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“Beyond Religious Normativity:
Creating Plural Worldview Spaces”

Abstract

The term “worldview” has entered our lexicon – in the academy, in the media, and now in Religious Education. In an age of plural worldviews – religious, spiritual and secular – it is imperative to be inclusive. Creating plural worldview spaces opens up refreshingly new inclusive opportunities for RE: inclusion of the worldview *self* and the worldview *other*, also as to invite interdisciplinarity. This paper will argue for expanding RE to include a plurality of worldviews, and for initiating worldview discussions across the academy, and even beyond to the public square.

Introduction

The use of the concept *worldview*, and even more so its understanding and application, needs to be expanded, beginning with religious education. It is currently undervalued and underutilized, and even more so misunderstood. We have not yet plumbed its depth, broadened its scope, nor recognized its reach. We have not yet invited students and scholars into a sufficiently robust discussion to uncover the value of worldview education for religious education as it faces challenges from societies that become more plural. It is not clear that we recognize the extent of its implication and implementation for the larger academy, as schools and institutions of higher learning continue to be inundated with multiple perspectives that become contentious when these perspectives are only narrowly perceived. Perhaps most important is the value of worldview education for enriched dialogue and enhanced engagement in a diverse public square, where an increasing failure to understand the other is a failure to engage meaningfully with the other.

Religious education faces the dire threat of becoming irrelevant if not obsolete the more religious institutional influence subsides in an increasingly secular society, the more younger and older alike distance themselves from religion as it is generally perceived, and the greater the challenges mount from the world of the natural and social sciences regarding religion's validity and legitimacy. Religious education has suffered a major blow in the past half century. Perhaps even its vitality has waned. It will, of course, survive, even in a diminished state – religion has had its challenges over the centuries and always survived. But can religious education regain its vigour and again make a substantial contribution to both academy and public square in spite of its numerous challenges? How might that be done? I suggest that it will occur as religious education reimagines itself. Let me try to spell some of this out.

Emerging Challenges

The term “religion” is problematic today, and increasingly so. It is problematic in politics, where with few exceptions politicians guardedly avoid linking their religious beliefs, if they have any, to public policies (Lerner, 2003; Carter, 1994). It is problematic in the media, which by and large tends to avoid mention of its contributions, though not its failures, or truncates religion to such an extent that its more thoughtful and faithful adherents deem unrecognizable (Marshall et al, 2009). It is problematic in the secular academy, where, according to religious and social historian D. G. Hart, “academic inquiry waters religion down to the point where faith makes no actual difference” (Hart, 1999, p. 12), and, according to historian George Marsden, where Christian scholarship is considered outrageous (Marsden, 1997). It is problematic in the general public, where religion has been “denounced as the greatest plague of mankind” (Clark, 1989, p. 182), where according to the late Christopher Hitchens, “religion poisons everything” (Hitchens, 2007), and where, according to former evangelical minister Dan Barker, “God is the most unpleasant character in all fiction” (Barker, 2016). Religion has an image problem.

Yet, in all of this, the large questions of life, once the intellectual domain of the religious traditions of the world, continue to surface, and are debated and discussed at length, even in the academy. There is also strong indication of increased interest in it

among students, if less so among faculty (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2007; Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; Young, 2003). Yet, where interest continues to be shown in matters religious, the academy has tended to consign it to specific Religious Studies or Religious Education departments, now often at the margins of academic inquiry. It becomes a special area of interest only for those so inclined. The result, according to professor of religion Stephen Prothero, is a growing religious illiteracy in society (Prothero, 2007).

The problem here is that neglecting to give religion, where existential questions continue to abound, its due at the academic table limits the discussion of some of life's most important questions and issues. It also leads to the uncritical acceptance of other perspectives – other beliefs and values that hold great sway in the public academy if not the public square. It also results in a failure to see other perspectives as competing viewpoints, and all with similar markings and traits of traditional religions – metanarratives, teachings, symbols, rituals and more. Can a focus on worldviews or “Worldview Education” begin to turn matters around, give greater exposure to numerous perspectives and viewpoints both religious and secular, and level the playing field when it comes to competing worldviews and their reach in the public square?

