

Worldview education in a changing society

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Abstract

Arlen Sharp proposes that religious education (RE) should prioritise the majority religion of a country. Using Finnish religious education that favours Lutheranism as the benchmark, he argues that such an education may enhance societal cohesion and trust, because it resonates with, and helps to deliver the central values of Finnish society, such as trust, together with a sense of (national) identity. Sharp argues that RE would be able to bring about these benefits better than ethics education exactly because of the interconnectedness of Lutheranism and Finnish culture. In my paper, I consider Sharp's argumentation from empirical, normative, and pedagogical perspectives. However, instead of solely focusing on RE, I discuss both RE and its alternative in Finnish schools, the philosophically oriented school subject 'Culture, worldviews and ethics' (ET) under the umbrella term of worldview education (WE). I claim that Sharp's argument is problematic from three interrelated perspectives. First, I aim to show that Finnish society is not historically as monocultural as it at first sight may appear. Second, I argue that prioritising one worldview over others in mandatory public education, even when non-confessional, is problematic from the perspective of legitimacy on one hand, and from the perspective of both guardians' and children's rights on the other. My last argument is pedagogical: in a complex world, it is crucial that students are provided space and time to reflect on and discuss various matters concerning worldviews—their own choices, roles, and identity in relation with worldviews and ethics. This is best ensured by employing approaches that enable reflective discussion in the classroom, such as Philosophy for/with Children.

Key words

children's rights, ethics education, legitimacy, religious education, worldview education

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss Arlen Sharp's suggestion that religious education (RE), or worldview education (WE), should mainly be based on the majority religion of a

country. I prefer the term ‘worldview’ here, as it is an umbrella term to cover a whole range of religious, non-religious, and secular outlooks of life. Worldviews are views, or world-organising conceptual and ethical frameworks, that take a stance ‘on life, the world, and humanity’ (van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema 2013). Worldviews take a stance on existential questions, ethical values, and what a good life consists of, and thus have a strong bearing on peoples’ behaviours and actions (van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema 2013). Typically, they take a stance on ontology (what kind of entities exist in the world), epistemology (how do we obtain knowledge of the world), and ethical questions (of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad) (Niiniluoto 1984). Worldviews can be organised or personal (van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema 2013). Organised worldviews, such as religions, come close to what political philosopher John Rawls (1993, p. 13) calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’. A comprehensive doctrine is ‘is a set of beliefs affirmed by citizens concerning a range of values, including moral, metaphysical, and religious commitments, as well as beliefs about personal virtues, and political beliefs about the way society ought to be arranged’ (Mandle & Reidy 2015).

By WE, I refer to educational content that explicitly concerns these kinds of worldviews: whether by teaching about worldviews to deliberate on them, to reflect on their personal meaning, or by emphasising a specific worldview. As worldviews typically include a stance on ethics, WE also often comes close to, or is mingled with, ethics or moral education. WE is not limited only to (a) specific school subject(s), but worldviews are in many ways present in all school subjects and the everyday school life (Lemettinen, Hirvonen & Ubani 2021). However, in this paper I refer to WE that is offered as a school subject. By ‘WE model’, I mean country-specific educational arrangements in mandatory basic education that explicitly concern worldviews. WE models vary by country, and explicit WE is not always offered at schools. However, when WE is offered, it is usually taught in the form of religious, moral, or ethics education (Kavonius 2021, pp. 23-24). Philosophy or philosophical ethics education can also serve as WE, when philosophical approaches are applied to reflect and deliberate on various worldviews. This is largely the approach in the Finnish school subject ‘Culture, worldviews and ethics’ (ET)¹ that is taught in schools as the alternative to RE (see NCCBE 2014, *elämäkatsomustieto*). Furthermore, just as religious education (RE) can be based on a specific religion and taught confessionally, so too

¹ The English translation of the school subject has changed recently. Earlier, it went by the name of ‘Ethics’, but now the official translation is ‘Culture, worldviews and ethics’ (see Finnish National Agency for Education 2025).

can philosophy education sometimes endorse a specific worldview, such as Marxism-Leninism, although this kind of philosophy teaching is fairly rare in contemporary Europe (Goucha 2007). Confessional, or even just religion-focused RE is also becoming rarer in Euro-American contexts (Easton 2019; Kavonius 2021).

