



Who studies religion? Towards a better conversation between Theology, Religious Studies, and Religious Education

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Abstract

This paper calls for better integration between the fields of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) and Religious Education (RE). Positive reform in RE requires integration between educational theory, policy, and practice, but we argue that the academic study of theology and religion is too often an overlooked partner in these conversations. The separation of TRS from RE is damaging at all levels of the curriculum, undermining the rigour and critical depth of school syllabi, cutting TRS and RE specialists off from valuable intellectual discussion, and leaving university departments unprepared to properly support student progression. This destructive divergence has long been observed (e.g. Cush in *Br J Relig Educ* 21:137–146, 1999), but this paper proposes that the emerging paradigm of Religion and Worldviews Education (RWE) has encouraged important progress. The advent of RWE has generated new interest among RE specialists in the theory and practice of multidisciplinary TRS. It has also created space for TRS academics from many fields to engage with teachers and policymakers in productive conversations. To illustrate this argument, we highlight some examples of good practice and suggest future work through which links might be strengthened.

Keywords Interdisciplinary dialogue · Religious Education · Religious Studies · Worldviews paradigm

1 Situating Religious Education

The relationship between the academic study of Theology, Religious Studies, and Religious Education (RE) in Higher Education and the teaching of RE (or RVE—Religion, Values and Ethics in Wales) in primary and secondary schools has long been an object

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of discussion. This article focuses on the situation in England and Wales, and calls on teachers and researchers at all levels of education to pursue closer conversations and collaborations. Strengthening this relationship means encouraging all participants to rethink their understanding of expertise. Our title asks who studies religion, and our answer is expansive and inclusive. Teachers and researchers across all educational contexts from primary school to university are experts in the study of religion who can contribute to multi-directional knowledge exchange for mutual benefit.

Our argument begins by analysing the current relationship between Higher Education Institution (HEI) -based Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) and school-based RE, identifying some of the key barriers to partnership and knowledge exchange. We then argue that a closer working relationship would be of benefit in both directions. TRS stands to benefit from dialogue with RE (Sect. 2) and RE can benefit from better dialogue with TRS (Sect. 3). Examples of work in progress are offered in Sects. 2 and 3 to illustrate what can be achieved through better collaboration.

In 1999, Cush wrote about tensions between Theology, Religious Studies, and RE, and challenged the view that RE was not an academic discipline in its own right. While RE could be studied using a theological lens (for instance when examining how sacred texts may be interpreted), and through a Religious Studies lens (for example, at the time, by borrowing from Smart's phenomenological approach), Cush (1999) argued that RE should be considered a rigorous academic discipline, distinct from Theology and Religious Studies. As she explains, "Religious Education in schools is not University Religious Studies watered down to make it suitable for children" (1999, p. 138), and nor is it to be conflated with Theology. Reflecting on the inequalities of power between these disciplines, Cush states that "[I]ittle sister RE is not content to be patronised by her older male relatives" (1999, p. 144).

Cush's (1999) argument remains relevant, and a reminder that the status of RE as an academically rigorous discipline has long been contested. At stake in this article are several issues which continue to resonate 25 years later: (i) the perceived confessional nature of RE; (ii) the differences in gender demographics between RE as teaching profession and Theology and Religious Studies as academic fields; and (iii) the view among some Theology and Religious Studies specialists that RE is not based on scholarly research, especially due to the emphasis on action research in schools, teacher-led inquiry, and qualitative methodologies. We will briefly discuss each of these three issues.

