

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 16 May 2018

Worldviews and Ways of Life



Podcast with **Ann Taves** (21 May 2018).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/worldviews-and-ways-of-life/>

David Robertson (DR): *It's my pleasure to be joined here today by [Professor Ann Taves](#) from the Religious Studies Department and the University of California, Santa Barbara. It's not her first visit to the podcast, but the first full-length interview I think. So this should be interesting. She's here in Edinburgh to deliver the [Gunning Lectures](#) and that's where the topic of today's discussion has come from: talking about worldviews and ways of life. So let's start where we were kind-of already talking before I started recording: a little bit, maybe, about, how did we come to this position? You were asked to write a blog? Is that right?*

Ann Taves (AT): Yes. I mean, really the question is: why am I even talking about worldviews and ways of life, or studying religion as worldviews and ways of life? Which was the topic of the Gunning Lectures. And, as we were just talking about before, I was pretty much what I would call an “anti-definitionalist”, when it comes to defining religion for research purposes. Because I think it's really important that we look at how people understand religion – and other related sorts of terms – on the ground. But I was kind-of forced to make a more constructive move – internally forced – after I was asked to write a blog post on method for the [Non-Religion and Secularity Project](#). And it just struck me that talking about non-religion and religion, without ever specifying any larger category or rubric under which these two items fell, was kind of absurd.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: So that got me searching for . . . trying to answer the question: what do these two things have in common? And terms like worldviews and ways of life are actually very widely used, as an overarching framework for talking about these things. In fact, [Lois Lee's](#) first objection to the worldviews language was it was too commonplace, and too ordinary.

DR: *Yes. And there's a question, there, why ordinary and commonplace . . . ? That should be fine,*

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*really? Maybe that's part of the Protestant thing that religion should be special and set apart? But . . .***AT:** Yes, I think her concern – and I'm putting words in her mouth . . .**DR:** *Yes. She can respond, if she wants!***AT:** Right. I think her concern was actually one that came up in the Q and A after my first lecture. The ease with which everyday definitions of worldviews might get confused with whatever we might want to mean by it, in a more technical sense. And that's one of our problems with defining religion.**DR:** *Yes. Very much so.***AT:** We construct these technical definitions of what we mean, but then everybody has their meanings on the ground. What I'm arguing with worldviews and ways of life is that we actually can define them in a way that I'm arguing can stabilise them, in a way that we can't stabilise definitions of religion; that religion is a complex, cultural concept – it simply does not have a stable meaning. But worldviews and ways of life – I think that we can root them in a perspective, and show how the ability to actually generate a worldview is something that humans can do that's grounded in evolved capacities, basically, that emerge out of all mobile organisms having a way of life.**DR:** *That's really interesting. I'm going to get you to take us through some of that – albeit in a truncated way – later on. First though, I think we need to jump back a little bit. (5:00) So, tell us what you mean by worldviews. And you also use this term ways of life.***AT:** Yes**DR:** *Just unpack, for the listeners, a little bit what we mean by these terms.***AT:** Well, let me start with worldviews. Basically, there's a range of scholarship on worldviews. There still is an interdisciplinary group in Belgium and there are scholars and anthropologists such as [André Droogers](#) in Amsterdam who've been working on this idea of worldviews. And generally, in this literature, they define worldviews in terms of what I would call Big Questions. So the kind of . . . they use fundamental terms that you hear in philosophy. So terms like ontology, cosmology epistemology, anthropology, axiology, and praxeology – those are the big philosophical concepts. But we can translate those into very everyday language.**DR:** *OK.*

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AT: So that's basically how [Egil Asprem](#) and I are working to define worldviews: in terms of answers to these six fundamental big questions.

DR: *Can you give us a couple of examples of those as questions?*

AT: Yes, so the ontology questions would be, "What exists? What's real?" And the cosmology question would start with the very basic question of either, "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" But it would expand to "Where do we come from?" and "Where are we going?" The anthropology question would be, "What is our situation? What is the situation in which we find ourselves?" It could also then expand to, "What is our nature?" But two really crucial questions . . . Well, let me just give you all of them. Because in relation to the "What's real?" and "Who are we?", "Where are we going?" questions, the next question is the epistemology question: "How do we know that?" And so you get answers from human beings, or science, or revelation – things like that. But then, after the one about our situation would come the question of goals and values. So, "What's the good, or what's the goal that we should be striving for?" And then, finally, the big path or action question: "How do we get there?" So we're arguing that we can use this set of questions to unpack lots of things. From – at a very high level – teachings of a broad tradition, all the way down to how individuals would answer that question.

