

Exploring worldviews: A framework

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Abstract

In an educational environment where multicultural and multi-faith classrooms have become the norm, it is essential that teachers are aware of, and are knowledgeable about contemporary worldviews.

This article provides a general framework for exploring a worldview—in terms of defining, analysing, developing, testing and refining it. As part of this process, several contemporary major worldviews—theism, pantheism and naturalism—are examined and compared, before some classroom implications are considered and conclusions drawn.

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Worldview defined

“Not another suicide bomber?” commented Joshua, as the family sat watching the evening news together. “Why do they do that, Mum?” Joshua is typical of children, growing up in the 21st century, who have been repeatedly exposed through the visual media, to people performing extreme and often violent acts; the motivation for which may be predicated by a personal worldview.

What is a worldview? In their seminal book, Walsh and Middleton (1984, p. 32) assert, “A world view provides a model of the world which guides its adherents in the world.” Solomon (1994, p. 1), citing Sire (1988), comments, “A worldview is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world [and which] helps us by orienting us to the intellectual and philosophical terrain about us.” Olthuis (1985, p. 29) defines a worldview as “a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it.” He continues: “It is the integrative and interpretative framework by which order and disorder are judged, the standard by which reality is managed and pursued.”

A scanning of general literature also reveals the term may be viewed as a mental construct or set of postulated coherent basic beliefs (not necessarily religious) with assumptions that may be totally or partially true or false. Furthermore, a worldview informs decision making, influences reasoning and perceptions, and assists in understanding the world

on a day-to-day level, as well as providing a reason for existence and a role in the world. It is a standard or ethic by which humans live.

Each individual has a personal worldview (Christian, 2009, p. 73); even if the individual is unaware of, or cannot articulate it. Its formation may be unconscious or conscious. This is clearly evidenced by the influence of pop culture and how modern media in all their technological formats—the purveyors of materialism, consumerism and societal ‘desires’—vie for ‘allegiance’ and imperceptibly shape one’s worldview. In this kind of social environment it seems needful to have a conscious awareness of, and evaluate contemporary society’s prevailing values and ideals.

The characteristics of a worldview

A contemporary worldview usually includes a number of common features. It is intuitively developed and does not require individuals to have higher or university education, to ‘come up’ with some answers to life’s most basic, yet ‘deep’ questions; such as: Who am I? Where did I come from; and how did the universe begin? Where am I going? Why am I here? What is going to happen to me? These are questions that invite corresponding answers regarding one’s identity, origins, future, *raison d’être*, and the subject of ‘life after death’.

A world view is often presented as a metanarrative that ties all the concepts of origin, purpose, and destiny together. It is generally developed over time as individuals engage in cultural experiences, family interactions, religious experiences, education, challenging personal experiences, social interactions, and the expectations of society. For most individuals it takes formal shape around 20-25 years of age. However, it can be communal as well as personal, because shared vision promotes community. Olthuis (1985, p. 29) points out, “[it] may be so internalized that it goes largely unquestioned.” Another feature of a worldview is that it potentially offers both a view of life and a vision for life by proposing ethical and moral standards and values (Walsh & Middleton, 1984, p. 31). Moreover, it may be further refined, deepened, and codified into a philosophy or creed such as Christianity, New Age, Buddhism or Islam.

Children are not born with a worldview. Parents (or significant adults), society and culture— together—play a significant role in facilitating a child’s emergent worldview. Teachers may also assist in this development, either overtly or covertly, by exposing children to new insights, experiences and information. As children mature, their understanding of, and reasons for, adherence to a given worldview may be modified or altered.

Three major worldviews are competing for allegiance in today’s global society (Lennox, 2009, pp.28, 29; Rasi, 2001, p.5; Sire, 1990; p.40). They are:

- *Naturalism*—with its ‘loose’ sub-groups of agnosticism, atheism, existentialism, Marxism, materialism and secular humanism.
- *Theism*—which may be divided into Christianity, Islam and Judaism; all of which are monotheistic.
- *Pantheism*—which includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and New Age.

Expressed in terse general premises, naturalism contends: God is irrelevant and either does not exist or it is impossible to determine God’s existence. All reality is explained in terms of physical elements, forces and processes and that everything can be explained on the basis of natural law. Theism asserts that God exists; is infinite and personal. He is the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. In pantheism, God is perceived as impersonal; nature is God, so all forces and workings of nature are divine; everything is God (Rasi, 2000; Geisler, 1999; Solomon, 1998; McCallum, 1997).

