

Original citation:

Everington, Judith (2018) *Including nonreligious worldviews in religious education : the views and experiences of English secondary school teachers*. British Journal of Religious Education. doi:[10.1080/01416200.2018.1478277](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1478277)

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/103035>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis British Journal of Religious Education on 05/06/2018 available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1478277>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

Including non-religious worldviews in religious education: the views and experiences of English secondary school teachers

Judith Everington*

British Journal of Religious Education

Abstract

Although the teaching of non-religious worldviews has been advocated in a Council of Europe Recommendation, few European countries include such a study in religious education. Guidance on implementing the Recommendation recognises that inclusion is problematic, raising issues for policy makers, teacher trainers and schools. In this article, findings from a qualitative study of the views and experiences of 25 RE teachers in England are used to identify and explore a range of issues, in relation to national and international debates and research. Examples of inclusion and the models that they suggest are considered and it is argued that major obstacles, such as limited time and lack of a framework for the integration of religious and nonreligious worldviews, can be overcome. However, it is concluded that this will require further research and curriculum development work and that international collaboration should be pursued.

Key words

Non-religious worldviews; religious education; teachers; international policy and curriculum development.

Introduction

The past decade has seen an upsurge of social scientific interest in the study of non-religion. Emerging issues are the implications of existing research for educators and the need for education-focused research to inform the wider field of study (Bullivant 2014; Wallis 2015; Lee 2016). In the same decade, the Council of Europe (CoE) undertook a series of projects on intercultural education culminating in a 'Recommendation' which advocates the study of 'non-religious convictions' in schools (Council of Europe 2008). However, in 2017, very few European countries include such a study in religious education and guidance on implementing the Recommendation has recognised that inclusion is problematic, raising issues for policy makers, teacher trainers and schools which require further research (Jackson 2014a, 75). On the basis of responses from 37 countries to a 2011 CoE questionnaire, Jackson suggests that,

The integration of non-religious worldviews into an area that previously has dealt specifically with religions is probably the biggest challenge facing educators in this field (Jackson 2014b, 139).

Within North European countries a growing number of empirical studies are focusing on the teaching of non-religious worldviews (eg Oostdijk, Veugelers and Leeman 2015) and on the

challenges of integration (eg Åhs, Poulter and Kallioniemi 2016, 2017; Braten (forthcoming); Lofstedt and Sjoborg (forthcoming). In England, where decisions related to inclusion are held back by the lack of a national RE curriculum and controversy over its content, a number of published works have explored the issues from philosophical perspectives (eg Aldridge 2015; Barnes 2015; Felderhof 2015) but there has been no empirical research dedicated to this matter.

This article reports and discusses the findings of a study which was undertaken to address an apparent gap in knowledge by investigating the views, experiences and needs of secondary school teachers of religious education in England. It begins with an introduction to recent developments in and debates about the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in England; reports and discusses key research findings and concludes by considering the implications of findings for further research and policy and curriculum development in England and beyond.

The inclusion of non-religious worldviews in religious education

In England, where the curriculum for religious education (RE) has been determined locally rather than nationally, non-religious 'stances for living' were included in the controversial Birmingham Agreed Syllabus of 1975 (Freathy and Parker 2013). However, it was not until 2004 that a national, non-statutory framework for RE recommended the inclusion of non-religious worldviews to local syllabus makers (QCA 2004). In 2010, school inspectors reported that not all syllabuses made reference to 'non-religious belief systems' and in schools, there was uncertainty about how to incorporate these within the curriculum. There were only a few cases where non-religious worldviews had been approached in 'a coherent and sustained way' or included a systematic study of the core principles 'of humanism for example' (Ofsted 2010, 44). In 2013, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), a non-governmental body which represents faith, professional and academic communities, conducted a nation-wide curriculum review. Its report was accompanied by a non-statutory 'national curriculum framework' for RE which reflected the review findings and reinforced the position of non-religious worldviews, including these in the curricula for all age groups. The phrase 'religions and world-views' was used throughout to refer to 'Christianity, other principal religions represented in Britain, smaller religious communities and non-religious worldviews such as Humanism' (REC 2013, 14). In 2017, and after the completion of the study reported here, a Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) published the interim report of its wide-ranging review of legal, education and policy frameworks for RE in which the inclusion of non-religious worldviews was given strong support (CoRE 2017).

