

## WHAT THEN, IS A WORLDVIEW?

World views function like eye glasses through which we see. A world view should provide the correct "prescription" for making sense of the world just as wearing the correct prescription for your eyes brings things into focus. Consequently, an incorrect prescription can be dangerous, even life-threatening.

James Sire's now classic *The Universe Next Door*, identifies the most influential world views of the past and present. These are:

- Christian Theism
- Deism
- Naturalism
- Nihilism
- Existentialism
- Eastern Pantheism
- New Age or New Consciousness

(James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988))

## HOW TO THINK "WORLDVIEWISHLY"

Sire helps us greatly by identifying what he calls *Six Worldview Questions*

### **First, Why is there something rather than nothing?**

Some may actually say something came from nothing. Others may state that something is here because of impersonal spirit or energy. And many believe matter is eternal.

### **Second, How do you explain human nature?**

Frequently people will say we are born as blank slates, neither good nor evil. Another popular response is that we are born good, but society causes us to behave otherwise.

### **Third, What happens to a person at death?**

Many will say that a person's death is just the disorganization of matter. Increasingly people in our culture are saying that death brings reincarnation or realization of oneness.

### **Fourth, How do you determine what is right and wrong?**

Often we hear it said that ethics are relative or situational. Others assert that we have no free choice since we are entirely determined. Some simply derive "oughts" from what "is." And of course history has shown us the tragic results of a "might makes right" answer.

### **Fifth, How do you know that you know?**

Some say that the mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Things are only known deductively. Others claim that knowledge is only found in the senses. We know only what is perceived.

### **Sixth, What is the meaning of history?**

One answer is that history is determined as part of a mechanistic universe. Another answer is that history is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without purpose. Yet another answer is that history is meaningless because life is absurd.

(James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988)

Other writers have trimmed it down this way:

#### **(1) Where am I?**

Or, what is the origin and nature of the world and universe I live in?

#### **(2) Who am I?**

Or, what is the nature, task and purpose of human beings.

#### **(3) What's wrong?**

Or, what is the basic obstacle that keeps me from finding fulfilment? In other words, how do I understand evil? How may we account for the distortion and brokenness in this reality?

#### **(4) What's the solution?**

Or, how is it possible to overcome this hindrance to my fulfilment? In other words, how do I find salvation? How can we alleviate this brokenness, if at all?  
(Walsh and Middleton)

#### **(5) What happens to me after death?**

Or, will I rot in the ground or will I be waiting for the resurrection of my body?  
(James Sire)

#### **(6) What time is it?**

(N.T.Wright)

*"Since writing *The New Testament and the People of God*, I have realized that 'what time is it?' needs adding to the four questions I started with. Without it, the structure collapses into timelessness which characterizes some non-Judaeo-Christian worldviews. . . We live in the overlap of the ages: the age to come has already broken in in Jesus, but the present age still continues... [N]obody knows when, Jesus will reappear, when God finally remakes the cosmos. The Roman world is tottering; only God's kingdom will last.  
(N.T. Wright)*

## Definitions of a Worldview

A variety of definitions have been offered.

James Sire: "A world view is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world.

(James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988, 17.)

Phillips and Brown: "A worldview is, first of all, an explanation and interpretation of the world and second, an application of this view to life. In simpler terms, our worldview is a view of the world and a view for the world."

(W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1991, 29.)

Walsh and Middleton: "A world view provides a model of the world which guides its adherents in the world."

(Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984, 32)

Arthur Holmes: says that the need for a world view is fourfold: "the need to unify thought and life; the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life; the need to guide thought; the need to guide action."

(Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 5.)

Sire has since revised his definition of worldview in his book *Naming The Elephant*.

Sire Revised: "A worldview is a **commitment**, a fundamental orientation of the **heart**, that can be expressed as a **story** or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we **live and move and have our being**" (James W. Sire *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004, p.161)

Goheen and Bartholomew traces some vital features in Sire's new definition:

1. It is a matter of **commitment** – though a person may not be conscious of this commitment. A worldview is not something theoretical or propositional. Rather, a person's worldview is his/her "religious orientation" and their **heart** is in it.
2. A person's worldview is expressed as a grand story or a master narrative. It's a person's story of her world.

