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## Worldview Literacy in the Academy and Beyond

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***Worldview Literacy in the Academy and Beyond:  
Advancing Mutual Understanding in Diverse Societies.  
Valk, Selçuk and Miedema***

*Abstract*

Diverse societies face increasing racial tension, social divide, religious illiteracy, and secularism. What role can education play in confronting these challenges? Universities generate scientific knowledge but less so the search for meaning. Worldview Studies encompasses both views of life and ways of life. Exploring various worldviews becomes a search for meaning and a journey into knowing self and other. This paper seeks to engage multiple partners to develop teaching pedagogies, curricula and educational tools to enhance greater knowledge, awareness and understanding of various worldviews.

*Introduction*

Certain phenomena are creating challenges in our modern and diverse societies. Increasing individualism, secularism, and consumerism are *views of life* that vie for the hearts and minds of many. They have brought numerous benefits but at the same time lead to *ways of life* that become worrisome today. More worrisome is a rise in Islamization, racial tension, and social divide, as domestic strife, economic imbalances and immigration test national and regional levels of tolerance, openness, and compassion for the other. But no less worrisome to religious educators is an increase in religious illiteracy and the rise of religious “nones”, where past social cohesiveness grounded in common visions of meaning and purpose have been shattered if not

truncated and are replaced by what could best be characterized as new forms of pillarization and segregation. Adding to all of this is a public square where discussions and debates become increasingly polarized and vociferous, as civil society as an encompassing entity begins to lose any sense of its meaning. What role can education play in confronting these challenges?

In the past century or more, universities increasingly shifted focus to that of science-based knowledge, with a stress on what has become known as STEM programs – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Knowledge from such programs has benefitted numerous societies, both East and West, with innovative advancements in travel, medicine, communication, and technology that have added ease, comfort and opportunity to many worldwide.

Yet in all these advancements a sense of meaning and purpose appears to allude all too many. The search for it, however, continues unabated in society at large and can be seen in numerous self-help, group-help and even substance-help programs and initiatives that proliferate in the land. But the search for meaning and purpose from religious institutions seems to have minimized, and in many cases even abandoned (Clark, 1989). There is decreased involvement and membership in traditional religious organizations, and not least that of the younger generation, many of whom prefer to call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” Yet they have interest in religious and spiritual questions (Bentall, 2008; Young, 2003). Further, the social and natural sciences have challenged traditional religious perspectives on many aspects of life. This has resulted in some down-sizing of religious education programs and even departments in the academy. In that sense, religious education faces a dire future.

Religion will, nonetheless, survive in this new state of affairs. It is not the first challenge religion has faced and overcome in its long history. Religious education too will persist in the

face of this new reality, but its success may be limited. Its exclusive and narrow focus on religious traditions alone may become its own undoing. In a time when the search for meaning continues unabated in an increasingly secular society fewer and fewer seek it from religious institutions, or even Religious Education. Yet Religious Education needs to speak again to faculty and students so as to overcome the increasing challenges facing us today, and not least the Islamization, racial tension, and social divide that perplexes so many (Valk & Selçuk 2017). But it cannot do so in its current rendition.

A new paradigm is needed for this diverse and divisive age – worldview education. Knowledge and awareness of the various worldviews, both religious and secular, and how they impact self, others and societies at large can lead to greater understanding of differences, so that focus can shift to tensions that become creative rather than divisive (Valk, 2010). In essence worldview education is a journey into knowing self and others (Selçuk, 2015).

That new paradigm may need to have its beginning in reimagining Religious Education as Worldview Education, or Worldview Studies. This will be a bold step for those steeped in this field of longstanding, but it might be a necessary one in terms of where we are today. Yet, it needs to go beyond the mere name change of a traditional program. It needs to extend into education in general, so that worldview literacy spills out into the larger academy (Valk, 2017). And further, it needs to spill out into the public square (Valk, 2009a). Let us spell out why this might be the case.

