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In this issue Attack and defend:

Is religion under attack?
Does humanism need defending?
Can RE defend itself better?

Professional Reflection:

The journal of NATRE

Learning, challenging students and understanding Islam

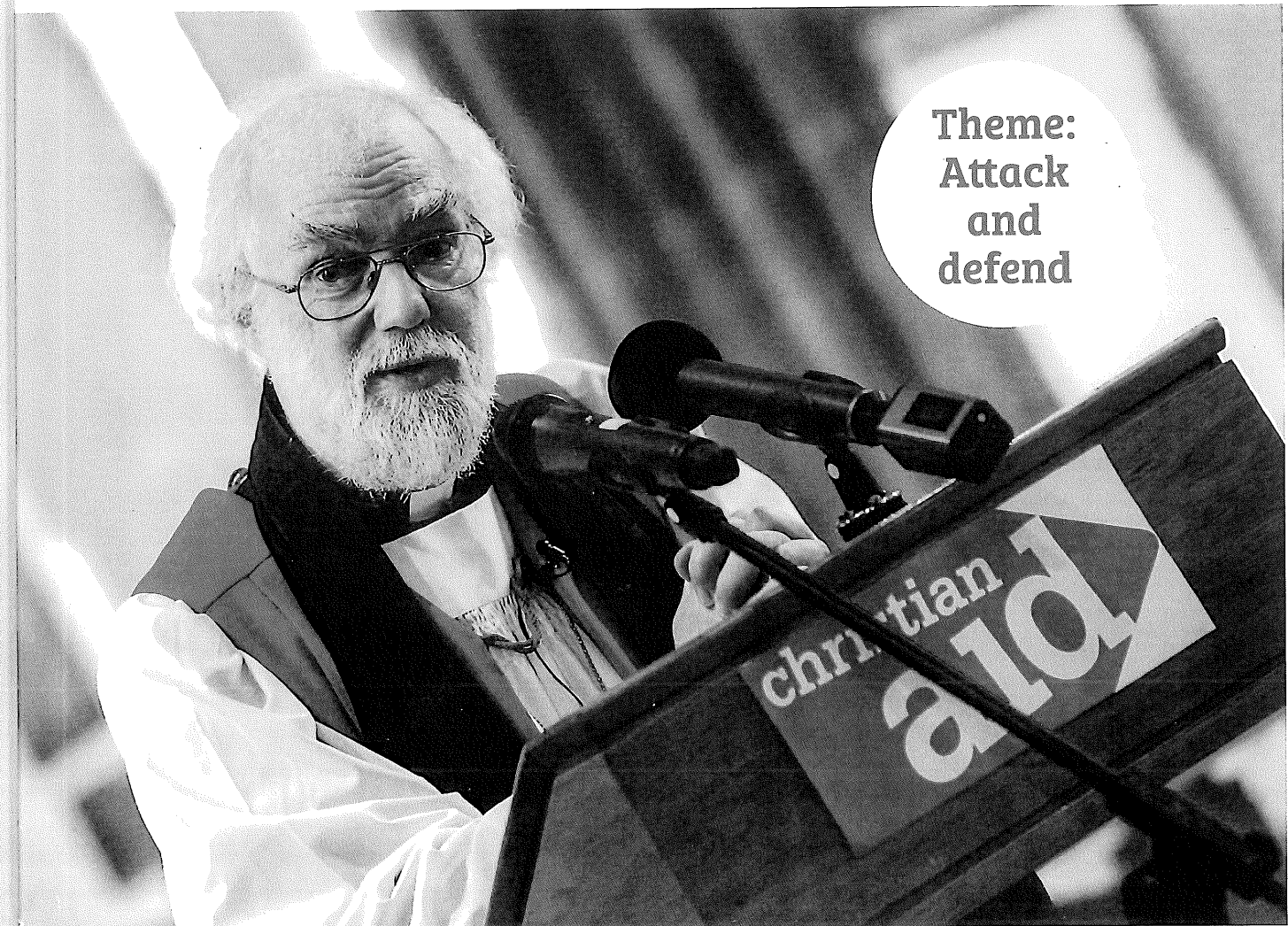
Perspectives on 'attack and defend' from six different religions and beliefs

Packed with over 30

RE classroom ideas for your pupils, plus ideas from:

- Rowan Williams
- Linda Woodhead
- David Suchet

and 25 classroom teachers





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Her latest book, *Perspectives on Religious Criticism – the Challenge of Globalization* was published in 2016 for an international audience. This book focuses on three subjects: religion and dogma, religion and gender, and religion and science.