Worldview

The term “worldview” has entered our lexicon, and is widespread in the English-speaking world. It has been integrated into the vocabulary of other languages. One increasingly hears of it used casually in the media, politics, economics, and more. Within the academy, virtually every academic discipline now uses it – from philosophy to physics, sociology to social work, health care to ecological care, and more. It is also now used increasingly in Religious Education, and in many countries. This is not surprising, for Religious Education recognizes *visions of life* and *ways of life* as its subject matter, notions central to the concept of worldviews.

The term “worldview” can be controversial, however. When translated into certain languages, its use can become problematic, conjuring up past eras and associated evils, especially when linked with leadership, as in the case of Germany. There it has been associated and identified specifically with certain social, historic, and problematic ideologies, such as Nazism, Marxism and Communism, if not hijacked by them. Yet, is use of the term nonetheless desperately needed, especially in regard to Religious Education, but also beyond? In a subject area that increasingly becomes contested, isolated and even closeted from mainstream academia because of its perceived outmoded and exclusive terms, concepts, and even ideas, can Worldview Education, more so than Religious Education, offer refreshingly new inclusive opportunities in a world increasingly shattered by divisive and competing viewpoints?

The concept “worldview” began with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who coined the now well-known German term *weltanschauung* – a life view. The well-know philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) understood it as “ways of living and looking at the universe.” The Danish philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) saw it as “a deep and satisfying view of life that would enable a person to become a total human being.” Historian, philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), often referred to as the “father of worldview theory”, linked it to life's ultimate questions, the stuff of numerous “life stories” or metanarratives. The truth of

metanarratives, Dilthey came to assert, however, could now no longer be affirmed with any absolute certainty: they can only be accepted on faith (Naugle, 2002; Bulhof, 1980). Each of these scholars came to recognize in his own way that diversity of viewpoints was a given reality, characteristic of a humanity for whom homogeneous thought and behaviour had vanished long ago, if it had existed at all save for some uniform and isolated pockets here and there.

And so the worldview discussions began. Since these early beginnings the debates have not only proliferated but also expanded, and so has their reach. In the university Christian theology, once the centerpiece of academic scholarship, gave way to an academic study of religion, highlighting its various features and functions but shifting away from necessarily investigating its truth, or even truth in general (Wellmon, 2018). In terms of religious education alone a whole new approach unfolded in the last half-century or more, where an exclusive focus on one religion gave ground to an inclusive examination of many. Attention shifted from the catechetical teachings of one to the exploration of the meta-narratives, sacred texts, doctrines, teachings, symbols, and rituals of many – Christian, Islamic, Indigenous, Eastern, and now also new Spiritual expressions. Within the last decade or so religious education has expanded even further to include some secular worldviews, such as Marxism, Communism, Scientism, and Humanism. Some also include in their list Consumerism and Capitalism. All of these have now come to be recognized, by those who study them in depth, as powerful *visions of life* and *ways of life* – formidable worldviews. Today they compete in the public square for the hearts and minds of people, though often unrecognized and unbeknownst to many of the unwary. We know these worldviews exist; we can even see their imprints and impacts, subtle or flagrant, good or ill (Valk, Albayrak, & Selçuk, 2017; Goetz & Taliaferro, 2008; Borchardt, 2006; Cox, 2016; Gill, 1999; Smart, 1983).

