

WORLDVIEWS

An effective method of presenting the Christian faith in a rational way is to explain the Christian worldview. We can compare and contrast our worldviews with other worldviews, to see which one is true. By thinking about worldviews, we can consider how consistent and coherent the Christian faith is over against other faiths. Of course, in order to do this, we must first know what a worldview is.

DEFINITIONS

It is usually best to start with a simple definition of a term. Therefore, I'll turn to Kenneth Richard Samples's concise description of a worldview: "In the simplest terms, a worldview may be defined as how one sees life and the world at large. In this manner it can be compared to a pair of glasses."¹ A worldview is simply how one views the world and everything in it.

Philip Johnson offers another simple definition. "Put simply, our worldview is the window by which we view the world, and decide, often subconsciously, what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant."² He then adds an important statement: "Every one of us has a worldview, and our worldview governs our thinking even when—or especially when—we are unaware of it."³ Even if you've never heard the term "worldview" before, you still possess one. That is because you have a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. Somehow, you decide what is true, what is important, what is right and wrong. You have probably asked yourself what the purpose of life is. You want to know what happens when you die. The answers to big questions are part of the way we view the world, the way we interpret our lives and all of reality.

A few more definitions will give us added clarity. Again, we will start with a simple one. According to Nancy Pearcey, "A worldview is like a mental map that tells us how to navigate the world effectively."⁴ In her brief definition, she describes how a worldview helps guide us through life, just as a map helps guide us on a journey.

Douglas Groothuis writes,

A worldview hypothesis is a broad-ranging theory of everything, in that it tries to account for the nature and meaning of the universe and its inhabitants. While worldviews can be dissected intellectually, they also reflect and address the orientation of one's innermost being—that is, the heart.⁵

¹ Kenneth Richard Samples, *A World of Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 20.

² Philip E. Johnson, in his foreword to Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 23.

⁵ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 49-50.

A worldview helps us make sense of everything in nature. It is more than just an intellectual view of life, far more than the arrangement of our thoughts. It encompasses our hearts and desires. In his book on worldviews, James Sire defines the term in a similar way.

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) that 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.⁶

Here, in this explanation of the term, Sire states that a worldview is a commitment or orientation of the heart. Furthermore, a worldview can be expressed in some type of narrative (what some would call a metanarrative) or a set of presuppositions. That story and those assumptions may or may not be true. We might not even be aware of our worldview, or adhere to it consistently. (Human beings are, by our sinful nature, hypocrites, so usually a worldview is not held to consistently). We may claim we have one worldview, but our actions reveal that we actually live by another. Still, we have worldviews, and they are the foundation of our lives.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

Where does this term, worldview, come from? It seems that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) first used the term, but only in passing. Non-Christian philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) also used the term. However, that does not mean the term is inherently non-Christian. Many Christians have used the term, notably Francis Schaeffer, James Sire, Ronald Nash, David Naugle, Nancy Pearcey, and Tim Keller, among many others.

Though the term is relatively new, the concept is not. In fact, it is very similar to the way the word “heart” is used in the Bible. Heart can be used to describe the emotional center of a person (Exod. 4:14; John 14:1). It can refer to the will (such as when Pharaoh’s heart was hardened: Exod. 7:13; 8:15; etc.). As such, it can refer to both purposes and thoughts (1 Chron. 29:18). Heart can also refer to the intellect (Prov. 2:10; Rom. 1:21). The heart is ultimately the spiritual center of a person (Matt. 6:21). All of these aspects of the heart seem to be in mind when Paul writes,

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his

⁶ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 20.

glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph. 1:15-21)

WHAT DOES A WORLDVIEW DO?

A worldview helps us make sense of the world and our lives, which can often be confusing. If our worldview is correct, it helps bring clarity to our existence. However, a worldview based on false presuppositions will distort reality. A worldview “supplies a comprehensive view of what a person considers real, true, rational, good, valuable, and beautiful.”⁷

The simplest formations of a worldview revolve around three major questions:

1. What is the purpose of life?
2. What is the problem?
3. What is the solution to the problem?⁸

Interestingly, these questions align with three parts of the Christian metanarrative (the big story, so to speak): creation, fall, and redemption. We were created to know and worship God. Sin creates all the problems in the world. The solution is the redemption found in Jesus.

