

What Hinders Communication?

Diverging Foundational Belief Systems

- Communication between people and groups is complex, and many factors can hinder, or even block, communication.
- A troublesome factor in the communication process is when people hold foundational belief systems that differ.
- Improving communication and reducing misunderstandings can occur by just identifying the differing belief systems that are foundational to people's lives.

Belief Systems

“The stories we tell ourselves to define our personal sense of Reality. . . and [how we] ‘make sense’ of the world around us”
(Usó-Doménech and Nescolarde-Selva 2016, 148).

One organizing axis for the many belief systems that exist entails religious and non-religious beliefs

- Belief systems have been defined as *“the stories we tell ourselves to define our personal sense of Reality. . . and [how we] ‘make sense’ of the world around us”* (Usó-Doménech and Nescolarde-Selva 2016, 148).
- Belief systems come in a wide variety, and organizing them is not well developed in large part because a number of organizing axes can be conceived (Oviedo and Szocik 2020).
- One organizing axis entails religious and non-religious beliefs, and that is the one used in the framework described in this presentation.

Religion – Definitions and Limitations

- A set of myths or sacred truths held in reverence by adherents – applies to many cultural institutions
- Entails observable behaviors and artifacts and provides a “glue” that holds society together – seems little different from many aspects of society that are not religious but serve the same purpose
- Provides a code of norms, morality, and virtue – little different from philosophy
- References to what is likely unique to religion, namely that it entails something beyond the realm of the “natural” universe of matter and energy (God, gods, the holy, absolute dependence, the divine, the numinous, etc.) – vague and open to variable interpretations

- In thinking about religious belief systems it is imperative to specify what is meant by the term “religion.”
- Myriad definitions exist, and each highlights an aspect of religion or is useful for a particular purpose, but they all have limitations.
- One definition is that religion is a set of myths or sacred truths held in reverence by adherents, but a limitation is that this definition applies to many cultural institutions besides religion and it does not elucidate what makes religion unique.
- Another definition is that religion entails observable behaviors and artifacts and provides a “glue” that holds society together. But a limitation to this is that religion seems little different from many aspects of society that are not religious but serve the same purpose, so again, the definition fails to explain what makes religion unique.
- Another aspect of religion that sometimes serves as a definition is that it provides a code of norms, morality, and virtue, but the limitation is that studying it in this way is little different from philosophy. Once again, the uniqueness of religion is unclear.
- Various definitions make references to what is likely unique to religion, namely that it entails something beyond the realm of the “natural” universe of matter and energy – references to God, gods, the holy, absolute

dependence, the divine, the numinous, etc. However, a limitation to such references is that they are vague and open to variable interpretations, interpretations that may or may not include something beyond the “natural.”

- Concern with something beyond the realm of the “natural” universe is well expressed by Stump (2008) as entailing “*superhuman entities postulated by adherents to possess transcendent attributes or powers superior to those of ordinary mortals*” (7).
- While the reference to “superhuman” indicates something beyond the “natural” realm as a unique characteristic, one drawback to this phrase as a definition of religion is its reference to “entities,” a reference that excludes pantheistic or monistic religions that do not posit “entities” but instead, hold that beneath the multiplicity of apparent forms in the universe is one unitary whole
- Something that is more inclusive of all religions is needed.

Religion

Supernatural

- The definition of religion used here employs the term **supernatural** because the term unequivocally refers to a realm of existence that transcends the “natural” realm of physical matter and energy while it does not unduly specify how that realm is conceived.
- Note that the term “supernaturalism” is used quite regularly to refer to the “other reality” that transcends the reality of our everyday experience (see Bishop 2009). Sometimes the word “theism” is used instead.
- The definition used here also incorporates the functional aspect that characterizes religion – that religion provides the “glue” (sociological, biological, psychological, etc.) that holds society together.

Religion

An organized system for human interaction with the supernatural

- Consequently, the definition adopted here is that religion is an organized system for human interaction with the supernatural.
- The conceptual framework presented here refers to these as supernaturalistic belief systems, or as supernaturalism, which is the belief that an “other reality” exists that transcends the reality of our everyday experience.

