

# Worldviews at Work in the World

Darrow L. Miller, Bob Moffitt, and Scott D. Allen

Josie was a Peace Corps worker and nurse at the Serabu Mission Hospital in Sierra Leone, a nation on the west coast of Africa. She had just completed teaching a course in microbiology to ten Sierra Leonean nursing students. All the students had passed their examinations. In doing so, they had demonstrated an understanding that viruses, bacteria, and other microscopic organisms cause disease.

After the class discussed the results of the final exam, one student raised her hand and said, “Miss Josie, I know what you taught us about how white people get sick, but do you want to know how people *really* get sick?”

“How?”

“It’s the *witches*! They are invisible and fly around at night, biting people’s backs!”

Josie later explained, “At that moment, with a heaviness of heart, I realized that—as far as the Sierra Leonean students were concerned—I didn’t know what I was talking about when it came to the cause of disease. Their grandmothers had taught them that witches were real and that microorganisms were what white people believed in.”<sup>1</sup>

Josie and her nursing students operated from different sets of assumptions regarding the cause of disease. Each set of assumptions was part of its holder’s worldview, or “belief system.” Josie believed in a physical cause of disease; her students believed in a spiritual or supernatural cause. While the manifestation of any particular disease was the same, Josie and her students had different understandings of its nature and cause. Their respective beliefs were rooted in different worldviews and created conflicting ideas about how to cure diseases.

Like Josie and her nursing students, each of us possesses a worldview. This worldview shapes our choices and how we live. According to scholar Samuel Huntington, “In the back of our minds are hidden assumptions...that determine how we perceive reality, what facts we look at, and how we judge their importance and merits.”<sup>2</sup> These hidden assumptions also determine “what we believe is real and true, right and wrong, good and beautiful.”<sup>3</sup> For this reason, understanding our worldview is both practical and important.

Our worldviews literally form who we are. These beliefs are deeply ingrained in our minds, and unearthing them is not easy. In many instances we remain unconscious of their existence or influence until alternative views challenge them. Nevertheless, a critical issue for any follower of Jesus is whether or not his or her worldview is rooted in biblical truth or if instead the surrounding culture has shaped those beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Josie Kornegay, staff person with YWAM Mercy Ships; interview by Darrow Miller, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999), p. 13.

In many ways our worldview functions like a pair of eyeglasses for the mind. We wear them all the time and they shape and color everything we see. They focus our attention upon certain issues while filtering out others. Josie’s worldview focused her attention on the physical causes of disease—the microscopic organisms that negatively affect the cell life of a human body. At the same time, her worldview tended to filter out possible spiritual causes for disease. Meanwhile, the worldview of her Sierra Leonean nursing students did the opposite.

As we grow and develop, others impart their assumptions about reality to us. Our beliefs are shaped by input from parents, friends, teachers, mentors, and role models. The broader culture we live in also influences our worldview, which we absorb as we go about our daily lives, from sources like television and radio, what we read, the music we listen to, and even conversations with others.

### **The Big Questions of Life**

Worldviews are extremely important, partly because they help answer “the big questions of life.” For example: Does God exist, and if so, what is he like, or are we alone in an impersonal universe? Are there many gods, and if so, what are they like and how do they relate to us? Who am I and what is the purpose of my life? How should I understand the natural world around me? Is there purpose to history, or is it meaningless? Is history ultimately going somewhere, and if so, where? What happens after I die? Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Interestingly, wherever one travels in the world, the big questions of life are basically the same. However, the answers vary tremendously. That is because they are founded upon different assumptions about life.

### **Ideas Reap Consequences**

One of the purposes of this study is to provide you with an opportunity—perhaps for the first time—to examine your own worldview. Our hope is that you will take off your worldview glasses, handle them a bit, and examine them carefully. This is a powerful exercise—one of the most important exercises you can ever do! Your worldview is not simply a set of ideas floating through your head, with no bearing on the rest of your life. Rather, your worldview largely determines how you live, how you function within your family, the role you play in your community, and the type of society and nation you create with others.

