

Foundations

- Fears and questions, Culture and worldviews

SETTING THE SCENE

Preparation

This session is to prepare us for a weekend exploring world faiths, which may prove to be demanding in some areas for some people:

- We start with the recognition that encountering people of different worldviews is challenging.
- We look to create a supportive environment to meet the significant challenges which diversity presents

Building trust

When working with a topic that can stir both significant emotional and intellectual responses it is important to create a climate of trust. This begins to come as we learn about one another in the group; where we are each coming from and what our questions might be.

Building honesty

The unknown has a powerful ability to breed fears. These may come from a variety of sources:

- **Obstacles** – previous encounters that may not have been good; these may be personal experiences, attitudes within your local church, or ideas via the media,
- **Questions** – that come out of ignorance or misinformation

We need to connect up so that we feel we can get to know each other in our fears, obstacles and questions and become more comfortable in sharing your stories whether they are positive or negative. Personally, and then in small groups, ask and reflect of the following questions:

- What do you know for sure about relating to those who hold other worldviews?
- What's at the heart of the matter for you?
- Are you aware of uncertainties or mixed feelings in exploring different worldviews?

What fears are raised?

Individually write down three things that bring up fearful emotions in relation to meeting a person/group who have a different worldview. Place these cards where everyone in the group can view them.



What excitement is stirred?

Individually write down three things that bring up fearful emotions in relations to meeting a person/group who have a different worldview. Place these cards where everyone in the group can view them.

Shared reflection

Review lists of both the 'fears' and 'excitements':

- What do you notice?
- Are many of the fears/excitements the same?
- Do you want to clarify any of the responses?

MIND AND FAITH

Inner worlds

In a world teeming with billions of people, expressing among them multitudes of different religions, beliefs and philosophies, it is important to ask, "Where does faith begin?"

For all the great spiritual leaders and teachers, the sacred writings and scriptures, the profound visions and religious experiences, faith always begins with the individual, very quietly, almost subtly and unknowingly, at birth; a spiritual journey that will last a lifetime.

When a baby is born it is the universe! It is the centre of all that exists. It knows little beyond itself. Other beings and presences there may be, but they are only there to serve it. All that begins to change very soon! Very quickly the child will learn that it is not the universe, but rather a tiny fragment within it! Coming to terms with this traumatic realisation is called 'growing up' and has faith and belief running through its core. So faith does not begin with 'religion' but rather with 'person' – thinking, questioning, discovering and behaving.

Deep within each one of us there is a profound inner sense and sensation that we exist. We then look out from within ourselves to an existence beyond ourselves, which we experience through our senses and influences our actions. This fragile personal core of understanding is found at the epicentre of every human being. It is from this essential base we begin to ask searching questions, like:

- "What is reality?" Cosmos
- "What is human?" Selfhood
- "What is truth?" Knowing
- "What is good?" Value



- “What is society?” Community
- “What is history? Time
- “What is death?” Destiny

These are ‘existential’ questions, they spring from human experience, and are common and relevant to every living person. We cannot function as a mature human being without coming to some answer to these questions. They are rarely presented to us in a formal way; most people come to at least an initial answer to them by some form of osmosis. Our responses to such questions create the framework within which we interpret our existence and find meaning for our lives. Grappling with these questions in some form or other has been the experience of every person who has ever lived.

Worldviews

Each one of us tries to make sense of both the universe and ourselves; behavioural scientists as formulating a ‘worldview’ have described this profoundly personal process. The whole idea of a worldview has something subtle about it. It is more fundamental than a philosophy or theology. It is not an objective reality; it is instead a way of thinking that shapes a person’s understanding of what is real. A worldview is:

- **A foundation:** a central core of concepts, presuppositions and assumptions which provide people with their understanding about the world and reality;
- **A universe:** fashioned by words and concepts that work together to provide a more or less coherent frame of reference for all thought and action;
- **A perspective:** a way of thinking; an instinctive structure of consciousness based on ideas/beliefs more or less consistent with each other, more or less consciously held, more or less true, generally unquestioned and rarely mentioned, that enable an individual to make sense of experience.

