WORLDVIEW, IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION - A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS[1]

Dirk J Louw
Department of Philosophy
The University of the North

Abstract

The concepts worldview (or view of life), ideology and religion are often used in definitions of (cultural) identity. However, these concepts are themselves rarely clearly defined. This article does so by mapping the (overlapping) ways in which these concepts are used. Special attention is given to the differences and similarities between what is often called a 'worldview', an 'ideology' and/or a 'religion'. This is done in view of presuppositions, which acknowledge the complexities of the use of language and which, as such, preclude ahistorical and essentialist definitions.

1. Defining identity

Most concepts used to define (cultural) identity are contested, but few concepts evoke as much controversy as the notions of a worldview (or view of life),[2] an ideology and a religion. In fact, efforts to abandon these notions and to use other concepts instead, are becoming increasingly prominent. 'Worldview' is making way for 'cognitive map'; 'ideology' becomes 'political thought system'; and 'religion' is substituted by 'faith' or 'doctrinal system' - to name but a few of these alternative concepts, all of which are thought to have a less complicated history of shifting sense (cf. Craffert 1997:194-195, 196; Thompson 1994:134).

But, be that as it may, the terms 'worldview', 'ideology' and 'religion' are still widely used, albeit in a confusing variety of ways. Not only is each of these concepts used with a bewildering number of meanings, but also the ways in which they are used often overlap. While some scholars differentiate sharply between ideology and religion, others use these concepts interchangeably. Samuel Huntington (cf. Allis 1993:41), for instance, notes that religious conflicts are *replacing* the struggle between various ideologies (thereby suggesting at least one definite distinction between religion and ideology), while others study these very ideologies *as religions*.[3] Neither the latter, nor Huntington would, however, hesitate to refer to all the ideologies or religions in question as 'worldviews' - that is, if 'worldview' here merely means 'one's beliefs or assumptions about the world'.

Not that everyone, and certainly not Huntington,[4] would simply want to abide by this minimalist definition of a worldview. But the more one adds to this basic definition of a worldview, the closer one again gets to what many would rather call an 'ideology' and/or a

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1   Earlier versions of this paper were read at the annual Spring Lectures of the University of the North (3 - 5 September 1996), and at a colloquium on 'Understanding Contemporary Africa' of the Research Unit for African Philosophy, UNISA (17-18 October 1996).

2   I shall be using the expressions 'worldview' and 'view of life' interchangeably. I shall also do so with 'word', 'term' and 'concept', although I am aware of the sense in which one cannot use these expressions interchangeably without being vague and confusing. Cf. in this regard Brümmer (1981:chap. 3).

3   The program of the next annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (21-24 November 1998) includes a study of 'isms' - nationalism, communism, capitalism, etc. - as religions.

4   In this regard Huntington also uses the concept civilization, which he defines as 'the broadest level of cultural identity a person has', adding that 'civilizations to a large extent are defined by religion' (cf. Allis, 1993:41).

'religion'. Du Toit (1997:151-154), for example, adds that a worldview constitutes a fundamental and comprehensive belief system, that it has an integrative, interpretative, motivating and didactic or normative function, and that it involves the whole person - not only the intellect. However, this elaborate definition of a worldview significantly overlaps with the definitions of ideology of, for example, Liebenberg (1990:13-17) and Esterhuyse (1987:309-318), both of whom emphasise the explicative, legitimising, consolidating, mobilising and programmatic functions of ideology. Du Toit's conception of a worldview also overlaps with Shutte's definition of religion. Shutte (1993:163-165) underlines the fact that religion deals with the *whole* of life, that it includes our cognitive, volitional and emotional powers, and that it generates the 'power to liberate' (in this respect Shutte's 'religion' again resonates with Liebenberg and Esterhuyse's 'ideology'). And so on - the list of ways in which these terms are tossed around seems endless.

So, how should the concepts worldview, ideology and religion be understood? What exactly are the differences and similarities between a worldview, an ideology and a religion? Can these concepts be understood in ways which will clarify, rather than mystify our definitions of (cultural) identity?

2.   Defining the definiens
2.1   Presuppositions
Let me, to begin with, list the presuppositions in view of which I shall analyze the concepts in question.