Non-Religious

Naturalistic

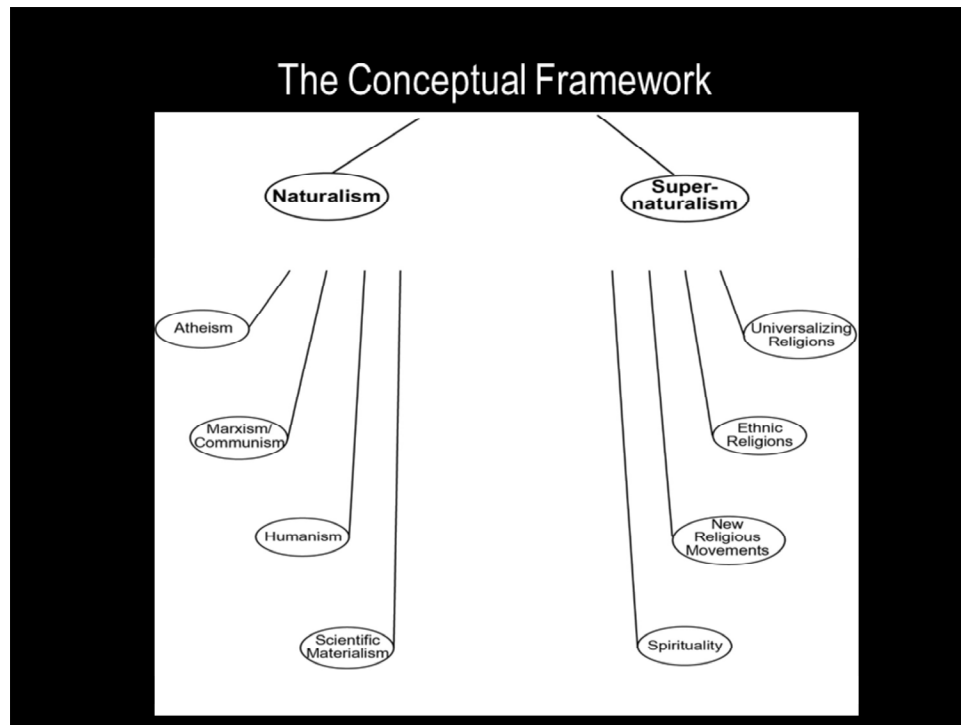
- Methodological
- Metaphysical

An organized system that does not involve (or even explicitly rejects) interaction with the supernatural

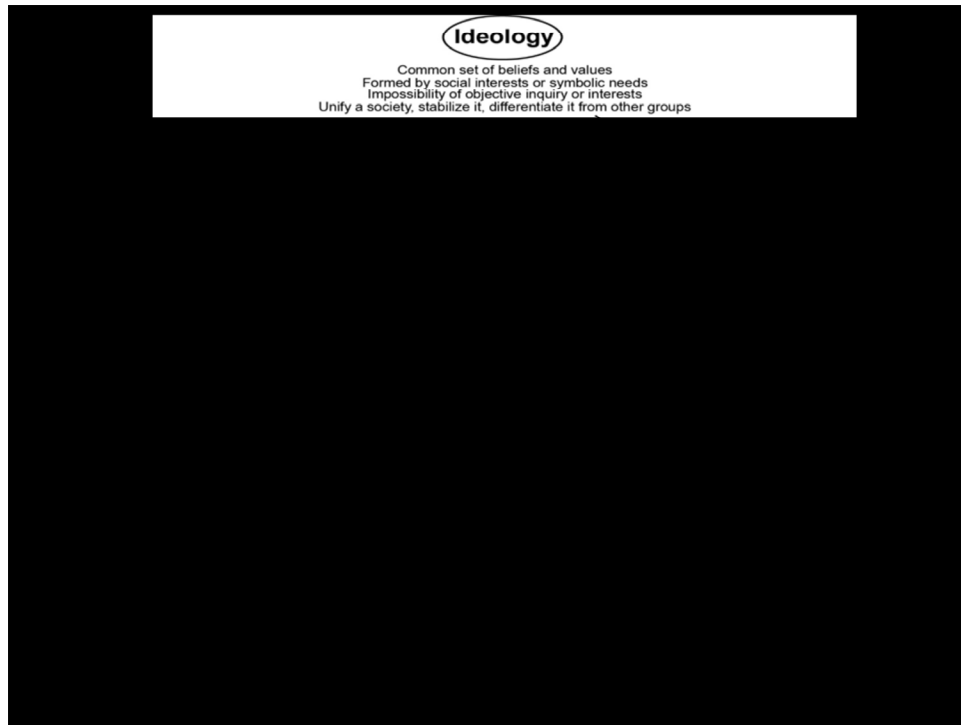
- In contrast to religious or supernaturalistic belief systems are non-religious belief systems, referred to here as naturalistic (or naturalism).
- Much has been written about naturalism as a belief system but various authors (Campbell 2006; Bishop 2009) designate two types of naturalism, methodological and metaphysical.
- Methodological naturalism is practice-oriented and avers that to pursue our projects, we assume that no supernatural forces or entities are involved. Bishop (2009) states that “*methodological naturalism is a commitment to particular methods of inquiry for particular limited purposes*” (108).
- Metaphysical naturalism, on the other hand, maintains that the natural world of matter and energy is all that exists and there is no “other world.” Bishop (2002) states that “*metaphysical naturalism makes a substantive commitment to a picture of what really exists: namely only matter, energy, and their interactions*” (108). The practice of assuming that supernatural forces and entities are not involved (methodological naturalism) tends to foster the belief that such forces and entities, in fact, do not exist (metaphysical naturalism).
- In part as a result of this process, metaphysical naturalism has become a strong belief in the contemporary world, particularly in Western countries that were strongly influenced by Enlightenment thought (Rutherford 2004;