### *Current Challenges to Religious Education*

Religion has an image problem – in the media, the academy and in the public realm. The media is more inclined to mention its failures than its contributions and is prone to offer its

essential teachings in trivial sound bites (Marshall, Gilbert and Ahmanson 2009). Politicians in general are reluctant to link their private beliefs to their public policies (Lerner 2003; Carter 1994). In the academy, it “waters religion down to the point where faith makes no actual difference” (Hart 1999, p. 12), and where Christian scholarship is considered outrageous (Marsden 1997). In the general public, it has been “denounced as the greatest plague of mankind” (Clark 1989, p. 182), though to “poison everything” (Hitchens 2007), and its God as “the most unpleasant character in all fiction” (Barker 2016). While such comments may be rather extreme, religion nonetheless has a imagine problem.

But so does the academy, if not more so. One of those problems has to do with its current STEM focus, which is under scrutiny. Some are insisting that its focus should be STEAM, rather than STEM, so that the Arts, itself under scrutiny, remain a crucial aspect of a university education. This issue has resulted in no small number of debates, and at very high levels.

Not lost in some of these debates, but often under the radar, is that the large questions of life continue to be raised by students, though more reluctantly engaged in by faculty (Connor 2006; Chickering, Dalton & Stamm 2006; Young 2003). All too often, unfortunately, these questions and interests are consigned to Religious Studies or Religious Education departments, which are themselves increasingly placed at the margins of academic inquiry (Jacobsen & Jacobsen 2007; Connor 2005). When issues about faith and beliefs, about stories of God and gods, about rituals and symbols linked to them are focused on traditional religions, it cloisters them into narrow academic sectors, communicating to all too many that these are optional compartments of life. Not only is the richness of religious traditions cloistered, a wide array of life’s questions and issues are viewed in terms of exclusive perspectives (Joas, 2008; Smith

2001). Both become isolated from learning as a whole, from mainstream society in general, and from their contributions to dialogue in the public square in particular (Valk 2009a; Miedema 2014). They fall off the radar screen for all too many educators and students, whose interest in religion in particular becomes narrowed, waned or hostile as a result (Connor 2005). Today students can graduate today with the highest degree the academy offers without having rubbed two religious or existential thoughts or ideas together (Hauerwas 2007; Burtchaell 1998; Marsden 1994). Small wonder that a growing religious illiteracy has surfaced in society (Prothero 2007).

Limiting or cloistering some of life's most important questions and issues leads to another problem – the uncritical acceptance of other perspectives: other beliefs and values that hold great sway in the public academy if not the public square. Other perspectives or worldviews, most particularly secular ones, with markings and traits similar to those of traditional religions – metanarratives, teachings, symbols, rituals and more – come to dominate the public square and influence the lives of younger and older alike, often without a broader sense of how, where and why. A focus on worldviews or “Worldview Education”, rather than only religions or “Religious Education”, can turn matters around. Various perspectives and viewpoints, both religious and secular, are given greater exposure, leveling the playing field when it comes to competing for the hearts and minds of people, and seeing the extent of their reach in the public square. It also presents an opportunity to compare and contrast, to see where and how an awareness of other worldviews might broaden and deepen one's own – a journey into knowing self and others.

Worldview Studies, rather than Religious Studies, opens up many new possibilities (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter & Miedema 2013; 2017; McBain 2003). It is inclusive of all traditions –

religious and secular. While numerous and competing differences exist between them, each has its own richness, beliefs and values. Each can contribute meaningfully to discussions in the public square, which is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith. An awareness of them leads to an increased awareness of them at play in politics, media, economics, the academy and more. Not to be minimized is the further awareness that we all have a worldview – a view of life that gives shape to a way of life. The search for meaning and purpose is a search or exploration of our own worldview, and those of others. Above all, it leads to increased literacy. It is a recognition that various views and ways of life are portrayed and depicted in film, music, poetry, novels, and more. Education is enhanced when there is awareness that worldviews, traditional or alternative, come in many different shapes and forms (Gardner, Soules & Valk 2017; Valk 2017b).