The academy remains a place where worldviews can and should be studied, debated and discussed, with lessons learned from them that enlighten younger and older alike. The educated mind must be aware of these worldviews, of their subtle influences and their pervasive reach. They impact the university itself, for shifts in the dominance of one worldview for another can easily alter the goal and focus of education (Thiessen, 1993; Baltodano, 2012; Lakes & Carter, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Inherent Challenges

The endeavour to debate and discuss various worldviews becomes problematic, however, when two things occur. One, when worldviews are explored only in terms of a study of one's own personal worldview, in effect, a study of "the self". We see this occurring in the proliferation of courses focused on personal identity or "personal well-being courses", where effort expended on coming to terms with one's own personal identity or well-being becomes a principal objective of learning. This can easily hide an individualism that so often drives them, a common feature of the fragmentation of much of modern society. The German philologist Max Müller (1823-1900) stated that "he who knows one (their own); knows none".

Equally, he/she who explores only the worldviews of others, as academic Religious Studies programs have been prone to do, fails to explore and engage the worldview of the self. Study of the various religious traditions that have greatly influenced and shaped humans since the dawn of time can be intriguing, especially in an

era where secularization has taken a strong foothold. But such an approach can easily lead to treating them as museum pieces, of individual interest but of little or no value to modern society. This easily hides a secular-centric view of life, and a failure to appreciate that various religious worldviews are alive and well in spite of their marginalization by media and academy alike.

As such, study of the self and of the other go hand in hand. Questions asked of the worldviews of others in effect become questions asked of the worldview of the self. Exploring the beliefs and values of others, their sources, how they are expressed, where they stand on certain issues and why becomes crucial as one explores at the same time the beliefs, values and positions of the self. Knowing self necessitates knowing others.

The second problem area is one of education itself, especially higher education. Some of this is a problem of our own making in the academy in general, but no less of those of us in religious education in particular. There is a serious risk of truncating the learning of students when learning becomes siloed. The risk is even greater when certain kinds of learning are marginalized, physically relegated to the margins of a university campus, or even removed from the curriculum altogether. A significant paradigm shift has occurred in the academy and the public square in the last half-century that has siloed, marginalized, truncated and even removed religion from academic and public discussion whereby students can graduate today with the highest degree the academy offers without having rubbed two religious thoughts or ideas together (Menard, 2010; Miller, 2010; Hauerwas, 2007; Burtchaell, 1998; Marsden, 1994). All of this raises four issues that I now want to spell out.

Worldview Education

First, education about faith and beliefs, about metanarratives and sacred texts, about God and gods, about rituals and symbols are all too often relegated to Religious Education, and then still all too often with a focus on traditional religions. This too narrowly confines such issues; it cloisters them into narrow if not optional compartments of life. It is exclusive. It cloisters the richness of religious traditions that have a long history of addressing a wide array of life's questions and issues (Joas, 2008; Connor, 2006; Smith, 2001). It communicates to students that only religion and religious people concern themselves with such matters. The more it is confined to religious studies or religious education the more it becomes isolated from learning as a whole, from mainstream society in general, and from its contributions to dialogue in the public square in particular (Valk, 2017a). Existential or ultimate questions of life - long the domain of various religious traditions - fall off the radar screen for many educators and students, whose interest in religion has narrowed, waned or become hostile as a result (Connor, 2005; Austin & Austin, 2004). It even results in a separation of religion from ethics, spawning an entirely different subject area, with the presumption that ethics can even *be* separated from groundings in religious traditions.

Second, expanding the subject area from Religious Education to Worldview Education opens up many more possibilities (Van der Kooij et al, 2017; McBain, 2003). This necessitates a name change so that those who are not religious are also invited into the discussion, communicating to them that not only do they also have faith, beliefs and values, but also exploring these with others is a valuable undertaking (Valk & Tosun, 2016). Müller's dictum holds alike for those of religious *and* secular worldview

perspectives. This is particularly relevant for younger people. Worldview education signals to students that humans by nature are spiritual creatures that need faith and beliefs to make sense of their world. Faiths and beliefs come in many different forms, styles and patterns, and have done so throughout the ages. *Visions of life* and *ways of life* are of various kinds, and reveal themselves among traditional religions, within them, and even outside of them. Today these various visions and ways of life are portrayed and depicted in film, music, poetry and novels. Education fails students when it ignores such matters, overlooking the fact that worldviews, traditional or their alternatives, come in many different shapes and forms (Gardner et al, 2017; Valk, 2017b; Parks, 2011; Benthall, 2008).

