

Thinking About the Bible

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What is a Worldview?

Some of my earliest memories are of the backyard on East 3rd Street. It seemed like a huge place. When I followed my dog Timmy to the back fence, the little tile house looked miles away. That was my world, along with occasional trips to town, church, and grandparents.

There were many mysterious things in my world. I recall watching through the fence as large, noisy trucks chugged by carrying long sticks on the back. Toward the end of most days, I remember hearing a low, mournful sound in the distance. Mama would comfort me, “It’s just the mill whistle.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but it was enough to know that she knew and wasn’t afraid. I began to look forward to the sound because it meant that in a little while Daddy would come home. He would always hug my sister and me as we met him at the door. Daddy smelled like something I never smelled in the backyard. I figured it was just daddy smell. When I sat on his lap, I remember seeing little brown flakes all over his clothes. His pants had tiny holes with dark edges that mine didn’t. My little brain pondered a lot of these mysteries.

I’m not sure about the details leading up to this particular event. One day my dad put me in the car, and we went to an unfamiliar place. It was noisy. Stick trucks were everywhere. Little brown flakes were blowing into the car window onto my pants. The smell in the air was my dad’s smell, but much stronger.

Daddy pulled the car up next to a tall machine and said “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

I watched as my daddy climbed a ladder to the top. He put on a strange hat and fiery sparks began raining down the side of the machine. In a minute, he crawled down and shook a man’s hand. Suddenly, I heard

the sound again. The mill whistle—except it was so loud! Then another loud sound... I watched as sticks like the ones on the trucks started rising one by one into the huge building.

Something incredible had happened. My daddy probably didn't notice. When we got back home, there was no change that my mama could have seen. Yet within my little brain, a coherent worldview was starting to form. All those random, mysterious puzzle pieces of my life were fitting together. For the first time, I was beginning to see my world as a "big picture." Things made sense...

When I saw the trucks the next day, I knew they were taking trees to the mill. The mill whistle? Not so mysterious. It comes from where my daddy works. When he came home, smelling of sawdust, I could touch the holes burned in his pants and ask, "Did you fix machines today?" I could carry on an intelligent conversation with him! Even more important, I had a framework for new information. When Mama said Daddy had to work late, I understood that a lot of machines must be broken. When I saw a tree being cut down on TV, I could predict that it would be put on a truck and be taken to a mill. The world started to make more and more sense.

My worldview has continued to develop for several decades now. Each new factoid of truth I learn is a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I go merrily through life picking up a piece here and another piece there, placing them securely in my idea bag. Over the years, I've amassed quite a collection of information. It's a hodgepodge of data about philosophy, TV, theology, friends, science, society, ethics, history, and such.

As an adult, I have enough information in my bag to live an engaging independent life. However, there are different ways to deploy the data. When a new question/challenge/need arises, I could simply sort through the random pieces until I find the appropriate truth. In theory, this would work, and it's very likely a good metaphor for how most people process their world.

But I can think of a better way... Let's take the pieces out of the idea bag and lay them out on a table. It would be great to have a puzzle box top with a picture, but let's say we don't. My grandmother taught me the strategy of connecting the edge pieces first then looking for same-color pieces. So, the puzzle is beginning to take shape. And, I'm learning an

important concept—the pieces “fit” in one way better than in others. In fact, with the not-so-good fits I have to mangle and distort a piece if it fits at all.

As I find more fits, I’m becoming quite pleased with my puzzle-assembling skills. But something much more subtle and profound is occurring. If someone were to say, “That piece doesn’t go there,” I would quickly retort “No way, it has to! Look at the way it locks in place perfectly with the other pieces and how the pattern matches. How could it not be in the right place?” A context is emerging. I’ll fight for my puzzle accomplishments! It isn’t just the information of the pieces, it’s also their connections to other pieces. *Connected pieces have a contextual “certainty” not associated with individual pieces.*

After adding a few more pieces I have an epiphany... I know what the picture is! “It’s the Mona Lisa!”

Suddenly, the bag of random pieces makes sense. There is a full context. My ability to process and understand information has reached a milestone. That piece with a nose—it has to go here. And that piece of a mountain—there. I even have predictive power: “The piece that’s missing on the left side of Mona’s face has to have an eye on it...”

And perhaps even more important, I know what *doesn’t* belong. Suppose some sadistic puzzle-packer had slipped in a few pieces from a lemon bowl still-life puzzle. No problem. I can easily see that those bright yellow pieces would never fit the context of the Mona Lisa. A worldview is kind of like that.

As a child gaining new puzzle pieces each day, my task was usually manageable. Most of my incoming knowledge bits were practical—how hard I can press a crayon before it breaks, not to take food from Timmy while he was eating, ants walk in a line on the driveway. I even started adding my own pieces. Does a red crayon break easier than a blue? If I put a bread crumb in the ant line, do they respond? All of this data was allowing my reality to make sense.