It should be noted, however, that not all philosophies or religious beliefs are easily catalogued within the three outlined, well-defined major worldviews and their respective premises. Panentheism, for example, is a worldview that combines elements of theism and pantheism. According to Culp (2009, p. 1), “Panentheism understands God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world. It offers an increasingly popular alternative to traditional theism and pantheism”.

Discovering, developing and testing a worldview

All worldviews have a set of beliefs that require some measure of commitment. Because individuals may not always be consciously aware of these beliefs, they are sometimes surprised by what they *really* believe. For example, various aspects of a belief system may be more explicitly revealed, even challenged, when a person is confronted with difficult or changed circumstances. That person

may then be compelled to make sense of a personal world that may be spinning out of control, with the consequence that the person’s worldview eventually may be consolidated, modified, or rejected.

Walsh and Middleton (1984, p.35) suggest that by answering four fundamental questions which tap the core of any worldview, a person’s faith commitment or belief system can be discovered. The questions:

1. *Who am I?* Addresses the nature, meaning and purpose of human existence.
2. *Where am I?* Deals with the nature and extent of reality.
3. *What is wrong?* Seeks an answer to the cause of suffering, evil, injustice and disorder.
4. *What is the remedy?* Explores ways of overcoming hindrances and obstacles to personal fulfilment.

Each question may assist in discovering and determining a worldview, but not in evaluating it. A theological or philosophical system can support the evaluation process as it offers a systematic conception of faith, belief and reality.

According to Nash (1992, p.55) and Naugle (2002, p.327), three criteria—coherence, reality and practicality—need to be applied when *evaluating* the strengths and weaknesses of a worldview. The evaluation should test whether the worldview fits together in a coherent and consistent manner; if the worldview data adequately explain the totality of human existence; and whether the belief system works and can be applied in everyday life. If these criteria are met satisfactorily, then a person probably is well on the way to discovering and developing a personal worldview.

Probing and refining a personal worldview

Nash (1992, pp.26-30) and Sire (2004, p.20) similarly outline major themes, or presuppositions that also may be used to describe a worldview. The themes, *God, ultimate reality, human kind, knowledge, ethics* and corresponding, accompanying questions that are applicable for each theme, represent an extended exploration of the general premises of naturalism, theism and pantheism posited above.

Because worldviews inform and define a person, a worldview is more than a personal feeling. It can provide a sense of communality, purpose and direction in life, outline cherished and venerated values, inform decision making and recommend standards of conduct. In a 21st century multicultural classroom, it is inevitable that a variety of worldviews will be expressed and encountered. Some may be in conflict or even be perceived to be at ‘war’ with one

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another (Lennox, 2009, p. 15). This is exemplified by the intellectual distain which atheists such as Richard Dawkins show for theists—which sometimes is reciprocated—or the current controversy in NSW over the teaching of Scripture and/or Ethics Classes in public schools.

By carefully considering the questions, issues and strategies mentioned above, teachers are encouraged to utilise a framework for discovering, developing and testing their own worldview. In the process they will become aware of the various worldviews that are evidenced in textbooks, curriculum materials and educational policies, among others, in the contemporary educational environment; overtly or covertly. It is expected that Christian teachers are able to articulate their worldview because, as Van Dyk (2000, p. 87) suggests, “It controls what you believe not only about the big picture, but also about subject matter, about children, and about the purposes of your efforts in the classroom”.

Belcher (2003, p.20, 34) collected data; recording the comments of Christian pre-service teachers’ about worldviews. She concluded that, even though the pre-service teachers professed to have a biblical worldview, there was a discontinuity between the “talk and walk” of their worldview. In her research, Belcher posed four questions similar to those of Walsh and Middleton’s (1984, p. 35): Who am I? Where am I? What is wrong? What is the solution? Table 1 provides a sample that is typical of the pre-service teachers’ responses that Belcher recorded, illustrating the difference she noticed between the *articulation* and *application* of a worldview.

It seems evident that a worldview is demonstrated in the way people live, their concept of reality, and their understanding of society, the world and their place in it. It is indicated by the pattern of a lifestyle, not a reaction to a specific situation. Sometimes a person may state a particular belief

or worldview but his or her actions may not always match the words. It is the consistency of actions and overall behaviour that most clearly demonstrates what a person really believes, and what might constitute his or her worldview. The position, that profession, is only authenticated by action, i.e. genuine believing leads to doing, finds support in the millennia-old admonitions of New Testament Scripture (cf. Matthew 5:19; 7:21–24; 25:34–36; James 1:22–24).

