

Religion and Worldviews in English schools, Study of Religions, and disciplinary knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of the Commission on RE report for England in 2018, there has been much discussion of the concept of 'disciplinary knowledge' and of which academic disciplines underpin the school subject commonly called Religious Education (RE) e.g. Kueh (2018, 2020); Georgiou and Wright (2020). Study of Religions was notable for its absence. Against these and other more outspoken critics such as Barnes, this article argues for the simple answer, which would seem obvious to members of BASR, the university discipline known as Study of Religions, or previously and more ambiguously, Religious Studies (cf Alberts, Jensen). This is not however to accept that Religion and Worldviews in schools is merely a watered-down version of SR at university level, or that other disciplines including philosophy or even theology cannot make useful contributions. Future RE needs to build upon the insights of the Commission, the Worldviews Project and other recent projects such 'Big Ideas' to construct a vibrant and memorable curriculum which is both academically rigorous and personally inspiring, providing students with the knowledge and skills they need not only for the few who choose Study of Religions at university, but transferable to the many situations in which they will find themselves in in later life, both professional and personal.

KEYWORDS

Religious Studies, Study of Religion, Religion and Worldviews, Religious Education, Worldviews, Discipline

Introduction: The 2018 Commission on RE and the discussion about 'disciplines'

For several years now, in English RE circles, there has been much discussion as to which university level academic discipline(s) underpin(s) the school subject normally referred to as 'Religious Education', or 'Religious Studies' when at GCSE (16+) and A level (18+) examination level. This issue was given more prominence by the work of the Commission on RE (CoRE) set up by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) 2016-2018, in reference to RE in England only, and of which the current author was a member. The Final Report of the Commission (CoRE, 2018) was addressed in the first instance to policy makers, in other words, politicians, but with the recognition that it would probably, at least initially, have more influence in the professional community. Among eleven recommendations, the first two have had most impact to date.

The first recommendation was to change the name of the school subject to 'Religion and Worldviews'. This was felt to be more inclusive and less ambiguous than 'Religious Education'. It recognises the increasing number of pupils and their families who identify as 'non-religious' (whatever they mean by that) so that it is now often a minority in the class who claim to be 'religious' (whatever they mean by that). The term 'worldview' was felt to be inclusive of religious and non-religious as well as the various non-binary positions that are beyond or in-between or reject this dichotomy (see Bråten, 2022 and Cush, 2023). As used by CoRE, and as elaborated in the ongoing Worldviews Project, www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/worldviews/ the term is used in a wide and open way, to 'describe the way in which a person encounters, interprets, understands and engages with the world' (Pett, 2022a, 8). It was felt important to retain the term 'Religion', not just to indicate continuity with the past and the need to interrogate such contested concepts, but to make clear the field of study, in other words, the study of religion (inclusive of the study of non-religion). 'Religion and Worldviews' was also thought to avoid the ambiguity of 'Religious Education', suffered also by 'Religious Studies', in that it may suggest that this is a religious pursuit, engaged in by people who identify as religious. At school level, this can of course be the case, given that internationally 'religious education' is used to refer to intra-religious education or faith development as well as that which attempts to be objective, critical and pluralist. In England, the existence of a large number of state-funded 'schools with a religious character' of various sorts compounds the ambiguity. This article will continue to employ 'RE' at times for simplicity, but please read 'Religion and Worldviews' where appropriate.

The second recommendation was a two-page 'National Entitlement to the Study of Religion and Worldviews', with nine elements, including the need to examine key contested concepts, and to engage with 'the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines and through direct

encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these views' (CoRE, 2018, 13).

During consequent discussions about the 'wide range of academic disciplines', the claim was often made that unlike other school subjects such as History, Maths, Physics, there was no university level equivalent of 'RE' (see for example Teece 2019, 54, although his view was more nuanced than others). This may sound strange to members of BASR, as the obvious answer would seem to be 'Religious Studies', given that this is the name of the English school subject at GCSE and A level, or (as we prefer to call it to avoid the ambiguity) 'Study of Religions'. Internationally, scholars such as Wanda Alberts (e.g. 2007) and Tim Jensen (e.g. 2021) have long argued for a Study-of-Religions based school RE. Others in the RE world such as Barnes (e.g. 2015) consider that Study of Religions has been a malign influence on school RE, preventing it from having a genuinely educational contribution to the moral development of pupils and the social aims of education. Some of those who share this view are also very critical of the developing 'Worldviews Approach' for similar reasons.

