

Christian theology and school Religious Education (RE): exploring the relationship

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Abstract

This article examines the place of theology in school RE in the light of the 2018 Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) report. We outline the history of theology's ambivalent relationship with RE and then offer some positive implications and possibilities arising from CoRE's new emphasis on worldview.

Keywords

Commission on Religious Education, National Entitlement, teaching the Bible, theology in schools, World Religions paradigm, worldview

In September 2018, the Commission on Religious Education in England (CoRE) launched its final report.¹ Established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales two years earlier, the 14 commissioners were charged with producing a 'game-changer' report that made RE fit for purpose in twenty-first-century, government-maintained schools in England.² In this article we explore the potential relationship between Christian theology and the new vision for RE outlined in CoRE.

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Context

RE in England looks back to the 1944 Education Act as its historically significant legislation, which made it compulsory for all pupils in all government-maintained schools. The unquestioned assumption then was that RE was an induction into the civic Christian faith of the nation. The main challenge was to define the content to be taught, given the interdenominational rivalry of the time. To that end, the law required that this content must be non-denominational, except in those church schools whose foundation was linked to a particular denomination. The resulting syllabuses were based on Bible knowledge, this being the one thing that was regarded as denominationally non-controversial.

One innovation of the 1944 Act was the Agreed Syllabus structure, whereby each local authority was required to establish a conference to agree the RE syllabus for schools in that local authority. Each conference had four committees: Church of England, other denominations, teachers and local authority representatives. Each committee had one vote and agreement by all four committees was required for a syllabus to be adopted; therefore, each had a potential veto. This structure remains in place today, although the 'other denominations' committee has evolved into the 'other denominations and religions' committee. (A contested aspect of this structure is the exclusion of Humanist representatives, given their active involvement in RE over many years.)

The place of theology

One of the enduring debates has been the role of Christian theology in RE. Post-1944, it was largely off limits because of the non-denominational legal requirement. Then, following research by Ronald Goldman,³ its educational appropriateness was also questioned on psychological grounds because it was seen as too challenging for young minds. The notion of conceptual readiness became a cornerstone in curriculum design and abstract theology was therefore kicked upstairs to the sixth form, if not into the attic.

In the 1970s, a major paradigm shift took place in school RE. Seminal was the publication of Schools Council Working Paper 36,⁴ which advocated a non-confessional, world religions approach to replace the confessional Christian approach. This, now often called the World Religions paradigm, has since dominated. Again, theology was often deemed inappropriate in world religions RE. There were two main reasons for this. First, it was considered to be a confessional activity of the community of faith and therefore inappropriate in an objective and phenomenological educational approach.⁵ Second, there was the lurking persistence of the psychologists' concern about readiness. The study of abstract doctrine was still seen as an 18+ activity.

This rejection of theology in RE was challenged in the mid-1980s by an approach called 'Concept Cracking'.⁶ This argued against the prevailing psychological notion of readiness and offered, in its place, the pedagogical notion of

a spiral curriculum where any concept can be taught to any child of any age so long as the child's stage of development is taken into account. Employing the idea of powerful knowledge, the importance of understanding key concepts such as salvation and incarnation was highlighted if pupils were to be able to make sense of the phenomenon of Christianity. It advocated a non-confessional, educational study of Christian creedal doctrines that stayed the right side of the non-denominational legal requirement but went beyond the mere accumulation of Bible knowledge. Concept Cracking itself was redeveloped in the currently influential *Understanding Christianity* resource pioneered by the Church of England.⁷ Teachers now routinely introduce young children to the study of ideas such as incarnation and salvation, although there is continuing resistance from those who still regard this shift as inappropriate confessionalism in a world religions approach.

The impact of the Commission

The recent CoRE report has changed the nature of the discussion. It approached RE from a totally different perspective by challenging the prevailing World Religions paradigm itself.⁸

The starting point of a world religions approach is the existence of different religions that pupils need to learn about through objective and critical study if they are to be religiously literate. The curriculum is then too easily conceived as a number of boxes, each with a different religion inside and whose contents are distilled into a form that pupils can assimilate in the limited time available. Christianity is but one box, albeit in most people's eyes the biggest, and inside that box, alongside other things such as church architecture, is theology. The problems identified with this model include: (1) too many boxes to cope with and resultant disputes about which boxes should be included and their relative sizes; (2) the distorted nature of the distillations that pupils are taught and, in particular, an essentialist representation that does not reflect the diversity of real lived experience of adherents within any religion; and (3) the lack of attention to the educational benefits this approach offers pupils, increasing numbers of whom identify as being of no religion.

CoRE proposed a quite different paradigm by using worldview, not world religions, as its signature idea. CoRE's fundamental premise is that to be human is to seek to make sense of our experience of the world. In doing that, CoRE argued that everyone draws on a worldview unique to them, which shapes how they interpret their experience of the world. This notion is described as personal worldview. This personal human activity of making sense is influenced by organized worldviews, which are often expressed through institutions such as the Church. These organized worldviews can be religious or non-religious and are the phenomena that are the focus of study in the world religions approach. However, in the proposed new worldview approach, RE is not shaped by these organized worldviews, as in the world religions approach, but by a study of how humans

make sense of the world through engaging in worldview formation as they encounter these religious and non-religious organized worldviews.