As there is no statutory national curriculum for RE in England, local Agreed Syllabus conferences must decide if and how non-religious worldviews are to be included in the curricula of schools which make use of a such a syllabus. Increasing diversification within the English school system means that many schools have no obligation to adopt this syllabus and may adopt or create a syllabus of their own¹. Nevertheless, the REC's 2013 promotion of non-religious worldviews has provoked fierce debate between those who view this development as reflecting the wants and needs of pupils and teachers and essential for an inclusive religious education, and those who view it as a damaging attempt to change the distinctive and proper aims and content of the subject.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school>

The former view has been strongly promoted by the British Humanist Association (BHA)² which has argued for inclusion on grounds which include the need to ensure that the RE curriculum is relevant to, and reflects the worldviews of, the large and increasing number of pupils who have no religious background or commitment (BHA 2015). Proponents of the latter view include Marius Felderhof (2015) and Philip Barnes (2015). Barnes' critique is based on the view that, 'Understanding and interpreting religion and religions is the central aim of RE' (2015, 82). He argues that confining pupils' study to a small number of religions is necessary to avoid superficial learning and that pupils are as likely to find interest and relevance in what is new to them as exploring their own beliefs. Moreover, as the curriculum is almost exclusively devoted to secular approaches to knowledge, there is a case for a subject exclusively concerned with religion. Some of these views have been apparent in the government's position on this matter.

Although the lack of a statutory national RE curriculum limits government direction of the subject, at secondary school level, the aims and content of national Religious Studies (RS) examination syllabuses are determined by government-produced requirements for subject content, giving them considerable control of the secondary school curriculum³. In 2015, new requirements for RS syllabuses aimed at increasing the content and time devoted to the systematic study of religions, excluded a systematic study of non-religious worldviews despite substantial opposition during the consultation exercise (DfE 2015b).⁴ In response, the BHA launched a counter-campaign (BHA 2014) and supported a court case which challenged the legality of the exclusion. The government interpreted the court ruling as supporting its position and issued 'guidance' which stressed that the statutory requirements do not include an obligation to teach non-religious worldviews at any particular stage of schooling unless a school is using an Agreed Syllabus which includes such an obligation (DfE 2015c).

It remains to be seen how the REC and CoRE's support for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, the exclusion of a systematic study of these at examination level and the apparent conflict between these two positions will impact on the development of RE syllabuses and on what is taught in schools. However, the evidence that can be drawn upon to make decisions about these matters is lacking in at least one important respect. Within the debates and developments summarised above, claims have been made, on both sides of the inclusion/exclusion argument, about what teachers think, want and do without reference to empirical research that has focused on these matters. In recognition of this gap, the study described below aimed to investigate and give a voice to teachers' views and experiences; identify issues and questions for policy makers, curriculum developers and researchers and lay some foundations for more extensive research.

The Study

² The BHA has recently announced that 'Humanists UK' will be its operating name.

³ Religious Studies is the term used for RE at examination level. In many schools pupils begin an examination course in their third year and all schools must select a course from the range offered by accredited national providers.

⁴ The requirements do state that syllabuses should aim to develop students' knowledge and understanding of religions and non-religious beliefs such as atheism and humanism (2015,3).

The study was undertaken between 2014-16 and employed qualitative research methods. Questionnaires were completed by 25 teachers. Eleven of these (4 men and 7 women) agreed to participate in one-to-one, semi structured interviews of 45-90 minutes duration.

Participants responded to an invitation disseminated through RE networks. All were RE specialists and almost all were leaders of RE departments. Reflecting the current policy of diversification, their schools included comprehensive schools, Church of England and Independent schools, and recently established Academies and Free schools. Although there were fewer northern schools than those in the south and middle of England, the schools were located in different parts of the country.

Reflecting the research questions, the questionnaire asked participants to explain their understanding of the term 'non-religious world-views'; their views on whether these should be included in RE; their experiences of teaching non-religious worldviews, including pupils' responses and any challenges, and any support that they might need. Interview schedules covered similar ground.

Analysis involved close and repeated interpretative reading of questionnaire and interview responses in order to identify themes in each set of data. As a second stage, questionnaire and interview data were analysed together, in light of the first stage themes, and new themes were identified (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Some of the key findings are reported below. For the most part, findings are presented under headings which reflect the research questions but material within these sections has been selected in relation to themes. Pseudonyms are used when necessary.

Key Findings

What are non-religious worldviews?

The difficulties of arriving at agreed definitions of terms related to non-religion (Lee and Bullivant 2016) and of defining a non-religious worldview in the context of school curricula (Jackson 2014), have been recognised. However, Jackson highlights the value of a distinction between organised and personal worldviews, as examined by van der Kooij et al (2013). An organised worldview has developed over time as a more or less coherent system with sources, traditions, values and ideals and a group of adherents. It prescribes answers to existential questions, includes moral values and aims to influence thinking and action and provide meaning in life. A personal worldview is a view on life, identity, the world and existential questions that includes values and ideals. It may draw on a variety of sources and influences an individual's thought and action, usually giving meaning to life. It can be eclectic and idiosyncratic and might not involve belonging to a specific group (Jackson 2014, 71-2). As discussed below, a similar distinction has been made in the recent CoRE's interim report where it is argued that the subject matter for RE should be 'worldviews', as understood in two senses: 'institutional systems of making meaning and structuring how one sees the world' and the 'individual process of making sense of life and making meaning' which may be more or less consciously constructed (2017, 20).