Study of Religions goes missing

Exploring recent influential discussions of 'disciplines' in RE during 2020, the current author was shocked to find that Study of Religions/Religious Studies did not seem to be there, or at best was relegated to a subset of social/human sciences. The obvious candidate for the university-level discipline relating to RE in school was conspicuous by its absence. As someone who has spent their life working in Study of Religions as well as RE, both somewhat insecure, marginalised and embattled disciplines, I was impelled to put forward a defence of Study of Religions as a discipline, drawing upon my own 'lived experience' as teacher, lecturer and head of department, as well as academic scholarship, and ended up writing what was published as Cush (2021a and b), in two parts, in a journal aimed at teachers and other education professionals in the field of RE. The present article draws upon much of the argument in that article, but for a different readership and with the experience of two further years of discussion.

Two of the most influential contributions to the discussion about disciplines underpinning RE have been made in the work of Georgiou and Wright (e.g. 2020) and Kueh (e.g. 2018, 2020). The former authors, first in the context of Anglican diocesan RE, and then more widely in the context of the 2019 Norfolk Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education (Norfolk SACRE, 2019) and beyond, propose a 'three-legged stool' or 'three-pronged approach' to the disciplinary underpinnings of RE in schools: Theology, Human and Social Sciences, and Philosophy.

While agreeing with much of what these authors say about RE, approving of their adoption of the new name 'Religion and Worldviews', and also observing that their approach does lead to fruitful RE in practice, this trinity of subject disciplines appears to marginalise Study of Religions, as well as other relevant disciplines, such as the arts and creative arts.

Georgiou and Wright are correct to argue that Religion and Worldviews (R&W) needs to be established on secure disciplinary foundations, and that a balance needs to be struck between different methods of studying religions/worldviews, so that it is not dominated by philosophy-and-ethics, Biblical Studies, or sociology of religion. However, the three ‘prongs’ identified are problematic. Starting with ‘theology’ might be appropriate in a diocesan context, but is worrying in the context of English RE, where the difference between confessional and non-confessional RE has often been blurred, especially in some state-funded Church schools (and as Alberts 2022 argues, there can be ‘hidden confessionalism’ even in nominally non-confessional contexts). It is also difficult for Study of Religions, which has had to struggle to distinguish itself from the much older and more established discipline, which still has access to advocacy and sources of funding unknown to the junior subject (for further discussion of the continuing need for Study of Religions to distinguish itself from Theology see Cush, 2009, and for the threat posed by the hegemony of confessional theology to critical study of religions in Germany, see Alberts 2022:6).

It may be that ‘theology’ is shorthand for ‘Theology and Religious Studies’, as in the QAA Benchmarking Statement for the ‘subject’. The two, though clearly different, have much in common, and can work together, especially to support, promote, and defend the subject(s) against the ever-present threats, in TRS:UK (<https://trs.ac.uk/>). However, it does not appear to be the case with Georgiou and Wright that theology stands for TRS. Theology is defined (for schools) as ‘thinking about and thinking through believing’ (2020, 158, as corrected in correspondence with the authors¹), and focuses on main beliefs, concepts, key texts and issues of authority. Of course, these do feature as part of the content and methods of Study of Religions, but fit much better with the Theology from which Study of Religions seeks to distinguish itself. The priority given to beliefs and texts is more appropriate for some traditions than others, and the reader may guess that the content will be dominated by Abrahamic, and most likely Christian, material, than anything Dharmic or relating to nature-based and/or ‘indigenous’ traditions, as was the case with the author’s 1970s Theology degree.

A major problem with the term ‘theology’ is that it is subject to the same ambiguity as ‘religious’ education/studies – do you have to be a ‘believer’ to engage in it? Clearly at university level it is an academic and critical pursuit, but ‘Theology’ is also used to refer to intra-tradition systematic intellectual thought, as in its use in ‘Buddhist Theology’- a term the current author finds difficult as ‘theology’ does seem to suggest the centrality of a theistic God. Theology is also often linked in higher education with ministerial training. A further issue is that Theology would seem to be just as multi-disciplinary or polymethodic as Study of Religions, as even if limited to belief, texts and concepts, it might (and does) employ philosophical, historical, psychological or sociological methods, literary and media criticism. There is not one

¹ The publisher has stated that future print runs and in online editions of this book, the definition will revert to that cited here, rather than that which was published ‘thinking about and thinking through what it means to believe’, in accordance with the wishes of the authors.