In order to make this new approach accessible for teachers, many of whom are not subject specialists, CoRE proposed a National Entitlement that lays out the key features of this human meaning-making process. It is this, CoRE argues, that should form the framework for curriculum development. The proposed National Entitlement has nine key statements on what pupils should be taught, of which one example is as follows:

The ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other, have some shared beliefs and practices as well as differences, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition.⁹

The study of the contextually shaped, lived experience of people as interpreters of organized worldviews is emphasized as the content most likely to be appropriate since it illustrates the fuzzy edges and internal diversity of organized worldviews. This contrasts with the neatly packaged, abstracted distillation of key features that is characteristic of a world religions approach. The overall aim of this worldview approach is that pupils emerge from their school education having an academically robust understanding of the role of worldview in human life, a sound knowledge of the part played in that by organized religious and non-religious worldviews, an ability to be critically reflexive about their own personal worldview, and the willingness to interact well with those who think differently from them.

Not surprisingly, these proposals have provoked debate. Many have welcomed them as offering a fit-for-purpose approach for the twenty-first century that will enable all pupils to benefit from this important subject. Some, however, have serious reservations.¹⁰ There are indeed legitimate questions to be asked of this shift to worldview. Will it make the subject relativistic and subjectivist? Will the impression be given that there is nothing that is common to any given worldview, for example to most Christians? Are worldviews just a human construction? Of particular relevance here is the concern that the new approach will dilute the religious content, further marginalizing theology. We will, therefore, focus on the implications of the worldview shift for the role of theology in RE.

Theology in a post-CoRE approach to RE

In the world religions approach, the danger is that in an objective, phenomenological approach to religion, theology becomes akin to the study of dead butterflies pinned by naturalists into a showcase – a display of abstract propositions to be represented by pupils in a catechetical-like fashion in tests. Can the worldview approach overcome this aridness without lapsing into inappropriately denominational or confessional teaching?

One possibility is relevant for the thousands of state-funded religious character schools where the ethos is, by law, determined by the Church. In this type of

school, a theological worldview can legitimately shape the educational vision. An example of such is the Church of England vision statement *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*.¹¹ Inspired by Professor David Ford's theological work on wisdom and interfaith relations, its approach illustrates the deployment of public, biblical theology in the service of state education. This offers a distinctive vision for a church foundation school as an institution serving a civic function for a local community (not just for Christian families). Here, theology has a legitimate, shaping role in articulating a Christian worldview that respects the educational needs of its plural clientele. Much more could be said about the implications of this shaping role for theology for the curriculum (including RE), but now is not the place.¹² The important point to note is that this theological approach is not simply the assertion of first order theological propositions, but rather a responsive, theological dialogue with the educational requirements of a particular type of school.

Such a shaping role for theology is not, however, appropriate in other state-funded schools, which are secular in character and where RE is supposed to be objective, critical and pluralistic. If the worldview approach is adopted by these, what possible role is there for theology? We suggest at least two.

First, there are strands of Christian theology that embrace the notion of worldview and that can be a conversation partner with RE. Notable is the Dutch Reformed tradition,¹³ which has been influential both in North America¹⁴ and in England.¹⁵ It might therefore seem that this is fruitful soil for cultivating a theological conversation with the new developments in school RE.

Todd Weir,¹⁶ however, raises concerns about this theological tradition, arguing that its concept of worldview originates in a nineteenth-century context of ideological conflict between Enlightenment naturalism and fundamentalist Christianity. Weir worries that it too easily descends into a tribal mentality that sees the Christian worldview as something that has to be fiercely defended with a view to securing its dominance.¹⁷ With its emphasis on absolute truth expressed through carefully crafted doctrinal propositions, allegiance to which is taken as evidence of a biblically formed Christian mind, it can become an aggressively apologetic approach that would be quite inappropriate in schools. Weir's point is that this understanding of worldview does not embrace the pragmatism, pluralism and dialogical approach that is essential for education in liberal democracies. It is simply focused on the assertion of its own worldview.

This fundamentalist mindset certainly exists. However, Weir's analysis ignores more recent manifestations that seek to engage positively with the experience of pluralism in the modern world. Such approaches moderate their commitment to the idea of Christian worldview by embracing a critical-realist rather than a naïve realist epistemological approach that values epistemic humility, by adopting a pluralist rather than a Christendom stance with regard to the public role of theology and by emphasizing a more holistic understanding of Christian worldview that values the affective as well as the cognitive.¹⁸ These developments have resulted from the experience of Reformed theologians seeking to engage with the

realities of the society they inhabit. Such developments have a lot to offer those in school RE who are developing the new worldview approach.¹⁹

Second, there are instances where theology can move from being a conversation partner in developing a worldview approach to having a more significant, defining role in improving the quality of RE. We refer specifically to the use of biblical text in schools. As we have seen, the study of biblical text was central to confessional, post-1944 RE. However, with the advent of ideas about readiness and then the multifaith, phenomenological approach, biblical text all but disappeared from the curriculum. Where it remains, it is often poorly taught. Here we consider how drawing on the seminal work of Anthony Thiselton²⁰ on biblical hermeneutics might shape how students in the latter part of their secondary education experience the Bible.