In the study reported here, most participants appeared unsure about what the term 'non-religious worldview' should refer to or include and there were differing interpretations of the term. Nevertheless, all offered definitions which included one or more of the features of an organised

worldview. The focus tended to be either on a way of making sense of human existence and giving answers to ultimate questions or on providing beliefs and values that form the basis of moral/ethical decision making or more broadly, a way of life. These differences possibly reflect the ways in which the teachers had presented non-religious worldviews to pupils.

Almost all of those who gave examples included Humanism and some had used BHA guidance and resources for schools. However, none of the examples was limited to Humanism and some of the teachers believed that a focus on Humanism was not the most appropriate way of enabling pupils to engage with non-religious worldviews. Other examples given were atheism, agnosticism, secularism, rationalism, existentialism, utilitarianism and 'spiritual beliefs'.

Only a small number of participants appeared to make a clear distinction between organised and personal non-religious worldviews, for example:

This could form a structured belief system or could be how someone who does not adhere to any religious teaching /influence may refer to their beliefs.

A viewpoint that doesn't need a religion to validate it. It can be a conscious thought through set of values or something that naturally evolves without much thought.

However, most of the participants did encourage non-religious students to express their views in the classroom. As such students were never identified as Humanists, it seems likely that the teachers were used to the inclusion of personal non-religious worldviews but did not recognise or have the terminology to identify a distinction between these and the formal worldviews that were presented in teaching.

Should non-religious worldviews be included in religious education?

All participants felt that non-religious worldviews should be included in RE although they identified challenges to this which are considered below. Many expressed the view that non-religious worldviews should be taught because RE should represent a range of beliefs, including those which are held by a large and growing number of people in the UK. A number of responses focused on reasons related to social cohesion, for example, 'Students should be able to understand others and prepare for life in a diverse society'. There were also a number of references to the development of academic skills: for example it was suggested that pupils need to draw on a knowledge and understanding of non-religious worldviews in order to learn how to analyse and evaluate religious worldviews and claims. Two teachers referred to the fact that their students regularly express their own non-religious views in RE lessons and believed that by teaching them about non-religious worldviews they would learn how to express and justify their views more effectively in assessed work.

However, the largest number of responses to this question focused on students' personal development. Responses which referred to students in general included the views that encountering non-religious as well as religious worldviews is necessary if students are to 'explore their own beliefs and spirituality' or 'make informed choices about their own views of life, the universe and everything'. Teachers who focused on students with religious commitments believed that encountering non-religious worldviews is important because such students can be intolerant of the non-religious and 'need to have their views challenged'. A greater number of teachers focused on

the value of teaching non-religious worldviews for non-religious students. In these responses there were references to students' need to explore their own morality, sense of self or view of the meaning in life and to the importance of providing them with reassurance, the confidence to express their beliefs and models which would help them identify and articulate these.

How are non-religious worldviews included in RE?

As indicated above, the question of how non-religious worldviews might be integrated within religious education is viewed as a challenge, internationally. Amongst teachers in this study, the approach most often referred to was to make frequent reference to non-religious views or perspectives in RE lessons and to ensure space for the expression of students' non-religious views. However, for most of these teachers this was just general practice and pupils were given more focused opportunities to engage with non-religious worldviews or aspects of these.

Many participants referred to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews within examination courses which were of a philosophical nature, for example, 'Contrasting theistic belief with non-theist/atheist stances'; 'Critiques of and alternatives to religion and secular ideas of life after death'; 'Arguments against the existence of God and non-religious arguments about morality'. There were several references to units of work⁵ on ethical issues, for example, 'Abortion and Euthanasia from a Humanist view'.

A number of participants referred to units of a philosophical nature for younger, non-examination classes, all related to the existence of God and bringing in agnostic, atheist and humanist positions. Another non-examination approach referred to by a number of teachers involved the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in thematic units of work with titles such as, 'Is there meaning and purpose in the Universe?'; 'Is there more to life than this?'; 'Life after death'; 'Creation' and 'Justice'.

Four teachers had invited members of the BHA to act as speakers to RE classes but there were only four more who referred to lessons devoted specifically to Humanism. Two simply indicated that these were short units of work and another described lessons which involved interviewing a Humanist, looking at the Humanist movement and 'considering whether a person can be good without religious belief'. One teacher had created a substantial unit of work on Humanism, as described below.

While the findings of the study appear to be in line with 2010 inspection evidence that there were few cases of a systematic study of Humanism, they did indicate that a number of participants viewed thematic units of work as opportunities to include Humanism and/or other non-religious worldviews. It is interesting to note that a thematic approach is recommended in the only analysis of English agreed syllabuses for RE to be undertaken from a Humanist perspective (Watson 2010).