Third, becoming more inclusive by implementing a worldview approach, yet separating organized or structured worldviews and personal worldviews, as some have done, is helpful and necessary, but not sufficient (Van der Kooij et al, 2015). Focusing only on developing one's own personal worldview isolated from larger worldview groupings, organizations or structures may spawn creativity, imagination and independence in terms of the self, but it also fits in nicely with today's post-religious, post-secular and individualistic culture. It can easily result in further privatization of one's faith and beliefs; a fulfilment of an individualized self. Yet, it remains disconnected: isolated from the other, from a sense of community, and from the rich traditions of the past and present – from the “wisdom of the ages”. It tends towards today's *bricolage* and “spiritual but not religious” phenomena (Mercadante, 2014; Ammerman, 2013; Blake, 2010). Such worldview independence may prove creative and liberating in the short-term but elusive in the long run, with dissatisfaction, isolation, even fear of commitment as key characteristics.

Connection to a larger entity, a larger collective, with a longer history of communal care and thoughtful responses to some of life's big questions, gives an individual something to go on, something to think about, something by which to compare one's own percolating thoughts and ideas. It recognizes that within traditional religions there have always been creative forms, innovative expressions, artistic outlets, and engaging theologies. One-size fits all has never held sway for very long periods of time, least of all today, where they are more variations in religious expressions than any other time in Christian history. Have all too many younger and older people today shunned the religious traditions in which they have been raised, without sufficiently exploring their depths (Smith, 2017; Prothero, 2007)?

Fourthly, the subject matter that worldview education encompasses cannot be confined to one narrow area – it is interdisciplinary. It touches all subject areas, even though it might be grounded in one, or have its starting point in one. Worldview education has to do with how our *views of life* and *ways of life* – our beliefs and values – come to be what they are.

Worldview Education has to do with how these views and behaviours are shaped and influenced by the circumstances in which we were raised, by the communities in which we live, by schools that shaped our minds, and by our ethnic and/or national identities. In essence our worldviews are shaped and influenced, though not necessarily determined, before we may even become conscious of them. I have explored these influences in a “Personal/Group Identity” framework, which is the subject matter of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. These scholarly areas have

rendered great insight into revealing how we are all products of our environments, even if those environments do not determine our every thought and action.

Worldview education has to do with the metanarratives and teachings we embrace, which inform our sense of right and wrong, and our responsibilities and obligations to self and others. I have explored these in a “Cultural Dimensions” framework, earlier written about by historians of religion such as Ninian Smart (Smart, 1983). Metanarratives are the stories by which we live, and from which we derive teachings about life, notions of right and wrongs ways of living and being, and the responsibilities and obligations that weigh on individuals. These all differ from age to age, cultural to culture, and tradition to tradition. These are also the domains of disciplines such as history, sociology and cultural anthropology.

Worldview Education has to do with how and where we find meaning and purpose, how we understand ultimate reality, the nature of the human, our sense of God or gods, religious or secular, and whether we see this life as the only life or as the beginning of a larger journey. I have explored these matters in an “Ultimate/Existential Questions” framework. These concerns have long been the domain of disciplines such as theology, religious studies and philosophy (Tillich, 1957; Volf, 2015).

Worldview Education has to do with whether we think matter or spirit is the essence of all things, or a combination of the two. It has to do with what it means to be human, and what we think the future may hold for humans as well as the larger cosmos. It concerns also the difficult epistemological questions; from where we get our knowledge and to what sources do we turn for our knowledge. I have explored these issues in an “Ontological/Epistemological” framework, which is the subject matter of philosophy, science and religion.