In part, the perception of RE as confessional is a historical legacy. It was only when the 1988 Education Reform Act was passed that a broadly Christian Religious Instruction officially became multi-faith RE. While some locally agreed syllabi had already moved away from RI before 1988 (e.g. Bath, Birmingham, Hampshire), others adapted after 1988 (Benoit, 2020; Gillard, 1992). However, despite this shift to multi-faith RE, Christianity—and more specifically Anglican Christianity—remains at the heart of Religious Education (Benoit, 2020). Maintained schools still teach a locally agreed syllabus which must, by law, be developed by and voted on by Committee A of a SACRE (Standing Advisory Council of Religious Education) that includes representatives of the Church of England and other faith and belief communities (now including Humanism) (Humanists UK, 2023). By law, this syllabus must privilege and centre Christianity (Education Reform Act, 1988). Some of these syllabi have also emphasised the promotion of religious and spiritual perspectives, encouraging students not only to "learn about", but also "learn from" religion and to value religious insights. While academy schools are not required to follow their locally agreed syllabi, many choose to adopt existing guidance (from their own Local Authority,

or another), and all must abide by the law, which privileges the place of Christianity within RE (Education Reform Act, 1988).

Cush's attention to gender also has lasting significance for the relationship between disciplines. When Cush (1999, p. 144) refers to Theology and Religious Studies as the "older male relatives" to "little sister" RE, her choice of gendered terms is deliberate. At that time, university TRS departments were dominated by male scholars, while RE in school was much more likely to be taught by female teachers. Progress towards gender balance since 1999 has been slow. In 2013, women made up only 29% of academic staff in TRS departments (Guest et al., 2013). The British Academy analysed the state of TRS departments in 2019 and reported slightly different figures: 35% of staff were women in 2012/13 and 37% in 2017/18 (2019, p. 4). In contrast, the undergraduate population was 64% female in 17–18 (2019, p. 3). Among school teachers, the gender divide is very different: in 2021, 75.7% of teachers in England across all subjects were women (Gov.uk, 2023). Cush argues that these gender dynamics impact how Religious Education is perceived in academia and beyond, informed by patriarchal discourses that devalue teaching as women's work (Cush & Robinson, 2014).

Cush's third and related point is the low status of RE as an academic discipline in its own right. RE has long been dubbed a 'Cinderella subject' (e.g. Dierenfield, 1967; Copley, 1997; Bastide, 1999). In 2018, Schweitzer went as far as to say that "Religious Education is shown to be a true Cinderella, existing in ways which are lacking in dignity and which make it impossible to recognise or to develop the true potentials of this subject" (2018, p. 517). As a result, Schweitzer argues, RE research is "particularly rare in Britain" (Schweitzer, 2018, p. 521). With the notable exception of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), which was established in 1994 under the directorship of Professor Robert Jackson, research centres that specialise in Religious Education are hard to come by. Research on RE is rarely located within Theology and Religious Studies departments and tends to occur within Schools of Education or teacher training contexts instead.

Cush returns to the question of disciplinary relationships in a more recent article co-authored with Robinson (2014), and this later work identifies a different kind of challenge for RE. Cush (1999) objects to a relationship of dependence between disciplines, in which the academic fields of Theology and Religious Studies expect to be regarded as experts and parent figures by teachers of RE. In contrast, Cush and Robinson (2014) argue that very little communication about the study of religion is happening at all. Although Religious Education, Theology, and Religious Studies are still in dialogue with one another "at the level of policy and practical issues", Cush and Robinson argue that there is "no forum to share developments within subject content" (2014, p. 5). They propose that a dialogue between the different disciplines, and between schools and universities, needs to be re-established "in the spirit of the pioneers of non-confessional multi-faith religious education" who revitalised the subject in the 1970s (2014, pp. 14–15). Cush and Robinson caution against returning to a top-down approach prioritising the expertise of Theology and Religious Studies, and emphasise knowledge exchange: academics, teachers/teacher trainees, and pupils should all be seen as "partners in the continuing attempt to understand religion and religions" (2014, p. 5). Nonetheless, the bulk of their article is dedicated to trying to explain then-recent developments in the field of Religious Studies to readers who, the authors assume, will be unfamiliar with trends in university-based research on religion.

