

Article

Dimensions of the Relationship between the Individual and Her Unique Worldview Construction

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Abstract: Each individual constructs his own private worldview using elements from established worldview traditions. The biographical character of this formation makes this the individual's "Unique Worldview Construction" (UWC). The purpose of this theoretical study is to analyse the dynamic relationship between the individual and her own UWC. It describes more *how* than *what* he believes in or denies. The variation is exceedingly complex. To make it accessible, the complexity is crystallized into seven dimensions: (1) The authority structure deals with the individual's perception of herself as being superordinate/subordinate to her own UWC. (2) The importance dimension analyses the span from indifference to involvement among a variety of religious/nonreligious, age, and gender cohorts. (3) The certainty dimension explores doubt versus confidence, using theories like confirmation bias, naïve realism, and cognitive dissonance. (4) The dimension of one's relationship to rejected beliefs describes different ways of being inclusive/exclusive. (5) The emotional dimension depicts the individual's weak/strong and negative/positive feelings towards different elements of her UWC. (6) The openness dimension sheds light on the respective traits of being introverted/extroverted regarding one's private worldview. (7) The continuity dimension explores different development patterns, along with complex pre/post-conversion and deconversion processes. The different dimensions partly correlate to each other.



Citation: Eidhamar, Levi Geir. 2021. Dimensions of the Relationship between the Individual and Her Unique Worldview Construction. *Religions* 12: 215. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030215>

Received: 21 January 2021
Accepted: 12 March 2021
Published: 21 March 2021

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Keywords: belief; faith; intellectual humility; open-mindedness; apodictic certainty; conversion; atheism; agnosticism; secularisation

1. Introduction

The English term "worldview" is rooted in the German word *Weltanschauung*, first used by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and theoretically developed by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) (Sire 2015, pp. 23–25; Dilthey 1957). According to several researchers, a worldview may denote both a collective and an individual phenomenon. The two may be regarded as complementary perspectives and not conflicting theoretical approaches (Sire 2015, pp. 25–27; McGuire 2008, pp. 8–20, 51–96; Berger 1969, pp. 3–28; Schlitz et al. 2010, pp. 8–9).

Firstly, "worldview" is described as a collective set of ideas, often developed by an elite of philosophers, religious innovators, prophets, reformers, and theologians. These religious and secular worldview traditions, with all their subdivisions, are studied within disciplines like philosophy and comparative religion. Based on Leo Apostel and van der Veken, "worldview" in this sense may be defined as a structured body of ideas dealing with basic existential questions like: (1) *Ontology*: What is? (2) *Explanation of the past*: Where does it all come from? (3) *Prediction*: Where are we going? (4) *Theory of values*: What is good and what is evil? (5) *Theory of actions*: How should we act? (6) *Epistemology*: What is true and how can we know it is true? (Apostel and Veken 1991, pp. 29–30; Vidal 2008, p. 4).

Secondly, "worldview" may be perceived as a personal and individual construct, usually studied within disciplines like psychology of religion and worldviews, cognitive psychology, sociology of religion and worldviews, anthropology, but also increasingly

accentuated with comparative religion. In his article on ethos and worldview, Clifford Geertz describes the cultural, emotional, attitudinal and practical aspects of a person's worldview (Geertz 1957). According to Marilyn Mandala Schlitz and colleagues, an individual worldview combines beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, and ideas in forming a comprehensive model of reality. This model arises from interactions with primary attachment figures, and provides a framework for understanding new experiences and guiding social interaction (Schlitz et al. 2010, p. 19).

Even though each person's worldview is individual, it is socially constructed. Family, friends, and particularly socialisation are crucial for its development. The process is dynamic, going on continually in daily life through practices, symbols, customs, and traditions (Shaver et al. 1996, p. 39). This means the individual worldview, notwithstanding being a social construction, also has a biographical character that makes it entirely unique to the individual (Streib 2001, pp. 145–46; Buitelaar 2014, pp. 11–12; Sire 2015, p. 25; Eidhamar 2019, pp. 39–41; McGuire 2008, pp. 51–54).

As such, I launch a new term and name it the individual's "Unique Worldview Construction" (UWC). The term "construction" is chosen to indicate that it is developed by the humans themselves—consciously or unconsciously. It is dynamic and denotes both the ongoing process and the result of it. The UWC contains cognitive, emotional, social, and practising dimensions—to name a few. This article focuses on the cognitive aspects of the UWC—be it religious or secular.

The UWC is here defined to include both positive and negative elements from the collective worldview traditions known by the individual. This means the individual either positively believes in or negatively rejects elements within the different collective worldview traditions.

The UWC may contain standpoints regarding both transcendent and immanent elements. The transcendent elements are beliefs on matters outside usual human knowledge, like the possible existence of an afterlife. Conversely, the immanent elements can be subjected to academic scrutiny. An example of the latter is preservation of holy scriptures from their old initial manuscripts until today.

The individual's UWC normally contains components from an array of different sources like literature, mass media, personal experiences, and internalised values which are gradually developed through interactions with the surrounding society.

Some of these individual worldview constructions are mainly what I name *mono-traditional*. That means they are positively based on one specific kind of an established collective worldview tradition, while alternative traditions are rejected. Other constructions are *poly-traditional*, which means they positively and eclectically contain and relate to different elements of a variety of the collective worldviews. Any UWC may then be located within the dimensional span between the two poles, mono-traditional and poly-traditional.

While the collective worldview traditions are theoretical and ideological systems that might exist separated from individual humans, the UWC exists as a fully integrated part of the single individual, and the two cannot be separated.

According to research on the religious development of children, the first intuitive thoughts of worldview questions like the possibility of a life after death or existence of God, is developed around the age of three (Yust 2003, p. 133; Helm et al. 2007, p. 273; Ratcliff 1992, p. 119). Therefore, all human beings who are above about three years of age and have an operating cognitive function possess their own individual UWC, which they continually develop throughout their lifespan.

In a thorough article from 2004, Mark E. Koltko-Rivera reviewed and analysed the dimensional variation of worldviews as such (Koltko-Rivera 2004). He depicted a large variety of dimensions among and within different worldviews. These various dimensions of worldviews are also comprehensively analysed and discussed elsewhere within existing research literature (Woodard 2019; Vidal 2007, 2008; Schlitz et al. 2010; Desimpelaere et al. 1999).

In addition, a large amount of literature within different fields touches diverse facets and dimensions of *the relationship* between the individual and her personal worldview—directly or indirectly.

The aim of this article is not to construct a new theory, but to summarise, extract and highlight how empirical findings and secondary literature shed light on the range of varieties within the different dimensions of the relationship between the individual and her personal worldview. That means, the aim is not primary to describe and analyse *what* the individual believes or denies but rather *how* she believes or denies, even though the two approaches are closely related and the lines are often blurry. In doing so, I find the term UWC to be a useful and clarifying tool. A project like this has not been previously carried out.

The article may help to further understand the relationship between oneself and one's worldview, and thereby how this relationship influences life in its totality, the relationship to oneself and to other people.

The dimensional variation of the individual's relationship to her UWC is exceedingly complex. To make it accessible, I have tried to simplify and crystallise the complexity into seven dimensions constituting a continuum between two poles. The dimensions are entitled: authority structure, importance, certainty, the relationship to rejected beliefs, emotion, openness, and continuity. The seven dimensions and their associated poles are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The seven Dimensions and their associated Poles.

Dimension	Weak Pole	↔	Strong Pole
Authority structure	Superordinate	↔	Subordinate
Importance	Indifferent	↔	Involved
Certainty	Doubtful	↔	Convinced
Relationship to rejected beliefs	Inclusive	↔	Exclusive
Emotion	Weak/negative emotions	↔	Strong/positive emotions
Openness	Introvert	↔	Extrovert
Continuity	Changing	↔	Stable

When reading the large amount of relevant literature, I have found these seven to be appropriate as a tool in simplifying and crystallising the complexity depicted. Even though, the seven dimensions are neither self-evident nor exhaustive. The list could have been shorter or longer, and some dimensions could have been replaced by others.

