

Preparing Our Students to Confront Error and Unbiblical Philosophies through Worldview Formation, Awareness, and Analysis

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How do we prepare students to retain their faith and refute error when they encounter unbiblical ideas?

- 1) Some attempt to rely on theological tribalism (inculcate adherence to “our system,” foster *us vs. them* mentality, limit their exposure to error, respond to error by avoidance or mockery)
- 2) Some attempt to teach the details of as many belief systems as possible, and provide detailed theological critiques for students to memorize and rely on in future engagements
- 3) Some attempt to rely on proof texting, having students memorize references to one or two counteracting verses from Scripture for each of the many different unbiblical philosophical systems

But do these methods really adequately prepare our students for a world of rapidly changing ideas? What will they do when they meet (or stream the messages of) a charismatic speaker with thousands of followers, who “just makes sense”? What about ten years from now when the popular philosophical systems look very different than the ones on the scene today? Will these methods really inoculate them against error and prepare them to defend historic Christian orthodoxy? Or will they leave them on shaky ground without much-needed answers to the challenges posed by unbelief, and unable to refute error when they see it?

Only an awareness of fundamental worldview assumptions and an ability to critically interact with them will give our students the ability to confidently engage with many different kinds of error, compare them with Biblical assumptions, and retain their faith.

Philosophical Analysis of Worldviews

There are three main areas of human inquiry which all human religious or philosophical systems address through interconnected sets of fundamental assumptions (adapted from Jack Chalk, *Making Disciples in Africa*):

Metaphysics asks what, if anything, lies beyond or above the observable physical world and looks at issues of:

- a. Ontology – the nature of existence and questions of what really exists and what it means to exist
- b. Cosmology – asks about the origin, nature, and order of the universe
- c. Teleology – asks questions about the purpose of existence and the end to which things are moving

Axiology, also known as value theory, studies judgments of worth, goodness, and importance, and asks why and how those judgments are made. It is divided into:

- a. Ethics and morality – morality deals with absolutes of right and wrong, whereas ethics deals with situational applications of moral absolutes and usually focuses more on weighing factors and possible outcomes, generally this includes consideration of what problem humanity faces and its solution
- b. Aesthetics – the study of beauty and how people/cultures make judgments of beauty and worth
- c. Philosophy of History – asks questions about what value historical memory ought to have on decision making, includes core assumptions about the progress of history and its effects on the future

Epistemology asks how we know what we know and studies the nature, possible sources, and correct uses of knowledge: What can we know, how can we know it, from whom can we know it?

The problem with worldview assumptions is just that; they are *assumptions* and can easily go unnoticed if students are not trained to recognize and evaluate them.

See the final page of notes in this handout for a sampling of worldview assumptions that are central to many of the prevalent competing philosophies and beliefs that our students are likely to encounter once they leave our schools. The chart is nowhere near exhaustive, but is meant to illustrate the dizzying array of competing worldview assumptions that the philosophies of the world have to offer. The point is that we cannot possibly

hope to adequately prepare our students to effectively respond to every single one of the arguments of all the various competing belief systems that they will encounter (especially the many that have yet to be formulated!). But we CAN and SHOULD equip students to become aware of the core assumptions of any system of belief, to compare them with the fundamental assumptions of biblical worldview, and to refute them on the basis of their conformity to God’s revelation and/or their own internal contradictions/inconsistencies.

The Biblical Worldview: Our Starting Point

All of this of course assumes that we are doing a good job of inculcating a Biblical worldview into our students through our theological training efforts. Before we can train them to engage other worldviews, we must ensure that they are firmly grounded in the Biblical worldview, and that they are both *aware* of their own worldviews and *able to assess* the conformity of truth claims to the eternal standard of truth. As the oft repeated analogy goes, the person best able to spot the counterfeit is the one who has spent much time acquainting himself with the real thing.

Metaphysics: Do we teach our students to see the world as God sees it, to conform and order our lives according to his design, and to see and celebrated evidences of his design, sovereignty, and purposes?

Axiology: Do we teach our students to assign value in accordance with God’s eternal values, to acknowledge his absolute moral authority, and to view the progress of history from the perspective of God’s plans?

Epistemology: Do we teach our students to submit to the epistemic lordship of Christ, to seek truth through the whole of divine revelation, and to judge competing truth claims in the light of that revelation?

