

Culturewatch Ethos

A. Damaris mission

Damaris is an educational charity with a Christian foundation. It serves people of all faiths, and none, as they explore the spiritual and moral issues underlying contemporary culture.

B. Damaris vision

To build a global community of people who have a firm grasp of the Bible, a clear understanding of contemporary popular culture, and the ability to connect one to the other.

C. Damaris approach

Damaris is committed to rigorous study and effective communication as it seeks to relate biblical Christian faith and contemporary popular culture. This is carried out as follows:

Biblical study

Damaris has great respect for the Bible and believes that it is God's word. Damaris engages in rigorous study of the Bible's content and context in order to understand and respond to it with integrity.

Cultural study

Damaris has great respect for contemporary popular culture and believes that it is an expression of people's search for answers to fundamental questions. Damaris engages in rigorous study of its content and context in order to identify, understand and respond to the underlying worldviews with integrity.

Biblical communication

Damaris has great respect for people and their freedom, and acts as a humble guide to the Bible. Damaris invites people to consider and respond to the message of the Bible, including the answers it provides to questions raised by popular culture.

Cultural communication

Damaris has great respect for people and their freedom, and acts as a humble guide to contemporary popular culture. Damaris invites people to evaluate and respond to the underlying worldviews.

D. Culturewatch policies

1. Culturewatch resources are consistent with the Bible

This doesn't mean that every resource should *explicitly* refer to the Bible, nor that the voices of contemporary culture are not allowed to speak for themselves, but that any Christian critique which is included *must* be biblical.

2. Culturewatch does not promote a particular position

Everything we write must be biblical – that is from within the orthodox historical Christian understanding of the Bible – but must not promote a particular denominational line. Contentious issues within Christian circles may arise from time to time (especially ideas about origins) but writers should handle these issues even-handedly. Writers are free to express their own opinions within articles providing that they do so with sensitivity and allow for other perspectives.

3. Culturewatch resources engage with contemporary popular culture

Culturewatch primarily engages with the world of ordinary thinking people, but at times needs to engage with the academic ideas behind popular culture. The connection with popular culture is still important and even academic issues should be dealt with in a way which is easily accessible. Most resources will deal with aspects of contemporary culture that are very recent. But there is a place for some resources dealing with classic material that has continuing significance within contemporary culture. Some articles may need to deal with the principles or methodology of engaging with culture.

4. Culturewatch resources treat contemporary culture with integrity

Culturewatch resources need to allow the voices of contemporary culture to speak for themselves – we must treat the source material fairly and not twist it or misrepresent it. Part of treating the culture with integrity means that Culturewatch must celebrate the good within culture, and also be uncompromising about the bad. Since human beings are both God's image bearers and also fallen, anything they produce will include aspects of both good and bad.

5. Culturewatch focuses on worldview issues

Resources should be probing beneath the surface to the underlying beliefs, values and attitudes. Articles and study guides should be analytical rather than descriptive, although there is a need for some descriptive material.

6. Culturewatch resources help people respond to contemporary culture

Part of the purpose of Culturewatch is to help people – both Christian and non-Christian – understand the relevance of Christian faith within contemporary culture. Resources must therefore move beyond analysis to enable people to think through the implications.

7. Culturewatch is written primarily for non-Christians

Culturewatch is targeted beyond the confines of the church to the non-Christian world. If resources are able to help a non-Christian visitor to the website to consider the relevance of Christian faith, they are also useful for equipping Christians to use contemporary culture within their ongoing evangelism. If the resources are written exclusively for Christians, it is less likely to be useful to non-Christians as well.

However, since Culturewatch is an explicitly Christian resource, there may be times within articles and study guides when it is important to focus on the Christian audience more directly. At such times it is vital to remain sensitive to non-Christian readers.

8. Culturewatch resources are rigorous but gentle

While all resources should analyse contemporary culture thoroughly and uncompromisingly, they should still respect the freedom of the readers. The tone should be warm, identifying with the readers and encouraging them to think through the implications, rather than aggressively evangelistic.

9. Culturewatch includes both study guides and articles

Culturewatch study guides are intended to help people think about the book/film/etc. for themselves rather than to provide answers. They provide some background material but the key part is a number of open-ended questions to help groups or individuals think both about the content of the book/film/etc. and its implications. Culturewatch articles, however, are the perspectives of a particular writer and contain his or her personal views about the content, merits, and implications of the book/film/etc. (providing that these views do not go against other policies listed here and are expressed with sensitivity to those who might disagree).

10. Culturewatch resources are written by people who share Damaris perspectives

Culturewatch articles and study guides need to be written by people who can happily work within these policies. Our basic requirement is that all writers are able to affirm both the Damaris Statement of Faith and the Damaris Approach. Primarily the resources are written by Damaris team members who have signed a document indicating their agreement with these statements. Non-team members would be expected to indicate their agreement verbally or in writing as appropriate. Damaris team members are committed to working within these policies, and non-team members must be aware that Culturewatch Editors have the freedom to ensure that all published material is consistent with them. Copyright remains with the authors. Damaris team members have signed an agreement which assigns a licence to Damaris to publish all Culturewatch material electronically free of charge. Non-team members need to licence to Damaris the non-exclusive rights to publish Culturewatch electronically free of charge.

