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# Worldview in religious education: autobiographical reflections on The Commission on Religious Education in England final report

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**ABSTRACT**

The notion of worldview figures prominently in the recent discourse surrounding Religious Education (RE) in English schools following the publication of the final report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) in 2018. This article reflects on the veracity of this initiative. It begins with an autobiographical reflection on the impact of worldview on the author's development as a scholar. Then, the work of several critics of CoRE is discussed and a more nuanced understanding of worldview is developed as a result. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the shift to worldview are explored by drawing on the personal development approach of Michael Grimmitt and the responsible hermeneutics approach of Anthony Thiselton.

**KEYWORDS**

Auto-biographical reflection; commission on RE (CoRE); pedagogy; personal development; worldview

## Introduction

Since the Second World War, RE in England has experienced significant paradigm changes in approach, often in response to external initiatives (Jackson 2018). The Commission on RE in England (CoRE) is the most recent such initiative. In his Chair's foreword to the final report (REC, 2018), John Hall claimed that CoRE offered a new vision for RE in a changed world in its use of the word *worldview* and by calling for the subject to be renamed *Religion and Worldviews* (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 30–31). This article is a reflection on the veracity of that claim.[1]

At the heart of the CoRE, report is concern about the injustice that some pupils in schools in England experience given the very different quality of teaching and learning in RE that exists across the country (NATRE, 2018). The report therefore calls for a legislated National Entitlement in *Religion and Worldviews* (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 12–13), embodying the aspiration that all pupils develop a good understanding of the role that worldviews, be they religious or non-religious, play in human life. There is a particular concern that the needs of pupils (especially the so-called 'nones') in the current complex demography of religion and belief are not currently being met (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 6, Woodhead 2012 & Woodhead 2016). The CoRE report aspires both to develop an inclusive approach to RE suitable for all pupils (irrespective of their personal backgrounds and convictions and type of school attended) through a focus on worldview and to promote equality of provision across England through a legislated statement of National Entitlement. This article primarily focuses on the first of these two aspirations.

Worldview is defined by CoRE 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 (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 4)

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The report claims that 'everyone has a worldview' (26). Furthermore, it proposes that a distinction should be made between institutional or organised worldviews and personal or individual worldviews (72–73. See also van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2013). This is reflected in the two-fold aspiration that 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). The recommended content for study is both religious and non-religious worldviews, which reflects a potentially controversial but explicit commitment to extending the diversity of subject content beyond the religions (Everington 2018 contra Felderhof 2015; Barnes 2019). The classroom is deemed to be a safe space in which these challenging demands can be explored by pupils (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 28). Beyond this, however, the Report offers little elaboration on either the nature of worldviews and their role in the curriculum or on the pedagogical implications of the relationship between organised/institutional and personal/individual worldviews.

This article seeks to contribute to the developing discussion stimulated by CoRE (e.g. Freathy and John 2019; Hannam and Biesta 2019; Flanagan 2019) by offering an interpretation of the nature of the paradigm change that is foreshadowed in the Report's recommendation. It will explore its pedagogical implications and consider whether or not the new paradigm is incommensurable with the current world religions paradigm that it seeks to move beyond (Jackson 2018). In order that my readers are able to understand my positioning in this debate, I begin with an auto/biographical reflection on the significance of worldview.

## Worldview: a personal journey

Auto/biographical reflection is an increasingly influential mode of academic discourse, being a manifestation of the growing recognition of the importance of narrative in human meaning-making and of an academic's personal journey in the development of their scholarly work (e.g. Hick 2002; Merrill and West 2009; Ter Avest 2012; Jackson 2016).

My background is that I went to university as an enthusiastic evangelical Christian to read natural sciences. As part of my undergraduate course, I had the opportunity to study the philosophy of science, where I was introduced to Thomas Kuhn's (1962) notion of scientific paradigms. This exposure challenged the assumed, common-sense (sometimes called naïve) realism that I had absorbed as a young scientist, which also significantly informed my Christian faith. What Kuhn alerted me to was the role that belief frameworks and their attendant presuppositions played in the development of scientific knowledge. The straightforward assumption that reality is the same as my perception of it was challenged. This was further undermined through encounters with the ideas of other philosophers of science including, amongst others, Imre Lakatos' (1970) notion of scientific research programmes and Michael Polanyi's (1958, 1966) concepts of personal and tacit knowledge. As far as I can remember, no one used the word worldview then, but the assumed hard line between subjectivity and objectivity that underpinned my unreflective view of both scientific and theological truth had begun to dissolve. I had been sensitised to the role of interpretation in human knowledge construction and meaning-making.

