

What are the Major Worldviews?

Our Daily Bread Christian University
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“The Blind Men and the Elephant”



Nineteenth-century American poet John Godfrey Saxe is most remembered for his poem “The Blind Men And The Elephant.” It was based on his version of an ancient Indian fable about six blind men who were examining an elephant. By touching only part of the elephant, each blind man arrived at a different conclusion of what an elephant was like. Feeling the huge animal’s side, one of them said it was like a wall. Another touched its tusk and thought it was like a spear. Holding on to its trunk, one blind man said the elephant was like a snake. Touching one of its legs, another believed it was like a tree. Grasping one of its ears, still another concluded it was like a fan. Grabbing its tail, one of the blind men thought the elephant was like a rope.

The poem concludes:

*And so these men
of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was
partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

Each one of the blind men was partially right in what he experienced but ultimately wrong in his conclusion. Together they confused their limited viewpoint with the whole of reality.

Not only is this clever parable amusing to read, it also carries an important point about the way we all look at our world. The part of reality that we see shapes our view of what is true.

The reality that each of us sees, however, is often fragmented and confused by the different windows of popular media. Just



by clicking on the TV remote, we find ourselves leaping from one perspective to another. The History Channel reviews past events and analyzes their meaning. Discovery Channel takes us to different parts of the globe, examining animal and plant life while explaining their relationship to evolution. The series *Lost* depicts complex characters on an island, with flashbacks that often redefine each person’s identity and relationships. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* offers free and compelling counsel on spirituality. *Seinfeld* tickles our funny bone but has no unifying plot—only disjointed and absurd life situations. *The X-Files* traces disturbing evidence that points to the paranormal. And various reality shows film the conflicts of real people in real situations. Interestingly, each of these programs assumes some kind of window on the world, but its perspective is often hidden. With so many different windows to look through, how do we discern the key ingredients of a worldview?

What Is a Worldview?

From the dockworker to the teacher of philosophy, all of us are trying to make sense of life. On the way home from a funeral or when suffering a serious loss of health, we are often prompted to ask the “why” questions. How we answer those questions is likely to reflect our personal philosophy of life and our worldview.

For example, most of us would agree with our five senses that an external world outside of our own awareness actually does exist. After this admission, however, we are apt to believe, with unswerving conviction, that our window gives us the clearest reflection of ourselves and the best view of our world.

A worldview, therefore, is our assumptions about what makes up our world. More often than not, worldviews influence us in ways we may not always be conscious of.

What Are The Major Worldviews?

In an age of global communication and travel, our interaction with other cultures has made us increasingly aware of the different ways we look at our world. Let’s see what distinguishes these worldviews and what they have in common.

Worldview:

“Our assumptions about what makes up our world.”

Monothemism

One God exists who is separate from but involved with the universe.



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The three great monotheistic world religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Together, they believe that God is an eternal Spirit who brought our material world into existence and enables it to operate according to natural law. Their shared beliefs include: the story of the rebellion of the human race against God, His providential guidance of human affairs, His desire for reconciliation, and the promise of ultimate peace and justice. All of these monotheistic systems believe in one God who exists separate from but is involved with the universe.

But despite their similarities, they are marked by some profound differences. The major beliefs of Judaism are drawn from the first five books of Moses, often called the Pentateuch. Members of the Jewish faith believe that God has uniquely revealed Himself to them through Moses and the Prophets. Obedience to God's law is central to their faith. Their hope lies in the anticipation of a Messiah who has not yet come but will one day usher in a time of world peace and righteousness.

The second great monotheistic religion is Christianity. Building on the Jewish Scriptures, Christians believe that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. His followers point to His fulfillment of prophecies as well as a series of very public miracles. According to the New Testament, His mission on earth was to keep the law of God perfectly and then die upon a cross to pay the penalty for our sin. His miraculous resurrection from the dead is seen as a basis for providing eternal life for all who believe in Him. Just prior to His supernatural ascension into heaven, this same Christ promised to return and to rule over a new heaven and earth. The authoritative Scriptures of Christianity include the Old and New Testaments.

