

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Everyone has a worldview?

Everyone has a world view. Or so the Commission on RE tells us in its final report published last September. But what does it mean to “have a worldview”. How do I know what mine looks like? Is it something intangible like a soul? Or is it a defining and obvious feature like my face. Is it unique to me, so that even my twin brother Dave does not share it? Or is it provided by a group that I have joined or strongly identify with - that would probably mean that I have an evangelical Anglican worldview. Probably the question uppermost in every RE teacher’s mind is, however, what on earth teaching worldviews will mean for their classroom work. Will the aim of RE now be that pupils all graduate at 16+ clutching their worldview in the same hand as their GCSE certificate?

Worldview- a personal journey

I first encountered the *concept* of worldview as a science undergraduate, when I had the chance to study a module on the philosophy of science. It was an experience that challenged all my unexamined assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Up until then I had just taken-as-read a naïve, common-sense view of reality – namely that what I knew was, straightforwardly, the case. That was how I understood science and that was how I understood my Christian faith. After the course I had to take account of the idea that scientists operate within paradigms and that these can change. There was a Newtonian paradigm and then Einstein came along and science had a new paradigm; a new framework for interpreting the data of science. I discovered that different philosophers gave different names to this same phenomenon – fiduciary framework (Michael Polanyi) and research programme (Imre Lakatos) to name just two. It had dawned on me that acquiring knowledge was an act of interpretation.

It was only when I began my masters degree in education that I encountered the *word* worldview. Many scholars argued that education is not neutral; an education always offers a worldview-shaped vision of what it means to be a flourishing human being. So, although the Commission can be credited with introducing worldview into the mainstream language of English religious educators, it is actually a concept with a long history in discussions of religion and education.

Responses to the Commission

Much of the response to the Commission’s use of the term worldview has been positive. This has largely been because people welcome the idea that RE should be inclusive. Surveys suggest that around 70% of 18-24 year-olds regard themselves as non-religious. How does RE accommodate this?

Unfortunately this legitimate concern for an inclusive subject has led to one misunderstanding of the Commission’s proposals. Some have assumed that the introduction of worldview language is primarily designed to add the teaching of non-religious worldviews, particularly Humanism, into the RE curriculum. So there have been objections to the dilution of the religious content. Others are concerned about content inflation, making the job impossible for RE teachers.

The second main concern has come from those of a philosophical bent, who see the worldview concept as imprecise and unhelpful. They query whether everyone does actually have a worldview, arguing that the term only applies to those who are committed members of religions or organizations like Humanists UK.

What the Commission Actually Says

I am quite sure that getting into detailed textual analysis of the Commission Report is not going to help us develop a vibrant RE for the future, but it is surely only fair that we base our judgments on what it actually says and not on wrong perceptions.

First, the introduction of the term worldview is not an attempt to add a range of non-religious and minority worldviews to the curriculum. These are, after all, already taught in many schools. Rather it is an attempt to introduce a new way of framing how we construct an RE curriculum that enables the vast content that RE potentially offers to be managed in a way that makes sense to pupils and prepares them to engage with the amazing diversity of religions and beliefs that they encounter in the modern world.

Second, it is true that worldview is a contested term; but the same is true of religion and we seem to be able to cope with that in our subject. The Report does work hard at explaining what is meant by worldview, but, frustratingly, the critics have not paid much attention to this. The overall definition given is: "A worldview is a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world" (p4). The Commission then goes on to distinguish between institutional worldviews and personal worldviews. Both are the concern of RE. One of the core tasks of education is said to be "to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview" (p.5). This is to be achieved by rigorous academic study of institutional and personal worldviews and their role in human life.

What is not being recommended is what could be called a spectator approach to worldviews where pupils study increasing numbers of institutional worldviews one-by-one with an exclusive focus on acquiring accurate information. That would lead to content overload. Such an approach misrepresents worldviews as being primarily about beliefs and propositions, rather than ways of life reflecting human beliefs and aspirations. Personally I wonder if the Commission's cause might have been better served by adopting the word *habitus* coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Its meaning is "ingrained habits, skills and dispositions; the way that individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it". This captures the sense that we are talking about a way of being and not just a way of thinking. It also takes account of the influence of our family and cultural experiences in what we have become and not just of the ideas that we encounter. But I doubt a report entitled *Religion and Habitus* would have had much traction with teachers, parents and pupils.

What the Commission has done is to offer a radically different way of thinking from the approaches that we have become used to. Through the means of a National Entitlement, the commissioners offer the stimulus for developing programmes of work that introduce pupils to how worldviews operate in human lives through a study of religious and non-religious worldviews. What exactly those will look like is down to us, the RE community. My feeling is that materials that characterize the National Entitlement will support students in three ways.

1. Recognizing the role of interpretation in worldview development
2. Reflecting on their own worldview and its development.
3. Recognizing the complexity of the relationship between the personal and the institutional in worldview development.

Does everyone then have a worldview? Probably not if by that we mean a systematized set of beliefs about the world that shapes their thinking and behaviour. But if we mean that everyone inhabits a habitus that is often unexamined and inherited but which shapes their thinking and behavior, well yes they do. RE has an important role in helping pupils take responsibility for that habitus through learning about different worldviews.

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