3. A person unwittingly lives out his worldview again whether consciously or not. They are not mere propositions on paper but people express their worldviews by living it out in real life.

Goheen and Bartholomew hold the view that all worldviews originate in a grand story.

(Goheen and Bartholomew, p.23ff)

Two examples:

1. Modern science is itself a worldview. As a worldview, modern science chooses a paradigm that has its beginning with the “Big Bang” out of which life began evolving, including human life, but the universe is ever expanding and all existence is winding down to an inevitable death. Based on a purely naturalistic framework, this story is spun out without any reference to God or any form of spiritual reality .
2. The Christian worldview is told from the setting of a radically different grand story. It looks to the grand story of God’s creation, fall and redemption as it’s framework viewing the world.

Everyone needs a big story within which to locate and make sense of their smaller stories.

## **HOW DO WORLDVIEWS COME IN**

We begin with the meaning of the gospel.

Jesus did not come to inaugurate yet one more religion amongst many.

- + The gospel asserts that it is inaugurating a kingdom of God on earth. This narrative begins with the creation of the universe and comes to a historical terminus in the renewal of a new heaven and a new earth.
  - + As such the gospel does not simply promote a system of religious beliefs of interest only to a particular ethnic group.
  - + And Jesus is not just another rabbi with a new ethical teaching to offer.
- + Instead, the gospel makes a normative claim that it is “public truth”
  - + It purports to paint a realistic picture of the world as it factually is
  - + It is not a local tribal saga woven around a Jewish people group.
  - + When we read a novel, or a story, watch a play or a movie, we partly forget about the real world we are in and become immersed in the story-line of what

we read or watch. When the movie or book ends we return to the real world we live in.

This is not what happens when we read the Bible. We are not leaving the real world to become immersed in a fictitious world of Bible stories.

***The Bible claims to be the real world.***

The Bible story claims to **be** a story about the way our world really factually is.

It is to be in the Bible story we find the meaning, purpose and significance for our lives or we find it nowhere else.

The story of the Bible is universally true for all people at all times. It is never intended to be a private story for only a particular group of people.

**What is the Mission of the Church?**

- + The Church makes up a community of people who have embraced the truth and validity of the Gospel message.
  - + Christians endeavour to live their lives by the gospel narrative.
  - + Together, as a Church, they are to be missional in declaring the gospel story to be public truth.
  - + The mission of the Church is defined by the gospel.
- + Christians are to incarnate the gospel story in a multiethnic and multicultural environment.

This is the greatest challenge of the Church.

Every culture has their own meta-narrative by which they live.

- each has its own creation account (cosmology)
- each has its own understanding what humans truly are (ontology)
- each has its own take on what is good (ethics)
- each has its own spiritual destination (eschatology)

- + The main Western story spins out a radically different tale from the Gospel story. It narrates a story of the progressive maturing of the human race. Humans are becoming more free.

Humans will come of age. In time.

Human ingenuity, especially through science and technology will bring the human race to materialistic prosperous future

Goheen and Bartholomew make three points about this Western story.

(Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, Baker Book House, 2008, p. 7)

1. Like the biblical story, the Western story purports to be the true story of the world. "In fact, it often simply assumes this distinction, masking its own grand claim to truth by relegating all other such stories to secondary status, as being merely "religious". (Goheen & Bartholomew, p.7)
2. Like the biblical story, the cultural story is all-embracing, with claims on every aspect of human life.
3. The Western story is radically, although not totally, incompatible with the gospel story.

As Christians we find ourselves at a crossroads of two stories

+ If the Church were to be faithful to the Gospel, she will find itself on an inevitable collision course with our present Western cultural story.

+ This, primarily because

1. Both stories are comprehensive.
2. Both claim to be true.

+ The mission of the Church is to call people to be converted to the Gospel story.

### **The "Darker Possibility"**

Thinkers like Leslie Newbigin believed that the Church has in some measure sold out to the modern Western world. (Goheen & Bartholomew, p.9)

+ By either consciously or unconsciously imbibing the world-story surrounding our culture, we have failed to be faithful to the Gospel.