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Postmodern religious criticism and worldview literacy

Dorthe Enger

Young people in our schools are growing up in an increasingly complex globalised world, despite the attempts of some prominent political figures to reverse this. Given such a context, it is important that our students learn to negotiate their way around differing and sometimes conflicting worldviews. RE is, of course, well placed to enable them to do that. Here an experienced author and teacher offers her approach to this challenge.

Introduction: what is worldview literacy?

Worldview literacy is:

... the ability to consciously acquire the skills and capabilities we need to understand the nature of our own worldviews, and to become more aware and accepting of the worldviews of others – granting them legitimacy even when they seem quite at odds with our own sense-making – without any need or pressure to adopt their worldview as our own.

(Schlitz et al. 2011)

Becoming worldview-literate means embracing the complexity of conflicting positions rather than rejecting them; students learn to balance critical reflection with empathy, helping them to become skilled, responsible communicators in today's globalised world.

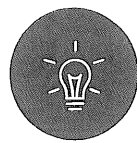
Furthermore, teaching students worldview literacy addresses the fact that many students in Western Europe are 'third culture kids' (TCK), who have to negotiate the worldview they encounter at home with the worldviews they meet at school and in society. Often these students experience an increasing sense of homelessness; of not belonging anywhere. Such students may experience cognitive dissonance. They may feel that they have to choose between worldviews. They may become adept at code-switching in order to avoid conflicts, or they may seek the comfort of extreme worldviews, where friend and foe are clearly defined. By exploring the architecture of conflicting worldviews, frustration may be transformed into curiosity, and a new sense of belonging may emerge, based on independent thinking and a growing skill at juggling paradoxes. In this way, teaching students worldview literacy may also be a small, yet constructive, step towards preventing them identifying with extremist views.

This article focuses on how postmodern religious criticism can help develop worldview literacy in RE. First, it addresses religious criticism in general, then modern and postmodern religious criticism in particular, before showing how postmodern religious criticism, used as a didactic tool, may help to develop worldview literacy.

Religious criticism

Religious criticism has always existed. Religions would not have evolved had it not been for the internal clarification processes which separated the components that were to be part of the religion from those that were to be rejected. Religions are syncretistic phenomena, the sources of which are varied. Thus Christianity is a product of both Judaism and Hellenistic philosophy, and Islam of pre-Islamic Arabic religion, Judaism and Christianity. The dogmatic structures of these monotheistic religions are the outcome of internal conflicts. However, the losers of the original conflicts were not silenced forever, and today their voices are once again heard, challenging orthodox worldviews within the religions.

Modernity introduced secularisation, and the holistic, religious paradigm of the Middle Ages – the Great Chain of Being (a strict, religious hierarchical structure of all matter and life, believed to have been decreed by God) – ceased to be the dominant worldview in the West. It was now possible to adopt a critical perspective on religion from an outside position (the etic approach). Religion became an object of inquiry. Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud thus targeted Judaism and Christianity from an atheist and secularised worldview. Religious criticism is often identified with this criticism. However, this perspective is too narrow, because it does not include the religious criticism within the religions themselves (the emic approach).



Modern and postmodern religious criticism

Because of globalisation, it is very hard for anyone to stay isolated within a particular worldview.

