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Why Do We Make the Decisions We Do? - Chapter 2 from "Worldviews: The Challenge of Choice"

Ken Badley

George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

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Chapter 2: WHY DO WE MAKE THE DECISIONS WE DO?

Imagine you are on a vacation in Latin America and have just flown into a large city. You know nothing about this city. To your amazement, you quickly discover that most stores and businesses close from noon until about 3:00 p.m. People enjoy a long, leisurely lunch and nap before returning to their jobs. They work until 7:00 p.m. and dine at 10:00 or so in the evening. As you travel around, you discover that many Latin American cities follow the same routine, which is quite different from yours.

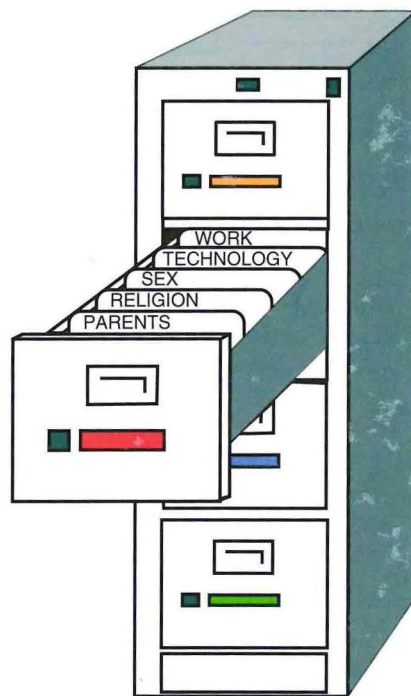
- ☐ What makes our Canadian daily schedule “normal”?
- ☐ Is the Latin American siesta not also “normal”?

As human beings, we look at life and make all our judgments and decisions within a larger framework or overall view of life. Philosophers call this framework a *worldview*, or *world-and-life view*. Our worldview functions in two main ways: it guides our thoughts day by day, and it guides our actions in *all* areas of life.

Metaphors can help us understand what a worldview is like. Some people suggest a worldview is like a filing cabinet for organizing life. Others compare a worldview to a map that helps us find safe routes through the ups and downs of life. Others suggest that a worldview is like a compass that provides direction or guidance, or like a pair of eyeglasses that help us see more clearly.

By the end of this chapter, you will have had an opportunity to:

- ☐ understand the nature of worldview and the questions it tries to answer
- ☐ develop further your understanding of your particular worldview and the role it plays in your life
- ☐ explore some of the influences that help shape most of our worldviews and realize that when these influences change, our worldviews may also change



The “filing cabinet” metaphor helps us realize how much there is to take into account and keep organized. It also may serve as a warning to us that the way we approach life and the ways we cope with our surroundings can become static or rigid. We face a situation similar to one we have faced before and, looking up the appropriate file, we find an answer we have used many times before. But the changing circumstances of our lives require that we regularly re-evaluate and update our files and sometimes create new files to meet new situations.

- ☐ reflect on possible ways to respond to challenges to your worldview
- ☐ understand that world religions share many elements in common

What Questions Does Our Worldview Answer?

Some people are very conscious of their worldview and often think about how well their view explains what happens in the world around them. Philosophers, religious leaders and students in religious studies, ethics and philosophy courses concentrate on the kinds of questions worldviews try to answer. They reflect frequently on how well their worldview provides guidelines for the situations in which they find themselves. People confronting death, rapid change and acts of human kindness or evil sometimes reflect more carefully than usual on the questions that worldviews answer.

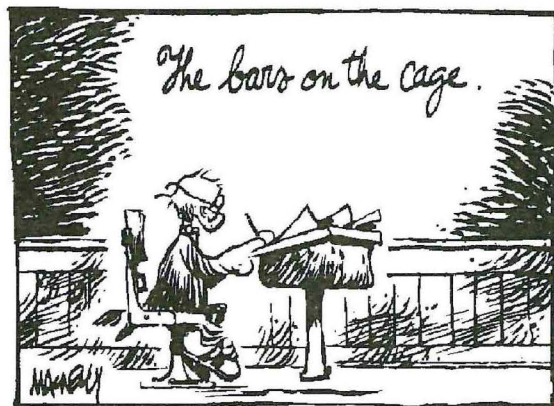
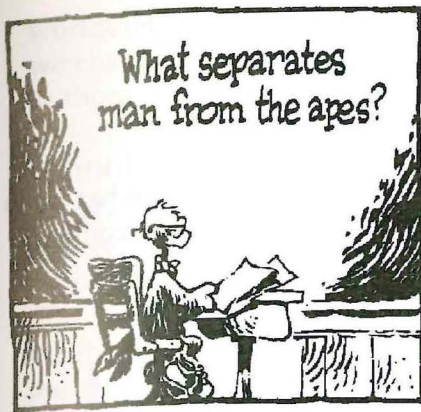
The majority of us, however, rarely think about our worldview or ask ourselves whether the universe makes sense. Often we are not even aware that we have a “view” of things. We tend to think that we simply see things the way they are. We assume that things everywhere in the world are done largely the same way they are in our lives and our communities.