E. Criteria for selecting material

- **Appropriateness:** Is this material legitimate for the age group? Is this material typical for this audience? Is this material that we are happy to encourage others to engage with?
- **Relevancy:** How relevant is this book/film/album/TV programme to this audience?
- **Popularity:** How much impact is the book/film/album/TV programme making within the culture?
- **Content:** Does the book/film/album/TV programme raise enough issues to justify writing about?
- **Influence:** How much impact will this book/film/album/TV programme have on the ways in which people think or behave, or on future writers/film-makers/etc.?
- Material for inclusion must fulfil the criteria for **appropriateness** and **relevancy**
- Material must also fulfil at least two of the criteria for **popularity**, **content** and **influence**

F. Some examples of Culturewatch users

Damaris Study Groups

Usually groups of Christians (though some groups include or are targeted at non-Christians) who meet regularly to discuss something from popular contemporary culture and evaluate it from a Christian perspective. Members of groups are primarily Christians who want to be more effective in their evangelism. Groups are looking for resources to help them have stimulating and open-ended discussions rather than looking for pre-packaged answers.

Christian leaders

Leaders – at whatever level, whether full-time or spare-time – are looking for resources to help them engage with popular contemporary culture in their preaching, evangelism, youth work, etc. Often they looking for articles containing Christian perspective on a film or current issue, but don't have time to think it through for themselves.

Families

A family may use a study guide to help them talk about a film over a meal after watching it together. The family members are obviously at different ages and stages of Christian growth. Some may not be committed Christians at all, and the family may use film as a way of opening up discussions.

Teachers

Teachers in secondary education sometimes use (or adapt) study guides to stimulate class discussions. Neither the teacher nor the students may be Christians.

Casual web surfers

Many people arrive at the Culturewatch website after following links on other websites, or via a search engine. A significant proportion of these are not yet Christian. Some will be fans of a band or author, others will be interested in the worldview issues. They may be interested to read a Christian perspective and may be stimulated to use a study guide to think about spiritual issues in relation to the album/film/etc.

Culturewatch Articles

Aim

To help people who have not been able to study a book, film, album, etc. to understand it and consider an evaluation from a biblical Christian standpoint, whether or not the reader is a Christian.

Format

Basic information

For books: Author, title, publisher and publication date, and other useful information

For films: Film title, director, scriptwriter, distributor, release date, certificate and tag line if appropriate and any other useful information

For music: Album or single title, artist, distributor, release date and any other useful information

For TV: Programme or series title, director, writer, channel, date and other useful information

Key themes

Identify a few keywords to describe the central concepts or themes – these are used in the title information on the Culturewatch pages. What's the main subject matter? Are there any other big themes? Do certain images, motifs, phrases or ideas keep recurring? Are any of these particularly relevant to contemporary culture?

Description

Write a one sentence description of your article – this is for search engines to pick up

Main body of the article

This should include a summary of what the book, film etc. is about, as well as analysis of the issues raised. Articles must fit in with the Culturewatch ethos (see above).

The length of Culturewatch articles is very variable. Some are very short having been published as a newspaper column, others are long because they provide an in-depth analysis of a philosophical book. The average article is around 1,500 words. Aim for writing between 1000 and 2000 words **unless** the Culturewatch editor has given you a different brief, **or** has approved a longer article in advance. If you think you are likely to overrun or will need to write a substantially longer article, please talk to the editor as soon as possible.

Audience

Many of our readers are not Christians so it is essential to make your article appropriate for a non-Christian audience, and deal with any Christian-specific issues in sensitive ways.

Assume that the reader hasn't watched the film/read the book etc. but wants to understand the issues anyway. That means you need to fill in some of the story as you go in order to explain the significance of the points you're making. But they may well *want* to see the film, so don't give away too much of the plot if you can avoid it. On the other hand, many readers will have already seen it, and they need more than simply a retelling of the story. It may be important for such people that you draw out the implications of a key scene which means you will have to spoil the plot for the others (unless you can find a subtle way of saying what you want that keeps everyone happy). It's worth warning people if you're about to give away plot spoilers, preferably at the beginning of the article.

Article structure

You need to introduce the article – set the scene, write something about the cultural impact or other significance of the material under discussion.

Focus on two or three of the key themes you've identified. Explore how those themes are expressed and provide some Christian analysis/evaluation of the key messages that are being communicated. Include some good quotes if possible.

Draw the threads together in one or two concluding paragraphs which focus on the implications of all this. Again, remember that the primary audience we are aiming at is non-Christian; any implications for Christians should be dealt with sensitively.