+ Newbigin believed the Church has compromised by "allowing the biblical story to be subsumed within the modern scientific story". He described the Western Church as being "an advanced case of syncretism", marrying two impossible bedfellows. (Leslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984, Questions for the Churches*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983, p.23 – Cited by Goheen & Bartholomew, p.7)

## The Worldview of the Bible

The biblical story begins with God, "In the beginning God . . ." (Gen 1:1)

"The biblical story begins with God" "In the beginning God . . ." Genesis 1 was written, in part, to counter the pagan notions dominant in their day. This startling beginning tells us that there was a time when only God existed . . . A biblical worldview must therefore begin with this God, the God glimpsed first in the creation account and then revealed more fully throughout drama. And while worldview is concerned to elaborate how to view this world (as the word *worldview* implies), one cannot properly view this world without understanding its proper relation to the living God, for this world is created by him, ruled by him, and permeated with his presence, glory and revelation. The doctrine of creation includes an understanding of the basic relationship between the awesome God and everything else, since everything exists only because he has called it into existence."

(Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *Living at Crossroads, An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, SPCK, London 2008, p. 33)

"In the beginning God created . . ."

+ these are the first five words (four in Hebrew) of the Bible; the theological Big Bang.

Walsh and Middleton affirm that "the worldview of Scripture does not begin with Christ and salvation. It begins with God and creation. The first article of the Apostles' Creed emphasizes the Genesis account: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." This is where Christianity begins. Creation is the biblical starting point."

(Brian J. Walsh, J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, IVP Downers Grove, 1984, p.43)

+ No one can know the universe and the answers to the great questions of life unless one knows God. The question of the purpose of your existence is inseparable to the question of your origin.

+ The question "Where did I come from?" is a crucial starting point.

If you think that you evolved up from the slime as the result of blind evolution over millions and billions of years; a product of an evolutionary stream that was started when a bolt of lightning hit the primordial soup in the dim reaches of the distant past, you may despair.

+ Martin Heidegger sees human people trapped in the claws of time; they are conscious of the passing of time and are threatened by the uncertainties of life. They do not know from where they have come or to where they are going. They feel that they have been hurled into existence with neither rhyme nor reason. And the only certainty he has is death

- + Frederick Nietzsche spawned much a similar kind of philosophy. He declared that God is dead and what is left is the *nihil* or “nothingness”. Except for the values and purpose you create for yourself there are no values or purpose.
- + As Christians, our cosmology begins with God.
  - + We believe that God existed before anything else and He is the creator of everything that exists. We may quibble over the finer points of how the world was created but fundamentally, we affirm that God is the Maker of everything.

### Original Competing Worldviews

When the writer of Genesis took out his pen, and wrote the words “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”, his was not the only creation story around at that time and he was well aware of it.

- + Part of the reason the Book of Genesis was written was to combat the pagan worldview dominant in their day.
- + The *Enûma Eliš* is the Babylonian creation myth recovered by Henry Layard in 1849 in the ruined Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (Mosul, Iraq), and published by George Smith in 1876. The *Enûma Eliš* exists in various copies from Babylonia and Assyria. The version from Ashurbanipal's library dates to the 7th century BC

Friedrich Delitzsch unfortunately concluded from some apparent Babylonian ingredients in Genesis account and made the conclusion that the Bible was guilty of plagiarism.

(Delitzsch, Friedrich. *Babel and Bible: Three Lectures on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion, Embodying the Most Important Criticisms and the Author's Replies*. Open Court Company, 1906. 50.)

- + He asserted that there were similarities in the Genesis account to the Mesopotamian creation account, and concluded that the Genesis account was derivative of the *Enuma Elish* or other Babylonian literature.
- + Admittedly, there were some similar concepts between the Mesopotamian creation accounts and the Biblical accounts like the Hebrew word *těhôm* (“deep”) in Genesis 1:2. The Babylonian goddess Tiamat was the goddess of the deep sea and an enemy of the creator-god Marduk.
- + This, together with other apparent similarities have led some scholars to conclude that the Biblical writers were about the task of demythologizing the then-dominant pagan myths.

