

TUTORIAL

6.4

Worldviews 4

This tutorial is the fourth and final one focusing on worldview. We will look at some of the more informal worldview influences at work in our society that may affect the way we think. We will also look at four important questions to ask about any worldview to see if it “works”.

The notes were transcribed from a video presentation, so watch the video as you read the notes.

Last Time

We looked at some of the major, common worldviews that Sire describes as a result of applying those eight questions to the human view of life in many societies.

The second set of worldview issues we are going to describe now, will be in terms of the less formalised model, (from Wilkens and Sanford) that we looked at last time - the one with Story at the center. We said that the *story* develops an *identity* for each individual, which in turn derives into a set of *convictions*, and that those convictions create *values* and *ethics* (ways that we define our priorities and what we believe to be the most important things to do). Then, our *morals* and our *actions* are the ‘doing’ that results in our activities from our story, our identity, our convictions and our values.

These two authors are saying that we don’t take in worldviews as formalised systems that are a cohesive or coherent package that we intellectually evaluate, then accept. That almost never happens - that’s not the way worldviews are adopted. They are adopted informally, piecemeal, they change, morph, grow, shrink in certain areas, they are based on our own personal stories in society, in cultural contexts. Those cultural influences have a high degree of involvement and interaction with the development of our worldviews.

We are going to build on that idea by looking at another set of worldview categories.

Describing some informal worldview categories

These worldview categories are not comparatively religious - they are not about the comparison between Hinduism and Islam, or the Muslim and Christian worldviews. These worldviews, as Wilkens and Sanford describe them, are about the means in Western society by which we define what ultimately redeems our existence.

Many of these things are informal. They are bought into because they are the societal or political influences that drive our societies. They are not even necessarily developed as rationally coherent systems - in other words that we have made sure that there is no contradiction between the components and therefore we accept them. No, these are very informal, very culturally derived - and, they make a very good point - that the church is not at all immune to this kind of worldview influence. These worldview influences do affect believers and affect Christians in ways that we are surprised by, and if we are not careful to evaluate our lives we find ourselves unknowingly buying into key components of these worldviews.

This is important because we want to have a story that is an outworking of God's Grand Story, of His Narrative. We don't want to be surprised one day that we promoted something - for example something as heinous as slavery, which many Christians did promote - and then to find that it is inconsistent with a true Christian Theism or truly Christian worldview. So, we don't want to be taken by surprise by not understanding what our worldviews actually consist of.

We are going to look at some worldview categories, and we will look at them, not using Sire's eight questions, but from the point of view of Wilkens and Sanford, by looking at the minimal, most important component.

Individualism

I am at the center. My happiness is at the center. 'Salvation' is found in me being happy - my fulfilment is salvation. The American Constitution and some of the early American documents from the Deists who wrote those - Thomas Jefferson and others (who, ironically, many Christians quote, even though they were Deists and we couldn't ever buy into that) - uphold that strong sense of individualism, that the pursuit of happiness is our right and it is a divine right. It is something that drives our societies and it turns into pragmatism - 'leveraging relationships' for an ulterior motive, for example in business models. Even in the Christian community we hear talk of that kind of thing and we are alarmed by it - at least some of us are.

So, Individualism defines us at the center and creates a cold pragmatism that says: 'what is in my best interests is what is best'. That means that I have to operate in the context of my political and social environment and 'get along',

yes, but ultimately I am doing that and following the rules in business because if I don't, I will get sent to prison. So, at the end of the day I am going to do what's best for me.

Individualism is a very strong value in American society and in a lot of situations. It affects Christians and creates a relative standard of right and wrong in practical terms for people, because it is about what is best for me at the end of the day - what I can get away with, too (unfortunately). So, Individualism: salvation is found in the fulfilment of the individual - my happiness fulfilled.

Consumerism

I am what I own. It is very subtle, but it is very strong in our societies. Branding, advertising, the association of our identity with the things that we own, the things that are in our house, that we drive, that we wear - consumerism is a big issue. As we said, it is like a means of salvation.

Defining our story and our identity on the basis of fulfilment or salvation as provided by my identity showing off what I own and what possessions I am associated with. It's crazily non-Christian, but we buy into this. We see this all the time in the church, in Christian circles, in 'society' - the pomp and circumstance view of competing with the neighbours for the nicer car, or nicer house or nicer boat or the nicer clothes or the prettier family or whatever... So, Consumerism very much affects us.



