



Worldviews:

COMPETING PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

When I went on my first field trip to Pakistan in 2008 in order to interview members and leaders of the nascent Taliban movement, I received some advice from one of the veterans within the field of comparative religious violence Mark Juergensmeyer, based on his own personal experiences. He encouraged me to take seriously and respect the perspective of those I was encountering (Sheikh 2016). Not out of a strategic interest to trick them to “spill their guts,” but to take interest in the perspective they represented. Precisely this approach became the starting point for some of our conversations that have continued up until today: how do you immerse yourself into the worldviews of those you are trying to understand? What are the merits of thinking about worldviews?

In this essay, I describe what has, until now, come out of this. I have worked on two intertwined concepts and frameworks for thinking; first sociotheology (Juergensmeyer & Sheikh 2013; Juergensmeyer 2013) and secondly worldviews (Sheikh and Juergensmeyer 2019). While the first was initially an identification of a scholarly approach that integrates theology and social sciences, the second collaboration developed into a methodological elaboration of how scholars can embrace an insider-oriented understanding of how their religious research subjects view the world, published in the volume *Entering Religious Minds – The Social Study of Worldviews* (2019). Aspects of the points presented in the sections below repeat and draw from the above-mentioned publications in an attempt to summarize the collective contributions.

SOCIOTHEOLOGY – A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT WORLDVIEWS

The perspective that we termed “sociotheology” is based on three foundations: an empirical observation within comparative studies of religious violence, a trans-disciplinary approach to connect theology with sociology, and a series of epistemological revolutions across fields.

First, our empirical observation was that militant actors affiliated to different religious traditions justify their acts through a particular *religious understanding* of *social reality*. Work on comparative fundamentalism that goes back to the 1990s (e.g., the Chicago project on Comparative Fundamentalism), Juergensmeyer’s own work (e.g., *Terror in the Mind of God*), and individual case studies (Jerryson 2011; Mahmood 1997; Sheikh 2016) illustrate the necessity for a better understanding of the way that diverse religio-political actors interpret the social reality that they are part of, and the lenses they apply to make sense of it.

Second, sociotheology was based on the observation of a *trend* that we appreciated across social science disciplines where scholars had been hospitable to theological points of view. Within the fields of religious studies and the history of religion, religious perspectives are a natural part of the objects of their studies. However only a few scholars who study religion have been mindful of the social implications of religious ideas. These have included comparativists such as Ninian Smart and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. The political significance of religious thinking has been a theme of scholars from a variety of theological traditions as noted in our joint publication (see Juergensmeyer & Sheikh 2013).

Finally, sociotheology in our understanding represents a *methodological* approach that has been shaped by epistemological revolutions emerging across disciplinary borders. For example, as we have described in earlier work (Sheikh and Juergensmeyer 2013), the Strong Programme associated with the Edinburgh School of the Sociology of Science holds that all human knowledge and ideas, including religious ones, contain some social components in their formative process. Another relevant methodological revolution had come from within discursive psychology and social psychology, which dissolved the mind–body dichotomy, and basically challenged the image of the individual as possessing an isolated, inner side that cannot be verified by positivist test methods, and hence is not of interest to scientific understandings (Edwards and Potter 1992; Harré and Gillet 1994). Thus, according to this standpoint, beliefs cannot be isolated or identified outside the context in which they are expressed, and the mind (e.g., beliefs, emotions, attitudes, intentions) only comes into existence “in the performance of actions” (Harré and Gillet 1994: 22).¹ The same sort of bridge-building between inside and outside perspectives has taken place within the field of theology, where George Lindbeck (1984) has argued against taking religious doctrines as truth claims objectively pointing to realities, but also against holding doctrines to be expressions of inner feelings, motivations and experiences of the divine, thereby approaching truth as something prelinguistic. Instead, he argued that language shapes experience more than the other way around (Juergensmeyer & Sheikh 2013).² In our view, the drawing closer of the fields of psychology and theology (mind and belief) and sociology (context and interactions) as two poles of the same discursive dynamics thus contributed to eroding a stonewall dichotomy between theology and the social sciences and opened a space for sociotheology.³

¹ The dynamic view on the mind–body relationship is part of what has been called the “second cognitive revolution” that challenged the idea that mental and psychological entities exist in a self-contained way. Instead, it brought forward the idea of socio-mental practice and positioned these seemingly psychological entities out in the social world of action and interaction.

² Lindbeck (1984) has developed a “cultural-linguistic” concept of religious doctrines by bridging anthropology and a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language that probed the relationship between language and culture, on one hand, and experience and belief, on the other.

³ In our work (Sheikh and Juergensmeyer 2013), we outlined guidelines for conducting “good sociotheology,” which included demarcating an epistemic worldview, bracketing assumptions about the truth of a worldview, entering into an epistemic worldview, conducting informative conversations, identifying narrative structures, and locating social contexts.