A switch of course to an education degree led to the study of philosophy of education under the direction of Professor Paul Hirst. Hirst argued for a distinction to be made between what he called *sophisticated* education that was based on rational principles alone and *primitive* education that rested on contested beliefs (Hirst 1981). We were being trained to be sophisticated educators. Hirst's view of knowledge is echoed in Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's recent claim that 'reason is foremost' (2018, 8) and his assertion that:

> If there's anything that Enlightenment thinkers had in common, it was an insistence that we energetically apply the standard of reason to understanding our world, and not fall back on generators of delusion like faith, dogma, revelation, authority, charisma, mysticism, divinations, visions, gut feelings, or the hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts. (2018, 8)

What I learnt in the philosophy of education about human knowledge was, however, incompatible with what I had learnt in the philosophy of science. In Hirst's rational world, there was little room for Polanyi's idea of personal knowledge. Pinker's recent argument that 'to take something on faith means to believe it without good reason' (30) echoed what I was being told as a trainee teacher. As a student teacher, I was left feeling that my supposedly primitive and irrational Christian faith was at best an embarrassment in the educational context. The notion of Christian Education was deemed a 'contradiction in terms' (Hirst 1972). Sadly this still seems to be a challenge for some Christian teachers today (Cooling et al. 2016).

In contrast, my masters and doctoral studies introduced me to another literature in Christian philosophy and theology which drew heavily on Dutch Reformed philosophy in the Kuyperian tradition (Kuyper 2019) and, more recently, on the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics, where the concept of worldview is very important (e.g. Middleton and Walsh 1995; Naugle 2002; Sire 2004; Goheen and Bartholomew 2008; Thiselton 2009). This is where I encountered the idea of developing a Christian mind through education where it is acknowledged that human knowledge is framed by worldview presuppositions that are not provable in a positivist sense but are warranted when held in a manner that is open to review and critical challenge. This became a central tenet of my academic work (e.g. Cooling 1994, 2010).

The notion of worldview therefore helped me to recover confidence as a Christian academic in the idea that to have faith is a potentially rational state and as an educator to challenge the crude distinction between sophisticated and primitive education that marginalised discussion of faith-based approaches (Cooling, 1994, Cooling 2010). Also, convinced that as rational beings all humans are inhabiters of a worldview, I concluded that a core purpose of inclusive religious education for all was to promote understanding of and development in worldview(s). In a world where diversity is a feature of everyday life, it is incumbent upon education 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 the only just and inclusive approach in the context of pluralism. My academic story therefore resonates strongly with the position taken by CoRE.

## Detractors from worldview

Worldview is not a new idea for RE. The word itself was used by Ninian Smart in his landmark publication that initiated the last great paradigm shift in RE to the world religions approach (Schools Council 1971, 48). The concept underpinned the prominent British humanist philosopher Stopes-Roe's (1976) introduction of the term 'life stance' to counter the marginalisation of the non-religious in RE and the term itself was proposed by Geoff Teece (2017) when CoRE started its work. Scholars in other parts of the world, particularly in continental Europe and the USA, have been advocating use of the worldview concept for some time (e.g. van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema 2013; Miedema 2014; Taves 2020), but this literature did not have much impact on the debates around CoRE.[2] Despite these precedents, although welcomed by many, the CoRE recommendation on worldviews was perceived as a radical innovation and met with some resistance. This can be broadly categorised as reflecting three main objections.