Bishop 2009; Oluikpe 2019).

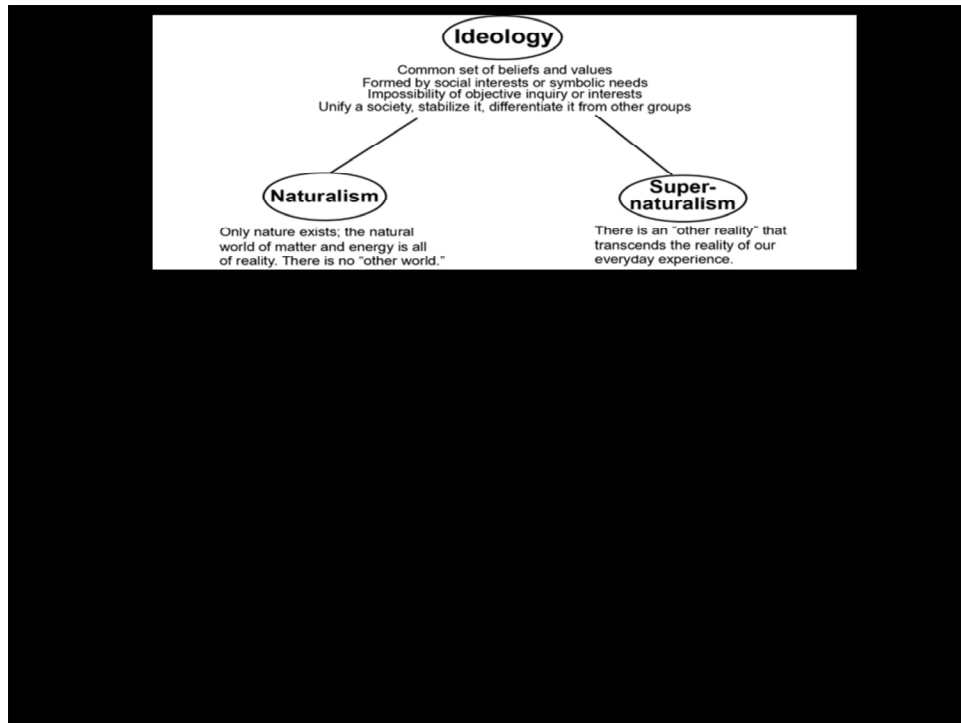
- In fact, many in the West have been surprised, stunned, and baffled that some people “*seem actually to believe in God, pray to Him, and even invoke His assistance*” (Almond, Appleby, and Siven 2003, 3).
- A non-religious belief system, then, as used here, is an organized system that does not involve (or even explicitly rejects) interaction with the supernatural. Such a belief system entails organization but its focus is only on the material, natural universe of matter and energy.