A worldview is a ‘mind world’ of profound significance. Very few people have a personal thought-out philosophy or theology that they could express in words; but everyone has a worldview. Because it is essentially intuitive and rarely articulated it tends only to be thought about when challenged. However, the simple process of thinking can only take place within a worldview framework. It is only with the assumptions of a worldview that we can reason. So it is something to do with the very fabric of personhood; it is as unconscious as it is conscious, it is as emotional as it is intellectual. To understand our own worldview, as Christians, is vital if we are to experience the wholeness of self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-understanding, which God wants to give us. To understand the worldview of others is essential if we are to know them as people and share truth and meaning.



Worlds within worlds

Everyone recognises that something exists; that there is something rather than nothing. But when it comes to saying what that something is; innumerable voices respond, each with distinct replies. In practice we tend to group people together according to the broad patterns of their response to the essential questions of existence, calling these clusters of thought philosophies and religions.

However, we must never forget that beneath the umbrella of any creed or thought system there are multitudes of individuals each with their unique way of viewing the world. The truth is that the totality of human consciousness presents us with a kaleidoscope of worlds within worlds; each person, while holding many things in common with others, has their own particular perspective as personal as their fingerprint or DNA code. Quite simply there are as many worldviews as there are people who view the world. Personal worldviews shape deep personal faith and belief.

Distinct worlds

Nevertheless, however personal a worldview may be, its major elements will be shared by many other people as well. A collective lifestyle, developed by people who hold a common worldview, is what we call 'culture'. Culture is worldview incarnated. Just as philosophy and religion are worldviews articulated. Culture expresses itself in dress and design, in food and formalities, in music and manners, and so much more. When we look at a society that shares a common culture our understanding of a worldview becomes even clearer.

A collective or shared worldview, enabling culture to flourish, with religion and belief at its heart, has been described as:

- **A system of values.** Accepted as the basis of interpreting the world. If culture is like a game, then the worldview is like the invisible rules by which it is played; if culture is like the leaves of a tree, the worldview is like the trunk and branches that give it shape. The worldview has been called the 'soul' of a culture.
- **A set of assumptions.** Accepted as the obvious interpretation of the world. If culture is how a particular people look to those on the outside, then the worldview is how everything looks to the people on the inside. The worldview is the way we see ourselves in relation to everything else.
- **A model of reality.** Accepted as the practical basis for interpreting the world. If culture is the means of providing equilibrium by giving fixed points to its people in an unstable world, then the worldview is like a gyroscope at the centre of the society. The worldview is the grid against which unusual and unpredictable experiences are laid to create a sense of order and security.



- **A learned perspective.** Accepted as the inherited interpretation of the world. If culture is like language then a worldview is like our mother tongue; we were not born with it but it is so part of us we cannot remember learning it, it also has a deep emotional link with us; we may struggle with new languages. The worldview is like learning to see through a pair of tinted glasses, which when removed bring stress and a longing for the 'original' perspective.

Touching worlds

Our pluralist multicultural societies contain numerous worldviews, verbal and conceptual universes, which constantly interact with one another. Touching and being touched by other worlds is not a matter of choice, but a fact of life. For those holding distinct worldviews it can be an experience of great stress. Not only their customs, but their ideas, values and whole way of thinking are challenged through employment, social contact, education, media and so much more. It can cause tension in families where the parents think one way and their children another. It can pressure people into leading double lives; expressing one worldview in public while holding another in private. It can, as we shall see, spawn new worldviews, creating fresh ways of thinking from clearly established ideas.