‘theological method’, though there may be a general ‘theological approach’. It is not that theology is illegitimate as a contributing discipline to RE in schools, but it is important to clarify in what sense the term is being used and how and why its various methods and approaches are being used. Freathy and Davis (2018) are very helpful on this issue.

So, it seems on the whole that Study of Religions is not subsumed under ‘theology’. Perhaps it is included in the second category of ‘social and human sciences’, explained for schools as ‘thinking about and thinking through lived experience’. ‘Lived experience’ (is there such a thing as un-lived experience?) sounds like much contemporary Study of Religion, with its stress on ‘living religion’ rather than ancient texts, and thus much use of sociological and anthropological research methods. In addition, the claim that ‘the human and social sciences enable us to explore religion and worldviews through a phenomenological lens’ (p.153) might be a reference to Study of Religions, given the prominence of phenomenological approaches in the subject from the late 60s to the mid 1990s in the UK, and in the work of some of Study of Religions founders such as Eliade or Smart. The claim however would surprise many current practitioners of Study of Religions, especially those who do prefer more social science approaches, and all who blame phenomenological approaches for creating the World Religions Paradigm. On the whole, I think that this is where the authors are placing Religious Studies/Study of Religions, but, *it is not named*.

The third leg of the stool, philosophy (including ethics) ‘thinking through and thinking about the experience of reflection’ (p.161) need not detain us here. The authors do recognise that their further characterisation of philosophy is a Western one, and that there are others, which may be encountered in higher education. Using ‘philosophy and ethics’ as a new name for RE is used by some RE teachers as a way to get round the ‘toxic’ baggage of the term ‘religion’, but it needs to be explained to pupils, especially those choosing the popular A level Religious Studies papers in philosophy and ethics, that this is mostly philosophy *of religion*, and the challenges presented to traditional religious (i.e. mostly Christian) philosophies by (Western) atheistic humanism.

It is possible that Study of Religions is present implicitly, in that the argument that these three disciplinary areas underpin Religion and Worldviews in schools is also presumed for Study of Religion at university level, seen as a mixture of theology, social/human science and philosophy. However, many would query the inclusion of theology (TRS is after all, Theology *and* Religious Studies, two distinct things) and any list of contributing subjects would seem to require a much longer one, to include humanities subjects like history, and arts subjects such as literary criticism, creative arts and media studies, as well as critiques arising in relation to colonialism, orientalism, gender, sexuality, race and class.

The second example, is in the work of Richard Kueh, very influential as he is currently Specialist Adviser, His Majesty’s Inspector of Schools and National Subject Lead for Religious Education for Ofsted, the body responsible for maintaining standards in education, children’s services and skills in England.

Kueh (2020) proposes four, rather than three, disciplinary groupings which underpin Religion and Worldviews/RE: the human sciences, philosophical approaches, theology, and history. The inclusion of history as an important element is to be welcomed (cf IAHR as the international equivalent of BASR). This time we do not have to guess where 'religious studies' belongs, it is listed as one of the human sciences, alongside psychology, sociology and anthropology. Although some colleagues may be comfortable with this, the current author, whilst recognising the importance of social scientific approaches in the Study of Religion, does not see it as exhausted by them, but requiring perspectives and methods from the other disciplines and critiques listed above. More importantly, Study of Religions in the 'lived experience' of the current author (admittedly now perhaps becoming dated) carefully distinguished itself from the (often, not always) reductive and naturalistic norms and modus operandi of those social/human sciences that seek 'natural explanations for the phenomena they encounter' (Kueh, 2020,141) as much as from theology.

