

# ISRSA Report: Religions and Worldviews (Weltanschauung)

## A Personal Response addressed to the IRSRA Patron and Council from Professor Trevor Cooling, Emeritus Professor at Canterbury Christ Church University.

In this document I respond to the IRSRA Report in my professional capacity as an academic. Although I was Chair of the REC from 2015 to 2021 and a member of the Secretariat for the Commission on RE and am now Director of the ongoing REC Worldviews Project, I have no authority to speak on behalf of the REC. I have responded because I was the lead author of the Theos Report that is highlighted in the IRSRA Report as outlining the "new vision" that is being critiqued by the IRSRA.

This response should be read in conjunction with the text of the IRSRA Report

<https://isrsa.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ISRSA-Report-Religion-and-Worldviews-LowRes.pdf>

The IRSRA Report does not explain how it was constructed. From its structure I make two assumptions in this response.

1. The Report constitutes a position statement on behalf of the IRSRA Council and membership.
2. That in eliciting IRSRA members' views, some form of consultation was conducted and that eight responses were reproduced verbatim, all of which express reservations. How these comments were elicited and whether any supportive comments were received is not reported.

### Response to the IRSRA Council Position Statement.

The fact that the IRSRA report has been prepared for the APPG on RE makes it a statement of more than usual significance and potential influence. It is presented as a response to the REC's initiative in developing the vision of the Commission on RE Final Report published in 2018. Accuracy in describing and commenting on the REC initiative is of critical importance. The following inaccuracies are therefore of great concern:

1. The word *Weltanschauung* is used throughout the IRSRA report with the implication that it is central to the REC's and my position, when it is not. This word has never been advocated as having significance for the understanding of worldview that the REC has been developing, by either the REC or myself. It is a word with connotations that would be deeply unhelpful for Religious Education in schools. To link it to the current discussions of worldview in RE as advocated by the REC and ignore the rationale actually advocated is disingenuous.

2. The ISRSA Report claims that the National Statement of Entitlement (NSE) is all about requiring “the statutory teaching of humanism and atheism under the umbrella term Religion and *Weltanschauung*”. That is simply untrue. What is true is that the REC supports the teaching of non-religious worldviews in RE, as did the Commission, but that is a longstanding position of many years. As was made clear in my presentation at the ISRSA conference in March 2022, the current REC initiative is to do with a pedagogical approach and is not primarily about content. To use Ofsted language, it is a reframing of curriculum intent.
3. The ISRSA Report kindly refers to my Theos report<sup>1</sup>. ISRSA states that this Theos Report outlines the new REC vision of Religion and *Weltanschauung*. This is inaccurate and misleading. Firstly, it is made clear in the Theos document that I wrote it in my professional capacity as an academic and not on behalf of the REC. Secondly, and more importantly, I did not use the phrase Religion and *Weltanschauung* to summarise the vision I was advocating, but rather developed a completely different understanding of the implications of a worldview approach for RE. However, the text that I wrote is ignored in the rest of the ISRSA report.
4. The ISRSA report claims that the REC initiative is largely focused on a name change for our subject. It is of course true that a name change was one recommendation made in the Commission Report, but it is not one that has been advocated in the subsequent literature produced by the REC. Personally I regard the change of name as an irrelevance and am entirely happy with our subject being called *Theology, Philosophy and Religion*. However, I would want to examine carefully the pedagogical approach and the view of knowledge that was being assumed by teachers adopting the ISRSA recommended name. A key question is the role of personal knowledge in our subject whatever it is called. However, whatever debate we might have on this, as a matter of fact the ISRSA Report is in error in claiming that the change of name is a central element of the REC’s new vision for RE.
5. The ISRSA Report correctly notes the academic debate there is about the meaning of the term worldview. What it fails to mention is that the questions asked in the ISRSA Report are dealt with at length in the REC publications that followed the Commission and in my own writing, including the Theos report<sup>2</sup>. The implication that this matter has not been the subject of serious attention by either the REC or myself is deeply misleading.
6. In the conclusion, the ISRSA report observes that the worldview approach “struggles to find an academic footing”. This observation ignores the extensive discussion that is present in the wider academic literature, in the REC’s academic literature review and in my own academic journal articles. Even more disturbing is that having referenced my Theos report, this accusation is made ignoring completely the discussion in that Theos Report. For example, the contribution of theories of knowledge, particularly critical realism and hermeneutics as an academic footing for a worldview approach in RE, are discussed at length in that Theos Report. The suggested contribution of the work of leading scholars like Professor Andrew Wright in philosophy and Professor Anthony Thiselton in theology to developing an academic footing for RE is ignored.