According to one twentieth-century American philosopher, James Sire, even if we do not often reflect on our worldview, we do all try at one time or another to answer five sets of questions.

1. What is the meaning of humankind’s sojourn on earth? Is this life all there is? Is it an illusion? Is this life preparation for



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another world? Are we here once or repeatedly? Do we stay or do we leave when we die?

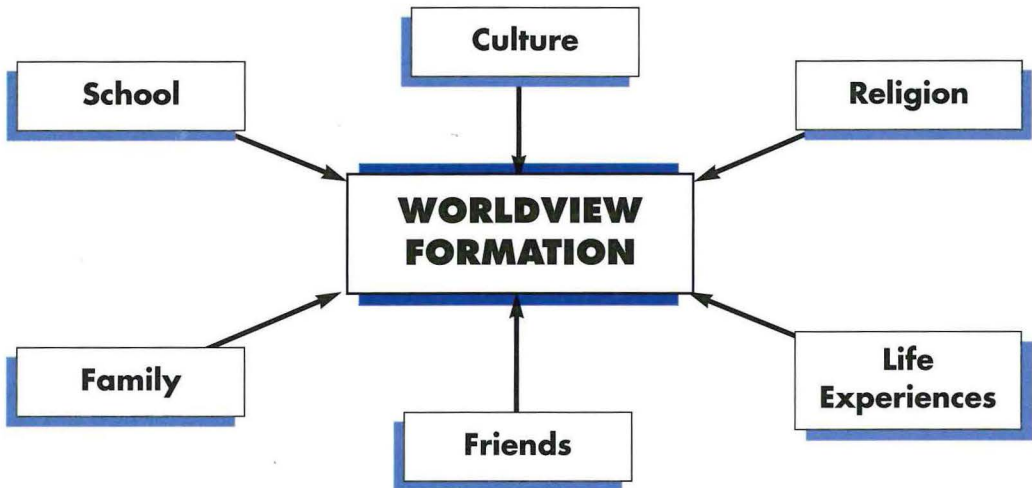
2. What makes us human? Are people good or bad? Are they able to change and on what basis? Do they have free will or is their course pre-determined? What makes humans different from other forms of life?
3. Is there a God or Ultimate Reality? What do we understand by God or Ultimate Reality? Some people believe there is a personal God. Others believe that there is an impersonal force, and others believe that there is nothing but the here and now.
4. What is the nature and the character of the natural world? How did the world come into being and how is it ordered, if it is? Or do humans impose on the world all the order there is? If the natural world is ordered, is it ordered for some purpose?
5. What is moral and what is immoral? How any one of us defines right and wrong has much to do with how we define the "good" life. Is it a life defined primarily by pleasure, by love, by service, by justice, by freedom, or by some other qualities or properties?

Do You Know What Your Worldview Is?

Think about your own worldview. Start a journal in which you note some ideas you have about the five worldview questions discussed: the meaning of human life, human nature, God or Ultimate Reality, the natural world, and morality and ethics. You will be focusing on some of these questions throughout *Worldviews* and may want to check back periodically to see how your views are changing, becoming more fixed or becoming more detailed.

How Does Our Worldview Develop?

The factors that help shape worldviews vary somewhat from person to person. However, all share some elements in common.



Family

Our *family*, whether we wish it to be or not, is deeply important in helping to form our perspectives or worldviews. Family members affect our worldview in areas as simple as whether or not we watch television or listen to a radio during a meal, to the roles of males and females. Families also contribute to how we answer the large worldview questions of God or Ultimate Reality, the meaning of life, what elements make up the good life and what is moral.