Worldviews: Similarities, differences and distinctives

Figure 1 illustrates that everyone has similar basic questions about their identity, origins, future, purpose and the subject of life after death. However, people, as individuals, handle these questions differently. Some people choose to accept a holistic worldview or codified belief system because, for them, it supplies the most satisfying answers to these questions. They like the idea of a metanarrative. Others may be unaware of the need to answer the big life questions until a crisis arises in their lives. This may lead to choosing a set of disparate and fragmented ideas to help them cope and make sense of their world in tough times. Still others are suspicious of a codified or systematic set of beliefs. They prefer a worldview that is constantly changing and feel uncomfortable with a historical metanarrative.

In post-modern western society, there is a growing conviction that it is unnecessary for a worldview to include a metanarrative or to entail a systematic, codified belief system. It is claimed, disparate and eclectic presuppositions from a variety of faith traditions and worldviews can ‘fit together’—despite apparent contradictions—and answer life’s ‘big questions’. Understandably, this contemporary conceptual framework encompasses the idea that spirituality and religion are separate entities.

Table 1: A sample typical of pre-service teachers’ responses to *Who am I?* (Belcher, 2003, p.29)

Worldview question	Most common response (Teacher-focused)	Less common response (Bible-focused)
Question 1: Who am I?	I am a teacher. I am what I do. I love children. I teach to make a living.	I am a person created in the image of God. I have been created for a purpose and a plan. I am to fulfil God’s plan for my life and for his glory within teaching as a calling upon my life. I am to foster redemptive relationships between God and man. I am living covenantal history.

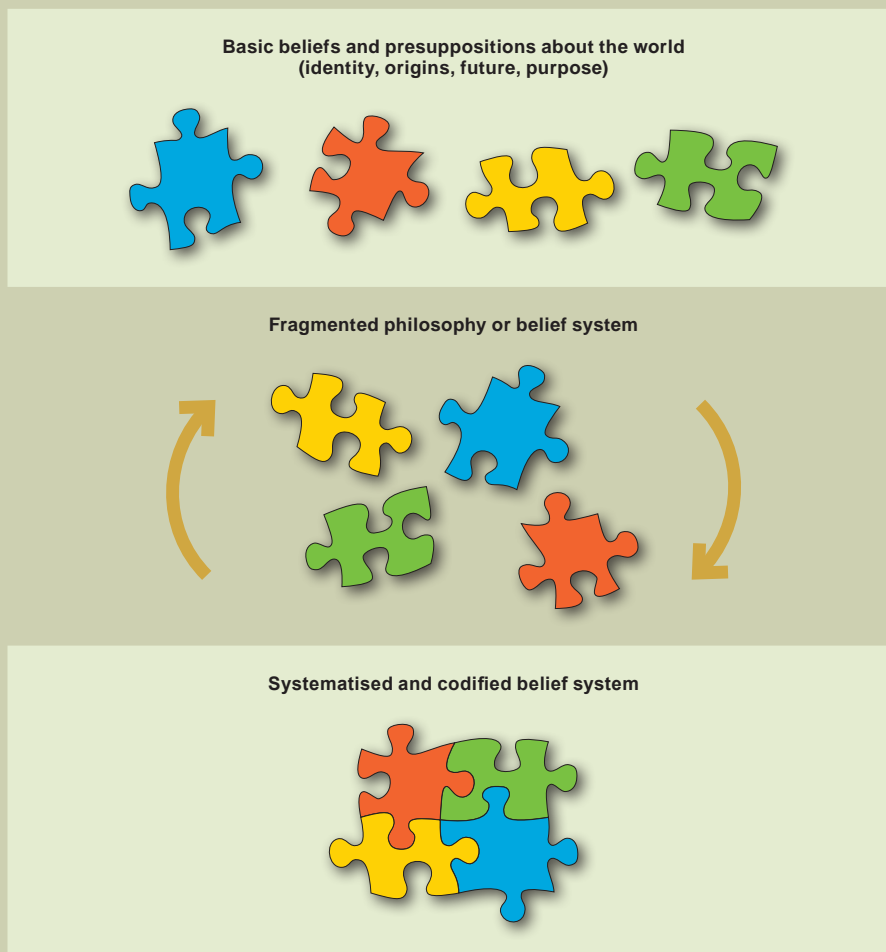
In contrast, theism—and Christianity in particular—is a more systematised, codified worldview with a set of specific, organised beliefs that form a metanarrative. Theism considers spirituality as an important and integral aspect of religion. Interestingly, it may lead to two extremes. When the adherents of a systematised, codified worldview become extreme in their naturalistic interpretations and reject theism, they move towards atheism; a worldview that considers God (or gods) to be only a human construction. On the other hand, when the adherents of a systematised and codified worldview become extreme in their literalist canonical interpretations and eschew rational discussion, they move towards

