

Enhancing Religious Education Through Worldview Exploration

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Abstract

Exploring one's worldview requires a journey into one's heart, soul and mind (Knowing Self). But Knowing Self requires Knowing Others, imperative in a global world. To what extent do schools prepare students for participation in that global world, especially when it comes to awareness of its worldview diversity, and no less its religious diversity? This paper presents the findings of two research projects highlighting knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards various worldviews. The findings of the first is rather discouraging, a result of little to no attention given to teaching about religion in the schools. The second is much more encouraging, a result of worldview education that explores both religious and secular worldviews – their impacts on individuals and society. It then gives a brief description of a worldview framework that deepens and broadens awareness and understanding of self and others, encourages questioning and openness, and develops critical thinking.

Keywords: worldviews, religion, teaching about religion, critical thinking, worldview framework.

Introduction

Exploring one's beliefs and values (one's worldview) requires a journey into one's "inner territory" – into one's heart, soul and mind (*Knowing Self*). But "he who knows one; knows none" (Müller) – *Knowing Self* requires *Knowing Others*, imperative in an increasingly global world.

Canada has increasingly become home to people from various cultures, regions and religions. Canadians also increasingly travel where they encounter people from various cultures, regions and religions. As such, knowledge of the other becomes essential. But so does critical thinking about them. Knowledge and discernment go hand in hand.

Schools purport to be the most appropriate institutions to enhance these skill sets. They have become prominently positioned in our societies and their certificates and degrees are highly sought. But are schools delivering?

In an increasingly secular world, knowledge of the other, especially the religious other, is waning. According to Nord, students are able to graduate, often with the highest academic degrees, without having rubbed two religious thoughts together (Nord, 1995). For all too many, religion is an afterthought, with little relevance to life in the modern world. Religious illiteracy is at an all time high (Prothero, 2009).

Teaching about religion has been removed from the school curriculum in some provinces in Canada, transmuted into ethics course in others, side-lined in many, and what of the rest? This impacts education as a whole. Promoting awareness of the *global* other can hardly afford neglecting awareness of the *religious* other. Yet, it appears that this might indeed be occurring. What steps might be put in place to reverse it?

All of these questions and concerns surfaced in regard to two different research projects carried out in 2015 at the University of New Brunswick (Canada). The first, a quantitative pilot project, probed the level of knowledge and awareness of students who had not taken religious studies courses. The results were discouraging. The second, a qualitative PhD research project, probed the level of awareness and critical thinking of students whose program intentionally mandated worldview studies courses. The results offered rays of hope.

This paper seeks to accomplish three things. One, it will outline the theoretical framework that underlies the research projects. Two, it will highlight the results of the two research projects, revealing the significant differences between the findings of the two. Three, it will suggest a model that enhances knowledge and awareness of both the global and the religious other through the exploration of worldviews – religious *and* secular.

Theoretical Framework

The two research projects were premised on the assumed significance of teaching about worldviews – religious and secular – in the public school system. One of the aims of education is to enable students to create meaningful relationships with self, others, nature and social structures (Şişman, 2010, pp. 26–27). To achieve such an aim education should engage all aspects of the human, including the religious or spiritual dimensions. Some strongly argue that teaching about religious worldviews in particular enhances human connections to self, others, the environment and a greater or higher transcendent being (Selçuk, 2008; Bilgrin, 1981; White, 2004).

Teaching about religion, as well as learning from them, can act as an integrative element in multicultural societies. It assists people in achieving greater knowledge and awareness of the religious other and developing greater understanding and tolerance of them (Altaş, 2005). This is especially significant in a multicultural society where social engagement among different worldviews (religious and secular) and cultural groups is highly important and inevitable. Worldviews are an important aspect of culture and countries that are multicultural, such as Canada for example, will have in its midst people of various religious and secular worldviews. Worldview teaching enhances global citizenship (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2015; Iliško, 2010).