When a source is referred to as support for a detail in the presentation, it noticeably does not indicate that the actual source supports the totality of the perspective presented.

Some dimensions relate to a broader field of research than others. Because of this, two dimensions—certainty and continuity—are discussed and analysed more comprehensively than the others.

2. The Authority Dimension: Superordinate versus Subordinate

This dimension depicts the individual's perceived authority structure between herself and her own UWC. Some may consciously or unconsciously regard themselves as the creator of their own UWC and therefore also regard themselves as superordinate to it. They do not perceive it as an authority, and it is no problem for them to admit that their UWC is their own construction. Quite naturally, this would be the position of most adherents to secular worldviews. This illustrates that the authority dimension may be linked to the content of the worldview traditions that the individual positively adheres to within her UWC.

The opposite is represented by those who regard themselves as subordinate to their own faith or worldview. They would usually regard their belief system as an authority that exists independently from themselves. This might be the case within several religious traditions. Some of those who regard their faith as a divine authority in their lives may

oppose this article's statement that they construct their own UWC. They see the faith in their heart as a divine and eternal entity, existing independently from themselves. The failure to see one's own UWC as a human construct may be caused by inadequate segregation between the worldview tradition one adheres to and one's own individual interpretation of it (Bogardus 2013).

Deciding whether a specific religion reveals eternal truths or is merely a human construct is an assignment of belief determined by each individual's UWC and cannot be accomplished academically. The point in this article is that the UWC is an individual interpretation of existing religious or secular traditions and will therefore, inevitably, be a human construct. This viewpoint neither confirms nor contradicts the beliefs of religious adherents who are convinced that their religion is based on divine revelation and was not constructed by human beings. That means a devoted religious believer who consciously distinguishes between the religious tradition she adheres to and her own interpretation of it may perceive herself as the superordinate master of her own UWC. She may then combine this superordinate position in her UWC with being subordinate to the specific religion she adheres to.

3. The Dimension of Importance: Indifferent versus Involved

This dimension describes how important worldview and belief are to the individual and her identity. It also depicts the involvement and consciousness of the individual's relationship to her own UWC. The range within this dimension is huge. Some are totally indifferent and seldom give their beliefs a conscious thought. Others regard their belief to be the basis of their identity and devote their entire life to it.

There is a wide range of importance found internally among adherents of both religious and secular worldviews. At the same time, for the majority of those who perceive themselves as being nonreligious, there is a general tendency for their UWC to play a minor role. According to a global survey from 2010, 16.3% of respondents regarded themselves as unaffiliated, which means they did not adhere to a specific religion (Pew Research Center 2012).

Lois Lee, in his research on non-religiosity, emphasizes that the term "nonreligion" includes a diverse group including atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, those who are indifferent, anti-religious and those who want to believe but fail to do so (Lee 2012, 2014). Several non-religious people may still be spiritually seeking, and not straightforwardly secular, but they reject theological doctrines and established religion (Woodhead et al. 2016, pp. 551–70).

Within the sociology of worldviews, the spectrum of non-religiosity may be subdivided into two main types: positive and negative atheists (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, pp. 14–15). Positive atheists—also labelled strong, hard, analytic, or theoretic atheists—claim a theoretically conscious conviction of the nonexistence of any kind of supernatural deity. Negative atheists—also labelled weak, soft, or practical atheists—do not relate to any deity and suppose there is none but regard the question as immaterial. Some do not regard themselves to be atheists. Norenzayan and Gervais (2013, pp. 21–23) subdivide negative atheism into 'apatheism', arising from conditions of existential security, and 'inCREDulous atheism', found in cultures where there is a relative absence of exposure to faith in God or gods.

Theoretical reasoning and empirical research indicate that positive atheists have a stronger and more conscious relationship to their UWC than negative atheists (Bréchon 2017, p. 144; Norenzayan and Gervais 2013, pp. 21–23; Stolz 2017, pp. 9–13).

The difference among the types may be illustrated by the population of Estonia, which is considered one of the most secularised countries in the world. During the Soviet regime, the influence of Christianity was greatly diminished. At the same time, the militant propaganda of positive atheism aroused distaste. Atko Remmel sums it up like this:

In short, religion and church were out of the picture, but instead of atheism, indifference towards both religion and state-supported atheism was achieved. (Remmel 2017, p. 127)

Recent Estonian surveys show that questions of religion or atheism are considered uninteresting and unimportant (Remmel 2017). This negative form of atheism connotes weak and unconscious links to the individual's own UWC.

Convinced and conscious atheists often constitute a minority in opposition with strongly religious communities. Atheist activity then appears as a rebellion against religious dominance. The British scholar of nonreligious worldviews, Steve Bruce, has stated that “you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious” (Bruce 2002, p. 42). A few individuals claiming a determined conviction in unbelief seem to be symptomatic of strongly religious societies. The fact that firmly religious nineteenth-century Britain was also the golden age of British unbelief may serve as a classical example (Bullivant 2012, p. 100). Conversely, secular societies characterised by negative atheism do not provoke positive atheism, illustrating that secularisation not only diminishes the importance of religion but seems to weaken the salience of questions regarding belief and worldviews in general, as the situation in Estonia illustrates (Klug 2017, pp. 219–23).

Today, positive atheism is primarily represented by the “four horsemen of new atheism”, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens (Finley 2019). Although they have emerged in a time of increasing secularization, their success may also be understood as a reaction against the traditional Christian dominance in the Western World.

A positive belief in a specific transcendent reality is usually more crucial for the individual than simply assuming the absence of such realities. This means the UWC is generally more important to religious individuals than to most nonreligious individuals. Religious believers regard their faith to be more than a theoretical worldview construction—it is rather the basic foundation that gives their lives direction, content, and meaning.

According to an international survey from 2014, the percentage of those who stated that religion was important in their lives varied among adherents of the different religious traditions: Evangelical Protestants 79%, Muslims 64%, Catholics 58%, Mainline Protestants 53%, Orthodox Christians 52%, Buddhists 33%, and Hindus 26% (Pew Research Center 2014). This might indicate that the belief in one personal God, as in Christianity and Islam, is perceived to be more personally engaging and binding than the more pluralistic and philosophical traits of Hinduism and Buddhism. In 2014, 53% of those adhering to a religion regarded religion to be important in their personal lives, a small decline from 56% in 2007. In 2014, 22% of the same group did not regard their religious ties to be important, an increase from 16% in 2007 (Pew Research Center 2014). This may be the effect of a moderate global secularisation, combining firm secularisation in the West and a trend of sacralisation in several Muslim countries (Eidhamar 2017a, pp. 142–45).

Karel (Dobbelaere 2002) has depicted secularisation/sacralisation at three levels: macro, meso, and micro. Secularisation may cause individuals at the micro, or personal, level to regard their own religion as less important in their daily lives. Still, the majority of the religion's adherents regarded their religious UWC to be personally important to them, with an increasing minority regarding the religious part of their UWC as being not considerably important.

Based on qualitative and quantitative studies in Switzerland, Jörg Stolz (2017) has developed a typology identifying four types of (un)belief. Three were connected to specific worldview traditions: Institutionals (Christianity), Alternatives (Spirituality, Holism), and Seculars. A fourth group labelled Distanced was by far the largest with 57%. As the label indicated, this group had a distant relationship to all the established worldview traditions. They might be open to the ideas of higher powers or some existence after death, but their belief was fuzzy and blurry. Using the terminology of this article, their UWC did not seem to play an important part in their life. The existence of such a large “distant” group may be the case for several secularised societies in the West (Stolz 2017, pp. 9–13).

Most religions are founded by men and have strong patriarchal traditions. Generally, priests, imams, and other religious leaders are men. Notwithstanding, women statistically seem to be more religiously devoted than men. According to a Pew survey from 2016, reli-

gion was equally important to both genders in 46 countries and personally more important to women than to men in 36 countries, while it only was more important to men in Israel and Mozambique. In the United States, 60% of the women and 47% of the men surveyed regarded religion to be “very important” in their lives (Pew Research Center 2016).