It is also interesting that the only participant who had created a substantial unit of work focused entirely on a systematic study of Humanism had done so within an RE curriculum which included a balance of thematic and systematic units. This interviewee, Claire, had created the Humanism unit despite the exclusion of such a study from the new national examination syllabuses and the local agreed syllabus followed by her Church of England school, and despite the doubts of a senior member of staff. She was proud of the RE department's inclusive approach in a 'faith school' which

⁵ A unit of work is typically 5-10 lessons.

included a substantial number of non-religious students. She had become convinced that the study of Humanism was needed to address the 'intolerant' attitudes of some of the Christian students. In her view, this would serve as middle ground or a bridge between atheism and religious commitment,

Humanism offers them an understanding...of what it is not to believe in God but still be a loving person and engage in the world and want the best for the world.

Taught in the year prior to the examination course, the unit was intended to to balance the development of academic skills and opportunities for personal development. Pupils began by researching 'What is Humanism?' and moved on to explore ethical issues from a Humanist perspective, deciding for themselves how a Humanist might respond, given core beliefs and values. In lessons on key philosophical thinkers, pupils were asked to critically evaluate the arguments and express and justify their own views and in lessons on 'Milestones' in life, they reflected on and evaluated Humanist funeral rites.

A similar determination, confidence and freedom to produce units of work which would reflect students' needs, the chosen approach to RE and a balance between academic rigour and personal development was evident in the responses of two other interviewees. In both cases there had been a decision to avoid a systematic study of Humanism and focus on significant 'thinkers'.

One participant, Maria, taught in a long-established independent school and described an approach in which there was a focus on existential questions, explored through a range of religious and non-religious worldviews. These worldviews were frequently encountered through the views and arguments of 'thinkers', including Nietzsche and Sartre, presented in the context of their times and biographies. Although the intention was to challenge pupils intellectually and promote academic skills, this approach made it possible for them to view the ideas as 'visions of the world' and 'reasons to live a particular way', rather than detached philosophical arguments. For a balance of academic rigour and personal reflection to be achieved, the nature of their encounter was considered to be crucial,

They listen, they understand, they think about the implications - what would it mean for me in the world and my local community? Then they start discussing – what's made me think? What do I really disagree or agree with? And why?

Another participant, James, taught in a recently established Free school with a commitment to classical liberal education. James was concerned that pupils should develop an in-depth understanding of religions but he had developed a pre-examination year unit of work focused on 'Thinkers'. This began with a study of ideas about God, faith and morality in writings ranging from Plato to Pascal and moved on to exploring 'challenges to the religious worldview'. The latter included study of Hume, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx and the New Atheists. Throughout the unit of work, key aims were that pupils should explore ideas in context and 'consider the questions that arise from these thinkers about morality, faith, good, evil, suffering and the existence of God'. The 'Thinkers' lessons were followed by a unit which involved a sociological study of 'the changing nature of the religious landscape', globally and in the UK. This included a study of the growing number of people identifying as 'no religion' and of non-religious worldviews. Here the BHA were studied as a movement, which was viewed as preferable to the practice of studying Humanism 'as if it was a religion'. James believed that pupils could learn *from* religious and non-religious worldviews

if learning *about* them involved in-depth and rigorous study and he encouraged both the skills of critical evaluation and the ability to present personal views on the questions raised, in discussion and writing.

Challenges to including non-religious worldviews

When asked about challenges, almost all participants referred to practical matters. The issue referred to most frequently was lack of time, for RE generally and for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews. Some were concerned about the erosion of time and flexibility created by the demands of the new religion-centred examination courses. Lack of resources, even for Humanism, was referred to by many, although the participants who had developed full units of work stressed the importance of teachers creating their own resources. Another concern was lack of knowledge about non-religious worldviews, their own and/or that of non-specialist teachers. Those who commented on training were concerned that initial training had not provided subject or pedagogical knowledge and that there was no relevant in-service training available.

Although they were very positive about the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, five of the teachers felt that challenges were presented by students with religious commitments who found it difficult to understand, accept or even engage with non-religious worldviews.

A significant theme, suggested by responses to a range of questions, related to potential or actual difficulties in the representation of non-religious worldviews. Four teachers referred to the danger of polarising, for example, setting up an opposition between religious and scientific perspectives or between theistic and atheistic positions, but the difficulty referred to most frequently was how the diversity of non-religious worldviews could or should be represented.

Six participants were explicit in criticising the national focus on Humanism and three of these expressed concern about what was referred to as the 'missionary zeal' of the BHA. However an over-arching concern was that the principle of representing diversity should be pursued throughout the RE curriculum,

You wouldn't represent Christianity through one denomination and when you teach one denomination you would try to provide differing interpretations of what belonging to that denomination means.

Despite a commitment to this principle, some participants saw a difficulty in representing non-religious worldviews because of the diversity and messiness of views:

What appears to be a non-religious worldview could be just a combination of different views.

There's a lack of clear doctrines and unified consistency.