Barnes (2014) responds critically to Cush and Robinson (2014), and his argument recalls at least the first and third of Cush's (1999) explanations for the divide between disciplines. Barnes argues that the aim of RE is different from that of Religious Studies. Religious Studies, he suggests, aims to understand religion but university departments "make

no moral demands on students and do not aim to further their moral or social development” (2014, p. 203). In contrast, “understanding and interpreting religion is not the sole aim of religious education” (2014, p. 204). Instead, Barnes claims that RE should promote moral and social education by teaching “the moral content of the different religions” (2014, p. 204). In fact, according to Barnes, it is the turn to Religious Studies and away from moral education that has caused RE to lose “much of its relevance to the interests and *Lebenswelt* of pupils” (2014, p. 202). Arguments like this are not quite promoting confessionalism, but they attempt to situate RE in a different and more celebratory kind of relationship to religion than university-based Theology and Religious Studies. Such perceived differences in aims have at times generated mutual suspicion between teachers based in schools and universities, suggesting to schools that university-based Religious Studies is dry and impersonal and to universities that school-based RE is insufficiently concerned with critical thinking.

Taken together, Cush (1999) and Cush and Robinson (2014) suggest that a bad situation is getting worse. The older male relatives and the little sister, once trapped in a patronising relationship of dependence, have failed to develop a new relationship of mutual respect, and instead have become estranged. The disconnect observed by Cush and Robinson (2014) between RE, Theology and Religious Studies has become increasingly noticeable over the following decade, at least in part because of three changes in the career path of RE teachers in England and Wales: (i) the ongoing decline of student numbers in theology and religious studies departments in the UK; (ii) the long-term crisis in recruiting and retaining specialist RE teachers; and (iii) the promotion of alternative, non-university-based teacher training routes by the UK government. Even the existence of specialist teachers cannot be assumed. In many schools, RE is now delivered by non-specialist teachers who trained in other areas and spend most of their time teaching other subjects. Disciplinary divides, student markets, and government policy factors have combined to produce generations of teachers of Religious Education who have no connection to university-based religion research.

The purpose of the present article is to draw attention to this situation, to indicate areas of positive growth and improvement, and to call for further work to reconnect the fractured disciplinary family of Theology, RS, and RE. By exploring potential models for connection, focusing here on case studies from our own work, including two recent grants funded by Culham St Gabriel Trust, we argue that the lack of communication between these disciplines is damaging to all of them, and that knowledge exchange and collaborative research will be a source of mutual enrichment. We do not, of course, mean to imply that these three disciplines have an exclusive relationship or that RE should not engage fruitfully with other disciplines, most notably Education. We merely hope that this article can be a helpful provocation towards a better coexistence between those who teach and study religion in different educational contexts.

2 How can Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) benefit from dialogue with RE?

We begin here—in acknowledgement of Cush’s call for disciplinary humility among Theology and Religious Studies academics—with four issues where university departments that study religion stand to learn from their colleagues in primary and secondary RE and RE research. We use the acronym TRS (Theology and Religious Studies) as a collective term to refer to university departments, subject units, or degrees where these disciplines

are taught together. We use the words Theology and Religious Studies (rather than the acronym) to refer to the separate disciplines as independent fields of study.

First, RE teachers and scholars are experts in the theory of education, including pedagogy and curriculum design. Despite ongoing advances in pedagogical training for university teachers in the UK, the professional development of teachers in school contexts remains much more thorough and conceptually sophisticated. TRS academics and curriculum designers could benefit greatly from collaborative work with school curriculum experts.

Second, collaboration between teachers in HEI and school contexts is a vital step to promote subject recruitment across educational levels (Cush & Robinson, 2014). While TRS degrees are struggling to recruit undergraduate and postgraduate students (British Academy, 2019), RE remains attractive and recruits relatively stable numbers at GCSE and A-level (REC, 2017; 2021). University departments may wish to ask what is it that secondary school students are enjoying in RE but do not seem to find in TRS degrees. Conversely, teachers of RE in secondary schools need to know how a specialism in their subject can lead pupils to a successful career.