Firstly: I shall derive the meaning of the terms 'worldview', 'ideology' and 'religion' from the way in which these terms are used. I shall especially concentrate on the way in which these terms are used to refer to 'cultural phenomena'. However, this methodology will *not* be accompanied by the belief that language obtains its *primary* meaning by referring to, or representing states of affairs. This belief simply ignores the many other uses of language. It also denies the complexity of the relation between language and the reality which it is claimed to represent (cf. Murphy, 1990:292, 294; Murphy & McClendon, 1989).

Secondly: The concepts in question were used, are used and will be used in an ever-changing variety of partially similar or overlapping ways. Or, differently put, the range of phenomena to which these concepts refer, do not exemplify a common essence, but rather form a complex continuum of resemblances and differences, like those found between the members of a family (cf. Hick, 1989:4). These 'family resemblances' - to use Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous metaphor (cf. 1963:par. 66) - will form the substance of my definitions. I shall therefore *not* be aiming at a fixed and finite list of characteristics which is supposed to capture the essence of a worldview, an ideology or a religion. Respect for otherness and flux, that is, for otherness *in* flux, or, in a word, *difference* (Derrida),[5] precludes a historical, essentialist definitions.

Thirdly: My definition of these concepts will not be purely descriptive, but to some extend also stipulative. Or, to use Wittgensteinian jargon again, I shall not 'leave everything as it is'.[6] That is, I shall not only be identifying the games people play with language, and the rules

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5   Cf. Degenaar (1996:17).

6   One may of course argue, with *inter alia* Hans-Georg Gadamer, that a completely unbiased definition of these concepts is an impossibility from the outset (cf. Gadamer 1960:292; 1975:270-274; Tracy 1984:124; Brümmer 1988:21f). In so far as this is the case, it is in any event impossible to 'leave everything as it is', even if one tries to.

according to which they do so, but I shall also be asking whether a particular game should be played, and if so, how? (cf. Brümmer, 1981:78; 1988:35). Nevertheless, my conclusion should not be read as an absolute dictate or *sine qua non* regarding the meaningful use of the concepts in question. It merely suggests a way of using these concepts discriminately or discreetly, without precluding *a priori* the possibility of serving the same end in alternative ways.

So much for the presuppositions of my conceptual analysis, to which I shall now turn. Allow me to start with that most peculiar manifestation of culture which somehow never fails to amaze - religion.

2.2   Religion

A disconcerting number of features of religion have already been emphasized by a variety of scholars. I shall not list them all here, or - even worse - attempt to determine which of them, if any, are of the essence of religion. For, as was noted, there is no such essence. Instead, I shall concentrate on features which, to my mind, serves an analysis of religion *vis-à-vis* worldview and ideology best. According to the way in which it is often used, the word 'religion' depicts an ultimate, all-encompassing frame of reference. Harold Netland, for example, refers to the religious beliefs of someone as his/her '...*fundamental* worldview and *most basic* commitments...' (1991:287 - italics mine). In the same vein, David Tracy speaks of '...the *most fundamental* presuppositions [and] the *most basic* beliefs, of all our knowing, willing and acting' (1987:87 - italics mine).[7] And Terry Godlove notes that '...nothing experience has to offer - no object, event, or subject matter - can escape religion's interpretative grasp' (1989:3; cf. also Shutte, 1993:164). Add to this Paul Tillich's 'ultimate concern' (1957:1-4), Peter Berger's 'symbolic universes' (1967; Rupp 1984:215-216), and Gordon Kaufman's 'God-constructs' (1981), and you will probably end up with a conception of religion in terms of which it is nothing short of all-encompassing, '...that is, a mode of creating and of interpreting the world' (Neusner 1979:xi).[8]