But then I grew up... Now, my media-rich world feeds me bits of information by the trainload—with more trainloads available. And a lot of the data is more subjective. Some of the information bits are ideas, beliefs, and mental pictures. Occasionally, someone might show me one of their puzzle pieces and it’s just weird! Even some of the pieces I

collect have to be discarded because they so obviously don't belong in my picture.¹

Everyone has informational puzzle pieces. They may still be in the idea bag or in some stage of “fittedness.” There may be crucial pieces missing. There may be pieces that don't seem to fit. There may be pieces that are awkwardly forced onto other pieces. The bottom line is... *When the context is known, the individual pieces make more sense.*

So, how does all this play out in a real-life worldview? I'll describe a typical student sitting in my biology class...

The Adventures of Mary Metanarrative

Mary is a freshman journalism major. She has attended a Bible-teaching church all her life and has good Christian parents. Mary is a believer but has had little organized training in biblical doctrines other than weekly sermons. Nevertheless, her idea bag is bulging with information, including many good biblical and philosophical truths.

Mary's BFFs are all generally nice people, ranging in belief from ambivalent to confused agnostic to atheist. They've dropped a variety of puzzle pieces into Mary's idea bag. BFF1 used to be in the church youth group with Mary. A few years ago, he became interested in Eastern mysticism through a martial arts friend. Mary was impressed by his newfound diligence and enthusiasm. He says it's because the Universal Power gives him clearer insight than he used to have. He's at one with the cosmos—no more guilt-baggage like sin and penitence.

Just last summer, Mary helped BFF2 through a very difficult time. Her unplanned pregnancy changed everything. Mary spent long hours talking with her. At one point, she was on the brink of suicide. The school counselor was quick to inform her of an alternative. Disaster averted—BFF2's life is back on track now. She's Mary's roommate now, aiming at a promising career in medicine. Although she would never make the

¹ Some may say that this is a type of stubbornness or closed-mindedness. I suppose that's the negative take on it. Still, that's what a worldview does; it allows concepts that fit to be held and those that don't to be rejected. But that's why it's important to form ones worldview intentionally and with good evaluation. A functional worldview will allow for thoughtful and informed rethinking of various elements as appropriate.

same decisions BFF2 did, Mary feels that in her roommate's case—well, who was she to judge someone else?

The professor in Mary's gen psych class has an interesting take on the human mind. He believes our thoughts and emotions, everything mental, is simply the accumulated electrochemical reactions that have allowed us to survive as a species climbing the phylogenetic tree. In the last session, the professor scoffed at the archaic ideas of a soul and the afterlife. Mary had heard these ideas before, but now they seemed to be more reasonable.

Tonight, after she finished up her assignments, Mary opened her idea bag. She saw the new puzzle pieces piled onto all the others. Digging around to the bottom, she found some pieces that were similar to these more recent ones...

Mary found an old piece from second-grade Bible school. It had God as a personal, transcendent being who loved her enough to die for her. She held it up next to the Eastern mysticism piece; they were very different. Which one is right? She pondered a few moments then dropped them back into the bag.

Mary noticed another old piece regarding how humans are special, formed in God's image. "Which God?" she wondered. "The one from church or the Universal Power? And if humans are special, then is it okay to dispose of one? Maybe the professor was right. If our minds are just chemical reactions, humans are not that special after all."

She spent a lot of time the next few days sorting through her idea bag. Mary would pull out one idea piece, consider it, then put it back. So many questions. So many different ideas. So much confusion.

Later in the semester, Mary was asked by a new friend to attend a seminar at her church presented by a Christian apologist. The speaker explained the nature of the God of the Bible in a way Mary had never experienced. The lady explained absolute truth, and how logically the concept fits with the nature of God. She left the seminar still filled with questions, but with a new perspective on how the idea of Creator God meshes so logically with the biblical ideas of truth.

During quiet times over the next few weeks, Mary would open her idea bag and remove certain puzzle pieces to contemplate them. One day she took out the human mind piece again. "If my mind is just chemistry,

then why do I have such a strong sense of right and wrong? How did these “rules” get into my head anyway? How do mere molecules *feel things*? Wouldn’t it be more logical for a transcendent *Mind* to create another mind rather than believing it to be a result of blind molecular collisions?”

Some of the puzzle pieces fit! Mary is beginning to grow a simple, yet functional worldview.

She continues to ponder... “And if that’s true, wouldn’t the idea of a personal, loving God make more sense than simply a vague force of some kind?”

In psychology class, the professor started in on how wrong it is to defund fetal stem cell research. He claims that so many lives could be saved by it. Mary knows nothing about stem cells, but something doesn’t sound right. She pulled out the image-of-God piece again and analyzed it. For a moment, she wanted to raise her hand and confront the professor but decided against it for now. Still, she wondered, “But if it’s important to save lives, why destroy other innocent lives to do it? And BTW, Prof, why are you even considering *right* or *wrong*? If your brain is just chemistry, how does it know the difference? Why does it know? You believe in ‘truths’ and not a truth-giver?” Mary isn’t merely reasoning randomly, she’s reasoning about the relationships of ideas to other ideas.

