

The Country of the Blind: Knowledge, Knower and Knowing (Part 1)

Helen C. John and Rob Freathy
University of Exeter

Most, if not all, Religious Education (RE) teachers are familiar with the parable of the *Blind Men and the Elephant*, traceable at least as far back as the text of the Buddhist *Udana* 6.4 from the middle of the first millennium BCE. In a later poetic version, John Godfrey Saxe relates how the ‘six men of Indostan’ grapple with the nature of an elephant: each of the blind men grasps a different part of its anatomy, and thereby arrives at a different conclusion as to its nature. Whilst there have been many interpretations of the parable, of which Saxe’s is one, the overriding moral would seem to be that human experience is partial and limited. As a result, and by analogy, the nature of God – a complex, but singular object of study (according to the story, that is) – cannot be understood fully by any particular perspective. No single perception of the transcendent – no religion or worldview – holds the key. Saxe’s poem concludes as much:

*And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!*

Here, then, we have an example of religions or worldviews – admittedly, both contested and problematic terms – being presented as limited perspectives, striving to understand a single reality. Blindness (human perception) is imagined, by way of analogy, as the obstacle that prevents them from understanding correctly the singular, metaphysical reality of God: their ‘worldview’ (in fact, a world-‘non-view’) limits their understanding. Those who search here – the ‘six men of Indostan’ – are blind to the whole truth. The parable can be applied more widely, including in the context of theoretical and conceptual debates. Those who question the validity of the term ‘worldview’, for example, highlight its predisposition towards a ‘sight-centric’ Western understanding that fails to convey other ways of being in, or orientated to, the world. Rather than arguing for or against alternatives, such as ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, or ‘faith’ (which we believe are equally susceptible to criticism), we wish to extrapolate and explore lessons from this uncertainty and indeterminacy. It signals both the variety and the multiplicity of ways in which people engage with both the seen and the unseen world around them. The difficulty in identifying the parameters of (any given) religion, worldview, culture, or philosophy highlights the evolving and contingent nature of knowledge in the human sciences, being derived from a multitude of perspectives, methodologies and methods, and lacking objectivity (Geertz 2002, 9).

In this article, we will explore these themes of metaphorical sensory deprivation and approaches to ‘the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)’ (for a discussion of this phrase, see Freathy and John 2018, 7). Contrasting the parable above with another metaphorical narrative about blindness – *The Country of the Blind* – we will argue that a multiplicity of worldviews (both religious and non-religious) and interpretations, methodologies and methods should form a central part of multi-faith RE. Just as they would in the context of academic research, we suggest that school students should be encouraged to reflect upon, be critical of, and sensitive to the peculiarities of their own perspectives and those of others. This is not new thinking. However, under-emphasised has been the suggestion that they should be encouraged to reflect on the multiplicity of interpretations, methodologies and methods in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s), thereby coming to an understanding of how one’s approach to study has a fundamental effect upon the conclusions (or ‘knowledge’) at which one arrives (Freathy and John 2018). Indeed, we would advocate that the *interpretations, methodologies and methods* through which religions and worldviews are studied should be *objects of study* alongside the religions and worldviews themselves, a point echoed by the ‘National Entitlement’ put forward by the Commission on Religious Education in their final report (CoRE 2018, 13).

Thought of in sensory terms, we need ‘multi-sensory RE’. Students should see, taste, touch, hear and smell in RE (i.e. *use* multiple interpretations, methodologies and methods), as well as reflect self-consciously on the senses that they use in their approach to religion(s) and worldview(s) (i.e. *study* interpretations, methodologies and methods). Critical and reflexive learners will also reflect on (a) how the sense used affects *what* they sense (i.e. how the interpretation, methodology and method employed affects the knowledge gained; that is, through epistemological and methodological reflection) and, (b) how they themselves prefer to use a particular sense or senses (i.e. how their identities as researchers, including their interpretative and methodological preferences, affect the knowledge gained). Pursuing the analogy even further, how much more critical and adept might they become, were they to appreciate that a sensorium limited to just five senses might be contingent and context-specific; that their context might privilege some senses over others (hence the popularity of the term ‘worldview’ in sight-centric cultures); and that sensoria (i.e. ways of knowing) in other contexts may be different?

The Country of the Blind

H. G. Wells’s *The Country of the Blind* (Wells 1979) is another narrative involving blindness that can be used as a parable in discussions concerning knowledge and knowing, especially in relation to the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). Whilst above we encountered the common trope of blindness as ignorance, here the situation is different. Rather than signalling sensory deprivation, blindness in H. G. Wells’s narrative functions in the reverse, at least to an extent: the sighted lead character is inhibited by his sight-centric approach, just as his hosts are inhibited by their blindness. The story (which we have summarised) goes as follows:

Nunez, a lost mountaineer, plummeted into a forgotten and isolated mountain valley in Ecuador’s Andes. The Country of the Blind was idyllic, save one thing: disease had rendered the community congenitally blind. Over time, generations had adapted and ‘blind men of genius’ had carved out wisdom and worldview to replace ‘fanciful’, forgotten, sighted traditions. An imagined roof above their valley had replaced notions such as the sky, mountains, and the great world beyond.