HEIs compete with one another to recruit students onto their programmes, but they can also work together to support schools and help raise the profile of the discipline as a whole among students, employers and parents/guardians. The national organisation TRS-UK was founded as a national association of departments, research centres, and subject societies of Theology and Religious Studies to support this kind of collaborative promotion. The two authors of this paper (Benoit and Hutchings) currently hold positions as Schools Liaison Officers on the TRS-UK Executive Committee, tasked with improving links between schools and universities. TRS-UK has recently produced a series of videos (funded by the RE charity Culham St Gabriel Trust) to show how Theology and Religious Studies graduates from a range of different HEIs use their degrees in law, politics, business and other areas (<https://trs.ac.uk/studying-trs/graduate-videos/>). These videos are being used in both school and university contexts to promote the value of an education that promotes religious literacy.

Third, beyond recruitment, a better mutual understanding is also necessary to develop a coherent curriculum that builds student expertise across education levels and supports progression from school into university. Without knowledge exchange, TRS academics cannot be fully aware of what knowledge or skills their students have been taught at school level, or what is viewed as popular and successful in the school classroom. Students who choose a TRS degree risk repeating content, missing out on something they expected to study, or encountering unexpected gaps in their knowledge, training and study skills.

Finally, RE also presents collaborative opportunities and intellectual challenges for Theology and Religious Studies. For example, RE's historic commitment to first-hand encounter with religions (Cush & Robinson, 2014) echoes the interest of many TRS researchers in lived religion. Teaching resources that bring the diversity of religion to life by applying a lived religion lens to local neighbourhoods and communities could be valuable to teachers at both school and university level and could be co-produced through collaboration between schools and universities.

A more recent intellectual catalyst for TRS scholars has been the shift in RE to a religion and worldviews paradigm. The publication of the Commission on RE report (CoRE, 2018), which proposed this new approach, has led to a flurry of publications from both RE and TRS researchers to evaluate this proposal (Hutchings et al. 2022; Owen 2022; Tremlett 2022), to explore the academic study of worldviews (Benoit et al., 2020), and to test religion and worldview education as a pedagogical tool (Lewin, 2020). One particularly

welcome aspect of the religion and worldviews approach, from a TRS perspective, is the consideration of both religious and nonreligious perspectives in the classroom. Another is the emphasis of the CoRE report on academic diversity. “At school level,” the report states, “the study of worldviews is inherently multidisciplinary [...]. It is important that young people experience a range of academic approaches to the nature, origin, role and function of religious and non-religious worldviews in people’s lives” (CoRE, 2018, p. 37). The study of religion and nonreligion through a diverse range of disciplinary approaches is a hallmark of university TRS departments (QAA Subject Benchmark, 2023, p. 11, 12). The religion and worldviews approach thus suggests a new paradigm that more closely aligns RE in schools with the study of TRS in universities, opening new possibilities for collaborative study and exchange of ideas. The section below illustrates how we can better work together to renew dialogues between the RE, Theology, and Religious Studies.

3 How can RE benefit from dialogue with TRS?

This new religion and worldviews approach to RE also highlights the value to schools of stronger dialogue with university-based TRS. The CoRE report called for multidisciplinary RE that is attentive to diversity, inclusive of religious and nonreligious perspectives, engaged with personal as well as institutional worldviews and responsive to the changing landscape of religion in Britain. This challenge has inspired some teachers to connect with university departments in search of expert advice and resources. These new relationships are encouraged by a joint initiative between NATRE (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education) and TRS-UK (Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education), who together launched a ‘Making Links with Universities’ webpage (<https://www.natre.org.uk/secondary/making-links-with-universities/>), to enable RE teachers to reach out to their closest TRS department (NATRE, 2023).

Better links can also be supported through networking and knowledge exchange opportunities. The authors of this paper have organised both online and in-person events to support conversation between teachers and TRS academics, in collaboration with TRS-UK. For example, the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group, Socrel, (a TRS-UK member) invited Hutchings to create an in-person study day in Nottingham to discuss approaches to teaching religion in 2021, ending with a free public webinar on teaching worldviews. The speaker line-up and the webinar panel included both RE teachers and TRS academics, supporting conversation about pedagogy across educational contexts. Around 30 teachers of RE and TRS attended the event in person and 100 more joined online. Following the success of this event, Socrel invited Hutchings and Benoit to coordinate a free public webinar on diversifying the RE curriculum as part of its 2022 annual conference. This event hosted a panel of RE teachers and TRS academics in conversation and attracted an audience of around 60 people.