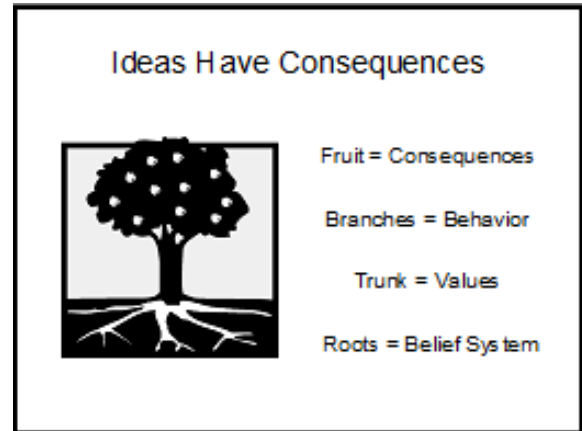
You can compare a worldview to the roots of a fruit tree. We cannot see the roots. They exist below the ground. Yet they determine the kind of fruit the tree will produce. Jesus used this analogy to warn us against the teachings of false prophets.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. *By their fruit you will recognize them.* Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. *Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them* (italics added). -- Matthew 7:15-20

Objective truth is recorded in the pages of Scripture and revealed in the created order. Yet Jesus warns us that lies also exist, and often they are subtle and difficult to detect. They arrive through “false prophets,” who “come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly, they are ferocious wolves.” Jesus

also tells us that there is a direct link between false ideas (the roots) and the result or consequence of these false ideas in everyday life (the fruit). If our roots are formed according to the truth, the fruit of our lives will reflect that truth and be good, a positive addition to our world. On the other hand, if our lives are the outgrowth of roots formed by lies, our fruit can only be more of the same, without worth and fit only to be discarded.

Just as people who look at a tree do not see the roots, those who observe our everyday lives and actions cannot see our worldview. Like the roots of the fruit tree, our worldview exists below the surface of our lives. Yet also like the roots of the fruit tree, our worldview produces fruit that has the same character as the worldview itself. The things we value, the decisions we make, and our daily actions reflect and grow from the assumptions we hold about the big questions of life.



In short, our worldview produces a certain kind of fruit, or consequences, in our everyday lives. A healthy worldview—one based on biblical truth—produces productive consequences. An unhealthy worldview—one based on lies—produces destructive consequences. These consequences not only affect our own lives, but also the lives of the people around us. This is even more reason to examine our own worldview with care.

According to author and scholar James Sire, “A worldview is a map of reality; and like any map, it may fit what is actually there, or it may be [very] misleading. The map is not the world itself of course, only an image of it, more or less accurate in some places, distorted in others. Still, all of us carry around such a map in our mental makeup and we act upon it. All our thinking presupposes it. Most of our experience fits into it.”<sup>4</sup>

There is only one map that accurately reflects reality as it truly exists. This “map” is the biblical worldview. The entire world is the Lord’s. He created it all. Loving God with your entire mind means understanding everything in light of God’s revealed truth in Scripture. It means “understanding God’s ordinances for all of creation, for the natural world, for societies, for businesses, for schools, for the government, for science, and for the arts.”<sup>5</sup> It means developing a biblical worldview, and this is a rewarding, enriching journey for a disciple of Christ.

### **The Impact of Worldviews on Society**

In every society there exists a dominant worldview shared by the majority. However, this doesn’t mean that each person in the society ascribes equally to this dominant worldview. There are always people who hold minority beliefs. Still, the dominant worldview of a society tends to wield the most influence in shaping its culture and institutions. It determines which things the

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<sup>4</sup> James Sire, *How to Read Slowly* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw, 1978), pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Colson and Pearcey, p. 34.

society does and does not value. It is evident through the society’s educational, political, social, religious, legal, and economic institutions. It also resonates through media and popular culture.