Within all countries and according to all measures of religious commitment, Christian women were more devoutly religious than Christian men. By contrast, the two genders showed quite similar levels of religiousness within Muslim societies (Pew Research Center 2016). This indicates that religion is not necessarily more important to women, but that specific traits and values may appeal somewhat differently to each of the two genders (King 2004, pp. 70–72). Furthermore, prescriptions and practices specific to certain religions may cause gender bias. This may be exemplified by rules requiring Muslim men to attend Mosque as well as the Shivaite tradition of carrying hooks, which is primarily practised by young males (Hackett 2018; Belle 2017).

Data from Western countries in particular indicate that the importance of one’s religious UWC often changes through one’s lifespan. Religious attachments tend to reach a small peak during adolescence, decline through middle adulthood, and then increase during the later years. One explanation may be that material values lose importance during the last part of life, while existential questions and a possible afterlife become more essential. Surveys also show that the interest in religion decreases moderately with increasing income and education (Pew Research Center 2018).

4. The Certainty Dimension: Doubtful versus Convinced

This dimension describes how convinced the individual is of the truth of her own UWC. The opposing poles may be labelled as doubtful versus convinced, ambivalent versus certain, doubting versus believing. Some experience real doubt, ambivalence, uncertainty, and questioning as they are drawn between different, competing, and potentially opposite worldviews and beliefs. Others are totally convinced of their UWC, or at least of the absolute truth of the religion or worldview that forms the foundation of their individual UWC.

The weak pole of this dimension may have different traits depending on the dimension of importance, which induces two poles or types of doubt.

Indifferent individuals may very well have low levels of conviction, but their doubt or ambivalence is generally almost unconscious, and it plays no role in their lives. When they are questioned whether there exists a creator or life after death, their typical answer would be: “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” This kind of uncertainty may also fluctuate. A typical answer may then be: “Sometimes I believe, and sometimes I don’t.” Members of the large “distant” group in Jörg Stolz’ typology may serve as typical examples of this attitude (Stolz 2017, pp. 9–13).

As already mentioned, secularisation seems to reduce one’s interest in worldview issues in general (Klug 2017, pp. 219–23). Not caring might indicate not reflecting and knowing for sure. This means secularisation may also promote the combination of not caring and not knowing. In its ultimate sense, this is characterised by individuals who have neither any religious nor atheist or agnostic conviction—they are “nons” in the real meaning of the word (Lee 2012).

If one’s worldview comprises an important part of one’s identity, a potential doubt may be expressed through severe and painful inner battles. Usually, this applies to believers who are deeply intellectually and emotionally involved in their religious worldviews. The most severe doubt may, as a last consequence, mean leaving one’s faith. Breaking these bonds may be as painful as breaking up a romantic relationship:

My whole sense of purpose, value, and meaning was wrapped tightly around my Christian faith. . . . I kept my doubts buried and crucified, and I tried hard not to think about the troubling things of faith. . . . A year ago, I abandoned evangelicalism . . . the pain I feel is deep and raw. (Winell 2020)

When doubt in atheism or agnosticism results in religious conversion, there seems to be less painful emotions. The reason may be that the emotional connection is usually stronger to belief than to nonbelief.

The opposite pole within this dimension is represented by individuals who are strongly confident in the religion or worldview that serves as a basis for their individual UWC. Psychologically, such a confident conviction might have positive functions, such as offering existential meaning. On the negative side, there may be a lack of understanding and respect towards opposing worldviews and their adherents.

The global population adheres to a variety of worldview traditions. That means each tradition is supported by a minority of the world's population—and even fewer minorities support the variety of subdivisions within each tradition. Regardless of whether there are many or few followers, some adherents might be quite convinced of the truth of the specific tradition or subdivision they adhere to. This may seem illogical since an individual with this conviction will oppose a massive majority of the globe's human beings. Are adherents of small minority beliefs less convinced than adherents of large religions? Sometimes the opposite seems to be the case. According to surveys, a large majority of Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints seem to have strong convictions, even though they are few in number (Pew Research Center 2014). How can the individual be so convinced that she is right against the conviction of a large majority of the world's population? What might be the causal explanation for this inclination, which seems to lack intellectual humility?

An explanation for a strong conviction may, of course, be that there are rational and convincing arguments. But that does not explain the unevenly distributed predilections regarding existential truths. A fundamental causal explanation for that is probably the deeply human habit of *confirmation bias*. That means all human beings have a firm unconscious tendency to prefer and absorb new information in a way that confirms their prior beliefs (Nickerson 1998, pp. 175–77).

This evident trait of human nature has been recognised for centuries, and is here exemplified by the Muslim scholar, social scientist, and historian Ibn-Khaldūn (d. 1406) and Anglican philosopher Francis Bacon (d. 1626):

... If the soul is infected with partisanship for a particular opinion or sect, it accepts without a moment's hesitation the information that is agreeable to it. Prejudice and partisanship obscure the critical faculty and preclude critical investigation. The result is that falsehoods are accepted and transmitted. (Ibn-Khaldūn 2005, p. 35)

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion... draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects or despises, or else by some distinction sets aside or rejects. (Bacon 1855, p. XLVI)

The tendency of confirmation bias has been strongly empirically confirmed within cognitive psychological research (Nickerson 1998, pp. 175–77; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017, pp. 2–3, 15–16). According to Jonathan Evans, "Confirmation bias is perhaps the best known and most widely accepted notion on inferential error to come out of the literature on human reasoning" (Evans 1989, p. 41).

Confirmation bias influences three major stages of human reasoning: selection, interpretation, and memory.

Firstly, we primarily search and select information that is consistent with our existing beliefs. This gives rise to a selective exposure. The phenomenon is characteristic of our searches on the Internet, which will be explored later in the article.

Secondly, the biasedly selected information—and possible divergent facts—are all interpreted in a way that confirms our existing positions. Several experiments have shown that when two groups holding opposite views receive the exact same information, there is a solid tendency for them all to interpret it as supporting their prior positions.

Thirdly, we selectively remember and recall knowledge that supports our existing convictions. Information that contradicts our prior beliefs will more easily be displaced and

forgotten (Nickerson 1998, pp. 175–77; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017, pp. 2–3, 15–16; Baack et al. 2015).

A prominent feature of confirmation bias is that it happens unconsciously. Within cognitive psychology, the term “naïve realism” is synonymous with the perception that I myself have the ability to observe the world as it really is. That means I am blind to my own confirmation bias. At the same time, I am fully able to see the confirmation bias of others. It is like wearing glasses: I can clearly see the glasses of others, but I am unable to see my own. This combination of confirmation bias and naïve realism may be the main source of deficiency within human reasoning (Munro and Stansbury 2009, pp. 1–3; Trouche et al. 2016, pp. 2122–24).

Empirical studies indicate that an individual’s tendency to engage in confirmation bias occurs independently from her level of intelligence. Highly intelligent and educated people may have even greater possibilities of finding good arguments for their own position. At the same time, the tendency to engage in confirmation bias is not evenly distributed. People who are open-minded and intellectually humble seem to be less influenced by cognitive bias. At the same time, being aware of the phenomena may by itself counteract this tendency within one’s own reasoning (Nalty 2016, pp. 45–48; Nickerson 1998, pp. 175–77; Caplan 2001, pp. 3–8).

Confirmation bias is not evenly distributed when it comes to the object of the bias. We are quite open to changing our opinion on matters we consider to be insignificant. On the opposite end of the scale, we are highly motivated to preserve our belief in existential questions we regard to be basic in our lives. This means confirmation bias seems to be extraordinarily influential on our individual belief and worldview position (Yousaf and Gobet 2016, pp. 3–5; Eidhamar 2017b, pp. 256–61).

