It is Time to Stop Talking about Religion **[1]**

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In the second half of the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Voltaire believed that they were living in the "twilight of Christianity". They looked forward to a time—perhaps the following century—when religion had made way for rational secular thought. A hundred years later, however, this had not yet happened.

But the enlightened were still heartened when Nietzsche predicted the "death" of God in the following century. In this millennium, the likes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have continued making the same predictions. However, based on current projections [2], it's safe to say that religion is not going anywhere soon. At present, orthodox Judaism is growing in Israel and the USA. Since the 1970s, Islam has been experiencing a revival. And Christianity also continues to grow: while it is losing ground in places such as Europe, it is growing rapidly in Africa and "atheistic" societies such as the former USSR and China.

Despite this, I think it is time we stop talking about religion.

The word "religion" has become loaded. It is generally associated with the words "faith" and "belief", which have also undergone a metamorphosis. Today they are almost never recognised by the secular world to mean something which is (almost) certain; rather it refers to the hope of what cannot be proven, is baseless and uncertain.

What is a religion, exactly? Is it a faith in some deity? That would be problematic for Buddhism, which does not believe in a deity. Is it simply having "faith"? Atheists get very defensive when one tries to label scientific naturalism (which is the foundation for most modern atheists) as a religion, even though it genuinely is only a presupposition. Is it something that is only ancient and historic? Pastafarians and Jedis [3] will beg to differ.

Talking about religion makes many people uncomfortable. At best these people fear long, boring rituals which they need to endure when supporting a married couple or family members of a deceased loved one. At worst, the mere mention conjures up thoughts of endless arguments over abortion, same-sex marriage, terrorism, freedom of speech, judgmentalism and hell talk. Some people may be happy, for example, to talk about Jesus, but not with Christians.

Conversations may be more constructive (and even more interesting and insightful) if we rather consider each other's worldview. In his book *The Universe Next Door*1, James Sire says that:

> A worldview is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it. This vision need not be fully articulated: it may be so internalised that it goes largely unquestioned; it may not be explicitly developed into a systematic conception of life; it may not be theoretically deepened into a philosophy; it may

> not even be codified into creedal form; it may be greatly refined through cultural-historical development. Nevertheless, this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and interpretative framework by which order and disorder are judged; it is the standard by which reality is managed and pursued; it is the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns.

Sire also writes:

> A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundations on which we live and move and have our being.

Everyone (with the possible exception of true Nihilists) have a worldview. This is an inescapable fact. For the devout Christian, it is Christian theism. For the atheist, it may be scientific naturalism. For many in the East, it is pantheistic monism. One will even find people who carry a specific religious label such as 'Christian' or 'Pastafarian', but (the truth is) they do hold a worldview which is actually incongruent with that religion.

According to Sire, we can discover someone's worldview by asking a number of questions:

1. What is really real? (That is, the prime reality)
2. What is the nature of the world around us? (The external reality)
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

When these questions have been explored, one can measure the consistency with which someone lives out their worldview by asking another question: What personal, life-orientating core commitments are consistent with this worldview?

It might not be the most constructive to sit someone down and interrogate them with these questions. However, if you have a sincere desire to discover someone else's worldview, you will work to try and discover their views on these questions over time. Also understanding why someone holds specific views are important as well.

Let us to seek to have dialogue, contemplate and evaluate our worldviews to understand each other and point one another to where Truth may be found.

This article was originally published on the Encompass blog *[4] of the* Scope Magazine *[5] website on* 13 October 2015 *[6].*

- 1. Sire, James W. The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue *[7]*. 5th ed. Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
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