“Worldview”: The meaning of the concept and the impact on religious education

J.C. van der Kooij, D.J. de Ruyter and S. Miedema
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Introduction

An important point in discussions on religious and spiritual education concerns the question of which religions should be addressed and whether other views on life should be part of the content of the subject too. Many authors argue that the subject-matter of “religious education” (RE) should indeed cover more than the established and institutionalized religions and therefore prefer to use the term “worldview” or “worldview education” or terms like “philosophy of life” or “view on life” instead of “religion” and “religious education.” Their main motivation is that these terms allow for a more personal and broader (i.e., secular) interpretation of views on life than the concept “religion” (e.g., Watson, 2008, 2010).

In this article we focus on the term “worldview” because authors in the RE domain often choose this word instead of or in addition to “religion” and because it links with the German “Weltanschauung,” which is used in the English language as well. Not only RE researchers are interested in the concept “worldview”; it is used in policymaking as well. In the British 2004 National Framework for Religious Education, for example, it was recommended that, apart from religions, secular worldviews be included in locally agreed syllabuses (Watson, 2010). Moreover, the concept “worldview” is not specific for the domain of RE. It is used in various research domains that often present a specific elaboration or emphasis of the concept. In anthropology for example, “worldview” is often related to the concept “culture” (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961); in psychology (Koltko-Rivera, 2004), worldview is used in relation to Terror Management Theories (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 1991) and in relation to theories about counselling (Ibrahim, Roysircar-Sodowsky, and Ohnishi, 2001); in philosophy of science it is the name for views more abstract than theories and observations that can be verified objectively or intersubjectively (Kuhn, 1969).

In the domain of RE, various descriptions of “worldview” are used. We will illustrate this by some examples. In a recent publication, Hella and Wright use the concept “worldview” in cases where the concept “religion” is too narrow. “The subject Ethics in Finland seeks to introduce alternative worldviews from an explicitly humanistic perspective” (Hella and Wright, 2009, p. 56). Valk (2007) states that a worldview is related to life’s ultimate questions. The Astley-Francis Open Worldview scale (Astley and Francis, 2002) takes McKenzie’s (1991)
definition of worldview as a starting point: “a worldview is an interpretive understanding a person reaches after reflecting on his or her experience of the world” (McKenzie, 1991, p.7). Finally, Oser and Reich define worldview as “a person’s mental representation of the universe (e.g. its origin, evolution, the laws governing it, its destiny), of the Ultimate Being’s interactions with the universe, as well as of the position and role of human beings in the universe” (Oser and Reich, 1990, p. 97).

A concept that is applicable to more phenomena might cause confusion on the connotation or the characteristics of the concept. This can be problematic in research and policymaking. In empirical research, for example, the existence of a variety of connotations of central research concepts can make a research project more difficult in terms of empirical operationalisations than when there is consensus about the central concepts (cf. Bertram-Troost and Miedema, 2009, pp. 34–35). When the meaning of the used terminology, in this case “worldview,” is not very precise and researchers and/or participants use and understand the concept differently, it is unclear what is exactly studied and what the meaning of the results precisely is. The same problem applies to policymaking: if the meaning of “worldview” is interpreted differently by various users, this complicates the workability of the proposed policy.

The aim of this article is twofold. In the first section we will clarify “worldview” based on theoretical and empirical literature. The aim of the last section is to answer the question what the implication of this analysis is for reflecting on educational practices. It is not our aim to propose an educational program nor does our analysis necessarily have to lead to a revision of current educational practices. We investigate what role the concept “worldview” plays in education and schools and more specific, how it can be part of the RE curriculum, and what topics need more reflection.