Friends

Friends, too, contribute to our worldview. In doing so, they indirectly help shape our moral and ethical decision making. Of course, they also contribute directly with advice and examples of one kind or another. Sometimes, friends may behave according to different beliefs and principles of right and wrong from the way we do. When this happens, we may reflect upon the foundations of our own attitudes and behaviour. Sometimes, we may alter our worldview because we think that our friends'

Chapter 4 explores some of the issues related to families, friends, worldviews and identity in greater detail.

worldviews make more sense than ours, or we may hope that if we change, our friends will view us as less “different” and like us more.

School

Schools influence our worldview. Education is one of the ways society shapes the values and outlooks of the next generation. With the widespread increase in formal and compulsory education, arguments have increased about what values should be taught in schools. Duty, honour and respect for authority were taught without apology some generations ago. These values have now been somewhat overshadowed by tolerance of differences and respect for the environment, to name two prominent examples. Whatever the particular values, the worldview-shaping function of education continues.

Culture

Our *culture* plays a large role in shaping our worldview. In Canada, for example, we drive on the right side of the road because that is what tradition teaches and our laws oblige us to do. When we travel to or live in Britain, we must quickly learn to drive on the left side of the road! More important reflections of our culture involve how we view people of other races, how we think children or the poor should be treated, what laws we think should be made to deal with thieves and murderers. The important thing to note is that, for most of us, “normal” is what we know. Until someone makes our definition into a problem for us—through a book, because someone directly questions our pattern of behaviour or because we have been somewhere where things are done differently from what we are used to—we will go on thinking that our way of doing things is “normal.”

Religion

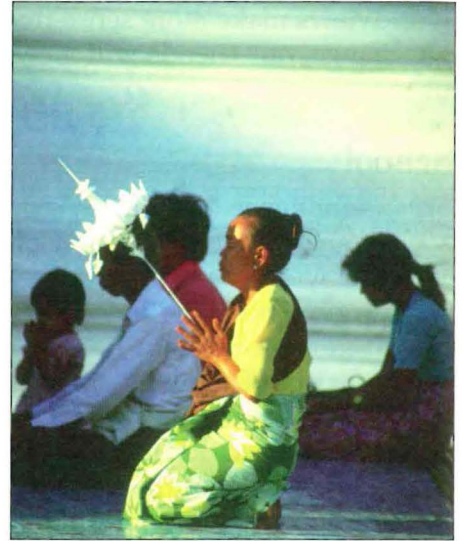
Consciously or unconsciously, *religion* contributes in vital ways to the composition of a worldview. However, our religion and our worldview are not the same thing. Our worldview also contains answers to simple questions such as whether we should eat everything on our plate or how frequently we should launder bed sheets. Religions tend to focus on the more perennial questions. They are the one element contributing to our worldview that explicitly addresses the questions of being and meaning that lie at the very heart of our outlook on life.

Definition

*For our purposes, we take **culture** to mean the patterned ways we have adopted in our living together in society—the arts, beliefs, habits, institutions, laws, and other human endeavours that together are typical of a particular society. The culture of a country or a people is not constant. It changes and adapts over time under various influences. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s radio played an important role in shaping Canada’s culture. In the 1960s-1990s, television did much to modify the patterns of Canadian culture. In the 1980s and 1990s increasing immigration of peoples from different cultures and religions also began to redefine Canadian culture. As we begin a new century, technological developments increasingly influence the shape of Canada’s culture.*



Christian church



Buddhist worshippers at Shwedagon Pagoda in Burma (Myanmar)

Life Experiences

Our worldviews are also shaped by *life's joys and sorrows*, by our *crises* and by our *watershed experiences*. A major disappointment in love or in business, for example, affects some people by making them wary, even cynical, for the rest of their lives. The reverse may also occur. Some people have only to receive one outstanding act of kindness to become lifelong believers that most human beings are essentially good and trustworthy. Significant events in our lives and even our ordinary life circumstances influence our worldview, and we may change our worldview in response to these situations.

Societal Change: Redrawing Our Worldview Map

In geographic maps printed several centuries ago, coastlines, which had been surveyed in some detail, appeared with names of both geographic and cultural features. Some rivers also appeared. But the vast, unexplored, interior areas of continents were generally either left blank or were filled with illustrations of animals or the words "unknown territories."