It's difficult to think of non-religious groups in the same way as religions – there's great diversity in beliefs and values at individual level – they are too individual, broad, vague.

A number of responses focused on difficulties related to teaching non-religious worldviews within a framework designed for the teaching of religions:

If a non-religious worldview doesn't fit in to a structured system of belief it can be hard to teach in a study of religious worldviews.

Non-religious world-views should not be forced in to the kind of model that religions are forced in to, for example, sources of authority, teachings, beliefs, practices, rites of passage.

As these comments were not presented as arguments against the inclusion of non-religious worldviews but as challenges, it appears that the teachers were highlighting a need for some kind of model for understanding and conveying what the term 'non-religious world-views' includes; a means of representing the 'messy' and individual, and an overarching framework that would make it possible to integrate and teach religious and non-religious worldviews without misrepresenting either.

Discussion

It is not possible to generalise from the findings of a qualitative study which relied on those with sufficient interest in the subject to volunteer their participation. However, the value of the research lies in the rich data provided by teachers who responded in some detail to questions about their views, experiences and concerns. In the absence of other research which focuses on these matters and context, the findings provide a starting point for further investigation and development in England, and insights which can contribute to thinking within the UK and other European countries where there is a need to address issues relating to the integration and representation of non-religious worldviews in RE.

From an English perspective, the finding that all participants were in favour of the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE is in line with qualitative data acquired at a similar time by the 'RE for REal' project. This investigated views of how religion and belief should be taught and learnt in England and found that of the 100 teachers involved, 'The overwhelming majority ...support the inclusion of teaching and learning about non-religion in RE' (Dinham and Shaw 2015,14). Larger scale research is needed to investigate the extent of this support. However it is significant that, following extensive consultation, the interim report of the Commission on Religious Education (2017) proposes an 'entitlement' for education in religious and non-religious worldviews.

From an international perspective, Jackson's 2014 review of research and policy development related to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, identifies four key issues which require further investigation. Three of these are: the difficulty of identifying which worldviews to include; how these should be represented and how to integrate the study of religious and non-religious worldviews (75). These issues were identified as key concerns in the study reported here and will be the focus below.

Which worldviews and how should they be represented?

As regards the first two issues, the study identified a concern to represent the diversity of non-religious worldviews. This is in line with Council of Europe recommendations (2008) and the emphasis that has been given to representing diversity in national guidance documents (QCA 2004; REC 2014). However, recommended content, "secular philosophies such as humanism' (QCA 2004, 14) and 'non-religious worldviews such as Humanism' (REC 2014, 14), appears to reflect uncertainty about what might be studied other than Humanism. This might be viewed not only as unhelpful, but also as promoting Humanism and fuelling a concern, expressed during this study, that there is a

‘missionary zeal’ to the work of the BHA that is given free rein by policy makers. The study suggests a need for further research and guidance that can offer ways of balancing the national, and apparently default, focus on Humanism and the BHA’s recently strengthened efforts to support and resource the teaching of Humanism in schools (see understandinghumanism.org.uk). The Association has already played a key role in establishing a place for non-religious worldviews in the RE curriculum and has gone some way to addressing the resourcing problem identified by participants. It would seem to be well placed to contribute to the development of a broader perspective on and for the inclusion and teaching of a range of non-religious worldviews in RE.

All participants in the study identified non-religious worldviews other than Humanism and these should be given careful consideration, along with the CoRE’s suggestion of Nationalism and Communism (2017, 20). It should also be noted that two of the full units of work outlined above included what Barnes refers to as ‘Nietzschean ‘will to power’ atheism’. This is used as a ‘deliberately... provocative’ example in his argument against the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE and to introduce the question, ‘Are all non-religious worldviews equally appropriate to pupils and consistent with the aims of education in a liberal, pluralist, democratic society?’ (2015: 80-81). This is an important question and one which should be addressed in thinking about the content of a curriculum which goes beyond Humanism and the criteria that might be used to make content decisions. However, the findings of this study highlight the importance of ensuring that within any debate, responses to the question include those of teachers such as Maria and James whose teaching of non-religious worldviews, including Nietzschean atheism, was justified at some length as appropriate to pupils and consistent with the aims of education in a liberal, pluralist, democratic society.

While recognising the importance of teachers’ views and judgements, very few of those who contributed examples of non-religious worldviews to the study had developed units of work which explored these in depth, reflecting the findings of earlier school inspections. Two key reasons for this appear to be concerns about lack of curriculum time and lack of a framework for the representation and integration of both religious and non-religious worldviews.

Lack of time and related issues

The problem of limited time was one of the most frequently identified challenges to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews and is an issue raised by Barnes, who argues that adding more content to an already over-crowded RE curriculum would lead to superficial teaching and learning and a lack of rigour (2015:87). However, it would appear that the situation is more complex than Barnes envisages and that it would be unwise to base an argument against the inclusion of non-religious worldviews on the inevitability of insufficient time.