In this volume, Arlen Sharp claims that WE should prioritise the major religion of a country. According to him, this would provide a beneficial cultural framework through which it would be easier for pupils to make sense of their history as well as current society. This deeper understanding would, in turn, translate into wider societal cohesion, Sharp claims. He emphasises that due to the special role that religious values have in societies, societal cohesion could not be created through secular ethics or philosophical education. He takes Finland as an example of a peaceful and socially cohesive society that also practices WE that prioritises the major religion of the country, in the Finnish case Evangelical Lutheranism. Furthermore, Sharp argues that RE, based on the major religion, ought to be prioritised over more philosophical or ethics education—exactly because Lutheranism is an existing ethical framework that is socially relevant and through which the Finnish majority makes sense of the world. However, he does not claim that RE and philosophical ethics education would be mutually exclusive as philosophy of religion is an established field of study. RE and philosophical ethics could thus be taught alongside each other, which actually is one proposal within the various ‘integrative models’ of Finnish WE (Salmenkivi & Åhs 2022).

Finland’s current, quite complicated WE model, that includes RE with as many as 14 syllabi and ET as the main alternative to RE, is currently under a heated public debate. Sharp’s paper thus offers a timely and welcome international perspective to this ongoing discussion. Sharp starts by presenting empirical arguments for the relationship between societal cohesion, beneficial values, and religion, to back his claim. Specifically, he considers the role of Lutheranism in the establishment of the (broadly) Nordic welfare state model that is also prevalent in Finland. In relation to ethical values, Sharp specifically prioritises societal cohesion, stability, mutual trust, as well as a ‘unique and well-defined’ sense of (national) identity, that upholds four values over others: egalitarianism, work-related values (of ‘Protestant ethics’), the value of education, and honesty. He is concerned about maintaining these values amidst growing value-pluralism and diversification, and correctly looks to the education system for the maintenance of certain core values and ethical principles.

In the following, I will consider Sharp's arguments from three viewpoints. I start by briefly considering his empirical claims about the Finnish welfare state, in particular the Finnish basic education (*peruskoulu*) reform during the 1970s, because it serves as a good empirical example of the disputes concerning the development of the welfare state. Furthermore, disputes over ethics education in Finland also indicate that there has not been as wide a consensus on central values in the Finnish society as Sharp claims. However, many of the empirical matters that Sharp raises in his paper cannot be settled here. For instance, I will not be able to evaluate whether RE, based on the majority religion, will actually be able to bring about a well-defined sense of identity or social cohesion, as this would be a matter of empirical research. In any case, the decision whether values and traits are valuable and justified aims of education is first and foremost a *normative* matter that must be considered in a wider framework of moral reasons. I will claim that prioritising a major religion is problematic because, contrary to Sharp's suggestion, by failing the requirement for moral and political legitimacy it contributes towards social *instability* rather than stability. Furthermore, prioritising one worldview over others in mandatory school education gives due respect to neither the parents' or guardians'² right to educate, or to children's own freedoms of religion and conscience. Last, I present a few pedagogical reasons for not prioritising a specific religion, or religions in general, in WE. In the Conclusions section, I summarise my arguments and briefly present my views concerning the reformation of the Finnish WE model.

Worldview education and the Finnish school reform

Sharp is correct in implying that the Finnish WE model is in a dire need of reform. The model provides RE in not just one, but—under certain conditions—in as many as 14 syllabi, with education in ET as the main alternative to RE. The model is the kind that Clayton and Stevens (2018) call 'selective': under certain conditions, it provides (some) guardians several options to choose from. It is complicated for schools and education providers (the municipalities) to arrange—as Sharp rightly points out. Lack of qualified minority RE teachers is also a well-acknowledged issue. However, from the normative viewpoint, the complexity of the model would not be the issue if it were shown to be the most *morally* justified way of teaching about worldviews, ensuring central rights—most importantly children's freedoms of religion, conscience, and expression, and guardians' rights to educate. Protecting our central rights, such as bodily and mental integrity, typically requires complex institutional arrangements—

² By 'guardians' I refer to the parents or other legal guardians of a child.

for instance, legal systems and hospitals are established to ensure the realisation of those important rights. However, I will first consider Sharp's empirical claims concerning connections between Lutheranism and Finnish culture in relation with the birth of the Nordic welfare state model. The history of the Finnish school and WE education serve as examples of the diverse roots of Finnish culture and the welfare state.