fundamentalism. This type of worldview has long been associated with a ‘closed-mind’ psychological phenomenon (Rokeach, 1960), where a person refuses to entertain, much less accept, any evidence contrary to his or her worldview.

Having examined and considered various aspects of a worldview framework it is deemed appropriate now to inspect a more detailed analysis of one organised sub-group belief system (among the many that exist) within naturalism, theism and pantheism, respectively. Table 2 has been adapted from Rasi (2000, pp. 10–11) and used with permission. It lists examples of beliefs and premises that ‘sustain’ the worldview of each sub-group—according to 11 parameters—and enables the reader

“This type of worldview has long been associated with a ‘closed-mind’ psychological phenomenon”

Figure 1: Representation of a fragmented philosophy or belief system vis-à-vis a codified and systematic one



to tease out similarities, differences and distinctives. It also provides a useful context for the worldview statements articulated by several of the students, in the section of the article that follows.

Of immediate interest, in scanning the beliefs are the apparent intersections, disjunctions and the lack of any consensus across the systems; other than that there is no *irrefutable* supporting evidence for what are mostly and essentially metaphysical issues. There is, however, a clear division between naturalism and supernaturalism; with biblical Christianity and New Age falling into the latter category. In spite of this, vast gaps exist between the ‘truth claims’ of the two systems. There is also an intersection, to some extent, between Naturalism and New Age in the ‘human predicament’ and ‘solutions’ parameters. On the whole, however, the three worldviews represent discrete systems. Consequently, it seems to defy logic to fit disparate and fragmented ideas from the three worldviews together, into a coherent meaningful worldview.

Worldviews in the classroom

Table 2 may assist teachers to reflect on their own worldviews, as well as act as a framework and reference point to discover the source of some of the values and beliefs of the students whom they teach. In a present-day classroom, teachers can expect to find a diversity of worldviews being formed. The following responses, articulated by three tertiary students, illustrate this point:

“I mainly believe in evolution but do not rule out creation. I am not sure if there is a purpose to life, but I hope so. I do not believe that there is a “God” as such—but I do believe there is something more. I believe that pain and suffering are just a part of life—but I see Karma as a major part of why you do the right thing. I do not believe there is something after death, but I hope there is” (Student 1).

“Where did I come from? I came from a loving Father in Heaven who created me and knows me better than I know myself. Where am I going? When my life here ends I believe I will go to the grave and “sleep” until the second coming, the return of Jesus. He will cover my mistakes with his sacrifice. His grace and mercy will save me. Why am I here? What purpose do I have? I do not know the plans my God has for me, but my life has relevance because I know he made me for a reason. I trust him” (Student 2).

“I believe the origins of humanity come from evolution. I believe that humanity is survival of the fittest in general, but each individual has a purpose within themselves. I do not believe that God exists. I would honestly love to believe in

God and accept him, but with findings of science, I cannot. I believe that pain and suffering come from sin, but it is also part of humanity in the sense that there needs to be a balance of good and bad. As nobody knows what happens at death (I would love for something to happen to me after death), I believe (98%) that nothing happens. I do not believe that history has an actual meaning, but provides us with events that make us build a more positive life” (Student 3).

It should not be too difficult to identify aspects of the three worldviews in Table 2 reflected in the students’ responses, given above.

When considering students’ worldviews, it may be beneficial for educators to recognise some existing similarities and the common ‘deep life questions’ with which each worldview has to ‘wrestle’. A promising common ground for bringing together differing worldviews may be the area of values, where values such as compassion, fairness, excellence, humility, honesty, trust, thankfulness, self-control—among others—may find ready acceptance.

