Negotiating across Worldviews

When basic beliefs and deep values are in dispute, neutrals and parties should be curious, respectful explorers

By Jeff Seul

Most of us, much of the time, try to make decisions and act in principled ways. The values we uphold stem from many sources within our evolutionary and cultural heritages, including humanistic traditions, civic systems (such as law), and religious norms.

Religious norms, which often lie at the core of one’s identity, frequently are in tension with the religious or nonreligious values and expectations of others. These tensions may be most visible in disputes over abortion, school prayer, and LGBTQ rights, but they are also often central to everyday disagreements. Some people seek workplace accommodations for prayer and other ritual practices or time off to participate in religious ceremonies, requests that some employers resist or accommodate only grudgingly. A disagreement over the use of land or natural resources may be driven, in part, by differing religious
and secular perspectives on how we should relate to our environment. Two parents from distinct religious backgrounds may have basic disagreements about how to bring up their children.

Disputes driven by worldview differences can be particularly intense and challenging to resolve. When these disputes are litigated, the “resolution” we can expect is a judicial decision that disregards one party’s favored norms or attempts to balance competing norms in a way the litigants may not recognize as compatible with any of their respective worldviews.1

Consensual approaches to dispute resolution, like negotiation and mediation, hold greater promise for achieving outcomes that are consistent with all the parties’ worldviews — at least in theory. Needless to say, this is more easily said than done. The key is to embrace and work within parties’ seemingly incompatible worldviews, helping them explore and understand each other’s normative frames and search for agreements that can fit into those frames.

Worldviews everywhere, hidden in plain sight

We are meaning-makers. We seek and make meaning, individually and collectively, about mundane matters and about the very nature of reality.2

Worldviews are the mental models we hold, more and less consciously, about how the natural and social worlds cohere, what makes them cohere, what is valued and what is not, and even what we can know and how we know it. Our individual and collective identities — our sense of self and who we identify with and are most inclined to trust — are entwined with and substantially defined by our worldviews.3

For many of us, our worldviews overlap considerably with others’. Different worldviews sometimes even have common, though often differently interpreted, elements. Christianity appropriates elements of Jewish tradition. Islam appropriates Jewish and Christian prophets. Religious nationalist movements, whether Zionists in Israel or Christian Evangelicals in the United States, mix religion with political perspectives held by some who do not share their religious orientation. Many religious people the world over embrace scientific understandings as part of their worldviews; some scientists are religious.

In the WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) world, many of us tend to think of religion as the primary, if not sole, source of worldviews. If we are atheists or not particularly religious, we may not see our perspectives and values (whether right-leaning, left-leaning, or centrist) as worldviews. We may consider a scientific materialist perspective to be an indisputably judgment-free orientation rather than a perspective that requires its own inferential leaps — at least if we believe that science puts all the big questions about the universe, and life within it, to rest, or that it undoubtedly will do so in time. In science, we seek a grand, synthetic theory of everything, built upon propositions that have been tested extensively and not disproven, yet fundamental gaps in our scientific understanding of the universe and our own experience remain, and some of them may be impossible to fill.4 Religious worldviews are not the only worldviews, and worldview conflicts often involve one or more parties who do not think of themselves as religious.

Though worldviews tend to develop through group-level interactions — we send signals to each other about our respective beliefs, with communal beliefs and bonds of trust developing in tandem in the process — a given person’s worldview will also be anchored partially in individual experience. Each of us filters what we experience in the present through a unique prism that has been shaped and tempered, in part, by our family histories, our personal temperaments, the imprints left by difficult experiences (e.g., coping with a disability or a traumatic event), our differing patterns of membership in multiple affinity groups, and other factors, many of which influence us unconsciously. Intense conflict sometimes arises between members of the same moral community,
Despite the broader worldview they largely share, in part because of such individual differences. Our worldviews mostly operate in the background, before conscious perception, much as our eyes (which we are largely unaware of) operate in giving us sight, the sense through we perceive much of the world as we know it. Until we brush up against others’ worldviews, that is. When our worldviews collide, many of us, much of the time, reflexively defend the rightness of our perspectives. We regard them as self-evident or at least more securely justifiable — as they undoubtedly are, almost by definition, from within our own worldview.5

Worldviews evolve, though usually very slowly. Even so, a range of interpretive flexibility presently exists within most worldviews, including conservative religious worldviews — though, as an outsider, we may not see or be inclined to accept this. Our worldviews have fuzzy boundaries, and new situations require us to weigh and prioritize competing values within them. Members of moral communities are constantly negotiating over norms and how to apply them. This is why Jayne Docherty, a professor of leadership and public policy at Eastern Mennonite University and a leading scholar and practitioner in this area, prefers to speak of “worldviewing” (a verb, something that we are always doing), rather than “worldviews.”6

**Worldviews bind, orient, and guide**

Shared worldviews bind people together, orienting them personally and socially and guiding behavior. Religious worldviews can be a particularly strong force in the lives of individuals and communities, answering “the individual’s need for a sense of locatedness — socially, sometimes geographically, cosmologically, temporally, and metaphysically.”7

As Docherty explains, our worldviews generate “coherent structures of expectations”8 that communicate both permissions and constraints. These norms partially define who we consider ourselves to be, and the degree of our fidelity to them influences how we feel about ourselves and other members of our communities. Often the normative mandates of our worldviews are clear; at other times, our worldviews simply help us to orient and chart a path, functioning more like a map than turn-by-turn directions from Point A to Point B. In either case, most of us seek to act in ways that maintain our good standing as members of the communities we inhabit.