**The concept “worldview” explored**

Later in the article we will define “worldview” more fully. For now, we will define it as a view on life, the world, and humanity (cf. De Jong, 1998; McKenzie, 1991; Miedema, 2006; Vroom, 2006). “Worldview” and “religion” are terms that are closely related. To religion characteristics are attributed like “mythical,” “doctrinal,” or “ritual” (e.g., Smart, 2000), which may not be characteristic for “worldview.”
What is the exact difference between religion and worldview? Every religion can be called a “worldview” but not all worldviews are religious. For example, the main world religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are worldviews. But while Humanism is not a religion, it is a worldview. The difference lies in the fact that religions acknowledge the presence of transcendence while this is not a necessary characteristic of “worldview.” Religions are a subclass of the concept “worldview” (Vroom, 2006).

Second, we introduce a distinction between organized and personal worldviews (cf. De Jong, 1998; Hartman, 1986). With an organized worldview we mean a view on life that has developed over time as a more or less coherent and established system with certain (written and unwritten) sources, traditions, values, rituals, ideals, or dogmas. An organized worldview has a group of believers who adhere to this view on life. Every religion is an organized worldview. Christianity for example includes certain rituals (e.g., communion), sources (e.g., Bible), traditions (e.g., feasts), and dogmas (e.g., Holy Trinity). Organized worldviews can also be non-religious, as is the case for Humanism. Humanism does not have fixed rituals and traditions like many organized religions, but it has for example certain ideals (e.g., human equality), certain sources (e.g., Kant), and certain values (e.g., responsibility for one’s own actions) that are shared by a group of people who consider themselves to be Humanists. Although not every organized worldview contains the same elements as is clear in this comparison between Christianity and Humanism, they all might have something in common. It is our aim to investigate whether or not this is the case.

The concept “worldview” can also be used to describe someone’s personal views on life and humanity. This is what we call “personal worldview.” There are two conceptions of personal worldview. Some people state that a personal worldview consists of certain norms, values, and ideals and does not include practices that arise from these. Others do include these practices. For example, for some only the belief that lightning a candle for a loved one helps this person is part of a personal worldview, for others the lightning itself is as well. A personal worldview can be, but is not necessarily, based on or inspired by a (religious) organized worldview. If a person calls himself a Christian, his personal worldview will be more or less based on the organized worldview Christianity. A personal worldview can be more eclectic and idiosyncratic than an organized worldview (cf. Aadnanas, 1992 in Sandsmark, 2000; Hartman,
Because of the decline of the overall influence of Christianity in terms of secularization and especially in Western Europe (Berger, Davie, and Fokas, 2008; Taylor, 2007), increasing individualism and awareness of diverse organized worldviews due to globalization, people have begun to construct their own personal worldview not based on one specific organized worldview. We encounter for example “bricoleurs” (Hervieu-Léger, 2006).

Summarizing, a distinction can be made between organized and personal worldviews. Religions are always an organized worldview. But not all organized worldviews are religious. Moreover, a personal worldview is not necessarily based on a (religious) organized worldview.

Clarification of the concept

Although there is a basic agreement about the conceptual meaning of “worldview” in RE, namely a view on life, the world, and humanity (De Jong, 1998; McKenzie, 1991; Miedema, 2006; Vroom, 2003), this agreement is not sufficient to define the concept precisely. After all, not all views on life, the world, and humanity are worldviews. Political theories for instance have certain ideas about these matters, but such theories are not called “worldview.” In other words, to call such a view a “worldview” we need more defining characteristics. It is in these defining characteristics that descriptions of “worldview” seem to differ. The next section gives an outline of the conceptually necessary characteristics for both organized and personal worldviews. This will be done by discussing four elements that are found in descriptions of “worldview” in RE and related research domains (e.g., education, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion, theology, and philosophy of education). The characteristics will be compared with model cases (paradigmatic examples of “worldview,” e.g., Islam), contrary cases (cases that are definitely not an example of “worldview,” e.g., a political party), and borderline cases (cases of which exist controversy whether they are an example of “worldview,” e.g., nihilism). So, what are the elements that we found in descriptions of “worldview”?