Another possible reason for a biased worldview conviction might be what I name the *closed worldview socialisation* of children. This implies that a child’s nurturer conveys his own belief to be the sole truth, combined with transmitting closed, negatively stereotyped attitudes to opposing beliefs (Danso et al. 1997, pp. 497–98). In passing on information and attitudes, the nurturer consciously or unconsciously cherry-picks positively from his own belief-system and compares it with negative cherry-picking from opposing positions. The child’s independent, inquisitive, and critical exploration may be carefully diverted or actively counteracted. Scientific or logical facts causing questions and doubts are withheld or actively undermined if the child is already aware (Armet 2009, pp. 277–80).

The nurturer’s purpose in providing a closed worldview socialisation is to transmit his own worldview to the child in order to ensure that the respective child will adhere to it in the future. If such socialisation is combined with a warm relationship with the nurturer, it might be the best way to ensure that the child’s future UWC will be positively dominated by the nurturer’s own worldview tradition (Erickson 1992; Maliepaard and Lubbers 2013, pp. 425–26).

The research literature thoroughly discusses whether there is inconsistency between having a strong worldview conviction and being open-minded and intellectually humble (Kwong 2017; Carter and Gordon 2014; Adler 2004; Hoyle et al. 2016; Rodriguez et al. 2019; Kwong 2016).

Open-mindedness has been regarded as a main intellectual virtue since the time of Socrates (Hare 2011, pp. 9–10). The definition of the term is a subject of wide discussion within epistemological research. The British philosopher William Hare, who has published extensively on open-mindedness, defines it as “a willingness to form and revise our ideas in the light of a critical review of evidence and argument that strives to meet the elusive ideals of objectivity and impartiality” (Hare 2011, p. 9). Open-mindedness is close to and partly overlaps with the term “intellectual humility”, which may be defined as a nonthreatening awareness of one’s intellectual fallibility and thereby the fallibility of one’s own views and an openness to changing those views when warranted (Krumrei-Mancuso 2018, p. 65; Hopkin et al. 2014, p. 50).

The principal question of the relation between the strength of one's worldview conviction and open-mindedness may be specifically relevant to religiously devoted individuals who view their UWC as not only a theoretical conviction but a total commitment that is fundamental to their lives. A Muslim's devotion to Allah or a Christian's relation to Jesus are personal relationships in which doubt may be perceived as a betrayal (Hill 2019, pp. 194–98).

Adherents to religions which teach that an affiliation with one's own faith is crucial for a happy destiny in the afterlife might have a separate motive for staying within this religion and keeping a proper distance from the possible truths of other worldviews. For some Muslims and Christians, thoughts of afterlife might be an important motivation for holding on to a firm belief and actively rejecting possible doubts (Ghayas and Batool 2017).

This potential conflict between open-mindedness and religious conviction is extensively discussed in “Open-mindedness and Religious Devotion” (Spiegel 2013) and “Does cognitive humility lead to religious tolerance?” (Jones 2015). Both articles combine the fields of psychology and epistemology when discussing this conflict.

According to Spiegel, open-mindedness does not presuppose neutrality and may be combined with strong commitments. That means open-mindedness and a belief commitment are not mutually exclusive. A strongly convinced individual may still be open-minded as long as she is confident enough to seriously regard arguments against her belief. On the other hand, her belief is inconsistent with open-mindedness if it involves a doxastic foreclosure that consistently rejects all counter arguments, however convincing they might be (Spiegel 2013, pp. 143–45).

Jones distinguishes between two different kinds of certainty. *Certitude* or *psychological certainty* is a subjective feeling of conviction. This conviction may be as strong as it can possibly be, but epistemologically it still contains fallibility. An example could be the belief in the existence or non-existence of afterlife. On the other hand, he applies the old Aristotelian term *apodictic certainty*, which denotes uncontroversial, objective truths that are infallibly true beyond the possibility of being wrong. An example here could be the mathematical statement of one plus one equals two. Jones uses the terms to describe the ideal of cognitive humility for believers:

This distinction between certitude and apodictic certainty enables us to see that a person can feel certain of the truth of her religious convictions without having to believe that her religious convictions are infallibly true. Awareness of this distinction will then enable such a person to realize that even though she is convinced of the veracity of a belief, she could possibly be wrong. This realization of the fallibility of her strongly held beliefs could in turn lead to the realization that others with whom she strongly disagrees could conceivably be right. This is the beginning of cognitive humility. (Jones 2015, p. 84)

A strongly convinced believer may choose not to follow these ideals. Instead, he regards his own psychological certainty to be an apodictic truth. I choose to denote this conviction as *rigid certainty*. Within research literature, the position is regarded similarly to closed-mindedness, which is normatively valued as inferior to open-mindedness:

The closed-minded person refuses even to consider the possibility that her view is false, and this attitude is demonstrated behaviorally in her refusal to consider countervailing evidence and arguments. The open-minded person, in contrast, recognizes the possibility, however remote, that her present view is false, and this attitude is displayed in the form of a willingness to seriously reconsider her views. (Spiegel 2012, p. 28)

Open-mindedness poses no serious threat to held truths. It is highly plausible to think that the purpose of giving opposing viewpoints serious consideration is precisely to eliminate potential sources of errors, thereby removing the possibility of swapping true beliefs for false ones. . . . Since genuine open-mindedness has a

built-in mechanism to sift out falsehoods, mistakes and errors, it is not an obstacle to someone whose aim is to retain truths. (Kwong 2017, pp. 1919–20)

To prejudge other men's notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness but to put out our own eyes. (Locke 1966, p. 38)

To illustrate the terms, I use the metaphor of four men, *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*, all claiming themselves to be the fastest runner in the group. When they discuss a possible competition, *A* refuses to take part because he regards his superb running ability to be a holy truth raised above human judgment. *B* is willing to run but claims his superiority gives him the right to start one minute before the others. *C* competes but if he should lose, he will consistently blame this on to the others' cheating. *D* also takes part and if he—to his great surprise—should lose, he will admit to not being the fastest. *A*, *B*, and *C* represent rigid certainty while *D* describes psychological certainty with intellectual humility.

A represents those who believe their view to be obviously true without any further discussion. This position may also have connections to Kierkegaard's approach of totally separating religious belief from the domain of logic and science (Evans 2008). *B* refuses to approach his own worldviews and those of others on equal terms. This may be exemplified by believers who hold that only co-believers can research their own faith or religious history, without critical investigation from outsiders. *B* has the tendency to compare the best of his own with the worst of the others. If the opponents have better arguments, *C* consistently reinterprets, redefines, misunderstands, and refuses to acknowledge the content of these arguments.

Rigid certainty and psychological certainty with intellectual humility are not two separate positions with clear limits but may rather be understood as two poles of a continuous line. Some might consciously choose position *A*—possibly understood as being required in their worldview tradition. Many of those who choose *D* may still be influenced by traits from *B* and/or *C*—without seeing it themselves. They regard themselves as representing a pure *D* and are blind to the unwanted impact of *B* and *C* in their reasoning. As human beings, we are usually quite biased without seeing or acknowledging it ourselves.

What happens if we come across facts and information that totally contradicts and undermines our firm beliefs and deep convictions? This is an immensely painful state, named *cognitive dissonance* within cognitive psychology. A usual means of avoiding this grievous condition is to reinterpret the new information in a way that agrees with our prior conviction (McGrath 2017; Festinger 1962).

Leon Festinger has described an extreme case of this phenomenon in his classic monograph "When Prophecy Fails". It may serve as an example of rigid certainty. A woman, given the alias Marian Keech, received a message from the planet Clarion that the world was ending on 21 December 1954. When the prophecy failed, Ms. Keech immediately received a new message telling her that because her small group of believers had spread so much light, God had decided to save the planet from destruction. The event marked the starting point of the group's campaign to spread its message to a broad audience.

Festinger stated several conditions that must be in place for an individual to become a more fervent believer after disconfirming his belief. Among those were the conditions that the belief must be held with deep conviction, the believer must have sacrificed important actions for his belief, and he must have social support for his belief from others. Based on these observations, Festinger developed his theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962).