The first, pragmatic objection was that it introduces an *additional* category of subject matter into RE, namely worldviews, which dilutes the proper focus of RE on religion and makes the subject content unmanageable. This objection came mainly from faith communities (Freathy and John 2019). This criticism assumes that the word worldviews refers solely to non-religious belief positions and that the subject content will become religions *plus* worldviews, where worldviews are a distinct category of additional non-religious content over and above religions. The objection was that worldviews like Humanism, the main contender for inclusion, can be studied elsewhere in the curriculum, but that RE should be reserved for the study of religions. This was possibly a valid criticism of earlier reports (e.g. REC, 2013, 14) that appeared to assume that a worldview was

inherently non-religious in character. However that is not the case with CoRE, which is, rather, proposing a significant reframing of RE in terms of understanding worldview as a shared human phenomenon, of which there are religious and non-religious manifestations (RS Project 2018; Taves 2020).

The second, philosophical, objection is exemplified in the writings of Michael Hand who had challenged the idea that 'everyone has a worldview' (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 30) well before CoRE was published, arguing that worldview is an imprecise concept that only applies to people who identify with organised belief systems (Hand 2012). In responding specifically to CoRE, Hand reiterated these sentiments arguing that the switch to worldviews 'is a deeply unhelpful suggestion' and further argued that the notion of worldview is mistakenly applied in the examples of the non-religious worldviews cited in the report (Hand 2018). He argues that 'A worldview is, roughly, a theory of the meaning of life, an account of the significance, origin, and purpose of human existence', which applies to religions, but to say that everyone has a worldview 'looks very much like the imposition on non-believers of a category developed with believers in mind'. The problem with Hand's position is that he rigidly insists on his own strict and particular understanding of worldview as normative and ignores the work of many influential thinkers (e.g. Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Polanyi and Peter Berger to suggest but four), who have contributed alternative ideas that are potentially fruitful in developing the fecundity of the worldview concept for education (maybe using a different name).

The unhelpful associations that the term worldview evokes were also raised by Todd Weir (2017) in a TED talk, where he argues that the current concept of worldview originates in the nineteenth-century context of ideological conflict between Enlightenment naturalism and fundamentalist Christianity that spills over into the twentieth century. Furthermore, he points to the German association with Weltanschauung and the implicit linking of the word to National Socialism in the twentieth century (see also Schweitzer 2019). Weir's point is that the concept worldview does not appear to embrace the pragmatism, pluralism and dialogical approach that is essential for education in liberal democracies, but instead evokes notions of conflicting and oppositional, closed and systematised tribal ideologies that are resistant to change and can easily become totalitarian (e.g. Hull 1985 & 2000; Thomson 2012). There is certainly validity in Weir's concerns and my own personal academic struggle has been with the fundamentalist Christian Reformed tradition's slide into this toxic mindset (Cooling 1994). However, he ignores more recent discussions from scholars in this tradition who are very clear in distancing themselves from this fundamentalist use of worldview and who offer a more nuanced understanding (e.g. Walsh 2000, 104; Smith 2009 & 2013). In his history of Fuller Theological Seminary, George Marsden demonstrates how what initially appears to be a very tribal evangelical worldview can reform from within (Marsden 1987). This possibility needs to be pursued in the way RE is taught.

Hand is correct to point out that CoRE did not articulate its understanding of the term clearly enough. Weir too is correct in pointing out the danger of 'totality thinking', where 'worldview becomes the fence that keeps you penned in and inhibits creativity' and justifies the marginalisation of others in 'ideological power grabs' (Walsh 2000, 104–105). However, the question is whether the term *has* to be understood in the negative ways that Weir and Hand suggest; maybe the term can be given new understandings and a fresh lease of life?

The third, educational, objection was articulated by Patricia Hannam (2019) who in a recent monograph offers an extended critique of the current state of RE generally arguing that it leads to the objectification of religion as knowledge and a focus on transmitting that to the pupil rather than on the development of the pupils' faith and spirituality. The fundamental problem is 'that there has been limited attention given to what education should aim to achieve in the public sphere' (2019, 65). With co-author Gert Biesta (Hannam and Biesta 2019), this criticism is applied to CoRE arguing that the Report's fundamental error is to emphasise *understanding* in proposing that worldviews should be the content of the subject. This reveals, they argue, that the Report adopts worldview as a 'frame for sense-making' (56) and treats education itself as predominantly a hermeneutic exercise