Nationalism

Nationalism may affect Americans more than Australian or British culture. Nationalism - 'my nation under God', or as Bob Dylan said, 'Those who go to war, feel like they go to war because God is on their side'. Have you ever heard of a conflict in which one country says, 'God is not on our side but we are going to fight anyway', whereas the other country says, 'Well, God is on our side, so we have greater likelihood of winning.' Nobody goes and says, 'It is not our destiny to win'. Ironically, in the same competition, two different people will be praying and depending on God's intervention to help them to be successful, even in war and conflict.

So, in American society ('my nation under God') there is a strong relationship between conservative, political philosophy and conservative religious philosophy. Those things are closely tied together - if I am conservative religiously, I am conservative politically. If I am conservative religiously, then they would be shocked to hear that I am a 'liberal' politically - that is

incompatible in American national identity, in most circles. Nationalism becomes part of the fabric of Christian identity in many American situations, because of a close allegiance with the idea that 'my nation has a manifest or divine destiny'. Wilkens and Sanford point out (tongue in cheek) several areas where, if you view the divine destiny of the American government in a certain kind of way, you are probably a Nationalist. If you think that God's plan will be de-railed if America's role is diminished in the next 25 years, you might be a Nationalist. So, they are helping us to identify those areas of Nationalism.

I was watching the Diamond Jubilee ceremony with the Queen the other day, and although there is no problem with some level of patriotism, defining the world with our nation at the center is a tell-tale sign of Nationalism, and is certainly not a healthy place for Christians to live. Nationalism often carries with it a salvific message - our identities are defined by our nationhood, our salvation is defined by our nationhood - if our nation is not in the driver's seat, my life has less value. That is something that politicians and others in our societies talk about and believe and promote (which is a bit scary).

Moral Relativism

Relativism says that there is no absolute truth. Relativism gets itself into trouble by claiming *absolutely* that there is no absolute truth - by saying that there is no right or wrong, except that it is absolutely right for me to tell you that there is no right and wrong. That is the one absolute right, the fact that I can tell you to agree with me that there is no right and wrong. That is the kind of circular thinking that happens in Relativism.

Relativism is very prevalent in our societies. The guilt that is placed upon us, (especially as believers, if we defend Truth, or defend absolutes) is very strong. In TV and in the media, things that we read, and in conversations that we have out in society - if you do not hold to some humble sense of relativism, then you are an arrogant person who has no business out and about talking and dealing with people. You need to accept relativism and not try to force your ideas on someone else - that is the characterisation that gets made.

Scientific Naturalism

Scientific Naturalism says that 'only matter matters'. Wilkens and Sanford state that they don't want to include comparative religion in their study, because it would just be too long a book. Scientific Naturalism, however, is saying that if there is any salvation for humankind, it is through science. They describe what Scientific Naturalism means to our societies - the strong and militant push you see in certain circles for evolution as the only acceptable view - that any Creationist view is just utter nonsense. That view is being promoted so strongly and so militantly - everything you watch on TV for example, assumes evolution. Scientific Naturalism is a very strong influence on our societies today.

New Age

Are we actually gods ourselves, or are we God's creation? The New Age is seeking identity and salvation through 'spirituality' in all those ways we have already described - in a psychic, mystical, extra-sensory perception, occultic world. It is a different kind of salvation through the reduction to the means of New Age religion.

Postmodern Tribalism

Postmodernism tends to create an environment where relativity is king, where tolerance is the rule, and yet Postmodern Tribalists have to find salvation and an identity somewhere. What we see happening with Postmodernists is that they become "tribal". Postmodern Tribalism sounds like a self-contradiction. We see, for example, that Feminist rhetoric and Feminist literature is everywhere in Postmodernism - in Postmodern studies, Feminism comes to the forefront constantly. Why is that? Because Feminists have an agenda - they believe that their 'oppression' has been historically connected to other philosophical views and that people have not been tolerant of them in the past. They believe that their agenda needs to be promoted so that people will be more tolerant of them and so they talk and write in sometimes very militant terms about that view: that tolerance is the rule, but you do not have the right to be intolerant of me - you are required to be tolerant of me. I don't have to be tolerant of the fact that you are not tolerant of me. It sounds circular, and it tends to be circular.