**Worldview conflicts can be intense and stubborn**

Many of us feel uncomfortable when others conduct themselves in ways that are inconsistent with our worldview. A few of us respond to this discomfort by trying to influence social and legal norms in ways that constrain others’ behavior — think pro-life activism in the United States or efforts to regulate how Muslim women dress in Europe — but most of us, much of the time, basically live and let live, arranging our lives so we mostly interact with and depend upon like-minded people.

But the discomfort is likely to be more intense, and we may feel especially compelled to speak out or take action when others’ worldviews affect us personally, as they might in a dispute between a divorcing couple about whether their children will have a religious upbringing or a dispute among business partners about whether to source goods from fair-trade suppliers at greater cost than from other sources. Now it is our immediate world that may not cohere as we believe it should; our own sense of self is at stake in a dispute that directly implicates our identity-defining values. Many of us tend to think of identity dynamics as primarily fueling wars of the armed or cultural variety, but identity-anchoring norms often are at play in everyday conflict, and those disputes sometimes can be nearly as intense and stubborn.

Because the core issues in a worldview conflict often have sacred value, parties cannot realistically hope to coerce each other into their own conceptual reality.9 Interpersonal communication practices such as active listening and demonstrating empathy for the other’s perspective and experience sometimes can be immensely helpful in a worldview conflict, but they will not mechanistically assure a smooth process when
negotiating across worldviews. An intense emotional response is natural when we perceive identity-anchoring values to be threatened, but we must do more than attend to emotions wisely and sensitively. Essential as that may be, emotions alone do not tell us enough about the normative contexts we inhabit and how to achieve resolution in keeping with them. Nor can we expect to appeal to reason from a position outside another’s worldview, because the other is acting rationally within his or her worldview. Finally, in many dispute contexts, a resolution can be achieved if one party is willing to pay enough money, because money can sufficiently address the other party’s underlying concerns. Indeed, in a traditional dispute we might see it as “progress” if one party offered to buy the other out, trading dollars for some other thing of value (property, a legal right, or some endowment or entitlement). In a worldview conflict, however, the latest social science research suggests that even making an offer like this can backfire, causing the conflict to intensify, rather than move toward resolution.

In a nutshell, the conceptual frame of standard-issue interest-based bargaining, and many of the prescriptions that flow from it, are insufficient for addressing worldview conflict. Some of the typical orientations, process features, and skills associated with interest-based bargaining may prove useful in efforts to negotiate across worldviews, but they must be adapted to a different context.

Working with worldview conflict

One of the key prescriptions of standard interest-based bargaining is to identify “objective criteria” — for some, this ideally means a single legitimating standard that all parties can embrace to justify an agreement. In a worldview conflict, however, this may prove exceptionally difficult or impossible. Advice like this assumes parties share a more or less identical set of background norms, or at least that all the issues in the dispute, and the parties’ respective interests, lie in a domain in which their worldviews are substantially aligned.

But what if the parties’ worldviews do not align? Parties must develop a better understanding of their own and others’ worldviews and seek a resolution that is legitimate within each of those, even if each element of their agreement cannot be justified by pointing to a single rationale that all parties can embrace. Stakeholders who hope to negotiate effectively across worldviews, and dispute resolution professionals who wish to help them do so, would be well-advised to undertake forms of individual and joint reflection, dialogue, and other work that can be exceptionally challenging. Among other things, they should consider the following four practices.

Map the worldviews

Some variant of the principle “love thy neighbor” exists within all religions, and there is evidence that reminders of these principles make people more tolerant of members of other groups. Yet appeals to similar, but abstract, conciliation-promoting values that exist within different normative traditions tend not to be much help in resolving worldview conflict. Ultimately, the parties will need more complete and granular images of the normative landscapes — images that, among other things, reveal the fences and other boundaries that place limits on how reconciliation promoting values may be applied, as well as the gates and those sections of barriers that have begun to collapse, without a communal will to rebuild them.

Each party, whether an individual or representatives of a group, should map the contours of his or her own worldview (and the features of it that are most directly implicated in the conflict), and they should prepare to articulate all of this to others. The parties need a birds-eye view of the terrain they occupy, the place from which their perspectives on the conflict, their perceived interests, and options for resolution spring.