The first element is “existential questions.” The concept “worldview” is often related to the existential questions and beliefs that are part of people’s lives. For instance that death is not the end of one’s spiritual existence, that
life needs to be lived to the full, or that life is given by a god. Existential questions address what Tillich (1965) calls matters of “ultimate concern,” which are taken with unconditional seriousness in people’s lives (Tillich, 1965, p. 7 ff). Existential questions express ontological, cosmological, theological, teleological, eschatological, and ethical notions (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter and Miedema, 2016b). Secondly, when we speak about “worldview,” we have in mind something more than an abstract idea, belief, or theory that does not have a bearing on the person’s life. The second element that will be discussed is the influence of a worldview on the thinking and acting of people. “Moral values” is the third element. While ethical values are concerned with the broad theme of “the good life,” moral values can be restricted to those that are related to the well-being of other people. The last element is that a worldview is related to meaning-giving in life. We make a distinction between the meaning of life and the meaning in life. Both are existential questions. The meaning of life deals with an understanding of the purpose of human beings in general. The meaning in life is a personal interpretation of the meaning of life or other aspects in life, for instance someone’s family, and can give an individual’s life purpose, sense, value, and direction.

In the remainder of this section, we will first analyze “organized worldview” and then “personal worldview” by means of these four elements. For organized worldviews, the elements are closely related, as will become clear. Especially the element “existential questions” has particular influence on other elements.

**Analysis of “Organized Worldview”**

We described an “organized worldview” as a view on life that has developed over time as a more or less coherent and established system with certain (written and unwritten) sources, traditions, values, rituals, ideals, or dogmas. An organized worldview has a group of believers who adhere to this view on life. Because there is a certain consensus about this general description of “organized worldview,” we will focus on a more precise description on the basis of the four elements. It will turn out that there is discussion whether some of these elements are part of the concept.
An organized worldview prescribes answers to existential questions.
Not every view that addresses existential questions is an organized worldview. Views in scholarly books and articles about existential notions can be agreed with by many people, but do not necessarily express a worldview. The difference between these books and organized worldviews lies in the fact that the books are descriptive and objective. The goal of an organized worldview on the other hand is not objectivity or describing existential matters, but prescribing particular answers to existential questions. Sire (2004) contends for instance that a worldview prescribes answers to seven existential questions, including: “What is the nature of the world around us?,” “What is a human being?,” and “What happens to a person at death?” The literature converges on the fact that a worldview prescribes answers to existential questions and what we tend to call worldviews in daily speech, indeed all answer existential questions. Organized views that do not prescribe answers to existential questions cannot be characterized as worldviews. An example of such an organized view is a political party.

However, is it a sufficient condition? Is every view that prescribes answers to existential questions an organized worldview? We are inclined to agree with this. We have not been able to think of views which do this and that are not an organized worldview.

An organized worldview aims to influence thinking and acting.
Inherent to the idea that an organized worldview prescribes answers to existential questions, is that an organized worldview aims to influence the thinking and acting of people. For example, the belief in Islam that Allah is God is not just stated, but it is expected that people who adhere to Islam believe and accept this. From this belief, certain actions can spring like praying to Allah or making a pilgrimage.

Thus, an organized worldview aims to influence the acting and thinking of people by prescribing answers to existential questions.

An organized worldview contains moral values.
Although we described this as a separate category, in organized worldviews the distinction between moral values and existential matters is not always clear. The answers to existential questions often dominate the moral values an organized worldview holds.
The paradigmatic examples of worldviews contain certain moral ideas about how people should act and ideas about right and wrong. The eightfold Path of Buddhism contains moral ideas like the intention to abstain from cruelty and harming others, to be honest and to develop compassion. Humanism contains moral views as well, for example the belief that all people are created equal and should enjoy the same opportunities. This speaks in favor of the conceptual necessity for an organized worldview to contain moral values. There is however, an exception to this statement: (moral) nihilism, the belief that morality in itself does not exist and that there are no inherent ideas about right and wrong in life. But (moral) nihilism can be characterized as a borderline example of an organized worldview. We described an organized worldview as a view on life that has developed over time as an established system with certain sources, traditions, rituals, ideals, or dogmas. Because it is questionable whether (moral) nihilism includes these aspects, it might be better characterized as a midway between a philosophy and an organized worldview.

