

## WORLDVIEWS AS OPERATING SYSTEMS OF THE MIND

*If little else, the brain is an educational toy. . . . While it may be a frustrating plaything, . . . [it] comes already assembled; you don't have to put it together on Christmas morning. The problem with possessing such an engaging toy is that other people want to play with it, too. Sometimes they'd rather play with yours than theirs. Or they object if you play with yours in a different manner from the way they play with theirs.*

TOM ROBBINS, *EVEN COWGIRLS GET THE BLUES*

**W**orldviews are like operating systems on a computer except that they are in our minds, which are far more powerful and efficient than modern computers. Operating systems determine the particular functions on a computer that can be accomplished and the ones that cannot. Worldviews function in much the same way, determining the range of thoughts we will entertain. Computer operating systems are constantly being improved and their glitches fixed by downloading new updates. It is the same with worldviews; we are constantly acquiring new information and experiences that inform our beliefs and can cause us to adjust or change our worldviews (operating systems) altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever worldview or worldviews we hold shape what we notice or

ignore, how we interpret what we see and experience, how we process information, and ultimately what decisions we will make and how we will act. It is the lens through which we interpret reality and by which we reason. Our actions are stronger indicators of our actual worldviews than our thoughts, feelings or words.

Worldviews shape what we think is plausible and reject what does not seem plausible. We don't buy software that was designed for a Mac when we own a PC. Once we buy a machine and the operating system, we have limited our options. Limits are necessary; we all have them else we could not make decisions. We are constantly deciding—this is better than that, or I believe this and not that—though we are sometimes not aware of other options.

A contemporary example of how different worldviews influence our beliefs and actions is revealed in the debate over abortion. Some believe that the developing embryo is merely a mass of cells, nothing more than a clump of material that can be discarded when unwanted or no longer needed or used to help regenerate spinal cords, heal diseases or make better skin cream for the living (material naturalism). Others believe that the developing embryo is a baby human being, made in the image of God, with intrinsic value and purpose, whose life should be as well protected as any person would be under the law (Judeo-Christianity). Still others believe that abortion is wrong because it breaks the cycle of birth and rebirth; the soul's karmic journey is interrupted and must begin again (pantheism). Another group simply overlooks these existential issues and pragmatically defends the political position that, no matter what the fetus is, it is the right of the person in whose womb or test tube it lies to decide its future—life or death (existential secular humanism). In some countries the right to decide the fate of a fetus resides not with the mother but with the government (technocracy, another form of secular humanism). I used many of these secular positions to justify my two abortions; once I came to Christ, I began to grieve them.

Because of mass communication and individual differences, we find every worldview in the midst of every culture. There is as much diversity within a culture as between cultures. James Sire defines worldview in this way:

A worldview is 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) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.<sup>2</sup>

Most of us hold some mixture of assumptions from two or more worldviews; on particular issues we lean to one or the other, even though they may be logically incompatible. For example, years ago I occasionally accompanied a colleague who had a special passion to investigate odd religious movements in Los Angeles; the city gave him endless opportunities. I remember we once ended up at an engineer's house where quite a number of logically exacting engineers were experimenting with various pantheist practices; some were bending spoons and others walking on coals.

### The Four Dominant Worldviews

Different authors classify worldviews into various categories. Sources for a variety of approaches are provided in the notes.<sup>3</sup> I simply distill worldviews at their most basic level into four major global worldviews—material naturalism, secular humanism, pantheism and monotheism, represented here by Judeo-Christianity. (In chapter 25 is a brief discussion of the differences between Christianity and the monotheisms of Judaism and Islam.) It is generally possible to trace all philosophies, theories and even most practical actions back to one or more of these four worldviews.

When I stopped trying to write about Mother Teresa so that our secular culture might better appreciate her, I began to realize how differently she would be interpreted from each of the three non-Christian worldviews—material naturalism, secular humanism and pantheism.

*Material naturalism* is the belief that all that exists in the world is ultimately reducible to material phenomena. From this perspective, Mother Teresa was just a unique bundle of brain chemistry with particular psychoneural processes acting predictably, prompting her to do what she did. This chemistry fueled her thoughts, decisions, ethics and work.