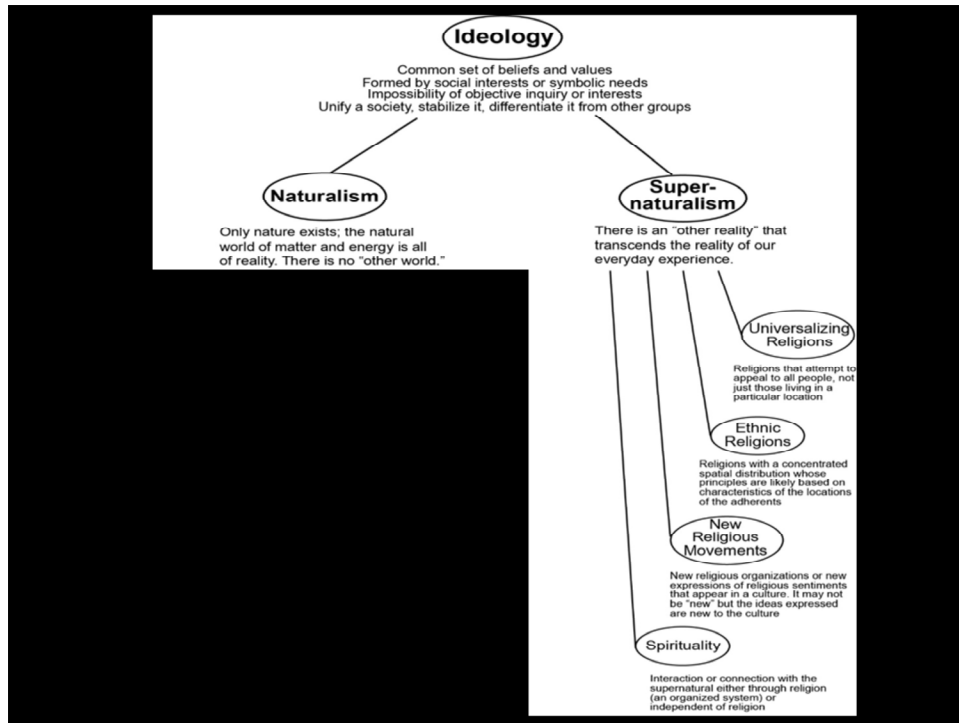
- To reduce the miscommunications that often occur between people who hold these differing belief systems, this presentation presents a conceptual framework.
- It is a binary framework that juxtaposes “naturalistic” and “supernaturalistic” belief systems.
- While binary/dualistic thinking has been rightly criticized for a variety of reasons, it is, nonetheless, useful for at least two reasons.
- First, it is useful for simple identification that does not carry any normative insinuations (e.g. good/bad, desirable/despicable, oppressor/oppressed, etc.).
- Second, it is useful when options for a third situation or multiple, hybrid, edge, or continuum situations are improbable (e.g. a citizen or not). Both of these reasons apply to the conceptual framework presented here; the framework is certainly not normative and the existence of a third situation is improbable. In fact, Lennox (2020) explicitly states that there are only two options – naturalism and supernaturalism.
- Some of the major belief systems that lie within “naturalism” and “supernaturalism,” and the presentation describes them.



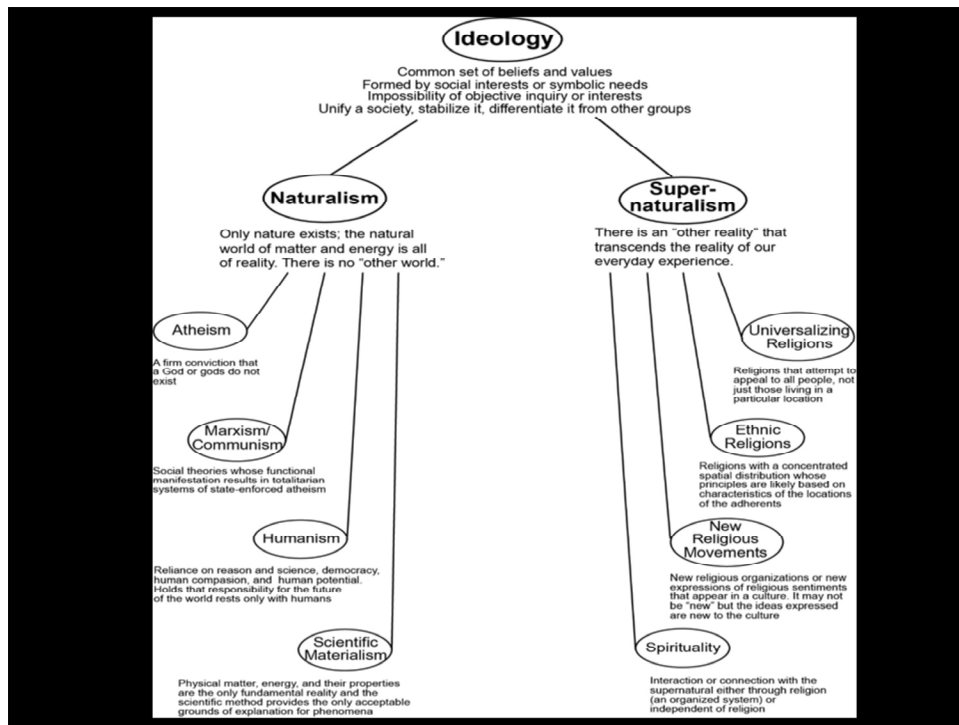
- But first, both “naturalistic” and “supernaturalistic” belief systems lie within the overarching concept of ideology
- This a term that has been defined as: “. . . a collection of beliefs and values held by an individual or group for other than purely epistemic reasons [and is] shaped in unacknowledged ways. . .by social interests or symbolic needs. . .in a process that presupposes the impossibility of objective inquiry or objective interests” (Honderich 1995, 392-3).
- Ideologies consist of beliefs and values, and they underlie all human thought and action.
- Moreover, social interests or symbolic needs that are not well known (or even go unrecognized) by the people who hold them shape these beliefs and values.
- In addition, this definition of ideology assumes that there exists no objective way, free from social interests or symbolic needs, by which humans can develop fundamental beliefs and values.
- This framework chooses to use the term “ideology” rather than the term “worldview” which is sometimes used instead. The reason for this is that the term “ideology” is more specific and is limited to beliefs and values while the term “worldview” includes normative postulates, emotions, and ethics.