Tolerance is the rule for life. That is the view of the Postmodern Tribalist, and we see that return to tribalism in our Postmodern society. People cannot exist in a 'tolerance vacuum' - it is not possible - they have to define themselves, they have to define their core identities in conjunction with society - that is the way God has made them. So as much as people try to create a neutral, value-free environment for themselves to live in, at the end of the day, their natural bent and penchant for definition requires them to move toward defining identities. That is the way God has made them. Unfortunately, if they reject God at the starting point, their salvation gets defined in other terms. Postmodern Tribalists find their salvation in their core identities, over and against the lack of tolerance that others are showing to them. Their identity gets defined by that intolerance of others itself - which is quite a bizarre twist to things - because that defies the Postmodern view itself.

Salvation by Therapy

Wilkins and Sanford use the quote: “Not as good as it gets” - this is a quote from a movie where a guy is dealing with psychologists and therapists, and he is trying to find the cure for his problems through therapy, with psychologists and psychiatrists. Wilkins and Sanford are saying that in society, many times salvation gets reduced to the psychological component and that people try to find their salvation or their restoration through the health of their psyche - their psychological make-up.

Wilkins and Sanford are contending that, in contrast to all of these informal worldviews, Christianity *includes* all those elements, but it doesn't reduce life to one specific area. It doesn't reduce life to 'my happiness'. It doesn't reduce life to 'my physical needs being met' (as in Consumerism). It doesn't reduce life to 'my security and safety in national identity' (as in Nationalism). It doesn't reduce life to the relative relationship of 'I need you to be tolerant of me and treat me with respect' (as in Moral Relativism). It doesn't reduce life to scientific explanations (as in Scientific Naturalism). It doesn't reduce life to spirituality only (as in the New Age movement). It doesn't reduce life to tribalism (as in Postmodern Tribalism) or to salvation by therapy. They are saying that all of those components, in balance, are encapsulated in the Christian Theistic worldview, but these worldviews distort reality by over-emphasising specific components of life. So, they have given a list of these informal cultural influences on our lives that we need to be aware of, and which help us to evaluate our own worldviews. Because, as we said in the beginning, the starting point for us in the evaluation of our own worldviews.

Evaluating our own worldview

If we want to evaluate a worldview, we use Sire's questions, we hear someone's story told, or we evaluate our own story and we apply Sire's questions to our story and we see the outworking of our worldview. Most of you would have clear answers to Sire's questions - all except the last one - which is: 'What core commitments manifest themselves as a result of your answers to those first seven questions?' Those of us who are Christian Theists would answer the first seven questions the same way, but, the core commitments that result in practical outworking - our morals and our actions - do not necessarily look the same. We may find, that in that specific area, we need to evaluate our worldviews more in accordance with Wilkins and Sanford's list, to see if... 'Wait a second, in practice, my life is pretty Individualist - or it is pretty Consumerist...I actually have some Nationalistic thinking that is built into my core commitments'.

Which challenges us to go back to this worldview model that is centered on our story and our core identity and to evaluate our identity correctly. Because,

our Christian allegiance should create an identity centered in the person of Jesus Christ and what He has for us, but it doesn't always happen that way.

Wilkins and Sanford are challenging us in a more informal way, to answer that eighth question, about our core commitments in terms of what our morals and our actions actually demonstrate - and that is a good challenge for us.

That is the way we describe worldview, it is a way we can understand a bit more about our own core commitments and our own identity. But, as we apply ourselves to other worldviews - as we look at animists in minority society, as we look at the Islamic worldview, as we look at Naturalism - what kind of questions can we use to critique or evaluate those systems of thought? That's where we are headed now.

Worldview Coherence

Here are four questions that we can use to evaluate worldviews around us:

1. Is it rationally coherent?

Is the worldview rationally coherent? Is it non-contradictory, or do individuals with this worldview hold to two components that tend to be contradictory?