Study of Religions has, at least historically, positioned itself as *methodologically* agnostic, a middle way between the *methodologically* theist approaches of theology and the *methodologically* atheistic approaches of the traditions of social sciences. Bocking (2006,6) explains that methodological agnosticism has nothing to do with personal belief, but is one of the skills that the Study of Religions student develops as part of their involvement in the subject community. This means an open exploration of worldviews, neither endorsing nor refuting the claims of adherents, at least initially. 'Natural explanations' are examined, but 'the spooky stuff' (as a colleague on CoRE, the late Professor Anthony Towey, memorably nicknamed it in our discussions, meaning the human experiences that seem beyond the reach of empirical evidence, scientific investigation, or rational philosophy, yet which underpin so much of both religious traditions and individual worldviews) is not dismissed from the outset either. As James Cox argued, there is still 'a methodological middle ground between theology and culture' (2004,263).

Why has Study of Religions been neglected or downgraded in such discussions?

There were never many university departments in the UK calling themselves 'Study of Religions' or 'Religious Studies', more often the subject was added to an existing Theology department, such as in Oxford's current Theology and Religion faculty. Even those that did exist have mostly now been subsumed into larger subject groupings. Elsewhere, those with expertise in particular traditions may find themselves working in (geographical) Area Studies. This may contribute to a lack of awareness of Study of Religions as a distinct academic discipline, that is neither Theology nor Sociology of Religion. In RE circles, there has been a critique of Study of Religions as merely descriptive and failing to engage with issues of meaning and truth (eg. Barnes 2002,73), which is hard to maintain in the light of the history of the subject from Smart, 1968 to Sutcliffe, 2020, but which has had some influence.

The defence of Study of Religions as an academic discipline in its own right

In the light of the way in which, in RE circles, Study of Religions has recently been either missed out, relegated to a subset of human/social sciences, or blamed for all that is wrong with RE, and also in the light of the fact that in so many UK universities, departments of Study of Religions/Religious Studies, never many in number, are disappearing into larger subject groupings, it seems important to revisit the defence of Study of Religions as a separate subject. A longer discussion can be found in Cush and Robinson (2016).

Taking it as given that an academic discipline or school subject is an artificial construct, we might argue that Study of Religions is well-placed to criticise the whole notion of disciplinary silos, and rejoice in being at the cutting edge of a new approach to education which rejects such fixed and limiting divisions. However, we work in institutions (whether schools or universities) that are structured according to modernist categories inherited from the 19th century, and it is important to take a pragmatic approach. In a knowledge industry that divides up labour by disciplines, it is important that Study of Religions is seen as having a distinct role to play. Experience shows, whether at university or school level, crosscurricular approaches can lead to SR/RE being integrated out of existence, and specialist teachers and lecturers lost (see Cush 2007).

At Bath Spa University, sometime in the late 80s or early 90s, a student of Brian Bocking suggested changing the subject name from Religious Studies to Study of Religions to avoid the ambiguities mentioned above and stress the plurality of worldviews involved. Sutcliffe has argued that Study of Religions should be adopted as the 'single, common disciplinary name for "cross-cultural, comparative and theoretical studies of religion/s" as it clearly explains what we do, and 'also supplies a distinctive recognisable international brand' (2020,129).

In what ways is Study of Religions a distinctive brand and deserving of respect as an academic discipline in its own right? Not everyone would agree that it is, and there are those who would argue that it is not really a distinct discipline. Almost half a century ago, one of the pioneers of the subject at Lancaster University recognised that 'doubts have sometimes been expressed as to whether the comparative study of religions is a subject at all, or whether it might not be just a conglomerate of ill-assorted fragments of other subjects (history, philosophy, sociology, psychology and so on) stitched together into a sort of crazy academic patchwork quilt' (Sharpe, 1975:191). Leaving aside the feeling that a 'crazy academic patchwork quilt' might actually be an exciting thing to be constructing, the accusation has been made many times since that the Study of Religions is 'little more than a themed study made through the methodologies of other disciplines' (Felderhof 2004,243).

So what arguments can we use for the case that Study of Religions is an academic discipline in its own right, as much as any other subject is? Kueh suggests two useful ways of thinking about the disciplinary, 'the sum total of the tools, norms, methods and *modus operandi* of the way in which humans go about exploring a field of knowledge that has its own conventions' (2019, 57) and 'an ongoing conversation taking place from generation to generation'

(2020,133). The current author's proposed possible criteria (fully accepting that this is engaging in a game that we also need to critique) are 'a designated area of human experience/substantive knowledge, founding scholars, a current community of scholars with a lineage relationship to these founders, well-established academic associations and related conferences and journals, a shared (if debated) set of values, a discrete epistemology, distinct methodology and/or methods, and its own way of going about things. These would include matters such as what is viewed as valid knowledge within the discipline and what kinds of evidence count' (Cush, 2020a, 55). Sharpe added a useful thought that disciplines are called such because they involve hard work and commitment (1975,202).