Brief Summary of Biblical Worldview Assumptions

Core Belief (Philosophical Categories)	Some Key Underlying Assumptions
God (Metaphysics: Ontology)	Infinite, triune, personal, spiritual, Creator, self-revelation
Man (Ontology/Cosmology/Axiology)	Finite, personal, physical/spiritual, fallen, image-bearing, creature
Revelation (Epistemology)	Limited-but-enough, mediated (general)/immediate (special)
Christ (Ontology/Axiology/Epistemology)	God-Man, God-revealer, substitute (solution), moral standard
Salvation (Cosmology/Axiology)	Sin necessitates, God alone provides, grace restores nature
Destiny (Teleology/Epistemology)	Knowable, man finite but eternal, cosmic restoration/victory

The Challenge of Worldview Assessment: Seeing Past Beliefs to Core Assumptions

Theology/beliefs describe specific conclusions drawn from observation and various other sources of authority. This is what students can most easily observe and are most inclined to attempt to engage.

Worldview, on the other hand, is the fundamental set of operating assumptions (unproven and unprovable), which undergird every system of belief. They are seldom explicitly stated, but with practice and effort their effects can be seen throughout a system of belief.

Theological students especially are prone to focus on theology rather than worldview assumptions, and on the one hand this is quite natural. They come to our schools expecting to learn specific theological systems, and many of our classes are structured around delineating our own set of theological positions and their corresponding applications, and describing and disproving opposing theological positions. So, we cannot fault them when they learn and seek to apply these same skills. But we MUST remember, when dealing with unbiblical systems of thought, surface level theological/belief engagement is ultimately comparing one set of worldview *products* to the *products* of a competing worldview. To successfully know/show *why* sound biblical conclusions are superior to unbiblical conclusions, our students must be able to go deeper, to attack the very foundations and assumptions that produce those beliefs.

A simple method that can demonstrate the difference between belief/theology and worldview is to compare the Biblical teachings about homosexuality with the traditional African teachings about homosexuality. Both systems teach that homosexuality is wrong, therefore we are tempted to think that they agree here. But when we ask *why* each system teaches that homosexuality is wrong, we discover very different operating worldview assumptions that nonetheless lead to the same conclusion.

Biblical Worldview: *Homosexuality is wrong because it violates God's created design for humanity, thus is a rebellion against God's intentions for humanity.* Notice this is an unchanging and inflexible moral standard tied to the created order (rooted in ontology/cosmology).

African Worldview: *Homosexuality is wrong because it goes against the communal expectation of marriages participating in the overall goals and benefits of the community, and the assumption that procreation is the primary means that marriages can contribute to the community.* Notice this is a relative standard tied to the values of the community and the relative importance of procreation for one's belonging to the community (rooted in axiology/ethics). Thus, if either of these values shift (i.e. rapid Westernization?!?), upon which the wrongness of homosexuality is contingent, then homosexuality ceases to be wrong!

In other words, worldview assessment cannot merely focus on the *what?* questions of belief systems, but must go deeper to ask the *why?* questions that lie behind those beliefs. And this is the challenge that we MUST lay before our students: to critically engage with the core assumptions that undergird any system of belief that they encounter, and to push them to compare its assumptions with the assumptions of Scripture, both to test its truthfulness and to provide an avenue for engagement and response when it needs to be disproven.

The Importance of Modelling

As we reflect upon the task of equipping students to assess and evaluate worldview assumptions, we must always remember our educational context, and the value of modelling these crucial skills. We might be tempted to just tell them all the underlying assumptions of any worldview that they might encounter, but will they remember them when needed, and will they be able to assess other worldviews that we missed? As the chart below illustrates, the list of competing worldview systems has grown far too long for anyone to memorize all their various nuances and assumptions. At its core, worldview assessment is a *practical* skill that can only be learned by doing, so our teaching methods must provide opportunities for them to both observe others doing it, and to be guided though doing it themselves. What follows is one possible way that we have developed to both model awareness of and engagement with worldviews, and ultimately to prepare students themselves to critically engage with other worldviews that they will eventually encounter:

Method of Training Used in CABC's WDV401 Apologetics Course

- CABC's *Apologetics* course comes at the end of a series of courses designed to familiarize students with the basics of worldview. Our *Critical Thinking* and *Personal Evangelism and Discipleship* courses are required first-year courses where students are introduced to the basics of logical assessment and assumptions, and introduced to the basic worldview systems that they are likely to encounter.
- *Apologetics* is a fourth-year course and has three sequenced components: 1) Introduction to/Systems of Apologetics, 2) Introduction to Worldview Assumptions (modelled through an inductive study of the Biblical worldview), and 3) Introduction to Worldview Analysis and Engagement (modelled through an inductive study of the African worldview).
- In order to both model worldview awareness/engagement, and to provide guided opportunities for students to practice, the course is designed around three core assessments:
 - 1) A Worldview Research Project: students choose a prevalent worldview system, research it thoroughly, and then write a paper describing its core philosophical assumptions, comparing them with the biblical worldview assumptions, and offering suggestions for effective engagement
 - 2) A Worldview Presentation: after they have walked inductively through both the Biblical and African worldviews, students teach the class their worldview research, focusing on strategies for engagement
 - 3) A Personal Application Paper: since all successful worldview engagement is done person-to-person, students are given a final opportunity to practice by writing a letter to a friend, in order to assess a single person's worldview and lovingly expose their core assumptions, in order to engage them.

