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4-12-2008


# Making Sense of Your World: A Biblical Worldview

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## Recommended Citation

Brown, William E.; Phillips, W. Gary; and Stonestreet, John, "Making Sense of Your World: A Biblical Worldview" (2008). *Faculty Books*. 6.

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# Making Sense of Your World: A Biblical Worldview

**Keywords**

Life, Bible, Philosophy

**Disciplines**

Biblical Studies | Practical Theology | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

**Publisher**

Sheffield Publishing Company

**Publisher's Note**

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**ISBN**

9781879215511

Second Edition

Making  
Sense  
of Your  
World

*A Biblical Worldview*

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*William E. Brown*  
*John Stonestreet*

Foreword by Norman Geisler



Sheffield Publishing Company

# PART I: THE DIFFERENCE A WORLDVIEW MAKES

What the meaning of life may be I don't know; I incline to suspect that it has none.

H. L. Mencken

The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.

Vaclav Havel

Is life worth living, or is it a meaningless absurdity?

How one answers this question sets the stage for how (and even why) one chooses to live. Disagreement about how to answer this question, and whether it is a question even worth caring about, cuts deeply into the fundamental differences among religions and philosophies.

Mencken's way is by far the easier path to travel. A meaningless existence requires nothing from anyone. There is no need to check for bearings along the way, no need to justify one's choices, values, or goals. Life is a lark at best, a tedium at worst. Such a philosophy agrees with Brendan Gill, who once quipped, "Not a shred of evidence exists in favor of the idea that life is serious."

On the other hand, despite our attempts to ignore these sorts of issues, there exists a "quiet desperation" that drives humanity to think about the question, "Does life have meaning?" Deciding that life does have meaning is not the end but the beginning of a quest. Life becomes a continual pilgrimage to find, affirm, and reaffirm a philosophy of life. One may join a church (or leave a church), change religions, switch jobs, get married, get divorced, or make any number of changes in an attempt to find meaning and purpose.

This is the stuff of worldviews.

The tragedy in American culture is that thinking has been trivialized by distraction, pragmatism has replaced principles, and "how" has displaced the more profound question, "why?" Robert Bellah describes a woman whose worldview epitomizes many: "I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don't think about it a whole lot."<sup>1</sup> The results of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 14.

this approach are the autonomy and individualism that are so much a part of current American public thought.

A vital corrective for Christians is that we learn to think in terms of worldviews. Raising the basic questions addressed by worldview inquiry is imperative in the face of New Age irrationality, Islamic extremism, scientific dogmatism, and existential sensuality. Christianity must present an alternative that sweeps away stereotypes and speaks to the central longings of man's existence.

Some argue that God merely requires a childlike faith and that a breadth of understanding of worldviews is unnecessary, but this confuses "childlikeness" with "childishness." As a child is unusually focused on his own needs and desires, so many Christians brandish a commitment to a biblical worldview that goes little beyond a "moralistic therapeutic deism", believing in a God who only exists to enhance their personal behavior and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

If a superficial knowledge of a biblical worldview continues to dominate the evangelical community, we cannot expect that community to stand unblemished against the onslaught of other worldview choices. David Wolfe wisely cautions, "Our ungrounded belief is easily swayed and abandoned, even though it may be correct."<sup>3</sup>

Christians are to put away childish thinking (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20) and boldly confront the world with the full message of Christ. This involves knowing the essentials of a biblical worldview, the basic tenets of the alternate views, and where these views both agree and disagree. A person often finds it helpful to understand what he believes by knowing what he does not believe, and why. To this end we begin by exploring the difference that worldviews, including a biblical one, actually make.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase "moralistic therapeutic deism" was coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their important book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> David Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), p. 15.

# 1

## WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

Worldviews: Making Sense of Life

Worldviews: What Are They and How Do They Work?

The Definition of a Worldview

The Elements of a Worldview:

Confronting God

Confronting Humanity

Confronting Nature

Worldviews: The Cultural Mold

What Is Culture?

