Chapter 15

Afterword

*Martha Shaw*

The chapters in this book provide a timely ‘state of play’ with regard to understandings of religious literacy in the Nordic context and its relevance to education. These theorizations and explorations of practice respond to and reflect both the changing religion/worldview landscape in the Nordic countries and an evolution of ideas around knowledge in relation to that landscape; what knowledge about religion/worldviews looks like, whose knowledge it is, and what it is for.

Many authors in this book and beyond (e.g., Bråten, 2013, Halafoff et al., 2016) show how Religious Education as a school subject is still strongly embedded in the national context. As illustrated by Inge Anderstand, religious literacy can be and indeed has often been seen as part of a normative, nationalizing endeavor in which pre-determined knowledge about Christianity is considered central to preserving cultural heritage. Yet, as argued by Tine Brøndum, rather than contributing to national cohesion, such an approach is exclusionary to huge swathes of the population in countries where cultural, religious, and non-religious plurality are increasingly the norm. As many studies have shown and as Karin K Flensner points out in her chapter, Religious Education can often serve to reinforce stereotypes and further marginalize particularly religious minorities, especially when one’s way of life or identity is not represented or given recognition within the classroom.

The link between religious literacy and citizenship is, as observed by Fredrik Portin, apparent in curricula across the Nordic context, where the study of religion/worldviews is related to participation in democracy. Such is the trend in many Western democracies, in which the increased visibility of religion in the public sphere has become an important factor in the challenge of balancing national unity and the celebration of diversity.

A concurrent trend throughout most of the ‘Western world’ is that of educational reductionism, driven by PISA and the broader global educational marketplace, which encourages an obsession with outcomes and effectiveness as shared and valued currencies in the ‘knowledge economy’. At the supranational level, the focus on ‘competencies’, can further promote an understanding of education as outcome, in the form of 21st century skills that equip young people for the future. In this context religious literacy risks being understood as a normative set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes vis-a-vis religious diversity that will equip young people for engagement in plural democracies.

Such reductive understandings of religious literacy and the related essentialization of ‘religion’ are problematic in that they overlook the lived reality and complexity of worldviews and disregard the co-productive nature of knowledge, as generated through experience and interpretation. The chapters in this book share a common narrative: religious literacy as pre-determined, static ‘knowledge’, combined with prescribed skills and attitudes is not enough. Correspondingly, there are some key threads woven through these chapters that challenge such reductionism; an emphasis on the importance of lived religion and its representation in classrooms and curricula; the centrality of a reflexive process in religion/worldviews education; and the insistence that students (and teachers) develop *critical* religious literacy and student agency.

**‘Lived’ religion/worldviews**

When we refer to the ‘livedness’ of religion or worldviews, this resonates in two ways: The first relates to the complexity of worldviews in that they cannot be reduced to static blocks of belief or practice. As Kristian Neimi shows in his comparison between Swedish and Indian Religious Education, worldviews are understood and experienced in a myriad of ways, and ‘core beliefs’, if distinguishable, are variably interpreted, practiced and embodied. Secondly, this ‘livedness’ consists of processes of interpretation by social actors, through which worldviews themselves evolve. Rather than constant entities, worldviews are continuously re-shaped through human action. In this sense they are live as well as lived.

The ‘livedness’ of worldviews raises questions in relation to knowledge about them and whose representation of religion/worldviews is valued and given space in the educational context. Here the hierarchy of ‘everyday’ and ‘curricula’ knowledge (Young, 2007) begs re-examination. I will say more about the relationship between types of knowledge below, and here the key point is that any representation of religion/worldviews is an interpretation. As many authors have pointed out, in classrooms and curricula throughout the Nordic region and beyond, this representation is largely framed by a Western, Protestant lens. Critical religious literacy then involves the recognition and challenging of such dominant, colonial framings of religion and close examination of the concept itself. As argued by Malin Löfstedt, it involves the development of critical capacity in relation to dominant discourses. The development of epistemic literacy in the study of religion and worldviews is, according to Stones and Pearce (2022), necessary in righting some of the ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2007) evident in current RE practice.