Reflecting a series of nation-wide reports (see CoRE 2017, 40-43), a number of participants expressed concern about the lack of time for even a basic teaching of religions in their schools and related this to the low status of the subject which they found disempowering. In contrast, the three teachers who had developed and integrated full units of work on non-religious worldviews and were concerned to balance academic rigour and personal development opportunities, worked in schools in which RE had a relatively high status and proportion of curriculum time. They were also

experienced specialists who had been given freedom to develop their own approaches and curriculum content and had the confidence to promote and defend these

The issue of school and teachers' autonomy is highlighted in Amanda Keddie's study of factors which enabled the development of 'progressive approaches' to religious and citizenship education in a London secondary school. In Keddie's view, the school's Academy status, providing freedom from external control of the curriculum, gave the school and specialist RE teachers time and opportunities to develop the kind of wide-ranging, inclusive curriculum provided by Maria, James and Claire and appeared to liberate, '... professional judgement to challenge traditionalist curriculum and open spaces for innovative, connected and academically rigorous social and moral learning' (Keddie 2014, 372; Everington forthcoming).

It is perhaps no coincidence that support for RE and school and teacher autonomy were features of Keddie's Academy, Maria's Independent school, James' Free School and in most respects, Claire's Church of England school and that in these situations, time was created for an academically rigorous exploration of religious *and* non-religious worldviews. However, in these cases another important factor appears to be the involvement of experienced RE specialists with sufficient knowledge and understanding to make decisions about how to use the time available to include both religious and non-religious worldviews. In a report of a Swedish study of the teaching of a national RE curriculum which aims to integrate religious and non-religious worldviews, it was found that the teachers did not achieve a balance between these two elements. While the teachers viewed this as the result of insufficient time, the researchers concluded that this was not the key obstacle. Lack of subject knowledge and understanding about *how* to integrate the differing elements of the curriculum was identified as a more important issue and one that needed to be addressed through initial and continuing teacher education (Lofsted and Sjoborg, forthcoming).

There is therefore reason to believe that where there is a will to include non-religious worldviews in RE, the issues of time available for this, school autonomy, support for RE and RE teachers' freedom, knowledge and expertise are interlinked and further research might explore the relationship between these. However the study suggests that amongst these factors, teachers' knowledge and understanding of *how* to represent and integrate non-religious worldviews requires particular attention.

Maria and James had created units of work on key 'Thinkers' which fitted in to a form of RE which reflected whole school and departmental approaches. These examples offer one possible model but they were the only two participants to have created units on worldviews other than Humanism. Analysis of all participants' responses suggests that one of the key obstacles to the development of units of work on non-religious worldviews was a difficulty in envisaging what such a unit would look like if it was not focused on a structured presentation of Humanism and how it would relate to similarly structured religion-focused units.

Lack of a framework

All of the participants could provide examples of non-religious worldviews other than Humanism and most, of pupils presenting their own non-religious worldviews during lessons. However, there was

concern that these were ‘messy’ and that it would be difficult to fit them in to the kind of structure used to represent religions, within individual units of work and within a programme of such units. One participant characterised this structure as, ‘sources of authority, teachings, beliefs, practices, rites of passage’, reflecting a conventional phenomenological approach to the representation of religions and the way in which religions must now be represented in examination syllabuses.⁶ Some argued that it would be inappropriate to try to represent non-religious worldviews using this kind of structure and that religions should not be represented in a way that failed to recognise internal diversity and the messiness of individual religious worldviews. It appears from such responses that the teachers were in need of a framework that would enable them to represent ‘messy’ as well as more structured religious and non-religious worldviews and to provide a coherent programme that would include units of work on both.

The CoRE’s recent interim report is highly critical of ‘essentialist’ approaches and proposes, ‘A National Entitlement for RE’ which would require that, throughout their period of compulsory schooling, pupils should learn about, understand and engage with ‘the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and ways of life that exist locally, nationally and globally’ (2017, 8). Within the report there is also the basis of a framework that might offer a solution to the difficulties recognised by the study participants. So, it is suggested that the subject matter of RE should be identified as ‘worldviews’ and as religions are worldviews, this could serve as an overarching concept encompassing both religious and non-religious worldviews (19). It is also suggested that within the category of ‘worldviews’ and within both religious and non-religious worldviews there are both ‘institutional worldviews’ and ‘individual worldviews’. From this perspective there are possibilities for representing and integrating a wide range of worldviews and enabling connections to be made between these. One connection appears in the suggestion that although many young people have individual worldviews and no formal affiliation to institutional religious or non-religious worldviews, they draw on ideas from these, consciously or unconsciously.

it is therefore important for young people growing up and working out their own worldviews to understand the origins and complexities of some of the ideas that influence them and others (20).

