

What's in a name?

The Welsh Government's Department for Education and Skills has put forward proposals for Religious Education which include renaming the subject "Religions and World Views". This name is almost identical to that of the Report of the Commission on RE: "Religion and World Views: The Way Forward". Almost identical, but not quite. The addition of the "s" is apparently quite minor, but in fact it opens up a multitude of avenues for discussion and reflection. In exploring these avenues, I will use, for brevity, the acronyms RRWV (the Welsh preference) and RWV (the CoRE Report).

Religion or religions? The plural form subtly alters the perceived balance between the halves of the proposed names. This in turn affects views about the weight that should be accorded to each half, and the time that should be allocated, within the RE curriculum. RWV suggests an arrangement in which "religion" is broadly balanced by "world views", as in "swings and roundabouts".* RRWV on the other hand points to a rather different balance which recognises the abundance, richness and multiplicity of religions within the religious field, once the umbrella term "religion" is set aside.

The word "religion" itself is problematic. It is an abstract term, a construct which falsely implies a common essence or normative paradigm. On the contrary, to echo Margaret Thatcher's notorious soundbite, there is no such entity as "religion"; there are only religions. Whereas RVW downplays faiths and faith communities and elevates World Views, RRWV allows proper weight and respect to be given to faiths and faith communities alongside World Views. Conspiracy theorists might be forgiven were they to harbour the unworthy thought, that if you wanted to promote secularistic atheism in schools, you could do a lot worse than to get RE renamed as "Religion and World Views".

Consciously or not, there does seem to be a drive within the RE world to marginalise faith, faiths, and faith communities. The REC Commission's members did not include anyone identifiable as a faith - or faiths - representative. The Commission's proposals for Local Area Networks grudgingly included faith communities only at the tag end of the list, lumped in with libraries and galleries. If religious education, under whatever title, mostly shuns actual faiths and faith communities, how can it justify its name, be relevant in today's society, and fulfil the spirit and the letter of pupils' statutory entitlements?

Further nuances emanating from the two names are spelt out speculatively in the attached chart, which has a deliberately provocative edge to it. In the last resort, it is perhaps more a case of "both...and" rather than "either...or", but the contrasts are a warning that small linguistic differences can conceal very different agendas and programmes, and the two columns do map out two very different understandings of religious education. The Welsh Government's Consultation Paper simply states what its preferred name is (see the relevant paragraph below). I certainly applaud its pragmatic wisdom, and concur.

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"RE provides opportunities for learners to explore the range of spiritual, philosophical, moral, social and cultural beliefs within their community, across Wales, and throughout the world. We feel the subject name should reflect what learners will be taught through RE. As such, we are proposing to change the name of Religious Education, so that it appropriately reflects teaching practice within the new curriculum, and allows for the exploration of all religious and philosophical beliefs, as well as other beliefs and world-views, including nonreligious world views. Our preferred name is Religions and Worldviews."

* The term "world views", in its broadest sense, includes both religious and non-religious ideological stances. I use the term in this article as a shorthand to refer more specifically and narrowly to non-religious world views.

Nuances emanating from the names proposed to replace Religious Education.

Name	Religion and World Views (RVW)	ReligionS and World views (RRVW)
Implied curriculum balance	Downplays the curriculum space for individual religions, i.e. faiths and faith communities; elevates and magnifies World Views.	Gives space for faiths and faith communities to be accorded adequate weight in their own right, alongside World Views.
Subjective effect	Fails to affirm the reality and significance of religious traditions and communities today.	Strikes a fair balance within the whole range of religious and non-religious realities.
Suggestive adjectival clusters and contrasts	Cool, impersonal, rational, lofty, detached, individualistic, objective, vanilla, grey.	Warm, personal, existential, earthed, engaged, social, affective, vibrant, rainbow.
Kindred disciplines	Philosophy, ethics, humanities.	Social sciences, psychology, arts.
Pedagogical mode	Rationality	Phenomenology
Characteristic activities	Analysing, comparing, evaluating.	Perceiving, empathising, self-understanding.
Focus	The individual pupil, the mind.	The experienced world, the heart.
Key values	Autonomy, individuality.	Authenticity, identity, belonging.
End product descriptors	The autonomous individual, able to make moral and personal choices on rational grounds, and to evaluate current issues; the pupil able to tackle A Level questions in Religious Studies.	The responsible citizen, able to live authentically within a plural society; the pupil aware of the challenges and tensions generated by religious/World View diversity, both within himself/herself and communally.