Exploring worldview and identity in an Institution of Christian Higher Education

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As numbers of higher education institutions are increasing across the world, policy makers stress the value of Higher Education for “driving economic growth and social cohesion” (cf. OECD, 2006). The Bologna Process reflects a worldwide tendency toward standardisation in higher education, emphasizing “shared values and principles” and “common understandings” (Bologna Policy Forum, 2009). How then does a higher education institution develop and articulate an identity that is distinctive, one that meets the needs of its particular students and academics? The published ‘worldview’ of a Christian Higher Education (CHE) institution can be one way to locate its distinctive identity. Typically, this worldview articulates a set of underpinning theological values or principles in curriculum documents and promotional materials, which are constituted in and influenced by the day to day experiences of groups and individual students and teachers in the institution. This paper reports on a four year study investigating a CHE Institution in Canada, the ways this worldview has evolved over thirty five years, and factors mediating the emergence and experience of this worldview. The study is an institutional ethnographic inquiry into a particular site of Christian Higher Education (Smith, 2005) that seeks to better understand the notion of worldview. It is part of a broader epistemological inquiry into the nature of knowledge, identity and experience in higher education.

Keywords: Christian Higher Education, worldview, institutional ethnography

Introduction: Worldview ‘matters’?

Institutions of Christian Higher Education (ICHE) across the world, and especially in Canada, have been familiar with the term ‘worldview’ for decades (cf. Hiebert, 2008; Naugle, 2002; Smith, 2009; Walsh & Middleton, 1984). But there is disagreement as to what worldview means and how it mediates life in ICHEs over time. For the Christian Institution of Higher Education central to this study, which we will call Omega College (OC), worldview is a ‘core’ element of its existence. OC ‘brands’ itself in its mission statement as educating from a particularly stated worldview. Its worldview is based upon a ‘common’ understanding of how God has framed the world. It recognises the responsibility of individuals in OC to live, work and converse in a manner reflective of the character of Christ, and to serve the world at large in ways that bring healing, grace and restoration to daily life.
As we will show in this short paper, worldview matters a great deal to those who have taught and researched in OC over three generations. We present academics and students speaking passionately about their interpretation and experience of worldview and its relation to their faith. The ‘matters’ that promote such lively responses range across the gamut of ‘everyday’ institutional life. They pertain to individual personal faith and collective ‘beliefs’, academic perspectives, individual and community dynamics, institutional narratives within which the worldviews are embedded, and stories in the popular press or scholarly papers published in academic journals or books. Worldview is both constituted in and influenced by the wide range of public artefacts that claim to speak about the worldview of a particular institution. In that respect, we will argue that worldview involves a rational allegiance to a particular intellectual framework (Hiebert, 2008; Naugle, 2002; Wolters, 1985/2005), but also a more elusive notion of ‘leaning into life’ where the emphasis is on the social, communal, embodied practice of institutional life (Fernhout, 1997; McGrath, 2010; Smith, 2009).

For academics and students in ICHEs, a particular ‘worldview’ can help to express what is distinctive about that institution. However, for others, worldview can be synonymous with generic notions of religious faith in ways that compromise or even threaten the quality of intellectual inquiry and research. Recently, in Ontario, Canada (the location of this research), a major ‘think tank’ in Canada and the US contemplated the notion and value of worldview in ICHEs (http://www.cardus.ca/). For CARDUS, worldview matters because it impacts academic autonomy and diversity in educational practice. One of the authors of this paper, Christina, is acutely aware of tensions in her own university in response to investigations by an educational organization (Canadian Association of University Teachers; CAUT), that also believes worldview matters. CAUT is concerned that privileging ‘faith’ is damaging to an academic education, claiming that ICHEs should not have a statement of faith for faculty to sign upon hiring. In another way, worldview matters to institutions and to people who are part of these institutions, as they defend themselves against attacks by groups such as CAUT. As we craft this paper, in the local morning papers, many public universities are condemnation the actions of CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers), calling such investigations a ‘witch hunt’ (e.g., http://www.thespec.com/opinion/editorial/article/484051--academic-witch-hunt).

