

# INNOVATIVE RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS IN SCHOOLS

## Multiple Interpretations of Lived Religion

The school has made a shift from treating religion and worldviews as monolithic blocks of unchanging facts to engaging with them as lived, fluid and messy. This is rooted in texts, rituals and practices which, far from being seen as 'fixed' are precisely engaged with as interpretable. Children are enabled to understand that there are different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied. Direct encounter and discussion with people who hold varying worldviews is key to the innovation. Incoherence and complementarity within and between worldviews are acknowledged, embraced and explored.

At the end of their 'Science and Religion' topic, a group of year 5 children prepared for the session by exploring creation stories in Christianity, where they were encouraged to notice that plural stories exist, and that they contain their own inner contradictions. They are introduced to four theories of interpretation: literary (where the stories are treated as containing truths but not necessarily being true), literalist (where the stories are regarded as facts), concordist (where the stories are thought to represent ways in which the universe was created which might also be expressed in other paradigms) and reconstruction or gap theory (in which the creation stories fit with scientific accounts as almost metaphorical versions of them).

Three visitors, a Christian vicar, a Christian scientist and a Buddhist educationalist were invited into the class to talk to the children about their understanding of Genesis 1 and what it means to them. Each speaker took their turn, with careful attention to the fact that they were giving their own, personal interpretation as 'a Christian' or 'a Buddhist' rather than representing that tradition. The children were then invited to ask the panel their own, pre-prepared questions.

Discussion focussed on the difference between 'truths' and 'facts' in the creation story and the dynamism of religious traditions. The children were enthralled and engaged in reflection on the similarities and differences between and within traditions and how different interpretations of scripture can shape how people make sense of life.

As part of a reflective process, in a previous session, the children were asked to predict the response they would receive to their questions and then to reflect on the actual response and their own reaction to it during the session itself. This further embedded the importance of interpretation by foregrounding and challenging any assumptions the children may have had about religion or about a particular tradition, leading to a deeper understanding.

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## What makes innovation possible?

This session represents a sea-change in the way in which religion and worldviews are approached within the school from a disjointed study of world religions as monolithic blocks of belief and practice, to exploring traditions as lived and dynamic. This is enabled by the vision of the lead teacher, who brings their own expertise and vision for primary RE that engages with the concept of religion or worldview to provide a solid foundation for deeper understanding.

As well as strong and innovative teacher agency, this innovation is enabled by supportive leadership that is willing to take risks and recognises that the children are not too young to engage with such conceptual enquiry.

In a busy teacher's timetable, organising such an event is no easy feat. This was facilitated by the lead teacher's engagement with local, regional and national networks such as NATRE and the regional Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity. Drawing on such expertise and support is a key enabling feature.

## Key Messages

- Exploring religion and worldviews as interpretable draws attention to how they are lived out in messy and fluid ways
- Talking with real-life 'livers' of worldviews can lead to challenging misconceptions and assumptions
- Strong teacher agency and vision is key – an RE expert brings RE to life
- Supportive, empowering leadership
- Engagement with wider networks