

After  
**Religious  
Education**

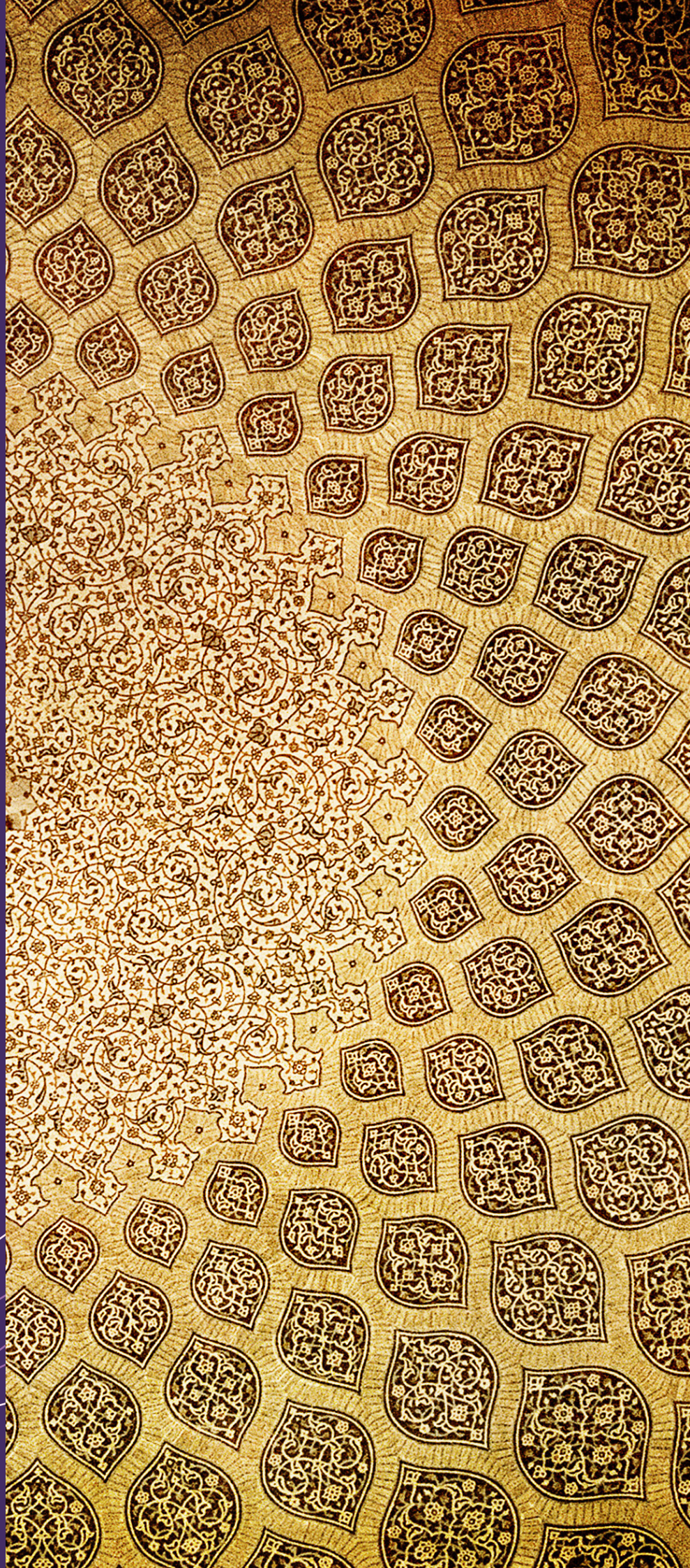
Applying the After RE Framework

**Exemplarity and  
Intellectual Autonomy  
in Teaching about Islam**

Kate Christopher



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## Exemplarity and Intellectual Autonomy in Teaching about Islam

