**Response to** ‘Religious Literacy’: Some Considerations and Reservations’, Johannes C. Wolfart

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In responding to Wolfart’s article, I do so from an interdisciplinary, yet primarily from an educational perspective. My conceptualisation of what I prefer to call ‘worldview literacy’ is certainly influenced by scholarship within Religious Studies and the sociology of religion, and can be seen, as a product of my work together with Adam Dinham, as an expanded theorisation of his framework for religious literacy in public professions (Dinham, 2017, 2020). What makes my conceptualisation of worldview literacy distinct from Dinham’s, and from other approaches discussed by Wolfhart, such as that of Porthero and Moore, is its contextualisation within the school classroom. More specifically, I have argued that ‘worldview literacy’ should be a key element of Religious Education and citizenship education and suggest it provides a framework for thinking about the crossover between the two school subjects (Shaw, 2022).

The educational perspective is important is addressing the efficacy of religious or worldview literacy, for which Wolfhart rightly points out there is scant evidence-based research. As Wolfhart argues, this is partly down to the lack of consensus over the definition of religious, let alone ‘worldview’ literacy and the rationale underpinning their pursuit. Wolfhart’s summary of the aims and purposes of religious literacy into “academic rationalist”, “socially efficient”, “humanist” and “social reconstructionist” traditions is helpful both in outlining the range of rationales and in thinking about their intersection within any particular approach. The question of purpose or value in the study of religion can of course be extrapolated to debate the purpose of education itself. Whether for personal or social development, or for the intrinsic worth of ‘knowledge”, or indeed a combination of all three, I would argue that in seeking to provide an evidence base of the worth of approaches to religious literacy, we should be mindful that a preoccupation with measurement risks undervaluing it as an educational process. In what follows, I outline my understanding of worldview literacy as a process of educational praxis which I hope offers both an alternative lens on the purposes of learning about religion and worldviews, and an at least partial response to the perceived problem of a lack of evidence for its efficacy.

As I have argued elsewhere (Shaw, 2022) when religious literacy is understood in reductive terms as the acquisition of substantive knowledge of the majority religions, alongside the development of certain skills and attitudes *vis-à-vis* religious diversity, this frames religious literacy as a product of education. As with other forms of literacy, the suggestion is that one can become literate enough in religion, or finance, technology etc, in order to function well-enough in society. So being religiously literate means having gained enough knowledge about some religions, usually the ‘main’, institutionalised traditions and having been socialised into a set of liberal values (tolerance, respect etc) so that one is ready to engage with religious ‘others’ in society. This chimes with the views expressed in the American Academy of Religion roundtable Wolfhart mentions, that religious literacy could be considered part of a larger set of "life skills," "job skills" and "citizenship skills." Such reductionist understandings are problematic for many reasons, not least because they risk overlooking the diversity, hybridity and fluidity of religions and non-religious worldviews as evidenced in contemporary research (Shaw, 2018; Hannam et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021). The idea that there is a set of ‘building blocks’ of religious traditions, “their terms, symbols, doctrines, sayings, characters, metaphors and narratives” (Prothero, 2007:15) that the religiously literate person should know also minimises the critical dimension, both in terms of the role (good and bad) that religion plays in history and contemporary society (Davie, 2015, Moore, 2007). Furthermore, it overlooks the crucial need for the critical deconstruction of the very notion of ‘religion’ and its representation in society, including in education (Goldburg, 2010; Shaw, 2018, 2020). Most importantly in relation to the argument I would like to make here is that framing religious/worldview literacy as a product of education, a set of prescribed knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be learnt and that then inform engagement *with* diversity, overlooks the value of the educational process itself as part of enactment *in* diversity. Such approaches risk positioning worldviews as ‘out there’, as external phenomena that the individual needs to understand. Rather than promoting understanding of difference, the effect can often be counterproductive, contributing to an ‘othering’ of those with different worldviews. Moreover, in positioning religion or worldviews as external, observable phenomena, this reduces the agency of the learner, who rather than someone who observes and understands, can be understood as an actor in plurality. Afterall, as recognised in the Commission on Religious Education for England and Wales in their recent National Plan for Religion and Worldviews education, everyone has a worldview (CoRE, 2018), although this may not be in the form of a coherent set of beliefs and practices.

