

A Letter to My Daughter About What We Believe

As promised, I shall try to describe to you what I see as our worldview.

In 1968 when we came to Australia, the word “worldview” (or world outlook) was not very much in use in English. In Slovak or in German it has been a pretty basic concept for years. Today, worldview has become more common also in English. Just to make sure you understand, this is how it is described in my dictionary:

Worldview means “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world, a framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual interprets the world and interacts with it”.

You can see that it is somehow related to a more complicated concept of religion, and you will not be surprised that my — our family's — worldview is religious. There are non-religious worldviews — their carriers usually call themselves atheists — who pretend not to have anything to do with religion, with religious beliefs. Well, that is true to some extent, although their worldviews have instead something that plays *psychologically* a similar function as religion, a kind of *ersatz-religion*, artificial religion. I might come to that later.

So what is religion? I could again quote from my dictionary, however I am sure you are more familiar with that word than with worldview. So I shall start by stating — as I did in the thread when discussing the concept, mostly with atheists (c.f. <http://forum.onlineopinion.com.au/thread.asp?discussion=2952#68780>) — that *religion is like that “elephant” in the old Indian story about the blind men and the elephant*.

[In case you do not know the story: In various versions of the tale, a group of blind men (or men in the dark) touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each one touches a different part, but only one part, such as the side, the tail, the tusk etc. Then they compare notes on what they felt, and find it hard to imagine what was the object they all were experiencing, since each one of them had a different idea of it based on what he perceived. The story is used to indicate that something might look different, depending on what perspective, what angle one approaches it from, and only a “higher insight” can hope to put the partial perspectives together to arrive at the subject the “blind men” were “touching” from different angles.]

In case of religion, there are seven “blind men”,

the philosopher (asking what can exist and can be known to exist),
the ethicist (studying morals, what is good and what is bad),
the (evolutionary) psychologist,
the anthropologist (studying ancient cultures and the myths associated with them),
the sociologist,
the biological evolutionist, and
the historian.

They all can agree that there indeed is a phenomenon called religion but — unless they have faith — are confused about what is its purpose or why it is there at all.

There is one thing one has to keep in mind when speaking about religion (well, I mean in our Western, essentially Christian, context): the English language can distinguish between religious *faith* (a person's religious disposition or state of mind) and religious *beliefs* (statements that a religious person believes to be true). The German or Slovak languages cannot make this distinction, they have the same word for both. Actually, even in English, the Creed goes like "I believe IN one God, the Almighty etc. ..." indicating *faith*, rather than "I believe that an Almighty God exists ..." which is a proposition Christians, of course, *believe* to be true, but when praying use the former wording.

There are many aspects of a worldview, what is right, what is wrong, how to be good — i.e. what are the moral norms we adhere to, or should adhere to, how to behave in particular situations, etc. Let me concentrate here only on what we believe from the philosopher's position, i.e. *what we believe EXISTS*, never forgetting the perspectives of the other six "blind men".

Of course, we all believe that we exist, and so does the material world around us. Here, I must explain what I understand under material (or physical) world. It is everything that we can access directly through our senses, or through instruments (microscope, telescope etc.), or through mathematical constructions that are part of physical theories confirmed through observation/experiments. The latter I added to cover things like superstrings or other universes — with their own, completely different space-times and/or laws of physics (thus not simply other galaxies that can be seen through a telescope) — as suggested by some recent, still speculative, theories. Should science once tell us that there is definitely a multiverse — consisting of many universes, of which one is our universe which in turn consists of many galaxies, where our Milky Way, containing many suns, is one of them — then this multiverse would be what I call the material world.

Essentially, there are only two possible presuppositions about reality, about what actually exists. Either

- (a) the *material world* is all there is, it has no cause and no purpose ("nobody created it"), alternatively, it is its own cause and purpose¹,
- or
- (b) the material world does have a cause and purpose for its existence, which must be given by Something *that is not reducible to the material world*, usually called the *Divine* (different religions describe it differently, often it is seen as part of a wider, *spiritual world*) that has no cause and no purpose ("nobody created It").

Actually, because of *consciousness* (or awareness) — i.e. the quality that makes us, humans, distinct from other creatures (as fuzzy as this division within the evolution chain might be) — there is also a third world, our *mental world* (that plays an important role in how we perceive everything, i.e. in epistemology). Everybody is aware of it, so nobody doubts its "existence".

¹ "The (material) cosmos is all there is, or was, or ever will be" (Carl Sagan).

Atheists are those who believe (a) ², i.e. no Divine, and the mental is reducible to (emanates solely from) the material; *theists* are those who believe (b), where the Divine is reducible neither to the material nor to the mental worlds but is *related to both*. Agnostics are those who sit on the fence, do not want to commit themselves to a particular belief on these matters. ³

Christians, Jews and Muslims are theists in the proper meaning of the word, they are usually referred to as *monotheists*; they believe that the Divine includes the qualities of a “superior person” ⁴, they believe in a personal God, Yahweh or Allah. There are also some (not all) Buddhists who are theists, believe in a divine, they call it the world of spirits that is irreducible to the material, but they do not see there a superior person that we call God. Hindus have many gods, but one could argue that they actually have only many manifestations of one God. I shall later return to how we Christians see the Divine.