The preliminaries of Finnish WE model were originally laid out in the first law on religious freedom after Finland gained its independence from the Russian Empire in 1917 (Parliament of Finland 1922). The elementary school law of the time, taking effect in 1923, mandated schools to provide RE according to the majority religion. The law on religious freedom stated that other than Lutheran pupils can be exempted from Lutheran RE, and that non-Lutheran pupils could receive education 'according to their own faith' (Hämäläinen 2024; Salmenkivi et al. 2007). At a national level, this referred to Orthodox Christians (Parliament of Finland 1923; Hämäläinen 2024). In the Finnish capital Helsinki, also Jewish RE has been available from the early 20th century, as was Islamic RE at the Tatar Muslim school (1948–1969). In addition, from 1932, Christian Adventists could send their children to an Adventist school in Helsinki. However, all pupils who were exempted from Lutheran RE for religious or ideological reasons, including atheist students, could receive education in the history of religions and ethics (Hämäläinen 2024). During the 1920s and 1930s, Finland—recovering from civil war in 1918 between the victorious Whites and the defeated Reds and its cruel aftermath, and an attempted fascist coup d'état in the turn of the decade—was in fact a highly polarised society with heightened political tensions (Saaritsa 2026; Sandelin et al. 2026; Simola et al. 2017).

Although it may be plausible to track many values that the majority of Finns hold dear to Lutheranism, the building-process of the Finnish welfare state was centrally a political process which was not conducted without internal rifts and heated political debates. The reform of the Finnish school system in the 1970s actually serves as a very good example of this, not least because education was seen as a central institution of the welfare state (Ahonen 2003). However, school reform was initiated by the political left, as a joint effort of social democrats, communists, and the liberal left (Ahonen 2003, pp. 109, 125-126, 132), with no reference to religious values. The political left may have 'sacralized' the state (Sharp 2026), but if it did, it did so for quite other ideological reasons than religious. The overall idea of the reform was to offer free and publicly funded—even quality—education for every student, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographical location (Ahonen 2003, pp. 152-154). The

peruskoulu reform was introduced in stages, and by 1977 every Finnish pupil in effect started school in the reformed comprehensive school (*peruskoulu*). The school reform eradicated most of the private schools and the previous two-track educational system that divided pupils to an academic and non-academic educational path at the age of 10 to 12. In the school reform, the political left gained an unlikely ally from the agrarian political centre, a considerable political force of the time, which aspired to enhance the educational opportunities of the rural population (Ahonen 2003, pp. 134-135). The reluctant political right joined the building process of the new *peruskoulu* only later and stayed highly sceptical until the first PISA results in 2000 that quite unexpectedly plunged the Finnish basic education into international fame (Ahola 2003, pp. 137-138, 148-149; Okkonen 2017; Simola et al. 2017).

The reformed *peruskoulu* school inherited its WE model from the earlier educational system that it replaced. This model was transferred without change to the new school as a political compromise in order to gain the support of the political and religious right for the school reform. It was seen to preserve the special place of the Lutheran Church in the Finnish education system, as well as respecting the guardians' right to decide about their children's worldview and moral education. RE was also to be taught confessionally. This meant that RE classes included elements of religious practice, such as praying and singing religious songs, as well as active participation in religious events such as church services. The teachers were also required to be members of the religious community of the religion they were teaching (Hämäläinen 2024, pp. 135-147; Tomperi 2013). However, the *peruskoulu* WE model inherited from the previous two-track school system faced challenges from the beginning. In 1978 Erkki Hartikainen, the chair of the Finnish Freethinkers Association, submitted a complaint to the European Human Rights Committee about the (Christian) religious and confessional emphasis of the school subject of history of religions and ethics that both non-Lutheran and non-religious students attended (Salmenkivi et al. 2007; Hartikainen et. al. v. Finland 40/1978). This complaint provided the final push that led to the creation of an entirely new school subject, 'Culture, worldviews and ethics', that was introduced in all school levels in 1985 as the alternative to RE. The Finnish name for the school subject, *elämäkatsomustieto* (ET), translates more or less as 'worldview studies'. The name was chosen instead of the originally proposed 'Ethics' (*etiikka*) as a compromise. This is because the proponents of RE, mainly the Lutheran Church, opposed ethics education as separate from RE (Hämäläinen 2024, pp. 135-147). Despite the introduction of secular ET as a new school subject, RE continued to be taught in a confessional manner for the majority of students (Salmenkivi et. al. 2007).

