

Feature Article: JAF6365

## WORLDVIEWS: THINKING AND LIVING

by Winfried Corduan

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 36, number 05 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

### SYNOPSIS

Imagine a conversation in which three friends—a Christian, a Buddhist, and a materialist—discuss the nature of a flower they are admiring. It turns out that even though on one level they see the same flower, on a deeper level, they interpret what they see very differently: as a creature made by God, as an illusion that conceals ultimate emptiness, and as nothing but atoms and molecules. These different approaches represent different worldviews.

Even though we acquire worldviews initially with the rest of our culture, and even though it is not possible to live rationally without a worldview that pervades all thought, it is still possible not only to change certain beliefs within our worldview but also to change from one worldview to another. Such changes may be deliberate, but it may also be the case that a person merely drifts away from the worldview he claims to hold and incorporates elements from another worldview into what he believes. Thus a person may claim to be a Christian but manifest non-Christian beliefs and attitudes. The Christian worldview is particularly vulnerable to such undermining because it is not just about “seeing” the world correctly but also includes living properly based on God’s actions for us in history and the response He requires of us. Still, the Christian worldview, as uncompromising as it may seem to many people, is also the worldview that embodies true redemption.

---

If you would, imagine a friendly discussion among three acquaintances who were admiring a stunningly beautiful flower in a botanical garden. If asked, they would identify themselves as a Buddhist, a Christian, and a materialist (someone who rules out God and all other spiritual realities and believes that only material things exist).

“It’s a lotus flower,” the Buddhist commented. “It teaches us that, even though our thoughts may start out as sullied and polluted as this water, if you live correctly, your mind can emerge just as pure and undefiled as this flower.”

The Christian chimed in. "Interesting metaphor; though I believe that we can be cleansed only by Christ. Still, I first of all recognize that this flower is something created by God and that it reflects the attributes of its maker."

"We're all agreed that we're looking at a beautiful flower here," the materialist responded. "But in reality this is just a collection of molecules playing their determined role for this species of plant. What we consider to be 'beautiful' must represent an aspect of nature that has been advantageous to us in human evolution. Speaking analytically, we and the flower are molecules sharing adjacent space for the moment, and some of our molecules are interacting with those of the flower. That's all there is to it."

The Christian was not impressed. "It seems to me you're going pretty far out on a limb. I would have to say that, as far as I'm concerned, neither this flower nor we humans would even exist were it not for the Creator who made it all."

The idea of a Creator did not resonate well with either the Buddhist or the materialist. The Buddhist explained,

"Actually, we can't say that the flower has been created at all because in reality it does not even exist. It has no intrinsic essence, and so, ultimately, there is no real flower. It is an illusion arising out of Emptiness."

We will leave the conversation there.

## TWO WAYS OF SEEING THINGS

The question comes up as to what each person actually perceived. Did they each see the same flower, or did each one of them see a different object altogether? It is probably safe to conclude that:

- On a superficial level, they saw the same flower, or they could not have been chatting about it.
- However, when they explained what they saw, they gave it three radically different descriptions. The Christian saw a beautiful object created by God. The materialist saw a temporary aggregate of molecules, depending on so-called laws that were ultimately grounded in chance. The Buddhist saw a beautiful illusion camouflaging the Emptiness that is really everywhere.

So which of the three saw the "real" nature of the flower? Here is, of course, where the shoe rubs the toe. Each of them provided an interpretation that was incompatible with that of his other two friends. One might imagine that each of them was wearing a set of different spectacles, and their vision was mediated by a filter built into them. Consequently, the Christian, the materialist, and the Buddhist understood only what they saw according to the focus allowed by their lenses.

Each of them is going through life with different conceptual frameworks that guide their perceptions and conclusions. It has become common usage to refer to such a

framework as one's *worldview*. Clearly, in order to decide who has the correct understanding of the flower, we need to take their worldviews into consideration.

## THE NATURE OF WORLDVIEWS

Let us look at a number of common features of worldviews.

1. *The fact that we think within the context of worldviews is unavoidable.* Some people think that they hold all of their beliefs in a purely neutral, objective way without any surrounding framework. But such vaunted neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Whenever we run across a new claim to truth, chances are that we automatically evaluate it in terms of whether it fits into our worldview and discard most of them because we have neither the time nor the means to check them out individually. What chaos our minds would be in otherwise! A worldview may simply pass as common sense or conventional wisdom in someone's immediate context, and, thus, he may not recognize that he has one.
2. *Initially, we acquire worldviews socially and culturally.* Please note the word "initially," and let me emphasize the important distinction between the source of a worldview and the truth of a worldview. For example, since I am a Christian, someone could ask me why I hold to a Christian worldview. This question is ambiguous. If it seeks to identify the source of my worldview, the answer is that I learned it from my parents under the influence of my early surroundings. Those were the sources of my belief system; their authority simultaneously implied that it was true. Now, many decades later, the source of my worldview hasn't changed, but the reasons why I think it is true have changed. After much thinking and exploration of other worldviews, my reasons for considering Christianity to be true now have little to do with parental or cultural influence.
3. *Worldviews are all-pervasive.* At least in theory, I do not hold any beliefs that are not affected by my worldview. As we saw in our imaginary conversation, even something as simple as admiring a flower is channeled by the categories of my worldview. How much more will a worldview influence more complex matters, such as relationships, society, politics, or ethics! None of our beliefs are neutral; they are all affected by our worldviews, even when they don't show up on the surface.
4. *Worldviews can be discerned on various levels.* It is easy to tell the difference between Christian, Buddhist, or materialist worldviews. On the other hand, two Buddhists may share the same fundamental worldview, but differ in a few relatively minor matters. Similarly, we can talk about the worldview of "theism" and contrast it easily with the worldview of "atheism." Then again, there are some significant differences between Christian theism and Islamic theism.<sup>1</sup> How tightly we group worldviews depends on the level of our investigation. Sorting them by fundamental religious commitments is frequently the criterion of choice, as it is in this essay.