Study of Religions has a huge area of substantive knowledge to explore, religious, non-religious and non-binary worldviews both organised and individual over a global geographical spread and back through human history into pre-history. Founding scholars in the lineage might include Max Müller, Mircea Eliade, or in the UK 1960s iteration, Ninian Smart and Ursula King (the reader may wish to add or substitute their own). There is a well-established community of scholars, internationally the IAHR is 72 in 2022, and the BASR 66. There is an ever-increasing range of academic journals and conferences, so that conversations can continue in person, on paper or on-line. It is perhaps harder to argue that Study of Religions has its own methods, drawing as it does on a wide range of methods from other disciplines, but it can be argued that it has its own *methodology*, in that whatever methods are used, they are chosen with reflection upon their advantages and limitations, suitability to the enquiry at hand, and compatibility with the overall approach of the subject. For a few decades (1960s to 1990s), 'phenomenology' provided the subject with the nearest to an -ology of its own. Although the subject has moved on, some of the values of those days as well as those developed in the decades since, flavour an overall 'Study of Religions' approach. Perhaps methodological agnosticism, epistemological humility, open-mindedness, respect for the adherent without (at least initially) endorsing or rejecting their claims, recognising one's own perspectives and presuppositions and how these may affect one's interpretations, allowing the adherent's perspectives to challenge one's own assumptions, scholarly accuracy, integrity, informed empathy, a code of ethical research practice, a commitment to equality and diversity, a critical approach in the sense of basing evaluative judgments on evidence, clear argument and ethical commitment, and in the sense of taking account of critiques relating to race, gender, sexuality and class, and being prepared to take engaged action, might form part of an overall 'Study of Religions Approach'. These may perhaps be in part personal to the author, and in part should apply to any academic undertaking, but there remains a way in which a discipline is characterised by a certain 'state of mind' (Sharpe 1975,199), shared by a connected community, with a lineage of academic ancestors.

The defence of Religion and Worldviews (RE) as a discipline in its own right

As recently as 2017, even in a publication with which the current author was associated, it was claimed that 'RE not a discipline in the way that most other subjects in the school curriculum can claim to be' because 'English, mathematics, science, history and music can trace their origins to the academic disciplines that are taught in universities and share their name' (Wintersgill (ed), 2017,45). This captured a view common in discussions in RE circles (see above). However, in addition to the argument above, that RE in schools can and should be related to Study of Religions in universities, and even shares its name, where both are called Religious Studies, the current author would like to argue that Religion and Worldviews/RE (or 'Religion and Education') can stake a claim to being a discipline in its own right.

Religious education in the wider sense obviously predates Study of Religions' arrival as a university subject, if we include the confessional, denominational or intra-tradition education, with roots in institutions such as Buddhist or Christian monasteries or Muslim madrasas, going back many centuries, or even the non-denominational Christian nurture found in state-funded schools in England since the nineteenth century. However, RE in the sense of the non-confessional, multi-tradition RE pioneered in Sweden and the UK from the late 1960s, is only just over 50 years old. Nevertheless, an argument can be made that in that time it has become established enough to claim to be a discipline in its own right. Using the same criteria listed above, it has a huge area of potential substantive knowledge. It has founders such as (in the UK): Donald Horder, Mary Hayward, Ninian Smart, Peggy Morgan, John Hull, Jean Holm, Edwin Cox, and Terence Copley who began (and in the case of Mary and Peggy are still joining in) conversations which later generations are continuing. It has national and international communities of scholars such as AULRE (Association of University Lecturers in RE) in the UK and ISREV (the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values), though admittedly members of these work in both non-confessional and denominational settings, and the many shades of grey in between (the 'complex field' or perhaps 'mess' referred to by Wanda Alberts 2022:24). Academic journals include the internationally respected *British Journal of Religious Education* and *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. There are now Professors, the first in the UK being John Hull in 1980, followed by the first female, the current author, in 2003. There is a shared (if much debated) set of values.

