

What in the World is a Worldview?

January 1, 2007 By **Kenneth R. Samples**

I believe deeply that "all truth is God's truth." As an RTB scholar I have a great passion to help people understand and see the truth and relevance of Christianity's truth-claims. <http://www.reasons.org/articles/what-in-the-world-is-a-worldview>

Everybody has one. A person may be educated or uneducated, liberal or conservative, rich or poor, nonbelieving or God-fearing, but all people act and live in certain ways because they are guided by particular worldviews. Given its importance, just what exactly is a worldview?

In the simplest terms, a worldview may be defined as how one sees life and the world at large. In this manner it can be compared to a pair of glasses.¹ How a person makes sense of the world depends upon that person's "vision," so to speak. The interpretive "lens" helps people make sense of life and comprehend the world around them. Sometimes the lens brings clarity, and other times it can distort reality.

Derived from the German term *Weltanschauung*,² the word "worldview" refers to the cluster of beliefs a person holds about the most significant concepts of life—such as God, the cosmos, knowledge, values, humanity, and history. These beliefs (which may in reality be right or wrong or a combination thereof, not unlike the visual clarity or distortion given by glasses) form a big picture, a general outlook, or a grand perspective on life and the world.

In more technical terms, a worldview forms a mental structure that organizes one's basic or ultimate beliefs. This framework supplies a comprehensive view of what a person considers real, true, rational, good, valuable, and beautiful. In this vein, philosopher Ronald Nash defines a worldview as "a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality."³

Similarly, philosophers Norman Geisler and William Watkins describe a worldview as "an interpretive framework through which or by which one makes sense out of the data of life and the world."⁴ Worldview perspectives involve much more than merely sets of intellectual beliefs, but a basic conceptual system is critical. Rather than a disconnected or disparate group of unrelated beliefs, a carefully examined and reflective worldview consists of a network of interconnected ideas that form a unified whole.

This system of beliefs then responds to the big questions of life, focusing on issues central to human concern. These issues especially include thoughts about the human predicament: Why is man the way he is? Why does he face the challenges he does? Such questions explore how human beings derive meaning, purpose, and significance.

Philosopher Michael Palmer explains: "Through our worldview, we determine priorities, explain our relationship to God and fellow human beings, assess the meaning of events, and justify our actions."⁵ A person's worldview provides a general context for life, including a vision of what one considers authentically real.⁶

Life's Road Map

More than just an interpretive lens, a worldview perspective shapes, influences, and generally directs a person's entire life. Because people behave as they believe, their worldviews guide the development of the values that inform their decisions and actions.

Living a well-balanced life based on realistic values requires thinking about basic and critical questions. When a worldview attempts to answer them, it functions like a chart or plan used to navigate through the journey of life (though potential flaws in the plans must be kept in mind). A worldview can be seen as a "road map" that supplies directions that guide a person's life decisions.

Therefore, a well-thought-out course or worldview needs to answer twelve ultimate concerns that philosophers identify as "the big questions of life:"⁷ (see sidebar). The answers given to these inquiries not only provide focus and purpose in life, but they can also (as a system) be tested for logical coherence, correspondence to reality, explanatory power and scope, and internal and external livability.

The Big Twelve

A viable worldview must offer adequate answers to these questions

Ultimate Reality	What kind of God, if any, actually exists?
External Reality	Is there anything beyond the cosmos?
Knowledge	What can be known, and how can anyone know it?
Origin	Where did I come from?
Identity	Who am I?
Location	Where am I?
Morals	How should I live?
Values	What should I consider of great worth?
Predicament	What is humanity's fundamental problem?
Resolution	How can humanity's problem be solved?
Past / Present	What is the meaning and direction of history?
Destiny	Will I survive the death of my body and, if so, in what state?

References:

1. See Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook on World Views*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 11-12; and Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 17-18.
2. For a thorough historical and philosophical analysis of the term *Wweltanschauung* (worldview), see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
3. Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 24.
4. Geisler and Watkins, *Worlds Apart*, 11.
5. Michael D. Palmer, comp. and ed., *Elements of a Christian Worldview* (Springfield, MO: Logion, 1998), 24.
6. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics For a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 4.
7. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 35; David S. Dockery and Gregory Alan Thornbury, eds., *Shaping a Christian Worldview: The Foundation of Christian Higher Education* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 3.