in developing pupil understanding (58). This 'hermeneuticism', characterised by its focus on making sense or meaning-making, it is argued reduces the teacher to the level of being a technician whose job is to find the right way to deliver the content knowledge to be understood, namely the beliefs and practices of the worldviews to be studied (60). This means that: 'The child or young person is mainly positioned as an "understander" or interpreter of things others put before them' (59). This, they argue, is educationally inadequate because it does not promote children gaining a perspective on their own worldview and making important judgements as to whether or not it will help them to flourish in life. The point, it seems, is that understanding of itself does not necessarily facilitate action that is helpful on the part of the pupil. Furthermore, CoRE's approach is deemed religiously inadequate since it decries the spiritual nature of religion where 'rather than that human beings "make sense" and "give meaning", something is actually given to them that radically breaks through such meaning-making' (59). Hannam and Biesta conclude: 'What it means to live a life with a worldview is objectified as something to be studied; any question as to the significance of living a life with a religious orientation in existential terms is missing from the report' (60). Faith and spirituality, they argue, have disappeared. However, this charge that CoRE's adoption of the language of worldview reveals an exclusive concern with the transmission of the content to be taught at the expense of the pupils' spiritual development seems unfair in light of its identifying the importance of personal worldview. What is true is that CoRE did not elaborate this notion enough such that Hannam's and Biesta's criticisms can be clearly seen as a misrepresentation. We will return to this point in due course.

Although misunderstanding CoRE, Hannam and Biesta's critique of worldview is often justified. I have earlier noted the emphasis given to developing a Christian mind in the Christian Reformed tradition's use of the worldview concept, which was very influential in the development of my own academic thinking, and, according to Weir (2017), of the concept itself in western thinking. Working within the Christian Reformed tradition, the influential North American philosopher James K.A. Smith (2009, 2013) is a vocal critic of the notion of promoting a Christian worldview and of the aspiration that students develop a Christian mind for reasons similar to Hannam and Biesta. Smith argues that such a focus makes an *anthropological* mistake because it treats the human person as 'fundamentally a thinking thing – a cognitive machine' and 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' (2009, 42). In contrast, Smith maintains that education should focus on the development of students' desires and imagination, and not just on them knowing/believing the contents of a Christian worldview. It is not that Smith is opposed to the notion of worldview per se, indeed he admits to giving two cheers for the idea (2010), but his concern is with an over-cognitive understanding of it. So he indicates a preference for Charles Taylor's idea of 'social imaginary' (Smith 2009, 65–70) and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, because both shift the focus from the cognitive to the affective and reflect 'a communal and collective disposition that gets inscribed in me' (2013, 81) rather than a collection of propositions that I learn in order to understand and apply. Habitus is, Smith thinks, anthropologically a less reductive concept than worldview.

The problem, I suggest, that these critics have correctly identified is the *apparently unexamined* assumption that to teach worldview is to engage students in a spectator sport (Smart 2007). In this approach in RE one might learn to understand the worldviews of others through objective study of pillarised,[3] self-contained worldviews like Humanism and Christianity (as might happen in English RE). Or, in a religious context, one might learn one's own community's worldview in order to nurture one's confidence in its superiority over other pillarised, self-contained worldviews (as might happen in North American Christian education in the cause of developing a Christian mind). This approach reduces Christian education to the study of objectified, propositional creeds – one's own true one and the false ones of others – and certainly, does not promote sympathy for pluralism or willingness for constructive dialogue.

In the rest of this article I will argue that while Hannam, Biesta and Smith are correct in challenging this unhelpful, over-cognitive assumption that many make about the paradigm shift to worldview,

this is not inherent in CoRE's use of the concept and misunderstands CoRE's use of it. I will also offer a different understanding of worldview from that criticised by Hand and Weir.

## Worldview – a more nuanced understanding

The worldview paradigm seeks to replace the current world religions paradigm dominant in England. Until recently, teaching world religions was widely understood as entailing learning about and learning from religion (e.g. Grimmitt 1987; Teece 2010), where religions were largely interpreted as manifested in what CoRE defines as 'organised worldviews shared amongst particular groups and sometimes embedded in institutions' (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 4). From this, it might be assumed that CoRE is embracing the pillarised notion criticised by Weir and Hand and the transmission model of learning about them criticised by Smith, Hannam and Biesta. Such would no doubt lead to fomenting the tribal mindset that is such a threat to community cohesion. However, there are two important indications of a more nuanced understanding in the CoRE report.

