

Research Space

Journal article

Paradigm shift or shuffling the content?

Cooling, T.

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Reflections on, and suggestions for, development of the Commission on RE Final Report.

Trevor Cooling

Introduction

Following the publication of the Commission on RE Final Report (CoRE) in 2018, the notion of worldview has become the talk of the RE town. CoRE defined worldview as:

..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. A person's worldview is likely to influence and be influenced by their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments (CoRE, 2018, 4)

Worldview was, however, only one tool in the commissioners' proposed new toolbox for RE. A second essential element was the outlining of a National Entitlement, which laid out the characteristics of RE that all pupils should experience if they are to properly understand the significance of worldview for human life.

CoRE's claim is that 'everyone has a worldview' (26). Furthermore it proposes that a distinction should be made between institutional/organised worldviews and personal/individual worldviews (72-73). The purpose of the newly envisaged subject is both 'to enable each pupil to understand reflect on and develop their own personal worldview' (5) and to 'understand the worldviews of others' (26). Finally, probably the most commented upon recommendation was that pupils should learn about both religious and non-religious worldviews.

These suggestions were meant to provoke a paradigm shift in how young people in England experienced learning in the RE classroom. But did CoRE really herald that or was it just another shuffling of the content that RE teachers preside over? In this article, I offer some personal reflections on this question.

A Brief Autobiographical Reflection

As Chair of the Religious Education Council (REC), the body which set up CoRE, I was privileged to sit in on the meetings as one of the Secretariat team. CoRE itself was, it is important to stress, independent of the REC and the Secretariat did not participate in the commissioners' decision-making process. Personally I was intrigued to observe the emergence of the worldview concept as central to the commissioners' thinking since it was an idea that had been part of my academic life over very many years.

I first came across the idea in 1972 through my encounter with the philosophy of science when an undergraduate on a biology degree. That blew my mind. As a young scientist I had always naively

assumed that what I learnt in science was straightforwardly the case. What I realised from this philosophy course was that scientists' understanding of the world is not just a straight reading-off of the facts, but involves a process of interpretation rooted in their basic beliefs. But none of the scholars that I came across at that time used the word *worldview*.

A few years later whilst teaching, I studied for first an MA and then a PhD where I came across the notion of Christian worldview in the Dutch Reformed tradition of Christian theology. This had a massive influence on my thinking as someone who wanted to integrate my faith and my work and became a central tenet of my future academic work. I was particularly influenced by the work of Michael Polanyi (1958, 1966), and his use of the ideas of personal and tacit knowledge. Polanyi was a Hungarian born high-flying chemist, who switched to philosophy of science because of his own experience of the abuse of science by fascist and communist regimes. For me he put the nail in the coffin of my assumed hard line between subjectivity and objectivity that underpinned my unreflective view of both scientific and theological truth. I had been sensitized to the role of interpretation in human knowledge (Cooling, 1994, 2010).

The notion of worldview therefore led me to conclude that, in a world where diversity is a feature of everyday life, it is incumbent upon RE teachers to equip young people both to take responsibility for their own worldview development and to cope in a civil and informed fashion with the fact that others understand matters differently because they have been shaped by different worldviews. This seemed to me to be a just and inclusive approach to RE in the context of pluralism. My academic story therefore resonates strongly with the position taken by CoRE.

Worldview: A Developing Idea

Not everyone, however, is as convinced as I am! Some viewed CoRE *solely* as an attempt to broaden the scope of RE to include non-religious worldviews. Their fear was that the breadth of content would become unmanageable and the subject would become superficial and lack academic rigour. A few even suspected a secularist take-over. Others saw worldview as a hopelessly confused concept with the unhelpful connotation that we all belong to warring tribes. Finally many viewed it as a heavily cognitive idea that makes each pupil into 'a thinking thing – a cognitive machine' and that leads to an educational approach which relies on 'a steady diet of ideas fed somewhat intravenously into the mind through lines of propositions and information' (Smith, 2009, 42). All of these are legitimate concerns, but they are not reasons for rejecting the CoRE proposals. Rather they are pitfalls to avoid in implementing them. There are a number of points that can be made in response.

First, CoRE argues that worldviews are 'complex, diverse and plural', 'that they have changed over time' (6) and that there are 'interactions and blurred boundaries' (73) between them. CoRE rejects the notion that worldviews are inherently propositional in nature claiming that they have 'emotional, affiliative (belonging) and behavioural dimensions' and should not be reduced simply to 'belief and practice' (72). The problem with earlier approaches to RE, CoRE says, is that this reality has been largely ignored, which has 'inadvertently reinforced stereotypes about religions, rather than challenging them' (5). In contrast, CoRE urges a focus on the varied, lived experience of adherents within their communities who express identity with a particular institutionalised worldview (76). The pitfall to be avoided here is presenting pupils with stereotypes of worldviews as sealed boxes containing clearly defined beliefs that can be straightforwardly described and are entirely separate

from and in conflict with each other. This is a distortion that results in people talking about, for example, *the* Islamic worldview and even suggesting that the job of RE is to line up these packaged worldviews before our pupils so that they know about them and possibly might even choose one of them. CoRE is suggesting something very different.