Culture and Worldview

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### Worldviews: Making Sense of Life

This is a book about worldviews. If the average person were asked to describe their worldview, their response would be a blank stare. If they asked what the question meant, our response would result in glazed eyes. But this does not make the question any less relevant. Everyone has a worldview, whether they know it or not.

The events of September 11, 2001, the devastation of a tsunami, the assassination of a world leader, the evils of ethnic cleansing—all these tragedies elicit a certain type of response. Ask about one of these realities and most people will have an opinion on not only what happened, but why it happened and what it means. On the other hand, the wonderful things in life—the birth of a child, falling in love, witnessing an act of heroism—also bring about a response. When we are confronted with the great events of life, we tend to become armchair philosophers, wrestling with the deeper reasons and meaning of the events and life itself.

Some believe there is no particular reason. “Things just happen,” some say. Scientist Richard Dawkins put it this way:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design,

no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference....<sup>1</sup>

Others believe that there is a personal God who is constantly involved in the affairs of people. Helen Young Hayes, a securities analyst from Denver, survived the 1989 crash of United flight 232 in the cornfields near Sioux City, Iowa that killed 111 people. She believed God took her through the crash for her own personal benefit. She claimed, “I think I went through this for a purpose—to show that God can still be seen and felt and glorified in the face of this tragedy.”<sup>2</sup>

Still others postulate that events result, sometimes unwittingly it seems, from the “positive or negative psychic energy” that we all express. Feng Shui consultant Marie Diamond says, “The Secret means that we are creators of our Universe, and that every wish that we want to create will manifest in our lives.”<sup>3</sup>

A coincidence . . . a personal God . . . cosmic forces? These different interpretations represent more than just isolated opinions. They reflect differing worldviews and different understandings about the basic makeup of the world, how it works, and why things happen the way they do.

A worldview has been compared to a pair of glasses through which we see the world. Without these glasses, the world would appear as an unfocused, meaningless blob of people, places and ideas. Our worldview puts the world in focus and shapes how we make sense out of what we see; and, like glasses, it will either help us or prevent us from seeing the world as it really is.

Everyone has a worldview—whether they realize it or not. It is not only a human prerogative, but a human necessity. Some people embrace a well-defined worldview, chosen carefully after examining the various options, and they can articulate it clearly as their “philosophy of life.” Others possess a worldview that is not so systematically arranged—at least not consciously—yet it still serves to give direction and meaning to their lives. Theirs may be more of a “whirled-view” made up of a smorgasbord of contradictory, but personally satisfying and culturally popular, ideas. Either way, our worldview is our way of making sense of the world and our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Quote taken from *Life*, September 1989, pp. 29-35.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006), p. 113.

Our existence in the world screams for answers. Our minds question our existence and crave to know what this life is all about. The individual knows this is not *his* world and that he did not create himself, yet he has the frightening task of trying to make sense of it all. Where did we come from? What is our purpose? Is there anything after death to look forward to or to fear? How should we live while we are alive? Who are we?<sup>4</sup>

Even the nonreligious recognize that man has a “crying need” to make sense out of his life. Humanist Deane Starr writes, “Humans find their most complete fulfillment, whether real or imaginary, in some sort of intimacy with the ultimate.”<sup>5</sup> The inability of many to find some reason for living results in an array of emotional and behavioral aberrations. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert concludes “to lose the faith that there is meaning in life and in the universe is to lose part of what it means to be human.”<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bettelheim adds, “Our greatest and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in life. It is well known that many people lose their will to live because such meaning evades them.”<sup>7</sup>

All around us, people desperately try to make sense of their lives and put their worlds together. Many, without ever really consciously thinking about it, accept popular views about life because they are fun, glamorous, or easy. Worldview evangelists are everywhere: the New Age actress, the internet religious “expert,” the television scientist, the libidinous teenagers in the latest Hollywood youth movie, the conveniently religious politician, and even the characters on Saturday morning TV cartoons.