We suggest that organized worldviews do contain moral values and that moral nihilism is a borderline example. It is not a sufficient condition to speak about an organized worldview, however; when a view only expresses moral values, it is a moral or an ethical theory that can be shared by many people, but not a worldview. To be called a worldview an orientation on existential questions is necessary.

Organized worldviews aim to provide meaning in life.

Organized worldviews are related to both meaning giving in life and of life (e.g., Brümmer, 1981; De Jong, 1998). To answer the question whether it is conceptually necessary for an organized worldview, we will first explain what we mean with “aiming to provide meaning in life.” First, a worldview can actually state the meaning of life, for example to serve a god or to reach Paradise after dead. And second, a worldview can give meaning to other aspects of life. A worldview that regards family as the corner stone of society for instance, gives (particular) meaning to family life.

It is not possible to state that an organized worldview actually provides meaning in life; this depends on individual persons. However, we can explore if it aims to provide meaning in life. Most organized worldviews do indeed aim to do so both by stating a certain meaning of life and by giving meaning to other aspects in life. Christianity for example contains meaning-giving ideas
like honouring God and loving one’s neighbor. Humanism aims to provide meaning in life by stating the importance of developing oneself as a person and helping others. In Buddhism, finding spiritual fulfilment by meditating can give meaning in life.

Again the existential views in (existential) nihilism like the belief that life has no meaning and little of a person’s life matters, seems to be a counterexample. However, as we stated before, we believe that (existential) nihilism is a borderline example of an organized worldview.

Because most organized worldviews aim to provide meaning in life and because existential nihilism can be seen as a borderline example of an organized worldview, we are inclined to say that it is indeed conceptually necessary that an organized worldview aims to provide meaning in life. It is a sufficient condition as well. Every organized view that aims to provide meaning in life can be called an organized worldview.

Concluding, an organized worldview is a view on life, the world and humanity that prescribes answers to existential questions. This way, organized worldviews aim to influence the thinking and acting of people. Organized worldviews contain moral values and aim to provide meaning in people’s lives.

**Analysis of “Personal Worldview”**

Analyzing “personal worldview” is more complex than analyzing “organized worldview.” Personal worldview has not been the subject of much analytical discussion and it is harder to demarcate than organized worldview. When analyzing personal worldview, attention needs to be paid both to what personal worldview means and to what it implies when we say that a person has a personal worldview. Because of this, the sequence of the elements will be different than before. The first two elements we analyze, a personal worldview answers existential questions and contains moral values, are related to what personal worldview means. The last two elements, a personal worldview is a source of meaning in life and influences thinking and acting, are related to what it means to have a personal worldview. Eventually, understanding the meaning of personal worldview is necessary for understanding what it means to have a personal worldview but for clarity, we discuss these separately.

A question that might arise is whether it is necessary that a person can articulate or explain their personal worldview clearly. We believe this is not the case and that one can have a personal worldview without being able to put it
into exact words as will become clear in the continuation of this article (see for instance Bertram-Troost, De Roos, and Miedema, 2006).

**A personal worldview answers existential questions.**

Many people will not have clear-cut answers to existential questions. They may never have thought about these things and have never been confronted with a situation that forces them to make their existential views explicit. Some people may for example state that they are not sure about the answers to these matters or that they are confused. We would, however, not say that these people do not have a worldview on the basis of these statements. The fact that they are reflecting on these questions might precisely indicate that they have a worldview, albeit an uncertain and unclear one. Does this not make the meaning of “personal worldview” too vague for this would mean that almost everyone would have a personal worldview? That could indeed be a consequence of this conceptualization, it is, however, an empirical question that is not relevant for the analysis of the concept.