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### Introduction

My work as a teacher of RE in England occurs against a particular backdrop, a key moment in the subject's history, this is the shift from the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) to Religion and Worldviews approach. I have been involved in RE, as a teacher, adviser and researcher, for 20 years. My research has shown me that the subject has laboured under competing and incompatible aims as it has evolved over the years. A vestige of its confessional origins leaves the subject with the aim of moral or personal growth, and the evolution to the current phenomenological multifaith curriculum means academic aims are given as well. However, the personal and academic aims do not always sit easily together and this has caused confusion and incoherence in (Christopher 2020). My own single aim in all my planning and teaching is my students' intellectual autonomy; their ability to make sense of the world for themselves. This seems to me to be an educational aim that I can set out to contribute to and is appropriate for a teacher in an educational space. The learning content and methods I employ are all ultimately towards my aim of my students' capacity to understand the world in increasing complexity, to see patterns and to explore different interpretations or viewpoints, as they grow towards adulthood. I am working towards realising the Religious and Worldviews approach in RE, driven by my own aim of students' understanding.

The problem with attempting to teach about religion and belief following the World Religions Paradigm is abstraction. Truth claims, principles, ethics, ritual and tradition are unmoored from people, times and places, as I have shown with Lynn Revell in teaching about the mosque (Revell and Christopher, 2021). This tendency allows reduction and sweeping generalisations that do not tell pupils (or teachers) much about the world. The abstractions of the WRP hide relations of power and cultural, geographical and economic contexts that might illuminate phenomenon. In this example, I will focus on one particular aspect of Klafki's didactic analysis which to my mind is crucial at this point in the shift from the WRP to the Religion and Worldviews approach; this is the idea of exemplarity. This is shown in Klafki's first question and summarised in Willbergh: 'what exemplary meaning can the content illustrate?' (Willbergh, 2021).

I will focus on the idea of exemplarity in one unit design for Year 9 (age 13-14), also reflecting on Klafki's didactic framework and the benefits of this way of thinking for a classroom teacher.

## Context

What exemplary meaning is unlocked through the content is Klafki's first question, and the 2nd question is about context, as Willbergh phrases it: 'How do the students understand it at this point?' (Willbergh, 2021) This is key. All educational principles, principles or pedagogy must come to life in specific classroom contexts. My school is a single-sex girls' school in a predominantly Asian area of East London. The majority of my students are Pakistani- or Bangladeshi- heritage Sunni Muslims. A small minority includes South Indian, Sri Lankan, Romanian, Kenyan and Somali- heritage students. White, British pupils represent less than one per cent of 30. My colleagues provide another dimension of the context in which this unit will become operational. Most of them are quite happy with the WRP and the tendency to essentialism. If pushed, my colleagues see the aim of RE as to engender respect. They have avoided contextualising analyses over the years, whether historical, ideological or geopolitical in order to avoid both a negative representation of religious power, or upsetting students (and parents) who take a particular view of their own. Our students have been raised on this diet of mildly confessional abstractions since Primary school and see it as normal. Therefore, a dimension of my work is more than my own research and curriculum design, it is creating lessons and schemes of work that my colleagues will teach and my students will engage with; it must show the benefits of a Religion and Worldviews approach, without straying too far from what they are comfortable with.

My own educational outlook is very much non-confessional. While I certainly adapt my teaching to avoid topics or lines of reasoning that might upset or disorient my students, I never veer from my overall goal of their intellectual autonomy. My aim is to facilitate my young people to make as much sense of the world as we can in the classroom, as well as develop open and curious modes of thinking for their futures. My aim in redesigning this unit is, as always, to recontextualise- to avoid abstraction and essentialism through contexts and case studies that illuminate important moments, patterns or ideas. As Klafki describes it, to exemplify through concrete examples, something fundamental about the world. For me, exemplification meets my goal of intellectual autonomy because it provides information about the world that students can critically engage with.