Islam, the third great monotheistic religion, claims to build upon and supersede the Scriptures of both Jews and Christians. Its central authority is the Koran, which presents itself as the infallible word of Allah (the Arabic word for God). According to Islam, the world we see was created by Allah for His own sovereign reasons. Like Judaism and Christianity, it affirms the

Deism

God created an orderly world to operate on its own.



Deism



Thomas Jefferson

Benjamin Franklin

rebellion and sin of the human race and the hope of an afterlife. Muslims, as followers of Islam are called, believe that reaching paradise is possible if one submits to the laws of Allah. Although Islam affirms that Jesus was the Messiah, it does not believe that He was equal to God or that He died on a cross as a sacrifice for our sin.

Deism

God created an orderly world to operate on its own.

In the 17th century, the progress of science and technology gave birth to a philosophy that stressed the value of human reason over revelation. Great champions of this philosophy were John Locke and Voltaire. Sir Isaac Newton's laws of physics also led to a view that some have called "the clockwork universe." Deism holds that an intelligent Creator set up the world to operate on its own without divine interference.

Many Americans honor the founding fathers of the United States as Christians in faith and practice. But some of its finest minds, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were deists.

As a philosophy, deism derives its understanding of God from reason and personal experience—not from revelation. Jefferson, like other deists, rejected miracles and asserted instead that God does not interfere with human affairs or with the laws of the universe.

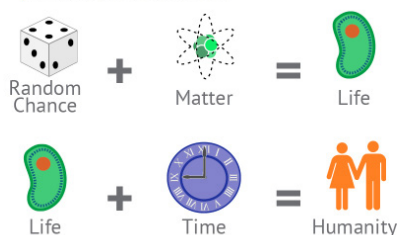
To become more familiar with the history and beliefs of contemporary deism, see The Ontario Consultants On Religious Tolerance at www.religioustolerance.org/deism.htm.

Naturalism

Matter is all that exists and is best understood through science.

During the 18th century, most scientists still believed in a Creator as the First Cause of our universe. But with the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin Of Species*, a naturalistic explanation for origins was proposed. The theory of evolution claimed that given enough time and under the right conditions, simple life-forms would spring from nonliving

Naturalism



matter. Then, over countless eons, these life-forms evolved into more complex ones until finally man appeared on the scene as a highly developed ape. With this explanation, many in the scientific community began to replace a Creator as First Cause with random chance. Many concluded that matter is all that exists and that the best way of exploring truth is through the scientific method. The naturalistic worldview is widely held today.

One who has popularized this view is Carl Sagan. In episode 1 of his TV show *Cosmos*, titled “The Shores Of The Cosmic Ocean,” Sagan made a comment that is at the heart of the naturalistic worldview: “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” Struck with awe and wonder at the vastness of space, he believed our tiny planetary home is lost somewhere between immensity and eternity.

For books written from a naturalistic perspective, see Carl Sagan’s *The Dragons of Eden* and *Broca’s Brain*.

Nihilism

Objective truth and positive values are to be questioned and dismissed. Nihilism is more of an attitude than a formal philosophy.

It questions the validity of knowing truth and moral values. If man is determined by irrational forces beyond his control, then why trust his own rationality? Any certainty of knowledge is clouded by a former nonreflective animal brain. Nihilists believe that objective truth is, at best, arbitrary and relativistic. Because of this assumption, they feel compelled to tell others how inadequate traditional ideologies are. In many ways, nihilists are “anti-philosophy activists” who seek to debunk what others affirm.

A nihilistic view is also skeptical about moral values. In the novel *Fathers And Sons*, Ivan Turgenev wrote: “A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered.”

The word nihilism is derived from the Latin word for “nothing.” It holds that all traditional values are baseless. In response to

nihil:
“Nothing.”

Existentialism

Life has no objective meaning.



Pantheism

Everything that exists is God (Spirit). Matter is an illusion.



religion, it repudiates previously held morality and spiritual belief. When it is brought into politics, it favors the destruction of existing traditional social institutions as a means of making way for improvements.

Literature that reflects a nihilistic worldview is Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

Existentialism

Life has no objective meaning, so significance must be subjectively created within.

