

the worldview... at ground level

Clare Bird helps us to ask 'why'?

Relativism, pluralism, scepticism, exclusivism ... all of these are interesting academic concepts, but surely have no real use when talking to your average student colleague? I beg to differ. How many times have you heard the phrase, 'your faith is so lovely, but it just isn't for me' or 'you may think that's not right, but it's fine in my morality'. When discussing end of life ethics, many will say 'surely nothingness (referring to death) is better than suffering?'

All of these statements are based on truth claims about life, the universe and everything. Even the classic relativist's statement 'there is no absolute truth' is a truth claim. If there is really no absolute truth, then surely the statement can be only relatively true - in which case it is self-refuting! Such truth claims inform our view about the world and influence our decisions and opinions. Even though everyone holds a set of beliefs about the world, not all would recognise it as a worldview. Evaluating a

worldview is not just the role of a philosophy professor; it can be a helpful tool in everyday discussions with friends. Such evaluation may help us to challenge friends about their beliefs.

A few months ago, I attended CMF's *Answering Other Faiths* course. As part of the day, we discussed the bases behind different religions and worldviews with the aim of becoming better prepared to share the gospel with proponents of these views. Since attending the course, I've been surprised how often I've heard people making decisions or expressing opinions which imply a great deal about their worldview.

Let me give you an example. This week I was talking to my ward partner about an ethics project; he'd concluded his essay by saying 'there is no difference between humans and animals, because when we include the young or the demented, we cannot draw a line between their specific skills

and capabilities'. Does he have a worldview? His comment implies that he views mankind as the most recent step in the evolutionary process, here on this earth by chance and with no ordained value other than that which we give ourselves. Yet there's an inconsistency here. He continued to tell me that

he still considers it favourable to use animals, over humans, for experimentation. Why?

The simple challenging question 'why?', gently and genuinely presented, can work as a great conversation starter. It is neither rude nor offensive to question the beliefs that influence the thoughts of our friends and colleagues. Here, the art of listening is valuable; it is often very interesting to see the way



others consider the world, and their response can also inform future conversations. Sometimes 'why' will be a challenge in itself, but at other times it may be helpful to highlight the inconsistency in their worldview. This should be done gently and with respect, as Peter reminds us.¹

how can we diagnose a worldview?

To determine someone's worldview, there are a few helpful questions we could ask such as 'What are human beings?' or 'What is God?' or 'How do we decide on right and wrong?' or 'What is the point of life?' The answer to each of these questions guides the thinker towards the foundations of their own

Some helpful resources:

Bethinking.org - a website full of articles tackling a huge range of apologetics issues. It includes some really helpful articles explaining the 'isms' of different worldviews and the consequences of these in today's society.

Questioning Evangelism by Randy Newman² - this book has some practical suggestions and transcripts giving examples of how to use simple questions in evangelism.

Francis Schaeffer is a Christian thinker who wrote '*The God Who is There*';³ he discusses the cultural shift towards relativism and how to confront it.

beliefs, and helps us to understand them.

why diagnose a worldview?

The student mission field has changed greatly over the last hundred years. When Christian Unions were established, most students were familiar with the church and had some basic grasp of the gospel. The aim of evangelistic events was to provide a forum for students to respond to the great news and to choose to follow Christ. Today, church attendance has dropped and increasing numbers of students arrive at university with little or no Bible knowledge or understanding of Christianity. There are increasing numbers of

international and home students from diverse backgrounds. Discussing worldviews helps us to identify a friend's starting point, rather than making assumptions about what they already know.

The last 50 years have also seen a cultural shift towards the need for 'tolerance' of everyone's view, and a resulting intolerance of any suggestion that one view is right and another wrong. For example, a Christian Union may be considered 'intolerant' for wishing to define its beliefs with a doctrinal basis and therefore restrict leadership. It seems rather hypocritical that this need for 'tolerance' has been strictly imposed upon us by

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regulations that do not tolerate dissent, and which we must conform to. Allowing everyone equal 'rightness' breeds pluralism (the idea that all paths reach the same destination). This shift in thought creates a great stumbling block for Christian mission today. Truth is foundational to the gospel. The good news would be yesterday's news if Jesus was just one of the many ways to reach God; it would barely be news at all if God only existed for me. There is very little value in explaining 'what Jesus means to me' to a friend who sees no link between what is right for me and what is right for her. The result of this shift is that we must be aware of what a friend understands by the words we use. We can do this by considering their worldview.

Whilst writing this article, I find myself once again in a tangle of 'isms', searching for a formulaic solution. It needn't be this way. All one needs is to understand the societal shift towards so-called 'tolerance' of all beliefs and to consider the impact that a worldview has on the way a

person directs their life. Then take a step back into ordinary, everyday life. Especially in medicine, it doesn't take long for me to stumble into another conversation which is influenced by someone's view of the value of life or the source of morality. Some well placed 'whys?' and a timely 'could you explain that to me?' might be all you need to gently expose the flaws in a misformed worldview and open the door for gospel conversations. What a great opportunity to explain the way you see the world and how this influences the way you see the situation!

Often it can be much easier to pray for opportunities to speak to friends than it is to actually take them. So here's a challenge... over the next week listen carefully to your friends or colleagues as you talk. See if you can diagnose their worldview from the decisions they make or the opinions they give. And when you do, ask them 'why?'

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CMFs **Answering Other Faiths** course goes into greater detail about worldviews. As well as learning how to diagnose a worldview, participants learn about some of the different worldviews commonly encountered today. The course looks at ways of identifying the truth contained within a given worldview, challenging the falsehood, and inviting the holder of that view to consider the claims of Jesus. The course is usually run as a Saturday day conference, although other models are possible. Details of upcoming events can be found at www.cmf.org.uk/students/events.asp. If no course is listed in your area, why not ask your CMF reps (listed on the inside back cover of *Nucleus*) about organising one?

REFERENCES

1. 1 Peter 3:15
2. Newman, R. *Questioning Evangelism: engaging people's hearts the way Jesus did*. Kregel, 2004
3. Schaeffer, FA. *The God Who Is There*. IVP, 1968