The dominant worldview of our society influences us profoundly. Often we do not realize this until we leave our society and visit another one. Then we begin to understand—sometimes with amazement—how strongly we hold to our society’s dominant worldview.

### Worldviews on the Move

Worldviews are constantly on the move. They spread outward across oceans and around the world. A classic example is the spread of Christianity. Jesus commanded his followers to be “my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). From Jerusalem, Christianity spread to every continent and nearly every nation on earth.

Worldviews often originate in the minds of intellectuals, philosophers, and theologians. From there, artists and musicians illustrate them. (It has been said, if you want to know how the next generation will live, study the art and music of today.) Worldviews then spread to other educated or professional people, such as teachers, lawyers, pastors, journalists, and politicians. Eventually they can become “institutionalized” as laws, governing policies, and educational curricula. As they continue to penetrate the culture, they eventually affect the everyday behavior and lifestyle of its people.

Worldviews also spread through time, from one generation to the next. They pass from parents to children. In the Old Testament, God

## Worldview Impact on Popular Culture

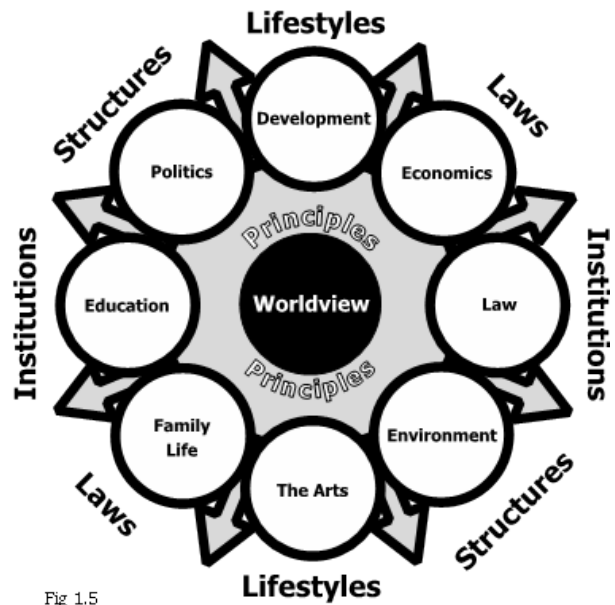
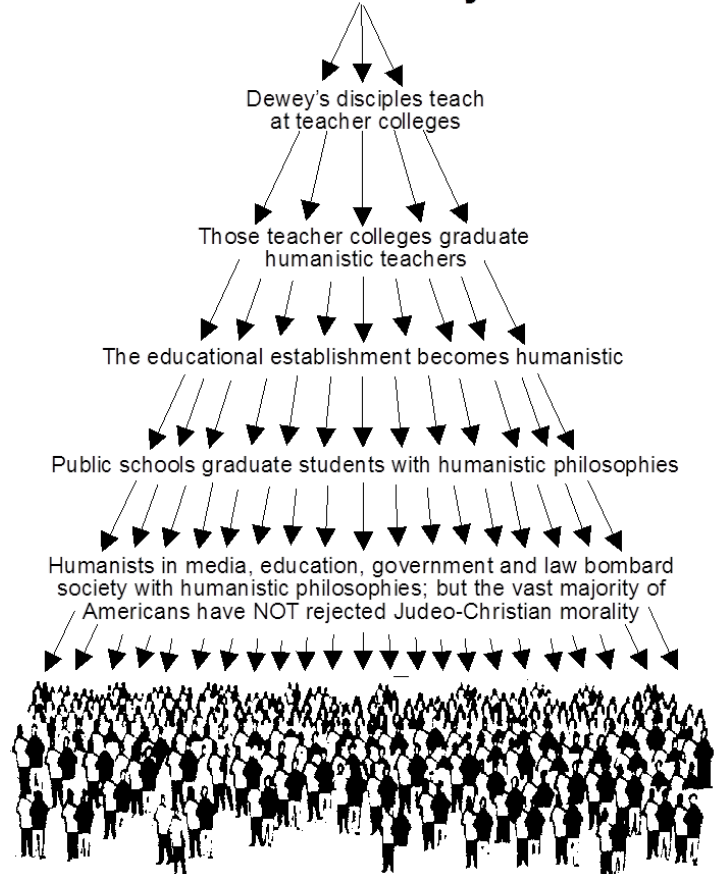