Thiselton's work is embedded in philosophical and theological hermeneutics. His notion of responsible hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of worldview (or horizon) and its impact on interpretation. He stresses the importance of taking account of two horizons: that of the interpreter and that of the interpreted text. In responsible hermeneutics, there are two key scholarly responsibilities. The first is to acknowledge the pre-understandings that the scholar brings with them, so that these are transparent and do not overly prejudice the interpretation of the text studied. This requires reflexive, self-critical awareness and epistemic humility. The second is to seek to understand the text on its own terms and in its own context, seeking to represent it as fairly as possible before making critical judgement. This requires the exercise of the scholarly attributes of careful reading and listening so as not to misrepresent the interpreted object. In other words, a text cannot be made to mean just anything. Respect for the author means that their intentionality is represented as fairly as possible.

The impact of taking account of Thiselton's work can be clearly seen in the sorts of questions that are set in GCSE examinations in RE.²¹ This exam is taken by over 200,000 students every year and for many people is the most sustained study of religion that they will ever undertake.

The impact is particularly evident in ethics questions, where students are asked to discuss responses to controversial issues. The tendency in question setting is to set up an opposition between literalist readings of biblical texts and other perspectives, or to create a sense of meaning relativism whereby a text can be found to justify anything. Texts are then utilized as decontextualized fragments to be deployed in a winner/loser argument between two worldviews:²² for example, the utilization of phrases such as 'an eye for an eye' as a proof text to justify the death penalty and the commandment prohibiting killing to oppose it. This illustrates how the Bible can be presented to students as arbitrary and contradictory and the encounter with text one of utility in winning an argument.

The current GCSE approach to assessment is thus promoting a theologically unhelpful understanding of how to read a theological text well²³ – or, to put it another way, virtuously.²⁴ It implies that reading biblical text is about extracting propositions.²⁵ At Canterbury Christ Church University, we are piloting approaches inspired by Thiselton's work in hermeneutics that equip teachers to

use texts in more theologically sophisticated ways:²⁶ for example, by supporting teachers to apply hermeneutical techniques in analysing longer passages and by revealing different ways of reading those passages that acknowledge literary, historical critical and readerly methods of interpretation. This then radically changes the assessment tasks that students are set and gives an entirely different framing to their encounter with biblical text.

Conclusion

Theology has had a chequered history in school RE. From being regarded as an illegal activity, it was later absorbed into a phenomenological study of doctrine. The Church of England Vision Statement,²⁷ however, points to new possibilities where theology becomes a conversation partner in education rather than just an object of study. CoRE, with its advocacy of a worldview approach, develops the potential of this conversation. We have illustrated this in two ways. First, by drawing on the developing understanding of worldview in the Christian Reformed tradition; second, by indicating how Thiselton's hermeneutical scholarship can help in designing GCSE study.

Notes

1. Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), *Final Report. Religion and worldviews: the way forward* (London: Religious Education Council, 2018).
2. The focus on England alone was because the English and Welsh approaches to RE are different.
3. R. Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (London: Routledge, 1964); R. Goldman, *Readiness for Religion: a basis for developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge, 1965).
4. Schools Council, *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in the secondary school* (London: Evans/Methuen, 1971).
5. See, for example, W. Alberts, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).
6. T. Cooling, 'The Stapleford Project: theology as the basis for Religious Education' in M. Grimmitt (ed.), *Pedagogies of Religious Education: case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE* (Great Wakering: McCrimmons, 2000), pp. 153–69.
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9. CoRE, *Final Report*, p. 12.
10. See, for example, L. P. Barnes, 'The Commission on Religious Education, worldviews and the future of Religious Education', *British Journal of Educational Studies* (2021), DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2021.1871590.
11. CEE0, *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good* (London: Church of England Education Office (CEE0), 2016).
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15. See, for example, M. Goheen and C. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: an introduction to Christian worldview* (London: SPCK, 2008); Cooling et al., *Worldviews in Religious Education*.
16. T. Weir, 'What's in a worldview?', YouTube, 25 August 2017, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I6LAYwN3Jk> (accessed 28 May 2021).
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18. T. Cooling, 'Editorial. The return to worldview: reflections from the UK', *International Journal of Christianity and Education*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (2019), pp. 3–9; T. Cooling, 'Worldview in Religious Education: autobiographical reflections on the Commission on Religious Education in England final report', *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 42, no. 4 (2020), pp. 403–14.
19. Cooling et al., *Worldviews in Religious Education*.
20. See, for example, A. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: an introduction* (London: SPCK, 2009).
21. GCSE is the examination that 16-year-olds in England take at the end of compulsory secondary education.
22. R. Bowie, 'The implicit knowledge structure preferred by questions in English Religious Studies public exams' in G. Biesta and P. Hannam (eds), *Religion and Education: the forgotten dimensions of Religious Education?* (Leiden: Brill | Sense, 2020), pp. 112–23.
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27. CEE0, *Deeply Christian*.

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