

Worldview Matters

A Series of Reflections by Worldview Resource Group

If Everything is Worldview Then Nothing is Worldview

By Mike Matthews

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In recent years the term *worldview* has sparked significant discussion among some mission agencies with whom Worldview Resource Group works. Most of those involved in these discussions agree their understanding of why people think and act the way they do has been furthered. Most are also excited by the idea that understanding a people's worldview gives powerful insights for helping people think and act biblically.

In the ongoing dialogue, it will be beneficial to fine-tune the understanding and usage of the term *worldview*. The concept is too crucial to be misunderstood. After all, words matter, definitions matter, and understanding matters.

What does the word *worldview* really mean? You may have heard the term used loosely as a synonym for culture, personal opinion, or personal experiences. Perhaps you have heard people say things like:

“So you are a conservative. That's your worldview. Mine is different. And that's why I am a liberal.”

Or, “Ah, now I finally see it. I have been living all these years with an abuse worldview.”

Such statements indicate a need for further clarity. For if we are not careful, many things can be labelled as “a worldview.” If we use the word *worldview* in place of culture, or race, or opinion, or experience, or whatever, then we run the risk of losing the point of talking about worldview at all. Indeed, if everything is worldview, then nothing is worldview.

George Walker defines worldview as “the lens through which one sees life.”¹ That's a good basic definition. One's worldview is not the same as one's culture, opinions, or experiences. Rather, it is the core assumptions that determine how one interprets and interacts with the world. These assumptions are so closely held, so deeply ingrained, that they may not be known even to us. Hence one's worldview functions at a much deeper level than one's opinions, experiences, or even culture.

¹ “Worldview Issues in Cross-Cultural Ministry,” (lecture and seminar notebook, Worldview Resource Group curriculum, February 12, 2008)

Suppose there are two farmers - although they live in the same area, they are very different from each other. They hold completely different worldviews, that is, they hold different core assumptions that influence how they interpret and respond to life. One farmer is a dyed-in-the-wool secular humanist; he does not believe in God. He views man as the center of all things and he sees the natural world as a physical thing to be understood and manipulated through science. However, the other farmer is a dyed-in-the-wool animist. He believes in many spirits, views life as a cycle of interactions with the spirit world, and sees the natural world as a physical thing with power to be manipulated by ritual. As farmers (who live next to each other), each experiences tilling dirt, planting seeds, killing weeds, and watching the same seasons and clouds. Each does his best to manipulate his environment to produce a good harvest. So (up to this point) their experiences are very much alike. But let's consider how the farmers might respond to a severe drought and bug problem. The secular humanist, on the one hand, might change his fertilizer. He might contact the local agriculture specialist to see if there is a better drought resistant plant. He probably will use some spray for the bugs. The animist, on the other hand, may try some of these things. But, contrary to the secular humanist, the animist would also likely seek help from a medicine man. He may try to discover who placed a curse on the crop. Or, he may perform some sacrifice or ritual to bring rain and to get rid of the bugs. We can see that the two farmers share many of the same experiences of farm life but they have very different worldviews. And it is the worldview that determines how one responds to the experiences of life.

The reason for addressing the usage of the word *worldview* is to highlight the possibility of losing the meaning of the word through diffusion. If everything (that is, experiences, opinions, culture) becomes worldview then the whole dialogue concerning worldview becomes a quagmire of confusion. And the distinctiveness of the word would be lost.

Experiences, opinions, and cultural distinctives are not the same as worldview. They are tied to worldview, for certain. But worldview is more core, more fundamental, and more comprehensive in nature. In the illustration of the farmers, one could substitute riches or poverty,² pampering or abuse, or any number of experiences in place of the drought and the bugs. The result would be the same: The respective worldviews would cause different reactions; each reaction consistent with the core assumptions making up those worldviews.

Words matter. Definitions matter. Understanding matters. If everything is worldview, then nothing is worldview.

² Paul Hiebert (2008) writes an entire chapter dealing with peasant worldviews. However, in that chapter, he is careful not to present "a peasant worldview." Rather he lists common themes present in the great diversity of peasant communities. In other words, the peasant who has an animistic worldview and the peasant who has a secular-humanistic worldview would obviously have very different views of reality, but they could nonetheless share a number of common themes such as a significant sense of community and an affinity with the local geography (*Transforming Worldviews*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, p. 124).