Be True to Yourself **[1]**

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Society today values it for one to be “true to yourself”, meaning to express your beliefs and desires without being repressed or directed by others. At the same time, many people have commented on how the world seems more divided today than ever before. People have certainly been divided in deep ways before (and not too long ago either): one nation versus another; one race of people against another; communists versus capitalists. But today—seemingly more than ever before—people truly are *polarised*. On the left-right or liberal-conservative spectra, more people find themselves at extreme opposites, and those in the middle are derided for not holding to an extreme.

People find themselves at these extremes because they perceive a real danger and threat in the opposing viewpoint, and are either unwilling or unable to see or reason about a particular point from another perspective.

We hold the viewpoints which we do for various reasons. We might have been personally affected and reason from a first-hand basis, or we reached a logical conclusion through our reasoning, or we had a strong emotional reaction to a situation which has left a deep impression on us. No matter how we arrived at our particular viewpoint, it was through a profoundly personal experience, and it will most likely be difficult for us to change our perspective.

It is entirely possible—and even common—for people to hold contradicting viewpoints. Or, someone can *profess* one viewpoint while actually believing another (without the intention of deceiving others). This can lead to difficult personal situations, and send confusing messages to other people.

A perspective on how Christians should think about extreme and opposing positions has already been given in a previous article [2]. The purpose of this article is to be honest and authentic about one’s worldview.

For this article I would like to recall two things from my article about worldviews [3], namely that according to Sire1:

1. everyone has a worldview, and
2. people may not be able to articulate what their worldview is.

Keeping these two points in mind, the rest of this article will explore two facets on which one needs to reflect to understand oneself and other people.

Recognise Your Own Worldview

Some people are confident and expressive about their worldview. The Apostle's Creed [4], in fact, is intended to be a summary statement of the Christian worldview2. If someone thoughtfully and sincerely agrees with every statement of the creed, then they are considered to be an orthodox Christian theist. On the other end of the spectrum, a nihilist can bluntly say that they do not believe in any higher or supernatural power, that materialism is true, that there is no purpose in life, and all search for ultimate meaning is futile3.

Not all worldviews have such succinct summaries, or even are fully formalised. Some people may believe in a mix of ideas. For example, they might accept traditional Western moral values and elements of Christian theism, but also believe in Karma (a pervading and immaterial energy which binds all living things), or even reincarnation. Such people are not fully Christian theists, but they also are not necessarily fully pantheists.

Returning to the example of the Apostle's Creed, it becomes difficult when someone does not thoughtfully and sincerely agree with every statement. If someone finds that they agree with all the statements in the Apostle's Creed, but, for example, in their heart of hearts have an uneasiness to accept the ones referring to Jesus's resurrection and ascension, then that person is more likely merely a theist; perhaps even a deist. They might still think of themselves as Christian. They might believe that other Christians, similar to themselves, only say the creeds as a matter of habit or tradition without actually believing every single word of it. Such people (who profess one worldview but do not fully believe it) can end up being befuddled about what their worldview really is.

Discovering what one's worldview is requires intense introspection and honesty with oneself. Not everyone is comfortable doing that, because it brings up difficult questions which demand an answer. It can also lead to conflict with other people. If someone realises and finally admits that they do not believe in (for example) the Christian worldview, they can come into conflict with family and friends, and suffering agonising personal losses because of it4.

However, I believe that it is a matter of personal honesty and credibility to discover your own worldview and to be able to express it. If one finds oneself "on the fence" over a set of competing worldviews, it will lead to a journey (often difficult) of discovery, but it can also be immensely fulfilling. And confronting different worldviews can also open the door to another reality: realise that others have their own worldviews, and which may be different from what you actually believe.

This does not have to be a lonely, private journey: it would actually be good to talk to different people and explore their reasons for believing whatever it is that they believe, and to understand where and why your beliefs are different from theirs.

Realise That Others Have A (Possibly Different) Worldview

It might seem obvious that different people believe different things. But, without actually being intentional about it, some people may not actually believe so.

I recently saw a TV programme where they were exposing psychics as fakes. They presented compelling evidence that the people who were presented5 on the show were fake. However, throughout there were several underlying assumptions:

1. all psychics are fake
2. the is no such thing as extra sensory perception
3. science would be able to measure something like extra sensory perception
4. people who believe in psychics are gullible, stupid, or emotionally vulnerable in some way to hold unto such a false belief

It is not my intention to defend psychics or extra sensory perception, or to speculate on whether such things could be true. The point is that a particular worldview—scientific naturalism—was taken for granted, and at no point was any consideration made that a belief to the contrary could be credible, or even that scientific naturalism could be false. This kind of self-assuredness, particularly

about the infallibility of scientific naturalism [5], is incredibly popular and pervasive today.

Many people are enthusiastically pluralistic6. They celebrate the rich diversity of different cultures and religions. But they are wary to accept any of them as *true*; unless it agrees with what they themselves believe. There are two sides to this reality. The first is that it is generally commendable to be tolerant, curious and accepting of cultures which are different from your own. On the other hand, it is curious to, at the same time, be indignant of, or hostile towards, their sincerely held beliefs.

It is important to recognise that other people sincerely hold to their beliefs, even if it contradicts your view of reality. Such people are not therefore inferior in their intellect for doing so, and may even have a stronger philosophical grounding for their beliefs than you do. A Christian having a discussion with a Buddhist can make a compelling argument for Christian theism, which the Buddhist then can summarily reject, because their philosophical framework is constructed in a radically different way: the very meaning of truth, logic and reason are called into question.

Conclusion

In order to navigate today's highly polarised world, two things are invaluable: really being honest about your own beliefs and values, and recognising that other people are sincere and honest about theirs. For the former, it is important to realise that you do not have to fit into a neat category. For the latter, one needs to recognise that one's own position is not necessarily superior to that of others. One is also required to have patience and understanding when talking to people who think and believe differently. That does not mean that we should not have discussions and try to persuade others to a view which we sincerely hold, but we need to do it respectfully and with understanding. And—scariest of all—we need to be open to be changed by others. Doing so does not mean that we are not being true to ourselves, but instead that we are actually intellectually honest enough with ourselves to ask difficult questions about reality and explore truths which may be uncomfortable.

- 1. Sire, James W. The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue *[6]*. 5th ed. Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- 2. Indeed, the root of the word creed, "credo", means "I believe". However, the Apostle's Creed is not intended to be a comprehensive and exhaustive worldview summary. There are many aspects which it does not address. For example, it does not propound a particular view of human free will, about gender roles, a theory of educations, etc. But it does present the core tenants of a view of the nature of reality and, taken together with Scripture, can be used as building blocks to reason about a wide span of nature. Other creeds, such as the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, have the same purpose, but go into more "technical" details about particular elements already stated in the Apostle's Creed.
- 3. Some nihilists are more nuanced than this, but this is essentially the nihilistic position.
- 4. The same is true for many other communities which strongly hold to a certain worldview-tradition; most notably Islam, where some people can be targeted for murder for leaving the religion.
- 5. I have previously read a report that this show, while promoting itself as credible, selectively include and leave out certain interviews to most effectively promote their own preconceived agenda.
- 6. The word "pluralism" has different meanings. On the one hand, it can refer simply to the existence of diversity of beliefs. On the other hand, it can refer to the acceptance of diverse beliefs as all being true. While the latter use is common today, I am using it in the former sense.

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