As the CoRE report acknowledges, there is a need to work from such ideas to create a framework that provides sufficient guidance but allows for interpretation. In this endeavour, it would seem wise to investigate how these ideas have been developed in other countries. For example, in Norway, religious and non-religious worldviews have been taught within an integrated form of RE since 1997. In a discussion of her recent study of one secondary school teacher’s practice, Oddrun Braten (forthcoming) describes an approach in which ‘worldviews’ served as the foundational concept of a framework within which pupils explored religious and non-religious worldviews and organised and personal worldviews. Their secondary school RE began with an introduction to these key concepts and the first term included an exploration of the similarities and differences between religious and non-religious worldviews; the diversity of and within religious and non-religious worldviews and how people form personal worldviews by drawing on a range of sources. Conventional subject content such as the Christian denominations was used to exemplify and

⁶ Syllabuses must cover four topics: Beliefs and teachings; Practices; Sources of wisdom and authority; Forms of expression and way of life (2015, 5-6).

illustrate and pupils could move on to a more systematic study of religions with an understanding of the diversity of worldviews and relationship between them.

A forthcoming comparison of English and Norwegian approaches to the inclusion of religious and non-religious worldviews (Braten and Everington) will explore these matters, but here it can be noted that there is much to learn from the Norwegian situation in terms of policy-related issues as well as practical approaches. For example, Braten found that although 'worldviews' was used as a primary concept and pupils were taught that religions are worldviews, this has been a matter of controversy beyond the classroom. Within debate about the subject's name and primary concept, some have argued that this should be religion and some that it should be Christianity. The historical association of the term 'worldviews' with secular Humanism is an additional complication and lack of consensus has resulted in four changes to the name of the subject since 1997. The current name, 'Christianity, Religions, Worldviews and Ethics' reflects the kind of attempt to cover all bases that is evident in recent discussion of a new name for English RE (see CoRE 2015, 12) and it seems likely that the CoRE's proposal to use worldviews as an 'overarching structure' will be viewed as highly controversial by some and generate heated debate.

Conclusion

The study findings and evidence discussed above suggest that there is considerable support for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in the English RE curriculum. They also highlight the need for careful reflection on and debate about a range of issues and for further research that can inform the development of policy and practical guidance.

One conclusion is that although the study indicated possibilities, work is needed to identify which worldviews could be studied in addition to Humanism and to develop criteria for making decisions. Two further and key conclusions are that there is much work to be done to provide guidance on how non-religious worldviews might be integrated and that this should not be approached with a view that 'one size will fit all'. Although particular attention has been paid to units of work dedicated to non-religious worldviews, this is not the only way in which RE content can be presented. A number of the study participants had included these worldviews in thematic units of work such as, 'Is there more to life than this?'; 'Creation' and 'Justice'. This approach, as distinct from the practice of presenting non-religious perspectives on religious themes and teachings, appears to provide opportunities to present non-religious worldviews in a 'coherent and sustained way' but further research and curriculum development work is needed to explore the possibilities. In this author's view, the CoRE's proposal for an approach that uses 'worldviews' as an overarching concept to encompass both religious and non-religious worldviews is an important step forward in the development of models for integration. Such an approach would make it possible to include both systematic and thematic teaching of non-religious worldviews and to create a more structured place for pupils' own worldviews to be presented and explored. Although this approach is likely to prove controversial, its development might aim to allay some of the fears.

The crucial role of teacher education is highlighted in Jackson's guidance on the implementation of the Council of Europe's recommendations for the teaching of religious and non-religious worldviews (2014a). The findings of the English study support this view, providing evidence of the importance of specialist teachers' knowledge, understanding and confidence in developing ways of representing

and integrating non-religious worldviews and of concern about the lack of training available. Looking forward, the development of initial and continuing teacher education programmes to include relevant subject knowledge and pedagogical guidance should be a priority.

Finally, it has been noted that the inclusion and teaching of non-religious worldviews is attracting interest from North European researchers. Comparative research and the collaboration of curriculum developers (including teachers) from countries at different stages in the development of provision is important for the future of RE in England and elsewhere. It has been recognised that the English RE community has much to learn from policy and curriculum developments in other countries. However, the study provides evidence of the ways in which English RE teachers are grappling with issues and creating approaches without the benefit of training or guidance and further research is needed to enable their insights and work to make a contribution to international debates and developments.

Notes on Contributor

Judith Everington is Associate Professor at the University of Warwick's Centre for Education Studies. She has worked with teachers of religious education for 25 years as a teacher educator, MA course leader and PhD supervisor. As a member of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, she played a key role in the Warwick RE Project and development of the Interpretive Approach and her publications include studies of curriculum development and RE pedagogy. She has been researching the beliefs, practices and lives of religious education teachers for 18 years and written extensively on this theme.

References

Åhs, Vesa, Saira Poulter and Arto Kallioniemi. 2016. "Encountering Worldviews: Pupil Perspectives on Integrative Worldview Education in a Finnish Secondary School Context." *Religion and Education* 43(2): 208-229. doi: 10.1080/15507394.2015.1128311.