First, as Freathy and John (2019) clearly show, the report rejects this sealed-box conception of worldviews arguing that they 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 (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 76). There seems little doubt that CoRE is here drawing heavily on the insights developed by Robert Jackson (1997) through his work on the contribution of ethnography to phenomenological RE with its emphasis on careful attention being given to representation of the adherents' experiences and perspectives. At this level, there is huge diversity which may often bear little relation to the essentialised and abstracted picture presented in textbooks (Jackson et al. 2010). The worldview paradigm offered by CoRE can therefore be seen as an endorsement of and evolution from Jackson's approach to representing institutionalised religion and not a rejection of it.

What then of more recent developments in RE? How does CoRE relate to these? One particularly significant one is the switch of focus to disciplinary knowledge (e.g. Kueh 2018, 2020). In this, it is argued that the responsibility of the RE teacher is to teach powerful knowledge using the discourse of the discipline. The danger is that the emphasis is not so much on the lived experience of adherents as on the academic discipline being deployed to study that experience. One version of this approach has suggested that there are in fact three disciplines relevant to RE, namely theology, philosophy and social studies (Georgiou and Wright 2018, 2020) Others take a different approach and see the core discipline as hermeneutics where students learn how to be interpreters of the world they live in (Aldridge 2015; Bowie 2016). Finally, a team at Exeter University (Freathy and John 2019; Larkin et al. 2020) maintain that focusing on metacognition and using a multi-disciplinary approach is the best way to enact CoRE. They have therefore developed materials that introduce pupils to different ways that researchers construct knowledge in RE. I suggest that CoRE itself, following the Big Ideas project (Wintersgill 2017; Freathy and John 2019), can be said to have drawn insights from the disciplinary approach by taking Worldview Studies as its framing discipline and identifying the core disciplinary knowledge of that in the National Entitlement (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 12–13, 32–37). For example, students are to be taught about 'the way in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other' (12). The aim here is that RE should equip pupils with an understanding of the phenomenon of worldview as well as an understanding of the content of a range of particular worldviews.

CoRE aspires to the more nuanced understanding of the study of institutional worldviews reflected in these recent developments. It rejects a notion of learning as just acquiring information

about pillarised, self-defining worldviews. It hints at this in two ways; first by representing these worldviews as complex and understood through lived experience and secondly by focusing on disciplinary knowledge defined in the form of the National Entitlement.

Second, CoRE presents worldview as two-dimensional, namely organised and personal. A personal worldview is defined 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' (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 26). Here it appears there is a concern to pick up the positive elements of the learning from dimension of the world religions paradigm. When explaining this notion, CoRE focuses, as Hannam and Biesta point out, on the process of 'making sense of life and meaning of experience' (72). This, it is claimed, may happen at a more or less conscious level (72), but a core task of education is 'to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview' (5). Frustratingly, little more is said about personal worldview. Other research suggests that personal worldview formation is not a simple matter of transmission of an institutional worldview. For example, Ann Casson (2013) concluded that pupils in the Catholic schools she studied behave as bricoleurs, constructing their own personal understandings of catholicity in response to the nurturing attempts by the educational hierarchy of institutional Catholicism. It appears that pupils learn to become skilled cultural navigators as they bring together the varied influences on them in the formation of their personal worldviews (Freathy. et al. 2017; Jackson 2019). Hopefully, in RE they construct their own identity and become self-aware and reflexive interpreters of the knowledge they gain. Perhaps the job of RE is to support students in becoming educated bricoleurs rather than impulsive bricoleurs in the development of their own personal worldview? As Hannam has pointed out, understanding alone is not enough; there needs to be a transformative encounter with the subject content (Hannam 2019. Also Palmer 1993).