At the same time, another kind of map was clearly drawn.

The Shaping of Your Worldview

- ① Look at the web on page 20. What elements would you add to this web?
- ② Which of the factors discussed in this section do you think have had the most influence on shaping your own worldview? Why? Using headings such as Family, Friends, Religion, etc., create a table or draw a graph to show what proportion of influence you think each factor has had.
- ③ *Debate:* It is important that we know what our worldview is.

These were “worldview maps.” Questions of God or Ultimate Reality, the meaning and purpose of life, ethics, where one might expect to live and what one’s employment might be were all relatively fixed and clearly drawn on people’s worldview maps. There were few blank spaces.

Today, there are very few areas of the world that have not been explored and thoroughly detailed on geographic maps. At the same time, many of our worldview maps now have large blank areas where details used to appear.

How have our worldview maps come to be undrawn so?

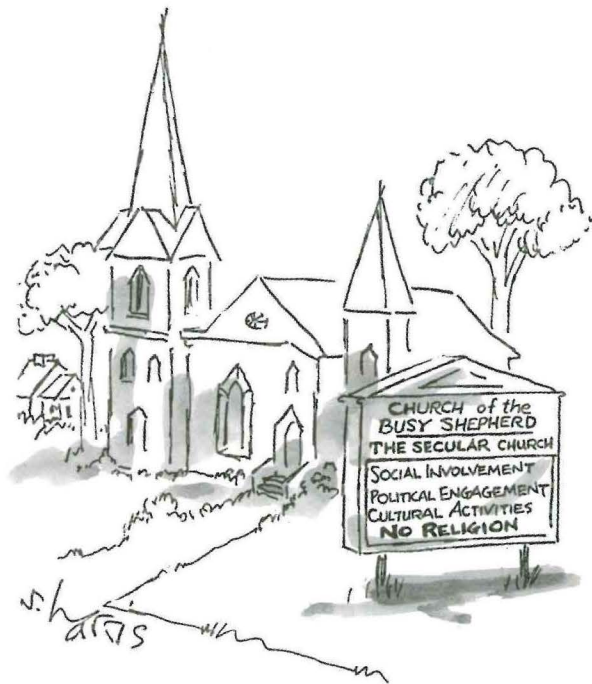
Urbanization

Urbanization certainly has played a part in changing how many of us view the world. We have a sense of meaning when we believe we have purpose or belong in some context—when we belong in structures like family, community, places of worship, workplace and clubs. Yet, as more and more of us move to urban centres, we often find ourselves not participating in, or even removed from such traditional structures. In these circumstances, all that we once “knew” appears to be more negotiable than when we shared a fixed idea of home and community.

In 1851, 13% of Canadians lived in cities. Today, almost 80% live in urban centres.

Secularization

Secularization often comes hand in hand with urbanization. Secularization is the process whereby the influence of religion on society grows smaller. The end of Sunday closing laws in Canada and women’s freedom to dress in Western styles in some Islamic countries are examples. Secularization has an important effect in the ethical area. In the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s Christianity heavily influenced Canadian life. As a result, people tended generally to agree about what was right and wrong. In the last half of the twentieth century, however, the influence of Christianity steadily declined. With this decline a view has developed that individuals should be able to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. Such a view leads to conflict because we do not all agree with one another.



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Definition

Institution—organization or society or groups established for some public or social purpose (e.g., doctors, politicians, places of worship, schools, hospitals); established law, custom, or system

Declining Trust in Institutions

Our *institutions* have always acted as fixed points for us. They have been structures within and around which we could live our lives. But many of us have recently lost faith in some of our institutions.

Research shows that most Canadians lack confidence in politicians and in government. Our trust has been undercut by corruption and broken promises. We also trust the media less than we used to. We often read of an individual reporter or an entire TV network that has had to confess either to plagiarizing or to making up stories.

A large percentage of Canadians have also lost respect for lawyers, doctors, teachers and other professionals. Although jokes about professionals may make us laugh, they indicate a change of mind about the trustworthiness of such people.