The educational approach that I term ‘worldview literacy’ suggests a focus on the *process* of engagement with difference. It is beyond the scope of this response to outline my approach in detail, and this is presented elsewhere (Shaw, 2020, 2022). For the purposes of positionality, ‘worldview literacy’ can be situated within an emerging ‘worldviews approach’ that is gaining popularity in the English context as an alternative to traditional models of Religious Education based on the dominant ‘world religions’ paradigm. Whilst debates around the terminology continue (Benoist et al., 2020, Tharani, 2020), the term worldview is generally employed to denote religious and non-religious, organised and personal traditions and identities. Worldview literacy can be seen as part of an approach that engages with diverse ways of being in the world, alongside the overhaul of essentialist, reductionist representations of religion.

As the ‘worldviews approach’ is articulated and exemplified in the English context, it is associated with philosophical hermeneutics in the Gadamerian tradition (see Cooling et al, 2020) which emphasises the coming together of learner and subject in a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer, 1975). Such approaches focus on the event of understanding as a process of *I-Thou* dialogue in which the learner’s own perspectives are brought to the fore and ultimately challenged. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics and approaches to critical religious literacy, Ihave argued that worldview literacy as a process should focus on *interpretability*, *reflexivity*, and *transformation through encounter*. Again, the detail of these strands is explored elsewhere (Shaw, 2022), but together they promote engagement with the fluid and dynamic nature of lived worldviews through a process of ‘self-critical scholarship’ (Goldberg, 2010) - self-aware reflection on both the pupil’s own interpretation and on dominant representations of religion/worldviews (themselves understood as interpretations).

As a dialogical approach, worldview literacy is distinguished from traditional transmissive approaches by the focus on transformative encounter with the subject matter. The concept of worldview literacy, so understood, is aligned with critical pedagogy within RE such as Baumfield’s (2003) ‘community of enquiry approach’ and transformational approaches to critical citizenship education. It can make an important contribution to the broader aim of education as the space in which young people become actors in plurality (Hannam, 2019) and practice democracy (Biesta, 2010). As such it can be seen as making a contribution to Biesta’s process of ‘subjectfication’, empowering young people to “come into the world” and enabling them to engage with it (Biesta, 2013).

With the focus on encounter, worldview literacy can be understood as a process of educational praxis in which Bernstein’s (1983) three elements of hermeneutics; *understanding, interpretation* and *application*, are interwoven. Learning about religion and worldviews is not distinct from interpretation of others’ and one’s own beliefs. Neither is it distinct from application, as the very act of understanding is played out in everyday engagement and encounter. It is through encounter with another’s worldview that understanding happens. Through the learning process, the student develops the skills of critical enquiry and positive engagement with difference. Likewise, understanding and disposition are enacted and developed through the application of skillsof encounter. So rather than an outcome or product of good RE, or any other education, worldview literacy can be understood as a process of dialogical encounter with difference, an educational praxis that brings young people to a greater understanding of the dynamic diversity of worldviews and of themselves as social actors therein.

As such, worldview literacy is not simply about the acquisition of knowledge or personal formation but is made up of a complex set of interrelated aims. Whilst I disagree with Wolfhart that a confessional mandate prevails in England and Wales, where, in the majority of schools, RE is absolutely not about ‘inculcating religious values or beliefs’, as evidenced in previous research, there is no doubt that confusion remains over the aims and purposes of the subject, even within schools without a religious character (Dinham & Shaw, 2015, 2017). A worldviews approach offers a reconciliation of what have been seen as competing aims of RE in relation to academic, personal and social development (Shaw, 2020), a reframing of ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion[[1]](#footnote-2976). Academic development and skills of critical analysis are entwined with personal and social formation and social transformation through the act of encounter.

As a process of transformative encounter, worldview literacy sits more comfortably within *Didaktik*, as developed in continental European teacher education, particularly in Germany and the Nordic context (Hopmann, 2007) than in the Anglo-American content focused context, where, as Hoppman argues it is almost unknown. Central to the Didaktik tradition is the concept of *Bildung*, which is about “more than mastery of contents or development of competencies and abilities, more than ‘knowing something’ or ‘being able to do it’ (Hopmann, 2007:115) and about “the use of knowledge as a transformative tool of unfolding the learner’s individuality and sociability” (Hopmann, 2007:115). It is about ‘grasping as much world as possible’ and ‘contributing to human mankind’ by ‘developing one’s own unique self’ (Humboldt, [1792] 2000, cited in Hopmann, 2007:115).