**Reflexivity**

The development of critical consciousness is a key part of religious literacy. At the epistemic level this entails a deconstruction and challenging of dominant discourses and representations, as described above. Yet religious literacy also involves the development of critical consciousness at the personal level, through a dialogical process that is necessarily reflexive. Reflexivity is seen as a key component of religious literacy by many of the authors in this book and features as an aim of RE in national educational frameworks. In the English context, reflexivity is seen as central to a ‘worldviews approach’ as it is articulated by its proponents (Cooling et al., 2020, Shaw, 2020). This builds on interpretive approaches to Religious Education (Jackson, 1997) and draws on hermeneutic traditions, particularly Gadamer (1975) and the idea of understanding as a ‘fusion of horizons’.

In terms of its application in classrooms, how reflexivity is interpreted and implemented in teaching will inevitably vary. Some approaches focus on the student and/or teacher exploring their own worldview and bringing one’s own perspective into dialogue with another. Thus, Malin Löfstedt provides examples from classrooms of opportunities for self-reflection by which students might “see themselves”. This illustrates a need for the reflexive process to be made a more explicit part of religious literacy and worldviews education, so that students and teachers might perceive and challenge their own assumptions. Some approaches draw heavily on the hermeneutic spiral to capture how one’s own perspective is transformed through this process. For example, the Religious Education Council for England and Wales are leading a ‘worldviews project’[[1]](#footnote-1), and at the time of writing are in the process of devising materials to support the implementation of a ‘religion and worldviews’ approach in schools. In the draft materials, reflexivity is promoted in terms of pupils being aware of their own worldview, having an awareness of how this affects their learning, or ‘exploration’, and how in turn, their learning, or ‘journey’ affects their own worldview. The whole premise of a worldviews approach is that it presents a paradigm shift away from the ‘world religions approach’ and the primacy given to ‘objective’, substantive knowledge. Rather, the act of interpretation is foregrounded as a dialectical process. This shift is supported in the English context with the suggestion by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) that Religious Education concerns ‘substantive’, ‘disciplinary’, and ‘personal’ knowledge (Ofsted, 2021).

**Critical Agency**

Reflexivity, as part of religious literacy, brings into focus the dialectical process of understanding and further highlights students’ agency. Anna Wrammert links reflexivity to students’ agency as *awareness. So too,* ‘agency as resistance’ might apply not only to representations or ‘substantive knowledge’ about religion/worldviews, but also to challenging students’ (and teachers’) own misconceptions, stereotypes; and assumptions as internalizations of the colonial legacy – the development of *critical consciousness*. This process, as argued by Wrammert is potentially empowering as students are enabled to positively reframe and express religious dimensions of their own identities.

As Jørgensen and Unstad point out in their chapter, this criticality can also manifest itself in action. They draw on Green (2012), who describes the critical dimension as “one that enables individuals not simply to participate in the culture but also, in various ways, to transform and actively produce it” (Green, 2012, p. 7). This echoes Wrammert’s emphasis on agency and emphasizes religious literacy as a social act, highlighting the importance of encounter. A focus on agency highlights the transformative potential of religious literacy. This perspective is reflected in Fredrik Portin’s argument that seeing past society’s hegemonic structures allows young people to be agents of change in the community. He draws on Parker & Hess (2001) to suggest that religious literacy might contribute to “a form of moral and political awakening” which encourages “common action with a multiplicity of actors in the public sphere”.