Quite a similar phenomenon is named the *backfire effect* by Nyhan and Reifler (2010). This term draws on their research and depicts the situation when contradictory evidence does not weaken previously held beliefs but instead makes them stronger. A parallel is the *true-believer-syndrome* described by Keene and Spraggett (1976). It refers to people who continue to believe in paranormal entities, even after being exposed to clear evidence of their nonexistence.

If one's UWC contains beliefs in immanent matters that one then detects to be scientifically disproven, this might cause hard inner battles. One example could be some Jews, Christians, and Muslims who believe that their holy scriptures have been preserved letter

by letter from the first manuscripts until today. When they then read about the thousands of small variants between the variety of initial manuscripts and today's Biblia Hebraica, Greek New Testament and the 1924 Cairo Edition of the Hafs Quran, new reflections may invade the mind with emotional pain. The believer normally has the choice between two alternatives: to change this particular belief, or to reject or reinterpret what seems to be academically proven (Elliott 2010; Déroche 2014; Altikulac et al. 2009; Wurthwein and Fischer 2014).

Within the last generation, the Internet has revolutionised our possible access to information. Two opposite theories describe how this new access affects which information we actually select. One theory claims that the Internet increases exposure and thus enhances the diversity of perspectives. The other claims—in accordance with confirmation bias theory—that the enormous amount of information strengthens our ability to select exactly what confirms our prior belief. This leads us into echo chambers and filter bubbles that are created through the Internet. Regarding worldviews, the last theory seems to describe the dominant trend (Flaxman et al. 2016, pp. 298–301). When it comes to existential and important questions of life, most people search webpages which confirm their own beliefs. Devoted Christians or convinced atheists do not read Muslim websites with an open-minded desire to find answers to their existential questions. The growing amount of information has hardly any limits and Internet pages supporting the most farfetched positions are growing. Because of this, groups like the Flat Earth Society have gained increased support lately. This confirms that the Internet generally results in higher degrees of confirmation bias (Klein 2017, pp. 54–55, 60).

5. The Dimension of the Relationship to Rejected Beliefs: Inclusive versus Exclusive

Atheism, Hinduism, and Islam hold contradicting postulates and cannot be true at the same time. That means, however tolerant or relativistic one is, it is in principle impossible to positively believe in everything. There will always be beliefs and elements of beliefs which the individual rejects or regards as unlikely to be true. Here, this is defined as the negative elements within the individual's UWC. Even though the UWC per definition includes such negative components, the individual might relate to them in a variety of ways. This variety can range from inclusiveness to exclusiveness.

Usually, when talking about the acceptance of diversity, one thinks of relating to people who adhere to beliefs other than one's own. In this context, it is crucial to distinguish between one's attitudes to other people and one's attitudes to their beliefs. One can respect a Nazi sympathiser as a human being without respecting Nazism. Jürgen Habermas describes the difference like this:

... the normative expectation that we be able to live alongside those with different ethical life-styles and value-orientations is of a different nature than the assumption that we must accept the difference between religious truths or between contrary worldviews, in other words accept statements that contradict our own. (Habermas 2003, p. 12)

Relating inclusively to a certain belief will here be defined as one of two levels—respect and tolerance. Neither of these is equivalent with believing in it oneself.

The term "respect" derives from the Latin term "respicere", which literally means "to look again". Respecting the views of others, then, may mean not being satisfied by the first glance but looking thoroughly a second time with an open mind of the possible truth in the opposing belief. The ideal is to properly see and consider the opposing view from a positive insider perspective and to engage the least amount of bias possible. It may also imply that even though I do not share your belief, I try to understand that this belief plays a positive role for you—seen with your eyes. To respect may also indicate a recognition of intellectual equality between my own views and those of my opponents. An agnostic may regard her disbelief in afterlife as intellectually equal to having such a belief, since the question applies to transcendental entities of which nobody can have certain knowledge (van Quaquebeke et al. 2007, p. 187).

“Tolerance” represents a lower level and is less demanding. In Latin, “tolerare” comes from “tolus” (the burden) and means “to bear or endure”. Historically, the notion of tolerance is linked to the French king, Heinrich IV, who granted freedom of religion to the Huguenots in 1598. Originally, tolerance was used to describe a majority who chose to bear or endure the deviation of the minorities. Tolerance was later developed from its initial pragmatic and commercial reasons and is now based on freedom of belief and conscience, as expressed by Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, and Pierre Bayle ([Habermas 2003](#), pp. 4–5; [van der Burg 1998](#), pp. 227–32).

Tolerating a standpoint or belief could mean accepting that the belief is there and not trying to deny anyone the right to proclaim it. Unlike respect, it does not require you to further positively investigate or regard your and your opponent’s beliefs as intellectually equal: Even though I inclusively accept and tolerate that this is a belief or philosophy someone adheres to, I do not necessarily appreciate it ([van Quaquebeke et al. 2007](#), pp. 188–91).

An exclusivist attitude to the negative elements of one’s UWC is usually based on two different types of reasons, here denoted as particularistic and universalistic. A particularistic reason for opposing an explicit belief is based on distinct dogmas within one’s specific worldview. Muslims and Christians may mutually reject each other’s beliefs due to some opposing dogmas on God, Jesus, and the Trinity. If the particularistic rejection is very strong, one tries all means to avoid being influenced by it. Fundamentalist groups may establish their own schools in order to prevent their children from being attracted to the cultural and religious diversity they could be exposed to in public schools ([Springs 2012](#)).

Religious and nonreligious individuals may mutually have particularistic rejections of each other’s worldviews. Which group nurtures the strongest rejection is hard to disclose empirically. Within the nonreligious group, the degree of rejecting religious beliefs spans a wide range:

Although nonbelievers’ attitudes toward religion have not been systematically examined, the implicit assumption underlying many studies is that what distinguishes different nonbeliever types from each other is God beliefs and attitudes toward religion: some have extremely negative views about religion whereas others are indifferent, some reject God absolutely whereas others are uncertain, and some have reflected on their views about religion many times whereas others have not. ([Lindeman et al. 2020](#), p. 3)

Western secularised societies seem to be sceptical of strongly held religious beliefs. A survey from Norway shows that 70% of respondents opposed strongly held Muslim beliefs, 54% opposed strongly held Christian beliefs, and 34% opposed moderately held Muslim beliefs ([Brekke et al. 2020](#)). This indicates that, when it comes to the strength of negatively rejecting what one does not believe oneself, the strength of others’ beliefs maybe just as important as the content.

Rejecting beliefs or ideologies for universalistic reasons means that one regards these beliefs to be unacceptable according to universal, commonly shared human values. Beliefs or ideologies which defend dictatorship, racist grading of human dignity, or torture of dissidents may serve as examples. It may seem contradictory, but intolerance towards openly intolerant ideologies may actually be based on the value of tolerance ([Habermas 2003](#)).

6. The Emotional Dimension: Weak versus Strong and Negative versus Positive

This dimension may be divided into two sub-dimensions: the strength of the emotions, from weak to strong, and the value of the emotions, from negative to positive. The opposite of a strong emotional relation to one’s UWC is not necessarily an intellectual or rational relation. One may very well combine both having a strong emotional and intellectual relation to one’s UWC.

Religious emotions and the feelings the individual nurtures towards his own religious beliefs are related but not identical entities. While religious emotions are thoroughly described and analysed in existing research, the individual’s feelings towards the different elements of her own UWC has, until now, not been such a topic ([Emmons](#)

2014; Ringnes et al. 2017; Goldie 2011; Ringnes et al. 2019; Kim-Prieto and Diener 2009; Riis and Woodhead 2010).

The individual may have a varied spectrum of feelings for the various parts of her own UWC that she believes in or rejects. All four combinations of weak and strong, negative and positive feelings are possible.

The individual will normally cultivate positive feelings towards the elements within her UWC that she believes in and approves. One might then attach a spectrum of emotions to these elements, from neutral to strong positive emotions towards the elements one believes in, and neutral to strong negative emotions towards the elements one rejects. This may occur all by itself, but could also be influenced by a perceived “feeling rule”, using Arlie Russell Hochschild’s term or an “emotional regime”, using a term of Linda Woodhead and Ole Riis (Hochschild 2012; Riis and Woodhead 2010).