DR: *So there's a real scalability to this then?*

AT: exactly

DR: *And so these build into . . . am I understanding correctly, that the responses to these questions become embodied in ways of life? Would that be correct?*

AT: Yes. We're arguing that all mobile organisms, broadly speaking, have what we can think of as a way of life. But the more basic the organism, the more basic the way of life. There's not going to be any choices. There's certainly not going to be any mental reflection on ways of life, right? So, ways of life can get more and more complicated. But we see that as one of the ways that we can talk about humans as evolved animals. And we want to stress both continuity and difference. We're trying to do a "both/and" kind of thing, rather than an "either/or".

DR: *OK*

AT: But you were asking then, for humans, how do worldviews relate to ways of life?

DR: *Yes. And prior to that, how do the big questions relate to ways of life and worldviews? What's the*

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direct relationship there?

AT: Yes. Well. We're distinguishing – and I keep saying we, because Egil Asprem and I have been collaborating on some of this work. We're talking about modes of worldview expression. And we're distinguishing between enacted, articulated and recounted worldviews. **(10:00)** So recounted would include both oral traditions, where things are memorised, and textualised traditions. But before you can get to recounting, we've just got articulating a worldview in language. Then, prior to that, we've got the fact that they can be enacted without even being articulated. And all these levels can work together and interact. And so, at the enacted level, you've basically got implicit worldviews embedded in ways of life. And as researchers we would have to extract or infer answers to big questions, based on people's actions and behaviour.

DR: *So is it with this embodied, recounted level – is that where we start talking about worldviews rather than simply ways of life?*

AT: Yes. Yes. So we're arguing that, basically, you have to have a cultural capacity before you can have a worldview. And so we used a distinction, on the one hand, between natural and cultural affordances that we borrow from ecological psychology, and also a distinction between evolved and cultural schemas, which are a psychological construct for the kinds of representations that we have for things. And the distinction between natural and cultural is that natural affordances, or evolved schemas, are very much . . . there's a direct relationship between the organism and the environment.

DR: *OK.*

AT: There's no mediating possibility for some kind of cultural construct that organisms have agreed upon together. It's not until we get to humans that – as far as we know – we have those more collective kinds of agreements about things that can be detached from the environment.

DR: *So, maybe something like: you think you've seen something in the shadows, and you're frightened – so it might be a schema: there's an embodied reaction of fear. But that you saw a ghost, you are therefore frightened of ghosts – that's more of a worldview? Or at least part of a way of life?*

AT: Yes. It's drawing in a cultural schema about ghosts.

DG: *A collective cultural schema.*

AT: And layering that on top of the evolved schema of when you hear a sound – or, more likely, when

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you perceive some sort of movement, right? We have an evolved tendency to assume there's something animate there – something potentially dangerous.

DR: *And potentially then, that would also tie into a larger view of the world. Because in order to have ghosts going about, you have to have some sort of notion of survival after death or non-real beings of some sort.*

AT: Exactly. Right. So you can expand from that in steps to develop a larger underlying conception of how they would describe what's real in the world.

DR: *Right. And what's nice about this schema, I think, is that it's definitely a bottom-up approach to this, rather than top-down. So we're starting with the most basic kind of responses and then building up to the worldviews from there.*

AT: Well, certainly, if you want to start at the level of individual behaviour. But we actually can start in all kinds of places as long – I would argue – as we're being responsible about the nature of our starting points. I mean as long as we're up front about that.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: I think, as you know, I've been teaching Comparing Worldviews-type courses, which is an attempt to overcome some of the problems with the world religions paradigm.