Further changes to the Finnish WE model were initiated by Finland's accession to the European Union in 1995. The membership required harmonisation of the Finnish constitution with the EU laws and the European Human Rights Convention in particular. This constitutional reform specifically strengthened the freedom of religion, as the new constitution included not only the positive right to religion, but also the negative freedom from religious practice. The current constitution §11, harmonised with the EU laws, states that 'No one is under the obligation, against his or her conscience, to participate in the practice of a religion' (Parliament of Finland 1999; Salmenkivi et. al. 2007). After the constitutional reform, everyone, including members of the Lutheran Church, were to be exempted from religious practice, and thus, confessional RE would have been unlawful. Since the new constitution took effect in 2003, Finnish RE has supposedly been non-confessional—although there were no significant changes in the RE curriculum. Currently, every pupil who is entitled to RE receives education 'according to their own faith' that is, according to the law, taught in a non-confessional manner. Nowadays, RE teachers do not have to be affiliated with any religious community, not even in the religion they are teaching (Salmenkivi et. al. 2007). However, the constitutional reform did not have a larger impact on the Finnish WE model as such. I will explain the current model below.

The current Finnish WE model is complicated. Its specifics are mandated by the Basic Education Act 628/1998, §13. The law follows the hundred-year-old practice that 'the education provider must provide religious education according to the *major* religion' (translation and emphasis mine, Parliament of Finland 1998). This is interpreted as obliging students who belong to the Lutheran Church to attend Lutheran RE classes. If there is Orthodox Christian RE available, pupils and students belonging to the Orthodox Church must attend these classes. In contrast, non-Lutheran pupils are allowed to attend Lutheran classes. Furthermore, if there are three pupils who are entitled to education in some other religion within a municipality (which is the education provider), they must offer RE in this religion if the pupils' guardians demand it. Additionally, non-Lutheran pupils are also allowed to receive RE within their own religious community instead of the school, or they can be exempted from school WE (including both RE and ET) altogether if their guardians wish. If there are three pupils within a municipality that are not members of any registered religious organisation, the education provider should automatically offer classes in ET. These classes are open to all students *other than* members of the Lutheran Church. Orthodox students are allowed to attend ET if no Orthodox RE is available (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022). ET is regulated nationally by one curriculum only, but

the RE curriculum consists of 14 syllabi of the following religions: Adventism, Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Catholic Christian, The Christian Community, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Herran kansa ry (a sect of Lutheranism), Hare Krishna religion, Islam, Judaism, Lutheran Christian, Orthodox Christian, Pentecostalism, and Suomen Vapaakirkko (the Free Church of Finland) (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022). All RE syllabi partially overlap, but their emphasis is always on the religion in question. Human rights education was also included in the RE curriculum in two curriculum reforms in the new millennia (in 2003 and 2014/2015).

ET is in the Finnish model taught as the alternative to RE. ET as school subject serves a double role. Originally, it was the school subject for children with a non-religious or atheist background. However, nowadays it also serves those pupils who do not have their 'own' RE classes. This means that on many occasions, ET is the sole alternative to Lutheran RE. ET classes are thus diverse in terms of the pupils' worldviews and cultural background. This also has consequences for the content and pedagogy of ET. As a school subject, ET focuses less on transferring content knowledge. ET is more pedagogical and skill-based than a content-based school subject, although worldview education, human rights education, as well as education on cultural heritage and cultural diversity form its central knowledge base. Pedagogically, ET draws mostly from the practices of Philosophy for/with Children (P4C, PwC) but the teachers employ a wide variety of methods, and often creative methods such as drama and arts. In ET classes, pupils are encouraged to discuss every-day ethical questions and to develop their skills of discussion and dialogue. The main aims of the subject are to enable pupils to reflect on their own personal identity and core values and assist them to seek their own model of a good life (see NCCBE 2014, *elämäntutkimustieto*). In addition to RE and ET, guardians of pupils who do not belong to the Lutheran Church may choose to exempt their child from WE altogether or arrange for their religious education through a religious organisation (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022).