As with Study of Religions, it is hard to argue for distinctive research methods, in that scholars draw upon a wide range of methods drawn from all the disciplines employed by Study of Religions as well as those used in the wider academic field of Education Studies. However, there is certainly methodology in the sense argued for Study of Religions above, as well as a strong history of pedagogies. There is a strong sense of community, not only between university-level researchers, nationally and internationally, but also in links with teachers, teacher-trainers and other education professionals. This tradition was started by the Shap Working Party (1969-2019 – though the Calendar is still going) and continued by initiatives such as Culham St. Gabriel funded REonline research resource, including RExChange conferences (<https://www.reonline.org.uk/research/>) or the *Professional REflection* section

of *REToday*. The academic and professional Religion and Worldview/RE community is also closely engaged with other stakeholders in school RE, including religious and humanist organisations, in fora such as the RE Council and NASACRE (National Association of SACREs) and AREIAC (Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants).

RE is not exactly the same as RS (Study of Religions)

Although there is a strong argument for Study of Religions as the university discipline which should underpin school RE, there is an additional dimension to RE, which is that of being *educational*. RE also draws upon Education Studies, another discipline in its own right, which since the 1990s has broken free from its roots in teacher education to become 'a highly popular developing subject in some eighty universities in the UK' (Ward 2020,1). So, Religion and Worldviews in schools is not quite Jensen's 'study-of-religions program in mini-format' (2021,194) though the rest of his arguments are compelling and inspiring. Perhaps for examinations at 16+ or 18+ (GCSE and A level) this could be the case, and why these are called 'Religious Studies' in England. However, for both younger pupils and 14-18 year olds outside of formal examinations, there needs to be more attention to the educational needs of the pupils themselves – what aspects of the study of religions/worldviews will help them navigate the complex world in which we live, reflect upon the sources of and influences on their own developing worldviews, discern what they can learn of value to themselves and their contexts from this rich (both positive and negative) heritage of human experience, and apply this to building a better future for themselves and the planet. This may arise naturally in the hands of a talented teacher of a mini study-of-religions programme, but may not without conscious attention at the curriculum planning stage.

Multi-disciplinarity: recent projects in RE

Multi-disciplinarity is both a strength and weakness of Study of Religions and Religions and Worldviews style RE, and to some extent Theology as well (though the latter has the advantages and disadvantages of a stronger and/but ancient brand). It was certainly one of the attractions of all three subjects to the current author. Celebrating and making use of multi-disciplinarity has been a feature of much recent English RE. Freathy et al (2015) produced an innovative and exciting resource for primary RE where children were invited to become researchers of religion themselves, using the methods of Ava the interviewer, Hugo the participant observer, Derek the philosopher and Suzie the interpreter of narratives (the descriptions of the characters are the shorthand of the current author rather than in the original).

The team at RE Today Services, led by Stephen Pett and Fiona Moss, have just completed a series entitled 'Challenging Knowledge in RE' for secondary pupils, and 'Big Questions, Big Answers' for Primary pupils, explicitly taking a multi-disciplinary approach, six booklets for each level, see <https://shop.retoday.org.uk>

Each booklet takes a topic and applies the insights and methods of two disciplines. They include interviews with academics who explain how their particular discipline works, their tools, methods, kinds of evidence, and methods of evaluation. 'God' is explored through theology and psychology, 'World Views' through religious studies and sociology, 'Religion and the Environment' through theology and environmental science, 'Religion' through religious studies and anthropology, 'Prayer' through religious studies and sociology, and 'Good and Evil' through philosophy and theology. BASR's own Chris Cotter features as the religious studies expert, and it is good to see that religious studies features in half of these resources. According to Pett (2022b), these resources are already having an impact - with the final issues only just published, already 21,000 booklets have been distributed and c.1,500 teachers have attended related training events. The examples of teachers' units of work presented by Pett, based on the materials, were impressive. Pett commented that the pupils were now actively involved in their own learning, rather than being 'tourists of religion'.