These are just snapshots of ongoing arguments about whether worldview in Christian Higher Education can enable diversity, whether it can encourage institutions to be distinctive, or whether it over-regulates and constrains intellectual activity. Meanwhile, global policy makers continue to stress the value of Higher Education for "driving economic growth and social cohesion" (cf. OECD, 2006). And the Bologna Process, begun in Europe in 1999 and now attracting considerable interest from higher education sectors internationally, believes the best way to achieve that growth and cohesion is through "shared values and principles" and "common understandings" (Bologna Policy Forum, 2009). Indeed one aim of the Bologna Process is to "create overall convergence" in the face of considerable diversity by standardising structures and accountability frameworks (van de Wende, 2008, p. 50). At the same time, different jurisdictions and even the OECD are appreciating the importance of responding to the diverse needs of different groups in local and global contexts, and thus of "loosening regulatory controls and encourage[ing] institutions to pursue diverse missions" (OECD, 2006, p. 1). This paper steps back from making bold
generalisations about worldview and how it affects all ICHEs. Rather, using institutional ethnographic approaches (Smith, 2005), we investigate worldview in one particular site of ICHE, teasing out some of the tensions at work in this local setting and observing how they connect with tensions in a global sense in Christian Higher Education.

The four year study, on which this paper reports, received ethics approval for extended semi-structured interviews of 32 OC students and academics (the transcripts of whose interviews were subsequently organised in three generations: Cohort 1, Cohort 2 and Cohort 3). The students and academics volunteered to speak about their experience of the OC community over a total of 35 years, from 1970 - 2005. From this study, we present here a perspective of institutional life, crystallised from extended narrative accounts offered by the students and academics in their interviews. We also draw on what we see as various perspectives about worldview contained in curriculum, research and policy documents, published by OC. These perspectives, overall, reflect a sense of the complex history of worldview in the institution, and reveal the ways hybrid worldview discourses have impacted upon, and reflected, the life and lives of this institution.

The conceptual framework for our investigation makes use of what Wolterstorff (2002) calls ‘disequilibrium’, which he argues needs to be engaged in the educational process of individuals and communities if transformation is to occur. His notion of disequilibrium involves being curious about, or dissatisfied with, an existing state of affairs. Where an institution encourages rigorous intellectual culture, where there is support for open dialogue, disequilibrium can lead to diverse declarations of worldview within that institution. In these circumstances, worldview presents as a complex ‘problematic’, as Smith (2005) defines that term. For instance, there may be debate in an institution of CHE as to whether it should draw on, even rely on, public funding or not. Disequilibrium invariably involves tensions; and disequilibrium can reveal tensions which might otherwise remain invisible and corrosive to that culture. In this paper, we want to show the complexity, the potential richness and the dangers of worldview in action, by investigating how particular individuals in one particular CHE, from different times in its institutional history, make sense of and experience that institution’s worldview. Through such an investigation we seek to lift knowledge about worldview beyond the level of slogans and help to generate a more nuanced understanding of how worldview can mediate social practices, relationships, and narratives of that institution.

Identity and Institutional mission

Many ICHE institutions in Canada and North America articulate their worldview through statements of theological values or principles in curriculum documents and promotional materials. These values or principles are constituted in and influenced by the day to day experiences of groups, individual students, teachers and researchers in the institution (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009; Bertrand, 2007; Sire, 2004). ‘Mission statements’ seek to articulate a normative ‘commonness’ in institutional practices; they can provide ‘structure and direction’ (Wolters, 1985/2005). Yet the impact of such statements can only be fully understood by listening to the voices of those within institutional walls (Gudmundsdottir, 1998; Lingard & Gale, 2007; Smith, 2006).
situate these voices as part of a multi-levelled dialogue, where “each word [of that dialogue] tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin, 1981/1987, p. 293). Through this dialogue we present an account of OC’s worldview as it has been experienced and enacted in OC over time.

Omega College has its own mission statement and an academic creed. This creed flows out of the grand narrative of Reformational philosophy, which allows OC to see Christian education as part of ‘a larger story’, or meta-narrative, that embeds academic and social learning as part of the larger ‘life’ story. Similar accounts of how the ‘Christian story’ affects educational life are offered by Eliot (1948), Malik (1987), McGrath (2010), N. T. Wright (1992), Palmer (2004) and Smith (2009). These writers see faith as variously present in all learning, and they illustrate how Biblical narratives are often used to guide institutional norms. In this study, we see OC’s identity as responsive to but not dictated by these norms. The norms encourage a reflexive scholarly engagement with the norms, and this is what they see as ‘leaning into life’ through the lens of a Christian worldview.