Secondly, the question of the academic rigour of RE is attracting comment at present. Sometimes it is seen as relating to the *amount* of content studied and sometimes as the *depth of study* of that content. Generally this substantive content is perceived as being comprised of what CoRE calls organised or institutional worldviews. More recent discussion has focused on the concept of disciplinarity (e.g. Kueh, 2020). What is meant by this is not particular substantive content, but the academic discourse that is used to approach and understand that content. This is a very important point that I will return in the final section.

Thirdly, the critics of CoRE have not taken enough account of the fact that it talks about both institutional/organised worldviews and individual/personal worldviews. In my experience it is the former that we RE teachers tend to worry about; the stuff we teach. But CoRE emphasises personal worldview as well, defining it as ‘an individual’s own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews’ (26). This has huge implications for the teaching of RE.

Implications of CoRE for the RE Classroom

Michael Grimmitt is one of the giants in the history of recent RE. He was troubled by the idea of the RE curriculum as ‘a commodity which the government could *deliver* to teachers in schools who subsequently would *implement* and *deliver* it to pupils’ (2000, 8). His alternative vision of learning was that pupils ‘should evaluate their understanding of religion in personal terms and evaluate their understanding of self in religious terms’ (15). For Grimmitt good pedagogy is all about promoting an educational interaction between the pupils and the content they are studying.

From Grimmitt’s perspective, there is still pedagogical work to be done by CoRE since the nature of the interaction between the institutional worldviews studied and the personal worldviews of the pupils is not addressed. CoRE states that, ‘It is one of the core tasks of education to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview’ (CoRE, 2018, 5), but this is not developed. So we are left wondering what this might mean.

Echoing David Aldridge (2015), my proposal is that RE will need to adopt a hermeneutical approach if it is to do justice to CoRE’s aspired paradigm shift. Hermeneutics is ‘the theory that everything is a matter of interpretation’ (Caputo, 2018, 4). It is the recognition that no-one can occupy a worldview-free position of pure reason. By adopting a hermeneutical approach, RE can address Grimmitt’s question of the nature of the interaction between the institutional worldview content studied and the pupils’ personal worldviews. This, I suggest, is the very heart of the RE teacher’s responsibility.

In order to illustrate this, I will draw briefly on the notion of responsible hermeneutics as developed by the theologian Anthony Thiselton (2009). Responsible hermeneutics, I suggest, provides the disciplinary knowledge that should be the focus of RE and which supports the subject’s claim to be academically rigorous. It encapsulates the aspirations of CoRE’s National Entitlement. Thiselton’s

work is focused on interpreting biblical text, but is a case study of wider discussions of hermeneutical approaches to religion and worldviews more generally. Responsible hermeneutics addresses the question ‘exactly what are we doing when we read, understand and apply texts?’ (2009, 4). Generalised, this question becomes ‘what exactly is going on when a pupil encounters worldviews in the classroom?’

Thiselton argues that every reader should be aware that they approach the text with a ‘pre-understanding’, which he describes as ‘an initial and provisional stage in the journey towards understanding something more fully’ (12). Applied to the classroom, this is echoing the widely-accepted hermeneutical insight that every pupil and teacher approaches text from the vantage point of their own worldview. There is, therefore, no such person as a purely-objective, fully-neutral, critical learner. In order to be critical, objective and pluralistic, it is essential to be reflexive about one’s own pre-understanding and the impact of that on one’s reception of another person’s worldview. This applies to both pupil and teacher.

Responsible hermeneutics also highlights the importance of taking into account two horizons; namely that of the worldview being studied and that of the participants (teachers and pupils) in the learning process. Understood pedagogically, it emphasises three academic responsibilities. The first is to rigorous study of the knowledge being taught. The second is to rigorous reflection on the contemporary context so that its influence on the pre-understandings of teachers and pupils is recognised. The third is to rigorous interrogation of the potential interaction between these two horizons so that the pupils (and teachers) benefit in their own personal worldview and spiritual development. In this way the study of Religion and Worldviews will contribute to pupils’ academic understanding, their personal development and their growth as active citizens. Early examples of how such hermeneutical pedagogy is fleshed out in classroom work when teaching Christianity are offered by Freathy et al (2018) and Pett (2016) and in RE more generally by Larkin et al (2020). The task now is to hone CoRE’s aspirations. I am glad to report that the REC is attempting to do just that in its current project work.

Conclusion.

Is CoRE then just another shuffling of curriculum content? I suggest not. Rather it represents a paradigm shift in how we approach that content. It focuses attention on the rigour of the interpretative process that takes place when humans encounter religious and non-religious worldviews rather than simply on learning about those worldviews. That is why the National Entitlement looks like it does and is not just a list of substantive content. However we are in the early stages of working out what that means. But if CoRE is successful, my expectation is that RE will be a very different experience for our pupils ten years from now.

If you would like to read more about the study referred to in this article, please see:

Cooling, T. (2020). ‘Worldview in religious education: autobiographical reflections on The Commission on Religious Education in England final report.’ *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42 (4): 403-414. DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497)

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Trevor Cooling is Professor of Christian Education at Canterbury Christ Church University and Chair of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. The views expressed in this article are personal and should not be taken as the policy of the REC. Trevor can be contacted at trevor.cooling@canterbury.ac.uk.