

[What is a Worldview? \(marketfaith.org\)](http://marketfaith.org)

Recently I had an interesting interaction with a person who is involved in trying to start a new religion. It has been an fascinating process in many ways, but there has been one element that has been rather frustrating for me. When I shared with him the Christian understanding of God's grace, he simply could not bring himself to imagine that God would operate that way.

It is not that he is incapable of understanding it. In fact, I spelled it out to him several times in very basic terms, and he has repeated it back to me. But his repetition of my words didn't seem to sink down to his core understanding.

His mental conception of God simply won't allow for the concept of grace. In his theology, when a person dies, each individual is judged by God for all his wrongdoing. With that judgment, a person is sentenced to spend an appropriate amount of time in hell to pay for the sins he committed on earth. Following that sentence, the person then goes to heaven to spend some time there based on the good he did on earth. Finally, each person is reincarnated on another world and repeats the process. The very idea that God would not punish every sin and reward every good deed simply does not register with him.

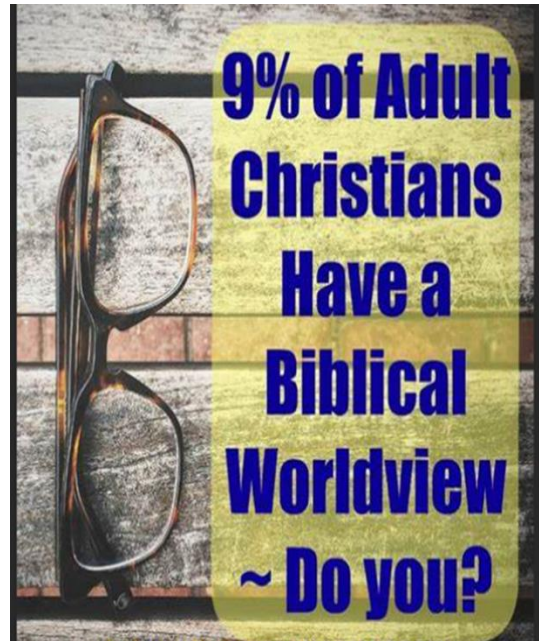
So every time he tried to summarize my Christian faith he got mixed up. He couldn't seem to help but filter my beliefs through his own understanding of what God is like. The result, every time, was a total misrepresentation of my beliefs.

Now if this was not so serious it would be comical. And the really strange thing is, he doesn't seem to be able to understand what his problem is. His view of God is so pervasive in his mind that he even kept telling me that I believed things that I told him I didn't believe. And even when I corrected him, he would come back and tell me I was wrong, and that I didn't believe what I told him I believed. His understanding of the way reality is structured is so strong in his mind, that he cannot imagine that it could exist another way. When confronted with another way of thinking, it simply goes right over his head.

This example illustrates the pervasive nature of worldview. Essentially, it is the way an individual understands the structure of reality. It is so fundamental to the way we view our lives that most don't even realize there are other possibilities, if they don't deliberately take the time to study it.

### **A Set of Glasses**

Let me give an illustration of how this works. A worldview is like a pair of glasses.



Typically when we look through glasses, we are not really interested in the properties of the glasses themselves. Rather we are interested in what we see through them.

But what if the glasses themselves had properties which created a distortion? At first thought, you might think that you would recognize the distortion and take it into account. But that is not necessarily true. Suppose you had worn a particular pair of glasses all your life which had a blue tint and had never seen the world without your tinted glasses. In that case everything would look normal to you. You would not even realize that the colors you were seeing were distorted. In fact, you would believe that what you saw was normal and that everyone else saw colors the same way you did. Even as you talked with others about the colors you were looking at, you would both be using the same words and think that the two of you were seeing and talking about the same thing, but you wouldn't be. And as you talked, there would probably be times when things didn't quite seem right, but you couldn't imagine that the difference was real, so you just let it pass.

Worldview is your belief glasses. It is what you believe about God, the universe, mankind, life after death, knowledge, morality and human history. People with different belief systems from you actually have completely different ways of understanding these things. And when you talk to people with different beliefs, you can actually be using the same vocabulary yet have a completely different understanding of what you are talking about.

### **The Basic Worldviews**

There are a number of ways to look at worldview, but as we break it down to its most foundational components, we can divide it into four unique ways of understanding reality. Each of these four are so different that they actually contradict one another. The four are Naturalism, Animism, Far Eastern Thought and Theism.

Naturalism is the belief that only material reality exists. There is no God or spiritual existence. The practical implication of Naturalism is that morality becomes strictly man made. Man, himself, is the only known being in the universe which is able to make moral distinctions and must decide for himself how to structure life. Naturalistic belief systems include existential-ism, secular humanism, atheism, much of postmodernism and others.

Animism sees reality to have separate material and spiritual parts which interact in a symbiotic relationship. There are spiritual gods who manifest themselves in physical nature and are capable of causing good or evil to happen to humans. It is up to people in the physical world to perform the necessary rites and ceremonies to take care of the needs of the gods. Those who do right are treated well by the gods and those who falter find things going wrong. The practical implication of this worldview is that people tend to live completely "in the present" for the purpose of appeasing and manipulating the gods. Animistic religions include such belief systems as Shinto, Wicca, Voodoo and various other nature based religions.

Far Eastern Thought understands reality to be a totally impersonal cosmos which is moving toward unity. Though it is impersonal, everything is understood to be a part of everything else – god is everything and everything is god. All of material reality is seen to be an illusion, as the actual reality is the unity of all. The practical implication is a passivism which asserts that we can't objectively know anything so there is no need to get agitated about anything. Far Eastern systems include Hinduism, Buddhism, elements of New Age and others.

Theism is the belief that there is a God. This God may be either personal or impersonal. Theistic systems usually depend on some kind of revelation as their authority source, and the way things ought to be are prescribed by a written revelation or a prophet. The practical implication of Theism is that adherents should work to fulfill the morality specified by the authority. Theistic belief systems include such traditions as Christianity, Judaism and Islam along with many spin-offs such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism.

### **In Our Day**

You, yourself, understand life by looking through the lens of one (or a combination) of these worldviews. If you do not understand the nature of worldview, you will end up doing what the man in my illustration above did when you are confronted with a belief system that is outside of your own. You will try to understand it based on your own worldview core which will prevent you from being able to come to a complete understanding.

It used to be that American culture was much more homogenous than it is now. Almost everyone saw reality through a Theistic set of glasses – more specifically, through a Judeo-Christian worldview. But that is no longer the case. There are many more worldviews represented now. On top of that, postmodernism has become very pervasive and even many of those who outwardly follow a particular worldview will assert, at the same time, that every view is just as valid as every other view.

In our day, if we are truly interested in fulfilling the commission that Christ gave us, it is essential to not only know our own beliefs, but to understand the worldview foundations of all beliefs. When we do, we will be able to share our faith with anybody. If we don't, we will become totally confused when we interact with those who have a different faith and our witness will fall short of its potential.

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