In this respect, James KA Smith's introduction of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* might well have been helpful for CoRE. It is, he considers, more nuanced than the perceived intellectualism associated with the term worldview and embraces a more sophisticated anthropology than the 'brains-on-a-stick' (2016, 3) model that Smith thinks is associated with the term worldview. The strength is that it moves the debate away from a purely cognitive focus on pupils forming their own systems of ideas and takes on board the emotional and identity-forming aspects of human experience, embraces the importance of desires and takes seriously the human experience of growing up in community in contrast to the individualism of much western education (Cooling 2018). However, the danger is that habitus loses the concept of agency treating the student a product of cultural shaping by powerful traditions rather than as self-determining (Cooling 1994; Cooling et al. 2016). Larkin et al. (2020) could be seen as picking up this concern with their suggestion that pupils develop their own 'worldview profiles' where they reflect on their own worldview development in light of their academic study. Understood in this way, CoRE's focus on personal worldview formation would help in allaying the concerns of Hannam and Biesta about objectification if it embraces these insights, because it becomes not just a one-way process of being given understanding of organised worldviews, but embraces notions of self-determining response and action and spiritual benefit (Hannam 2019).

There are other approaches currently being developed that might well contribute to a more nuanced understanding of personal worldview. One of the ways that worldview has been interpreted is to see it in terms of the influence of intellectual movements like instrumentalism, consumerism, post-modernism and scientism (Smart 2007). Here I agree with Michael Hand that to speak of these as worldviews is probably unhelpful as they are clearly not the same as organised worldviews. This is one example where conceptual clarity is lacking. However, they are clearly important influences on the formation of personal worldviews. For example, Billingsley (2017) has demonstrated the widespread influence amongst young people of the epistemic belief that science and religion inherently clash with each other. It appears that this epistemological mindset is highly influential in the development of young people's personal worldviews leading to tacit difficulties with taking the study of religious belief seriously and failure to see science as embedded in a wider framework of beliefs and values (Polanyi 1966). Billingsley's alternative is to propose an approach

that focuses on developing pupils' epistemic insight, meaning that they gain an insight into how knowledge works in different disciplines (Billingsley 2017). Larkin et al. (2020) take a not dissimilar approach with their emphasis on the importance of pupils developing an understanding of meta-cognition in the way that they are taught RE. These initiatives highlight the need for more creative and rigorous pedagogical thinking about personal worldview development that transcends the limitations of the previous learning from world religions paradigm, but by building on it rather than rejecting its important insights. And, of course, understanding the impact of such intellectual movements on the development of organised worldviews will need to be part of any National Entitlement laying out the powerful disciplinary knowledge required for rigorous academic study of organised worldviews.

A final observation. Much attention has been given here to the personal worldview of the pupil. However, if CoRE is correct in emphasising this concept, questions clearly arise about the impact of the personal worldview of the teacher on their professional work (Revell and Walters 2010; Everington et al. 2011; Bryan and Revell 2011; Arthur et al. 2019; Flanagan 2019). Having argued that everyone has a worldview, the teacher cannot then be treated as somehow professionally insulated from the operation of worldview in their own lives. This issue warrants further attention.

## The pedagogical implications of CoRE

Michael Grimmitt (e.g. 1987) was a key influence in the development of the world religions paradigm of RE and the architect of its, until recently widely accepted, twin aspirations of learning about and learning from. Grimmitt (2000), like Hannam and Biesta (2019), was troubled by the idea of 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 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 pedagogy is all about promoting an educational interaction between the pupils and the religious content they are studying. The teacher's professional responsibility lies in the design of this interaction and in ensuring that the study of religion makes an educational gift to the pupil (2008). The liminal space between the content as object and the pupil as subject is the space where teachers' pedagogical expertise is deployed. The currently fashionable idea that academic rigour is all about disciplinary knowledge and has nothing to do with pupils' personal development would have been anathema to Grimmitt.

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. Following Grimmitt (2000, 207–226), I will explore a possible pedagogical approach that builds on the CoRE's important but under-developed statement: 'It is one of the core tasks of education to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview' (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 5). In doing this I am following Grimmitt's advocacy of a constructivist approach that highlights the importance of the pupils' processing of what they learn as the central educational focus for teachers to concern themselves with. Thereby I hope to address what I believe to be a key omission from CoRE, namely its silence on the question of pedagogy.

