

# Worldview Matters

A Series of Reflections by Worldview Resource Group

## ***Two Sides of the Same Coin: Worldview and Metanarrative***

By Mike Matthews

May 2010

A few years ago I was bombarded with the subject of worldview. I attended several seminars, took a graduate-level course, read a dozen or so books on the subject, and even joined an organization that had the word *worldview* in its name. In that tsunami of information I noticed the words worldview and metanarrative were often said within ear-shot of each other. It was not unusual for a discourse on worldview to include at least some allusion to the idea of metanarrative and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the words were used almost interchangeably - as though the two words were synonyms.<sup>2</sup> I wondered just what the relationship was between these two concepts.

Are these two words speaking of the same thing? Or are they speaking of different things - things with a close relationship? If speaking of different things, how are the two related? Is it a cause and effect relationship? Or (when all is said and done) does it make any real difference if one uses one word or the other in any given context? Are the words really completely interchangeable?

The assumption of this article is that these two words are, indeed, speaking of the same thing<sup>3</sup> - the same coin - the exact same coin. That, however, does not end the discussion. There is a further question. If the two words are speaking of the same thing, are they merely synonyms? That is, in speaking of the exact same thing, are they speaking of it in the exact same manner? Do the individual words offer any distinctives?

One is not hard-pressed to find definitions for worldview. There are nearly as many definitions as there are authors on the subject. Here are a few. The first is from James Sire. In his book *The Universe Next Door*, Sire defines worldview as, “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) which

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004) 100.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in a worldview seminar notebook we read, “What is the cosmic creation story, and what are the supporting stories that together form a *metanarrative* that provides an understanding of reality?...[L]earning the details and specifics of the aforementioned aspects will help you to understand the *worldview* of a people...” *Worldview Issues in Cross-cultural Ministry*, (Worldview Resource Group, 2008) 46.

<sup>3</sup> This is an assumption in line with N.T. Wright, who alludes to worldview and metanarrative referring to the same thing in *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 41-42. It is also seen in Sire’s definition of worldview, Sire, 122. And it is explicit in Groothuis, Douglas. Facing the Challenge of Postmodernism.” In *To Everyone An Answer*, edited by Beckwith, Francis, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2004) 240.

we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world.”<sup>4</sup> Norman Geisler defines it this way, “A worldview is a way of viewing or interpreting all of reality. It is an interpretive framework through which one makes sense of the data of life and the world.”<sup>5</sup> And, finally, Worldview Resource Group has compiled a definition that reads, “Worldview is the tacitly and emotionally held core assumptions about the nature of reality that form a grid through which one interprets and by which one relates to all aspects of life.”<sup>6</sup>

There are other definitions for worldview. But these are representative. Notice the similarity. In each definition a primary implication is that this entity called worldview does something. The accent is on action.<sup>7</sup> It accomplishes something. It has a particular function. As a story or set of presuppositions, it orients the *commitment and orientation* of the heart. It *provides a foundation* for life. As an interpretive framework, it *makes sense* of the data put through it. It is a way of viewing or interpreting reality. As a set of core assumptions, it *functions as an interpretive grid*. In a general sense, it could be said that the definition of worldview focuses on function.<sup>8</sup>

Not to be outdone by worldview, metanarrative also is not shy on definitions. Bartholomew and Goheen define metanarrative as a foundational, comprehensive, grand story that provides one with an understanding of the whole world and of one’s place within it.<sup>9</sup> Albert Wolters writes, “Metanarrative refers to any overarching universal account of reality and human life that purports to explain everything.”<sup>10</sup> A third definition states that a metanarrative is “an all-encompassing story of reality that provides an overall framework in terms of which people give meaning to and interact with all the various experiences of life.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Sire, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: a Handbook on Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1989) 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Worldview Issues in Cross-cultural Ministry*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> “Every operative worldview *directs action*” (accent mine) Sire, 100.

<sup>8</sup> “Worldview in a Christian perspective implies that human beings as God’s image and likeness are anchored and integrated in the heart as the subjective sphere of consciousness which is decisive for shaping a vision of life and *fulfilling the function* typically ascribed to the notion of *Weltanschauung*.” (emphasis mine) David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 267.

<sup>9</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 18.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Wolters, “Metanarrative,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). 506.

<sup>11</sup> *Worldview Issues in Cross-Cultural Ministry*, 12. (Note also how close this definition is to the definitions given for worldview.)

There are other definitions for metanarrative. But, as with the worldview definitions, these three are representative. Notice the similarity here also. In each definition a primary implication is that this entity called metanarrative is something. The accent is on being. It has a particular form. As *a grand story* it provides understanding. As *an overarching universal account* of reality it explains everything. As an *all-encompassing story of reality that provides an overall framework* that gives meaning to all of life. In a general sense, it could be said that the definition of metanarrative focuses on form.

Let's be fair. The definitions of worldview are not devoid of all references to form. There certainly are such references, but the emphasis leans toward function. The same is true of metanarrative. The definitions of metanarrative are not devoid of all references to function. Each definition has some function aspect, but the emphasis leans toward form. We are speaking in generalities. And notice how each word hints at its respective nuance of meaning: *Worldview* - how one views the world (an action). *Metanarrative* - a grand story (a thing). The nuance of worldview is function. The nuance of metanarrative is form.

The distinction in definitions (and subsequent usage) of these two words is subtle. Regardless of that subtleness (or, more importantly, because of that subtleness), the distinction is helpful to note, understand, and capitalize on when using either term.

Worldview and metanarrative are two sides (indicating a nuance of difference) of the same coin (indicating an essence of sameness). This thing we call worldview and metanarrative is only one thing. Yet it has two primary aspects.<sup>12</sup> The difference is emphasized by the distinctions of form and function (being something and doing something). The sameness is emphasized in the blending of form and function (a something that does something).

Therefore the term *metanarrative* should be reserved for the form of one thing: that one thing being, worldview. This would help corroborate the fact that metanarrative does not function solely as a power structure bent on holding people in bondage, as some postmodernists claim. Metanarrative is the story-form of a way of interpreting and interacting with reality. And, most certainly, not all interpretations and interactions with reality are power plays.

Likewise the term *worldview* should be reserved for the function of one thing: that one thing being, metanarrative. This would help corroborate the fact that worldview is not the viewing of reality through the smaller, individual stories or experiences of a person, culture, or society. Rather, worldview is the seeing of reality through the one, comprehensive story of a people.

Worldview and metanarrative: Two sides. Same coin.

---

<sup>12</sup> As Clifford Geertz points out - this "one thing" is both a model *of* reality and a model *for* action. Thus it describes and explains the nature of things (as metanarrative) and it provides the mental blueprints that guide behavior (as worldview). Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 28.