Introduction for Culturewatch Update

Please also write a brief introduction (or abstract) to the article for use in the weekly Culturewatch Update email. This could incorporate the first couple of paragraphs of your article, or could be a summary of the entire article, or it could be a specially written piece which raises questions answered by the article. Try to make it something which will be at least some use to people who only read the introduction but never read the full article. The introduction should be 150–250 words.

Good quotes

When you are working on your article, please try to identify a few quotes which other people might find useful. Make these as accurate as you possibly can and list them separately, even if you've included them in the text of your article – we will use these on the ToolsForTalks.com website.

Culturewatch Study Guides

Aim

To enable members of Culturewatch Groups and other discussion groups to intelligently talk about, evaluate and respond to the book, film, etc. from a Christian perspective.

Format

Basic information

For books: Author, title, publisher and publication date, and other useful information

For films: Film title, director, scriptwriter, distributor, release date, certificate and tag line if appropriate and any other useful information

For music: Album or single title, artist, distributor, release date and any other useful information

For TV: Programme or series title, director, writer, channel, date and other useful information

Key themes

Identify a few keywords to describe the central concepts or themes – these are used in the title information on the Culturewatch pages. What's the main subject matter? Are there any other big themes? Do certain images, motifs, phrases or ideas keep recurring? Are any of these particularly relevant to contemporary culture?

Summary

A very brief summary of what the film/book is about without giving away too much of the plot. The typical length of a study guide summary is 300–500 words. Many Culturewatch users also value detailed summaries of the entire plot – see below.

For music, a longer summary is useful which helps people to understand what is being said on some of the tracks (see examples on the Culturewatch website to see how different writers have handled this). Typical length: 500–1000 words.

Background

Typical length: 300–500 words. This could include: a brief explanation of why this book/film/etc. is significant, possibly introducing the key themes; brief biographical information on the writer/director/artist etc; other material by this writer/director/artist; useful links to other relevant resources or information. This is very useful for people leading discussions. It's often a good place to include a quote or two about the motivation behind the work, what the writer/director/artists thinks it's main point is, etc.

Questions

The questions are to help Culturewatch Groups in their discussions. Eight to twelve questions is about right, although more than this can give the group leader extra flexibility in leading the discussion.

It's good to include some questions that draw out people's personal response to the film, story, characters, etc. Ask questions about feelings as well as understanding. Remember that these are used in group discussions.

It is helpful to focus some questions on each of the key concepts. As a general principle, it's worth making the later questions focus more on implications for the way we think and live. It is important to include some questions which have a distinctively Christian angle, and often it is appropriate to have a clear Bible focus. Bear in mind that the context of these group discussions is very often evangelistic.

Questions should be open-ended, requiring more than a yes/no response. Questions that help a group to discuss the subject matter well will also help individuals in their own thinking.

Detailed summary

A more thorough summary of the book, film, etc. for those who don't want to read or watch it for themselves. This is unnecessary for music study guides. This will not be on the same web page as the other material but will have a link from it so don't worry about giving the plot away.

Focus on points where one of the key concepts is being discussed or illustrated. Include some significant quotes. The length should usually be 1000–1500 words. If you feel you need to write more, please check with us first.

Introduction for Culturewatch Update

Please also write a brief introduction to the study guide for use in the weekly Culturewatch Update email. This could be a specially written piece which introduces the issues examined in the study guide, but may draw heavily on the summary within the study guide. Try to make it something which will be at least *some* use to people who only read the Culturewatch Update introduction but don't have time to read the study guide. The introduction should be 150–250 words.

Good quotes

When you are working on your study guide, please try to identify a few quotes which other people might find useful. You may include these in the questions, the background or in the detailed summary. Make these as accurate as you possibly can. Please also list them separately, even if you've included them in the text of your study guide – we will use these on the ToolsForTalks.com website.

General purpose questions

These questions are intended to be useful to Culturewatch Groups looking at a wide range of material. Not all the questions will be relevant to any specific topic, but they can form a good basis for adapting to suit your specific purposes.

1. What were your overall impressions?
2. What do you think are the key themes?
3. What do you think the writer's worldview might be? What about the worldviews of any characters?
4. How far do you think the characters reflect the writer's own views?
5. What do think might be the reasons for the main characters' character and behaviour?
6. How well does this fit with the people around us and with whom we work?
7. Does the book/film/album etc. use any biblical or Christian imagery or ideas? Why? How does it use them — positively or negatively?
8. What do you think is being said about ...
 - a) the nature of reality
 - b) God
 - c) the purpose of life
 - d) truth
 - e) freedom
 - f) love
 - g) relationships
 - h) ethics and morality
 - i) etc.
9. To what extent do you think the ideas, beliefs or values presented here make sense?
10. How well does this connect with the real world? Does it describe reality as it really is? Or is the evidence being twisted to fit in with the writer's pet ideas?
11. How good a basis for life do you think this is? Do you know people who are living this way or by these beliefs? Why do you think they're attracted by these ideas?
12. What should Christians agree with and affirm in this book/film/album etc.? What should they be critical of or stand against?