Thus, a personal worldview does not need to have clear cut answers to existential questions. However, it is conceptually necessary that a personal worldview does answer some existential questions at least very vaguely. If a person states that s/he does not have any answers to existential questions, s/he might for example be in search of a worldview, exploring a worldview or be in an existential crisis but we would not say that s/he has a personal worldview. It is not a sufficient condition because the answers to existential questions need to influence a person’s life as well. The idea of a personal worldview implies that someone *has* this worldview and having a worldview means that it is not a theoretical construct, but has impact on someone’s life. We will come back to this.

**A personal worldview contains moral values.**

Sire (2004) contends that every human being has certain ideas about right and wrong. The source of these ideas is their worldview. However, a personal worldview can be morally indifferent. Imagine an artist who sees the value of beauty and aesthetics as the main value in life. He strives for an aesthetical view of reality. The artist’s idea of aesthetics is existential, it is the most important in life and it gives meaning in his life. Moreover, his decisions in moral situations are not based on the well-being of the other (i.e., on intrinsic moral reasons),
but on his aesthetic worldview. He acts in a way that he believes will lead to the most beautiful outcome. Harmony is not a moral value to him, but an aesthetic one. Seeing harmonious people pleases him. This hints that moral values are not conceptually necessary for using “personal worldview” correctly.7

Is it a sufficient condition, however? Can we call a person’s set of moral values a personal worldview? If someone has a set of moral values, for example based on care-ethics, and this set only influences his moral decisions, we would not characterize this as a personal worldview. However, if someone’s moral values fulfil a comprehensive role in his life and give meaning in person’s life, we would say that it is a personal worldview.

**Having a personal worldview means experiencing meaning in life.**

Individuals are strongly motivated to find personal meaning, to understand the nature of their lives and to feel that it is significant (Frankl, 2004). Research shows that people find meaning in life by undertaking activities like their work and hobbies and by having relationships with for example their friends, family, and children (Baumeister, 1991). By giving meaning to these activities and relationships, they are able to attribute meaning to their life (De Ruyter, 2004). The beliefs that entail a person’s worldview can function as a source for attributing meaning in life. This can happen in the same two ways as described for organized worldviews. First, the norms, values, ideals and existential notions a personal worldview consists of, can state what the meaning of life is. Second, a personal worldview can also give specific meaning to aspects of life because of ideas and beliefs it holds on for example living a moral life, a pleasant life or a healthy life. For instance, when a person believes that his body is a temple, this view gives specific meaning to exercising and eating healthily.

Is experiencing meaning in life conceptually necessary for having a personal worldview? Does having a personal worldview imply that someone has meaning in life? There are situations imaginable in which someone does not experience meaning in life, but where it would be inaccurate to say that this person has no worldview. A person who suffers from clinical depression and does not experience meaning in life may still have a worldview. Equally, when someone is depressed, caused for instance by the loss of a loved one or the ending of a relationship, s/he might (temporarily) not experience meaning in his/her life and s/he finds that undertaking activities and having relationships do not give his/her life meaning. However, his personal worldview might still

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7 This is an extreme example because most people will hold at least some moral values.
be a source of meaning but because of his/her depression, this does not come through. S/he cannot get in touch with these meaning giving ideas. When s/he has recovered from the depression, s/he is able to see his/her personal worldview as a source for meaning in life again.