2.3   Worldview/View of life

Religion shares this all-encompassing nature with another closely related phenomenon, often called 'worldview' or 'view of life'. However, as will be explained in due course, this does not make *any* view of a life a religion. As such, a view of life constitutes '...the total set of [accepted, though not fixed or irrevocable - DJL norms, ideals and eschatological expectations in terms of which someone directs and assesses his way of life' (Brümmer, 1981:132-133; cf. also 1981:131-136). In this sense, a view of life is the framework within which questions such as 'What ought I to do?', and 'What is the meaning of the things and situations I encounter?', are posed and answered in the 'final' analysis. Not all of us concern ourselves deliberately or consciously with these questions. Not all of us therefore have an articulated view of life or worldview. However, to the extend that we do ask these questions, we do have an articulated view of life. Moreover, these questions inherently belong to a crazy little thing called 'life', and, in this sense, all of us adhere to some or other view of life, whether we are aware of it or not, that is, whether we deliberately address these questions or not.[9]

However, some views of life also exemplify important differences with religion, of which a

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7   Cf. also 'limit-of experiences' (Tracy, 1981:160-165; 1984:116-117; 1987:84-86, 92).

8   Quoted by Godlove (1989:2). Neusner specifically refers to Judaism.

9   For a more elaborate explanation of these questions, and of the similarities between a view of life and a religion, cf. Louw (1995:203-204).

primary difference and some secondary differences. The primary difference coincides with what Anders Jeffner (1988) calls the 'devotional-transcendent element' of religion. This element refers to the worshipping of some or other transcendent Ultimate or Supreme Being, or, at least, to some or other devotional striving towards an ultimate state of being.[10] Accordingly, each religion harbours some or other theory concerning this transcendent Ultimate, whether it be personal or non-personal, a Supreme Being or supreme being (i.e. being supremely). All this, i.e. what is perceived to be the transcendent Supreme Being or supreme being, the devotional attitude and practice,[11] and the corresponding theories or doctrines, constitute the 'devotional-transcendent element' of religion. No worldview shares this element with religion, or, rather, no worldview which is not also a religion (cf. also Wiredu, 1995:183-184).

The aforementioned secondary differences between religion and a view of life or worldview refer to the fact that religion usually comes with some or other conception of liberation, sacred objects, an organized community, a sacred canonical Text, and a certain (characteristic) strategy to cope with those crisis which might disturb the life of an individual or a group. These crisis might, for example, include ageing, child-rearing, moral conflict (including guilt), suffering, and, especially, death. Usually believers also expect of a religion to constitute or symbolise a revolt against whatever oppress and enslave people (cf. Devine 1986:275). None of these traits is in itself a necessary and sufficient constituent of religion, but, as William Alston aptly puts it: '...[They] will help to make something a religion' (1967:141)!

Thus, in short: a religion has properties which some views of life do not have (i.e. the views of life which are not also religions). A view of life, on the other hand, has no characteristics which are not also characteristics of a religion. All religions are therefore also views of life, but not all views of life or worldviews are religions. A religion is a peculiar kind of worldview, of which the peculiarity primarily lies in the so-called 'devotional-transcendent element'.

2.4   Ideology

As said, what any religion has in common with any view of life or worldview, is its all-encompassing nature or function. This function is also shared by another peculiar worldview, viz. ideology. John Plamenatz, who specifically investigated the function of the word 'ideology' in the expression 'religion as ideology', defines 'ideology' as follows: an ideology is a collection of beliefs: (a) which are held by specific groups or communities, (b) which exemplify a certain coherence (albeit not necessarily strictly logical coherence), (c) which meet a social need, (d) which have a persuasive function and prescriptive implications, and (e) which are accepted because they meet a certain need, whether these beliefs are true or not. Jeffner summarizes all these characteristics as follows: 'an ideology consists of interrelated theories, evaluations and norms about man, society and the universe in relation to man and society, which are held in common by a group and have a socio-political function' (1988:43).

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10   Jeffner's definition of the transcendent as 'the ultimate power that governs the universe' (1988:43) is not quite as liberal as my own and is therefore unable to accommodate the non-personal 'ultimates' of some of the Eastern religious traditions. These 'ultimates' include the Brahman of advaita Vedanta, the Nirvana, Dharmakaya, Sunyata, Tathata of the Buddhist traditions, and the Tao of Chinese religion (cf. Hick, 1989:278).

11   Cf. in this regard also Wiredu's estimation of the attitude of Akans towards extra-human beings or so-called 'minor gods'. According to Wiredu, this attitude is predominantly utilitarian and therefore 'not really religious' (1995:183).