It can also significantly enhance emotional, psychological and character development. Studies indicate that teaching about religious and secular worldviews increases knowledge and awareness of different religions, enriches understanding of others, and assists integrating into multicultural societies (Miller & McKenna, 2011). Not teaching

about religious worldviews neglects or ignores the worldview diversity of society (Chidester, 2003). Not least is to mention that learning about and from various worldviews in a healthy school environment can increase student knowledge and awareness of local, nation and global issues (Hargreaves, 1999). Could it be that a failure to teach about and learn from various worldviews, religious or secular, increases religious illiteracy locally and globally (Conroy, 2016)?

The research undertaken in this project sought to determine the knowledge level of students about worldviews, religion and spirituality, and about their attitudes towards religious education and religious people. Highlighting the relationship between knowledge and attitudes, specifically towards religion and religious people, is of particular interest for it may reveal a disquieting reciprocal relationship. To overcome such a relationship different strategies, techniques, and contemporary approaches can be taken to teaching about and learning from religious worldviews. Some are more suitable for multicultural and interreligious class settings and environments. This paper will suggest a particular worldview approach as one alternative.

The second research project investigates the effects of that approach. The main purpose of worldview education is to assist students to develop a broader and deeper understanding of self and others. In doing so it engages students in ontological, epistemological and existential questions about life, beliefs and values (Van der Kooij et al., 2016; Van der Kooij et al., 2013), using a Socratic approach, critical thinking and site visits as teaching tools. These experiences assist students to broaden and deepen their understanding about life, self, others, and environment (Valk, 2009b).

In general, the two research projects attempted to seek answers to the following questions. One, what is the level of knowledge about and attitudes towards religions or religious people of students who have little or no education about religious worldviews? Two, what are the primary sources of knowledge about religions or religious cultures for students who have had little or no education about religious worldviews in the public school system? Three, what does worldview education offer to students about their worldview and the worldviews of others? Four, what are the effects of religious and secular worldview education in regard of knowing self and others, and learning about and from different religious, spiritual and secular worldviews?

Research Project #1

The first (Research Project #1) was a pilot study and a quantitative survey of students at various stages of their undergraduate studies. The main objective was to determine the level of knowledge, awareness and attitudes of students towards religious and secular worldviews and this was done by means of a questionnaire. A total of 151 students from a number of different faculties at the University of New Brunswick responded to the questionnaire during the Winter and Summer terms of 2015, from March to June.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part One focused on basic participant demographic information – gender, area of study, year of study, and province and country of origin (Table 1). Part Two sought information regarding religious activities and religious education. Part Three probed knowledge about different religions and secular worldviews: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Humanism. Part Four investigated participants' thoughts and attitudes towards religions, religious activities and religious education. At the end of the questionnaire participants were asked to articulate their

thoughts and feelings regarding religion, spirituality and religious education. A statistical SPSS package was used to analyze the acquired data. Frequencies were used to determine participant tendencies, knowledge and attitudes about religions and religious education.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Information

Gender		Year of Study			
F	M	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
114	37	91	14	19	26

Findings: Research Project #1

Students have limited opportunity to study religion, other than as a philosophical curiosity, an historical entity or a sociological oddity. All too often it informs their education only peripherally. This is also the case for all too many students before they enter university. The study of religion as a subject area does not exist in the English speaking (Anglophone) public schools of the Province of New Brunswick. No Religious Studies Department exists at the University of New Brunswick (Valk, 2009a).

This was discovered in the Research Project #1, of which 91% of respondents were from the Province of New Brunswick, 60% were in their first year of study, 17% in their final year of study, 86% where from faculties defined by the humanities, and the majority were female (75%). Here are some findings that surfaced from the questionnaire.

- 82% took no courses about religion in high school.
- 70% took no courses while at UNB.
- 80% were involved in no activities that would increase their knowledge, awareness or understanding of religion.
- 74% do not attend church, mosque or synagogue at present; yet 87% did when they were younger.