But there are stark differences between the two metanarratives.

John D. Currid has pointed out some distinguishing differences between the Genesis account and the *Enûma Eliš*.

- 1) The main purpose of the composition of the *Enûma Eliš* was to praise Marduk, the Babylonian creator-god. It paints him as the supreme god in a polytheistic pantheon of gods.

The Genesis account explicitly expounds a monotheistic concept of God.

- 2) The *Enûma Eliš* account speaks of a cosmic war in which Marduk has had to struggle to eliminate chaos to bring creation into being.

The God of Genesis effortlessly spoke creation into being.

- 3) The *Enûma Eliš* clearly portrays human people to be slaves to their gods. The Genesis account gloriously extols human people as being made in the image of God.

- 4) The gods portrayed there in the *Enûma Eliš* are not pictured as omnipotent beings. They are shamelessly depicted as beings who themselves were subjected to even more powerful force of other crafts and magic.

(Currid, John D. *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997. 29-30.)

The God of Genesis is later in the Old Testament depicted as unquestionably omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent.

The Judeo-Christian creation story began with nothingness. It speaks of God as One Who is self-sufficient and eternal (John 1:1-3, 14; Romans 16:26; Colossians 1:15-16; Hebrews 9:14; Revelation 22:13).

+ And the universe was created *ex nihilo*; out of nothing.

+ Plato believed that God is not the only eternal force. Apart from God there always has been another eternal force. Plato believed that the Demiurgos formed the world from matter that was eternally there. Plato's God was a Former, not a Creator. He did not bring matter into existence

He formed the world *ex hula*, i.e. "out of pre-existing matter".

+ Neither do we believe creation to be *ex deo* "out of God"; for only the Son proceeds from the Father.

+ Neither do we buy into contemporary process theology promulgated by thinker like A.N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne who hold that evil is merely the incompatibility of some factors within the ongoing growth of God. God being finite and in the process of struggling with evil Himself.

This makes God incapable of guaranteeing the final vindication over evil. It robs God of His transcendence. He seems to be tied inextricably to the processes of the materialistic world. It is difficult to comprehend worshipping a God of whom evil is a part of His essence

+ Rather, we affirm the notion that God created the world *ex nihilo* “out of nothing” (Gen :1; Col 1:16; Heb 11:3; Rev 4:11)

### **Humanity as God’s Image.**

God made human people in His own image “let us make human beings in our own image” Gen 1:26.

This must have come as a shock when the original listeners first heard the creation story. They lived among a people whose pagan worldview told a radically different story of what it meant to be human.

1. Being made in God’s image would mean a life of creaturely dependence. Henri Blocher makes the point that an “image is only an image. It exists only by derivation. It is not the original, nor is it anything without the original. Mankind’s being as image stresses the radical nature of his dependence . “

(Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Trans. David G. Preston, Downers Grove, IL Intersity 1984; p. 82) Goheen and Bartholomew p.42

2. To be made in the image of God is to live in relationship to God. According to Genesis it is not only the king who has access to the gods: all of humanity has a relationship with the one creator God. And if God constantly orders all things by His word, then human life is meant to be a life of constant response to Him. Responding to God living in communion with Him and enjoying Him are essential elements of what it means to be human.

3. To be made in God’s image is to reflect God, to be like Him, to mirror His character. Men and women do not share in the divine nature but they are finite creaturely reflections of the infinite Creator. Like God, human beings can e.g. see, hear, think, love, pursue justice, get angry, and show mercy. Yet it is not just in possessing these capabilities that we image God; it is also a matter of the way we use them. It matters what we think .what we love, how we use our ears and eyes, what makes us angry. Moreover we reflect God not just individually but also communally. This “Godlikeness” enables us

to know, love, worship, and enjoy God because we can in some way understand Who He is and what He is doing. Being fathers or having fathers helps us to understand what it means for God to be our father; showing compassion, helps us understand God's compassion.

Since humanity reflects God's glory we are able also to behold God's glory.

4. To image God is to represent God in the creation as His vice –regents and stewards, with the responsibility to rule on behalf of God.
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