### *Worldview Education: Challenges and Opportunities*

Use of the concept “worldview” brings certain challenges. It is often inadequately used, casually used, and even inaccurately used. Students, scholars and members of the larger public would benefit from a more robust discussion to uncover its value, especially for education as it increasingly engages plural voices. Its implication and implementation for schools and institutions of higher learning are beginning to surface as multiple perspectives now challenge education and educators. In this, a great opportunity arises to uncover its value for enriched dialogue in the academy and in a diverse public square, where meaningful engagement with the other becomes increasingly important.

A first opportunity begins with worldview education itself, but it also comes with a challenge. The challenge is to avoid or move away from an exclusive focus on the worldview of

the self – worldviews explored only in terms of one’s own personal beliefs and values. It remains, in effect, an exclusive study of “the self”. Such a focus becomes attractive in a society increasingly beset by an individualism, where personal formation, personal identity, and personal well-being draws great attention. In itself, such focus has importance and is necessary, potentially spawn creativity, imagination and independence in terms of the self. But in the end, it is insufficient, leading to a privatization of one’s faith and beliefs; a fulfilment of an individualized self that fits nicely with today’s post-religious, post-secular and individualistic culture. The self can remain 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”. Worldview education offers an opportunity for the individual to study and engagement with larger entities, larger collectives, with longer histories of communal care and thoughtful responses to some of life’s big questions, giving opportunities to compare one’s own percolating thoughts and ideas with others. All worldviews, and no less traditional religious worldviews, have creative forms, innovative expressions, artistic outlets, and engaging theologies, to offer richness to individuals while developing their own views of life.

The second opportunity is the flip side of the first, with the challenge to overcome that of a sole focus on the worldviews of others, especially more longstanding religious worldviews. 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 individual interest easily treats them as entities of the past – museum pieces -- that hides a secular-centric view of life. These forms of museologization fail to tap religious worldviews that are experiential and dynamic. These worldviews are alive and well today, able to assist students and others in the development and formation of their own worldview. Study of



the self and of the other go hand in hand. Worldview education provides an opportunity to explore the other – their beliefs and values, sources, rituals, where they stand on certain issues and why. Questions asked of others quickly become questions asked of the self. Knowing self necessitates knowing others.

A third opportunity comes in overcoming disciplinary isolation, an increasing challenge to the modern academy. Worldview education by its nature is interdisciplinary. It cannot be confined to one discipline, for it touches on all disciplines. Worldviews are *views of life* – our beliefs and values – and *ways of life* – our behaviours and actions. Various disciplines – psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, theology – all deal with aspects of how beliefs and values impact behaviour and action – individually and collectively. These scholarly areas have individually rendered valuable insight into various aspects of individual and collective life – our narratives and metanarratives, teachings, ethics, ontologies, epistemologies, cosmologies and more, past and present. An interdisciplinary approach to worldviews gives opportunity to explore these in greater depth, revealing the breadth and richness of human thought, ideas, imagination, creativity and innovation.

The fourth opportunity is the most daunting and with the greatest challenge. It is entering into the public square so that an exchange of different views and ideas of the world we want can lead to robust discussions and interactions. Public policy, economics, environmental concerns, communal care are rooted in individual and collective starting points, in essence one's worldview. The public square is finally the place where worldviews should be engaged critically, so that a secular public square is not mistaken for a neutral one (Habermas & Ratzinger 2006).

### *Initial grounding endeavours*

The waters of worldview education have already been tested by some who have ventured in its direction. The successes experienced by their initial endeavours indicate that students and others have gained considerably in greater understanding of their own worldview, those of others, and how worldviews impact what we think and what we do, both in the past and in the present. These grounding initiatives suggest that further study and engagement of worldview education bodes well for the future. Four initial endeavours will be described that will ground the project envisioned below.

#### *1. Exploring Worldviews In and Around: A Journey into Knowing Self and Others.*

This forthcoming book arose from an undergraduate university course taught numerous times over the span of almost 20 years at the University of New Brunswick. Its initial endeavours have been described earlier (Valk, 2009b). Further research has indicated that it opened the minds, and hearts of students to recognize the prevalence of worldviews, and their impacts on economics, public policy, education and more. It also led to an enhanced exploration of the impact of worldview study on education (Valk & Tosun, 2016). The forthcoming interdisciplinary book is a more comprehensive study of the concept worldview and explores various dimensions of both religious and secular worldviews. It reveals that worldviews impact numerous disciplines and reach all aspects of life and society. This book will serve as grounding for a larger study on developing pedagogies and curriculum.