A worldview helps us answer these big questions of life. Of course, those three questions are not the only questions we ask. If our worldview answers more questions, it will be more complex and multifaceted, addressing the most important issues of our human experience.

James Sire’s examination of worldviews includes eight questions. They are:

1. What is prime reality—the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?
8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?⁹

Kenneth Richard Samples believes that a worldview needs to answer twelve ultimate concerns.

1. Ultimate Reality: What kind of God, if any, actually exists?

⁷ Samples, *A World of Difference*, 20.

⁸ This is the approach taken by Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 91.

⁹ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 22-23.

2. External Reality: Is there anything beyond the cosmos?
3. Knowledge: What can be known and how can anyone know it?
4. Origin: Where did I come from?
5. Identity: Who am I?
6. Location: Where am I?
7. Morals: How should I live?
8. Values: what should I consider of great worth?
9. Predicament: What is humanity's fundamental problem?
10. Resolution: How can humanity's problem be solved?"
11. Past/Present: What is the meaning and direction of history?
12. Destiny: Will I survive the death of my body and, if so, in what state?¹⁰

Of course, these lists overlap in significant ways. They all involve the purpose of life, the human predicament or problem, and the solution. Sire and Samples include reality (the branch of metaphysics known as ontology, the study of existence), knowledge (epistemology), ethics/morality (what is right and wrong), and the afterlife.

Of these authors, Samples has the most comprehensive discussion of worldview. He believes that the major components of a worldview involve theology (a concept of God), metaphysics (the view of external reality), epistemology (a theory of knowledge or how we know what we know), axiology (a study of values), humanity (a view of human nature), and history (the study of unfolding historical events).¹¹

Within each of these components, we can ask several questions. Theological questions include:

Does God actually exist? Is there one God or many gods? Is God a personal or impersonal being? Is God infinite or finite? What is God's relationship to the space-time-matter world? Has God revealed himself to humanity? Does God perform miracles? Can human beings have a relationship with God? If so, how?¹²

With regard to metaphysics, we might ask:

Is ultimate reality mind, matter, or spirit? Can reality be apprehended by the five senses? Is the space-time-matter world the sole reality? Is the origin of the universe natural or supernatural? Why is the universe orderly rather than disorderly and chaotic? How can such things as time, change, and cause-effect relationships be explained?¹³

¹⁰ Samples, *A World of Difference*, 21-22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*

The major questions of epistemology include:

What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What roles do the five senses, reason, and revelation play in the process of knowing? Can one be certain of anything and, if so, under what conditions? Is belief in the existence of God rational? What is the proper relationship between faith and reason? What is truth? Is truth absolute or relative? What is the relationship between knowledge and belief?¹⁴

The major issues of axiology (values) can be categorized in terms of moral values, value theory, and aesthetics. The questions of moral values include, “What is the ultimate good? Is morality relative or absolute? Are ethics invented or discovered? How does one ground or justify one’s ethics? What is God’s (or ultimate reality’s) relationship to moral principles?”¹⁵

In the realm of value theory, we might ask, “What do people value (God, material things, money, pleasure, freedom, education) and why? How does (should) a person assign worth or value? What is of ultimate value? How do values affect other areas of thought?”¹⁶

The questions that concern aesthetics include:

Is beauty merely subjective—‘in the eye of the beholder’—or is there some objective standard? Does society imitate art or does art imitate society? Why do human beings have an aesthetic and creative sense? How is the aesthetic value related to moral values and to other focal points of one’s worldview, such as God, ultimate reality, and knowledge?¹⁷

The great questions of humanity include:

Are people merely the product of undirected, natural processes (naturalistic evolution) or are they special creations of God? What are human beings in relation to animals? Do people possess an immaterial soul? Are human beings good, bad, or neutral? Are people innately rational or irrational? How does a person derive meaning, purpose, and significance? How does God relate to mankind’s basic predicament? What is the final destiny of humankind: extinction, immortality, or reincarnation? What kind of afterlife exists, if any?¹⁸

Related to the issues of humanity is the problem of evil. The presence of evil in the world leads us to ask certain questions:

Why isn’t the world the way many people think it should be? What is the origin and cause of evil? Why does God allow evil to exist? Does the existence of evil

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

prove or disprove an ultimate standard of goodness? What role do humans play in the problem of evil? What about natural disasters and calamities?¹⁹

With respect to history, people ask questions like:

What is the meaning and significance of history? Where is history going? Is history cyclical or linear? Is history the product of purely natural factors or of divine providence? Has God intervened in history? What can be known from history? What will unfold in the future for humankind and the physical universe?²⁰

These are all excellent questions. If you want to know what another person believes and thinks—if you want to know another person’s worldview—you should ask him or her such questions. They open up the door for conversations about the Christian worldview.

