although these are issues, it is in the way religions, including Islam, are conceptualised in the World Religions approach. The World Religions approach is not only reified in Agreed Syllabuses, it is reinforced and perpetuated by the surrounding ecosystem of textbooks, teachers' resources and training.

Many of the questions and challenges raised by teachers in this project are echoed in debates among researchers. Teachers' concerns about their own lack of subject knowledge lead to the greater concern as to who decides what constitutes legitimate learning content. Our analysis of the anxieties, objections and concerns raised by teachers in this project suggests deeper epistemological barriers to an engagement with a Religion and Worldviews approach, in relation to Islam, and presumably in relation to other religious traditions. As we have noted in this article, what teachers perceive as Islam is a specific form of educational knowledge which is not only reduced and limited, but which teachers fear they do not have permission to stray from.

As Bernstein notes, '[e]ducational knowledge is a major regulator of the structure of experience' (Bernstein 1975, 85). In this study, we see a regulation of what teachers and pupils are permitted to experience, or to know, about Islam, within the World Religions approach. Islam as educational knowledge, as we have shown, does not permit a contextual, critical analysis of Muslim lives. The delegitimising of context and diversity in learning about Islam is found in the often-expressed anxiety of teachers when they say, 'is this Islam'? A fixed, essentialised view of what Islam is, means boundaries cannot expand, or horizons widen.

In many ways, the views of teachers in this project mirrored the findings of other critiques and studies (Hughes 2015). Research by D. Smith, Nixon, and Pearce (2018) on

essentialism in Religious Education also found an essentialised conception of religion held by many teachers. In this research, teachers perceived ‘true’ religion to be benign and peaceful, and any other presentation to be ‘false’ religion. In his analysis of ‘Muslimness’ as a form of knowledge constructed in a Danish school, Buchardt describes how essentialised social classifications are employed (Buchardt 2010). In RE, as we have shown, Islam as a form of educational knowledge is both essentialised, dehistoricised and decontextualised, reinforced by pedagogies which resist attempts to disrupt this formulation.

A recurring theme in group and one-to-one discussions was the establishment of perceived alternatives; on the one hand, the complexity of Muslim lives explored through various contexts, and, on the other hand, an ordered and legitimate study found in the Agreed Syllabus. In this dynamic, the possibilities for rich and connected study enabled by a Religion and Worldviews approach are experienced as arbitrary and the World Religions approach as potentially dull, but at least coherent and safe. However, successive Ofsted reports and other analyses of RE over the years have identified a lack of coherence in RE syllabus design, limiting pupils’ ability to obtain a progressive and increasingly rich understanding over the years. For example, the 2013 Ofsted report into the subject describes the curriculum as overcrowded, incoherent and confusing, leaving pupils with scant subject knowledge from their years of RE (Ofsted 2013).

Barbara Wintersgill (2017) notes that coherence and progression do not seem to have been the main drivers in designing RE syllabuses, meaning that topics are disconnected. The authors state, ‘the content of the RE curriculum generally lacks coherence and continuity How do students build on what they have learnt about three or four religions in primary school as they embark on a ‘philosophy and ethics’ course, or even a gospel study, in Year 7? How can students use their learning about Judaism when they were in Y2 for making sense of Buddhism in Y7–9?’ (Wintersgill 2017, 8). Conroy’s wide-ranging, multidisciplinary excavation into the subject, published in 2013, also raises the question of coherence, finding no overall purpose or vision for the subject (Conroy et al. 2013). The authors of this study found two heads of RE in two ‘adjacent’ (36) British state schools who articulated different aims and intentions for the subject they managed, led and taught, leading the authors to describe RE in English schools as a ‘strange social practice’ (37). The most recent Ofsted review into the subject concludes that ‘RE has not kept pace with the academic and intellectual developments that might help pupils to make sense of our complex multi-religious and multi-secular society’ (Ofsted 2021, section 3: ‘Developments in RE’).

In this same report, Ofsted, citing (Conroy et al. 2013) investigation, suggest that a path to curriculum coherence in RE lies in making sense not only of ‘substantive’ knowledge but also ‘ways of knowing’, which can also be termed ‘disciplinary knowledge’ (Ofsted 2021, section 7: ‘Curriculum Progression’). It is proposed that pupils will be able to ‘know and remember more’ if the information they learn is considered as part of a wider whole rather than atomised and unmoored from times, places and people (Ofsted 2021, section 7: ‘Curriculum Progression’). Likewise, the coherence we offer teachers through our Islam as a Worldview resources is founded in disciplinary knowledge, whether historical, theological, geographical or sociological. Our Worldviews resources enable pupils to situate their new learning against a backdrop of the world they live in and are making sense of. As well as the potential for a critical analysis where necessary, such as the white supremacy that Muhammad Ali had to

navigate, or the Taliban's view of women that Malala Yousufzai opposed, is a sense of knowledge itself as provisional and constantly created. Through engaging with different interpretations and responses, pupils encounter the ways humans make sense of complicated realities.