There are various existentialist philosophies. Whether atheistic or theistic, each emphasizes the meaninglessness of life and the isolation of the individual. Those who assume there is no God view the objective world as absurd and pointless with no overarching purpose. Despite this grim reality, the committed existentialist must rebel against the objective world and subjectively create his own meaning. When he makes personal choices, he is said to have "authenticated" himself (i.e., created significance subjectively). That which "authenticates" the individual is strictly a personal choice. An act that is meaningful to you may be absurd to me.

A representative of this view is Jean Paul Sartre. Other examples of existentialism may be seen in Albert Camus' *The Plague* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Pantheism

Everything that exists is God (Spirit). Matter is an illusion.

Some of the most ancient religious texts are the Vedas (which comes from the Sanskrit word for "knowledge"). They form the oldest Sanskrit literature and are the ancient Hindu sacred texts of India. For thousands of years, these religious writings have exerted their influence primarily in the East through Hinduism and Buddhism. With the advent of modern communication and travel, however, their influence has spread into the West. A starting premise of this kind of pantheism is that man's spirit is part of the Soul of the universe. God is Spirit and is all that exists. Therefore, the external world we experience is an illusion.

New Consciousness

Reality is beyond reason and can only be understood by altering the mind.



Through meditation, however, one can “become one with the universe.” These themes have been popularized in the West by the New Age Movement.

A proponent of this view has been Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Born in India in 1917, he became a proponent of the relaxation technique called “transcendental meditation.” The medical benefits of such practices began to attract attention from clients in the West. The Beatles were among his celebrity disciples. Many in the West who use transcendental meditation seem not to be fully aware of the pantheistic philosophy that lies at its base. For this kind of pantheism, the ultimate reality is Spirit.

Someone who has promoted a pantheistic worldview is Hollywood personality Shirley MacLaine in books like *Out On A Limb*. The novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse is also written from a pantheistic perspective.

New Consciousness

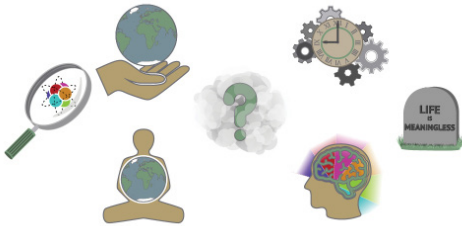
Reality is beyond reason and can only be understood by altering the mind.

During the 1960s, experimentation with various hallucinogenic drugs piqued interest in finding truth beyond logic and data gathering. College students in the US were encouraged to “tune in, turn on, and drop out.” The response of the youth led to hippies, communes, love-ins, and a variety of other social changes.

A high-profile representative of New Consciousness was Timothy Leary. He began his career as a professor of psychology at Harvard University. One day in 1957, Dr. Leary read a 17-page article in *Life* magazine in which R. Gordon Wasson reported his experiences with hallucinogenic mushrooms in a village in the mountains of Mexico. Leary was so fascinated by this that he traveled to Mexico and ate the mushrooms himself. The experience was so overwhelming that when he returned to Harvard he shifted his study to research the properties of psychedelic drugs. Ultimately, Leary was fired from Harvard. He went on to lead an eccentric life, including time spent as a convict, a fugitive, a lecturer, and an author.

Although Dr. Leary would admit that the external world exists,

Personal Combinations



he also believed that the ultimate quest for truth cannot be apprehended by reason alone. Instead, “stoned thinking” opens up the thought process to new categories and perceptions that shed the limitations of logic.

A series of books illustrating New Consciousness have been written by Carlos Castaneda. First in the series is the book *The Teachings Of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way Of Knowledge*.

Personal Combinations

Interestingly, many people see the world through parts and pieces of the worldviews we’ve just described. For instance, some believe in the scientific method as the ultimate guide to truth while using transcendental meditation (a pantheistic practice) to relieve stress. Others think like existentialists, believing that all objective values are meaningless, while joining a social activist organization to fight for social justice.

Yet, in spite of inconsistencies, people hold on to their perception of reality with strong conviction. Why? The answer may lie in how much is at stake in our own attempts to answer some of life’s most heartfelt questions:

- What is real?
- Who am I?
- Where did I come from?
- Why am I here?
- What is the basis for my values?
- What does the future hold?

We will now look at how each worldview answers these questions.