



L. Philip Barnes, ed., *Religion and Worldviews: The Triumph of the Secular in Religious Education* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. xi + 193, ISBN 978-1032206196. £22.99

After eleven years on a waiting list, I recently gained an allotment. This may seem a curious place to start the review, but bear with me The allotment had been neglected for a few years. Having been left to its own devices (along with the unhelpful contributions of ne'er-do-wells) it had accumulated a tangle of brambles, docks and litter, as well as being overgrown with all sorts of weeds. Some of this was clearly in need of disposal – trips to the tip and a large bonfire were helpful, but I was determined to find out what remained there that was good, and to build on that. What I did not do was call in an air-strike armed with napalm and Agent Orange defoliants, or ‘nuke the site from orbit ... it’s the only way to be sure’.¹

Religious Education in England could be seen to be in a similar state. Once-useful elements of the curriculum, such as Philosophy, have in many places usurped their ancillary role to become the upstart masters of the houses in which they used to serve. Pet interests and preoccupations, whether this be with trolley problems, the environment, civil rights, gender roles or LGBTQ issues sometimes edge the ‘R’ out of ‘RE’ altogether. It is, as has often been noted, a contested area.

The recent Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) in England and its proposal to replace and re-name RE with ‘Religion and Worldviews’ has had considerable, often positive, press coverage. L. Philip Barnes’s edited collection of critical responses to the proposals is a welcome contribution, containing as it does a series of well-informed, articulate and persuasive critiques of the seemingly benign proposals that CoRE made.

Anthony Towey’s insider view of the RE Commission’s work from 2016–2018 is essential reading, serving as a useful primer for those new to the intractable intricacies involved in thinking about religious education, and as a sobering reminder of the many and various challenges and threats posed to the subject, from inside as well as out.

¹ *Aliens*, directed by James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox, 1986).

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Marius Felderhof delivers a robust defence of the 1944 Settlement (the ‘Butler Act’) as being religiously sensitive, permissive, plural and consensual, in stark contrast to what he sees as the ‘reactionary, illiberal and paternalistic’ characteristics of the proposals contained in the Commission on RE’s ‘worldviews’ approach (p. 43). His advocacy of a religious education focussed on the development of young people’s character, and of the transmission and deepening of values is passionate and persuasive, but not, perhaps, reflective of what goes on in many RE classrooms (where there are still RE classrooms at all, despite the legal requirements for all schools to provide RE).

Penny Thompson’s critical examination “Who are the Professionals in Religious Education?” goes considerably further than a forensic examination of the uses of the word ‘professional’, although this, in the context of the controversy, is both insightful and useful. The highlighting of the ‘CoRE’s side-lining of the religious voice’ demonstrates very clearly the militant, anti-religious nature of the forces at play (p. 56).

Barnes himself addresses the claims central to the ‘Religions and Worldviews approach’ (R&W), that such a change represents a ‘new paradigm’. Barnes comprehensively demolishes this claim, drawing on close reference to Kuhn’s original sense and usage of ‘paradigm shifts’ in his theory of scientific revolutions.

Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam attempt to take matters further, beyond critique and into positive alternatives. Their critique of the ‘Religions and Worldviews’ recommendations is substantial, bringing educational, religious and philosophical perspectives to bear, and in each case demonstrating that the R&W approach falls short. Their suggested alternative approach, however, while ambitious and appealing intellectually and emotionally, carries more than a feint whiff of idealism that seems very far from the lived experience of the classroom practitioner. This is surprising, given Hannam’s role as Hampshire’s County Inspector and Adviser for RE. One might hope that their dreams of bringing young people’s attention to the experience of the common world, ‘before studying with intellectual humility and then to discern what is of value in order to live together’ would be the very least that an RE teacher might aspire to (p. 115), but one is tempted to ask how that would work in the last period of a rainy Wednesday with a mixed ability class of fourteen-year-olds.

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By the time we get to Roger Trigg's chapter on the philosophy of 'worldviews' one is tempted to plead that the poor thing is already dead, and can we please stop hitting it ... but no. Trigg pulls no punches: 'the idea of "worldviews" leads us to the abyss of nihilism' (p. 118). I'm quite sure that no-one on the CoRE panel had this in mind when they advocated their changes to the title and approach to the RE curriculum, but Trigg is unsparing in his critique. He declares that the direction of travel at the heart of CoRE's review 'is to drive people in on themselves, so that at the philosophical extreme, we are assumed to live in a solipsistic world [...] the whole story lapses into absurdity' (p. 122). Trigg's rather extreme critique and *reductio ad absurdum* founders somewhat on his contention that, within the proposed approaches, the pupil in Religions and Worldviews Education would be 'trapped within [their] particular horizons and cannot see beyond them' (p. 129). This is precisely the condition which good RE (and indeed many Humanities subjects) should and do challenge, not reinforce, and it is unlikely that the CoRE's purpose is to do away with this. His concerns and critique are nevertheless robust and rigorous; his concerns about the dangerous slide towards nihilism are rooted in his convictions about the importance of acknowledging a shared humanity and a real world we have in common, although we interpret it in many diverse ways.