I have concluded earlier that the difference between a religion and a worldview lies in what Jeffner calls the 'devotional-transcendent element' of religion. This element also constitutes a first and important difference between a religion and an ideology. An ideology does not necessarily contain this element, while a religion (by definition) does. A second difference between religion and ideology coincides with the socio-political function of the latter. By definition an ideology fulfils certain important functions for the group (often a political organization) which adheres to it. It, for example, legitimates and inspires the deeds and attitudes of the group and as such also integrates or consolidates the group (Jeffner, 1988:42; cf. also Plamenatz, 1971:91-92; Esterhuyse, 1987:314-318). A religion does not necessarily have such a socio-political function. However, only those systems of thought[12] which at least fulfil some or other socio-political function, may rightly be labelled 'ideologies'. Thus: in so far as an ideology contains a 'devotional-transcendent element', it is also a religion. And, by the same token, in so far as a religion fulfils a certain socio-political function, it is also an ideology.

This leaves us with the difference between an ideology and a worldview or view of life. An easy way out would be to claim that an ideology differs in the very same respect from both a religion and a worldview, viz. the fact that an ideology by definition has a certain socio-political function, while this is not necessarily true of a religion and a worldview. After all, although we may, and sometimes do, think of a view of life or a religion as belonging exclusively to a specific individual, we almost never think of an ideology in this way. As systems of thought, ideologies almost always function within a certain group. Ideologies are socio-political phenomena.[13]

However, a more important difference between ideology and worldview or view of life, lies in the fact that the word 'ideology' is used in both a negative (pejorative)[14] and positive sense, while the term 'worldview' is almost always used in a neutral or descriptive sense (cf. Van Niekerk, 1987:4-31). This difference between an ideology and a worldview does not necessarily apply with respect to religions, and thus also not necessarily with respect to worldviews *as religions*. The concept religion is, after all, sometimes also used in a negative or pejorative sense. A classic example of such a use would be Karl Marx's well-known reference to religion as the 'opium of the people' (cf. Thompson 1986:39).

Thus: in so far as all ideologies also fulfil the functions of a worldview or view of life, all ideologies (like all religions) are also worldviews or views of life. Like religion, ideology is a particular kind of worldview. An ideology is a worldview with a definite socio-political function, and which is, as such, sometimes criticised and sometimes commended.

3. Worldview, ideology and religion

All the various distinctions made in the foregoing between worldview, ideology and religion can now be summarised as follows. According to the way in which these concepts are

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12 My reference to ideology as a 'system of thought' should not be understood as a reduction of ideology to mental activities. The expression 'system of thought' as used here, specifically refers to what might be called the propositional or 'discursive' element of ideology (i.e. concepts, ideas, beliefs etc.). As such, this element is embedded in, and legitimates and inspires the 'non-discursive' element of ideology (i.e. attitudes, deeds, rituals etc.). Cf. Van Niekerk (1987:5). Cf. also Oruka's conception of 'ideological cultures' as 'types of cultural consciousness' (1983:59).

13 Plamenatz is nevertheless still prepared to call the beliefs of an individual an 'ideology', but only if the individual in question is or was important or influential (cf. 1971:15-16; Van Niekerk 1987:31).

14 Cf., for example, Njoroge's (1983:130) conception of ideology as an '`imported' thought system'.

generally used, there are four different categories of worldviews or views of life, viz.:

(1) religion, i.e. worldviews which contain a 'devotional-transcendent element';

(2) ideology, i.e. worldviews with a definite socio-political function, and which are, as such, sometimes evaluated negatively and sometimes positively;

(3) religion as ideology and/or ideology as religion, i.e. worldviews which exemplify both the special characteristics mentioned in (1) and (2);

(4) other worldviews besides religion and ideology, i.e. worldviews which do not exemplify any of the special characteristics mentioned in (1), (2) and (3).

The concepts religion, ideology and 'religion as ideology' and/or 'ideology as religion' each refer to a special kind of worldview, but not all worldviews necessarily fall within any of these (special) categories. Religions and worldviews are different species of the wider genus of worldviews. Whether we therefore speak of religion and/or ideology, '...we speak of identity and location: for human beings are restless without placement and a sure feeling of who and where they are' (Smart 1981:26).

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