The results of the above led to some of the following responses to questions posed:

- 61% named the Qur'an as the sacred book of Islam, but only 21% could name Ramadan as Islam's month of fasting.
- 91% felt Islam discouraged violence yet 68% felt the Qur'an mandated women to cover their heads when in public (wear the hijab).
- 80% did not know on what day the Jewish Sabbath began.
- 67% identified Moses as leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt but only 14% could identify Job as the Biblical figure who remained faithful to God despite great suffering.
- 25% (wrongly) identified the Great Commandment ("Do unto others ...") as one of the Ten Commandments.
- 64% identified Jewish people as chosen people of God and 76% knew they worshipped in a synagogue.
- 45% believed the Jews crucified Jesus and 22% believed he secretly married Mary Magdalene.
- 70% did not know Christianity is the world's largest religion.
- 55% felt Humanism has features quite similar to other religions yet 25% felt that it has no distinct beliefs.
- 48% identified the religion of the Dalai Lama as Buddhism.

- 18% identified Isaiah as the book from which Martin Luther King Jr. got inspiration for his famous speech “I have a dream”; 66% thought it came from *Long Walk to Freedom*, a book written by Mandela 26 years after King’s death.
- 50% identified Abraham as the Biblical figure most commonly associated with the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- 41% said they get most of their information about religion from the media, 33% from sacred scriptures and 34% from authority figures.
- 61% believe the Bible to be less important today than in the past.
- 12% learn about religion and spirituality from schools.
- 30% feel religious people reject the truths of science; 40% feel religion and science always conflict.
- 49% believe most things in the Bible are not true.
- 58% feel religion has been the cause of most war and conflict.
- 20% feel society would be better without religion; 40% believe religious people are often fanatical about their beliefs.
- 36% believe public discussions should not include religious beliefs and values.
- 36% believe schools need not teach about religion, yet 37% think schools should engage in spiritual rituals & meditations.
- 25% consider themselves to be religious persons while 65% consider themselves spiritual persons.
- 75% of students said they have no interest in religion; 43% said they have interest in spirituality.

So what are we to make of these findings? Though the study was a pilot project, perhaps a number of conclusions can be drawn at this preliminary stage. First, these findings appear to corroborate what Nord and Prothero earlier discovered: a general lack of religious interest, involvement and literacy abounds among students. In the Province of New Brunswick this seems also to parallel a general lack of concern or interest in religious matters on the part of educators and the educational system: what schools do not value or teach is quickly disseminated to students as not being important.

Two, most universities in the Western world were established by the churches, which also operated many primary and secondary schools. Beginning in the middle of the 19th Century, universities and schools started to become secular, and with disinterest in religious matters following suit. Studies reveal the impact of secular education on religious interest (Marsden & Longfield, 1992; Marsden, 1994; Valk, 1995; 2007). This appears to be born out in this research project.

Three, on the other hand, however, others note that students are indeed interested in religious/spiritual issues. But they also note that all too many faculty are deathly afraid to broach any of these issues (Astin & Astin, 2004). Some lament the university’s reluctance to address the bigger questions of life, long the domain of religious scholars and institutions, and thereby fail to nurture the questions students actually do have (Connor, 2005, 2006; Parks, 2011). This too surfaces from the research project.

It appears that we have a rather large disconnect. If schools and universities do not value teaching about, and learning from, religion or spirituality, students are inclined to exhibit little interest in it. If their main source of information about religious matters is the media, knowledge of it is disconcerting and attitude toward it appears low. Yet, there is an underlying yearning for the spiritual if not religious questions. Perhaps the real

issue is not that students are disinterested but whether or not they are taught about and learn from this subject area. This appears to be borne out by Research Project #2.