Prioritising a major religion, social stability, and children's rights

I turn now to consider Arlen Sharp's (2026) positive proposal for reforming the Finnish model of WE. Sharp criticises the current model for its impracticality and proposes it should be replaced by one mandatory school subject. With such a complicated model of Finnish WE education, there are obviously several practical problems, starting from the timetable, to finding qualified RE teachers for the minority religions. Class teachers sometimes find it frustrating to divide their pupils into

separate groups according to their religion or worldview (Lipiäinen 2024, pp. 68–73). However, as noted earlier, practical and financial considerations should not be the primary grounds for reforming these practices if they are deemed consistent with, and supportive of, the fundamental rights of the individuals concerned. Rather, the primary perspective on the matter is normative.

By using Finland's model as a benchmark, Sharp proposes a reformed WE model that would combine both RE and philosophical approaches, but nevertheless gives special priority to the majority religion of a nation-state. Sharp's main argument is that education in the majority religious tradition of the society—Lutheranism in the case of Finland—could bring social cohesion and stability in societies that are becoming increasingly multicultural and pluralistic. The kind of education that Sharp is proposing would, according to Sharp, bring about a range of valuable traits such as mutual trust, a 'unique and well-defined' sense of (national) identity, including appreciation of diligence in work and education ('Protestant ethics'), and values of egalitarianism and honesty. One way of considering Sharp's argument would be to, first, consider the empirical claim that education that emphasises the majority religion would actually be able to bring about such values and traits. However, as mentioned earlier, this is a matter of empirical research that cannot be resolved here. So, let us just assume that this is the case: education in a majority religion will be able to enhance mutual trust, national identity, and deliver values central to it. Another way to consider Sharp's arguments would be to discuss whether trust, a sense of identity, diligence, egalitarianism, and honesty are good and worthwhile traits and values to pursue in mandatory basic education. However, I will also leave this discussion aside and assume that these are valuable ends of education, and that education in a majority, or for that matter any, religion will be able deliver at least some highly worthwhile values (whether the ones mentioned above or some others). I have no reason to doubt this. Nevertheless, there are wider normative, principled ethical matters at stake. Therefore, instead of considering whether these values are truly worthwhile to be taught, in what follows, I will look into Sharp's appeal to wider normative principles.

It seems to me that Sharp's bottom-line argument concerns maintaining social cohesion and stability. However, contra Sharp's claims, there is real doubt that prioritising one worldview or religion, or, in Rawls' (1993) terms a comprehensive doctrine, over others will be able to deliver either of those aims. The main question concerns the moral legitimacy of such arrangements. Although guardians and citizens would give their consent to the arrangement in practice, the ethical, and potentially political, tensions remain. Basic education is mandatory; that is, the state obliges all

children to attend school or acquire basic education by other means. Guardians are legally obliged to ensure that their children are educated in this manner. As the state uses sanctions and, sometimes, coercion to ensure that all children receive basic education, the aims and practices of schooling (as of any other public institution) must be ethically justified and legitimate (Clayton 2006). This is important for ethical reasons, but if citizens do not consider the aims of public education legitimate, social stability may also be under threat, as citizens are bound to protest or even rebel against institutions that in their mind lack legitimacy (Rawls 1993).