Nunez recalled a proverb: ‘In the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed man is King’. And yet, he stumbled in their windowless huts and was met with disbelief when he talked of eyes, sight, and the outside world. Feeling his rough, mountaineer’s skin, the community decided he must be newly formed from the landscape.

Preferring to work in the cool of the night, the blind community slept through the heat of the daylight hours. Thinking he could demonstrate the benefits of sight, Nunez tried to avoid detection in the darkness. He stepped off the carefully-maintained path. He was promptly ordered to keep off the grass – with highly-attuned hearing and smell, the blind person reinforced Nunez’s status as a ‘clumsy and useless stranger’.

When he accidentally hit someone with a spade, Nunez was forced to hide outside of the community. He returned remorseful and told them all his talk had been false and that he was, indeed, ‘newly made’. He was accepted and integrated into the community, albeit considered somewhat idiotic and inferior. Nunez was assigned a master, and he fell in love with the master’s daughter. His request for her hand in marriage was not welcomed, however, because of the potential for his ‘idiocy’ to pollute the community. It was decided that he must be cured: the source of his oddity – his eyes – must be removed. Nunez eventually consented to the operation. However, pondering his plight the night before the operation, he resolved to escape from the community in which he had thought he would be ‘King’. He climbed and climbed and, resting (or awaiting his end) on the mountainside, he contemplated the beauty of his surroundings.

And there the story ends. Nunez had encountered total rejection of his sighted way of life, and of his sighted understanding of the world. Sight had not made him king, despite the reader knowing that the

protagonist's perception of the world – his world-‘view’ (as opposed to the native inhabitants’ world-‘touch’ or world-‘smell’) – is ontologically accurate. Ultimately, Nunez was unable to acculturate to life in the ‘Country of the Blind’; he could not come to terms with their way of being and knowing in the world.

Interpreting the Country of the Blind

This narrative serves up some interesting points for discussion concerning related issues and controversies in RE and the wider study of religion(s) and worldview(s). Key – both within the narrative and reflecting upon it – is the possibility of multiple interpretations. Multiple interpretations of the world exist (here we can substitute ‘the world’ for ‘culture’ or ‘religion’, for example). When differing interpretations encounter one another (for example, the sighted encounters the blind), that dialogical encounter can act to stimulate enhanced understanding. In this case, Nunez comes to appreciate a different way of being in the world, one of heightened ‘other’ senses. The encounter need not, we should add, result in agreement on a singular, ‘correct’ interpretation of the world/culture/religion. However, at least, in appreciating what appears to be ‘Other’, much may be learned about oneself and one’s assumptions and particularities.

There are also many possible interpretations *of* the story, and those, too, serve to highlight issues deserving of discussion. For example, whether one ‘sides’ with the community or with Nunez, there is a message embedded in this story about the assumed superiority of one’s own worldview. There are those who think that their worldview (whatever that may be) is so *obviously* correct that it should have ascendancy over others and their worldviews. This is a phenomenon apparent both within religious and non-religious groupings and across boundaries between them. Nunez’s experience is cautionary: whilst his perspective is presented as correct – his sighted view of the world is grounded in a reality and truth shared with/by the readers – his assumption that his worldview will trump the blind culture of his hosts is proved wrong. Indeed, the proverb he recalls – *‘In the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed man is King’* – is demonstrably false; Nunez falters in this ‘Other’ context, being (and being perceived to be) a ‘clumsy and useless stranger’, for this is a world ‘wired for people who cannot see’ (McDermott and Varenne 1995, 324).

Preferable, we glean from this narrative, is to recognise the particularity of one’s context and the limitations of one’s worldview. For Nunez, this level of humility is achieved by virtue of an encounter with another context and another worldview. Notably, simply being told about another way of ‘seeing things’, another way of being (sightedness and the sighted world) did little to convince the hearers (the inhabitants of the ‘Country of the Blind’), or to help them understand. Investigation and experience, on the other hand, on the part of Nunez, prompted greater comprehension: critical inquiry – through an encounter and dialogue – rewarded him with a more nuanced appreciation of himself and others (albeit not his agreement).