The success of these events encouraged the team to apply for funding for a more ambitious networking activity. In 2023, Hutchings and Benoit were awarded funding from Culham St Gabriel Trust to host a one-day workshop in Nottingham on research and teaching in religion and worldviews. This event was designed to bring together TRS academics and RE teachers with an interest in the religion and worldviews approach—both supporters and critics—to discuss their work, share findings, and identify future research priorities. The grant covered travel expenses for 40 delegates, allowing teachers and researchers to attend without relying on funds from their schools or HEIs. In total, 47 people attended the event.

The team programmed the day lightly, with presentations from key research projects in the morning and two sets of workshops after lunch. Topics for the first set of workshops were set in advance, but delegates were invited to propose their own ideas for the second set of workshops on the day using a wall of post-it notes. This event design was intended to maximise time for conversation, debate and networking, and to make space for new contacts and new conversations between RE teachers and TRS academics. Feedback from event delegates (collected after the event using an online form with 21 responses) was very positive and particularly emphasised the diversity of the conversations across educational contexts. For example, two RE teachers wrote that they most enjoyed “being able to network with not only other RE teachers but other professionals that are passionate about RE”, and “the opportunity to meet in-person and discuss issues surrounding the Religion & Worldviews paradigm with interested people from across the educational spectrum”. The feedback form also included a free text question asking what could be done in future to support more collaboration between RE, TRS, and Education. Proposals included more networking events like this workshop, expanding the discussion to include Exam Boards, establishing a mentoring scheme to partner individual RE teachers with supportive TRS academics, supporting more RE teachers to undertake their own postgraduate research through Masters or PhD scholarships, and encouraging RE teachers and TRS researchers to work together to produce new teaching resources.

As this final proposal suggests, one of the most important ways in which RE and TRS specialists can collaborate is to co-create learning and teaching material for use in the RE classroom. Successful collaborations are those where academics and teachers/teacher trainees operate on an equal footing. This standpoint of equality is not only about acknowledging the academic rigour of Religious Education as a discipline, but also reflects the collaborative and action-focused methodologies commonly used in RE. As Cush and Robinson highlight:

It is important to note that this task is not undertaken from the standpoint that academics at university level should cascade their superior knowledge of the subject to teachers and teacher educators who will then distil simplified versions to their pupils (2014, p. 5).

Examples of successful co-production include ‘Teacher Fellowships’. These modes of engagement involve a project leader (who may or may not be an academic), academics (from Theology and Religious Studies, as well as other disciplines where appropriate), and teachers of Religious Education (at primary and/or secondary level). The activity is informed by knowledge exchange, where all stakeholders learn from one another. Not only do all participants equally shape the project’s outputs, but the conversations also help inform the research agenda.

In 2023, the Diocese of Coventry Board of Education published a series of booklets on Christian Worldviews and Advocacy (<https://coventrydbe.org/news/download-category/christian-worldviews-and-advocacy-project/>). These teaching and learning resources are the result of a Teacher Fellowship project that sought to explore the “diversity of Christian worldviews with regard to a variety of societal issues” (Diocese of Coventry Board of Education, 2023, p. 5). One of the objectives of the project was “to demonstrate that there is no such thing as ‘the’ Christian worldview” (*ibid.*). Rather than presenting Christian thought as monolithic and singular, this project would invite pupils to recognise that “those inhabiting a Christian worldview may end up advocating across a continuum of positions” (*ibid.*), as per the requirement of the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) framework.