As Mary’s worldview develops, her idea bag will get smaller and smaller. Ideally, all the pieces will eventually end up on the table. Some will be fit into her growing worldview jigsaw puzzle. Some will be examined, evaluated, and discarded. Mary will pick up new pieces for the rest of her life. Now, however, she can assess them quickly and intentionally. “Do they fit with what’s already connected? Should I perhaps remove a piece because this one fits better? And what about that empty spot? Does my worldview have missing pieces I should find?”

All of this is obviously a simplified model of a worldview, but I believe it presents a good starting point for understanding its importance in decision-making.

The Anatomy of a Worldview

Discussion of a Christian or biblical worldview is typically avoided, as are many other “academic” concepts. This is unfortunate since the idea

of a worldview is quite sensible and straightforward. Moreover, one's decision-making capability depends on the type and state of the worldview that informs it. The reason for including the topic in this book is that our thinking regarding paranormal phenomena will be housed in a worldview (whether functional or still developing). My premise throughout has been that a biblical worldview best explains the phenomena. Also, my contention is that a Story (metanarrative) is an effective delivery method for complex ideas, and as such is quite compatible with the concept of a worldview. Sire wrote...

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.²

James Orr was one of the earliest proponents of the Christian worldview,³ arguing that Christians possessed a unique *weltan-schauung* (worldview).⁴ He believed that one who commits to Christ is committing to more than simply a heart devotion. The move necessarily includes “a view of God, ... man, ... sin, ... redemption, ... purpose of God in creation and history, [and] human destiny, found only in Christianity.”⁵ Orr organized the five belief components into a set of propositions. He believed a worldview should address a person’s...

² James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), 13.

³ The terms *Christian worldview* and *biblical worldview* are sometime used interchangeably (as in this book). I consider *biblical* more accurate and intend it to mean from a literal, fundamentalist perspective. A simply *Christian* worldview *could* encompass diverse, incompatible views. There would be some significant difference among, Evangelical, Charismatic, Mainline, and Catholic worldviews.

⁴ Orr studied the 19th-century German philosophers who had delved deeply into the idea of a *weltanschauung*. They believed this was an important framework for understand the many related factors that influence decision-making.

⁵ James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1897), 4.

1. Theology – Belief in a supreme being(s) or no supreme being.
2. Philosophy – How we interpret reality, knowledge, wisdom, rationality, purpose, and logic.
3. Ethics – Our method of determining good or bad, righteous or evil.
4. Biology – Our view of ourselves—what we are, where we came from, what we’ll become.
5. History – What is the story in which we find ourselves.

There are other good ways to approach the idea of a worldview. Anderson provides four questions that can be used in identifying a worldview...

1. What is our nature?
2. What is our world?
3. What is our problem?
4. What is our end?⁶

He goes on to say that each question must be considered in light of the others...

Answers to the first question have grave implications for the remaining questions; answers to the second question often entail necessary responses to the other question, and so forth. Hence, one’s worldview contains a holistic, wrapped-up-together set of answers to all the worldview questions.⁷

There is some disagreement as to which ideologies rise to the level of a worldview. I try not to get too caught up in strict definitions of the concept. In my view, I would consider such ideologies as Judeo-Christian, Islamic, New Age, Marxist, and naturalist to be worldviews.

⁶ Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 19-21.

⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

I believe one of the most influential contemporary worldviews is *postmodernism*.⁸ (Or possibly as a teacher I see it as predominant in my students.) A postmodern worldview attempts to throw off absolute truth, postulating that truth is nonexistent or unknowable. Even without the terminology, most can recognize postmodernism’s signature...

“Openness” (without the restraint of reason) and “tolerance” that rejects all moral absolutes are the mandates of postmodern ideology.⁹

In contrast to the thrust of this book, postmodernism denies that an actual metanarrative is useful or that it even exists; an overarching “story” implies too much truth. The biblical worldview is in opposition to much of postmodern philosophy, but it also threatens other ideologies...

...postmodernism taken to its logical conclusion not only leads to epistemological skepticism and moral relativism but can also undermine the academic study of almost any subject.¹⁰

⁸ As opposed to the Modernist worldview, brought about by the Enlightenment. Modernists believed that science and knowledge would eventually solve the world’s problems and elevate humans toward perfection. Also, postmodernism is considered by some to be an emerging worldview, not quite fully developed as of yet.

⁹ Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, “The Postmodern Challenge,” www.equip.org, 10 Jun 2009, Accessed 31 Jul 2020.

¹⁰ Anderson et al., *An Introduction*, 262.