To give an idea of the diversity of responses by interviewees to questions about worldview, we begin with a student from the First Cohort (1970-1985), Sydney, who explains the way he sees a mission statement (which we argue can be viewed as one iteration of worldview) mediating his experiences of life at OC:

As our mission statement suggests, spirituality is not a dimension of life but a pervasive life-direction. Though there are practices (of worship and devotions, e.g.) that would be readily recognized as "spiritual", these cultic activities are only one facet of a life which in all its dimensions--economic, intellectual, aesthetic, educational, ethical, etc.--is acknowledged as spiritual, as being in service of the One God revealed in Jesus Christ or of a substitute for God (an idol). (Sydney)

In Sydney’s comment, the idea of a spiritual education is not limited to or exclusive of ‘acts of worship’ in a formal sense, but is far more cohesive and pervasive. This same lack of demarcation between the sacred and secular life of community at OC is noted years later by Karol, a student in the Second Cohort (1985 -1997):

This institution breaks down the false dichotomy of separating faith and life; and makes faith significant to life in ways which benefit the world at large. (Karol)

This idea of cohesion over time to seeing faith as being ‘embodied’ within an academic education is once again noted by Lee, a student in the Third Cohort (1997 -2005). More than twenty years after Sydney’s experience, Lee is enthusiusing about the “common bonds of solidarity, intellectual struggle and faith/life integration” and yet this comment is preceded by the observation of “how different [OC] was from year to year”:

I think it is necessary to reflect more about the unique, historically constituted way in which students’ experiences and agency play into the way students themselves appropriate and utilise the variety of things an institute like [OC] has to offer. One impression I recall is how different
[OC] was from year to year... I was in Toronto and Edmonton during the summer rehooking up with students and staff I had been taught by or studied with. 12 years later, the same common bonds of solidarity, intellectual struggle and faith/life integration featured in our conversations and characterised our shared activities. The institute sharpened my intellectual skills and confirmed that it is legitimate to pursue academic interests that serve the needs of the marginalised and excluded in society. (Lee)

Institutional life over time: Emergent ‘grand conversations’

One aim of this study has been to investigate how worldview might help to maintain institutional values and/or contribute to change in that institution over time. Of great importance to this study is the ability to reflect upon and see change in an institution ‘over time’. Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of ‘chronotope’ argues that language, and the ideas we express in and through this language, exist within a frame of time, or time-space as Bakhtin expresses it. Such language produces what Bakhtin refers to as ‘grand conversations’ – conversations that lean into life and learning, and produce change.

Drawing on Dorothy Smith’s practice (2005) of locating and investigating ‘problematics’ in institutional life, we have been able to see how disequilibrium as a dimension of worldview has both maintained OC’s foundational norms, but also contributed to change in the institution. The accounts of life at OC conveyed by students and professors show some consistency with respect to a key foundational aspect of OC’s worldview – that this worldview, whatever it may be, applies as much to academic life as to non-academic life, and that it seems to endure beyond the years of formal education within OC.

The interviewees accounts converged on what they saw as a ‘foundational goal’: to be scholarly, academic and faithful to OC’s mission. And yet this played out in often divergent ways. The interview transcripts show that interviewees’ reflection became more focused and deliberate when it was associated with moments of ‘conflict’ (i.e., personal or professional relationships, a discomforting new direction in policy) in the life of OC. Rarely though, if ever, did the conflict become disabling. Conflict was seen more positively as ‘disequilibrium’, which prompted a focused desire for problem solving rather than antagonism. This reflects Wolterstorff’s (2002) definition of ‘disequilibrium’, to refer to something that should be desired, created through questions and embraced in order to see life not just as it is, but as how it could be. This implied to us that over time disequilibrium could be identified in community life as serving a purpose in promoting, not hindering, decision making. One distinctive aspect of OC’s worldview seems to be that openness to dialogue leads to openness to disequilibrium, and that this encourages rich reflection. This observation supports a similar definition regarding ‘disequilibrium’ in the work of Campolo (in Poe, 2004), who presents a view of being ‘lovingly dissatisfied’ with life as a way of bringing reconciliation to a broken world.
The significance of institutional reflection via narrative engagement