Amid the din of varied views clamoring for attention, the real issue is often overlooked: Which worldview is the “correct” one? Which view actually represents reality? Which one adequately explains the events in the universe and the experiences of a person’s mind and emotions? We must always keep in mind that it does not matter whether or not a particular worldview suits *us*; the question is, Does it suit *the world*?

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<sup>4</sup> These feelings of insecurity and dependence are what Reinhold Niebuhr calls man’s “natural contingency.” See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribners, 1941), vol. 1, *Human Nature*, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Deane Starr, “The Crying Need for a Believable Theology,” *The Humanist*, July/August 1984, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1976), pp. 355-56.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, “Reflections: The Use of Enchantment,” *The New Yorker*, 8 December 1975, p. 50. Bettelheim also notes that some people do attempt to live “from moment to moment” without giving any thought to their existence. For such people, finding a “meaning in life” is not important.



Christians believe God has spoken and revealed the essentials of a worldview that is genuine and objectively true. Through His creation (the universe) and His Word (the Bible), God has shown man how to make sense of his world and his life. God explains why He made the world and where He is leading it. In Scripture He unveils the nature and structure of reality, the cause of suffering, the remedy for evil, and the ultimate end of all things.

The purpose of this book is threefold and corresponds to the three parts of the book. The first is to offer an honest, though admittedly Christian, exploration and analysis of the world of worldviews. An understanding of worldviews is absolutely essential if one is to navigate the marketplace of ideas that have shaped history and are at the root of what many have termed the “culture wars.”

A second purpose of this book is to describe and defend a distinctly biblical worldview. To gain further insight into the nature of the biblical worldview we will compare and contrast it with competing worldviews. James Orr, who was one of the first to champion the Christian worldview, said:

He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

A third purpose is to take the biblical worldview and apply it to life. If a biblical worldview is true, then what difference does it make in the way we live? How should one view himself, his family, church, job, society, government, and world?

First, we shall lay the groundwork for our discussion by defining and clarifying what we mean by the term “worldview.”

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<sup>8</sup> James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (New York: Scribner, 1897; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1989), p. 4.

## Worldviews: What Are They and How Do They Work?

“The goal in life is to survive; you gotta keep out of trouble. You know, party and have a good time, but don’t overdo it and hurt somebody.”

Most prison inmates I talk with have no problem articulating their worldview—whatever it might be. Harry was no exception. He told me his story of how the world works and what is important in life.

“So you survive.” I asked, “What happens then?”

“You die,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“And after that?”

“Nothing.” He looked insistent. “When you die, you die.”

“You mean there’s no God or life after death?”

“Nope,” he responded. Then he looked away and sighed. “If there is, I’m in big trouble.”

### **The Definition of a Worldview**

Harry recognized that the choices he made in his lifestyle reflected his basic views of God and immortality. His rejection of God and life after death were a part of his worldview. Before I left, he had narrated his own story about the existence of the world and man’s purpose in life.

We all have a “story,” a description of what life is about, why we are here and where we are going. This helps us see where we fit into the world and how to get the most out of life. In one sense, our story is our worldview; and our story is made up of the basic beliefs we have about life and the world.