The threads identified in the chapters of this book relate to my own theorization of ‘worldview literacy’[[2]](#footnote-2), (see Shaw, 2020, 2022) which seeks to provide a framework for worldviews education in general and to support a ‘worldviews approach’ as the latter gains articulation and momentum in the English context. I have argued that worldview literacy and a worldviews approach should entail a focus on *interpretability*, *reflexivity* and *transformative encounter*. Building on Dinham’s theorization of religious literacy (see Dinham, 2020), I emphasize these three strands as interrelated elements of worldview literacy as praxis (a process of reflection and action). I stress the importance of understanding lived worldviews as interpretations, emphasizing the need for deconstruction of dominant and hegemonic discourses in relation to their categorization and representation. I describe worldview literacy as a process of reflexive engagement in plurality and draw on hermeneutic traditions to foreground the reflexive process of understanding. As with many authors in this book, I share a focus on critical literacy as practice. As I have argued elsewhere (Shaw, 2023), when understood as a praxis, religious, or worldview literacy can be transformative at the individual and societal level.

As with my model of ‘worldview literacy’, the ways in which religious literacy is interpreted in this book suggest more than a functional literacy and highlight the critical and transformative nature of literacy as practice. In his chapter, Inge Andersland argues that whereas the 1997 Norwegian curriculum was based on a model of Christian literacy akin to Hirsch’s cultural literacy, this has been abandoned in the new curriculum for a more open exploration of worldviews that no longer promotes knowledge about Christianity of other religions as the basis of positive engagement in diversity, but rather promotes an open exploration, focusing on development of skills or competencies. Indeed, religious literacy is widely valued as central to the capabilities of global citizens today. Thus, Martin Ubani argues that it is in relation to the conceptual framework of *new generic and applicable learning skills* (OECD, 2005; European Commission, 2013; OECD, 2018) *that* religious literacy connects to public education most explicitly. Like Ubani, I am wary of the instrumentalization of curriculum and am concerned that viewing religious literacy as part of a set of democratic competencies risks hollowing it out to a set of generic skills and prescribed attitudes that detract from its transformational potential as part of a holistic educational endeavor. Rather than a tool for the effective formation of rounded citizens, it is within the dialogical and critical nature of religious literacy that its contribution to democratic citizenry lies. It is through the empowerment of self-aware, reflexive actors in plurality.

As the chapters in this book suggest, religious literacy can be understood as an empowering, emancipatory process. Whilst such an understanding of religious literacy is not unique to the Nordic context, the latter does provide an interesting platform for rooting ideas of religious literacy within broader, humanistic educational traditions of Didaktik, and *Bildung*. Whilst the concept of *Bildung* is complex, at its center is an understanding of education as a holistic endeavor. This is not the place, nor do I have the expertise to present a detailed exploration of the concept, its history and application. Others have already begun this task (Biesta, 2002a, 2002b Deng, 2018; Schweitzer, 2023). In broad terms, in contrast to Anglo-American approaches and the prevailing focus on knowledge and content, *Bildung* signifies an educational tradition in which academic and personal development are inseparable and interdependent dimensions. In his exploration of the knowledge question in Religious Education, Friedrich Schweitzer (2023) summarizes the key thrust of *Bildung* as education that supports “the development of an autonomous person or individual self-characterized by independent reflexivity and self-determination coupled with critical thinking and responsibility for others” (p. 8). In accordance with such an approach, knowledge is not valued as powerful in its own right, but in relation to how it is understood by the individual and contributes to their self-development. Here the focus is on “the use of knowledge as a transformative tool of unfolding the learner’s individuality and sociability” (Hopmann, 2007, p. 115).  As with Biesta’s notion of ‘subjectification’, this is about a process of young people ‘coming into the world’ and engaging with it (Biesta, 2010). The development of our ‘subjectness’ can be supported by an education process that brings us to engage with “how we are, how we exist, how we try to lead our own life, what we will do with who we have become, with what we have learned, with the skills we have acquired, with the competencies we have developed, but also with our incompetence, our blind spots, the things we are not able to do, and so on” (Biesta, 2022, p. 33). This is what Biesta calls the existential dimension of education, that which goes beyond ‘cultivation’ and calls the ‘I’ into question.