In the previous example, the cause for not experiencing meaning in life is an illness and it is not the result of implicit or explicit (nihilistic) conviction. Thus, the next question is whether we can say that a person has a personal worldview when the lack of meaning in life is the result of such a nihilistic conviction. Can a person who does not experience meaning in life because of the conviction that life in general has no meaning and the conviction that relationships and activities do not have a meaning giving influence in his/her life, still have a personal worldview? Although it is difficult to imagine a person who has this total nihilistic conviction about life, let’s just assume it is possible. The belief that life has a meaning has been replaced by a permanent belief in the pointlessness of existence and the conviction that there is no meaning in life. It has become impossible to explain and experience aspects of life as meaningful. We are inclined to state that in this example, we can indeed speak of a (nihilistic) personal worldview. Thus, having a personal worldview does not necessarily mean that someone actually experiences meaning in life. It is however necessary that a person has a view on the question why s/he does not experience meaning in life. If someone answers the question whether s/he experiences meaning in life in the negative but is unable to explain this, it is difficult to state that s/he has a personal worldview.

If a person does indeed experience meaning in life, this is a sufficient condition to state that s/he has a personal worldview. Experiencing meaning implies that one implicitly or explicitly has an idea what gives meaning and why this is so. The answer to this last question can be found in the beliefs that are part of someone’s personal worldview, for instance the answers to existential questions someone holds. Experiencing meaning in life is not an isolated characteristic of “personal worldview” but is closely connected to beliefs and values that a worldview entails.

*Having a personal worldview means that this worldview influences acting and thinking.*

We stated that organized worldviews can only *aim* to influence the thinking and acting of people. Having a personal worldview on the other hand can
mean that the views actually influence the acting and thinking of people, for example by being motivated to take actions or by being prescribed certain matters. Many authors we have studied defend the idea that we use the term “worldview” correctly only if the view influences thinking and actions, if it makes a difference for the way one lives his life; otherwise the view is merely a “speculative construction” (Brümmer, 1981, p. 140; Hartman, 1986; Sire, 2004).

Beliefs and values of someone’s personal worldview are one of the sources that are used in reflecting on what to believe, what to strive for, and consciously or subconsciously can be a stimulant to act and perceive life in a certain way. For example, a person who has a nihilistic view on life might believe that the consequences of his nihilistic worldview is that he alone can be held responsible for his actions or he might enjoy life itself and engage in a life style based on hedonistic views. A personal worldview can either be decisive in acting, for example some Islamic women choose to wear headscarves as an expression of their personal religious beliefs. But a personal worldview can also be just one of the influences in someone’s decision making. It can inform one’s decisions in combination with other motives (e.g., practical deliberations). For example, a person who believes in protecting the earth and living beings from consumerism, but mainly buys nonorganic meat, might do so out of time or price related reasons. She might have considered buying organic and fair-trade products but because it would become too expensive to feed her five children this way, or because there is no health food shop in her neighborhood, she buys regular products instead. However, we do expect her to reflect on her choices and to give reasons for her seemingly contradictory behaviour, otherwise we doubt if she really has the ecological worldview as she claims. If ideas and beliefs of a person do not influence her thinking or acting, it is a theoretical construct but not a personal worldview. At a more practical level we do not need to state that a worldview does determine every action, as Brümmer (1981) argues. Although it is possible that worldviews play such an overall role, for many it does not. Instead, people are also influenced by practical reasons or conventions of a community, their work or society. For these people, their worldview is not an overall framework and has a less central-place in daily life (Hijmans, 1994).

Thus, we conclude that influence in daily life is a necessary condition to state that someone has a personal worldview. It is a sufficient condition as well. If someone acts consistent with his beliefs and views we would say that he has a personal worldview.
The two conceptions we spoke about in relation to “personal worldview” play a role in this element. According to some, the actions or thoughts that are influenced by one's personal worldview become part of this worldview as well. Others state that these are not part of a person's worldview, but a consequence of it. For example, if my personal worldview stimulates me to make a pilgrimage, some people will state that the pilgrimage itself is part of my worldview and others state that only the belief I should make this pilgrimage is part of it. People who agree with the first option will formulate this necessary condition differently: a personal worldview influences acting and thinking and includes ideas and actions that derive from this.