Things calm down a bit when Daniel Moulin-Stožek examines "'Religion', 'Worldviews' and the Reappearing Problems of Pedagogy". It is refreshing at this point to read that 'it is important to observe some caution about the dangers of setting up a "straw man" when attempting to evaluate' the Religion and Worldviews approach (p. 137). Given that the proposals have been rejected by the UK government, it might seem that the debate is rather redundant, but there is a distinct sense that admirers of the Religion and Worldviews changes have had their hands on the tiller for some time, and notwithstanding the reluctance of the government to give legitimacy to the proposed changes, the changes have already been made in many schools. The widespread disregard for the law concerning RE provision at all is concerning enough. The extent to which even those schools purporting to offer RE are approaching the subject in the ways recommended and required by the core curriculum and by local SACRE's is not something that is easily determined. Ofsted's 2021 overview of the subject in England certainly suggested that there were significant 'challenges' in relation to this, including the observation of 'school

decisions that are not taken in the best interests of all pupils, such as decisions concerning the statutory teaching of RE'.²

The final two contributions offer welcome perspectives from science education (Michael J. Reiss, raising an interesting comparison between the receptions given to 'worldviews' by science teachers and by teachers of RE) and from Germany (Friedrich Schweitzer reminding us of the unseemly origins of the term 'worldview' in the German language, and its historical associations with totalitarian regimes). Reiss's analysis is helpful in highlighting that in all subjects, there is no 'view from nowhere', and that perspectives will always influence the conceptualisation and understanding of any subject. He usefully echoes Barnes in pointing out that 'the essential content of secular worldviews is already integrated into religious education as criticism of religion' (p. 157), and that while both Science and RE 'would do well to pay attention to worldviews and to introduce this concept to students, there seems no need for either subject to envisage changing its name' (p. 165). Schweitzer's contribution is more a return to the tone of the collection, unsparing in his critique of the CoRE's proposals, lambasting their scorched-earth approach to the supposedly irredeemably awful state of RE in England and Wales. This is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the whole affair: the unquestioned assumption, on no empirical evidence, that RE is in a terminal state of decline. The whole thing needs tearing down and starting again, in the hands of nine supposed experts.

Whether or not Religious Education needs reform, the proposals contained in the CoRE report need to be seen for what they are. This is no mere tidying up exercise, nor is it even a 'root-and-branch' reform – to extend that horticultural metaphor, the proposals are akin to grubbing up the whole orchard and replacing it with an untried, untested drop of genetically modified plants. It is a land-grab, a secularist coup d'état. While the nature and purpose of RE continues to be contested, arguments around the best ways forward are unlikely to be solved by the imposition of a 'one size fits all' National Entitlement, determined solely by those who would reduce religions to interesting mistakes that other people make, rather than recognising them for their richness, their value, their diversity

² Ofsted, Research Review Series: Religious Education, 12 May 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education#conclusion>.

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and their vital contributions to the life and spirit not only of their own communities, but to society as a whole.

In Scotland, the inclusion of non-religious worldviews within RE classrooms (at least in the non-denominational 'RME' curriculum, as distinct from the 'RERC' model followed by Catholic schools) was achieved with relatively little controversy with the introduction of the so-called 'Curriculum for Excellence' starting in 2002. A robust critical examination of the state of RE in Scotland would be welcome but is unlikely to materialise in the foreseeable future. This book would serve as a useful primer for anyone setting out to reflect on the quality of religious education in Scotland, or indeed anywhere that seeks to be more inclusive simply by treating 'worldviews' as equivalents to established religious traditions.

Reading this book provides a similar satisfaction for the reader as a well-turned thriller: the 'bad guys' are systematically identified, challenged, disarmed, and ultimately duffed up by a crack team of critics, who with their various specialist skill sets comprehensively out-class their opponents. Unlike a thriller, however, this book is unlikely to receive a wide readership. More concerning is that those who should be able to enjoy and benefit from the work are often ill-equipped to understand or appreciate it. The very 'specialists' in classrooms up and down the land are too often lacking in the knowledge, understanding and religious literacies which have long been identified as sources for RE's malaise. For them, the secular has already triumphed.

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