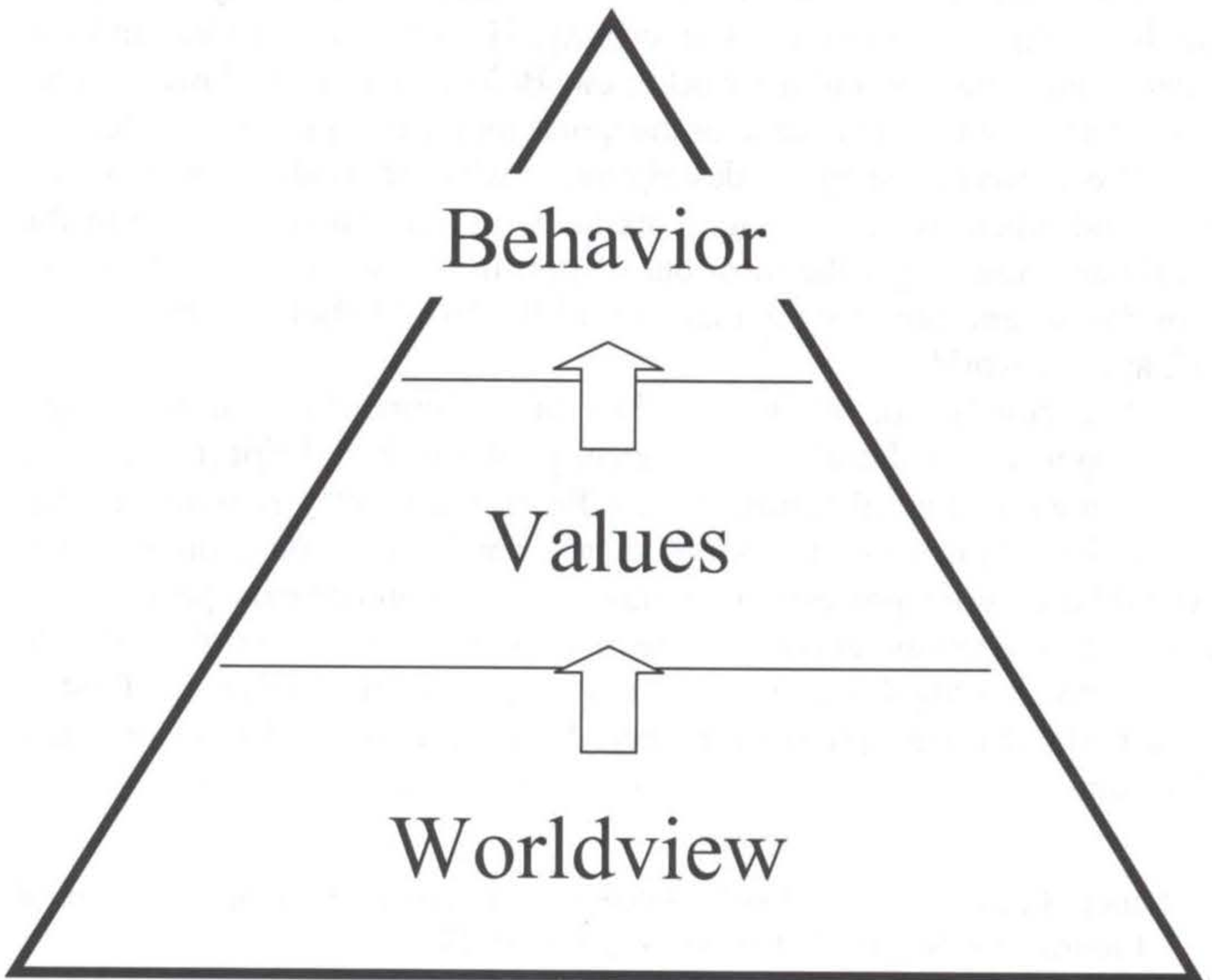
The concept of worldview has been defined in various ways: philosophically, culturally, theologically. While it is helpful to talk of worldviews in formal terms, Nancy Pearcey correctly reminds us that worldviews “(are) not the same as a formal philosophy; otherwise it would be only for professional philosophers. Even ordinary people have a set of convictions about how reality functions and how they should live.”<sup>9</sup> Pearcey highlights here two key aspects of any worldview. First, it is a particular perception of reality. Second, it is the basis for one’s decisions.

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), p. 23.

It is this two-fold perspective that will serve as the parameters for our working definition of worldview in this book. A worldview is *the framework of our most basic beliefs that shapes our view of and for the world and is the basis of our decisions and actions*. It is a blueprint, or a map, for reality: first, it helps me to explain and interpret life and the world; and second, it is the starting point from which I apply my view to life through my decisions and actions (see Diagram 1.1: “Worldview Triangle: Why Worldviews Matter”). The beliefs that we are referring to as basic here are the beliefs we hold about life’s biggest questions. These beliefs shape our worldview. We call them “basic” since they are fundamental to all of our other beliefs and are the assumptions upon which we build our lives.