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

2 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/worldviews/>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497> and <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2020/10/21/worldviews-in-religious-education>

# Members Reservations

I will comment briefly on these in the order they are laid out in the ISRSA Report:

- a. The REC has never promoted the secular view critiqued here. In my own case I am known as a leading critic of such a view. To quote this unsubstantiated suspicion without evidence is deeply problematic.
- b. Examination of the materials published by the REC will reveal that the westernised and colonial representation of religions cited here is something that it is criticised by both the REC and myself. This accusation that a Furbachian approach is being promoted is deeply problematic.
- c. This assertion is controversial, pessimistic and worrying in suggesting that the enterprise of seeking to understand the other is doomed. If true, it is not just the death of a worldviews approach but the death of the aspirations of multifaith RE overall.
- d. This is an extraordinary challenge to the notion of a multidisciplinary approach and directly contradicts Ofsted's recent research review. A multidisciplinary approach is widely adopted in doctoral studies. This is a controversial viewpoint and is only relevant in that the REC has followed Ofsted in supporting introducing children to the different disciplines that underpin RE. It also seems to contrast with ISRSA's own advocacy of *Theology, Philosophy and Religion* as the appropriate title for the subject.
- e. Neither the Commission nor the REC has advocated this change in the law. This is a baseless accusation as is the suggestion that the REC in its reports and myself in the Theos report advocate relativism.
- f. The REC has never suggested that religion should not be taught in its own right. Personally, I am known for my advocacy of teaching religions in their own right, for example in *Concept Cracking* and in *Understanding Christianity*.
- g. The REC has never advocated the rejection of metaphysics. This is another baseless accusation based on an interpretation of a worldviews approach which has not been advocated by the REC.
- h. The suggestion that the REC is seeking to reduce academic standards is unevidenced and goes against their strategic aims and impact statements.

It appears that these comments derive from people who have not read the literature that the REC has produced for its members (including ISRSA) through the Worldviews Project. Many of them seem to make assumptions about a worldviews approach that do not match what the REC and myself have published. The issues and questions that lie behind these reservations are of course important ones and need discussing. That is why the REC has produced resources designed to support members of the RE community in thinking through these important questions. However, to present these issues as accusations against the REC and myself without reference to the relevant published literature is deeply problematic.

# Academic Rigour

The ISRSA affirms the importance of our subject as “an academically rigorous subject of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice”. I couldn’t agree more. It also claims to carry out “cutting-edge research”. Again, a very important aspiration to be applauded. My question is how this particular ISRSA report measures up against these claims.

One fundamental feature of both academic rigour and cutting-edge research is careful attention to fair and accurate, evidence-based representation of texts that are being critiqued. Unfortunately, the ISRSA Report falls far short in this respect.

1. The attribution of the term *Weltanschauung* and its negative connotations to both the REC and to my understanding of worldview is factually incorrect as is the charge that the REC’s main concern is with a change of name for our subject.
2. The detailed discussion of the academic footing to the worldview approach offered in the cited Theos Report is completely ignored.
3. Many of the ISRSA members’ reservations that are published in the Report and are apparently condoned by the Council contain assertions that are simply not true as representations of the REC’s and my own published position.
4. The details of authorship and methodology adopted in gathering the data for the Report are not given.
5. The academic literature review and the discussion papers published by the REC and made freely available to all REC members are ignored meaning that the REC vision is not represented accurately.
6. The freely available wider academic literature appears to have been ignored. For example, the argument in my article in the *British Journal of RE*<sup>3</sup> discussing the worldview approach, which has had nearly 4700 reads to date and is currently the tenth most read article in the journal’s history, is ignored in the ISRSA report.
7. A key element of the REC’s vision is encapsulated in the National Statement of Entitlement. This is wrongly represented on page 1 of the Report as being primarily about the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, and then ignored in the rest of the Report.

Such failings are not characteristic of either “academically rigorous work” or “cutting-edge research”.

In the conclusion to its Report, ISRSA states “(W)e have particular concern about the general worldviews approach which struggles to find an academic footing”, expresses concern about the “core unexamined philosophical assumptions beneath the surface” and claims that the worldview approach will “weaken the academic respectability of the subject”. Given that these concerns are levelled against the REC and my work, it is shocking that there is no reference to the detailed attention given to academic footings in the REC academic literature review and the discussion documents that emerged from the REC’s extensive academic consultations<sup>4</sup>. The latter was undertaken in partnership with TRS-UK in June 2020 and resulted in discussion papers made freely available to all REC members<sup>5</sup>.

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3 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1764497>

4 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/worldviews/>

5 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Worldview-Project.pdf>

This consultation consisted of five online discussions involving fifteen leading academics including the likes of Professor David Ford from Cambridge, Professor Linda Woodhead from Lancaster and Professor Stephen Pattison from Birmingham<sup>6</sup>.

Furthermore, my detailed discussions of “academic footings” in the cited Theos Report and the BJRE article are simply ignored. These documents include extensive discussion around the nature of knowledge in RE and draw on works in philosophical and theological hermeneutics and epistemology, citing such scholars as Anthony Thiselton and Michael Polanyi. Furthermore, and worryingly, the ISRSA Report makes no reference to the discussion of knowledge in RE that appears in the Ofsted Research Review. The credibility of the ISRSA Council’s conclusions is seriously undermined by this failure to engage with the freely available literature published by the REC and myself that discusses “academic footing”. The Report’s conclusions appear to be based on little more than hearsay.

## **Conclusion**

The ISRSA Report is seriously flawed. My suggestion is that it is withdrawn immediately to avoid misrepresentation of the REC’s worldview initiative to the APPG. Then there could be an informed discussion of the very important questions that surround the proposed paradigm shift to a Religion and Worldviews approach.

June 17<sup>th</sup> 2022

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/5-REC-Worldview-Report.pdf>