To accomplish this aim, project leader Jennifer Jenkins chose to create a dialogue between primary and secondary teachers of RE and university academics from a range of TRS disciplines. Jenkins assembled a team of primary and secondary teachers to participate in a series of online seminars on different topics. Each seminar was presented by a leading academic researcher who specialised in that area and delivered an introduction to the topic and their own cutting-edge research. Jenkins then wrote a written summary of the key points of each seminar and asked the academic specialist to check her understanding. At the end of the seminar series, teachers worked in pairs to select one topic that appealed to them and produce classroom resources appropriate for pupils at Key Stage 2 (7–11 years old), and Key Stage 3 (11–14 years old). Jenkins invited the authors of this paper to act as academic advisors to this project, who worked together to support her from the grant-writing stage to the final publication of the resources. Benoit and Hutchings' role included discussing suitable topics, helping to locate the best academic specialists to speak on each issue, and helping to check the academic accuracy of the final resources.

Jenkins was able to break academic silos by engaging with academics from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including Theology, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Politics. The following topics were chosen, with the aim of developing “the understanding of teachers and pupils on a range of societal issues through the lens of Christian worldviews” (*ibid.*): climate change; ‘Golden Rule’ Christians; the body and abortion; motherhood and family; politics; race and violence; human rights and sexuality; the body and LGBTQ+ issues; and digital religion. Benoit and Hutchings also presented two seminars explaining sociology of religion as a distinctive disciplinary and methodological approach. The teacher fellows developed resources to explore all the topics for Key Stage 2, and Key Stage 3 classrooms.

According to the project leader, the scheme demonstrated that complex topics can be effectively explored using different disciplinary lenses in the RE classroom:

In the Christian Worldviews and Advocacy project [we worked] with a range of academics from the disciplinary fields of theology and sociology of religion. What we were able to do was benefit from hearing them present their academic work and then consider effective ways in which we might use that in the classroom, even with pupils in the primary phase. As project leader for the Christian Worldviews and Advocacy Project I was able to support non-specialists in taking the work of the academics and reimagining it for those younger pupils. I found that role of ‘percolator’ both challenging and rewarding and being the bridge between teachers and academics was made more effective by the support and advice of Céline and Tim. What we discovered through the project is that no topic need be off bounds, but sometimes it is necessary to lay foundations in the earlier years for successful learning later, rather than tackle a topic head-on. This was especially the case with regards to the human body and bodily agency. Whilst we did not include the research of academics in our project materials for Key Stage 2 on topics such as abortion and sexuality, we were able to think thoughtfully about the research academics had shared with us and include teaching and learning activities that would make engagement at Key Stage 3 more successful. Teachers working with academics is something I would like to see more of and I think this project [...] really demonstrates how successful that can be. (Jennifer Jenkins, Project Leader, Religious and Spirituality Officer, Diocese of Coventry Board of Education, personal communication)

Teacher participants also reflected on the importance of conducting work that allowed them to (re)connect RE with the academic study of Theology and Religious Studies. The project

enabled them to engage in conversations around religion(s) and (non)religious diversity, but also to delve deeper into a wider range of relevant theories, including feminist and postcolonial approaches. According to the teachers, the multi-disciplinary dialogue served to create a robust set of resources for the classroom:

It will enable our students to engage in scholarship in a scaffolded way - highlighting RE as an academic and challenging subject. It will help students to not see Christianity in a fixed way and open them up to diversity within the faith. (Key Stage 3 Teacher)

The project has helped to plan a curriculum focused more on research and current, critical thinking. Some of the themes and topics were challenging to see from a primary perspective, which is not to say they are not important or shouldn't be included but that we shouldn't limit children's access to these topics because they are more challenging for younger pupils. Nor should we limit their engagement with these themes and topics or their thinking and responses. (Key Stage 2 Head Teacher)

Some teachers also reflected on students' engagement with the resources, showing that they too benefited from the dialogical relationship between the different disciplines:

I found the experience of being part of the Christian Worldviews and Advocacy Project rewarding and incredibly thought-provoking both personally and professionally. Having the opportunity to dig deep into these issues, supported by the excellent speakers and leaders, was highly beneficial. I feel really proud of what we have achieved and where we have started to deliver sessions (on Worldviews) in school the children have been engaged, sensitive and mature in their response which is very encouraging. I am sure that our children will find these resources so helpful in tackling some of the issues they have to think about in today's world. (Key Stage 2 Teacher)