Åhs, Vesa, Saira Poulter and Arto Kallioniemi. 2017. "Preparing for the world of diverse worldviews: parental and school stakeholder views on integrative worldview education in a Finnish context." *British Journal of Religious Education*. doi: 10.1080/01416200.2017.1292211.

Aldridge, David. 2015. "The Case for Humanism in Religious Education." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 36 (1): 92-103. doi: 10.1080/13617672.2015.1014650.

Barnes, L. Philip. 2015. "Humanism, non-religious worldviews and the future of Religious Education." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 36(1): 79-91. doi:10.1080/13617672.2015.1013816.

BHA (British Humanist Association) (2015). <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Open-letter-to-Minister-of-State-for-School-Reform-Nick-Gibb-MP-supporting-Humanism-in-Religious-Studies.pdf>. Accessed August 12th 2016.

Braten, Oddrun. Forthcoming. "Worldviews in Norwegian RE". In *Existential Questions as a Resource for Education*, edited by Karin Spoore, Geir Skeie and Jari Ristiniemi. Munster: Waxmann.

- Braaten, Oddrun and Judith Everington. Forthcoming. "Issues in the integration of religious education and world views education in an intercultural context." *Intercultural Education*.
- Bullivant, Stephen. 2014. "Teaching Atheism and Non-Religion: Challenges and Opportunities," *Discourse* 10(2): 93-110. Accessed June 14, 2015.
- Bullivant, Stephen and Lois Lee. 2016. *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, Oxford :Oxford University Press.
- Commission on Religious Education. 2017. *Interim Report: Religious Education for All*. <http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Commission-on-Religious-Education-Interim-Report-2017.pdf>
- Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. 3rd edition. California, Sage.
- Council of Europe. 2008. Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805d20e8
- DfE (Department for Education). 2015a. *Religious Studies: GCSE subject content*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/403357/GCSE_RS_final_120215.pdf
- DfE (Department for Education). 2015b. *Reformed GCSE and A Level subject content: Government consultation response*. [https://www.gov.uk/.../Reformed GCSE and A level subject content](https://www.gov.uk/.../Reformed_GCSE_and_A_level_subject_content)
- DfE (Department for Education). 2015c. *Guidance for schools and awarding organisations about the Religious Studies GCSE* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/488477/RS_guidance.pdf
- Denzin, Norman and Yvonne Lincoln eds. 2011. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. 4th Edition. California: Sage.
- Dinham, Adam and Martha Shaw. 2015. *RE for Real: The future of teaching and learning about religion and belief*, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/documents-by-section/departments/research-centres-and-units/research-units/faiths-and-civil-society/REforREal-web-b.pdf>
- Everington, Judith. Forthcoming. "Should religious education include the exploration of existential questions through non-religious worldviews?: the views and experiences of English secondary school teachers". In *Existential Questions as a Resource for Education*, edited by Karin Spoore, Geir Skeie and Jari Ristiniemi. Munster: Waxmann.
- Felderhof, Marius. 2015. "An opinion piece in response to religious leaders who have asked for secular humanism to be included in Religious Studies examinations." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 36(1): 124-129. doi:10.1080/13617672.2015.1027532.
- Freathy, Robert and Stephen Parker. 2013. "Secularists, Humanists and religious education: religious crisis and curriculum change in England, 1973-1975", *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* 42(2):222-256. doi:10.1080/0046760X.2012.761733.
- Jackson, Robert. 2014a. *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Jackson, Robert. 2014b. "The development and dissemination of Council of Europe policy on education about religions and non-religious convictions", *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 35(2) :133-143. doi:10.1080/13617672.2014.953295

Lee, Lois. 2016. *What of non-religion in the public sphere?*
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionpublicsphere/2017/02/what-of-nonreligion-in-the-public-sphere/>

Lofstedt, Malin and Anders Sjoborg. Forthcoming. "Dealing with existential issues through the eyes of Swedish RE teachers." In *Existential Questions as a Resource for Education*, edited by Karin Spoore, Geir Skeie and Jari Ristiniemi. Munster:Waxmann.

Keddie, Amanda. 2015. "Prioritizing social and moral learning amid conservative curriculum trends: spaces of possibility." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 47(3): 355-373.
doi:10.1080/00220272.2014.941410

Ofsted. 2010. *Transforming Religious Education: Religious Education in Schools 2006–09*, London: Ofsted.

Oostdijk, Eveline, Weil Veugelers and Yvonne Leeman. 2015. *Humanist Worldview Education in Diverse Europe*, paper presented at the 2015 conference of the European Educational Research Association. <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/20/contribution/34575/>

QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). 2004. *Religious Education: the non-statutory national framework*. QCA.

Religious Education Council. 2013. *A Review of Religious Education in England*, REC.

Wallis, Simeon. 2015. "Young Nones: Young People of No Religion" PhD diss., University of Warwick.