As Christians we not only encounter other worlds by chance in the daily flow of life, but also by choice in our obedient walk of discipleship. In touching other worlds we must act with sensitivity and seriousness, with respect and a desire to learn and understand. Humility and vulnerability are the watchwords. A worldview shapes personhood so powerfully it is inevitable that people will have the deepest commitment to it. Their mind world creates their whole perspective.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

Question of culture

We have already begun to speak about 'culture', but "What is culture and how does it relate to faiths and world religions?"¹

Probably the classic, and most frequently quoted, definition of culture is the one by Edward Burnett Tylor (1871):

'Culture is that complex whole which involves knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as a member of society.'²

¹ Without wanting to be pedantic we are using the word 'faith' to describe and emphasise the very personal and individual aspect of belief; even the phrase 'world faiths' is stressing that within groups of particular believers, it is the individuals and their faith commitment that give the group its significance. In contrast we are using the word 'religion' to refer to the organisation and cultural expression of the belief structure.

² Quoted in *World Book Encyclopaedia*, vol. 4, p. 942



Another, but much more compact, definition of culture is that it is:

‘The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour’.³

So it is the totality of the way of life and behaviour of a particular group of human beings; all the ideas, objects and ways of doing things of that distinct body of people.⁴

Complexity of culture

Culture is also formed from an individual’s interaction with others, the relationship of people with the social world. Therefore, as it has been well stated:

‘Human beings are both the inventors and the inventions of culture.’⁵

While culture is a complex concept there are some clear points can be made about it:

- **Culture is created:** it has no existence apart from its emergence from the patterns of human experience; it is shaped by human ingenuity and ability from the physical habitat and resources, choices and unlimited chance to experiment;
- **Culture is learned:** it is external, we are born uncultured, we acquire ways of acting, feeling and thinking; they are not biologically determined; at birth any child can adopt any culture and will be basically encultured by the age of three;
- **Culture is security:** it enables people to live within a hostile environment; extending their ability to obtain food, seek protection and raise offspring; this has particularly been the case with primal communities;
- **Culture is identity:** it is the means by which each individual relates and sees themselves in terms of the physical and social world; its effect upon a person’s thought is both stronger than life and stronger than death;
- **Culture is continuity:** it develops a life of its own, a continuum that flows down through time; the development of a culture depends upon the human capacity to learn and transmit knowledge to successive generations;

³ Quoted in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

⁴ ‘Culture’ is a much broader word than ‘civilisation’, which describes a particularly complex form of society.

⁵ D W Augsburger, *Pastoral Counselling Across Cultures*, Westminster Press, 1986, p. 58



- **Culture is organic:** it is a complex whole, not an accidental collection of customs and habits; all parts are related, each aspect affecting all other aspects;
- **Culture is dynamic:** it is not static, but constantly changing and open to being reshaped and adapted in the face of new ideas, pressures and challenges;
- **Culture is transacted through symbols:** it is the result of the human capacity for both rational and abstract thought which provides the meaning that is shared by members of the group; found in language, ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, customs, codes, art, rituals, ceremonies, traditions, tools, institutions, inventions, techniques and technology.

This is the environment within which faith, belief and religion find their expression. Human nature and perception is so utterly saturated with its own culture that it is impossible for any one person to be a truly objective observer of any other culture. This inevitable subjectivity must keep us humble in our opinions and conclusions as we continue our exploration of this subject.

Basic building blocks

The most basic of all cultural building blocks is the human person. To understand the similarities and differences between people is not only the key to culture, but also to evangelism, discipleship, the church and the kingdom of God. It has been insightfully observed that:

‘Every person is like all others, like some others, like no other’.⁶

This reflection draws out the vital layers that make up the foundations of personhood, society and humanity:

- **Every person is like all others (‘universal’):** we are more alike than different, nothing happens to any other person that is totally foreign to us; we share the cycle of birth, life death, emotions and psychology;
- **Every person is like some others (‘cultural’):** we have been shaped and formed by the community that has called us into personhood; our values, customs, religion and basic assumptions are shared with that community;
- **Every person is like no others (‘individual’):** we are unique in our world of perceptions, feelings and experience; as we are in our genetic code, voice pattern, fingerprints, dental structure and life history.

All people share common dimensions of humanity:

⁶ C Kluckhohn and H Murray *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*, A A Knopf, 1948, p. 49.