In Finland, there are some signs of this kind of discontent concerning the conventional ties between Christian religious organisations and many schools. In general, the Finnish WE model favours Christian worldviews; of 14 syllabi of RE nine focus on various branches of Christian RE, but only one unified syllabus is offered in Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. In addition, many schools still maintain close connections to the Lutheran Church and other Christian organisations. For instance, many schools arrange services with the local parish before the Christmas break, and often around Easter too, although these events are voluntary for all the pupils, Lutherans included. The traditional school parties at the end of the autumn and spring semesters may involve some (typically Lutheran) religious elements, and various school events may be arranged together with various Christian religious organisations. Although events with religious content are voluntary, the schools are not always sufficiently aware of the regulations. Thus, events that involve religious content frequently cause complaints to the Regional State Administrative Agency, and these disputes and complaints are regularly covered in the media too (Aluehallintovirasto 2024; Holmberg 2023; Laakso 2024; Pekkarinen 2024).

Sharp (2026) does not propose that WE should in any sense be confessional, or that the school should follow any religious traditions. Rather, he argues that although Lutheranism should be prioritised, the education should be non-confessional. However, there would, in my mind, still be several ethical problems with WE that extensively prioritises one particular worldview. First, worldviews include values that are not shared by all guardians. Not even individuals of the same religion necessarily share the same values. For instance, the Finnish Lutheran church hosts both highly conservative as well as extremely liberal individuals and strands (this is demonstrated for instance by the fact that the Finnish Lutheran Church has not been able to reach an agreement on same-sex marriages; Kallatsa 2022; Yleisradio 9.5.2025). Regardless of whether they share a background in 'cultural Lutheranism', or that some core Finnish values could be identified, Finns evidently interpret core values in

different, even opposing, ways as they also hold a range of political views. An education that actively sought to deliver the values of a certain worldview would necessarily be based on just one interpretation of those values. Furthermore, as shown in the previous section, not all Finns are Lutheran; religious as well as secular and atheist minorities have existed throughout the nearly 120 years of independence.

Families and children's parents or guardians hold a variety of worldviews, values and lifestyles, and at the same time, the guardians' right to educate is typically considered strong in liberal democratic countries (Brighouse & Swift 2014). Teaching values that are not shared by all guardians, regardless of how worthwhile, risks breaching their right to educate. This moral right is stated in Article 26 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), in Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Council of Europe 1950), and in Article 5 of The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations 1989). The Article 2 of ECHR explicitly states that "...the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions." By not giving an equal choice of WE to of the guardians of Lutheran children the current Finnish WE model clearly does not respect their right to educate in the sense of the human rights documents. However, this cannot be amended by mandating RE with a strong Lutheran emphasis for *all* pupils, as this would, in turn, be at least as unfair towards the parents of non-Lutheran pupils.

At the same time, respecting the rights of the guardians does not mean that basic education should refrain from promoting *any* values. It would be impossible to conduct education without any stance on the good and valuable. Education requires a stance on a variety of values, starting from valuing the importance of formal basic education itself, on what is epistemically valuable to know and understand, but moreover, on the manner of ethically justified education and pedagogy, how students should be treated at school, and what kind of behaviour in general would be allowed at school. In the process, schools certainly aim to deliver some values, and regularly even values that not all guardians fully agree with. However, as the guardians' right to education is, for good reasons, considered strong, the justification for the values taught in schools must be correspondingly robust (Brighouse & Swift 2014). There are various ways to justify educational aims, but I bring up here two that are especially relevant in relation with worldviews and values: the requirements of public justification and children's rights.

First, to be legitimate for schools to uphold, deliver, or even inculcate values, they must be somehow publicly justifiable. This means that they must pass at least a hypothetical, if not actual, ‘test’ of public justification: the values must at least be in principle acceptable to all (reasonable) citizens. This does not mean that citizens must give their explicit consent, but that there are strong moral reasons to emphasise certain values over some others. Following Rawls’ political philosophy, Clayton and Stevens (2018) argue that the aims of (public) school education must pass an ‘acceptability requirement’: they must not be based on values and views that citizens find controversial. Worldviews, especially religions, include moral values, beliefs, views and practices that people typically disagree or hold various views about; these include, for instance, beliefs in supernatural entities, dispositions to submit oneself to the will of a god, or dietary restrictions on religious or ethical basis. These beliefs and values are thus controversial. Education that is based on a specific worldview, such as Lutheranism, would clearly not pass the public justification test or the acceptability requirement, because religions include controversial views, values, and practices. In contrast, moral norms that are non-controversial, such as the moral requirement not to harm others could even be taught in a directive manner at schools (Hand 2026).