DR: *Which our listeners should, by now, be very familiar with! (Laughs).*

AT: Exactly. That's why I brought it up in this context, because I figured it might be relevant.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: But there, starting with a textbook depiction of the teachings of a so-called world religion, **(15:00)** we can have the students analyse that in terms of the big questions, to give themselves a basic sort-of framework. And I can then analyse or show them, using historical materials, how over time that those answers to the big questions coalesced into some sort of, say, orthodoxy, or some sort of tradition – including looking at the power structures and the authority structures that would make it coalesce into being that. But it doesn't mean that every individual or all the groups all adhere to that. But we can still start at that level, and use this conception that way, is my point.

DR: *How – and the answer to this might just be, “Not at all.” – but how is this in any way related to*

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what [Ninian Smart](#) was trying to do, or at least what Ninian Smart said he was trying to do?

AT: Right. No, I think there is a relationship. And I think it's important to see both what Ninian Smart did that I think is extremely positive, and the limitations of what he did. So the really positive thing is articulating, in a kind of obscure article (that I think more of us ought to be aware of) in which he, basically, argued that we ought to subsume the philosophy of religion under the philosophy of worldviews: the history of religions, in the broad *religionsgeschichte* sense, under the history of worldviews and the anthropology of religion under an anthropology of worldviews. So sort-of the whole range of methodologies that we tend to use in Religious Studies he saw as part of an expansive conception of Worldviews Studies. And I think that's really cool.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: But the limitation is that he never defined what he meant by worldview. And what he did was simply import his six – or later, seven – dimensions of religion from the study of religion to the study of worldviews. And to me that was kind of importing You know, that was almost a new version of the missionary move – of taking our definition of religion and now applying it to worldviews.

DR: *Yes. And the choice of the dimensions, and the relative weighting of them, kind-of speaks to that. So you know, like “texts” is there But also, I’m not sure where exactly, but he certainly states at one point that obviously while we can view all of these things as worldviews, some of them are “more profound than others”. So, implicitly, he’s still making distinctions!*

AT: Right. Right.

DR: *And, of course, Christianity is going to be right at the top! I mean, I would put money on that.*

AT: Right. But part of our move to viewing worldviews and ways of life from an evolutionary perspective is to try to turn that on its head. Because it makes the highly rationalised, highly systematised worldviews that philosophers and theologians are into – and maybe even world religions textbooks – into a very high end product that may, or may not, have that much relationship to everyday life. Or at least it's a very open question – as scholars of so-called lived religion would argue – to how people live their everyday lives. So part of what we see, working from the bottom up, is a lot of open questions about: how integrated are people's enacted worldviews? Do they need to articulate them in order to function? Or can an enculturated way of life be perfectly sufficient until it's challenged in some way, by something or other? Then maybe people have to start to think about it on a

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need-to-know basis (20:00).

DR: *And this is something that really interests me, actually. You said something about this. I think you said that we can see external What's the term you used? Schemas. We can see schemas that are external to us, in other societies, very easily. But it's very difficult to see schemas in our own. Which, obviously, is something that, as scholars, we're trained to do, and we try and inculcate in our students as well. But I was thinking about . . . I'm very interested in the idea of challenging the idea of belief in the study of religion. I think there's a lot of stress put on, "This is people's belief." And, when you actually look at the data on the ground, people are not consistent in these kind of things. Beliefs are not performative statements which people hold in their brain and then act in accordance to. And, for instance, we have ideas like situational belief, where people will respond differently in different circumstances. And I certainly saw this a lot in my research on New Age and conspiracy theories. That, for instance, people who were suffering from chronic pain will change their position or adopt multiple positions on alternative therapies. They may be the most scientifically-minded person going, but when pain-killers no longer work they're willing to, subjunctively, entertain the idea that acupuncture, or flower remedies, or something else might work. And then, of course, if those seem to work, they may completely change their worldview.*

AT: Or *not* completely.

DR: *So yes. You can see where I'm . . .*

AT: Yes. Because they may still be going to a more conventional physician or healer at the same time. So they may, people may actually be able to keep multiple variant implicit worldviews going, without thinking really carefully about the conflicts between them – as long as the conflicts aren't causing them any problems.