Research Project #2

A second study was conducted in the early months of 2015 at approximately the same time as the initial study. It involved a qualitative survey investigating the effectiveness of worldview education at Renaissance College, a leadership studies faculty at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. Rather than a questionnaire, individual interviews were conducted. Students who were interviewed had all attended Renaissance College, and had all taken a Worldviews Studies course in their first year of study as part of that program. Forty-two students and alumni of Renaissance College participated in the survey (Table 2). A semi-structured interview was used as the tool for collecting data for this research project (Barribal & While, 1994). Students and alumni were asked about the impact of worldview education on their thoughts and attitudes. Students were asked eight questions, including what changed for them after taking a Worldviews Studies course, what did they come to understand about themselves and their own worldview, what did they come to understand about others and their worldviews, and what was the most important benefit from taking worldview education. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. Content analyses and NVIVO were used in the analyzing process. The researchers created main themes according to the data, without any judgement (Schutt, 2012).

Table 2
Participants' Demographic Information

Gender		Year of Study			
F	M	1st	2nd	3rd	Alumni
27	15	12	9	11	10

Findings: Research Project #2

The overall finding of Research Project #2 is that worldview education generates in students positive thoughts and attitudes towards others, and no less religious and spiritual matters. Worldview education enhances greater knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and values of others. Participants agreed that worldview education gives them a better understanding about the nature of reality and beliefs. It assists them in eliminating or reducing their prejudices towards others and to attempt at mutual understanding. It also assists them in seeing the importance of community and the benefit of living in a culture of mutual respect.

The Worldview Studies course (“Worldviews, Religions and Cultures”) that was at the heart of this research project was unique in a number of ways. One, it was a course on worldviews, not just religion: it studied both religious *and* secular worldviews. Second, religious and secular students alike were included; it was not just for the religiously inclined or interested. Three, presentations and discussions in the course, but also elsewhere in the program, examined the impact or involvement of worldviews in a host of academic areas, including public policy. Students saw worldviews as dynamic, with each

debated vigorously in the public square. Four, a final assignment in the course required students to write about their own worldview, about their own beliefs and values, whether religious or secular. Five, a specific outcome of the course was Knowing Self and Others, one outcome among five others that are central to the program. What follows are some representative statements that emerged from the interviews, categorized under a number of broader headings:

Questioning

- Began to question and analyse more of their own ideas after exposure to numerous other worldviews and students
- Felt less naïve

“And it really made me question everything. And maybe I still believe in that but you always have to be critical; you have to analyze it. So I think it makes me question more. I am not as naïve now.” (Participant 15)

“It really helped me. I never questioned my worldview and I think being in this class allowed me to question my worldview to critically analyze it.” (Participant 24)

Being Open

- Became more open to other worldviews and other ways of life; it opened their minds;
- Realized their worldview was not the only one, nor necessarily the best; that everyone looks at the world in slightly different ways.

“To be open minded and accepting of other worldviews I think will lead to a more peaceful world. I mean just believing your own worldview doesn’t make you right and someone else wrong.” (Participant 28)

“I think it opens you up to different ways of life and gives you an opportunity to experience what other people experience. And I think it broadens your mind.” (Participant 21)

Awareness

- Sensed that worldview issues surface in many discussions.
- Gained awareness of other worldviews and how helpful that is in working with others.

“Worldviews come out at some point during a daily life discussion and I think it is really important to learn to be understanding. And just to be aware of other peoples’ worldview and that they may be different then yours and that is ok.” (Participant 24)

“Taking worldview education helps to open up your eyes and look beyond your own religion and look beyond the kind of the religion you’ve been brought up with and be able to look at others. And come to understand that you don’t necessarily agree with everyone. Having that awareness I think helps working with other people. Just being respectful of other people’s religion.” (Participant 12)

Understanding

- Gained a greater understanding of others & where they are coming from.
- Developed an appreciation of being able to understand others in order to expand own knowledge.

