

A shift towards ‘Worldviews’ is troubling, say *Michael Wilcockson* and *Richard Coupe*



DURING the past year, a quiet but dangerous revolution has been taking place in the world of school [religious education](#) (RE). It is increasingly common now to refer to the subject as Religion and Worldviews; indeed, many [schools](#) have been persuaded that, if the subject is to justify its place in the modern curriculum, this is the way forward.

Many teachers of RE are worried, however, that what looks reasonable, even benign, may be reasonable, but is far from benign. The impetus for the change is aggressively secular, and is founded on some misleading principles.

Schools and religious organisations (churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples) need to realise that, unless they move swiftly, [Parliament](#) might well legislate in favour of a change of the subject to Religions and Worldviews. This, in our view, would undermine the distinctive nature of the subject.

In the past decade or more, there have been high-powered reports on the state of RE, and increasing calls for a further broadening of the subject to include necessarily non-religious approaches to life, and some of the problems associated with religious belief and practice ([News, 6 January, 10 February](#)) — a much more diverse subject, in fact.

At the same time, many schools have pursued a different direction, introducing proper [philosophy](#) and [ethics](#) into the subject instead of adding more and more religions and “worldviews”. Other schools, usually those “with a religious character”, are expected to follow syllabuses related to the faith and values of the foundation documents of their school. In addition, the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), which regulate syllabuses for schools in their areas through agreed-syllabus conferences, have also diversified to include pagans and humanists. This is all good and healthy.

OUR concern, however, is with the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), which says that it is the official voice of religious-studies teachers and other

organisations. It is campaigning for RE to change to Religion and Worldviews, as a result of the 2018 Commission on Religious Education report (which the REC organised and funded) ([News, 14 September 2018](#)).

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The motivation for change, or “paradigm shift”, the Council argues, is that society is rapidly becoming more [secular](#), and that many more people think of themselves as humanist rather than religious. Therefore, it argues, it is only right that the subject should change to reflect this new state of affairs.

The REC is busy producing a handbook, training courses, and teacher events to promote this new approach, despite the present Government’s refusal to authorise these changes, or to change the subject’s name. The draft handbook, however, repeatedly uses just “Worldviews” as a substitute for “religious and non-religious worldviews”. The REC would like a national curriculum for the subject and a National Statement of Entitlement, and to exclude religious bodies from any meaningful contribution. “Experts” will devise this, instead.

The irony might be that, if the Religion and Worldviews title is adopted, the “religion” element will be downgraded or, over time, disappear, to be effectively replaced by a subject called Worldviews (the REC is in discussion with Labour Party representatives to this effect). Pre-eminent among all possible non-religious world-views will be [humanism](#), as advocated by the Humanists UK and the National Secular Society — as apparently not all world-views are equal.

The ripples of this shift are already lapping at the shores of GCSE and A-level Religious Studies’ specification development. It will not be long, we fear, until humanism will be the compulsory element, and religion squeezed out, being deemed just one world-view among many.

There are many levels at which the world-views movement is flawed: religion is far from dead in the present world; non-religious perspectives are already necessary elements in the teaching of RE; and, most obviously, without prioritising the teaching of religion at its core, RE will become meaningless.

MANY of us who are involved in RE teaching, provider organisations supporting RE, and university departments sense that this is a kairos moment. Time is not on our side; so we need to move swiftly.

We have created the Religious Education Network (REN), which rejects the downgrading of religion into just another world-view and, instead, seeks to support the good practice that already exists in the teaching of RE in schools, and that values the contribution of religious bodies to the development of the subject. It is focused on theology, philosophy, and religion (TPR) as a route ahead.

The REN shares the REC’s concerns about teacher recruitment, teacher training, teacher subject knowledge, curriculum time, quality of resources, and public profile. The answer to these concerns is not to make a radical change to subject content, but to celebrate

success, learn from it, and explore the possibilities of the TPR approach that is already running in many schools, with great results.

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THE Bishop of Southwark, the Rt Revd Christopher Chessun, spoke against a Bill that would introduce an explicit requirement for schools in England to include non-religious world-views such as humanism in religious education, when the Bill had its Second Reading in the House of Lords last Friday



RE has a great future, and a very necessary one, as the Bloom report made clear ([News, 28 April](#)), for the religious literacy of the nation and the mutual understanding of diverse communities, as well as our cultural and political history. Eighty-five per cent of the world practises a religion, and this is the heart of our subject.

*The Revd Michael Wilcockson is an A-level Religious Studies senior examiner, an author, and a former Head of Divinity at Eton College. Richard Coupe is co-ordinator of the Religious Education Network, and has held senior posts and advisory positions during a long career in teaching.*