A large percentage of Canadians also seem to have lost faith in the formal institutions of organized religion. Attendance at places of worship in Canada dropped by about one half in the second half of the twentieth century. In Quebec, it dropped by 75% in just the 1960s and 1970s. Yet research shows that many Canadians continue to maintain strong interest in the spiritual dimensions of life. Research shows that 83% of Canadians believe there is a God or Ultimate Reality and 48% practise private prayer. However, we are less likely to pursue that interest through organized religions than at any time in our country's history.



"This shouldn't take too long!"

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Rappers, they educate through reality. They talk about how politicians be crooked, how TV and newspapers lie. They tell the truth about the world.

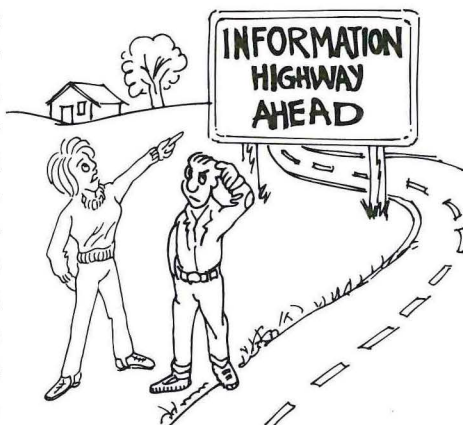
— SOLOMON RAY, AGE 17,
13TH GEN: ABORT, RETRY, IGNORE, FAIL?

What Do You Think?

Brainstorm with others why you think more Canadians seem to believe in God or Ultimate Reality than affiliate with religious institutions. Have someone record the ideas suggested. When you have finished brainstorming, look at the list of possible reasons. Does there appear to be a pattern in the reasons given? If so, what is it?

The Technological Revolution

The *technological revolution* has sped up so substantially that some of us now feel in danger of being left permanently behind. Advances in cable television, telecommunications, and computers—and the increasing degree to which these technologies are interconnected—seem to say strongly that we are moving into a new world. This concept of a new world helps lead many people to conclude that the world has



"I see the highway but I can't seem to find an on-ramp."

also changed in areas of relationships and morality. The technological revolution has introduced new ethical dilemmas as well, such as photocopying or recording of copyrighted material, the use of unlicensed software, or the deliberate spreading of hate and racism on the Internet.

Pluralism

The tasks of thinking ethically and living morally are also made more challenging by changes in the composition of society. For over two hundred years, Canada was a nation where Aboriginal Peoples and people largely of French and British descent co-existed, if not always that peaceably. During this period, the make-up of society was relatively constant, and the ethical beliefs of most Canadians likewise seemed generally fixed and agreed upon. However, immigration in the later twentieth century brought peoples from many races and representing many more cultures and religions to this country. That Canadian society is culturally and religiously diverse—that it is a pluralistic society—is no longer news. However, as the make-up of our society continues to change, many Canadians find it more difficult to believe anything is constant in the ethical realm. We must now decide how we are going to respond in a society where different groups consider widely varying patterns of life "normal," and where our own worldview is often challenged.

Technological Change: Scary or Not?

Do you think you and your friends have the same sense of being overwhelmed by technological change as some adults do? Why or why not?

Changing Our Worldview Map

① Suggest factors in addition to those just discussed that you think affect our worldview map. What changes do you think have taken place in your own region that have caused people to modify their worldviews? What factors have or are affecting your own worldview? Which factors do you think have been more influential in transforming how you understand the world? Why?

② Morality is the custom of one's country and the current feeling of one's peers. Cannibalism is moral in a cannibal country.

– SAMUEL BUTLER, BRITISH AUTHOR

■ What was moral 2000 years ago, is moral today.

– ROSEANNE SKEKE, ANTI-GAY MP FROM NOVA SCOTIA, QUOTED IN E. KAYE FULTON, "GAY AND PROUD: CANADA'S ONLY PUBLICLY GAY MP TELLS HIS STORY," *MACLEAN'S*

In small groups or as a class, discuss these quotations. Who do you think is "right"? Or is the truth somewhere between? Are there moral principles that remain valid, no matter what the circumstances? If so, which principles?

③ Somewhere along the line we still become accountable for ourselves; the factors that shaped us are moot.

– WENDY KAMINER, *I'M DYSFUNCTIONAL, YOU'RE DYSFUNCTIONAL: THE RECOVERY MOVEMENT AND OTHER SELF-HELP FASHIONS*

In small groups or as a class, discuss what point you think Kaminer is making. Do you agree with her conclusion? What meaning do you think her conclusion has for us as moral beings?