In real life it might also be possible to attach negative emotions to some of the elements one believes in. There may be a few Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists who feel negatively about their belief in Hell, but who might regard it as their duty to uphold—even though it is a dogma they honestly do not like. It is also possible to feel positively about elements one does not believe in, but hopes could be true. An atheist on his death bed may feel it is extremely sad to face the reality of being annihilated. Fantasies about reincarnation, like being born as one’s own future grandchild, might seem emotionally attractive—even though he intellectually regards it highly as unlikely to happen.

Fostering heavily negative feelings towards the rejected elements of one’s UWC may generate intolerance. As mentioned above regarding the dimension of one’s relationship to rejected beliefs, it is crucial to distinguish between beliefs and the adherents of those beliefs.

Some of the dogmas the individual positively believes in may cause fear. Examples could be fear of an austere God, fear of Hell, or fear of a bad rebirth due to negative karma. This might cause the relation to one’s UWC to be affected by, or even based on, fear (Cranney et al. 2018, pp. 867–68). Other religious individuals might look forward confidently to a wonderful afterlife and be filled with hope and high expectations. Some might feel a genuine love for the elements in their UWC that they accept because they feel their faith awards them with dignity and meaning in life (De Cruz and Smedt 2017, pp. 435–36; Bahmani et al. 2018, pp. 57–58).

It is quite apparent that individuals with strong religious emotions will also have strong positive emotions towards the religious part of their own UWC. Non-believers would normally have less-positive emotions towards their non-belief, even though many positive atheists may also attach positive emotions towards their worldview identity. One may conclude that religious believers generally attach stronger positive emotions to the elements of their UWC that they confirm than non-believers do. It may be harder to find differences between believers and nonbelievers regarding negative emotions towards the elements in the UWC that the individuals reject.

7. The Openness Dimension: Introvert versus Extrovert

This dimension may be described through dichotomies like private versus public, introvert versus extrovert, or concealed versus exposed. On the one hand, some may keep their UWC so private and secluded that it emerges as a hidden enigma—even to their most intimate contacts. Their shyness within the field seems absolute. The opposite extreme is represented by people who actively seek all imaginable opportunities in a tireless struggle to convince their fellow human beings of the obvious truth in their own belief.

The inclination of privacy regarding one’s belief and worldview may be more widespread among soft non-believers than among active believers. In the secularised West, talking about personal beliefs might seem to be quite a taboo, while it is a natural topic of conversation in many non-Western societies. As secularisation may promote indifference regarding worldview questions in general, it also seems to promote shyness in sharing such personal views with others (Remmel 2017, pp. 123–24).

Individuals who nurture a more engaged and assured relationship to their UWC are often also more extroverted. The relationship to their UWC then seems to be the reverse of, for example, their relationship to a romantic lover. A mutual relationship between the lover and an outsider causes jealousy and uncertainty. A similar relationship between the individual's worldview and other adherents of it seems contrarily to strengthen the individual's conviction of the relevant worldview. This phenomenon may be explained by shared reality theory. According to this classic theory within social psychology, truth is socially constructed. The individual turns outward rather than inward in her search for truth. Her conviction is strengthened by being confirmed by others. If it is verified by fellow human beings, her perception of the conviction as an objective and universal truth is enhanced. When shared reality is established, the conviction is perceived to be more valid. A conviction that is shared with others feels more certain than if it is only held individually. Because of this, humans continuously seek cognitive confirmation of their own assumptions (Rossignac-Milon and Higgins 2018, pp. 86–93; Echterhoff and Higgins 2017, pp. 175–78).

Higgins and Rholes (1978) described what they called the “saying-is-believing” effect (Higgins and Rholes 1978, p. 363). However, the crucial point is whether the audience agrees or not. If the message is rejected, the impact on one's communication may be small or even negative. That is why Higgins, in 2019, rather denotes this as the “sharing-is-believing” effect. This means that communicating one's own conviction to in-groups is more faith-enhancing than communicating it to out-groups (Higgins 2019; Rossignac-Milon and Higgins 2018, pp. 86–93; Hogg and Rinella 2018, pp. 6–10).

The individual's emotional relationship to the audience also matters. If her message is supported by people whom she likes and has good relations with, the content is confirmed more than if the relationship to the audience is dispassionate or negative (Newcomb 1968).

8. The Dimension of Continuity

As described before, the UWC is a dynamic entity being continually constructed by the individual in a biographically unique manner. For the majority, this development evolves through a slow process of continuity within the same worldview tradition(s) one has been socialised into during childhood. Others engage in a radical shift, changing from one distinct worldview tradition to another. This might happen gradually over a long time or quite suddenly.

Although the individual remains within the same worldview tradition her entire life, the UWC and her relationship to it will develop continually—sometimes with slow, small, and insignificant modifications, other times with more recognisable alterations. These changes may be caused by personal experiences, gradually acquired knowledge, and maturing age.

Based on interviews with several hundred American individuals of different faiths, James W. Fowler developed a theory of faith development that has dominated until today (Fowler 1981, 2004). Fowler depicted seven sequential, hierarchical stages from birth to late adulthood. Even though different faiths were included, Christians dominated, and the stages poorly fit agnostics and atheists.

Other theories have been launched, some describing the development of beliefs within all kinds of worldviews, including the nonreligious (Streib 2001; McCullough et al. 2005; Desmond et al. 2010; Genia 1990; Parks 2011).

All theories mainly describe a gradual maturing process within the same worldview. Some of them contain an implicit normativity promoting ideals that regard tolerance, cognitive empathy, and critical thinking as being more mature than blind faith. However, it is still common—also among elderly individuals—to adhere to one's UWC in quite a closed and uncritical way. Some worldview traditions may also regard critical thinking as being in opposition to their doctrine (McCutcheon 2019, pp. 349–53). That means that empirically, there is not always a linear development from blind belief in external authorities to independent critical thinking. A radicalisation process might involve a flow

in the opposite direction (Christmann 2012). Even though an individual remains within the same worldview tradition her entire life, details within the UWC, such as the dimensions of her relationship to it that are described in this article, may continually develop, fluctuate, and wave back and forth in a complex manner. This means it is hard to empirically construct universal sequential and hierarchical development theories which depict the multifaceted, sophisticated, and unconscious variations within the development of the individual's UWC and the dimensions of her relationship to it.

The shift from one worldview tradition to another, usually labelled deconversion and conversion, is one of the most researched phenomena within the psychology of religion. The terms are usually used to refer to exiting a religious faith (deconversion) and entering a religious faith different from the individual's previous worldview (conversion). Changing within internal branches of a religion may also be labelled as conversion, such as converting from Protestantism to Catholicism. The terms are seldom used to refer to exiting or entering a nonreligious worldview (Perez and Vallières 2019, pp. 1–3; Fazzino 2014, p. 249).

The change from one worldview to another is often primarily focused on either conversion or deconversion. If a soft atheist or nominal Christian converts to Islam, the focus is more on an attraction to Islam than a rejection of her previous lack of religiosity. When a Christian deconverts from his faith, he is usually more concerned by the problems within his former beliefs than he is with enthusiastically embracing his new state of non-religiousness.

In a groundbreaking article, Lofland and Stark (1965) discussed the conditions and motives for converting to a deviant belief. Their model underscored the importance of social networks involving members of the new faith. An empirical study by Snow and Phillips (1980) confirmed the influence of intensive interaction with the newly gained fellow believers. Others have refused unevenly ascribing the convert a passive role as the victim of brainwashing. They claim the empirical findings do not justify “depicting the convert as driven into the arms of a group that manipulates him or her (. . .) to exact cognitive and behavioral commitment to its belief system and institutional structure.” (Gooren 2007, p. 339). Straus (1979) described the potential convert as an active seeker. He outlined a typical pattern of combing for clues through relevant social networks and actively choosing to experiment with a specific religious group (Straus 1979, pp. 161–64). Gartrell and Shannon (1985) depicted recruits to religious movements acting “as if they weigh rewards and sanctions from affiliation with members and nonmembers in addition to weighing the attractiveness of movements’ beliefs and ideas.” (Gartrell and Shannon 1985, p. 33). This resembles a rational choice approach to religious conversion. According to the entirety of the research, a balanced combination of the pacifist and activist approach may be useful in describing the pre-conversion process. In this field, there are huge individual differences between one convert and another (Pitt 1991).