Concluding we state that a personal worldview is a view on life, the world and humanity that consists of norms, values, ideals that can be but are not necessarily moral and out of answers to existential questions. When a person has a personal worldview, these norms, values, ideals, and existential notions influence his/her thinking and acting and either give meaning in life or, in the nihilistic case, deny that there is meaning in life.

Worldview in education

In this section we will explore the implications of the distinction between organized and personal worldview for reflecting on educational practice and policy. Organized and personal worldviews may influence schools in different manners. First, teachers, children, and parents bring their personal worldviews into the school. Their beliefs and views on existential matters are not left behind at the school’s entrance and this influences their acting. Second, the school culture and the particular ethos or identity of the school (cf. Wardekker and Miedema, 2001) might be influenced by a particular organized worldview. The values and attitudes that characterize the community, the quality of relationships, and the way a school helps children to deal with sorrow, conflict, or other problems are influenced by this particular worldview. Third, worldview education can be an educational subject in the school curriculum and depending on the ethos of the school, attention can be paid to both personal and organized worldviews. Personal and organized worldview entering the school in these ways has educational implications. In the reminder of this article we focus on this last kind of influence.
In the RE curriculum of many schools, the emphasis could be on the phenomenological approach of organized worldviews. This is what Grimmitt (2000) calls “learning about religion.” Religious education is in that case mainly the academic study of religions and secular worldviews like humanism. Since organized worldviews are more or less coherent systems, children can, so it appears, relatively easily be taught about the characteristics, rituals, and feasts. Objects can be shown and places of worship can be visited.

By means of our analysis we can formulate two major problems with a mainly phenomenological view on RE. First, the personal worldviews of people identifying with an organized worldview are often very diverse. The Christian or the Buddhist does not exist. The risk of teaching about organized worldviews only is that teachers pass over the differences in personal worldviews based on organized worldviews. Taking the distinction between organized and personal worldviews seriously means that these differences should be the subject of classroom discussion: by asking pupils who adhere to an organized worldview, with which views and beliefs they do and do not identify or by introducing a person from a local faith community and talk about his/her personal worldview.

The second problem with the phenomenological view on RE is that, following our description of a personal worldview as answering existential questions, most people have a more or less explicit personal worldview. These worldviews can be but are not always inspired by one particular organized worldview. Bricolage worldviews are for example a “mishmash” of several views and traditions. When concentrating on organized worldviews only, the personal worldviews of pupils or that of their parents might be ignored. If one agrees with the idea that one of the core concerns of schools is the formation of a student’s personal identity (De Ruyter, 2007; Miedema and Bertram-Troost, 2008), attention for personal worldview in education is a consequence.

These objections to a purely phenomenological approach do not imply that phenomenological aims should not be part of worldview education at all. We believe that acquiring knowledge about worldviews is a necessary part of education. However, if one agrees with the distinction between organized and personal worldview and if one wants to pay attention to both, two educational approaches can be considered.

The goal of the first approach is to stimulate pupils to base their personal worldview on one specific organized worldview. Pupils are being introduced in the beliefs, norms, and values of a particular organized worldview and
it is expected that these become part of their own convictions. Personal and organized worldview are in this case very closely related. This is what happens in many denominational schools. Grimmitt (2000) calls this learning in religion. The goal of the second approach is to stimulate pupils to develop a personal worldview without transmitting the norms, values and beliefs of one particular organized worldview. Pupils are being introduced to several organized worldviews and these may be taken by the pupils as a starting point for discussing and reflecting on the views and beliefs they have themselves. They are stimulated to form their own personal worldview on the basis of this reflection and discussion. This is similar to what Grimmitt (2000) calls learning from religion.

We have discussed three different ways “worldview” influences education and we explained two educational approaches that make it possible to pay attention to organized and personal worldviews. If schools indeed have the educational aim to address both, they should consider how the elements that we attributed to the concept “worldview” can be included in the educational curriculum. What are matters that have to be taken into account when reflecting on this question? Our aim for the remainder of this article is to pose questions that need to be addressed, not answering them since that would require a whole new article.