Modern and postmodern religious criticism has in common a rejection of an absolute religious worldview. Modern atheist religious criticism adopts the binary and dualistic approach of rationalism, stipulating that two contrasting viewpoints cannot logically be true at the same time: one must be false, the other right. The world is either purely physically determined or spiritually determined. From this perspective, criticism means a negative judgement of religion. Postmodern religious criticism, however, defines criticism as *discernment*, the original Greek meaning of the word, which is how the term is used in this article.

The postmodern position argues that the throne left vacant by the dismantling of the Great Chain of Being is truly vacant and not to be occupied by for example scientific materialism. For this reason worldviews, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, are just interpretations; constructions. However, a deconstructive postmodern approach in which all worldviews are equally meaningful or meaningless will not be a well-chosen pedagogical tool if the aim is to encourage critical and reflective thinking in students. There is nothing to discern. It can be argued that, just as the modern approach rejects paradox by its either/or position, deconstructive postmodernism rejects paradox by its relativistic stance.

A constructive postmodern approach, on the other hand, juggles the paradox of relativism and essentialism. The throne is indeed viewed as vacant, but this means that it is left to human beings to fill it. And the bids for the throne do indeed matter. The choice of worldview affects self-perception and the perception and treatment of others. Juggling relativism and essentialism means respecting the freedom of people to have other worldviews than one's own while at the same time refusing to accept the acting out of worldviews that take away that freedom.

So, the constructively postmodern approach to religious criticism is a tool that respects interpretations, but also invites critical reflection on the foundation and consequences of them. In contrast to the worldview of scientism, which views the spiritual worldviews of religion negatively, the constructively postmodern approach aims at achieving a neutral position with a commitment to critical reflection and empathy. By exploring the worldviews available in the globalised religious supermarket (Graf 2014), the inner chaos many students may experience, confronted with its abundance of offers, may be reduced. As a result they may develop a resilience that makes them less likely to seek the comfort and apparent security of absolutist worldviews, characterised by an 'us and them' mentality.

	Premodernity	Modernity	Postmodernity
Time period	<i>Dominant paradigm in the West until about 1500 AD</i>	<i>Rooted in the Renaissance (1300–1650) and developed during the Enlightenment (1685–1850)</i>	<i>Rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and developed in the 1960s</i>
The role of religion	<i>An authoritative position</i>	<i>A predominantly abandoned position</i>	<i>One position among others</i>
Religion and dogma	<i>Dogma is authoritative</i> <i>The role of the individual is to identify with the perspective of dogma</i>	<i>Dogma is a product of history</i> <i>The role of the individual is to analyse dogma. The individual is the authority</i>	<i>Dogma is construction/interpretation</i> <i>Both dogma and the individual are authorities; two perspectives that interact and co-create meaning</i>
Religion and gender	<i>Defined roles</i>	<i>Equal roles</i>	<i>Fluid roles</i>
Religion and science	<i>Integrated in a religious worldview</i>	<i>Conflict and/or separation</i>	<i>Integrated as two perspectives on reality</i>

Examples of how constructive postmodern religious criticism may help develop worldview literacy

The students first need a proper introduction to the concepts of premodernity, modernity and postmodernity (see fact box).

Choosing a theme

The next step when preparing lessons in RE with a focus on worldview literacy is the choice of themes. The three themes from the fact box above – religion and dogma, religion and gender and religion and science – represent three major arenas where premodern, modern and postmodern worldviews clash. The theme of 'religion and dogma' could focus on the central dogmas of Christianity and Islam, for example, and how they are interpreted from premodern, modern and postmodern perspectives.

It may come as a surprise to students that the central dogmas of Christianity and Islam were the outcome of theological conflicts. In Christianity, the divinity of Christ was questioned by Arius and the Gnostics. In Islam the Mu'tazila (the rationalists) found that the Qur'an did indeed express the intention of Allah, but to define it as uncreated and eternal, as the Ash'ariyya (the traditionalists) did, contradicted the unity of Allah. The presence of premodern criticism of dogma supports the necessary and important distinction between fundamentalism and premodernity. The premodern worldview did not preclude reason, and the dogmatic controversies were also about the Platonic distinctions between *doxa* and *episteme* (belief versus knowledge). The encounter with critical voices of the past from inside their respective religions may encourage Christian and Muslim students to reflect on how their religion is communicated today by religious authorities, and create more curiosity to explore present-day positions than had the criticism come from outside.