Such a humanistic approach may be at odds with the prevailing international view of education as the delivery of outcomes. Yet there is another, arguably, less instrumental agenda for education, reflected for example in UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative (2021). In the proposed New Social Contract for education, UNESCO is clear that “a new relationship must be established between education and the knowledge, capabilities, and values that it cultivates” and that “content mastery does not need to compete with application, skills, or the development of capabilities. Instead, foundational knowledge and skills can intertwine and complement one another” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 64). The extent to which this suggests a move beyond education as ‘cultivation’ (Biesta, 2022) merits further discussion, but UNESCO’s humanistic agenda is clear in the insistence on the need for “curricula that teach people as whole human beings, [that] support their social and emotional interactions with the world and make them more capable of collaborating with others to improve it” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 67-68).

Religious or worldview literacy has a particular role to play in this process as an act of reflexive engagement in plurality (Shaw 2020,2022). As an act, and one that centralizes the student’s agency, worldview literacy is a key part of active citizenship. As Biesta describes it, “democratic citizenship is not simply an existing identity that individuals just need to adopt but is an ongoing process that is fundamentally open towards the future” (Biesta, 2011, p. 2). Understanding worldview literacy as an example of active citizenship places value on the process itself. As with *Bildung*, this ‘disorientating encounter’ (Biesta, 2021) is something that should happen throughout life, as a continuous part of being a reflective citizen. Worldview literacy can then be thought of as an ongoing process of reflection and action, or *praxis*.

As praxis, religion or worldview literacy is intrinsically and necessarily embedded in the social context. As such it needs to take account of the social, cultural and political implications of the contexts in which young people participate. So, we return to the importance of lived religion/worldviews and to the importance of the dialectic process. Students’ experiential knowledge is central to understanding religion/worldviews and it is through dialogue with their own interpretation and that of others that students gain deeper understanding of others and their own ways of being in the world. Rather than the students simply gaining knowledge about religion/worldviews, they are co-creators of evolving knowledge of lived worldviews.

As I have suggested, this process has transformational potential both for the individual and for society. At the individual level this might involve a challenging of assumptions, an evolution of perspective and increased self-awareness. This deeper understanding of others and oneself might encourage the development of empathy and solidarity, which in turn might promote concern for and action to address injustice and inequality. As praxis, understanding, interpretation, and application are interwoven and interdependent dimensions of the process of understanding (Bernstein, 1983). So the aims of purpose of worldview literacy reconcile the academic, personal, and social. As Braten and Skeie (2020) discuss in their discussion of Norwegian curriculum reforms, the importance of religion/worldviews education to the broader educational endeavor rests on an understanding of its contribution to ‘deep learning’ as part of a much broader understanding of the idea of ‘competencies’ as part of new pedagogies ‘of cooperation and solidarity’ (UNESCO, 2021) that build the capacity of young people to transform the world.

In a final reflection, and one to which UNESCO’s New Social Contract (2021) draws our attention, we cannot conceive of the future of education, or indeed religion & worldviews education, without regard to the role of technology. Whilst responses to the growth of artificial intelligence and its impact on teaching and learning vary from sceptical embrace to fearful rejection, it is clear that ‘AI’ is an unavoidable part of education. In this context, the educational response needs to look beyond generic competencies to the kind of capabilities developed through processes of critical religious literacy. Knowledge about knowledge, knowledge about the self, skills of self, and collective determination and discernment, are more important than ever. Furthermore, these are the very capabilities that a computer cannot recreate.

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1. https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/draft-resource/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have consciously adapted my terminology from ‘religion & worldview literacy’ to ‘worldview literacy’. This reflects the English context and the emergence of a ‘worldviews approach’. I understand the term worldview in a broad sense, to include ways of understanding and being in the world that may be influenced by religious and nonreligious traditions, beliefs and values. Within this, I retain the need for a focus on the categorization of ‘religion’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)