

How Do Our Worldviews Develop and Why Should We Care What People Believe?

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Jeff Myers is an authority on Christian worldview and apologetics who teaches Christians how to understand what they believe, why they believe it and how to defend it against fatal worldviews. Over the last 20 years, Jeff Myers has become one of America's most respected authorities on Christian worldview, apologetics, and youth leadership development. He's the author of several books and the president of Summit Ministries. Dr. Myers lives in Colorado with his family.

What we understand about God and the world affects what we believe about everything else, including what kinds of arguments we find persuasive and how we justify our intended actions.

That's why the apostle Paul said in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this

world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." To understand what God wants from us, we must identify the world's patterns, refuse to conform to them, and be transformed to embrace a God-pleasing pattern of living.

We call a pattern of ideas a **worldview**. A worldview answers such fundamental questions as, "*Why are we here? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Is there a difference between right and wrong? Is there a God?*" We all develop ideas in our attempt to answer these questions, and our ideas naturally give rise to a system of belief that becomes the basis for our decisions and actions. Our worldview is like a map. It helps us know where we are, where we need to go and the best route to get there.

Our worldview does not merely reflect what we think the world *is* like; it directs what we think the world *should be* like. In other words, our worldview not only *describes* reality; it *prescribes* how we should act and respond to every aspect of life. Because our ideas *do* determine how we behave, the bottom line is that our ideas *do* have consequences.

I think, therefore I believe...

This doesn't mean that everyone is aware of his or her deeply held ideas. If we were to ask a person on the street about her philosophy of life, we would probably get a blank stare. But if we asked how life began, she would probably offer some sort of

answer, even if the answer was not completely coherent. Still, her belief would impact the way she lives her life. It's also often the case that people are unaware of where their deeply held beliefs come from. If we were to continue our street conversation by asking *why* this woman believes what she claims to believe, she might shrug and reply, "I don't know; I just believe it." Often people pick up their beliefs like they catch colds—by being around other people! And since ideas are everywhere—on television, in books and magazines, at the movies, and in conversation with friends and family—it's easy to pick them up without considering whether they're worth believing.

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Regardless of where they come from, the ideas we embrace about the nature of reality lead to a set of core beliefs, which in turn form convictions about how we should live meaningfully. This beefs up our definition of *worldview*. A *worldview* is a “pattern of ideas,” but it’s also “a pattern of beliefs, convictions, and habits that help us make sense of God, the world, and our relationship to God and the world.”

Of course, some Christians don’t act Christian. There are also Muslims and Secularists whose lifestyles are inconsistent with what they believe. The Christian idea of the sinful nature predicts this. Human *actions* fall short of human *aspirations*. For example, if a person embraces the idea of sexuality as an expression of love between a married man and woman, he or she will probably believe in abstaining from sexual activity outside of marriage,

which reflects a value of sexual purity and a conviction to safeguard it. This does not mean, however, that the person will never indulge in pornography in a moment of weakness. Such indulgence does not invalidate the person’s ideas, beliefs, convictions and habits, but it will produce guilt because the person knows pornography is harmful. On the other hand, a person with no existing beliefs about love and marriage will still feel guilty but may not understand why. People who continue to indulge in pornography may end up in a habitual pattern shaped by the culture’s permissive stance rather than what God wants.

Ideas have consequences. They form our beliefs, shape our convictions, and solidify into habits.

There are hundreds of different worldviews. Is it possible to know which of them, if any, is actually true? If you look in the religion section of a bookstore, you’ll see books not only on Christianity and Islam, of course, but also on Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Vedantism, Jainism, Shintoism and many other religions. Each **religion** attempts to explain what the world is like and how we should live.



You'll also notice books on Secularism and atheism in the religion section. This might seem odd, but when you think about it, even atheists have a set of beliefs about the cause, nature and purpose of the universe. They're religious.¹ Even people who don't care about any of this are religious; their religion says the ultimate questions don't matter. All worldviews are religious.

If everyone is religious we would expect their beliefs to lead to certain actions. C. S. Lewis put it this way: "We are now getting to the point at which different beliefs about the universe lead to different behavior.... Religion involves a series of statements about facts, which must be either true or false. If they are true, one set of conclusions will follow about the right sailing of the human fleet[;] if they are false, quite another set."²

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Here's where we are so far. All people try to make sense of the rules of the world by developing ideas. These ideas flow in patterns, which we call worldviews. People's worldviews lead them to value certain things, which leads to particular convictions governing their behavior. These convictions solidify into habits that affect the way people live.

Why Should We Care What People Believe?