NOT ALL WORLDVIEWS ARE EQUAL

Experience tells us that people answer the big questions of life in different ways. Sometimes, the answers are radically different. In other words, we possess different worldviews. There are several major worldviews, such as monotheism (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), deism, dualism, polytheism, pantheism, and naturalism. Often, people mix and match elements of these major worldviews, so much so that could say that there are as many distinct worldviews as there are people.

In our study of worldviews, we will concern ourselves with the major worldviews. These are what Douglas Groothuis calls plausible worldviews. “A plausible worldview is one that holds interest and appeal for a significant number of people at a particular time and place.”²¹ This does not mean that each plausible worldview is true or even credible. We are simply acknowledging that throughout history, there have been several prominent worldviews.

It should be obvious by now that each worldview cannot be true. Christian theism and naturalism/materialism offer radically different ways of looking at life. They cannot both be true. The Christian, the Buddhist, and the atheist cannot possess equally true worldviews. Who is right, and how do we prove it?

A number of apologists have offered criteria for testing worldviews. As Samples writes, “Careful worldview thinking demands a logical evaluation of the various interpretations of reality offered in the marketplace of ideas. By applying methods of critical thinking to the various aspects of each particular worldview, the accuracy of that belief system can be analyzed to determine how well it actually fits reality.”²²

Both Groothuis and Samples offer criteria for testing worldviews. These criteria are remarkably similar. The following is my own synthesis of their criteria.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 50.

²² Samples, *A World of Difference*, 32.

- 1.) A worldview should not rely on mystery or paradox. It should explain something.
- 2.) A worldview must be logically consistent. Various elements of a worldview should not contradict other elements of the same worldview. If a worldview is not logically consistent, it is false. If it is logically consistent, it may be true. (In other words, logical consistency is necessary, but not sufficient to prove that the worldview is true.)
- 3.) A worldview must be coherent. The various elements of the worldview must be interconnected in a meaningful way. It cannot be a random collection of facts. (As above, coherency is a necessary, but not sufficient, proof of a credible worldview.)
- 4.) A worldview must have explanatory power. It must explain what we observe and experience in life. It must also have sufficient scope to address the big questions of life.
- 5.) A worldview's truth claims should correspond to reality, including facts and human experience.
- 6.) If a worldview can be verified through "various empirical, scientific and historical ways,"²³ it is more likely to be true. In other words, what the worldview claims to be true should be testable and verifiable.
- 7.) A worldview must be existentially viable. It must be livable. A worldview that denies there is a purpose to life does not allow a person to live with purpose. Such a worldview requires a person to engage in "philosophical hypocrisy" and "perpetual doublethink."²⁴ Similarly, a worldview that denies there is such a thing as evil cannot be lived out in an evil world. A worldview that denies truth cannot be true. A worldview that denies objective morality would require a person never to use words like *must*, *should*, or *ought*.
- 8.) A worldview should meet people's intellectual, spiritual, and practical needs. It should provide people with direction and help them to solve problems and overcome challenges.
- 9.) A worldview should be constant. It shouldn't be readjusted continually and radically in order to accommodate new evidence. If a worldview must change radically in the face of counterevidence, it probably wasn't true to begin with. For example, a person living a hundred years ago who believed that humanity is every progressing would have needed to alter radically that worldview in light of the genocide and horror of the twentieth century.

²³ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55, 56.

10.) A worldview should be complex enough to encompass the realities of life, but not unnecessarily complex. The principle known as Ockham's razor demands that, all things being equal, the simpler explanation is preferable.

11.) A worldview should explain better all of reality (empirical facts, history, and human experience) better than competing worldviews.

If a worldview can stand up to such criteria, it is a credible worldview. When we examine the Christian worldview, we see that it corresponds to reality, is logically consistent, it is coherent, and it has great explanatory power and scope. We also see that it helps us live productive lives and it meets our existential needs. When we compare the Christian worldview to competing worldviews, we see that Christianity measures up quite favorably.

THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Every Christian should be able to articulate the Christian worldview. This worldview helps us live as Christians. It is also a benefit in evangelism and apologetics. According to Groothuis, "when the Christian vision is presented in its wholeness and significance as a view of all of existence, which has engaged some of the greatest minds of history, this may constructively influence those in search of a broad and deep worldview."²⁵ I am certain that most unbelievers have not been presented with an accurate and comprehensive version of the Christian worldview.

We can define the Christian worldview, in its simplest expression, in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. As stated above, creation tells us what the purpose of life is: we exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it. Fall refers to our problem of sin. It tells us why we are alienated from God and each other, and why we feel internal struggle. The fall also explains why there are environmental problems. The solution to the problem of sin is redemption, which is found only in Jesus.²⁶

If we want a fuller description of the Christian worldview, we can answer Sire's eight worldview questions.

1. What is prime reality—the really real? "Prime reality is the infinite, personal God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. This God is triune, transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign, and good."²⁷ In other words, God is the source of all reality. The "really real" is grounded in God's being. Without God, there is nothing.
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us? "External reality is the cosmos God created ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an

²⁵ Ibid., 79.

²⁶ Many elements of the Christian worldview, including relevant Scripture references, were outlined in pp. 23-42 and will not be repeated here.

²⁷ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 28.

open system.”²⁸ External reality is the universe that God created out of nothing, at his command. The universe functions in a uniform, consistent way. When Sire mentions an open system, he means that not everything is predetermined. God can enter into the universe and interact with his creation. He can order the normal course of events. If there were no god, only blind forces, it would be a closed system.

3. What is a human being? “Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity.”²⁹ Because we are made in the image of God, we possess certain attributes of God, such as intelligence, will, the ability to create, and the ability to make moral decisions. This is the reason why human beings have inherent worth and dignity. It is why we have rights.

However, that is not the end of the story. “Human beings were created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to be capable of restoration; through the work of Christ, God redeemed humanity and began the process of restoring people to goodness, though any given person may choose to reject that redemption.”³⁰ Humans are capable of doing good because they are still made in the image of God, even though that image has been stained by sin. Humans are also capable of great evil because of sin. Sin taints everything to some degree. That is what theologians mean when they speak of total depravity.

4. What happens to a person at death? “For each person death is either the gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill human aspirations.”³¹ After death, there are only two options: for those who trust in Jesus, there is heaven, an eternity with God. Those who reject Jesus will be eternally separated from God in hell.

5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? “Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them.” We can know things because God has made the world to be orderly and he has given us intelligence. In reference to John 1:1-4, Sire writes, “The Word (in Greek *Logos*, from which our word *logic* comes) is eternal, an aspect of God himself. That is, logicity, intelligence, rationality, meaning are all inherent in God. It is out of this intelligence that the world, the universe, came to be. And therefore, because of this source the universe has structure, order and meaning.”³²

²⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁹ Ibid., 32.

³⁰ Ibid., 38-39.

³¹ Ibid., 41.

³² Ibid., 36.

6. How do we know what is right and wrong? “Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good (holy and loving).”³³ God’s character is the standard of morality. He has given us consciences, a general sense of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15). He has also given us his word.

7. What is the meaning of human history? “History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for humanity.”³⁴ History moves from past to present to the future in a linear fashion. It does not operate cyclically, as other worldviews would have it. History is meaningful. It is going somewhere, moving to an end that God has ordained. What we do matters.

8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview? “Christian theists live to seek first the kingdom of God, that is, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”³⁵ The primary goal of life is to glorify God. Therefore, our hearts should be committed first to God’s purposes, not our selfish agendas. Human happiness or progress (as defined by human beings) is not the purpose of life. However, when we worship God, we begin to find our true selves. When we orient our hearts towards God, we find true and lasting happiness and we begin to make real progress, as we become the people that God intended for us to be. In other words, we begin to be transformed in the true image of God, Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Viewed in this light, the Christian worldview explains so much. It tells us why we exist. It tells us how the universe came into existence. It explains why we can know truth and why we can reason. It tells us why things are wrong and why we die. It explains why humans have rights. It reveals the source of objective morality. It tells us what happens after death. And the Christian worldview communicates these things to us in a consistent, coherent manner.

³³ Ibid., 42.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.