We might map onto these oppositions (sighted *versus* blind) debates between religious and secular thinkers about the nature, place and value of religion(s) in society. From a plethora of possible questions, we might ask: Are the blind those lacking in faith (or those of the wrong faith), and the sighted those who have ‘seen the light’, those whom the sighted Jesus (or equivalent) rescues from their misperceptions? Are the blind those who are faithful to traditions based on ancient faulty cosmologies, and the sighted atheists and agnostics who draw instead on the comparatively novel fruits of Enlightenment science? Alternatively, in reverse, are the blind those who put their faith in scientific materialism, and the sighted those who recognise that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in that philosophy? In these latter regards, the story might speak to debates about research paradigms, the incommensurability of knowledge systems, and the idea of singular or multiple rationality/-ies. Nunez and his hosts do not agree on the best way to interpret the world, and their ‘truths’ about the world around them seem to clash at every turn. Both sides attempt to convince the other of the reality of their assessment of the world, and both are frustrated at the resistance they encounter. In fact, their understandings of what is real and what is fanciful are entirely at odds; as with Thomas Nagel’s bat example (highlighting that bats have a sense of which humans can have no first-hand sense),

they are *unable* to conceive of what it is like to experience each other's subjective reality, such is the cognitive dissonance between their worldviews (Nagel 1974, 438-441).

Pertinent Reflections for Religious Education

The brief reflections above hint at the importance of investigating a multiplicity of perspectives, interpretations, methodologies and methods – not least because their existence as collectives, *as multiplicities*, provide pointers as to some key underlying issues. This brings us to the question of how we might introduce RE students to 'multi-sensory RE' – RE that is critical, dialogical, and which both uses and studies multiple perspectives, interpretations, methodologies and methods. We have suggested elsewhere that the recently posited 'Big Ideas for RE' (which are, put simply, theories and generalisations about religions and non-religious worldviews) (Wintersgill 2017) should be developed to incorporate not just Big Ideas about *content*, but also Big Ideas about *how we study* such content. It is crucial to acknowledge variety and contestation regarding definitions and contexts in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s); to encourage students to think reflexively and reflectively about their own positionality; to introduce them to a diversity of the available interpretations, methodologies and methods, and the need for discernment in their application; and to promote contemplation of how their studies relate to the wider world and their place and activity within it (Freathy and John 2018, 7-10).

The 'RE-searchers approach' to RE in primary schools (see, for example, Freathy, G. *et al.* 2015; Freathy, R. *et al.* 2017) is underpinned by this commitment to critical, dialogic, and inquiry-led learning. It adopts the position that the main purpose of RE should be to teach pupils the disciplinary knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic inquiry concerned with the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) through Theology, Religious Studies and cognate disciplines. In other words, to enable pupils to enter into the kind of informed, critical and sensitive dialogues which are at the heart of such academic study (Freathy and Freathy 2013, 159). The 'RE-searchers' are four characters (Ask-it-all Ava, Have-a-go Hugo, Debate-it-all Derek and See-the-story Suzie), each of whom represents a different methodological approach to the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). Respectively, they are: the interviewer/empathiser; the philosopher/critic; the experiencer/participant; and the narrator/interpreter. Metaphorically, dialoguing with, and stepping into the shoes of, these characters encourages school students both to try out and reflect upon different approaches to the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). Furthermore, it requires that students are engaged as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge, rather than as passive receivers of a pre-determined canon of knowledge held and disseminated by, for example, the teacher or textbook writer.

For a secondary level audience, this approach has been adapted in a forthcoming textbook, entitled *Who is Jesus?* (Freathy *et al.* *Forthcoming*). This is a multi-perspectival examination of the figure of Jesus, encountered through a variety of cultural, religious, disciplinary and methodological lenses. The textbook aims to engender in students an appreciation of the variety of ways in which any given topic can be approached. In this case, questions about the significance of Jesus are tackled by a variety of fictional and non-fictional scholars, each unpacking aspects of their methodologies and approaches, and reflecting on Jesus within and without biblical representation. Artistic, visually-impaired, Muslim, feminist and cross-cultural perspectives are explored, and students are encouraged to consider their own standpoint alongside these reflections. The aim, of course, is not to inculcate any particular view of Jesus, or to suggest that there is a correct answer to the book's title question. For, ultimately, who is to say whether there is 'a Jesus' to be discovered, particularly in the context of schools without a particular religious designation? Are some perspectives closer to reality/truth than others, or are we just left with Jesus-es, with none attaining greater credibility or validity than the others? The questions, in this case, as well as the inquiries that flow from them, are of greater significance than the answers, at least in terms of the aim of initiating students into the discourses ongoing within the relevant communities of academic inquiry.