Religious mysticism can also be integrated into the theme of 'religion and dogma'. The dogmas of Christianity and Islam originated in the religious visions of their founders. Mystics, however, sometimes challenge dogmatic monotheism by focusing on the experience of God as an inner factor, thus blurring the difference between human beings and God. Many mystics have been persecuted and judged as heretics in both Christianity and Islam. The focus on individual religious experience, which characterises religious mysticism, attracts postmodern religious practitioners inside and outside the religions and may also interest a considerable number of our students.

A theme that involves the relationship between an internal and an external perspective on religion is religion and science. Conflict, separation, dialogue and

integration are all ways that religion and science can relate to each other (Barbour 1990). The conflict model, which is the one most students are probably familiar with, is between creationism with its fundamentalist approach to Biblical cosmology and evolutionism. Modern and postmodern Christianity – Catholic and Protestant – has fewer problems with science than proponents of scientism or scientific materialism have with Christianity. Working with these different positions on religion and science and discovering that conflict is not the only model may encourage students to further investigate this important topic.

Choosing a text

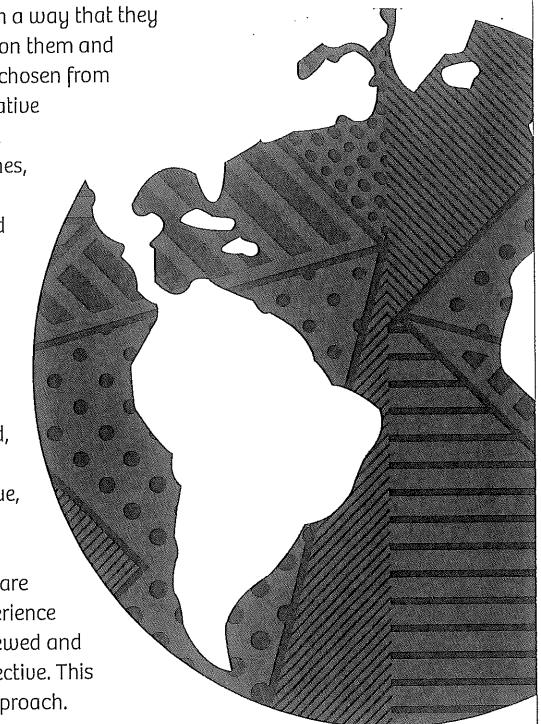
The third step is to find texts in which worldviews are clearly expressed and in such a way that they invite the students to reflect on them and compare them. Texts can be chosen from a variety of genres: authoritative religious texts, philosophical texts, articles, essays, speeches, movie clips, paintings and literature (fiction, drama and poetry). Articles, speeches and other non-fiction texts invite students to analyse the argumentation behind a worldview. This stimulates a rational critical approach. Literature, on the other hand, shows a worldview through the use of narrative technique, setting, linguistic devices, imagery, plot, character, rhyme, metre, etc. Students are invited to reflect on the experience of a worldview: how it is viewed and felt from a subjective perspective. This encourages an empathic approach.

Choosing activities

The final step in planning lessons with a focus on worldview literacy is to choose activities that will stimulate the best possible learning outcome.

The reader response method of textual analysis is well suited for exploring worldviews, because it involves awareness of the interplay between the students' own worldview and that of the text. Encouraging the students to explore their own position on the theme (if they have one) and sharing it with a fellow student may be a good start.

The texts need to be fully understood before the actual analysis of worldviews takes place. Some texts may be quite challenging in terms of vocabulary, and thorough accounts of the contents of the individual text is a necessary first step.





The analysis itself involves a definition of the worldview, based on examples from the text. The historical critical method is a good way of situating a specific worldview contextually. Linguistic analysis and thus co-operation with studies in English language and literature may be a great help in characterising the style and rhetorical devices of proponents of different worldviews.