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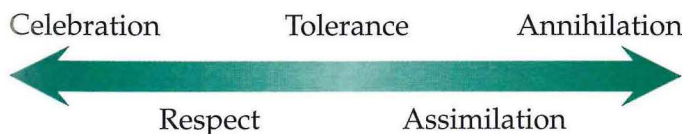
How Do We Respond to Challenges to Our Worldview?

Rapid changes in Canadian life are forcing all of us to recognize that there are different kinds of plurality. The most obvious kinds are cultural, racial and linguistic. Less visible are those differences among people's beliefs. Yet these differences are as important. In fact, they often serve as flashpoints between individuals or between groups of people.

We also experience what some philosophers call *associational plurality*. That is, we get together (associate) with different groups of people for our leisure, for our religious, political, and cultural activities, for our community meetings, our sports and for our work.

Some of these differences matter little either to society or to individuals. Whether we like pizza or not, for example, is rarely the subject of debate, and we assume it does not divide neighbour from neighbour or nation from nation. However, other differences often do divide: language, ethnic background, the status of the unborn, the use of taxes for war, what constitutes a fair profit, same-sex relationships. Some people suggest that a pluralistic society contains such profound differences that there is no way that disagreeing parties can find common ground.

When confronted with these kinds of differences, then, how do societies and individuals proceed? What responses do we make? Consider this continuum of possible responses to difference:



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QUESTA E LA VOSTRA BIBLIOTECA
ESTA ES SU BIBLIOTECA
ISTO E A SUA BIBLIOTECA
DES IST INRE BUCHEREI
EZ AZ ON KÖNYVTÁRA
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ΟΔΟΣ ΝΤΑΝΦΟΡΕ

Chapters 16, 19, 20 and 21
discuss how differences in matters
such as ethnic background and
religion can divide or unite people.

Definition

Tolerance: willingness to allow people whose opinions or ways of life differ from our own to express those opinions and live life in those different ways; recognizing the right of others to think, live or worship according to their own beliefs, and to refrain from taking action to prevent them from doing so, even if we disapprove of those ways of thinking and acting.

Tolerance is discussed in more detail in Chapter 19.

Of course, this continuum does not catch all the possible responses but rather illustrates a range. Let us look at an example to see what we mean. Several decades ago, left-handed persons were punished and told, or even forced, to *assimilate*—to convert—to right-handedness. Today, handedness is recognized as a characteristic to be respected. Some left-handed persons even view left-handedness as a gift to celebrate.

Of course, much sadder examples of the extreme response of *annihilation* abound. In the aftermath of European colonialism in Africa and after the breakdown of the Communist empire in Eastern Europe, civil wars have erupted based on the desire to annihilate differences.

In other settings, governments demonstrate the response of *celebration*, encouraging their citizens to celebrate important differences, in areas as diverse as race, ethnicity and language. Canada's policy of multiculturalism encourages such celebration. At the same time, many members of religious minorities in Canada believe that Canadian public schools attempt to annihilate the religious beliefs of their children by refusing to help fund religious schools or special religious classes.

Tolerance is perhaps the most difficult point on the continuum to understand. Living ethically requires that individuals and whole societies distinguish clearly those things that should be tolerated and those that should be celebrated. Today, many Canadians tend to think that tolerance is a virtue in itself, as if tolerating all differences is admirable. Yet, most of us do not want a society in which beating up people we disagree with or the ancient Chinese tradition of footbinding is tolerated. As well, too much talk of tolerance undermines the sense that some of our differences are worthy of celebration. Racial difference might inspire celebration—not simply tolerance—once we pause to wonder that there are so many unique kinds of people in the world.

When we consider the kinds of changes occurring around us, and our need to continue to make ethical and moral decisions in the midst of those changes, we need to ask what kind of worldview will serve us best. Some combination of *flexibility* and *strength* would help. We need *flexibility* because we live in a fluid situation and cannot predict with certainty what decision we will be called upon to make next. We need *strength* because we will always meet people who disagree with our approach to moral and ethical questions. Flexibility and strength seem to be in opposition to each other. Yet somehow they have to work together if we are to survive as moral and ethical beings in personal, social, institutional, and other settings.

How Different Are They?