DR: *So are we seeing people, then, moving between different schemas? Are they moving between different worldviews, then? Or are we able to negotiate multiple schemas in different contexts?*

AT: Yes. I mean I think Let me answer that a couple of ways. Because, if we think about other animals who would have evolved schemas that would be cued by the environment to elicit certain behaviours in certain situations, then certainly we could think that, at that basic level, we have tons of schemas that get differentially cued by different environmental contexts. Each of those contexts would be a whole situation where we could ask, "What's the situation in which we find ourselves?" "What's the goal in this situation?" "What is the means to get the goal?" "What kind of action . . .?" So, in that

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sense, we could begin to flesh out a micro-worldview, or micro-answers to the big questions, in that context. So part of the thing to keep in mind, I think, is the answers to the big questions don't have to be super-big sounding! (Laughs).

DR: *(Laughs). No, absolutely! Yes!*

AT: But at a more human level, I think, another way to think about your question, that again came up at our discussions, was to think about it in relationship to people that are bicultural. And it seems to me that there's an analogy between the kinds of people dealing with medical problems switching between healing frames, we could call it, that *could* develop into a whole consistent way of life, but *could* just be these partial things that people can flip back and forth between. And if we look at bicultural people, they get cued to speak different languages, bring whole different sets of cultural schemas into play when they're with their relatives, wherever their family came from, or when they're with their family in their new context.

DR: *Interestingly – I didn't mention this when we were talking about this yesterday (25:00) – but, because I worked in catering for a long time, I've known a lot of bicultural people. And several of them have said to me that their personality is slightly different when they're in the other register. Like, I've known a French friend of mine who says she's much more sarcastic and aggressive with her French family and friends than she is with her Scottish friends, for instance.*

AT: Yes, I think that's really interesting. I mean, in that she's answering the big question about “Who am I?” With different answers.

DR: *Differently.*

AT: Yes. And I think we need a language to make sense of that, to explore that. And that's part of what I see as the power of this approach. It seems to me there's a whole lot of different directions that we can use it to explore.

DR: *Yes. So let's pursue that then – briefly, I mean. In the Gunning lectures you used the example of the AA quite a lot. And I thought you could, maybe, talk us quite quickly through that – just so the listeners have a real world example to play with. So taking the Alcoholics Anonymous – a group that kind-of . . . you know: a debatable case, an edge case as to whether we're talking about something that's religious or not. So let's see how the model works.*

AT: Yes, well that was exactly why I picked it. Because they are adamant that they are not a religion.

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DR: *Absolutely, yes.*

AT: So, Alcoholics Anonymous is happy to call itself a spiritual . . . as embodying a spiritual path, or a spiritual way of life. They actually use the way of life kind of language, or call themselves a fellowship. So that was why I picked them. Plus, I know a fair amount about them – so it seemed like an example I could spell out.

DR: *Yes. That helps!*

AT: Yes. So part of what I did in the first lecture was just to show the variety of ways that we can analyse it. So in the first lecture I talked about it at the sort-of high level of itself as a group with official documents, you know, describing who they are collectively. And so I used the [Twelve Steps](#) and the [Twelve Traditions](#), which are their core defining documents, to analyse how as an organisation they would officially answer the big questions. They don't officially answer the big questions, but how we can tease out their answers to the big questions based on their official documents.

DR: *OK*

AT: And then I indicated that we could look, we could take that analysis in two directions. We could compare it to other groups in the culture to help us better understand how they were trying to position themselves, and why they wanted to insist they were not a religion. And it's basically because they wanted to argue that their path is compatible with any religion or none at all. But then the other thing that I showed is how we can look at subgroups within AA, or individual narratives within AA, and examine the extent to which they buy the official conception that this is a generic spiritual path. And so I alluded to some of the different commentaries: feminist, Native American, Buddhist, Vedanta – you know. There's all these different attempts to translate the Twelve Steps into other religious or spiritual terms.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: So that's the kind of thing that I was looking at in the first lecture: some of the big picture things we could do. Then in the second lecture, when I looked at the evolutionary perspective, or foundations of worldviews, I used the kind of layered approach – developing the idea that we have these evolved schemas, and also internalised cultural schemas, that can lead us to act very quickly without thinking about it – to tease apart [Bill Wilson](#) – one of the Founders of AA – what he would describe as the sort of drinkers' dilemma, which is that they can make this conscious choice to quit drinking and then have

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that immediately undermined when somebody hands them a drink (30:00). And so I use that to differentiate between an enacted way of life which is, “I’m an alcoholic”, and an articulated way of life, which is, “I’m going to quit drinking and I have the willpower to do it”.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: In the last lecture I looked at the emergence of AA and the transformation of the alcoholic as processes of change, both of groups and of individuals. And so I used this kind of analysis to analyse sort-of the before and after, and the transition from one way of life to another.