Many silly questions atheists ask theists, in particular Christians, to tease them have a tacit assumption that God belongs to the material world (since they cannot imagine any other world). To ask for *evidence* for His existence (as you ask for evidence for the existence of some sort of bacteria or a newly discovered galaxy) is like asking for a mathematical proof for the existence of black sheep. Mathematics can prove only formal existence (e.g. of a solution of this or that equation). And what scientists — atheist or not — call (scientific) evidence by its very definition applies only to phenomena or features of the material world.

There is *no rational way to decide a priori in favour of the one or the other of the pre-suppositions* (a) or (b), since they are the basic presuppositions, axioms, of the rational construction of one’s worldview. There are only *arguments*, more or less rational, that can *support* one’s preconceived beliefs. Only those holding the same beliefs (theists or atheists respectively) find them convincing. One of the strongest arguments for the atheist alternative (a) is what is known as the Occam’s razor principle: “When competing hypotheses are equal in other respects, one should select the hypothesis that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulates to answer the question.”

For a believer (theist) these “hypotheses” (a) and (b) are not of equal weight (so Occam’s razor does not apply): his/her preference for (b) comes from a personal (religious) experience or just simple marvel at the world around him/her that he/she cannot simply accept as being without cause and without purpose. However, one can-not convey by

² “An atheist ... is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no super-natural creative intelligence” (Richard Dawkins).

³ Of course, I had to simplify things. For instance, John Polkinghorne suggests a more subtle subdivision or “meta-physical divide” of the alternative (a):

“Strong reductionists” (like e.g. Richard Dawkins?) who maintain that, “the true account of reality lies solely at the lowest level, with the other levels in the hierarchy of complexity being just complex corollaries of what lies beneath.” (*Exploring Reality, the Intersection of Science and Religion, Yale Univ. Pr. 2005*, p. 8), and

“Emergentists” for whom “the whole exceeds the sum of the parts, so that it would be absurdly inappropriate to call a constituent account a Theory of Everything. They point to the degree of conceptual independence that exists between the various levels of the hierarchy of sciences. It is clear that the fitness of an organism for survival in an ecological setting is not an idea that can usefully be transcribed into statements about collections of quarks, gluons and electrons.” (ibid, p. 9)

⁴ That is, that “person” as we humans understand the concept, is an adequate “model” of the Divine. This, of course, like any models, should not be identified with what it is trying to model.

purely rational argument this experience, this marvel, to an atheist who for whatever reasons has no sense of it (or if, he/she is like the oriental fool who “when a finger points to the moon can look only at the finger”). Like you cannot convey to a blind man the beauty of a sunset, or to a deaf man that of a nice piece of music. We can find many arguments that help us to understand and maintain our faith — St Anselm (1033-1109) spoke of “faith seeking understanding” — but we have to keep in mind that they are not convincing for an atheist: as I wrote before, you cannot “prove the existence of God” like you can prove a mathematical theorem, neither can you find scientific “evidence” for His existence like you can for the existence of objects or phenomena of the material world ⁵.

Of course, this does not mean that an atheist cannot change his/her worldview, i.e. convert to, say, Christianity — there are legions of those who did — only that this conversion cannot be induced solely by rational arguments. We Christians call the “ingredient” (acting on the psychological, not logical, level) that can lead to such conversion (of heart and mind) God’s Grace.

So this is the *first step* in our worldview, the first thing we believe, underlying all other beliefs: that there is a Divine realm that touches upon both the material and mental worlds but is reducible to neither of them. This part of our beliefs we share with all Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, some Buddhists, Aborigines and adherents of other so-called primitive religions. Of course, there are other things, other steps in our worldview that gradually separate us from other belief systems, hence from other faiths.

Here are explicitly the **FOUR STEPS** — as I see them — leading to what we, meaning educated Catholics, hold as the rational basis of our faith. You can view them as concentric circles that gradually describe what we have in common (and where we differ) with other believers:

Step 1: There is a Divine Something that is the carrier of the cause and purpose of the existence of the material world, but is NOT PART OF it, is not reducible to it. It exists both outside and inside of our mental world but is reducible to neither the mental nor the material world. Thus we cannot accept that the material world (that we can “touch” and try to understand through science), including ourselves, is just there without cause and purpose. Not only theists and some Buddhists, but to some degree also deists⁶, or perhaps even pantheists⁷ believe this.

Of special interest might be *Albert Einstein*, who certainly was not a theist, with his:

I am not an atheist. I don't think I can call myself a pantheist. The problem is too vast for our limited minds. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with many book in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That it seems to me, is the

⁵ Although even this is not as simple as some people with a naive approach to philosophy of science might think.