Within families, in neighbourhoods and in classrooms, we often encounter disagreements about what is the moral thing to do in a given situation. Sometimes, people who largely agree about the “big” questions of Ultimate Reality and the meaning of life still disagree about ethical matters. How, then, can we expect people with massive religious and worldview differences to agree with one another?

Yet when we look closely at some of the teachings of world religions, we discover that followers of many religions cherish and believe many of the same things, especially in the moral and ethical realms. Most religions, for example, teach as one of many fundamental beliefs a variation of the Christian *golden rule*.

The “Golden Rule”

Sikhism

As thou deemest thyself, so deem others. Cause suffering to no one:

Thereby return to your True Home with honour.

– GURU GRANTH SAHIB, 1604 CE

Buddhism

I will act towards others exactly as I would act towards myself.

– UDANA-VARQA, C. 500 BCE

Islam

None of you “truly” believe, until he wishes for his brothers what he wishes for himself.

– A SAYING OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD RECORDED BY ACCEPTED NARRATOR AL-BUKHARI, 7TH CENTURY CE

The Bahá’í Faith

He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself.

– WRITINGS OF BAHÁ’Ú’LLAH, C. 1870 CE

Christianity

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

– BIBLE, MATTHEW 7:12, C. 90 CE

Judaism and Christianity

Love your neighbour as yourself.

– BIBLE, LEVITICUS 19:18 C. 1000-500 BCE

Judaism

What is harmful to yourself do not to your fellow men. That is the whole of the law and the remainder is but commentary.

– THE TALMUD, C. 500 CE, 5AB.31A, QUOTING RABBI HILLEL WHO LIVED C. 100 CE

Hinduism

This is the sum of duty: Do naught to others Which, if done to thee, could cause thee pain.

– THE MAHABHARATA, C. 150 BCE

How Should We Respond to Differences?

① In recent years, Canadians have debated whether freedom of speech should be absolute or should be limited. Should we celebrate, respect, tolerate, or annihilate (prohibit) the right to make racist remarks, for example? In a full-class group or in small groups, list the pros and cons for both sides of the argument. Indicate which moral principles governed your selection of pros and cons.

② To what degree do you think teachers should be free to talk about or to promote their own views about political questions, economic policies, religious convictions, and ethical standards? Is it possible for teachers to teach without bringing their own views into the classroom?

Another of the virtues taught in common by most of the world's religions is honesty. Most world religions also teach that there is a God or Ultimate Reality, that we have a purpose and that we have a duty to care for our neighbours.

What Value Do the Golden Rule and Honesty Have?

- ① Discuss why you think so many religions think the golden rule and honesty are so important. Suggest how these teachings tie in to living ethically and peaceably with others in society.
- ② A commentary on the times is that the word "honesty" is now preceded by "old-fashioned."

– LARRY WOLTERS

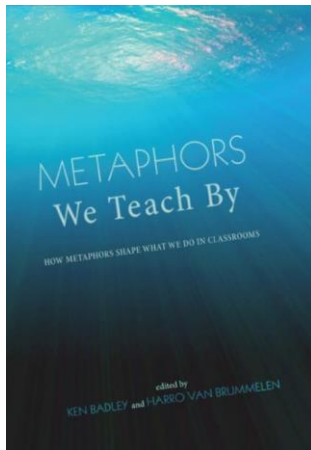
In small groups, discuss what this quotation means. Do you agree with the writer's conclusion? Explain your answer.

Throughout *Worldviews*, we look at how religions and spiritual beliefs approach ethical decision making, and we will see similarities and some differences. In some ways, learning about a religion that is new to us is a bit like getting to know someone. It takes time, and openness, and thought. We cannot come to know someone simply by looking at his or her outward appearance. Neither should we judge a religion and its teachings just by observing its outward signs and ceremonies.

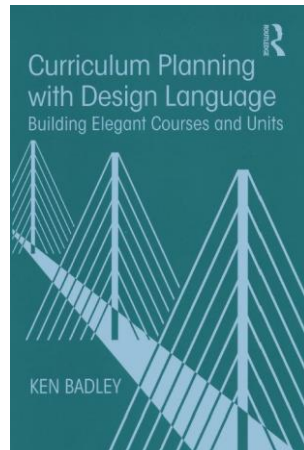
As we have seen in this chapter, each of us comes to understand the world from our own point of view. The worldview we develop depends on our ongoing experiences, where we live, how we are brought up, and what religious faith or spiritual beliefs we have been taught. Learning about different world religions helps us to find out how other people see and understand the world and how they would guide relationships among people within that world.