Closed systems - those that don't allow for a transcendent input or a transcendent standard - tend, by definition, to be contradictory. For example, for a Naturalist - a person who believes that all there is, is in the 'box', that there is no voice speaking into the box with any standard - has a very difficult time explaining right and wrong, or human rationality, or meaning, in a way that isn't contradictory with this deterministic, cause-and-effect system that they are adhering to. They can't say how a naturalistic causation of evolution produces beings who value certain things and don't value other things, who have a sense of right and wrong and a sense of self - they can't describe how that actually happens in terms of their own system. They can tell you what 'should be' or what 'can be', for example, they can tell you that a lion can kill a zebra, but they can't tell you what 'ought to be'. They can't tell you why a human being 'ought not' to kill another human being. They don't have an explanation for moving from what can be done to what ought to be done. That requires a transcendent standard - someone speaking into the box. That creates rational incoherence, which manifests itself in contradiction between the presuppositions of the worldview and what we are seeing in practise in the lives around us.

Animists do not tend to evaluate their worldviews in terms of rational coherence. There are a lot of rational contradictions in the animistic worldviews that I have been exposed to. For example, believing that a plant that cannot hear, and doesn't show any signs, in any way that we can imagine, of being able to react to us not following the proper ceremonies for it to grow,

they still believe, in spite of that evidence, that if I don't do the right incantations, that plant won't grow well.

A rationally coherent worldview is one that is non-contradictory, and closed systems tend to produce rational incoherence.

2. Is it empirically correspondent to reality, covering the whole of life in an adequate way?

Reductionist or Absolutizing worldviews - like the ones Wilkens and Sanford talk about, which reduce salvation or the means of fulfilment to a small component of the whole of human life: to psychology, or matter, or spirituality, or to our national identity, or to our tribalistic identity as in Postmodernism, or to Moral Relativism, or to Individualism or Consumerism - that reduce life to one area, do not provide a system that is empirically holistic - that covers the whole of life.

All worldviews, whether people admit it or not, are plans of salvation or redemption. They are ways to redeem back the problems of pain and suffering in life. That is why science makes the claims that it makes, they say they can solve life's problems. So, these are systems of salvation or redemption, and we are saying that those are not empirically correspondent to reality - they fail to explain the whole of our reality in an adequate way. For example, they fail to explain the existence of evil - they can't explain that. We can explain the existence of evil because a good God created perfect beings and He gave them a choice, and their choices led them to rebel against Him - He was not the person who created evil, but evil resulted as a consequence of the choices that were made by others. That is an explanation of the existence of evil, but many systems can't explain the existence of evil. They can't explain absolute rights and wrongs, they can't explain truth, they can't explain knowledge, etc. So they don't empirically correspond to reality.

3. Is it existentially consistent, liveable and functional?

Can you live that way? Is it liveable and functional? We already said that Naturalism or Relativism is very difficult to live. For a Nihilist, an adequate response is suicide, because there is no meaning to reality, there is no reason why I should respect and love my wife, as opposed to abusing my wife. There is no reason why I should drive on the side of the road that has been defined by the government as opposed to just doing whatever I want. There is no reason why I should avoid a car wreck as opposed to being in a car wreck. There is no reason why I should wear clothes as opposed to not wearing clothes. Ultimately there is no reason. So, that is a system that is very difficult to live out because we are forced to live in systems of meaning while at the same time, claiming there is no meaning.

It is the same with Relativism - we are forced to live in systems of truth and right and wrong,

while at the same time claiming that there is no such thing. As one philosopher said, even in India, where people claim that truth is relative in some of the systems that are there, if you cross the street and there is a bus coming, either you get out of the way of the bus or if you stand in the way of the bus, it kills you. The law of contradiction is not negotiable. You can't define a worldview system that is not practically liveable - that is not an adequate worldview. It needs to be existentially consistent.

4. Is it emotively compelling, addressing our heart-level questions?

Is the worldview emotively compelling? Does it address the heart-level questions that we have?

We have already stated, as Sire has explained, those kinds of questions about meaning, about truth, about right and wrong, about our existences, about the 'whys' of life - those are questions that human beings ask time and time again, around the world, culture to culture, age to age - they do not change.

Some worldviews just do not answer our heart-level questions. They provide us with a sense of futility, a sense of meaninglessness, a sense of nonsense and chaos. A worldview needs to be emotively compelling. It needs to address our heart-level questions.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Worldview 4

1. When you evaluate your own worldview, do you see any of the influences mentioned in the tutorial affecting you in any way, or have they affected you at some point in your life? (Individualism, Consumerism, Nationalism, Moral Relativism, etc.)
2. Do you think it is possible for a Christian to live in our society without being in some way affected by the prevailing worldview around them?