The students' response to the texts after the analysis could involve questions and topics such as 'What surprised you?', 'How and why does this worldview differ from your own?', 'How and why is this worldview similar to your own?', 'What are the consequences of your own and the text's worldview?' and 'Compare the worldview of this text with another text you have read.'

Students could be asked to work alone, in pairs or in groups, with accompanying questions followed by a summing-up and discussion in class. A very good method to illustrate worldviews is role play and debates, where the conflicting views can be presented and discussed.



Conclusion

High school students are at an age where they are transitioning into adulthood. When they finish high school, many of them will have reached majority. This is also the age when they are questioning worldviews, discarding perhaps the worldview of their parents or the worldview of the culture they grew up in, in favour of another, or becoming even more identified with the worldview of their childhood. In RE there is a unique opportunity to work academically with worldviews – and, in doing so, to both add to students' pool of knowledge and give them tools to reflect critically on the many ways in which people interpret the world.

The constructively postmodern approach to develop worldview literacy provides space to address these important issues without the negative judgement of modern atheist religious criticism, which may alienate many students who have a religious worldview. The constructively postmodern approach, however, may also provoke students by challenging prejudices and inviting them to reflect critically on their own – and other people's – worldviews.

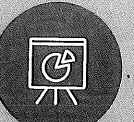
Worldview literacy is a skill badly needed in our globalised and conflicted world. In RE we have a unique opportunity to help our students and make them efficient, empathic and constructive global communicators who are not barricaded within a particular worldview but open to the challenge of dialogue with other positions.

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Research update

Compiled by Rachael Jackson-Royal, a teacher at King Edward VI High School for Girls, Birmingham, and a member of the NATRE Executive

Moving between two educational traditions

Given the importance of education and the acquisition of knowledge within historical Islam, it is not surprising that a huge body of literature has amassed over time.

Today, still, much is written about education from a Muslim perspective. But, at the same time, little has been written about the *actual experiences* of Muslims as they partake in various forms of Muslim education.

From their own particular research standpoints, Jenny Berglund (Associate Professor, Södertörn University, Stockholm) and Bill Gent (Associate Fellow, University of Warwick) became interested in the experiences of Muslim students today – whether living in Sweden or Britain – as they participated in both Muslim forms of education (at home, in a mosque after-school class, at weekend sessions and so on) and state secular schooling. How did such students 'make sense' of what each offered to them? Could they identify transferable skills? Did the experience in one setting help or hinder work in the other? In March 2016, Bill and Jenny were invited by a large comprehensive school in north-east London, with over half of its students coming from a Muslim background, to carry out research in order to investigate questions such as these. The result was a research exercise in which 30 older Muslim students participated in three activities: completing a short questionnaire, carrying out group activities in order to compare and contrast Muslim and state secular schooling, and a one-to-one interview with one of the interviewers.

The large amount of material that was gathered during this action research exercise is still undergoing analysis, but initial findings included the following:

- There was no one common pattern or sequence of Muslim education that Muslim students had experienced.
- Despite all these variations in students' experience, a common element was the commitment to learn to read and recite the Qur'an, memorising as much as possible during the process.
- Students could identify knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in Muslim education that they believed benefitted them at school (including listening skills, patience, improved memory skills, development of humility and recognising the value of knowledge).
- Students could identify knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in school secular education that benefitted them in Muslim education (including learning about other belief systems, becoming aware of aspects of Islam that others might find 'sensible', punctuality, how to word questions and teamwork).
- When asked about what Muslim education might learn from secular schooling, suggestions included 'choice' and 'discussions'.
- When asked about what secular schooling might learn from Muslim education, suggestions included 'tranquillity and respecting the environment' and 'one-to-one time with teachers'.



If you would like to receive a copy of the preliminary report on this research project, or ask for further details, please contact either **Bill Gent**: billgent49@yahoo.co.uk or **Jenny Berglund**: jenny.berglund@sh.se