To decide whether the traits and values suggested by Sharp, that is, ‘unique and well-defined’ sense of (national) identity, egalitarianism, ‘Protestant’ work ethics, valuing of education, and honesty, would be (publicly) justified aims of education, they should be tested by an acceptability requirement. However, at the same time it appears to me that many of the abovementioned values are not specific to Lutheranism or to any other single worldview. It seems to me that teachers—not only in Finland, but quite universally—already aim to teach some of these traits, dispositions, and values, such as the value of education and honesty. As quite widely shared and uncontroversial values of education, they would thus likely pass the acceptability requirement. On the contrary, references to specific worldviews, such as Protestantism, or to idea(l)s that can be given several conflicting definitions, such as ‘national identity’, would not pass the test—exactly because of their disputed and controversial nature. However, if ‘Protestant work ethics’ were understood more generally as ‘diligence’, not as a value tied to a specific worldview, or defined by a specific religion, it would not be similarly controversial. I think teachers quite universally aim to encourage the trait in students as central to learning. As a fairly uncontroversial educational value, diligence would likely pass the acceptability requirement (and the public justification test).

The second main way of justifying values education is by appealing to children's rights. The guardians' right to educate is strong, and therefore it can be only limited by similarly strong moral reasons, that is, only in reference to other people's rights. Many choices concerning moral education and lifestyle such as dietary choices stay within the boundaries of guardians' rights as long as they do not threaten children's physical or psychological well-being (Feinberg 1980/2007). However, the guardians' right to educate would not include, for example, teaching to despise other individuals or groups, because this denies them their rights to equal respect and dignity as human beings, and at the worst case, risks dehumanisation and even violence towards the vilified individuals and groups. Moreover, the guardians' right to educate ought not overrule children's own rights. According to the CRC, not just adults but children too are entitled to religious and conscientious freedom, as well as freedoms of opinion, association, and culture. Although small children may not be capable of enjoying these rights, guardians are nevertheless morally obliged to educate in a manner that does not prevent or endanger their children's capabilities to exercise these rights in the future. For this reason, indoctrination into a certain religious or political doctrine would be morally impermissible (Archard 2015; Feinberg 1980/2007). This means that even that parents agreed to education for a single worldview, this would not be morally permissible from the viewpoint of children's rights. Furthermore, freedom of religion, conscience and opinion require opportunities to develop capacities for exercising those rights (Kannisto 2019). For children to have the option to make a genuine choice for themselves, they need information about various options, and most importantly, opportunities to reflect on the meaning of values and worldviews (Clayton & Stevens 2018; Easton 2019; MacMullen 2007). WE that prioritises only one worldview crudely compromises these aims.

However, I would like to emphasise that although worldviews include values and epistemic stances that are controversial, that is, not even in principle acceptable by every reasonable person, this does not mean that they should not be taught *at all*. I find the contrary to be plausible. Given both the societal and personal meaning and influence of worldviews, they certainly should be an important, and compulsory, part of school education. However, if both guardians' and children's rights, and the acceptability requirement, are to be respected, neither of them ought to be taught one-sidedly or in a directive manner but widely and reflectively. This brings me to my last, pedagogical, point, that will be considered in the next section.

Pedagogical reasons against prioritising a worldview

Last, but not least, I wish to bring up a few largely pedagogical reasons for not prioritising one worldview over others in WE. As mentioned above, I endorse the view that WE is important and should be a mandatory part of formal basic education. Worldviews of various kinds, religions and ideologies, are personally meaningful and thus also strongly shape our societies. Knowledge and understanding concerning worldviews are important for our personal lives as well as for understanding our current world and its history (van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema 2013). WE has also the potential to enhance important values of tolerance and mutual respect across various differences, not only the ones concerning worldviews, but also personal identity such as gender (Kannisto 2019).

Given the importance of understanding and respecting various worldviews for mutual tolerance in a diverse society, WE should instead be mandatory for every student. One problematic feature of the current Finnish WE model is that it allows other guardians than those of Lutheran children to opt their children out of WE. However, as a mandatory school subject its legitimacy basis becomes ever more important: it must be suitable for children with various cultural backgrounds. And, as argued above, WE that prioritises one worldview, such as Lutheranism, would not be legitimate in culturally diverse settings. In any case, there would be no reason to prioritise a theistic, religious worldview over non-theistic ones. Prioritising a specific religion in WE would actually be a step backwards as in many European countries and the UK there is an increasing consensus that RE ought to involve secular views along with the religious (Easton 2019; Kavonius 2021).