In the face of such disequilibrium, we began to wonder whether or how it might be possible for an institution to own a worldview and how this worldview might relate to its identity”? Levin & Montero-Fernandez (2009) suggest that “the use of organizational identity theory and contemporary culture theory enables us to re-conceptualise the relationship between and among the institutional environment, organization and individuals” (Levin et al., 2009, p. 13). This idea supports findings in our research that the identity of OC as an organization is intricately interconnected with the identities of its students and staff. However, the institution cannot impose or control the identity of its staff and students. This idea connects with a rich range of literature that investigates ‘systemworld’ and ‘lifeworld’ and the connections between individual and institutional identity (cf. Kostogriz & Doecke, 2007; Sergiovanni, 2000; Smith, 2006). Typically, this literature notes that a balance between systemworld and lifeworld (also referenced in the earlier German work as gemeinschaft und gesellschaft - (Naugle, 2002; Olthius,1985; Wolters, 1985/2005) is essential for learning and growth. These concepts have not been dominant in research into Christian institutions but are key to this research as they have helped us understand the ‘past, present and future’ connections of OC’s worldview. Another way of looking at this balance is to see it as an ongoing tension between on the one hand diversity and hybridity in narratives and on the other a unifying grand narrative. 

Grand narratives operate within, and help to constitute particular worldviews (Wright, 1992). We understand worldviews, on the other hand, to be frameworks for a dynamic all-encompassing view of life that provides a provisional picture of what life ought to be, and in which grand narratives are operative. Yet the provisional picture is not static: it is open to change and development. To put it another way, worldviews are not so much what you ‘claim’ as what you ‘live’ – and this makes the need to explore insider perspectives more crucial. It also makes struggle an inevitable catalyst for learning and growth – and we believe this constitutes a particularly rich dimension of the worldview we perceived in OC across time and space. It was a ‘worldview’ that was more than a mere set of rules, rules that seek to dictate what an educator should believe and how an educator should think. MacKenzie, a professor in Cohort 3, expressed this most eloquently.

I think that [OC] has made me far more self-conscious about the ways in which my own work is tied to the orienting intuitions, convictions, [and] sensibility I bring to that work. It has made me far more self-conscious about looking at the work of others out of the expectation that their work too flows from equally deep impulses. And it has helped me thereby to come to both my own work and the work of others with a critical sympathy, at one and the same time convinced that we are seeing the same world and that we tend to see it in partial and [even] in distorted ways. (MacKenzie, Cohort 3)

MacKenzie would seem to be advocating a notion of worldview that not just allows but enables Christian educators to have what Kemmis and Smith (2008) call “moral agency” (p. 5). With a worldview that affords moral agency, educators and students in an institution can act creatively, with care and compassion, with intellectual integrity, and with a critical awareness of the consequences of their actions on the individual, the institution and the broader society. They can act this way and transcend a
supposedly all-powerful grand narrative that would position them as mere operatives within a system. Other aspects of worldview and its interaction within the system and life worlds of Omega College we saw as varying greatly. Such variation is what prompts us to propose the notion of ‘hybrid worldviews’. These are worldviews that may project tensions between the system and life worlds of an institution and even changes over time, without undermining underlying foundations that remain true to its academic and spiritual conviction. This is noted by students across the three cohorts:

There is much more emphasis now on entering into dialogue alongside other views (e.g., postmodernism or critical theory), less on stressing the distinctive content of a Christian approach [than there was 20 years ago]. (Alex, Cohort 1)

This institution breaks down the false dichotomy of separating faith and life; and makes faith significant to life in ways which benefit the world at large. (Karol, Cohort 2).

[OC works at preparing a] thoughtful and critical life-long learner who is always looking for fresh ways to seek justice, transform culture, obtain the common good. (Geri, Cohort 3)

It was from statements such as these in the transcripts that we saw students and academics from OC projecting a vibrant philosophical worldview perspective that is complex and dynamic, a perspective that resists any attempt to impose a grand narrative cause-and-effect identity. It then became a matter of importance to us to figure out how the vibrant ‘life’ and identity of an institution can be articulated in some distinctive way without recourse to slogans or platitudes. Our work in this area adds to the research on worldview analysis (Hiebert, 2008; Naugle 2002, 2004; Smith, 2009) by offering, not so much a static ‘model’ of evaluation as in Hiebert’s terms, but a framework for ongoing reflection upon the nature of institutional worldview over time.