Ofsted suggests that over the years, 'the very idea of "knowledge in RE" itself has been avoided because claims made about both religion and non-religion are contested, even though many educators recognise that the contention itself is part of the knowledge content of RE' (Ofsted 2021, section 7: 'Curriculum Progression'). We propose that the sense of coherence offered by the educational knowledge of religion in the World Religions approach is itself a construct which breaks down rapidly on contact with reality, and as such can be critically examined. The conceptualisation of Worldviews developed in this project starts with the experiences and lives of people, in doing so it emphasises not just the geographical and chorological context in which people live but also their agency (Panjwani 2021). Thus, the Religion and Worldviews approach enables the study of Islam that is non-essentialised, historically rooted and moves beyond the World Religions paradigm.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust.

Notes on contributors

Kate Christopher is a consultant, teacher and lecturer with a specialism in Religious Education and Islam.

Lynn Revell is a lecturer in Religious Education and writes and publishes in the areas of Islam, extremism and radicalisation.

ORCID

Lynn Revell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3133-3276>

References

- Barnes, P. 2022. "The Commission on Religious Education, Worldviews and the Future of Religious Education." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 70 (1): 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1871590>.
- Berglund, J., and B. Gent. 2017. "Believing, Belonging and Behaving: Some Considerations When Teaching About Islam." *Professional Reflection: Theory and Practice*. https://www.su.se/poly_fs/1.385561.1526389353!/menu/standard/file/BBB%20JB%20%26%20BG%20%282017%29.pdf.
- Bernstein, B., ed. 1975. *Class, Codes and Control (Vol 3): Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*. London: Routledge.

- Bucharadt, M. 2010. "When Muslim-Ness is Pedagogied.'Religion' and Culture as Knowledge and Social Classification in the Classroom." *British Journal of Religious Education* 32 (3): 259–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2010.498614>.
- Commission on Religious Education. 2018. "Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward." <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>.
- Conroy, J., D. Lundie, R. Davis, V. Baumfield, P. Barnes, T. Gallagher, K. Lowden, N. Bourque, and K. Wenell. 2013. *Does Religious Education Work?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Cooling, T. 2020a. "Worldviews in Religious Education: Autobiographical Reflections on the Commission on Religious Education in England Final Report." *British Journal of Religious Education* 42 (4): 403–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497>.
- Cooling, T. 2020b. *Worldviews in Religious Education*. London: Theos.
- Hannam, P., and G. Biesta. 2019. "Religious Education, a Matter of Understanding? Reflections on the Final Report of the Commission on Religious Education." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 40 (1): 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2018.1554330>.
- Hughes, A. 2015. *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity*. London: Equinox.
- McLoughlin, S. 2006. "Islam(s) in Context: Orientalism and the Anthropology of Muslim Societies and Cultures." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28 (3): 272–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617670701712539>.
- Ofsted. 2013. "Religious Education: Realising the Potential." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/religious-education-realising-the-potential>.
- Ofsted. 2021. "Research Review Series: Religious Education." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education>.
- Panjwani, F. 2005. "Agreed Syllabi and Unagreed Values: Religious Education and Missed Opportunities for Fostering Social Cohesion." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 53 (3): 375–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2005.00301.x>.
- Panjwani, F. 2021. "Teaching About Islam – Insights from Hermeneutics." In *Islamic Religious Education*, edited by L. Franken and B. Gent, 278. London: Routledge.
- Panjwani, F., and L. Revell. 2018. "Religious Education and Hermeneutics: The Case of Teaching About Islam." *British Journal of Religious Education* 40 (3): 286–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1493269>.
- REC. 2018. *Commission on Religious Education CoRE Report*. London: Religious Education Council.
- Revell, L. 2015. "Reading Religious Education Text Books: Islam, Liberalism and the Limits of Orientalism." In *History, Remembrance and Religious Education*, edited by S. Parker, R. Freathy, and L. Francis, 167–186. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Salih, T. 1966. *The Wedding of Zein*. London: Quartet Books.
- Sells, M. 2003. "The Wedding of Zein: Islam Through a Modern Novel." In *Teaching Islam*, edited by B. M. Wheeler, 145–167. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D., G. Nixon, and J. Pearce. 2018. "Bad Religion as False Religion: An Empirical Study of UK Religious Education Teachers' Essentialist Religious Discourse." *Religions* 9 (11): 1–19. <file:///Users/lynnrevell/Downloads/religions-09-00361.pdf>.
- Smith, W. C. 1991. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Stenberg, L., and P. Wood, eds. 2022. *What is Islamic Studies? European and North American Approaches to a Contested Field*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Tharani, A. 2020. "The Worldview Project – Discussion Papers." Culham St Gabriels. <https://religionseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Worldview-Project.pdf>.
- Thobani, S. 2010. *Islam in the School Curriculum*. London: Continuum.
- Wintersgill, B. 2017. "Big Ideas for Religious Education." University of Exeter. <https://bit.ly/219tTYW>.
- Zembylas, M. 2023. "Decolonising Religious Education Through the Prism of Affect Theory: Analytical Perspectives for Approaching Islamophobia in Curriculum and Pedagogy." *British Journal of Religious Education* 45 (1): 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2022.2042672>.