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## Exemplarity

I have redesigned a Year 9 unit on Islam. In the original unit the time before Islam is described as ‘the age of ignorance’, and other conceptions of God or gods as ‘idols’. There is no explanation as to this way of seeing the world. This means that Islamic, or monotheistic, ways of seeing cannot be excavated for what they reveal, they are rendered beyond comment. The emergence of Arabic monotheism could provide an exemplar of a monotheistic view more generally. Monotheism generates a view of false gods, but this way of seeing did not exist before Mosaic monotheism, there were no ‘false gods’, just other gods (Assman, 2010). The break with the old ways of the Arab tribes as Islam emerged could provide an exemplar of how a shift in culture through a reform movement often leaves behind a rent with the older tradition (Armstrong 1999). The reshaped unit of work follows a process of recontextualising, or in light of Klafki’s framework, exemplifying. To provide exemplars will be to, over time, build up an understanding of Islam as what Shahab Ahmed describes as a ‘human and historical phenomenon’ (Ahmed, 2016 p. 5).

The unit starts with data about Muslims in the UK. I used a free resource for teachers created by researchers at Cardiff University; Discovering Muslims in Britain. (University of Cardiff, 2022). I chose this resource because it offers an initial account of large-scale Muslim movement to the UK, including settlement patterns and reasons for migration. This is a real-life story for most of my students and colleagues. I wanted to show how context could be done, and offer a fruitful learning experience. The Cardiff University resource offers two videos, of an Arabic-language advert to attract workers to Cardiff in the 1950s, and several Welsh Muslims talking to camera about their roots, their faith and their identity. My students were interested in the young women who ‘look like them’, but have Welsh accents. One of my students’ relatives features in the video, a discovery that absolutely delighted the class, and me. Starting the unit with actual Muslims with histories, languages, accents and backgrounds is to exemplify causation from the offset. In this example, economic migration is not just a concept, it is what real people do for real-world reasons, which can result in a new hybrid identity, like the proudly Welsh and Muslim young people of Cardiff that so intrigued my London-based Muslim teenagers. An additional lesson was inserted at the last minute after reading an article about Bangladeshi-heritage gardeners in the UK, growing the fruits and vegetables of home, turning their suburban plots into verdant jungle-like oases (Guardian, 25th November 2022). To my mind this perfectly exemplifies the complex and bittersweet picture of migration stories; speaking of land, home, roots, change and growth. This example seemed to me to present a humanising story in the midst of large-scale socioeconomic information. My colleagues, three of whom are Bangladeshi-heritage, enjoyed teaching this lesson. One invited me to her mum’s East London garden for a meal under frames groaning with lau and naga chillis.

From considering Muslims in the UK today, we delve back in time to look at the medieval Islamic empires; the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid empires, as well as Moorish Spain and Portugal. This is to set the scene to enable pupils to engage with two critical questions; firstly, has Europe tried to erase the Islamic influences of the past, and secondly, can we see evidence of Orientalism? Both these questions became clear to me as I worked. I did not know these would be the questions students would engage with before I started researching and planning. They emerged as appropriate questions through this process; as authentic to the subject matter and offering analyses that illuminate something significant about today’s world. We look at maps, locate the centres of the empires in Spain, Turkey, India and Iran and consider their influence on the West through learning, art, culture, coins and trade.

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## Critical Questions

Considerations of Muslims in the UK and the historic influence of Islamic culture on Europe is by way of setting the scene for two critical modes of enquiry, as noted; does Europe deny how much it has been influenced by Islamic culture, and can we detect an Orientalist view? These are complicated, potentially emotive topics, and are light years away from the bland, confessional generalisations of the previous unit. They are topics about the world we live in, that my students live in, and are important contexts for Muslims and non-Muslims in the West. Engaging with these questions allows students to see patterns and make sense of things for themselves.

We revisited the medieval Islamic empires and encountered the phrase 'gunpowder empires' used to describe them. This phrase was coined by the American scholar of Islam Marshall Hodgson, in collaboration with Reuben Smith (Hodgson and Smith, 1974). Students learn the term 'Orientalist' and a very brief background to Edward Said, and are asked to decide if the phrase 'gunpowder empires' is an example of Orientalism. This is a time for student's own critical engagement with complicated information. Hodgson uses the term descriptively, as far as I can tell, not to demean or undermine the success of the empires. However, the empires were certainly far more than militarily successful, there was practical efficiency, cultural richness and astute leadership. Some students decided that the phrase is an example of Orientalism as it associates Islam with violence, others that it is not an example of Orientalism but an acknowledgement of superior Islamic military technology at that time. Based on the information given and their own reasoning, the students are processing and thinking for themselves, which is my aim.