5. *Beliefs within a worldview have different rankings.* Even though all beliefs are colored by their worldview and should hang together logically, it is also true that some beliefs will be more crucial than others. In our imaginary conversation, the Christian, Buddhist, and materialist presumably would place, respectively, the existence of God, the Emptiness of all that appears to exist, and the purely material nature of all things at the core of their worldviews. These core beliefs are then connected to other beliefs, which in turn link up with further beliefs of slightly lesser importance and so on, until we have a complete web of interconnected beliefs, with the crucial ones at the center, and the fringe constituted by beliefs that are relatively inconsequential for the whole.
  
6. *Worldviews can be changed.* Beliefs on the fringe of a worldview are most liable to change. Thus, for example, a Christian can switch from one denomination to another and change some beliefs in the process without causing a major shift in the entire worldview. But can a person change worldviews? We know how difficult it often is for two people with different worldviews to communicate on a serious level, let alone to persuade each other of certain beliefs. A worldview endows us with beliefs that we consider to be self-evidently true but that are dubious to someone else. Our words may conceal meanings unknown to another person, and, consequently, an attempted dialogue may turn into two parallel monologues. Nevertheless, just as we have experienced such gridlock, we have also seen people change their entire worldviews for rational reasons. It is important to avoid the trap of thinking of worldviews as mental prisons out of which it becomes impossible to escape. Philosophical overanalyzing may lead us to conclude that two people with different worldviews cannot communicate with each other, and that changing one's worldview on rational grounds is completely precluded. Still, we have seen it happen regularly. Theravada Buddhists become Mahayana Buddhists; Buddhists become Christians; materialists become Buddhists, and so forth.

Some thinkers have allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by the overarching nature of worldviews, thinking of them as mandatory ways of seeing reality, imposed by those who hold the greatest power in a society. Then whether a specific belief is to be considered true means nothing more than asking whether it is authorized in that particular culture. There is supposedly no way of stepping outside of a system to test beliefs or systems. Many of these writers have spent a lifetime attempting to convince others of this approach, an endeavor that cannot help but strike us as self-defeating. The only way in which I can explain this phenomenon is by assuming that, like the rest of us, they really still know that people can be persuaded of the truth of particular beliefs and sometimes even of the truth of a different worldview from the one with which they were raised.

7. *We can test worldviews by certain criteria.* Even though this is not the focal point of this essay, it would not do to avoid mentioning briefly how a change in worldviews is

possible. Even though all beliefs are affected by one's worldview, we can stipulate some basic overlap in what people experience. All three of our initial conversation partners agreed that they perceived a beautiful flower. Now the question comes up: which worldview makes the most sense of the common, albeit superficially shared, experience? We can ask questions as to the worldview's relevance to other basic experiences, its logical consistency and coherence, and—very importantly—whether it is possible to live according to the principles of that worldview. Without being able to go into further details, please let me merely state my conclusion. I find that both nontheistic conceptions (that true reality is Emptiness or that it is mere matter) fail on all three of those criteria. The worldview that sees truth as conforming to reality as created by God is the most plausible.

### **IDENTIFYING ONE'S WORLDVIEW**

Someone reading these lines may react by thinking that this is all very well, but that he (or she) is clueless as to what his own worldview actually is. As we said above, oftentimes one's worldview is not apparent because it seems to be nothing but common sense. But also, people may come to a point of recognizing that they have slowly drifted away from the worldview of their upbringing, and even though they may still say that they hold the same worldview, they are aware that it is not really theirs any longer. We must acknowledge that many people are not even aware of the "worldview drift" that they have undergone.

Let us say that someone claims to be a Christian and contemplates the lotus flower with which we began. What does he see? Does he really still see a piece of divine creation that reflects on its creator, or might he say, as I've heard many times, "Well, it really is a combination of atoms that came together by evolutionary processes. From a posture of faith, I can say that there must be a 'God' behind this process, but those two perspectives really have nothing to do with each other."

Or maybe, "For me, I see a flower created by God, though other people may see something different, perhaps just a perception in their mind. Whatever they truly believe to be there, that's what's there for them."