Fig 1.5

### John Dewey

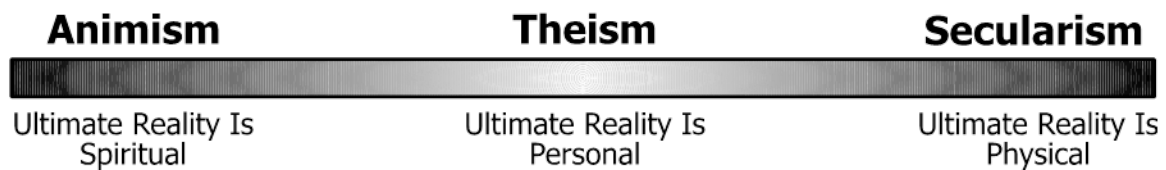


instructed parents of his chosen nation, Israel, to accurately teach his revealed commands and laws from generation to generation. This would ensure that the true knowledge of God would not be lost or forgotten (Dt 4:1-10).

### A Diversity of Worldviews

Throughout history there has been - and will continue to be - a wide range of worldviews. In this study we organize this broad range into three general worldview categories.

## The Worldview Continuum



*Theism.* Though the word can have other shades of meaning, in this study it will mean the belief in *one* God who is the all-powerful creator of the physical universe. According to theism, reality is comprised of both physical and spiritual reality. The physical universe exists, but so does God who created and sustains it, and who has a real existence apart from it. Likewise, human life is an inseparable combination of a physical body and a spirit. Theism contrasts with naturalism in that its proponents believe that God exists. Theism contrasts with animism in that there is only *one* all-powerful creator God, rather than many spirits controlling events. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are the three major world religions that subscribe to this general belief.



*Secularism.* Secularism (sometimes referred to as naturalism, scientism or materialism)



encompasses a set of beliefs that denies or ignores the existence of spiritual reality. According to secularism, the physical universe is all that exists. There is no God, or gods, and no spirit within human beings. All phenomena in the world can be explained through the science-defined “laws” (or principles) governing the physical universe and chance combinations and interactions of matter. Today secularism is the dominant worldview in much of the industrialized West. It gained supremacy through the widespread acceptance of British botanist Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) theory of natural evolution. Secularism underpins the modern faiths of scientism and postmodernism.

*Animism.* Sometimes referred to as pantheism, animism is a set of beliefs that sees the world as full of (or animated with) spiritual beings. There are scores of gods, demons, and angels. In fact, according to animism, ultimate reality is fundamentally spiritual. The line separating physical and spiritual reality is very weak or non-existent, with spirits inhabiting rocks, trees, and other elements of nature. The gods of animism may be expressed as impersonal forces or as personal, even humanlike, beings. Their actions are often arbitrary and unpredictable. Animism underpins many ancient religions such as Shinto in Japan and Hinduism in India and is still dominant in many less industrialized societies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In addition, elements of the modern New Age movement in the West have also adopted some animistic concepts.



While it's helpful to understand these three worldview categories as distinct from one another, it's common for people and societies to combine elements from each. Typically, one of these categories will be dominant within a culture; however, there will likely be elements of all three categories evident to some degree. In the industrialized West for example, naturalism is the dominant worldview, yet Christianity continues to exert an influence. Likewise, the animistic beliefs espoused by some in the New Age movement are exerting an increasing influence. In addition, today many Europeans are rediscovering and worshiping the same pagan gods that their ancient ancestors once worshiped.