Here’s a partial sketch of an employee’s worldview map as it might relate to a potential employment dispute:
I’m proud of my service at this hospital for the past 18 years. I’ve been devoted to this place and the ideals I thought it stood for. But I’ve been questioning whether I can stay ever since the administration decided to permit physician-assisted suicide in line with California’s law authorizing it. I’m Catholic, and it’s prohibited by the church’s teaching on the subject, which I wholeheartedly agree with. I became a nurse to preserve life, not to participate in homicide. I mean, I couldn’t face my spouse or our kids, let alone God, if I were involved in that. My boss has assured me that I’ll never be required to do it, but I still toss and turn at night because I know it’s happening at my workplace.

Groups with differing worldviews often can identify some common values, but those values do not exist in a vacuum. In practice, they have to be balanced and prioritized against other values, all as understood within the specific historical and institutional context of one’s own community. In addition to mapping the features of one’s worldview, one must understand the importance of each feature in relation to other features.

If they want to be able to help parties effectively, advocates and mediators also must map their own worldviews. When the disputants know they share a worldview, it may be wise to use a mediator with the same worldview orientation. When they do not, however, a single mediator may struggle to relate to the worldviews of one or both parties. In a worldview conflict, using a team of co-mediators that mirrors the parties’ differing worldviews, or that at least includes one person who has a deep understanding of and appreciation for each party’s worldview, can be a good approach.

Give others a tour

Once each party is clear about how the features of its worldview are implicated in the conflict, the parties should take turns offering tours of how things look from inside their respective worldviews. “Speak to be understood,” Herbert C. Kelman, professor emeritus of social psychology at Harvard University and one of my mentors, is fond of saying to parties in conflict. This means trying as best one can to present one’s inside perspective in ways that help outsiders relate to it; for example, by anticipating what might seem surprising to others and making tentative analogies to features of others’ worldviews.

Be an attentive, curious, and respectful visitor

“Listen to understand,” is the second half of Kelman’s formula. Setting aside the question of whether it is wise even to try to debate with the other party during a conflict resolution process, a party is not likely to change others’ worldview by doing so. The goal should be to understand where others are coming from, where they can go and how they can get there, and where they are unlikely to be able to go, at least in the near-term. A party should ask genuinely curious questions designed to serve that goal. If one party can express appreciation for features of others’ worldviews (or at least demonstrate understanding of them as their inhabitants see them), all the better.

Stack the maps

Now imagine the worldview maps the parties have created and shared as drawn on clear plastic sheets. The next step is to place one map on top of the other (or others) to see where they line up and where they do not. Mediators and parties might spot common features that already exist within each worldview. Perhaps more helpfully, everyone involved might notice regions of hospitable terrain on which new, shared, or adjacent structures can be constructed or in which seeds can be planted and

‘Speak to be understood,’ Herbert C. Kelman, a professor of social ethics at Harvard University and one of my mentors, is fond of saying to parties in conflict.

‘Listen to understand,’ is the second half of Kelman’s formula.
expected to grow. Perhaps everyone at the table can see that something one party wants is permitted by the others’ worldview — within certain parameters. The careful neutral and parties will also look for regions in each map that do not meet but are close enough that bridges could be constructed. If each party could envision taking a small step in the other’s direction, could they meet on that bridge?

One practical way to “stack the maps” is to create a chart in which each issue in the dispute gets a row and each party’s worldview is assigned a column, with another column for options to the right. Summarize the parties’ respective worldviews as they relate to each issue, then try to brainstorm options that could address each issue in a way that is consistent with the worldview of each party.

My map analogy is limited in a number of ways, including the missing dimension of (historical and future) time. Can exploring ways in which landscapes have shifted over time help everyone envision new present-day options? Can time-bounding elements of an agreement help parties accept a change to the status quo, at least for some time, because they need not concede that they have altered the landscape indefinitely?

There is much more to say about working with worldview conflict than can be covered here, but these are some key ideas. Being curious and respectful explorers of the unfamiliar terrain of others’ worldviews is challenging work. Finding secure ground within multiple worldviews from which parties can reach each other is more challenging still. Nonetheless, with patience, genuine curiosity, and a measure of goodwill, often it can be done.

Endnotes
3. Within the disciplines of religious studies and theology, the term “worldview” has become associated with the Christian evangelical tradition, perhaps complicating my use of it from the perspective of those working primarily within those disciplines. The term has a longer and more varied history, however, and it has been embraced more broadly, both by those in other academic disciplines and in common usage. I use it precisely because it has this broader appeal and a common meaning that many people seem to grasp readily. For an intellectual history of the term and its usage across disciplines, see David K. Naugle, Worldview: The History of a Concept (2002).
8. Docherty, supra note 6, at 108.
10. Docherty, supra note 6, 112.
11. For example, Daniel Shapiro places great emphasis on transforming emotional dynamics yet also emphasizes the need for other types of work, like the structural transformation of divisive relationships. Daniel Shapiro, Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts (2016).
12. Susan Hunter sees the essential tension in contentious public policy disputes not as one between emotion and reason, but as one between different meaning (reason) systems. Susan Hunter, The Roots of Environmental Conflict in the Tahoe Basin, in Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation (Louis Kriesberg, Terrell A. Northrup, & Stuart J. Thorson, eds., 1989).