Central to my argument is the proposal that Religion and Worldviews teaching will need to adopt a hermeneutical approach if it is to do justice to its aspired paradigm shift. This will, no doubt, alarm Hannam and Biesta, who regard hermeneuticism as the key problem with CoRE. However, their representation of a hermeneutical approach as instructional, all about understanding the content delivered by the teacher, is flawed. Rather, hermeneutics is 'the theory that everything is a matter of interpretation'. (Caputo 2018, 4) It is the recognition, contra Pinker (2018) and many other hard-line rationalists, that we cannot occupy a worldview-free position of pure reason. A hermeneutical pedagogy is based on the belief that pupils should be taught how to function well in a world pervaded by interpretation. By adopting a hermeneutical approach as the pedagogical principle for

taking forward CoRE's recommendations, RE can address Grimmitt's question of the nature of the interaction between the worldview content studied and the pupil. Furthermore, it can embrace his constructivist insights and, most importantly, can take forward CoRE's own under-developed aspiration that pupils will 'understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview' (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 5).

In order to illustrate this, I propose to draw briefly on the notion of responsible hermeneutics as developed by the theologian Anthony Thiselton (2009), who himself draws extensively on academic scholarship in philosophical hermeneutics (Pett and Cooling 2018). Responsible hermeneutics, I suggest, provides the disciplinary knowledge that should be the focus of RE and which supports the subject with its claim to be academically rigorous. 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 focuses on addressing 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 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. As Hannam and Biesta (2019) point out, this will entail taking the spiritual impact of such study on the learner seriously. Hermeneutics without that dimension reduces education to instruction. 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 learning objectives associated with such an approach are prefigured in CoRE's proposed National Entitlement (Religious Education Council (REC) 2018, 12–13). The task now is to hone CoRE's aspirations (Freathy and John 2019).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that CoRE marks a significant, but not yet fully understood, paradigm change for RE in England. It offers a new framing for the subject that, if adopted, will be a game changer. However, that does not mean that it has not built on previous paradigms. In particular I have argued that Jackson's interpretive approach provided insights into the representation of organised/institutional worldviews as complex and individually experienced entities, Grimmitt's personal development approach offered pedagogical insights in the teaching of personal worldviews and Wintersgill's disciplinary knowledge in the form of Big Ideas provided inspiration for the framing of the National Entitlement. However, its potential as a game-changer will not be realised without a pedagogical focus on the interaction between organised and personal world view. In order for this to happen, I argue that a hermeneutical approach is required and have offered one model of

that inspired by Thiselton's (2009) responsible hermeneutics model. Contra Hannam and Biesta (2019), I propose that CoRE's so-called hermeneuticism identifies the potential for the worldviews studied to offer gifts to the pupils in their own spiritual formation.

Whether the term worldview captures the full potential of CoRE's proposed game-change is another matter. Maybe it has too many unhelpful associations? Perhaps it fails to capture the complexity of what is offered? Maybe relying on one term to capture the entire approach is inadequate? Possibly JKA Smith's suggestion of using Bourdieu's term habitus for the idea of personal worldview would help? There are a host of other words and phrases that have been offered in the literature. Polanyi's (1958) 'fiduciary framework' is one of my favourites. But how much sense would that make to teachers? In the reality of school RE, I suspect that worldview is possibly the best term currently available. The task now is to interpret this term in academically rigorous, pedagogically sophisticated, teacher-usable ways that promote pupils' academic, personal and civic development as flourishing human beings. As Freathy and John (2019) exhort, we need to embrace the messiness of the worldview idea and pioneer the task of creating workable curricula and resources.

## Notes

1. As Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales, the author served on the secretariat for the Commission, but was not a commissioner and had no jurisdiction over their conclusions.
2. The Religious Education Council of England and Wales is currently preparing a literature review that will help address this academic provincialism.
3. This is a Dutch term describing a social system where people learn in an institution that reflects their own worldview. It is attributed to Abraham Kuyper, a former Dutch prime minister and acclaimed social reformer in the Reformed Christian movement.

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## Notes on contributor

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