How do I know a worldview when I see one?

I have experienced the hard reality that commonness of worldview may, nevertheless, lead to diverging practices. (Taylor)

Taylor’s paradoxical comment may sound melancholic, but his focus on the intellectual or ‘common’ understanding of a worldview, and rigorous reflection upon it, is significant to our perceptions and findings regarding worldview. Taylor is one of the few members of the OC community who has been involved across all three cohorts as a professor. In reflecting upon the life and changes within OC over 35 years, he speaks about worldview both from his philosophical understanding and from his lived experience. His narrative speaks of disappointments and celebrations with students and colleagues; these stories are not included in this paper due to their sensitive nature and concerns regarding anonymity. He acknowledges:
The institution accurately reflects and embodies its vision statement even though it is beset with all the foibles and frailties of human institutions. Yes, even as I have done my part in shaping the institutional worldview, experiences at the Institute have shaped me.

Taylor adds a significant understanding to our point that worldview cannot be ‘mandated’, but is complex and relational as well as intellectual. It is affected by and also affects institutional systems and personal/communal life. We draw attention to the complexities of Taylor’s comment to show how Hiebert’s worldview analysis model lacks the flexibility and groundedness to make sense of insights into worldview such as Taylor’s.

Hiebert’s (2008) model of worldview analysis has attracted considerable interest in the research literature. He has identified several methods for identifying and analysing a worldview, using ethnomethodic analysis, which focuses on the ordering of words and groups of words, discussion of underlying themes, patterns and cultural symbols and a form of narrative analysis. However, this study takes the view that analysis of worldview in institutions must appreciate and be more responsive to context. Approaches to discourse analysis and underlying themes such as Hiebert’s that tend to discount context in our view run the risk of losing sight of what is most meaningful in a particular institution. While there are dimensions of Hiebert’s model that we find helpful, we believe the presence of two distinct columns of ethnomethodic analysis into synchronic and diachronic columns encourages crude binary analysis and a ‘column-separate’ or compartmentalised reading of worldview. This potentially reduces worldview to being cognitive set of static features, and when one seizes upon what appears to be a simple ‘difference’ in one dimension, that difference itself becomes the issue. Worldview is more complex than that.

In reflecting upon participants’ interviews, we came to reject Hiebert’s model because of the way it implies worldview is a static entity rather than a complex dynamic that requires dialogic participation and a certain struggle with meaning making and identity over time. A worldview analysis should give more attention to time, relationality, reflexivity, context, and multiple narratives, utilising more of a Bakhtinian (1981) view of ‘grand conversations’ and their ability to bring to the surface information that is not apparent in decontextualised scientific analysis. A Bakhtinian conception is more disposed to appreciate worldview as a dynamic lived experience rather than an abstract set of bounded concepts that govern individuals and the collective of a whole institution over generations.

In the end, the key foundational components of OC’s worldview that we identified include: an openness to disequilibrium and a widespread fostering of a richly reflexive approach to worldview that is sustained over time. Based on the particular voices of those who have participated in the lifeworlds of OC over three generations, we are constructing an argument for a more complex and dynamic notion of worldview, one which draws more on traditions of educational praxis than on inculcation of a grand narrative or rule-following.

The conception of worldview that we have been describing and analysing here is reflective of a number of narratives and perspectives. This can be seen in some shared stories and values, but it also has tensions that individuals and the institution as a
whole have sought to engage with, grapple with, in order to find a way forward. This notion of worldview expresses certain significant values, beliefs and texts – there are dimensions of ‘commonness’ – but also some diversity. This might seem similar to what is happening across Europe as Bologna seeks to develop “shared values” of higher education, and yet diversity continues to exist despite Bologna. The difference in OC seems to be that the OC worldview is experienced as a dynamic and lived narrative, where individuals can own the institutional worldview and the diversity it encourages, and thus “lean into life”.

References


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