#### *2. An Islamic Worldview from Turkey (Valk, Albayrak & Selçuk, 2017).*

This book resulted from a group of younger and older scholars from Ankara University.

Through a number of workshops held for a period of five years, it engaged these scholars using a comprehensive approach of self-exploration of their understanding of Islam. The approach used allowed members to think systematically, creating new areas of thoughts and ideas. Many gained a stronger connection to their faith tradition and beliefs through the process. Asking the right questions served to provide new insights about self and others. Aspects of this methodological approach is now used in developing further pedagogical approaches and curriculum for teaching religious education in Turkey and elsewhere.

### *3. The Merits of Using 'Worldview' in Religious Education.*

A number of related studies address the meaning of the concept worldview, the merits of exploring worldviews, its impact on Religious Education, its relevance in fostering tolerance, its importance in religious identity formation, personal worldview formation, exploring the self in the context of larger worldviews, and inclusive pedagogy in the context of worldview education (Bertram-Troost & Miedema, 2017; Miedema, 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Vander Kooij et al., 2013). These studies give greater pedagogical detail on the use of worldviews in education, especially religious education, and its impact on personality formation, increasing tolerance and awareness of the worldviews of others, thus keeping the individual and the social aspect together.

### *4. Coming out religiously! Religious Educators as Public Intellectuals*

Taking religious education out of the academy and into the public square is a major step facing worldview educators. Discussion of worldview in the academy is necessary but not sufficient. What is also needed are religious or worldview educators acting as public intellectuals in the public

square, joining forces with different societal stakeholders with whom they share similar aims. Religious or worldview educators are to be challenged to also take roles and functions as public intellectuals for the benefit of children and youngsters, supporting them in becoming responsible in developing their self-determined personhood in education in general and in worldview education in particular. Religious or worldview educators are, with a few exceptions, virtually invisible in the public arena, one so often characterized by clashes of knowledge-politics (Foucault 1980).

It might be argued that the need for worldview education embedded in a holistic view of personhood formation is self-evident and does not require attention in the wider public.

Worldview educators need to voice their views in the public square, however, in part to counter the voices of others, most particularly the small minority of vociferous secularists, who increasingly dominate the scarce public space (Miedema, 2019).

### *In Summary*

The methodology ensued thus far engaged literature review and analysis, conceptual analysis, and insights from communities of students, scholars and practitioners. Some pedagogical methods have been explored and implemented. Some curriculum materials have been developed and implemented. But a more comprehensive strategy is needed. Something new is being envisioned.

Enhancing worldview literacy and fostering worldview personhood formation in education is of benefit to all. Advancing mutual understanding in diverse societies encourages universities to teach students to be responsive to different views of life and ways of life – their own and those of others. Enhancing worldview literacy in the larger society affords an

opportunity to overcome social divisiveness, racial tensions, religious illiteracy, and an uncritical acceptance of any one dominant worldview. It creates an opportunity to explore the richness of numerous worldviews and how they can contribute to an open and robust public square that creates space for those from multiple perspectives who seek to contribute to a freer society (Miedema, 2014; 2019)

The above four models have paved a way for moving in this direction. There may be others. We seek now to move to the next level and to engage multiple partners from multiple nations in a large research project. That project seeks a variety of partners to develop teaching pedagogies, curricula and educational tools to assist students younger and older alike to enhance greater knowledge, awareness and understanding of various secular and religious worldviews as a journey into knowing self and others. Further, it seeks to develop synergy projects to provide support for small groups of principal investigators to jointly address research problems that would otherwise be difficult to do individually. Lastly, it seeks strategies for engaging the public to increase worldview literacy in the public square as one way to overcome social divide and racial tensions. Engaging religious and worldview educators is the first step in that larger journey.

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