This 'multi-disciplinary' approach coheres with recent Ofsted suggestions that RE should engage with 'the substantive content and concepts', the 'ways of knowing' and 'personal knowledge' (Kueh, 2021, 50). It also appears to be a fruitful way of organising RE, and a useful way for preparing pupils for theories, methods and concepts employed in Study of Religions. However, concerns arise in relation to Study of Religions being seen as just one among several university disciplines relating to RE, rather than the main orientation which itself draws upon methods taken from other disciplines. Perhaps Smart's 'polymethodic' is preferable to 'multi-disciplinary' as a description of Study of Religions or RE (for a useful discussion of the 'polymethodological model' see Sutcliffe, 2004). Teachers, especially primary teachers, may find it daunting to be expected to have expertise in a wide range of disciplines, when expertise in Study of Religions is challenging enough. There is a danger of over-simplifying or essentialising disciplines, or teaching at cross-purposes with secondary specialists in history, sociology etc. As argued above, the list of contributing disciplines may need to be longer, to include media studies, creative arts, literary criticism and the natural sciences (the inclusion of environmental science in the 'Challenging Knowledge' series is to be welcomed, and neuroscience may become increasingly relevant, as well as aspects of biology and physics).

To avoid become lost in a mass of potentially incommensurable disciplines, the role of Study of Religions (and RE) is to select what is relevant and useful and pull it all together, so that a rounded picture of any religious tradition or individual/community worldview starts to form, how theory relates to practice, text to context and official doctrine to vernacular custom.

The REC Worldviews Project

The CoRE reported in 2018, and the work of the RE Council on Worldviews has moved on to further phases, and developing thinking. During 2019 and 2020, in partnership with TRS-UK, as part of a project to develop and communicate a 'shared understanding' of what a 'Worldviews Approach' might

look like, a multi-disciplinary report on academic literature on 'worldview' was commissioned (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe 2020), and a substantial online discussion process took place, with 13 senior academics/professionals, thinking through the implications of the 'worldview' concept for RE. These were captured in Tharani (2020). The latest phase of the project is now underway, with three school-based teams developing exemplar practical curricula to test whether the theory works out in practice

<https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/exemplar-curriculum-teams/>

The teams will be guided by a draft handbook (Pett 2022a), which will be revised in the light of the practical experience. This handbook captures how the Worldviews Project has developed in the four years since CoRE. This phase expects to complete in 2024.

Big Ideas for Religious Education

Simultaneously with CoRE, the *Big Ideas for Religious Education* project initiated and led by Barbara Wintersgill, has been developing theory and practice for RE curriculum development since 2016, and following more theoretical publications in 2017 and 2019 has recently launched a website with exemplar units of work for the RE classroom, produced by a team of teachers and other RE professionals <https://bigideasforre.org/>

'Big Ideas' in this project does not mean the same as 'important concepts' but is a technical term as used in an approach to curriculum design, teaching and learning developed by Wiggins and McTighe (eg 2005). The focus is on the main 'Big Ideas' students need to grasp in order to understand the subject. These can then be used as criteria for selecting from the vast possible substantive content, and as a focus for progression in learning, as the Big Ideas are structured in age-appropriate stages. 'Big Ideas' are thus a form of 'disciplinary knowledge'. Although each takes a paragraph to explain, even looking at the shorthand headlines, it is clear to see how insights and methods from a variety of disciplines would feature. Study of Religions and (with reservations mentioned above) Theology provide the academic underpinning for all six 'Big Ideas', but others would be important as follows:

1. *Continuity, Change, and Diversity* History, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology
2. *Words and Beyond*, Literature/Language, Creative Arts, Media Studies
3. *A Good Life* Ethics, Philosophy
4. *Making Sense of Life's Experiences* Psychology, Philosophy, Sciences
5. *Influence and Power* History, Sociology, Politics
6. *The Big Picture* Literature/Language, Philosophy, Sciences

This new approach may be viewed as a school-level 'subversive' or 'alternative' or 'innovative' pedagogy, in a spirit similar to that of the contributors to Cotter & Robinson 2016, which does not select or structure the content according to the World Religions Paradigm as many RE syllabuses do, but by examples which best enable pupils to grasp such matters as diversity and plurality; change over time and cultures; the necessity of interpretation whether of texts or creative arts; disagreements over ethical

issues; the role of experience whether visions or rituals or everyday life; the social and political power and influence of/on religions/worldviews (including the implications of labelling something/people religious); and the ways in which institutional traditions seek to present coherent and comprehensive accounts of human life in the world, the forms of authority involved in this, and the ways in which people may re-interpret, subvert or ignore it.