Worldview Education has to do with the universal beliefs and values we hold in common but understand and exercise in our own particular situations. We may all agree, for example, that dignity must be bestowed on humans, but how often is that dignity not rendered in ways that seem quite normal and accepting to so but appalling to others. We may also agree that the environment must today be preserved but come to accept environmental standards that others find completely unacceptable. I have explored such differences in a “Universal/Particular Beliefs, Values and Principles framework, a subject matter of disciplines such as ethics, philosophy, literature and even history.

In turn, all of these matters impact these subject areas even beyond the academy. Public policy, for example, has to do with “the world we want”, but this is fraught with worldview questions – what world or whose world do we want to create (Sandel, 2010; Kingwell, 2000). Economics has to do with how we care for our regional, national and international *econos*, that is, our household. This too is fraught with worldview questions – whose household or what kind of household do we wish to create, for whom will we care and whom will we neglect (Raworth, 2017; Belshaw et al, 2001; Goudzwaard & de Lange, 1994)? Physics, in investigating laws of the universe, bumps up against cosmological questions, which in turn are fraught with worldview questions, as new discoveries of the universe challenge currently held philosophical and/or theological views (Nagel, 2012; Polkinghorne & Welker 2000). Environmental Studies recognizes that one’s ecological care and concern for the earth is rooted in one’s starting points, in essence, one’s worldview (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013; Abdul-Matin, 2010; Gottlieb, 2006; Dunlop, 2004).

As one can perhaps see, worldview issues touch many if not all disciplines, and impacts people individually and collectively, whether religious, spiritual or secular. A case can be made for why this approach can take some questions out of the religious education cloister and into the larger academy. At minimum it ought to entail an expansion of religious education to worldview education, so that more than traditional religions become its subject matter. Even more so, however, these questions need to enter the academic public square, and with greater intensity for they are interdisciplinary and connections need to be made between various components. Even further, one hopes that these larger questions come to play also in the larger public square, where religious, spiritual and secular people can recognize in numerous ways how *visions of life* also impact *ways of life* (Valk, 2009). Neglecting to give space in the public square to various worldviews allows the dominance of particular worldviews. The public square should be a place where worldviews are engaged critically, but knowledge and awareness of these worldviews are needed, in order that a secular public square is not mistaken for a neutral public square. Perhaps Religious Education/Worldview Education can lead the initiative, pursuing even further a challenge posed by Habermas, to use language in the public square that is understandable by all (Habermas, 2006).

Conclusion

Let me draw all of this to a close by summarizing my argument. First, while valuable in itself, religious education has its limitations. It restricts itself by its very title, and its focus primarily on religious worldviews. No amount of openness to secular perspectives under the larger banner of religious education will resolve this dilemma. In a society with plural worldviews, schools should focus on religious, spiritual and secular worldviews, and within a subject area properly designated.

Second, while valuable in itself, exploring personal worldviews also has its limitations. It restricts itself by its very nature, if its focus is primarily on the personal. With apologies to Max Müller, “he who explores only their own; explores none.” We are all assisted in comparing/contrasting our beliefs and ideas to those of others, including the traditions out of which we come. Exploring the worldviews of others ought not be seen as a threat to our own, but as a way of expanding and deepening it. In a society of plural worldviews, knowing self cannot come without knowing others.

Thirdly, while the study of worldviews in a course so designated is valuable in itself, it too has its limitations. It runs the risk of remaining cloistered in a specific course, department, or curriculum area. Studying worldviews, as *visions of life* and *ways of life*, must be interdisciplinary. The study of worldviews cannot be confined to one or two areas – they are much too large, much too broad, and much too complex. The study of worldviews has implications across disciplines, across the curriculum, and in the public square.

Fourth, and lastly, an argument for worldview education is an argument for greater inclusion, broader focus, deeper exploration, and communal engagement.

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