Obviously, for such people, the Christian worldview, which they have confessed to hold, has been reconstructed in some way so that an incompatible set of beliefs has been tacked onto it. Let me identify a little more clearly what I have in mind when I stipulate a Christian worldview.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Dynamic Worldview`**

To a certain extent, all worldviews give us an inventory of what we can call the "furniture" of the universe and how it is arranged. By that I mean that a major component of any worldview is to postulate what is truly real and how the various aspects of this reality interact with each other. This feature is easily seen in the worldview of a materialist, for whom (1) only physical matter is real, and (2) the various clumps of matter in the cosmos relate to each other according to the generalizations that we call natural "laws." The biological organisms on planet Earth are exceptional only

insofar as the laws also include evolutionary principles. For a Buddhist of the dominant schools, there is no furniture in the room; in fact, there is no room, and even the thought that “all is Emptiness” is already Emptiness.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the point of the worldview is to grasp what actually exists.

A Christian worldview is essentially different. The first two that we mentioned are cognitive at heart, by which I mean that to hold on to those worldviews the fundamental requirement is essentially to recognize certain truths about the world. I don't mean to say that doing so is easy, as the disciplines of Buddhism demonstrate, but the goal is straight-forward, and it is first of all a way of thinking. However, to hold to a Christian worldview requires more than being able to grasp what belongs to the “furniture” of the universe. There is an indispensable dynamic side to it. Let me explain.

First of all, there is no question as to what constitutes reality in a Christian worldview. The most fundamental reality is, of course, God, the infinite Creator of all else. He is transcendent (beyond the world) and immanent (active in the world). He depends on no other entity for His existence or His properties, and He possesses all of His attributes without limitations. Thus He is omnipresent, omnipotent, all-good, and so on. He has created a universe that is real but is limited and dependent on Him for its existence. His creation includes human beings, who reflect His image and are responsible to Him. We need not extend this list for our present purposes. Second, a Christian worldview is what Jim Sire calls an “open worldview”<sup>4</sup> (not to be confused with “open theism”<sup>5</sup>).

This expression signifies that in the Christian paradigm, God has given human beings a will and a capacity for creative actions. God certainly knows all that will happen in the future, but His plan includes the significant actions of His creatures. In a Christian worldview, our actions matter.

Third, a Christian worldview must also include God's actions. It focuses on what is real, but also it embodies a story, both on cosmic and personal levels, in which God has disclosed Himself to us. It is a story in which human beings became alienated from God through sin and God reached out to them by taking on human nature and reconciling them to Himself by Christ's death on the cross and resurrection. The story continues on a personal level insofar as human beings partake of this reconciliation by believing what God has done.

The Christian worldview is far more therefore than recognition of the “furniture” of the universe. It is not just about what is, but also about what was and what will be. It includes the facts of God's acts in history and our own acts in response to Him. And, thus, to hold to a Christian worldview also entails that we live out the implications of what we believe to be real.

### **Living Consistently**

To put it bluntly, one cannot *rationaly* claim to hold to a Christian worldview and then act according to the tenets of another worldview. Thus one cannot logically believe that living beings are the creatures of God, representing His nature, and treat them as purely physical collocations of molecules. One cannot claim that God is the supreme reality

and then consider physical processes to be all-determinative for what occurs in the world. It is not coherent to proclaim the sovereignty of God and then act as though human beings, whether collectively or individually, are free to make up the rules as to what is right or wrong, true or false. The Christian worldview ascribes significant value to human actions, but that fact does not imply that God has established a democracy. God has reconciled us to Himself as His creatures, but that does not give us equal standing with Him. We still must worship Him and live by His Word, not the other way around.

The Christian worldview does not just represent one particular choice of many available ways of seeing the world. To see the world in a truly Christian way is not only to see reality but also to live in line with that reality. Many a person claims to hold to a Christian worldview, but is living according to a very different one in which, say, the alleged realities that God has revealed are to be taken as merely symbolic. Others may pay lip service to God as moral authority but then decide which of the principles that God has revealed are applicable to us today. We are forced to conclude that such folks do not, at this time, truly accept the worldview that they claim for themselves.

Let us close on a positive note. The Christian message is called the “gospel,” the “good news.” In the same way, we can call the Christian worldview the “good” worldview, even though the emphasis on consistent living that I just brought up may seem negative at first. The reason is this: the Christian worldview reckons with the negative aspects of reality without minimizing them, but doing so also allows for the reality of God’s actions that overcome the negative to stand out all the more clearly. By not shying away from acknowledging what is presently bad in the world, we also gain assurance of victory over the bad. We can look with open eyes at sin and evil as real, and then thankfully acknowledge the reality that, by His grace, sin and evil are overcome. This worldview is open to truth and allows for a life that one can live authentically.

**Winfried Corduan**, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of philosophy and religion at Taylor University.

---

## NOTES

- 1 See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, chap. 2 (Christian theism) and chap. 10 (Islamic theism) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
- 2 Expanded greatly in Sire, *Universe*, 25–46.
- 3 As brought out dramatically in the *Heart Sutra* of Buddhism.
- 4 Sire, *Universe*, 32.
- 5 “Open theism” is the belief that God intentionally has closed off His knowledge of the future. It is exemplified in Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).