Regarding the post-conversion process, conversions to Islam and Christianity, the world's two largest religions, are the most researched. More or less, both have a missionary agenda (Roald 2006, 2012; Casey 2019; Langston et al. 2019).

Anne Sofie Roald (2012) has depicted four stages of the post-conversion period based on converts to Islam but with relevance for converts to other religions. The stages describe a development from total acceptance and enthusiastic zealotry, through frustration and disappointed with religious peers to gradual secularisation. Some may also get into intellectual struggles regarding their new faith (Roald 2012, pp. 3–5).

When individuals convert to a new religion, they may unconsciously bring their existing values into their newly gained faith. A historic example is linked to Henry Steel Olcott, who converted to Buddhism in 1880. He interpreted Buddhism through the lenses of anthroposophy and Victorian morals. In order to educate children, he wrote his famous Buddhist catechism—in line with the Christian religious education of those times (Bretfeld and Zander 2017). Some Western converts to Islam who interpret Islamic values—e.g., regarding gender roles—through their own Western lenses may serve as another example (Eidhamar 2014, pp. 35–44; 2017b, pp. 156–61; Roald 2006).

While conversion is characterised by a strong attraction to and love for a specific religion, deconversion is characterised by directly the opposite. Armand L. Mauss ([Mauss 1969](#), pp. 129–31) described three main reasons for leaving a religious faith: intellectual, social, and emotional. He stated that the cognitive doubt of certain central dogmas may cause intellectual disinvolvement. Lack of desire to participate in religious rituals, disintegration of social bonds with fellow believers, negative experiences, and social ties outside the religious group may cause social defection. Youthful rebellion against the parental religion and a gnawing sense of guilt and shame may cause emotional defection. These reasons may function independently. That means one might leave a religion for purely social or emotional reasons without having severe doubt.

There are several different models of phases or stages in the deconversion process. One example is Julie Kruegar, who depicted five phases of pre-deconversion: detachment due to feeling distance and superficial bonds, doubt arising at specific events, dissociation from the religious identity, transition to an alternative identity, and open declaration of a secular worldview ([Krueger 2013](#), pp. 2–3).

The formerly devoted believers may experience a long and demanding post-deconversion process. This might include internal struggles, such as a remaining fear of hell, and external problems, such as complicated relations with family and one's old network ([Hookway and Habibis 2015](#), pp. 843–49; [Cottee 2018](#), pp. 281–89; [Vliek 2019](#), pp. 4–7).

Several of those coming out as atheists had a previously weak or detached relationship to religion. Many left a faith they had never really believed in. The change then may be more social than intellectual ([Krueger 2013](#), p. 4).

The metaphor of a romantic relationship may summarise the above presentation of (de)conversion. Converting to a religion resembles falling in love. In some cases, this gradually develops into a mature and deep relation. In other cases, it later develops into quite a platonic and distant affair.

Deconversion may be compared with the breaking up of a relationship. If the relationship was strong and emotional, the break is utterly painful. If the relationship was platonic and superficial, the break may be dispassionate or even felt as a relief. Some have good memories and maintain positive emotions after the split. Others are deeply hurt and regard the previous partner as an abusive enemy. The latter group of deconverts may feel obliged to help others break out—as they have done themselves.

The UWC starts functioning in early childhood and develops gradually through socialisation and by adapting the worldview of close family and significant others. Childhood and adolescence are then generally characterised by extensive UWC construction and thereby a high degree of development and change. At the same time, (de)conversions occur more frequently during adolescence and young adulthood than later in life. That means, while somewhat more changes take place from childhood to young adulthood, the later years are usually characterised by a slightly more stable UWC ([Lewis 2014](#), pp. 594–96; [Barro et al. 2010](#), pp. 6–7).

9. The Correlation Between the Dimensions

The seven dimensions described in this article are usually not independent. Each dimension might to a greater or lesser degree correlate to the other six.

Generally, it is likely that the different dimensions will cluster within the same area on the meta line between the weak and strong poles. If an individual has hardly any worldview convictions, it is likely that she is also indifferent to her UWC and rarely talks about it to others. Conversely, if an individual is strongly convinced of the truth of his worldview, it will increase the probability that his UWC will be important to him and that he will share it with others and relate more exclusively to competing beliefs.

At the same time, there may be several exceptions, and this fact by itself makes it beneficial to distinguish between the different dimensions. A devoutly religious individual struggles with severe doubt within her dialogical self. The struggle is especially painful because her UWC is very important to her and she has strong emotions connected to it.

She combines low scores within the dimension of certainty and high scores on importance and emotion. A deconvert is determinedly convinced of his newly gained non-belief but he vigorously refuses to share it with others in order to avoid disappointing his family or being sanctioned by the community. He combines high scores on certainty and low scores on openness. A completely indifferent individual remains indifferent all her life, thus combining weakness on importance and strength on continuity. The examples above illustrate that the different dimensions may fluctuate, partly correlating to each other, partly not. The dimensions of importance, certainty, the relationship to rejected beliefs, and openness seem to be quite closely correlated, while a dimension such as continuity may be more independent.

10. The Correlation between the Content of the UWC and the Individual's Relationship to It

When the individual constructs the content of her UWC, she uses her interpretation of elements from established worldview traditions within the raw material. A mono-traditional UWC is primarily made up of elements from one distinct worldview tradition, while a poly-traditional one combines components from several traditions.

Religiosity and religious worldviews have been classified in different ways. The term “religious fundamentalism” may be defined as a belief in absolute prescriptions which are revealed by God and should be interpreted as literally as possible. Strict, incontestable religious dogmas are then combined with refusal of all competing beliefs (Ardi and Budiarti 2020). To describe the opposite pole, William A. McConochie (2007) introduced the term “kindly religious belief” (McConochie 2007). He described it as a belief in a non-literal interpretation of holy scriptures with ideals promoting kindness, peace, and forgiveness for all people.

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have launched a typology describing three different forms of religiosity. “Religions of difference” emphasise the authority of the transcendent deity, “religions of humanity” proclaim a deity that is present, loving, gentle and tolerant, while “spiritualities of life” emphasise the divine potential that already exists within each person's interior (Heelas and Woodhead 2000).

These classifications and typologies might be useful in both analysing worldview traditions as they are generally interpreted by adherents today and analysing the individual's UWC. The content of the UWC and the content of the tradition it is grounded on will usually correlate but they are definitely not identical. Even though a UWC may be based on a tradition containing fundamentalist undertones, the individual may interpret it in a more liberal and flexible way.

An individual with a UWC whose content reflects kindly religious beliefs, religions of humanity, or negative atheism is likely to nurture some weaker parts of the dimensions, like inclusivism and intellectual humility. Conversely, a UWC reflecting fundamentalism, religions of difference, or firmly positive atheism is more likely to nurture some stronger parts of the dimensions, like exclusivism and firm conviction. An individual with a UWC based on traditions emphasising missionary outreach will indubitably be more likely to share his beliefs with others. A UWC based on dogmas strongly condemning competing faiths will naturally bring about exclusivist attitudes. An individual may be strongly convinced of an open, tolerant, and welcoming religion. This strong conviction leads to inclusiveness and prevents that the conviction as such becomes rigid.

Generally, there will often be a correlation between the content of UWC and the dimensions of the individual's relationship to it, but this correlation is complex and not straight-lined or absolute.

11. The Role of the Dimensions in Interpersonal Relationships

The dimensions between the individual and her unique worldview construction have not been systematically explored before. Hence, the correlation between these dimensions and the individual's interpersonal relationships has, until now, not been a specific topic of investigation. This section will provide some assumptions, partly based on the sparse

existing research on this topic. A variety of other examples could have been mentioned and the area is suitable for further research in the future.