DR: *We're getting towards time, now. So let's switch to the bigger questions. So, we're talking about maybe the idea of subsuming RS under a broader umbrella of worldviews and stuff – where we started. But why is this so important now? What . . . ? This has some strong resonances with the field, and issues within the field generally, I think. And it would be good to speak to that, briefly.*

AT: I think I'm frustrated with the field on a couple of levels. I'm frustrated with what strikes me as a continuing spinning of our wheels when it comes to critique. We're very good at critiquing and identifying all the problems with the concept of religion. But I don't see that much effort being put into solving the problems. And too often I see the potential solutions, including this one, being shut down because it might undermine our departments, and so-to-speak our way of life. So even if it might be more responsible intellectually, more consistent intellectually, we want to safeguard our way of life and therefore we're not going to go there, and we're going to continue to spin our wheels conceptually. I find that really frustrating – although I certainly understand why we might want to protect our way of life. The other frustration, for me, is the kind of polarisation between people that are deeply committed to a humanistic approach to the study of religion and people that are trying to approach it from a more scientific or cognitive scientific point of view. And I really see myself as trying to bridge between those two. And I strongly would argue for the value of both approaches. It's not an either/or kind of thing. So, taken together, this kind of approach that I'm talking about is designed, one: to offer a constructive kind-of option to get us beyond just critique, and second: to bridge between the humanistic and the scientific approaches. So I'd just like to see more of us engaging in both bridge-building and trying to solve some of our problems.

DR: *Yes. And we at the Religious Studies Project . . . those are two issues that we – well, certainly the former: moving beyond critique is something that we've taken quite seriously. And the interdisciplinary . . . I mean, we feature a lot of psychology and cognitive people on. But proper*

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interdisciplinary work that builds on both sides equally is rare. But it's also challenging to do, I think. This is may be a legacy of the way that the field's construed. We're already . . . you know, I've had to learn Sociology and History as methodologies, just in a standard RS context. So, then, to start building in Psychology and Cognitive Studies, you know – it's big ask!

AT: I totally agree. It is a big ask. And I've been motivated to do it because I find it really fascinating. So if people don't have any kind of internal curiosity driving them to do it, then you know it's probably going to be pretty tough (35:00). But, on the other hand, people could be more open to those who *are* interested in doing it. But the second thing that I think we need to be really aware of is that people in the sciences tend to work collaboratively and people in the humanities tend to be single-author type folks.

DR: *Yes.*

AT: And so, the more of this kind of bridge-building work I've tried to do, the more I've been collaborating. So, just in this conversation, I've been mentioning Egil Asprem. I've been working with him on this worldviews and ways of life stuff, but when we decided to work out some of these ideas for a psychology journal we enlisted a psychologist as a third author. And we're also working on a another paper that I'm going to be giving in an evolution of religion conference, where I'm going to argue about: why are we talking about the evolution of religion? Shouldn't we be talking about the evolution of worldviews and ways of life? But, anyway, we're enlisting an evolutionary psychologist as a third author on that paper. So, I want to have that kind of collaborative input so that I'm more confident that the ways that we're pushing these ideas makes sense to people who are deeply invested in those particular fields. So it's one thing to kind-of sketch a big picture, but it's another to present it with the kind of detail that the people specialising in that area would want to have.

DR: *Absolutely. And, you know, I know this myself from the limited amount of collaboration I've had in terms of working with conspiracy theory scholars. Because, as someone trained in Religious Studies, I'm kind of a minority there. Probably 50% of them are psychologists and maybe 30% are political science – so very different methodologies. But very clear that the next stage in the scholarship needs to take the humanities' critiques, and analyses, and understanding of terms together with the kind of data-generating ability, and the quantitative analysis that they can do. And so, yes, I think there's a very timely call. And it's probably a good place to leave, on that kind-of rousing call to action!*

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AT: Yes.

DR: *So I'm just going to say – thanks so much for joining us today, Ann. Thank you.*

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