Diagram 1.1  
The Worldview Triangle:  
Why Worldviews Matter



## The Elements of a Worldview

Worldviews are never passive; they are by their very nature a confrontation of our presence in the world. Before he became a Christian, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy listed six questions he had to answer:

Why am I living?

What is the cause of my existence and that of everyone else?

Why do I exist?

Why is there a division of good and evil within me?

How must I live?

What is death—how can I save myself?<sup>10</sup>

These “ultimate questions” of life confront every human being. They include questions about *origins* (Where did everything come from? Is there a God? What is the nature of ultimate reality?); *meaning* (Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose?); *morality* (Is there a right and wrong? Why does it seem that the world is not as it should be?); *destiny* (What happens after we die? Where is history going?); and *identity* (What is a human being? Who am I? Why am I here? How do I fit?)

The answers we embrace to these ultimate questions, whether consciously or subconsciously, shape our assumptions about the three major concepts of human existence: (1) *God*, or the concept of ultimate reality; (2) *humanity*, or the reality of human existence and self-consciousness (my own as well as that of other persons); and (3) *nature*, or the existence and purpose of the world around me, both physical and spiritual. These upward, inward, and outward assumptions form the framework for my worldview.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Zweig, *The Living Thoughts of Tolstoy* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1939), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> These three aspects of man’s existence became the focal point of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century theological inquiries. Schleiermacher’s theological system utilized man, nature, and God as a framework; see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928). See also William Temple’s *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934).

### *Confronting God*

One's view of God is the starting point for all worldviews. Mortimer Adler, in the Great Books series, comments, "More consequences for thought and action follow the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other basic question."<sup>12</sup> When *confronting God*, I come face to face with that which is of ultimate concern. An atheist may merely shrug off the existence of God, or he may face it with more sincerity than many Christians. In whatever way he arrives at his atheism, he still must confront "God." It is not optional.

If I deny the existence of God, I still must explain certain qualities of man and the world that have been traditionally answered by appealing to God. Why does humanity even have the idea of God if no such being exists? How did the universe come into existence? How do we account for the apparent design and purpose within nature? Why is there a sense of right and wrong in the heart of man, across cultures and histories?

Denying the existence of God usually results in a worldview that focuses on the more immediate concerns of humanity rather than on "ultimate" questions. A "God-less" philosophy of life generally emphasizes the "here and now" because there is no "out there and later." We shall explore the implications of a worldview without God in chapter two.

If I take the step to acknowledge the existence of God, I am forced to answer several questions about Him. Is He a personal being or an impersonal force? Is He actively involved in human events? Is He a moral God who will judge His creation? Is He a "he"? Can He communicate with man? Does He desire to communicate with man?

If I believe that God is the Creator of all things, I move myself from the center of my universe and see God as the most important being. I ask Him the crucial questions, "Why did you make me?" and, "What do you expect from me?" If He is the final judge, then I desperately need to know by what criteria He will judge me and what I must do to avoid His displeasure. A belief about God is really a belief about everything else.

### *Confronting Humanity*

"Man," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, "has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?"<sup>13</sup> In confronting humanity I am laying the foundation for my worldview. Why? Because

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<sup>12</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 2:561.

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, p. 1.

whatever I decide about humanity's place in the world affects me; it is my worldview. I am setting the agenda for my life.

I am me. How did I get to be "me"? Further, I see other people who all have this same concept of personal identity. They are like me, but they are not "me." What is my responsibility to them? What is their responsibility to me? Confronting ourselves is a difficult and unnerving task. We are both the subject and the object of the investigation.

Whatever I decide about my purpose and future will set the values I place on my family, my work, and all my relationships. If I conclude that life has no purpose, then I will live accordingly. If I reason that human existence has some meaning, then I will conform my life to that purpose (or at least I *should*).