I am mindful of Wolfhart’s critique and acknowledge the absence of an evidence base for the efficacy of worldview literacy. I agree that social science should indeed be supported by robust evidence, and many studies, including those referenced by Wolfhart, along with many more relating to RE indicate the positive impact of teaching about religions (see for example Gearon, 2002, Vikdahl and Skeie, 2019). At the same time, when considering the more holistic educational endeavour, “formation of the full individual, the cultivation of human powers, sensibility, self-awareness, liberty and freedom, responsibility and dignity” (Deng, 2018:374) for example, are not easily measured. Rather than seeking to reinforce the preoccupation with measurement that lies at the heart of education systems worldwide, the idea of worldview literacy as process moves away from viewing education as a set of outcomes to seeing it as an ongoing endeavour, as part of being in plurality.

Yet the need persists for a robust evidence base upon which such theorisations rest, if not to satisfy the measurability agenda, then as a basis upon which teachers can develop their practice. As an example of a response to this need, Adam Dinham and I developed a set of case studies, that evidence creative ways in which schools are embracing worldviews education.[[2]](#footnote-3786) These examples, drawn from five schools in England demonstrate an engagement with worldviews as interpretable, as lived and dynamic. They seek to support pupils in challenging representations of religion, in the media for example and more broadly in society. In two of the examples, pupils are explicitly invited to re-assess their own assumptions about religion and worldviews through a structured process of reflexivity. In one case this is in regard to assumptions about Islam and Islamophobia in the media. In another school, primary (aged 9-10) pupils are invited to interview three visitors with different worldviews (although two were self-identifying Christians). The children recorded the answers they thought they would receive before their encounter and reviewed their responses in light of these, leading to a transformation in their understanding as they learned about the ‘livedness’ of worldviews. This transformational encounter is a key feature of the case studies and illustrates a process of worldview literacy. In a significant sidenote, these examples are drawn from contexts outside the GCSE (examined) classroom, which was noted as an enabling factor by teachers. Whilst the restraints of the performativity agenda prevail in education systems worldwide, such examples may provide support for teachers seeking to carve out space for a process of engagement with worldviews that goes beyond the knowledge skills and attitudes mantra.

The hermeneutic process at the heart of worldview literacy is of course, not uniquely applicable to the study of worldviews and as outlined above is a feature of broader transformational or critical pedagogical approaches. Yet as I have argued, worldview literacy may provide a framework for rethinking the aims and purposes of RE and for the intersection of worldviews and citizenship education in schools. The importance of religion as a marker of identity and difference and as the basis of both belonging and participation in civic spaces signals the need for more careful consideration of the crossover between these two subjects, as does the complex relationship between multiculturalism and secularism. In relation to educational approaches, their positioning within the curriculum, whilst often seen as marginalised, might in some ways present an opportunity. In most schools in England, both subjects are optional at GCSE level (examinations taken at age 16). Yet they remain part of the national curriculum and and such often present educative spaces outside the performativity agenda with potential for the development more human-centred, transformational approaches.

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1. [[1]](https://euc-word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?ui=en%2DUS&rs=en%2DUS&wopisrc=https%3A%2F%2Fstulsbuac-my.sharepoint.com%2Fpersonal%2Fshawm7_lsbu_ac_uk%2F_vti_bin%2Fwopi.ashx%2Ffiles%2F55eae94329b24d16a2d436bcc5bfdb36&sc=https%3A%2F%2Fstulsbuac%2Dmy%2Esharepoint%2Ecom%2Fpersonal%2Fshawm7%5Flsbu%5Fac%5Fuk%2FDocuments%2FForms%2FAll%2Easpx%3FRootFolder%3D%252Fpersonal%252Fshawm7%255Flsbu%255Fac%255Fuk%252FDocuments%252FWriting%2520%25281%2529%26FolderCTID%3D0x012000A45167C5D6400C46A02303A549A5E1B7%26View%3D%257B2F6570ED%252D5FB1%252D4050%252DA546%252D2099C413781C%257D&wdenableroaming=1&mscc=1&wdodb=1&hid=66CA37A0-C015-4000-2BD4-5D29E1C369FD&wdorigin=DocLibClassicUI&wdhostclicktime=1651053793345&jsapi=1&jsapiver=v1&newsession=1&corrid=b45561f0-0d9d-46ed-b93f-9b69cb4aa58a&usid=b45561f0-0d9d-46ed-b93f-9b69cb4aa58a&sftc=1&cac=1&mtf=1&sfp=1&instantedit=1&wopicomplete=1&wdredirectionreason=Unified_SingleFlush&rct=Medium&ctp=LeastProtected#_ftnref1) Interconnected aims of RE as formulated by Michael Grimmitt (1987) [↑](#footnote-ref-2976)
2. See <https://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/current-projects/reforreal/case-studies/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3786)