Furthermore, once WE includes a wide variety of religious and non-religious worldviews, there is a real danger that the school subject becomes packed with knowledge content. Rather, given WE's personal and societal importance, it should not only aim at delivering content knowledge, but crucially, to allow time for reflective, deliberative, and critical thinking skills to develop. The main focus of WE should not be on knowledge content, but rather on enabling time and space for pupils to reflect and deliberate on important issues concerning questions of various dimensions of their identity, including their own convictions and values, societal issues, topical events and issues in an encouraging and safe environment with a reliable adult. An emphasis on delivering content knowledge too easily jeopardises these important aims, given that the lesson time is scarce. Importantly, Philosophy for/with Children approaches that have been developed particularly for

conducting reflective discussions, but these discussion methods require enough class-time to work (Gregory 2008; Lipman 2003).

Conclusions

In this paper, I have considered Arlen Sharp's arguments in favour of a religious education (RE) that prioritises the majority religion of a country. Here, I have used the wider term worldview education (WE) to refer to education that involves worldviews as well as ethics education. Sharp uses the current Finnish model of WE, that prioritises Christian religion and Lutheranism, an example to support his arguments. He proposes that the model should be reformed, but in a manner that would continue to give priority to the Lutheran religion. According to Sharp, teaching the majority religion would benefit social cohesion and stability by delivering and strengthening values that are widely accepted in the society.

I have argued, contra Sharp, that no society exhibits such a consensus in worldviews as would justify prioritising a specific worldview. Finnish society serves as a good example; under a seemingly homogenous surface Finnish society is pluralistic, and conflicts in values have at times caused bitter, even violent clashes. Imposing worldviews and values that not shared by every (reasonable) citizen through mandatory education does not enhance cohesion, but on the contrary risks causing social instability. Prioritising a worldview is not thus a legitimate aim of education. Furthermore, emphasising a specific worldview breaches both guardians' rights to educate and children's freedom of religion and conscience. It is evident that the current Finnish WE model is culpable of these breaches. However, the faults of the current model are not remedied by making Lutheran education mandatory for *every* student. In addition to the problems of legitimacy and rights, such education may cause a more subtle 'othering' of religious and non-religious minority students together with those Lutherans who do not subscribe to the particular version of Lutheranism taught—even if it did not lead to direct confrontation.

One motivation behind the current Finnish WE model, however imperfect, has been to respect, recognise and accommodate the plurality of worldviews in Finnish society. Although the majority—that is, the guardians of Lutheran pupils—are not given a choice, the other guardians are presented with a variety of choices. Thus, the simplest reformist solution, that would also be the most in line with guardians' rights, would be to keep the current model intact, but to allow every parent the *same* range of choices. Moreover, allowing children themselves to choose, at least at a certain age (at the age of 12 or latest at 16) would be the most in line with children's own rights.

However, it is very likely that the current WE model will be reformed, along with the National Core Curriculum, during the next government (2027-2031). This means that, in the future, all pupils may study an 'integrated' WE subject together. I have argued in this paper that every child should be entitled to WE because the knowledge and ability to reflect on worldviews is important for both personal and societal reasons, and because WE aims at enhancing the virtues of tolerance, respect and other public virtues. For the potential new WE school subject, it would be important to include all kinds of worldviews, both religious and non-religious, without prioritising any of them. Furthermore, as questions of worldviews are closely connected to morality and ethics, WE should include philosophical ethics education and exploration that is not connected to any particular worldview but enables critical and communal inquiry and reflection on worldviews and other topical societal issues. Importantly, WE should not become packed with content knowledge, but to truly allow the time and space – that is otherwise rare in the busy everyday life at schools – for discussion and deliberation. In Finland, this is already enabled in the school subject ET, that does not prioritise a specific worldview, and would, therefore, serve as the natural starting point for reforming the current WE model.

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