Sometimes, however, differences may need to be addressed. If students feel disconcerted because of the incompatibility of their worldviews, less learning is likely to occur. The educator, by encouraging a non-threatening and safe environment within the classroom, may provide an opportunity for each student to engage in an honest look at his/her personal worldview.

Conclusion

The writer has argued in this article that in the current multicultural and multi-faith educational milieu, teachers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about a range of worldviews.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the definitions and information presented, issues raised, questions posed, strategies suggested and criteria posited should provide practitioners with a basic workable framework for dealing with worldviews.

Also, because educators are ‘culture carriers’ and education does not occur in a vacuum, it is essential that they recognise their unique role, and have an appreciation of their own worldview before they can celebrate and understand someone else’s. As they strive to consistently promote and implement cross-cultural communication, practitioners may be required to go beyond their comfort zone. As noted by Warren and Taylor Warren (1993, p. 25), understanding that every “culture is as inhumane and as benevolent as every other,” will encourage educators to be less likely to sit in judgement regarding the ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ of any worldview. **TEACH**

“A promising common ground for bringing together differing worldviews may be the area of values”

Table 2: An analysis of sub-groups' belief systems within major worldviews: Secular Humanism, biblical Christianity and New Age

Worldview parameter	Naturalism Secular Humanism	Theism Biblical Christianity	Pantheism New Age
1. Ultimate reality	Inanimate matter and energy that have always existed	An infinite, transcendent God, who acts in the universe and is knowable by human beings	The spiritual universe, which is god/mind/one/all
2. Nature of God	There is no such thing, because God is a myth	A personal (triune), creatively active, omniscient, sovereign being, who is the source of morality	An impersonal and amoral god/mind/one/all
3. Origin of the universe and life	The universe is eternal and operates as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. Or, according to the Big Bang Theory, the universe appeared suddenly and inexplicably	Created by God by the power of his word, to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system	Manifestations of the eternal god/mind/one/all
4. Means of knowing truth	Human reason and intuition working through and confirmed by the scientific method	God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and through the Bible, human conscience and reason illuminated by God the Holy Spirit, and confirmed by experience	Trained introspection plus channelled revelations of god/mind/one/all
5. Nature of human beings	Complex "machines"; highly evolved animals	Physical-spiritual beings with personality, created in God's image, capable of free moral decisions, now in a fallen condition	Spiritual beings, a part of god/mind/one/all, temporarily residing in material bodies
6. Purpose of human life	Self-fulfilment, pleasure, service and betterment of the next generation	Establishing a loving relationship with God, realising personal potential, serving fellow humans, enjoying this life and preparing for eternal life	Transition toward progression (or regression) until union with god/mind/one/all is achieved
7. Basis of morality	Majority opinion, contemporary mores, the best traditions, particular circumstances, or individual conscience	Unchanging character of God (just and merciful), revealed in Christ and in the Bible	Inner impulses and inclinations; there is no "right" or "wrong" behaviour
8. Human predicament	Ignorance of reality and true human potential; bad laws; incompetent government; lack of human understanding and cooperation; polluted environment	Sin is a conscious rebellion against God and his principles; an attempt to enthrone humans as autonomous and self-sufficient creatures; as a result, the image of God became defaced and the entire world suffered	Ignorance of reality and of true human potential; lack of comprehension of supernatural communications; inattention to environmental balance
9. Solution to the human predicament	Better education, more support to science, technological progress, just laws, competent government, improved human understanding and cooperation and care of the biosphere	Spiritual rebirth involves faith in divine redemption through Jesus Christ. It leads to a new life of loving obedience to God, adequate self-understanding, proper human relationships and care of earth and its environments	Change in consciousness, which leads to better self-understanding, human relations, and care of the biosphere—self-redemption
10. Death	Final end of existence in its entire dimension	For some Christians it is an unconscious parenthesis. For other Christians it is an entrance into another conscious state	An illusion; entrance into the next stage in cosmic life
11. Human history	Unpredictable and without overarching purpose, guided both by human decisions and by force beyond human control	A meaningful sequence of events, guided by free human decisions, but also supervised by God; moving toward the fulfilment of God's overall plan	An illusion and/or a cyclical process

Adapted from Rasi (2000, pp.10–11), used with permission.

Endnote

* This article, in part, has been adapted for publication in *TEACH* from the book by Barbara J. Fisher, *Developing a faith-based education: A teacher's manual*. Terrigal, NSW: David Barlow Publishing, 2010; with the permission of the author and the publisher.

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