This collaboration between educational contexts means that the learning and teaching material that result from Teacher Fellowships can be informed both by the latest academic research and by up-to-date pedagogies. While the teachers involved in this fellowship welcomed the opportunity to rethink their schemes of work and resources by taking into account different disciplinary lenses, they also found that the way the current education system is set up limited their ability to be agile. Some explained that they felt they would not be able to use all of the material that had been co-produced, and would have to make tough choices about what to include in the classroom or not. This was particularly true at secondary level, where teachers felt the pressure to prepare students to sit examinations such as GCSE or A-levels, and the increasing pressure to teach towards the tests. This demonstrates the need to include Exam Boards in co-creation of learning and teaching material that reflects current academic and pedagogical thinking. While Cush and Robinson (2014) suggest that "pupils in schools, teachers, teacher educators, student teachers, and students and lecturers in degree courses" should be seen as partners, we argue that it is also essential to include Exam Boards in the conversation so that co-produced resources can help inform future examination specifications.

4 Conclusions

This article calls for closer links between teachers and researchers working in RE and TRS, based on mutual professional respect for all those who study religion. We have argued that renewed dialogue between schools and university TRS units should be a two-way knowledge exchange of mutual benefit. Areas for fruitful collaboration

can include sharing pedagogical ideas, designing collaborative research and engaging in shared projects of intellectual discovery—like the flourishing of debate across disciplines prompted by the shift in RE to religion and worldviews education. This kind of dialogue can lead to improvements to curriculum design and content at all levels of education, bringing new ideas and approaches into the RE and TRS classroom. For TRS academics, a better understanding of the aims, knowledge, and skills that students have already encountered in RE can help to support student progression by identifying where overlaps and gaps exist between school and university approaches to teaching. This does not necessarily mean that RE and TRS should be entirely the same in disciplinary approach and content, or that their aims should be identical, but improved understanding of students' prior experiences and expectations is still an essential step in curriculum development. We argue that the emerging paradigm of Religion and Worldviews Education can lead to renewed dialogue between the disciplines.

To explore potential models for connection, we have focused here on case studies from our own work, including two recent grants funded by Culham St Gabriel Trust. A number of different teacher fellowship projects have now been launched in RE/RVE in England and Wales, and we encourage colleagues working on similar enterprises to consider a more detailed future analysis that contrasts some of the different fellowship models now in existence to identify key principles of best practice. Other models to link schools and universities are also being tried, including study days, residential courses, webinar series, university production of teaching resources and discounted rates for teachers wishing to attend academic conferences. One common request we receive from teachers is for greater support from universities for teacher-led research, particularly through university library access. Our intention in this article has not been to provide an exhaustive survey of all attempts to build a closer relationship between RE and TRS, but to advocate for a particular kind of connection, dedicated to mutual respect, mutual knowledge exchange, and collaboration for mutual benefit.

One key issue that has not been discussed in this article is the pupil voice. If teachers and researchers engage in mutual dialogue, should pupils be included in the conversation? If so, how? The Coventry Teacher Fellowship project “Christian Worldviews and Advocacy” begins to answer this question by creating a pupil voice booklet, to be used to record how students engaged with the newly created resources. This booklet is intended to be used as a source for reflection to enhance pedagogical approaches in the future. Nonetheless, a more pro-active approach at including pupil voice would be worth exploring. For example, pupils could be included directly in Teacher Fellowships to help inform the project design. This approach would align with the ‘new’ sociology of childhood, which acknowledges that children should not be considered as objects that are acted upon, but should instead be seen as full active participants. As such, their active contributions to curriculum design should not be overlooked. This proposal is beyond the scope of the current paper, but we hope to explore it further in our future work.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical statements The data presented in this paper comes from feedback forms that were gathered as part of a knowledge-exchange project. All research studies involving human participants discussed in this paper were approved by the relevant Ethics Committees at the University of Nottingham and Aston University.

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