- The belief system – or ideology – of naturalism holds that only nature exists, that the “natural” universe of matter and energy is all of reality and that there is no “other world.”
- Those who embrace the supernaturalistic belief, however, hold that there is “an other reality” that transcends the reality of our everyday experience.



- With respect to the supernaturalistic belief systems, here are some that are familiar to geographers.
- There are universalizing religions that attempt to appeal to all people. These include the religions of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.
- There are the ethnic religions. Hinduism would be an example, primarily concentrated in the country of India. These are religions that have characteristics of specific locations and the people who live in them.
- There are new religious movements that are new expressions of religious sentiments. There are hundreds of these, with most being small. But a couple of the larger ones include Cao Dai and Soka Gakkai.
- And then, there is the idea of spirituality. This involves interaction with the supernatural realm in some way, either through an organized system (a religion) or independent of religion..
- The key point about all of these is the acceptance that "an other" reality exists that is beyond the reality of physical matter and energy.



- With respect to the naturalistic belief systems that do not recognize the existence of “an other” reality, these are a few that are familiar to us in an academic/educational context in the developed world.
- There is atheism, that is, a firm conviction that a supernatural realm does not exist.
- Marxism is a complex ideology, but it is used here in combination with communism in the functional sense – that of totalitarian systems of political economy that focus on the material world.
- Humanism is another complex ideology that can have many meanings and uses. The reference here is to humanism as defined in the various “Humanist Manifestos” of the 20th century that emphasize human potential and hold that responsibility for the future of the world rests only with humans.
- Scientific materialism begins with methodological naturalism but many times, extends to become metaphysical naturalism. It contains the idea that only the scientific method provides acceptable evidence, and in so doing, it can move into “metaphysical naturalism” as it rules out the possibility that supernatural forces and factors may be present.

What Hinders Communication?

Diverging Foundational Belief Systems

- This presentation has presented a conceptual framework that has the potential to alleviate misunderstandings that occur between people due to differences in their foundational belief systems.
- Specifically, it distinguishes between religious and non-religious (naturalistic and supernaturalistic) belief systems.
- These two belief systems are common and widespread in the contemporary world, and yet, they are often so taken-for-granted by those who hold them that anything other is unimaginable.
- The purposes of presenting this framework are,
 - First, simply to increase awareness among people of their own foundational belief system with respect to the religious/non-religious dichotomy. As Rutherford (2004) states, “[I]t would be helpful [for understanding] for all people to recognize and come to understand their own belief systems” (389). By providing examples of major belief systems within the religious and non-religious categories, people are likely to recognize their own beliefs.
 - A second purpose is to reduce the privileging or marginalization that can occur when one belief system is viewed through the lens of another. Both naturalistic and supernaturalistic belief systems can be understood as ideologies that are formed by social interests and symbolic needs rather

than through objective means, and in that way, they can be viewed on equal terms.

- The hope of this presentation is that the conceptual framework will help alleviate the misunderstandings that can result from failing to recognize one's own belief system and by viewing others through the lens of that belief system.

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