### **Biblical Theism**

While there is a diversity of beliefs among the world's peoples, the Bible declares that there is only one *true* reality. If this is the case, then there can be only one worldview that reflects the truth. The challenge for us is to understand this worldview and order our lives according to it.

This true worldview—the biblical worldview—is God's revelation to us in Scripture and through creation. The Bible teaches that this worldview is actually embedded within the hearts of all people (Rom 2:14-16), though humanity's fallen nature diminishes its presence.

When our minds embrace the biblical worldview, we begin to see the world as it really is—as God created and sustains it. As we believe and act on this worldview, our lives manifest healthy, fruitful living. This will be good not only for us but for our families, communities, and societies as well.

The Bible teaches that human nature is not perfect, but fallen. Because of fallen human nature, we cannot clearly see true reality without God's help. Naturalism, animism, and some forms of theism are distortions of the truth that prevent us from clearly viewing all of reality. Either they allow us to see a portion of what is real or they distort the portion that we see. Often, they do both. The biblical worldview, by contrast, allows us to see all that is real. When we “put on” the biblical worldview we can understand God as he truly is—and ourselves and creation as we were made to be.

## People Perish for Lack of Knowledge

Every Christian engages in a life-long process of putting off a false worldview and putting on God's view of the world—the biblical worldview. This renewal of the mind is central to the process of sanctification. The “putting off” and “putting on” process requires us to gain deeper understanding of, and live increasingly more consistently with, the biblical worldview.

It is only to the degree that individuals or societies put off false worldviews and put on God's view of the world that they experience life, freedom, and healing as God intends. False worldviews lead to bondage, impoverishment, corruption, and ultimately death.

There can be nothing more important for the Christian believer than the great quest to abandon deception and embrace the truth, for in the words pastor and professor Dallas Willard, “People perish for lack of knowledge, because only knowledge permits assured access to reality; and reality does not adjust itself to accommodate our false beliefs, errors, or hesitations in action.”

Willard continues:

We can fail to know because we do not want to know—because what would be known would require us to believe and act in ways contrary to what we want... The rejection and the subsequent loss of knowledge once possessed is a curious and tragic thing to be seen in individual lives and in societies. Whether we have knowledge and are living according to knowledge is a primary indicator of future weal or woe.

[In the Old Testament], knowledge of God and his ways was the Israelites' only essential resource. Conforming in practice to that knowledge kept them in harmony with the reality that mattered... [But] where people do not want to know God, he usually allows them to be without him—at least for a while. When desire conflicts with reality, sooner or later reality wins. A society is like any living organism; its continued existence depends upon the correct integration of its parts into a whole. That integration cannot be present if the society is organized around ignorance and illusion and the moral quality of the citizens falls below a certain level.

Worldview, simply put, consists of the most general and basic assumptions about what is real and what is good—including assumptions about who we are and what we should do...there is nothing more practical than our worldview, for it determines the orientation of everything else we think and do. Moreover, worldview is unavoidable. Everyone has a worldview... [It] is a biological necessity for human beings, because we act, whether consciously or not, with reference to a whole (a “world”). Our “view” of that whole determines what we shall undertake to deal with or omit in our actions day by day and hour by hour. It dictates what we will or will not count as resources and recognize as dangers. It determines our aims and our means, and eventually, the quality of our lives and the kind of person we will become. Our worldview is simply our overall orientation in life. You cannot “opt out” of having a worldview. You can only try to have one that most accords with reality...What is true of individuals in this respect is also true of social groups and even whole societies or nations. One's worldview...lies outside our consciousness in the moment of action, embedded in our body and in its social

environment, including our history, language and culture. It radiates throughout our life as background assumptions, in thoughts too deep for words.

What we assume to be real and what we assume to be valuable will govern our attitudes and actions. Period. Because worldview is so influential, it is also dangerous. Worldview is where we most need to have knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

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This reading is drawn from content in chapters 1 and 2 of *The Worldview of the Kingdom of God*, pp. 15-38.

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<sup>6</sup> Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), pp. 39-41.