“I developed I growing appreciation for being able to understand others. Not for the sake of trying to manipulate or change others but really for the sake of just expanding my own knowledge. I think that in coming to understand others your own worldview opens up.” (Participant 32)

“It (worldview education) increased my understanding of other worldviews: where they are coming from and how they might be influenced.” (Participant 4)

Critical Thinking

- Developed critical thinking skills; became more critical about their own worldview, and developed more openness to the worldviews of others
- Gained a solid framework for their values.

“I would say that I think much more critically about my own worldview, the way I see the world and why. I am much more open to different worldviews or different people who have different opinions because I recognize where they come from.” (Participant 14)

“... critically analyzing your beliefs. I think it did provide me with a more solid framework for my own values.” (Participant 26)

Knowing Oneself

- Gained a greater sense of awareness of their own worldviews.
- Recognized that their views were dynamic rather than static.

“It was a really great opportunity to do a lot of personal reflection. I might never have thought about my own worldview ... so it really provided me a great opportunity to do some self-reflection and become a lot more mindful of the concept.” (Participant 20)

“I think it did provide a more solid framework for my own values. And to realize that it is more than just even seeing the world one way for sure.” (Participant 24)

“I realize I really don’t know what it is but it is a good start to have all these different ideas. I definitely don’t know exactly what my worldview is yet but at least now I have proper education. I started to think about it.” (Participant 15)

Knowing Others

- Gained a much broader view of others,
- Let go of stereotypes; recognized the benefit of seeing different perspectives.

“I think worldview class allows us to have a better understanding of other worldviews and to interact with people from other perspectives who have different worldviews and be more understanding of them.” (Participant 14)

“Not just knowing about different worldviews but understanding them, appreciating them and seeing their place in the world. So not just know that they exist but really having an understanding of where they fit into the world and why there are different worldviews.” (Participant 33)

“I am more aware of and opened to other worldviews and more accepting of them. I also developed a new understanding for other peoples’ worldviews. And why this person thinks that way.” (Participant 24)

General Findings: Research Project #1 and #2

So what can one make of these findings from the two research projects? The first is to note that the two surveys were clearly different. One was more focused on student knowledge and awareness; the other more on student attitudes and awareness. One revealed that students had taken few religious studies courses; the other was premised on students having taken a Worldview Studies course. One was a questionnaire; the other involved interviews. As such, the surveys yielded different results.

Yet, the differences were also instructive. One, the questionnaire revealed a correlation between lack of exposure to and lack of awareness of various religions. The more educational institutions decrease study about religion the greater the decrease in student interest in them. Here, educational institutions impede global awareness.

Two, the opposite is also true. The more educational institutions expose students to the religiously and secularly diverse world in which they live, the more they become aware of it, the more they question their own ethnocentricity, even anthropocentricity, the more they come to understand the other, and the more they develop their critical thinking skills. Here, educational institutions enhance global awareness.

Three, teaching about religion enhances religious awareness, but this alleviates only part of the problem. Not all people are religious nor are they all interested in religion. However, exposing students to worldviews, both religious *and* secular, opens up new space. It is more inclusive, and communicates to students that everyone has a worldview; that everyone has beliefs and values of some kind (Sunshine, 2009). This levels the playing field, resists the dominance of a religious or secular worldview, and encourages pluralism – openness to a variety of worldviews.

Four, education is not simply the dissemination of information; there is also an experiential dimension. Students who have an opportunity to meet, become exposed to, and engage with the other, especially the religious other, become much more understanding and open to the other – bridges are built and walls torn down.

Worldview Framework Model

The Worldview Studies course on which Research Project #2 was premised uses a particular framework in its approach to studying various worldviews, religious and secular. It is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates worldviews to uncover breadth and depth. It understands worldviews as *visions of life* as well as *ways of life*, and hence impacts all areas of life.

This framework approach focuses on a number of areas. One, it looks at personal surroundings and circumstances that shape or influence a person’s beliefs and values.