The mutual influence between the individual's interpersonal relationships and the dimensions of the relationship to her UWC is dynamic. That means the influence fluctuates constantly and flows both ways. The relationship to other humans is one of the several factors contributing to the content of the UWC as well as the individual's relationship to it. On the other hand, all these different dimensions influence the individual's relationships—generally to other humans, and particularly to intimate friends and family.

A first assumption is that high scores on strong dimensions like importance, certainty, the relationship to rejected beliefs, and emotion generate high degrees of in-group/out-group distinctions based on worldview differences. It means that those who have a strong connection to their UWC will primarily socialise with others who build their UWC on the same worldview tradition or their particular branch within the tradition. These individuals regard worldview and belief as decisive traits of human beings, and fellow believers are obliged to support each other and expected to thrive together. This train of thought presupposes that individuals with high scores on strong dimensions usually also cling to a firmly mono-traditional UWC.

The above assumption is based on social identity theory, launched by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1979). According to this theory, individuals identify themselves with different in-groups, while out-groups are regarded as rivals. In-groups are valued positively, while negative stereotypes are often attributed to out-groups. There is a tendency to exaggerate similarities internally within in- and out-groups, at the same time as differences between the groups are exaggerated. Such a dynamic may become crucial when the group division is based on firm relationships to opposing worldviews with deep disagreements regarding existential questions (Eidhamar 2018, p. 14; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

This assumption may also indicate the reverse, that individuals who score high on weak dimensions, such as being indifferent, doubtful, inclusive, and introverted regarding their own (un)belief, more easily socialise across worldview distinctions. Worldview differences are regarded quite insignificant will thus cause less obstacles to human relations.

A romantic relationship between two individuals who relate strongly to contradicting worldviews might be challenging or even inconceivable. In a similar relationship between two individuals who relate weakly or softly to their contradicting worldviews, the differences could be regarded as just an exotic trigger of the relationship—if they at all know or talk about it (Williams et al. 2018, pp. 293–304; Røthing 2002).

Two individuals within the same worldview tradition score quite differently regarding most of the seven dimensions. A second assumption states that this fact alone causes potential challenges to their personal relationship. The assumption may be illustrated by a conservative, devoted Muslim, who believes firmly and tries his best to practise the Islamic prescriptions. When relating to a secularised fellow believer who hardly cares about his faith and the practices connected to it, the devoted Muslim is provoked. Perhaps it would even be easier for him to relate to a person who does not claim to be a Muslim. If the devoted Muslim tries to advise and exhort this secularised believer, the latter could easily be offended. A Christian and a Muslim, both liberals within the weak dimensions, are engaged in a mutual romantic relationship. Both feel themselves condemned by stringent fellow believers on both sides, representing the strong dimensions. These lovers might feel closer to each other than to their respective rigid fellow believers. They both believe in the same tolerant God, who loves all the human beings that he has created and downplays differences between his worshipers. The above examples illustrate that sometimes similarities and differences in the dimensions of one's relationship to the UWC are more crucial to personal relationships than similarities and differences in which tradition the UWC is based on.

When individuals of different beliefs relate to each other, their conversation might consciously or unconsciously have some traits of a religious dialogue or worldview di-

alogue. Such conversations might have quite different traits. Some individuals intend to learn from and about the other. Such a person enters the conversation with two ears and one mouth, which means listening is more important than speaking. In this way, she represents a high degree of intellectual humility. The formal and organised forms of such worldview dialogues are more likely to become an activity for the intellectually humble and inclusivist individuals within each tradition. At the same time, they might score high on importance since they give priority to being engaged in such a dialogue. They also recognise that the worldview is equally important for the opponent. This dialogue may sometimes be condemned by more exclusivist individuals who hold rigid certainty within the respective traditions.

Other kinds of conversations across worldviews intend to win a debate and persuade the other. The main motive is sharing one's own view with those who believe differently. In such a conversation, talking is more important than listening. Individuals scoring high on strong dimensions like rigid certainty, exclusivism, and openness may be most likely to engage in this kind of conversation (Chaudhari 2016, pp. 22–24; Kimanen 2016, pp. 80–81).

There is an old proverb stating that birds of a feather flock together. This might be valid for adherents of the same worldview tradition. This article underlines that the proverb sometimes also applies to individuals with a resembling set of dimensions in relating to their own unique worldview construction.

12. Conclusions

The present article has explored a manifold of varieties within the relationship between the individual and her unique worldview construction (UWC). The complexity of this relation is crystallised into seven dimensions labelled authority structure, importance, certainty, the relationship to rejected beliefs, emotion, openness, and continuity.

Seculars would normally perceive their worldview as their own construct, and thus also regard themselves as the authority of their own UWC. Religious adherents might view their belief, perceivably based on divine revelation, as a main authority in their life. On the other hand, if they distinguish between their religion as a revealed entity, and their personal interpretation of it, they may concede being the authority and constructor of their own UWC.

Generally, the UWC is more important to religious adherents than to seculars. It is quite insignificant to negative atheists and those who have a distanced relationship to worldviews in general. Strongly convinced positive atheists may view their UWC to be important. Monotheistic believers such as Christians, and Muslims regard religion to play a somewhat more significant role in their lives, than do Buddhists, and Hindus.

Individuals with a low worldview conviction, may basically be subdivided in two groups; the indifferent who do not care, and those struggling with painful doubts in their own conviction. In contrast, a large group are strongly convicted of the truth of their UWC—that means their own interpretation of the worldview tradition(s) they adhere to. One explanation of all these sharply contradictory convictions, is the shared human proneness of confirmation bias and naïve realism. Within this group, some have a psychological certainty with intellectual humility that principally is open for change if sound evidence contradicts their original conviction. Others have a rigid certainty, totally rejecting such a possibility.

An inclusivist relation to rejected beliefs may range from respect to tolerance. Respect includes the willingness to explore opposing beliefs with an open mind of their possible truth. Tolerance could mean accepting the existence of opposing beliefs, and not denying others their equal right to proclaim them. An exclusivist relation may be rooted in particularistic or universalistic reasons. Particularistic reasons are based on distinct dogmas within one's specific worldview. Universalistic reasons reject beliefs because they are considered unacceptable according to universal human values.

The individual will normally have positive feelings towards the elements within her UWC that she adheres to, and corresponding negative feelings towards the elements

she rejects. In some cases, the opposite might occur; one dislikes elements within one's accepted belief or one might cherish elements one finds it hard to believe.

Some individuals are introvert and keep their UWC secluded, while others love to share their own belief. According to shared reality theory, truth is socially constructed. Shearing one's UWC with fellow adherents might then strengthen one's existing conviction.

Childhood and adolescence are generally characterised by extensive UWC construction and thereby high degree of development and change. The later years are usually characterised by a more stable UWC. Religious attachments tend to reach a small peak during adolescence, decline through middle adulthood, and then increase during the later years. Several stage theories describe a gradual maturing process towards increased tolerance. However, there is no inevitable straight-lined development from blind belief to independent critical thinking. Different motives may cause (de-)conversions from one worldview tradition to another. The post-conversion process might include stages developing from enthusiastic zealotry to gradual, more relaxed relations towards one's new belief.

Performing this inquiry has required a term that includes the different aspects of being a personal worldview constructed by the individual, having a unique biographical character, and denoting which cognitive elements from the established worldview traditions the individual believes in or rejects. The term "unique worldview construction" (UWC) as defined in the introduction, has thus been of crucial importance in the present study. It unifies the psychological and cognitive aspects of the individual's personal conviction regarding the existential questions of life. The distinction between "collective worldview tradition" and the individual's "UWC" as terms defining two complementary entities, has not only being beneficial, but a clear prerequisite in performing the research. The distinction could be regarded as basic within worldview research in general.

Accordingly, the term "UWC" may be advantageous in a variety of other studies dealing with psychological, sociological, and cognitive aspects of the individual's worldview conviction.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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