- **Biological:** we *Homo sapiens* are one united species; our physiology is identical the world over, there are as many variants within groups as between groups,⁷ differences in colour, stature and features are inconsequential;
- **Social:** we all have common relational needs; for all the difference in human institutions they have the common purpose of uniting the group, harnessing the strength of cooperative action and limiting the fracturing power of self-interest;
- **Psychological:** we all share mental processes; the processes of perception, memory, reasoning, emotion and volition are virtually identical among all people, as are the needs for self-esteem, safety and sexual fulfilment;
- **Spiritual:** we all display a sense of transcendent awareness; every group has an expression of moral values though they might be quite different between groups, all have to explain an understanding of good and evil.

Every culture is fundamentally shaped by attempting to meet the basic needs that are shared in common by all people. There is no universally agreed list as to what these basic needs might be, but ten primary needs clearly are:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Nourishment | 6. Health |
| 2. Shelter | 7. Security |
| 3. Comfort | 8. Identity |
| 4. Reproduction | 9. Spirituality |
| 5. Communication | 10. Continuity |

⁷ The tallest people on earth, the Watutsi, and the smallest people on earth, the Pygmy, live within a few hundred miles of each other in Africa.



Whether we were to include more, or excluded some, from the list of basic needs above, they nonetheless point us to a core from which the variety and diversity of human culture springs.

Understanding worlds

An individual's faith and a community's religion need a personal and collective worldview and a culture that will meet their very significant needs:

- **Rational needs:** questions of knowing and believing. It must be able to explain existence in a way that has inner intellectual coherence; its propositions must be logically consistent;
- **Practical needs:** questions of living and surviving. It must be able to meet physical and social requirements in a way that is functional; if it cannot work in reality it is false;
- **Emotional needs:** questions of being and belonging. It must be able to fulfil deep spiritual and psychological demands in a way that brings real satisfaction; it must touch the heart as well as the mind;
- **Ethical needs:** questions of choosing and behaving. It must be able to handle moral questions and actions in a way that has acceptable authority; people must be able to decide whether behaviour is good or bad, and why;
- **Crucial needs:** questions of change and crisis. It must be able to adapt to new or unexpected experiences in a way that has meaning as well as flexibility; a rigid worldview will break under the strain of social change.

People will not change their worldview unless reason and circumstances prove it is totally inadequate for them to live by. If we are to touch another person's worldview creatively we must do it in an environment in which they can relax and share freely. Criticism and incredulity on our part will destroy essential trust and confidence. We must recognise that other perspectives of reality are valid and reasonable even if we do not believe them as true in the ultimate sense.

To begin trying to understand the faith of another person, gently explore these questions with them. The answers to these questions will be cut from the fabric from which that person's worldview is shaped. These questions are to help us touch another person's mind world and understand its practical consequences:

- "What are their beliefs?" Ideas
- "What are their customs?" Values
- "What are their offences?" Ethics
- "What are their rituals?" Essentials
- "What are their anxieties?" Pressures
- "What are their art forms?" Expressions
- "What are their exemplars?" Models (Heroes)

Here we see their values, concepts, and presuppositions clothed in life. The answers to these questions help us to understand the other person and their world in a multi-

dimensional way. This process of touching and understanding another's world is a vital step in helping us to understand our own worldview better, and is essential if we are to share what we know of truth with them and receive much in return.

However, before we begin to explore these questions in conversation with another person we must give time to understanding what these questions mean to us personally and what our answers in response might be.

In summary ...

As we have seen above, the foundations of faith and religion are:

- Stimulated at birth;
- Deeply personal;
- Activated by spirituality;
- Answering existential questions;
- Shaped by worldviews;
- Expressed in culture;
- Designed to meet people's essential needs.

Questions and Reflections

1. How significant do you think it is to recognise an individual's personal faith commitment when talking about particular religions?
2. Do you think it is more important to begin a dialogue about philosophies and religions with the idea of 'worldviews' rather than with 'doctrines'?
3. How important is 'culture' to our understanding of 'religion'?

Reading and Resources

D Burnett *'Unearthly Powers: A Christian Handbook on Primal and Folk Religions'*
Thomas Nelson 1992

JW Sire *'The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue'* IVP 2004