Second, it focuses on metanarratives, teachings, ethics, rituals and more that shape individuals as well as cultures and traditions. Three, it raises ultimate/existential questions – meaning/purpose of life, nature of the human, responsibilities/obligations, distinguishing between right and wrong, a sense of a higher being, and life after this life – and looks at how each worldview might respond to them. Four, it asks ontological questions, so that there is recognition that how we define the human impacts how we treat human life. It asks epistemological questions, so there is recognition we all base our certainty on or in something that requires a leap of faith of some kind, since absolute certainty is beyond the human scope. Lastly, it asks about how our universal beliefs and values become particularized in our own contexts, acknowledging that while we may all affirm lofty principles, our particular circumstances often shape how those principles play out.

Table 1
Students' Frameworks

Framework #1	Personal	Gender, Family Relationships, Orientation	
		Abilities/disabilities, interests, characteristics, desires	
	<i>Personal / Group Identity</i>	Social	Learning: education: levels, schools
Community – rural/ urban; religious/spiritual/secular identity			
Cultural		Socio-economic status: lower, middle, higher	
Framework #2	Metanarratives: Texts, Scriptures, Narratives, Stories		
	Teachings, doctrines		
	<i>Cultural Dimensions</i>	Ethical principles	
		Rituals; symbols	
		Community; social gatherings of the devotees	
		<i>Ekstasis</i> : experiences which strengthen this worldview	
Framework #3	Meaning/purpose of cosmic life, the universe		
	Nature, purpose of human life		
	<i>Ultimate or Existential Questions</i>	Responsibilities/obligations	
		Values, discerning good/bad, right /wrong	
		Greater force, power, being in the universe?	
Eschatology; Life after this life?			
Framework #4	Nature of being, reality	Physical: Ultimate nature of reality	
		Metaphysical: spiritual nature	
	<i>Ontological / Epistemological</i>	Cosmology: Origin/future of the universe	
		Nature of our knowing: certainty of knowledge	Subjective knowledge: intuition, revelation, neural
		Objective knowledge: reason, science, authority	
		Source, basis of knowledge	
Framework #5	Pursuit of justice: what is deemed to be just?		
	Dignity of all people: how is it expressed in everyday life?		
	<i>Universal / Particular Beliefs, Values and Principles</i>	Sacredness of life: is all of (human) life sacred?	
		Equality/diversity: is everyone given equal status?	
		Openness/tolerance: what is tolerated; what is not tolerated?	
	Environmental concern		

The framework assumes no right or wrong answers, but challenges students to learn how other worldviews respond to the questions it poses. It then challenges students to think about, even investigate – broaden and deepen – their own responses. In this manner, the questions they ask of others often become their own. Further, though worldviews are personal, they are far from private: they play out in the public square. In a global world *knowing self-necessitates knowing others*.

Conclusion

As the larger global world comes ever closer to our own doorsteps, knowledge and awareness of the other becomes paramount. The world is becoming anything but secular (Berger, 1999; Benthall, 2008). Lack of knowledge and awareness, even disinterest, in religious and spiritual traditions, as well as secular perspectives, does not serve us well. Educational institutions must strive to eliminate ignorance of the religious and spiritual traditions that inhabit the globe.

It behoves schools and universities to engage the learner. Knowledge and awareness of various worldviews – religious and secular – must also develop critical thinking skills, the kind that opens up space for the self and the other, that leads to new insights as well as new questions.

It behoves educational institutions to regard worldviews, especially religious worldviews, as dynamic, and not static. Religious worldviews are not museum pieces that have little bearing in the modern world. Nor are those who embrace them to be considered delusional or that such worldviews poison everything; that is only to speak in ignorance (Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). It does not mean that the shadow side of religious worldviews should be glossed over, nor that of secular worldviews (Froese, 2008). More beneficial, if not more balanced, however, would be to acknowledge that perhaps the global world might benefit from hearing more from religious worldview voices (Volf, 2015), just as it might from a greater understanding of secular worldviews.

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