⁶ Deism is a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, specifically of a Creator, who does not intervene in the universe (thus you cannot pray to Him, and He is no moral authority). Many scientists believe in this passive and remote “God”.

⁷ They have a concept of God but equate Him with the material universe.

attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws but only dimly understand these laws.”

See also his famous dictum “Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.”

Step 2: Since we believe that the Divine is also the cause and purpose of the existence of us, humans, it ought to stand "above" us, hence it should encompass the traits that place us above other creatures, that make us human. So we believe that this Divine has the *properties of a Person we can communicate with* (in prayer), who interferes with our inner most, a Person that is more powerful and more knowledgeable than what we can imagine (i.e. omnipotent and omniscient). We call this Person God (Yahweh, Allah etc.). A three year old child can communicate with his/her father as if he was also a three year old, although the child somehow feels that dad is more than he/she can comprehend. Similarly, we can communicate with God as if He was a person like us, although we somehow feel that He is more than just a human person, more than whom or what we can comprehend. This second step makes us monotheists. So are all Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other believers.

Step 3: We believe that this God somehow revealed Himself to us in the Bible — the Old, but mainly the New Testament. More importantly, we believe that God revealed Himself also by realising Himself in Jesus, who thus was a human like all of us, but special in that He was God's "projection" (the proper name is God's Incarnation), both human and divine, the Son of God becoming human as the Church officially calls this Incarnation (If you liked the previous metaphor, so this God-Incarnate is like the dad sitting down and playing with the three year old, so that he/she can face and better understand him). Or, if you like, you can see in God-becoming-one-of-us-in-the-person-of-Jesus-Christ His wish to make it easier for us to climb the painful ladder of evolution towards something we are not yet able to understand. Here by “us” I mean individuals as well as humanity as we know it today.

This is the basis of what makes us Christians, though — as you know — there are more details about what Christians believe, how they see God. For instance, we believe this God is structured as a Trinity, meaning that God wants us to see Him "split" into a God-Creator (Father), God-Incarnate (Son, who took upon himself the human form of Jesus) and also God-Teacher (Holy Spirit). This Step 3 represents the *Core of our religious beliefs*, although it — our “Christian model of Divinity” — is probably more culture-determined (even more so Step 4 below) than the previous two.

Step 4. As Roman Catholics we believe that Jesus commissioned one of his pupils (apostles), namely Peter, to continue in His work by founding a Church (later largely helped by Paul), and that the long succession of Popes over two millennia are the heirs of this commission. As you know, not all Christians believe in this special thread of direct successors to Peter (and Jesus), so there are many Churches that evolved over history by either splitting the original Church into our Roman Catholic and Orthodox (Greek, Russian etc.) Churches, or by revolting against the Pope and creating their own independent Protestant Churches.

I would say that the first two steps define our *worldview orientation*, the third step our *religion*, and the fourth our *religious orientation*. At each level you could ask WHY: why

should I believe this or that. I think the first two steps are easier to defend, although, as I already said, there are no procedures that “prove” our worldview as right and the opposite as wrong.

Let me quote here the dedication my father wrote into a prayer book he gave me for my twelfth birthday (I still have it, unfortunately all in Slovak):

"Remember, there are no unbelievers, because those who do not believe in God must believe thousands of hypotheses that are much less probable and much more incredible than the only, eternal and personal God, who provides an explanation of all mysteries of nature and man."

Today one would probably formulate it differently since atheists do not accept God as an “explanation” of anything. They are right if by that one means “scientific explanation”: some people indeed do not need any other explanation except for what they believe are scientific explanations, and that is fair enough. We, believers, accept these scientific explanations but do not believe they are all there is to understand reality and ourselves. We maintain that there are different levels of explanation, like there are different levels of existence, so an explanation of what we humans are, what we feel, think and do with our lives needs a higher explanation than what science can offer.

Many people will query the belief behind these four steps for various, often just emotional, reasons. Often people — including Catholic (or just Christian) apologists — do not realise that ***there is no point to argue about Step n with somebody who does not accept Step n-1.***

Therefore also in my discussions with atheists I concentrate only on Step 1, perhaps hinting at Step 2, because, it is pointless to argue about e.g. this or that quote from the Bible or this or that teaching of the Church with somebody who can understand it only superficially: not accepting Step 2 he/she cannot see why the Bible or the Pope should be accepted as an authority going beyond the literal interpretation. So when an atheist comes up with his/her objections to what Christians believe I would dismiss them by comparing them to objections to statements like $(a+b)^2=a^2+2ab+b^2$, on the basis that “everybody knows that you can add only numbers, not letters”. It takes some sophistication to understand algebra, and it takes some sophistication if you want really deeply understand what Christians believe.

The good news is that the Jesus message is not about the need to have deep philosophical *insights* into what He taught (although if one wishes, one can have them as well, especially before one wants to criticise or ridicule them) but about *following* Him with your life, to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind”. But that is a different topic, going beyond what we believe EXISTS.

Your father