The question "What is a human being?" is a key question any civilization must address, and history is full of examples of the devastation that results from answering this question in a way that elevates some races and people groups, and denigrates the rest. This will be discussed in chapter eight.

### *Confronting Nature*

A final aspect in the development of one's worldview is the *confrontation with nature*; or, as Redfield puts it, "man" confronting "not-man."<sup>14</sup> To possess a *worldview*, I must have an explanation that includes all the elements of the universe—one that first describes the origin of the world and explains its apparent design.

How am I related to the physical universe? At times I am the master of nature; at other times I am its slave. Is the natural world friendly, hostile, or indifferent to man?

In times past, the confrontation with nature was often the major influence in man's comprehending his place in the world. His understanding and response to nature set the agenda for the life and practice of his culture. Some of the earliest worldviews saw man and nature as partners in the universe. There was a personal relationship with the world that emphasized a need on the part of man to be in harmony with his environment. For example, to the early Egyptians, two central events in nature helped to shape their worldview: the triumphant daily

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U., 1953), p. 92. It is important to note that Redfield included beliefs about God and spirit beings in his category of "not-man." However, this confrontation with "not-man" is first of all a confrontation of that which makes up the physical universe. It is in this sense that we refer to his term.

rebirth of the sun and the triumphant annual rebirth of the Nile River.<sup>15</sup> Their confrontation with nature led them to assume a regularity in the universe. Nature was a friendly and benevolent partner in the cycles of life. For this reason, the people of Egypt considered themselves to be the special object of care by the gods of nature. The word *human*, in fact, was used by the Egyptians only to refer to themselves.

The ancient Mesopotamians, on the other hand, did not have the benefit of the Nile River or the somewhat predictable seasonal changes of Egypt; rather, they were overwhelmed by the power within natural events. The cosmos seemed capricious, often antagonistic. To the Mesopotamians, nature was a hostile, degrading feature of life. This may have led to their strong emphasis on submission and authority within society as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

The confrontation with nature by these ancient societies resulted in a different understanding of man's place in the world. It is no wonder then that the Egyptians built to themselves impressive monuments that still stand today. The monuments of the Mesopotamian civilizations, in the words of the prophets, "have become heaps."

Unlike ancient cultures (and many non-Western cultures today), Western societies do not generally confront nature with the same sense of respect. For us, the physical realm of "not-man" is indifferent to man. Nature is lifeless and spiritless, operating according to predetermined forces. It exists for man to harness for his own purposes. There are no gods to appease, no magic formulae to recite. Science and technology probe the cosmic machine for clues to increasing the well-being of humanity. We do not conform to the universe, rather we seek to conform the universe to us or our needs.

In spite of this indifference, there is another dimension in the confrontation with the created world. Is there a realm of reality that cannot be seen with physical eyes? Are there nonhuman personal beings who populate the universe? The belief in spirit beings permeates the worldviews of ancient civilizations. In their view of the universe, Persian, Greek, Jewish, Egyptian, Asian, and Roman cultures included demigods, angels, demons, and other beings.

Various mythologies ascribed certain powers to unseen personalities. Some were godlike beings and traveled between earth and the heavens, manipulating humans and circumstances for their own purposes. Other mythologies considered the unseen world populated with

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<sup>15</sup> John A. Wilson, "Egypt," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, ed. H. and H. A. Frankfort et al (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1946), p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, "Mesopotamia," *ibid.*, p. 202.

less powerful beings of questionable character, or the spirits of the dead that remained to “haunt” the living.

The modern mind, which drinks heavily at the well of naturalism, has no room for the existence of spirits. Metaphysical “objects” cannot exist in a materialistic scheme. Belief in angels, demons, and spirit beings is considered a remnant of archaic and superstitious thinking.

But the possible existence of a spirit world cannot be so easily dismissed. In spite of the great and numerous strides made by science and technology over the past two centuries, the scientific enterprise has not eradicated belief in another realm beyond the physical. In fact, interest in “the spiritual world” is on the rise. To admit to the possibility that unseen entities may exist opens a flood of possibilities in the worldview arena.

