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WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Is there anything you can think of which is indispensable to your personal identity? Perhaps your hometown, family, or friends come to mind. While these are important aspects of what it means to be you, they do not travel physically with you everywhere you go. They are not present during those private moments while you are sitting in your room. But one thing sticks closer to you than your own reputation: it is your worldview.

The term *worldview* has been around for a long time. First employed by philosopher Immanuel Kant, the concept of worldview (from the German word *Weltanschauung*) took on new significance for Christians with the publication of James Orr's book, *The Christian View of God and the World*. But it has only been recently that Christians have taken interest in worldview studies as an essential task in the mandate to become serious Christian thinkers.

There are two main ways in which people employ the term *worldview*. One is philosophical; the other, sociological.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEFINITION

Although numerous good definitions for *worldview* might be offered for the philosophical sense of the term, I find the late philosopher Ronald Nash's concise wording to be superior: "A worldview is a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously. . . interpret and judge reality." Notice the total scope indicated by the language. Our worldview acts upon both our conscious and unconscious impressions about everything around us.

If you have ever met someone who had a blind spot (anything from continuous body odor to an annoying personal habit), you know that we humans are not always aware of our own weaknesses. Our blind spots extend to our beliefs about reality, and since we are incapable of going it alone on our own wisdom, or even the collective wisdom of a community (with corporate blind spots), we must rely on an objective truth teller. This truth teller is God, the Creator of reality. He alone can steady our rudder in the sea of competing worldviews.

In broad terms, a worldview that is Christian examines cultural data and locates them within a pattern of belief that is consistent with the sacred text of Scripture, but also with the broader Christian intellectual tradition. In other words, whenever we encounter an idea, we ask whether the issue relates variously to how God created the world, how humans through sin have corrupted the world, or how the world through the work of Jesus Christ is in the process of being redeemed and restored.

Developing a Christian worldview is important for the Christ-follower because it tempers the way we interact with and assess the fallen world in which we live. Some Christians fall into the trap of being shocked about beliefs that secular persons express on a given issue. We must remember that worldviews serve the function of eyeglasses, helping a person to focus on the world around him in a meaningful way. Think of a trip to your local optometrist's office: you are asked to stare at a chart without the aid of corrective lenses. With each new lens, you are asked to choose either A or B. By the time you are finished, you see clearly. Without help, you may struggle to see at all.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEFINITION

The sociological definition of *worldview* recognizes that all conceptual systems are embedded in the culture. Think about the old Palmolive commercial on television: in it, a woman sits in a salon while getting her nails done. Her stylist, Madge, sits across from her, praising how wonderful Palmolive dishwashing liquid is and how gentle it is on the hands. Inevitably, the woman says to Madge, "I can't wait to try Palmolive!" Madge looks down at the woman's hands, which are immersed in a tub of liquid: "You're already soaking in it."

For all of the discussions Christians hold about "engaging culture," the reality is that long before we started thinking strategy, culture had already engaged us. Our society has a worldview all its own, which operates on our open imaginations, desires, and wills constantly. Worldviews also act like filters: they are totalizing and jealous. They are variously subtle, overt, systemic, systematic, faithful, or insidious.

A synonym for worldview is ideology. As Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, at the heart of every ideology is the following idea: "They do not know it, but they are doing it [anyway]." Ideology is unaware of its own presuppositions. Those in its sway naively believe that their way of thinking is the product of reason or science—when in fact deeply hidden background beliefs are at work.

For this reason, it is both right and wrong to speak of a "Christian worldview." If by that expression one means to say that biblical theology provides a comprehensive way of thinking and living, then yes, by all means we want to affirm the term. On the other hand, it is crucial not to confuse Christianity with being just another worldview standing alongside other culturally embedded worldviews.

As Yale scholar Lamin Sanneh has argued, whenever the question "Whose religion is Christianity?" is asked, the answer comes back: no one culture holds sway over Christianity; it transcends every time, culture, race, and nationality. In this sense, it is unique among other world religions. The gospel stands outside a culture, critiquing it with the resources of the biblical text, and always addressing its sinful desires and deepest aspirations. As theologian Harry Lee Poe observes, "Every culture has a question that only the Bible can answer. Listen for the question."

CHRISTIANS AND HOLISTIC THINKING

If you are not sensitive about the centrality of worldviews to the way people live, you will be an uninformed—and potentially dangerous—Christian evangelist. Unfortunately, too many well-meaning Christians have tried to share their faith with a non-Christian only to offend unnecessarily the person they are trying to reach. In other cases, a simple evangelistic inquiry turns ugly when the non-Christian turns out to be an articulate and intelligent defender of their own beliefs. Frankly, if you as a Christ-follower fail to understand the importance of worldviews, you might well do more harm than good.

This remark is not meant to frighten anyone away from being passionate about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. Nor am I trying to say that sharing one's faith is a task reserved only for Christian intellectuals. The gospel message is simple and clear, and it can be accepted with childlike faith. Still, every believer has a responsibility to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, a task that our Lord himself referred to as an issue of not only the heart but of the mind (Mt 22:37). Biblical worldview thinking, like discipleship, is a lifelong art that must be consistently practiced and studied, to be done well.

Worldview thinking opposes compartmentalization. There are not spiritual truths that can be divorced from daily life. Everything must be integrated into a whole. As Howard Ahmanson has so ably put it, "We worship a God who creates universes for a living. He did not set the sun, moon, and stars in their courses and then retire to go into full time Christian ministry."

Christ is Lord over everything. It is all one whole. Our job is to find out how to fit all of the pieces together in a broken world. In short, everything matters if anything matters at all. Minds awake, through faith and discipleship, can make real progress in understanding both how we should think and live in this confusing and wonderful world.

Gregory A. Thornbury