Students engaged with another set of information to make sense of for themselves. We watched the first 20 minutes of historian Bettany Hughes's documentary, 'When the Moors Ruled in Europe' (Channel 4, 2005). This is enough to take in Hughes's thesis that Europe owes a great deal to Islamic innovation through the connecting point of Moorish Spain, but since 1492 Europe has 'erased' its Islamic past. Students learn that 300,000 Muslims were expelled from Spain and 1 million Arabic books were burnt when Ferdinand and Isabella retook Al-Andalus. We also consider how the Alhambra in Granada or the Mesquita in Cordoba are immensely popular tourist attractions, to make the point that Europe's Islamic past is in full view. Again, students use the information given to answer this question for themselves. There is no right or wrong, there is analysis and exploration.



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## Didactic Analysis

Students of RE have been raised on a diet of idealised generalisations. Doctrinal propositions are presented as unproblematically accepted by all adherents, and rituals and customs as if all adherents, wherever they are, practice them in the same way. I will address the 5 questions of the didactic analysis, using Willbergh and draw some general conclusions.

Klafki's 1st question asks about the big picture; 'what exemplary meaning can the content illustrate?' (Willbergh, 2021). We draw a thread through history to view the influence of Islam on European regions from its earliest days, and the ways the Christian West makes sense of Islam. This seems to me to be a suitably critical view for 13 and 14 year- olds to encounter as they start to understand the world in increasingly political terms. Through encountering how the West constructs an image of 'Islam' my aim is to open the door to a general ability to spot patterns of interpretation and relations of power.

The fact that so many of my students and colleagues are Muslim themselves adds a piquancy to the learning experience. This brings me to Klafki's second question about the school context, in Willbergh's summary, 'How do the students understand it at this point?' which I have already outlined. I have noted that my context is not just my own understanding and resulting curriculum work, but is done in relationship with colleagues and students. They need to see the benefits of a more contextual curriculum so there is a degree of 'showcasing' to the new planning.

As to Klafki's 3rd question, concerning the impact of this learning on student' future lives, I return to my stated aim of their intellectual autonomy. As Willbergh phrases the question; 'What might it mean for those students in the future?' This aim drives my work in moving from the World Religions to the Religion and Worldviews approach, an enormous effort which requires a reshaping of my whole educational outlook as much as my classroom practice. I don't expect any personal outcomes, such as students' appreciation of or respect for people, practices, outlooks or ways of living. I test the students' cognitive development, that is, their recall, understanding and ability to engage with critical questions using the information given. In terms of what this means for the students' future, I stick to their intellectual development. I am showing them how to see patterns which they may be able to detect in other situations and contexts in future. Whatever sense students make of this is up to them.

In my work the aim of intellectual autonomy is inherently connected to the use of different disciplinary questions or ways of framing the information we encounter. I am referring to Klafki's 4th question, which Willbergh phrases as 'To what extent is the content embedded in the broader structure of disciplinary content?' (Willbergh, 2021). In any other subject on the English curriculum this would be a question about how effectively the academic disciplines are brought into the classroom, necessarily simplified but still broad and accurate enough to allow pupils to experience disciplinary modes of thinking. However, the disciplines, which would be Theology, Philosophy and Ethics, with History and the social sciences, have not been employed in any deliberate way in RE. One of the subject's historical dual aims has been 'learning about religion' (the other being 'learning from religion'), implying an academic basis for learning, but the information given has often been directed from an internal faith perspective. Pupils have considered doctrinal positions, abstracted from their historical, cultural or theological origins, standing as a proxy for what hugely diverse people think, as if we can know. In Grimmitt's words, the dual aims have allowed RE to become an 'uncritical confessional activity' (Grimmitt, 2010: p. 266).