My response to the confrontation of God, humanity, and nature gives much of the basic shape of my worldview. How many of us consciously examine our lives at this basic level to arrive at our worldview? The fact that we all see life through the lens of our worldview has significant implications. We ought to be intentional about our worldview. The question is not “Do I have a worldview?”; but “Which worldview do I have, and is it the one I ought to have?”

## Worldviews: The Cultural Mold

While worldviews are personal perspectives, they are rarely isolated perspectives. In fact, Charles Kraft defines worldview in a corporate sense, as “the central systematization of conceptions of reality *to which the members of the culture assent (largely unconsciously)* and from which stems their value system.”<sup>17</sup> One of his points is that worldviews are often shared perspectives of life that become part of the culture. A particular worldview thus pervades a culture and is passed on to succeeding generations as a “social inheritance.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, I may have my particular worldview primarily because it was the prevailing one of the environment in which I was raised.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Linton refers to culture as man’s “social heredity.” (See Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction* [New York: Appleton-Century, 1936], p. 76.)



## What Is Culture?

When we say a person has “culture,” we usually have in mind a refined individual who enjoys the “finer things in life. “ But in the broadest sense of the term, everyone has culture—at least *a* culture, because it is essentially the social environment in which one is raised.

A group of people within a particular locality will generally adopt certain behavior patterns that become normative for the group. These accepted forms of conduct are passed on by teaching and modeling. For this reason, culture is often described as our “social and intellectual heritage.”<sup>19</sup> One’s culture, then, is “the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.”<sup>20</sup>

Suppose a friend walked up to you, smiled broadly, and then spit on your chest. As an American, you might not be pleased with such a greeting since men generally shake hands when they meet. But if you lived among the Siriano of South America, you would smile and spit back, the normal manner of greeting. In Mexico, they embrace; whereas in parts of Europe, they kiss one another on the cheek. None of these behaviors is “right” or “wrong.” They are merely the culturally accepted (and expected) modes of conduct within a particular group.

Our culture takes a visible form in everything from the institutions of society (government, schools, churches, etc.) to eating and sleeping patterns (midnight meals, siestas, etc.). Economic, social, and religious institutions reflect what the group considers important. This is also seen in what the group chooses to commemorate through rituals: weddings, funerals, graduations, and other rites of passage. When and how these rituals are carried out (including religious worship) become a matter of cultural agreement.

## Culture and Worldview

How is a worldview related to culture? The visible aspects of a culture are to some extent a reflection of an underlying ideology or worldview, which gives the reasons for the customs. Kraft notes, “Thus, in its explanatory, evaluational, reinforcing and integrating functions, worldview lies at the heart of a culture.”<sup>21</sup> *Culture* suggests the way a

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<sup>19</sup> James F. Downs and Herman K. Bleibtreu, “The Evolution of Our Capacity for Culture,” in *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, ed. Peter B. Hammond, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 56.

group of people may appear to an anthropologist; *worldview* suggests how the universe looks to the group.

A worldview, as the heart of the culture, is passed from generation to generation. For example, we see a pantheistic view of God dominant in the Eastern world, whereas a theistic view prevails in the West. These views are certainly not genetic; an Asian child can be reared in Western society (or an American child in the East) and will adopt the cultural views of his social environment. In other words, the earliest worldview I accepted was the prevailing view of the culture in which I was raised—it was an “accident of birth.” In the same way that culture gives us the impression that our way of doing things is the “right way to behave,” the worldview of our society instills within us an overwhelming sense that our outlook is the “right way to believe.”<sup>22</sup>

From the beginning of human history man has confronted the issues of God, humanity, and nature and constructed worldviews that attempt to interpret life. Worldviews have been adapted, modified, embedded, and enshrined in various cultures. Now, in the information age, a smorgasbord of worldviews confronts us as we explore our global village. How are we to sift through all these views and determine which (if any) reflects true reality?