First, existential questions should be part of the curriculum in such a way that pupils not only learn how these questions have a place in one or more organized worldviews, but are stimulated to reflect on how existential questions and beliefs play a role in their own lives. As we explained, many people will have implicit or explicit views on existential matters. It is almost impossible to imagine that existential questions will never play a role in a person’s life at all. A starting point for a dialogue in the classroom can be pupils’ own beliefs and questions but also the convictions, rituals, or stories in organized worldviews (compare Hartman, 1986, pp. 10–11). The pedagogical goal a school has, the school population, specific events in the lives of pupils (e.g., the death of a parent or the birth of a sibling) influence which existential questions are being addressed and how this happens. We will share an experience of one of the authors of a classroom discussion about existential questions. When talking with 11- and 12-year-olds about Buddhism, the bowl of mendicants attracted most attention. The knowledge that people choose to become dependent on others for feeding them impressed the children. Especially the remark that a
mendicant would be grateful with any food, even if a mixture of soup and cake would be his meal for the day, made them think about this way of life. They thought and spoke about questions like “Why would someone choose to live like this?” “Can you imagine doing something like that yourself?” “What is the meaning of living like this?”

A second point that needs to be reflected on when schools want to pay attention to organized and personal worldviews is whether education should demonstrate negative sides and consequences of certain personal worldviews. Should education for instance pay attention to the possible problems that the lack of meaning-giving in a nihilistic personal worldview could cause? It is believed that experiencing meaning in life is a fundamental interest and contributes to people’s flourishing (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; De Ruyter, 2004; Frankl, 2004). Should this, and other potential negative sides of personal worldviews, be discussed in education?

A third point of reflection is the following. If schools have the aim to let pupils develop a personal worldview without transmitting the norms, values, and beliefs of one particular organized worldview, openness of teachers for ultimate questions and meaning-giving topics in both organized and personal worldviews is a consequence. If a teacher’s prejudices against or personal aversion of certain worldviews dominate his or her teaching, this will interfere with the pupils’ learning about and reflecting on these worldviews. Furthermore, the stimulation of critical reflection is inherent to stimulating pupils to develop a personal worldview. The question is whether critical reflection has a place in worldview education in schools where transmitting an organized worldview as the pupil’s personal worldview is the educational aim.

Fourth, we stated that a personal worldview influences the acting and thinking, for example through established or personal rituals, dogmas, or personal beliefs and thought and through specific prescriptions or recommendations. Pupils can be made conscious of the influence that their personal worldview might have on their acting and can be stimulated to reflect whether these influences have either a positive or negative outcome for themselves and others. If schools aim to pay attention to both organized and personal worldviews, didactics are needed that let pupils explore the influence a worldview aims to have or has in people’s lives. A last point that needs to be reflected on is the question whether teachers should communicate their personal worldview to the pupils and whether they are allowed to let this
worldview influence their teaching. Or, to put it differently, is it possible not to let a personal worldview influence teachers’ actions and, if not, what is the best way of dealing with this? These are questions that educational policymakers and educators should think about.

To conclude, we want to make a final remark about what can be expected of schools with regard to worldview education. We believe that we have to be realistic in our beliefs about what can be actually achieved in schools. Schools cannot be expected to let children develop a coherent and clear personal worldview. This is a lifelong process. However, if schools value the idea of worldview education, children can be stimulated and inspired to think and learn about their own worldview and the worldview of others. Existential questions, meaning in life and the influence a worldview might (aim to) have in people’s and pupils’ lives should be important educational topics. This way, pupils are stimulated to develop an understanding of others and a better insight into themselves (cf. Valk, 2007). In societies where traditional, non-traditional, religious, and secular worldviews all coexist, we believe this to be an important educational topic.
Meaning of “worldview” and impact on RE

References

Chapter 2