*Secular humanism* is the belief that human beings are alone in the world and must act responsibly by forming their ethics solely from their human experience, human reason and science. From this perspective, Mother Teresa simply decided who she wanted to be and what she wanted to do and garnered the fortune, determination and self-discipline necessary to do good works.

Both of these secular worldviews might have added the caveat that it was unfortunate that she clung to the myth of God, which was either an unnecessary genetic residue or neurochemical glitch destined eventually to devolve from human nature (material naturalism) or that she had created this God out of her own unmet needs and unfulfilled desires (Freudian secular humanism) or perhaps that she was just a poorly educated Albanian, in which case Mother Teresa's religious quirks could be tolerated and excused and, if exotic enough, maybe even celebrated (multicultural secular humanism). Less generously, Marxist secular humanists most likely would suggest, as popular atheist apologist Christopher Hitchens did, that Mother Teresa used Christianity strategically as an "opiate for the poor," a Marxist phrase meaning to make them happy with their condition.

*Pantheism* is the belief that everything in the universe is a manifestation of a universal spirit. From the perspective of this nonsecular worldview, Mother Teresa might be interpreted as a more highly enlightened or reincarnated soul who had a strong spiritual connection to the divine spirit inside all of nature, including human nature. According to pantheists, this spirit is an impersonal life force and not, as Mother Teresa believed, a transcendent personal God, external to her, living and acting in the world, as well as in and through her, hearing and answering her prayers.

But Mother Teresa was *Christian*, she believed that she and the Missionaries of Charity were, as she once said of herself, "pencil(s) in God's hand." Their first work was to belong to Jesus and to pray unceasingly; from this source they garnered the strength, wisdom and grace to conduct the work we saw and admired—serving the poorest of the poor. That Jesus appeared to Mother Teresa in three visions and asked her to do precisely what she did when she left the safe cloister of the Loreto

convent simply cannot be considered an admissible fact. It isn't plausible through the lenses of the secular worldviews. It isn't part of the Western secular plausibility structure (the set of meanings in a culture that qualify as being possible). Even Westernized Christians often find her visions incredible, acceptable only if interpreted as a personal psychological state, not as a reality.

Within the orthodox principles of the Judeo-Christian worldview, however, her visions of Christ and obedience to his request are wholly credible. My own conversion began with a very vivid and unshakable dream in which I remembered every detail—sights, sounds, colors, thoughts and feelings. To the pantheist, spiritual transactions such as visions and dreams are also credible, but they are either the result of an impersonal universal spirit or one of a host of deities, not the intentional communication of a personal, all-powerful Creator who hears and responds to prayers.

### Characteristics of All Worldviews and Their Relation to Christianity

There are five characteristics of all worldviews. First and most consequential, *all worldviews begin with faith*, a metaphysical belief that cannot be verified using scientific methods. Robert Bellah points out that the Latin word for faith, *fides*, is more akin to the English term for *trust* rather than *belief*.<sup>4</sup> Though these faith statements can be argued philosophically, and from evidence we can inductively and deductively hypothesize, none can be proven empirically through scientific methods, including material naturalism. Every worldview begins with faith in something empirically or scientifically unknowable.

Second, *every non-Christian worldview holds within it some principles of the Judeo-Christian worldview*. Thus there is an overlap between principles of Judeo-Christianity and those of material naturalism, secular humanism and pantheism.

Third, there are also *principles held by each of these three worldviews that lie outside of the Judeo-Christian worldview*, such as the material-naturalist belief that everything that exists is ultimately a material or natural phenomenon. From a Judeo-Christian standpoint, these principles would be considered errors of commission.

Fourth, there are *principles of Judeo-Christianity that lie outside the purview of believers in these other three worldviews*. The absence of these principles in other worldviews would be considered by Christians as errors of omission.

Finally, none of these worldviews is more progressive or modern than the other. *They have all existed ever since recorded history*. The only real question is, are one or more of these an adequate description of reality?