## Worldviews: The Biblical Perspective

Father Brown, the clergy-sleuth of G. K. Chesterton novels, often solved crimes by putting together the evidence in a creative manner that baffled the experts. Sometimes, investigators would view the scene of a crime and make elaborate guesses as to how the crime was committed. Father Brown would usually sigh and remark, “There are many explanations that may fit the evidence. What we want to know is, which one is right?”

In the same way, many different worldviews seem to fit the evidence found in our world. Atheistic naturalism seems to fit the view of the world as we investigate it by the scientific method. On the other hand, a pantheistic view of the world seems to explain the spiritual realities that

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<sup>22</sup> This of course does not mean that a person’s worldview cannot change. Through the process of growth and adaptation, one’s worldview does modify slightly. Drastic changes often occur when one is confronted with a worldview that is radically different from his own. At such a time, a decisive choice may be presented either to affirm one’s own worldview or to embrace the new. This is what happens in evangelism, for example, especially in cross-cultural missions.

are common to our experience. More and more new worldviews clamor for attention. With all these competing claims, what we, like Father Brown, want to know is, Which one is right?

Man's attempts to explain his existence are just that: *man's attempts*. Within the world, man's experience and perceptions of the infinite universe are limited and inadequate. We need help from the "outside." This is what a biblical worldview claims to be: help from the outside. It acknowledges that God, the Creator and controller of all things, has given light in the confused darkness. He has not given us all the answers, but He has supplied us with information sufficient for our need.

As we mentioned earlier, a worldview can function as a pair of glasses through which we observe and understand our world. Everything we perceive must come through these glasses. If such glasses have "Christian" lenses, then everything we observe will be "tinted" Christian. We will explain the universe and life's events from a Christian perspective. We will not understand why others do not see the world as we do—it is so obvious to us.

The same is true for those who wear atheist glasses or Buddhist glasses. They will "see" the same world, but it will be understood differently. Their "glasses" (worldview) do not shape reality nor do they ensure a correct perception, but they do determine a person's *explanation and interpretation* of life and the world.

A biblical worldview is thus a perspective that sees everything through the "glasses" of Scripture. Rather than allowing culture or experience to determine a worldview, it allows the Bible to make that determination.

Claiming that the Bible gives a perspective of reality that is uniquely true sounds narrow-minded and obscurantist. Immediately challenges to such a position arise.

Is not the Bible just one of many cultural attempts at piecing together a worldview? After all, the biblical writers were merely reflecting their own cultural worldview, were they not?

What allows the Bible to dictate the answers to my life? Do I not have a say? It presents such a mental straight-jacket; I am not free to sort things out for myself.

How can an ancient book speak to our situation today? The Bible does not address our modern technological society. Times are changing; the Bible does not.

We will not sidestep these (and many other) difficult challenges to a biblical worldview. Essentially, these challenges concern the nature of the Bible. Does it have the authority to dictate the correct worldview? Are we being foolish in allowing it to do so? We will take up these challenges in chapter four.

However, before a person dismisses a biblical worldview, he should be honest enough to consider the Bible's claims and its comprehensive view of reality. The question is: Does a biblical worldview fit the actual world? If it does not, then it may be discarded onto the heap of misguided philosophies. If it does, then a careful search into its implications and consequences is the only reasonable response.

Where does a biblical worldview start? Two basic truths are at its heart: (1) God exists; (2) God has uniquely revealed His character and will in the Bible.

Both of these statements are more complex than they first appear. We hope to demonstrate that they can be accepted with genuine intellectual integrity. If both statements *are* true (in the sense that we will define them), then we are driven to the conclusion that the Bible holds the answers to man's basic questions and longings about life. We will allow the Bible to give us a view *of* the world by detailing the answers to the ultimate questions of life. Then we will discuss how we should allow the Bible to determine both our view *for* the world and how we ought to live *in* the world.

Obviously, not everyone agrees that the Bible should be man's guide to truth. Many worldviews claim the right to be called "the way." What are these worldviews? How does a biblical worldview compare with them? In the next chapter, we will explore the world of world-views.