

Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School: Opportunities, Challenges and Complexities of a Transition from Religious Education in England and Beyond

Kevin O'Grady, *London: Routledge, 2023, £96, (Hbk), ISBN 9781032046198 or £29.59, (eBook) ISBN 9781003193944, 195pp.*

In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) in England published its final report. The Commission had been established two years earlier by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) to address concerns about the future of the subject in schools. In England, Religious Education (RE) is compulsory up to the age of 16 in publicly funded schools and is designed to be an academic subject that is appropriate for all pupils irrespective of their own religious background or none. CoRE offered a new vision for this subject based around the notion that everyone has a worldview. It recommended a national entitlement which laid out what pupils in every school should learn about how worldview operates in human life. In this book, O'Grady responds both to CoRE's recommendations relating to vision, pedagogy and curriculum and to the subsequent discussions in publications both from the REC and from academics. Although the focus of the book is England, O'Grady's discussion is of great relevance to all scholars interested in the nature and purpose of RE in publicly funded schools.

The book comprises ten discursive chapters. The first sets the scene by describing the key elements of the CoRE Report and the subsequent reception. Noting that this debate has been somewhat parochial, the second chapter surveys discussions of the worldview approach in other countries. Here O'Grady introduces the Council of Europe's work which features significantly in following chapters. Then he moves into conceptual clarification, discussing religion and religions (chapter 3) and worldview and worldviews (chapter 4). The point is well made that these are complex terms. In the case of religion, O'Grady argues that this

complexity should figure in classrooms rather than prescriptive definitions. In the case of worldview, he advocates for a clear understanding based on an article by Dutch scholar van der Kooij and colleagues in order to guide selection of non-religious worldviews for the curriculum. Along the way he introduces discussion of the place of philosophy and theology as disciplines in RE, of the importance of reflexivity, of the place that worldview plays in teachers' work and the challenge of the power that they hold.

In the fifth chapter, O'Grady returns to discussing the English scene, seeking to identify the foundations of CoRE's educational vision. He focuses on the very significant contribution made by Robert Jackson's team at Warwick University in their interpretive approach based on ethnographic research. He also notes that the critical realist approach developed by Andrew Wright and the human development approach pioneered by Michael Grimmitt are important contributors to the emergence of CoRE's approach. In his sixth chapter, O'Grady challenges the traditional conceptions of knowledge that he argues have influenced the UK government and develops an alternative view that resonates with a worldview approach. In chapter 7 he argues that the knowledge-rich focus currently dominating English discussions needs to be replaced by one that looks to RE's contribution to promoting democratic citizenship. In chapter 8 O'Grady explores how the concepts of religion and worldview literacy contribute to an understanding of CoRE's proposals. Chapter 9 is a discussion of the recent Big Ideas in RE initiative, particularly in framing a model of progression that resonates with the CoRE vision. Finally, chapter 10 summarises each chapter and then reflects on O'Grady's key themes of democracy, worldview, purpose, change and the contribution of research.

Having read most, if not all, of the responses to the CoRE report, I judge O'Grady's book to be the most insightful so far. He positions himself as a sympathetic critic who values the thrust of the CoRE educational vision, but offers refinements and alternative ways of

thinking. Much of the debate around the CoRE report has been fractious and parochial. O'Grady's contribution is in stark contrast. Modelling the Warwick interpretive approach, he draws on an extensive international literature, treating his sources with respect in his representation of them and with insight in his interpretation of their significance. His brief autobiographical contribution is an important indicator of how personal reflexivity is an academic virtue for academics, teachers and pupils in a worldview approach. Every Christian educator interested in how a worldview approach might contribute to public education should read this book.

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