Conclusions

Debates continue to rumble in RE about what content should be taught and in what sequence. However, just as significant is the need for RE students to be introduced to a wide range of perspectives, interpretations, methodologies and methods and for them to see, via this multiplicity, a way through to

the core issues at hand. These issues (conflicting worldviews, variation in approach and method, incompatible rationalities, amongst them) are core aspects of the subject and the wider field of study. The first parable we touched upon – the *Blind Men and the Elephant* – focuses our attention on the multi-faceted nature of the ‘object of study’ (trunk, legs, tail, and so on), accessed through a singular method (perception). The second parable – *The Country of the Blind* – focuses our attention on the multiplicity of available ‘methods of study’ (sighted/unsighted) in relation to a single ‘object of study’ (the valley/world). This raises the question: what is the ‘object of study’ in RE? Should the student (subject) study the world (object) through the lens of religion(s) and worldview(s) (method), perhaps providing, for example, a religious interpretation of life? Or, should the student (subject) study religion(s) and worldview(s) (object) through various academic disciplinary perspectives (method), perhaps providing, for example, one or more scholarly interpretations of religion? It is neither. What is an object of study may become a method of study and *vice versa*. Through self-reflection, reflexivity and metacognition, for example, the student (subject) might also become the object of study. Through epistemologically- and methodologically-orientated learning (put simply: learning about the nature of knowledge and how we create knowledge), interpretations, methodologies and methods might also become objects of study. Life, the world and reality as a whole, as ‘seen’ through the lens of religion(s) and worldview(s), might also become the object of study, if students, for example, are engaged in a thought experiment that encourages them to suspend (dis-)belief in an act of empathetic exploration. In all instances, at any given time, it is of utmost importance that teachers and students know and understand the relationships being established between these variables.

As a community of academic inquiry, we want to foster the development of critical and reflexive students. This means engaging them in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s), but also teaching them about the significance of positionalities, interpretations, methodologies and methods deployed in such studies. Part of that is the avoidance of inappropriate inculcation into any particular religion or worldview, or (even subconsciously) to suggest to pupils that religion(s) or worldview(s) – whether in their particularity or as a whole – offer inherently ‘good’ ways of interpreting our lives, reality, and the world around us. Part of that is the avoidance of promoting any singular mode of interpretation, resting on its own assumptions about the nature of religion(s) and worldview(s), which may infringe the rights of students to hold to other assumptions. No single religion, worldview, discipline, interpretation, theory, methodology or method should predominate. A diversity and multiplicity of approaches needs to be used self-consciously by all participants. In the spirit of critical reflexivity, individuals need to recognise the particularity of their own worldviews and the contexts in which they developed, in order to live and learn with and from difference (see CoRE 2018, 26-31). Our focus here has been on the encounter (meeting the ‘Other’), on dialogue, and on critical inquiry from a variety of perspectives. It is that thrust that we take forward into Part II, in which we will consider how these emphases play out in the wider field of the academic study of religion(s) and worldview(s).

Bibliography

Commission on Religious Education (CoRE 2018) *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A national plan for RE* (Final Report) (London: Religious Education Council of England & Wales).

Freathy, Giles; Freathy, Rob; Doney, Jonathan; Walshe, Karen; and Teece, Geoff (2015) *The RE-searchers: A New Approach to Religious Education in Primary Schools* (Exeter: University of Exeter).

Freathy, Rob; Doney, Jonathan; Freathy, Giles; Walshe, Karen; and Teece, Geoff (2017) ‘Pedagogical bricoleurs and bricolage researchers in Religious Education.’ *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65 (4): 425-443.

Freathy, Rob and Freathy, Giles (2013) ‘FORUM: Initiating Children into Hermeneutical Discourses in Religious Education: A Response to Rachel Cope and Julian Stern.’ *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 3 (2): 156-167.

Freathy, Rob and John, Helen C. (2018) ‘Religious Education, Big Ideas and the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)’, *British Journal of Religious Education*, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351)

Clifford Geertz (2002) 'An Inconstant Profession: The Anthropological Life in Interesting Times.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 1-19.

McDermott, Ray, and Varenne, Hervé (1995) 'Culture "as" Disability', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 26 (3): 324-348.

Nagel, Thomas (1974) 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' *The Philosophical Review*, 83 (4): 435-450.

Freathy, Rob; Reed, Esther D.; Davis, Anna; John, Helen C. and Schmidt, Anneke (*Forthcoming*) *Who is Jesus?*.

Wells, H.G. (1979) *Selected Short Stories* (Baltimore: Penguin).

Wintersgill, Barbara, ed. (2017) *Big Ideas for Religious Education* (Exeter: University of Exeter).

Authors

Dr Helen C. John is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter, UK. Email: H.C.John@exeter.ac.uk

Dr Rob Freathy is Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter, UK. Email: R.J.K.Freathy@exeter.ac.uk