Learning to understand the teachings of religions other than our own does not mean that we have to accept their beliefs. However, we should try to respect other people and the reasons they believe and act as they do. We will probably find they are as sincere as we are and that they consider the foundations for their beliefs to be as solid as we consider our own. Further, we may discover something new about ourselves, about the world, about right and wrong, and about living and dying as we learn to ask about our own beliefs, standards, and faith.

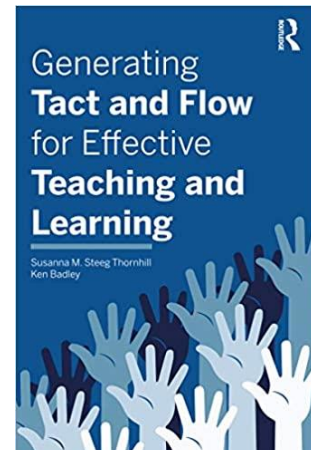
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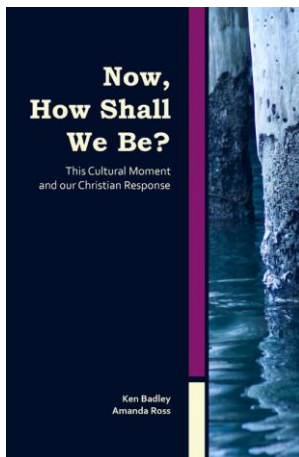
2011



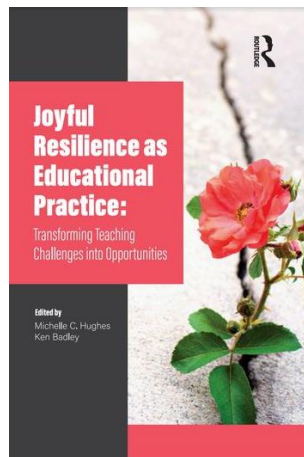
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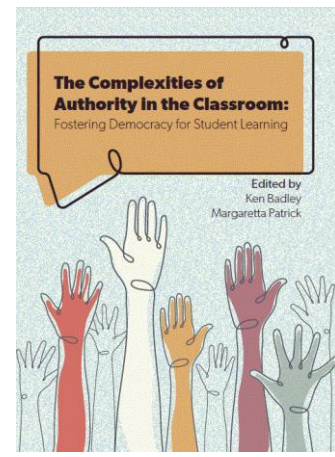
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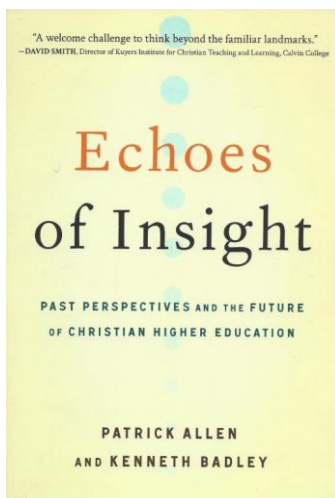


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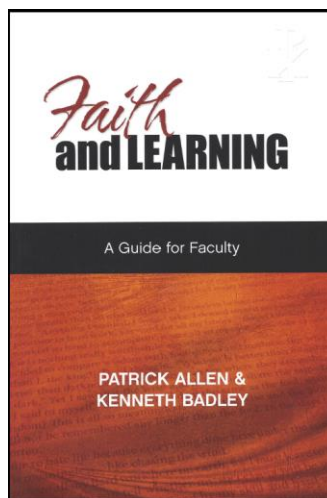


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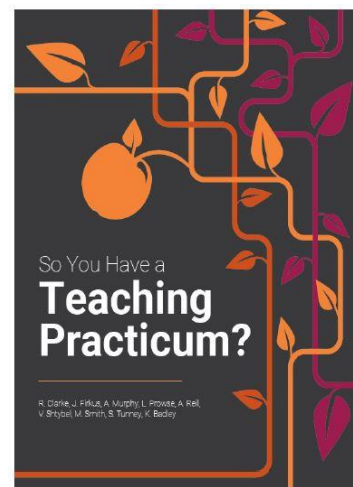


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2017

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