A vision for Religion and Worldviews in schools

The 'Big Ideas for RE' project endorses the general approach of the REC Worldviews project, and the two projects acknowledge their mutual influence (see Pett 2022a, 27). The 'Worldview(s) approach', as recommended by CoRE and developed in a variety of recent projects, seeks to provide an RE/Religion and Worldviews education which:

1. is for all pupils, not just the 'religious' or keen on studying 'religions'
2. draws upon a wide range of traditions including smaller, newer, and non-religious
3. explores the lived reality of adherents studied as well as institutional worldviews
4. stresses diversity and interactions between and within traditions
5. focuses on how religions/worldviews work and how the study of religions/worldviews works
6. problematises concepts: 'religion', 'secular', 'spiritual', 'worldview' etc
7. queries a sharp divide between 'religious' and 'non-religious', includes non-binary worldviews
8. challenges generalisations, accounts in social/other media, fixed boxes that divide people, dominant constructions, colonial impositions
9. avoids the distortions of constructing a World Religions Paradigm or a Global Worldviews Paradigm (see Cush 2021,152)
10. asks questions about sources of authority and whose experience counts, taking critical account of gender, sexuality, 'race', disability, and other issues of equality and human flourishing
11. enables pupils to interrogate the sources of their own developing worldviews and to benefit from exploring the rich heritage of humanity in order to best cope with its/their own future, socially, professionally and personally.

Conclusion: Why does the defence of Study of Religions and of Religion and Worldviews in schools as discrete subject disciplines matter?

Many of our colleagues are producing excellent research on religion/non religion based in departments of other disciplines (it was stated at the AGM on 7th September, 2021, that this applies to 60% of BASR members). As academic disciplines, like so much else, are artificial constructs given that human life, knowledge and experience is not divided up into subject areas, should we not be rejoicing in multi/interdisciplinarity (inter- may be preferable to stress fluidity and lack of boundaries rather than multi-, as we found with intercultural rather than multicultural education) and stop worrying about the name of the department in which we work? Would anything be lost if the

substantive knowledge claimed by Study of Religions at university level and RE/Religions and Worldviews at school level were to be divided up between historians, sociologists, philosophers etc? The argument for retaining Study of Religions as distinct discipline rests upon three main claims. Study of Religions is able to provide an holistic picture of the diverse range of traditions from many different perspectives and using a variety of methods, bringing together text and context, ideas and people, philosophies and lived reality, past and present. Study of Religions has a distinctive approach to the subject matter as suggested above, a methodological agnosticism which is nevertheless critical, reflexive and ethical. Given the vast possible substantive content, it is important for there to be scholars whose main efforts are concentrated on the field of religion/worldviews (Sharpe's idea of a discipline as commitment and hard work). It is also of pragmatic importance, as in institutional systems structured according to subject disciplines, the danger is that the expertise and insights contributed by the community and approaches of Study of Religions could be lost.

At school level, experience has shown that though there can be very good teaching by non-specialists, in the words of one primary pupil in presentations to CoRE 'bad RE is when the teacher doesn't know the subject'. 'Knowing the subject' is not just about substantive knowledge, it is also about awareness of the disciplinary approach, and the specialist pedagogies to enable pupils to respect, live and work with others who have worldviews differing from their own, think reflexively about their own worldviews and how this might affect their learning, and understand how the insights gained from their study may apply to their own lives and that issues facing our planet. Specialists whose central concern is Religion and Worldviews, 'RE enthusiasts', are requested and deserved by students from primary to post-16 (and at university level). Integrated, cross-disciplinary projects can be successful, but only where the contributing disciplines are strong in themselves. Observation in countries where religious issues are studied in schools (if at all) via other subjects strongly suggests that religions/worldviews are best studied via a discrete curriculum subject (Cush 2007).

Although a multidisciplinary approach to RE can be very successful, in order for RE in schools to best achieve its aims, it also needs to be seen as a discrete subject in its own right, underpinned in the most part by the university subject Study of Religions, also viewed as a distinctive discipline, as well as Education Studies. The subject at school level is however not just preparation for studying religion at university level, but an educational endeavour which aims to enhance the abilities of pupils to navigate the complex world in which they live, and to enable them to develop knowledge and skills transferable to their lives beyond school, with the hope that they can apply this to building a better future for themselves and the planet.

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