A multidisciplinary approach to RE is recommended by the Commission on RE (CoRE, 2018) and in Ofsted's 2021 Research Review of Religious Education (Ofsted, 2021). In my teaching generally I employ disciplinary modes of thinking as a way to frame the learning content, so students can engage with rich and complicated information. This unit is no exception. The information itself does not always offer a clear entry point to analysis, I need to read around the subject and identify contextual information that offers some critical purchase. The actual disciplinary analyses I employ are a mixture of History and Ethics in this unit. These disciplinary lenses are not alternatives to a largely Theological lens, but alternatives to the abstraction and confessionalism that has gone before. They are most visible in my planning, rather than something the students themselves are aware of. They provide structures for me in identifying the questions we will explore in the classroom.

Engaging in a bigger picture and pulling on historical or cultural threads to make sense of phenomena is new to my students, which is also part of the context of this work. This speaks to Klafki's 5th question as to what particular examples unlock the learning content, in Willbergh's words, 'What concrete cases, aesthetic objects, and the like, would enhance the learning of the content for these particular students?' This is key to the whole operation. A Bangladeshi gardener growing fruit and vegetables in London offers a human story in the midst of large-scale migration and change. Students consider whether they think they are seeing Orientalism in the term 'gunpowder empires', or whether Europeans now deny the influence of Islamic learning and innovation on the West, drawing their own conclusions based on the information given.



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Orientalism is based on unequal power relations. Looking at how this is manifested not only enhances understanding of how Islam and Muslims are framed in the Western, Christian world, but also reveals patterns of power. Power dynamics are exemplified, and in this way future patterns of power may be visible to students as they grow and understand more. Each case study had been chosen precisely because it opens the door to a wider mode of thinking and making sense of the world, revealing patterns, formative events or the ongoing impact on the present of the past.

How students respond is part of the Bildung process, as Willbergh describes it, a “double unlocking”: unlocking the content and unlocking the student.’ (Willbergh 2021, 7). In the didactic Bildung dynamic, the teacher chooses, breaks down and communicates information, and the pupil experiences it. Willbergh adds, that for the pupil, ‘the understanding of the world is changed’ (7). As a general description of education, I can accept this last point because education will change a person’s view of the world over time, but in terms of this unit, or any single unit of mine, I do not go so far as to claim that my students’ view of the world has changed. Students are given ample opportunities to reflect on their own and their peers’ understanding. In reading students’ written reflections in their books each week, I can report their increasing knowledge as they process the information and synthesise their own evaluations. How this changes their view of the world will most likely be outside my experience. In bringing rich information to the classroom for them to deconstruct and investigate, my aims are met.



## Conclusion

As a classroom teacher I find Klafki's didactic analysis extremely heartening. Theory or method is not superior to practice, but neither is practice devoid of theoretical intelligence. It is exciting to see the complex interplay between planning, teaching, evaluating, adjusting and experiencing one's planning come to life in young minds set out on the page. Klafki's didactic analysis honours the live relationship between a teacher and her pupils. As an underpinning for teachers grappling with a new approach to the curriculum, it asks them to think about what they are teaching and why; a good place to start.

The World Religions Paradigm has provided codification at a level seen as appropriately simple, but it does not evolve into complexity. Whereas didactics asks the teacher to consider what pupils are engaging with and how it will furnish their future understanding of the world by providing an exemplar or case study of a big idea, with every age group. The actual content and complexity is left to the teacher as the professional who knows her pupils, and subject, best. Klafki's 5 questions prompt teachers to think about the development of their own curriculum, rather than spending their time transforming a list of given content, a process, in the words of Mark Chater, which is 'as difficult as turning flat cola into sparking champagne'. (Chater and Erricker, 2013: p. 37). The didactic framework asks teachers to employ an educational analysis, bringing together theory and practice, and to make decisions based on their professional knowledge and skills. If the subject can successfully shift towards a Religion and Worldviews approach it will require mobilisation at the grassroots, i.e. the classroom level. I hope such an analysis reminds teachers that they can, and must, employ their professional autonomy.



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