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

Worldview analysis is relevant beyond the narrow field of religious violence as it nurtures sensitivity towards the situatedness of perspectives. It challenges claims of “objective” depictions of the world, threats, or the use of rationality in *singularis* that seem to underlie repressive security policies. As described in my concluding chapter of *Entering Religious Minds* (2019), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790) introduced the concept of *weltanschauung*, emphasizing the human mind’s ability to make sense and to create order in a complex world that is full of endless possibilities for perception of the infinite character of the world (Kant 1952: 111). Though this philosophical understanding that stresses the human need for meaning and order has been applied in different ways across disciplines (Sheikh 2019), in our use of the term, worldview analysis represents an insider-oriented attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview: its social, ethical, political and spiritual aspects; and how they come together into a coherent whole. It is concerned with the situated perceptions of those who articulate them and is hence close to the methodologies dominant within ethnography and anthropology. In our work on sociotheology *epistemic worldviews* are described as *one of* the focal points of a sociotheological approach – a concept that draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of episteme, the structure of knowledge that is the basis of an understanding of how reality works, and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, the social location of shared understandings about the world and how it should work (Juergensmeyer and Sheikh 2013). While the concept of episteme is related to broader trends in culture and society, a worldview is often applied more narrowly to the outlook of individuals or social groups.

The concept of worldview brings with it a different set of assumptions than ideology. In my previous review of the term (Sheikh 2019), it appears that ideology is often applied as a theoretical concept that is identical to the Marxist understanding of ideology, i.e., as a “distorted vision of reality” or as a superstructure that hides “the reality.” In this usage, ideology is an illusion, a false consciousness, which prevents people from coming to terms with capitalist organization and thus leads to alienation (Marx 1872). Somehow, paradoxically, this understanding of perceptions, often leads to elitist analysis that is interested in how ideology is “used” by manipulative actors, leaving the manipulated little agency. Overall, this perspective makes ideology irrelevant in itself or relevant only as a rhetorical tool to enhance matters that are seen as being “more real.” Thus, worldview analysis was a reaction against the search for underlying truths behind what people say, i.e., their real intentions.

WHAT DOES WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS BRING TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES?

So, what are the merits of worldview analysis and how can the sociotheological approach be helpful for social sciences?

First of all, the sociotheological approach to worldview analysis can contribute to debates on what determines political behavior by broadening them. The insights produced by a sociotheological analysis of worldviews can widen uniform and singular perceptions of rationality, authority and legitimacy, and worldview analysis can hence display the existence of competing forms of rationalities, legitimacy and authority structures that challenge Western-centric notions of universality. In situations of political conflict, it can be helpful in illuminating the presence of multiple rationalities, authorities and legitimacy structures that matter, and hence introduce a postcolonial aspect to such studies that can open up for parallel realities.

Secondly, worldview analysis can also have explanatory value, when it comes to behavior (Johnson et al. 2011; Koltko-Rivera 2004). The goal is to understand the subject's framework for thinking about reality and acting appropriately within a perceived understanding of the world (Sheikh and Juergensmeyer 2013).⁴ While worldview analysis is not concerned with classical questions of causality, it can still be used to explain under what conditions we can assert a stronger relationship between worldviews and actions? For example, one might assume that worldviews characterized by a very low level of ambiguity and a high level of simplicity are, for instance, more prone to enable or justify extreme action. If the world is seen through cosmic war images (Juergensmeyer 2000), such outlooks are more likely to have a stronger appeal to adopting confrontational directions of action. As a related aspect, worldview analysis can also shed light on questions related to mobilization. The interest here would lie in how worldviews become espoused, defended and disseminated in a relational context, and how they attain strong mobilizing effects, and hence have political implications. Such an analysis does not reduce worldviews to being mere instruments as it is interested in the effects they produce.

A third and *final* merit of worldview analysis lies in its contribution to conflict analysis. Here it is helpful as an operational analytical tool since it can show how members of the communities, groups and nations we want to study enter into conflict or competition with one another, and simultaneously make both themselves and their opponents objects of classificatory practices. Often, spirals of violence emerge from responses to simplified images of the enemy countered by actions based on stereotypes (Sheikh 2019). Hence worldview analysis represents a move away from the study of objective threats (as the field of strategic studies has

⁴ There are three important traps to avoid when conducting worldview analysis. The first is the assumption that behaviour is *only* determined by worldviews. The second is the proposition that worldviews actually determine action, and hence are something that comes before an action. And the third is an essentialist and static concept of worldviews that is detached both from those who hold the views, and from the interaction with social world.

often done) and can be usefully applied in conflict analysis that seeks to understand the reciprocal dynamics of a conflict: how the different parties of conflicts contribute to upholding conflicts, through particular depictions of the world.

This means that the applicability of worldview analysis is not limited to the study of religious violence, though it can be particularly useful for the study of terrorism and religious violence. Worldview analysis is relevant to a wide range of worldviews (including the visions embedded in conventional international politics), not just those related to religious traditions, and hence it can be an entry point for understanding diverse visions of the world, attempts to create order, and the most “ethical ways” of acting on these visions.

A sociotheological worldview analysis can in one sense also be seen as a normative project, that in spite of its critique of hegemonic perceptions of the world as “the only possible perception,” it can provide the basis of showing – somewhat paradoxically – commonalities. It can be used not only to show how epistemic worldviews differ, but also how common types of experiences often underlie epistemic worldviews across the globe. This is exactly what I consider to be imperative: a sensitivity towards the particular, but with an acknowledgement of the universal proneness of humans to make sense of the world.

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