For Further Study:

Anderson, James N. *What's Your Worldview: An Interactive Approach to Life's Big Questions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.

Beeke, Joel R. ed. *The Beauty and Glory of the Christian Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017.

Chalk, Jack. *Making Disciples in Africa: Engaging Syncretism in the African Church through Philosophical Analysis of Worldviews*. Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2013.

Dockery, David S. ed. *Shaping a Christian Worldview: The Foundation of Christian Higher Education*. Nashville: B&H, 2002.

Grenz, Stanley, and Roger Olson. *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

Wolters, Albert M. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Systems of Belief	Examples of Their Unbiblical Worldview Assumptions
African Traditional Religion (ATR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Metaphysics</i> – Henotheistic distant Creator, hierarchical spirit world • <i>Teleology</i> – The dead exert influence over the living (mediatorial ancestors) • <i>Axiology/Ethics</i> – Communal norms but no divine moral absolutes; man as morally neutral victim of spiritual oppression, resolved through power plays • <i>Epistemology</i> – Knowledge/power preserved in elders of community; access gained through spirit mediums
Prosperity Theology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmology</i> – Borrowing “Man of God” and hierarchical spirit world assumptions from African traditional worldview • <i>Ontology</i> – Denial of Creator/creature distinction in word/faith proclamations (man commands, God obeys) • <i>Axiology</i> – Borrows values from materialism in elevating purported physical benefits of atonement over spiritual benefits
Scientism/Theistic Evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmology</i> – Denial of supernatural fiat creation in seeking strictly natural/material causes for creation • <i>Axiology</i> – Evolutionary accounts of history cannot account for origin of sin/death and humanity’s fall • <i>Epistemology</i> – Denial of <i>fides quaerens intellectum</i> in allowing for naturalistic science to “inform” scriptural interpretation • <i>Epistemology</i> – Places false dichotomy between the testimony of general revelation (creation) and the testimony of special revelation (Scripture)
Open Theism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ontology</i> – Denial/redefinition of Creator/creature distinction by placing limitations upon God’s knowledge • <i>Epistemology</i> – Promotes human freedom and epistemological openness at the expense of God’s sovereignty
Postmodern Theologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Epistemology</i> – Denial of absolute truth, shifts epistemic authority from Creator to creature • <i>Axiology/Ethics</i> – Denial of absolute standards of right and wrong, results in moral relativism
Universalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Teleology</i> – Denial of biblical particularism (all roads lead to God) • <i>Axiology</i> – Minimizes value of atonement, making it one of many ways to God • <i>Epistemology</i> – Postmodern rejection of absolute truth
Liberation Theology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Axiology</i> – Redefines human sinfulness to focus exclusively on communal sin, limits moral righteousness to societal justice • <i>Teleology</i> – Redefines human salvation to focus on utopian goals and not on eternal reconciliation/glorification • <i>Epistemology</i> – Postmodern hermeneutic “de/recontextualizing” Scripture through modern cultural lenses (Black experience, poor experience, etc.)
Feminism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmology</i> – Denial of God’s design in creation distinctions between men and women • <i>Axiology</i> – Denial of God-ordained unique value of women in home, church, society • <i>Epistemology</i> – Postmodern hermeneutic “de/recontextualizing” Genesis creation account, “patriarchal” culture of Bible
Denial/Misuse of Male Headship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmology</i> – Imposes unbiblical marriage hierarchy: man domineering over women, women viewed as chattel, man’s action unimpeachable, promoting practice of polygamy (male authoritarianism) OR • <i>Cosmology</i> – Denial of God’s design in created order roles and relationships of husbands and wives (egalitarianism) • <i>Ontology</i> – Denial/reinterpretation of classically-framed trinitarian relationships to promote egalitarianism • <i>Epistemology</i> – Postmodern hermeneutic “de/recontextualizing” Genesis creation account, NT marriage commands, and NT prohibitions of female church elders
Aberrant Views of Human Sexuality (promoting homosexuality, gender fluidity, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmology</i> – Denial of God’s design for binary human gender aligning with physical form, denial/redefinition of Image of God • <i>Axiology/Ethics</i> – Denial of absolute standards of right and wrong • <i>Axiology</i> – Redefinition of human love to focus only on consensual feelings and acts • <i>Epistemology</i> – Postmodern hermeneutic “de/recontextualizing” Genesis creation account and/or commands against homosexuality