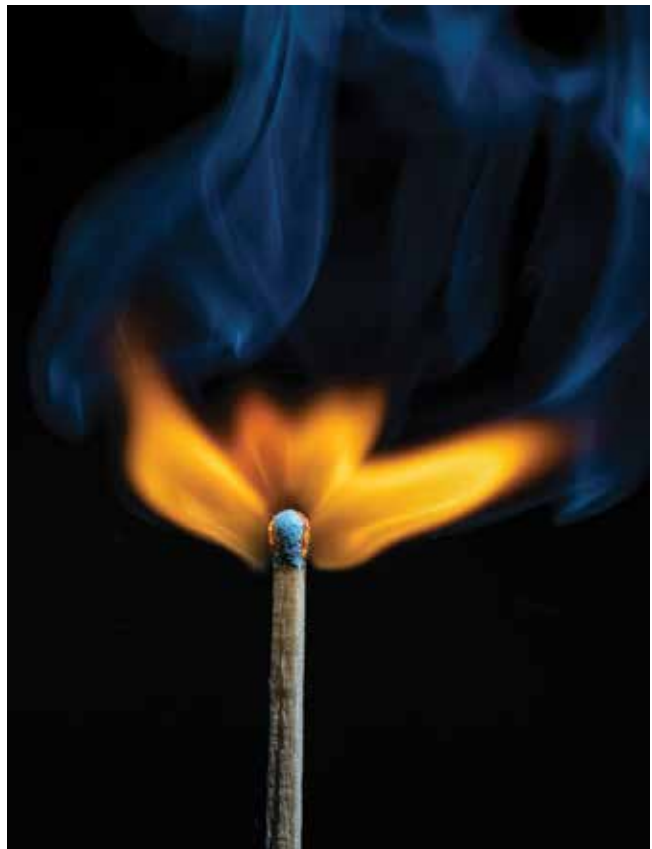
As people try to figure out the rules and patterns of the world, they diagnose what is wrong with the world and suggest prescriptions. As in medicine, a wrong diagnosis could lead to mistreating a disease or leave a serious illness untreated. If everyone lived in isolated caves, the consequences of our actions wouldn't affect others.

¹ John Dewey, the father of modern education, helped organize a group of philosophies into what he hoped would be a new worldview that replaced Christianity. He called it *Secular Humanism*. The word *secular* means "that which pertains to worldly things rather than religious things." And yet Dewey was forthright about the fact that his new philosophy was, in fact, religious: "Here are all of the elements for a religious faith.... Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind." John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (1934; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 87.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 58.

But we aren't isolated. We live in families, communities, cities and countries. The consequences of bad beliefs can cause serious pain. Some ideas in history have led to death for millions. Nazism systematically exterminated approximately 21 million people, not counting the tens of millions who died in battles initiated by the Nazi regime.³ Communist regimes slaughtered well over 100 million people in the 20th century. As we will see in the chapter on Marxism in this issue, the slaughter continues to this day.

Every one of these deaths was in the service of an idea. Ideas have consequences, sometimes unspeakably tragic ones. Like a wildfire, these ideas began with a single flame and rapidly spread before a stunned and unprepared populace, engulfing millions. People thought Adolf Hitler was a pompous fool early in his career. Who could have predicted he would actually amass enough power to slaughter millions? Similarly, who could have imagined that a radical writer named Karl Marx, a man deeply unpopular even with his friends, would be capable of unleashing an idea—communism—that would destroy more people than any other idea in history?

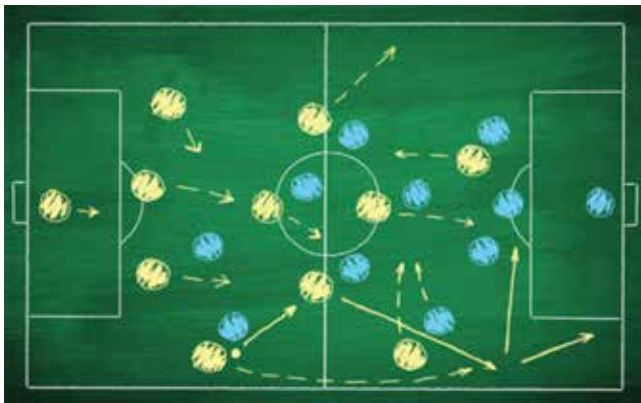


³ R. J. Rummel, "Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder" (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), chap. 1.

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Is it possible to understand ideas and their consequences? More important, is it possible to identify bad ideas in time to stop them before they can lay waste to the lives, hopes, and dreams of countless people? Fortunately, the answer is yes. To grasp the world of ideas, we don't need to know everything about everything. In the following pages, we'll take an in-depth look at the pattern of ideas, beliefs, convictions, and habits that makes up a Christian worldview. We'll suggest that understanding Christianity as a worldview will help us make sense of the world. Understanding other worldviews—other patterns—will confirm the essential truths of Christianity.

Here's a sports analogy: Let's say you play against a team that has 60 completely different plays. It would be hard to prepare for such a complex strategy. But if you know the team actually has six basic plays, each with 10 variations, then by figuring out the six plays, you can make better guesses about each variation and know how to counteract it.



In this issue of *Mission Frontiers*, we'll discover the six plays and the 10 variations that worldview "teams" are running these days. Based on this information, we'll form a mental model from which we can make more accurate guesses about how people all over the world see things.

✝ Christianity

☾ Islam

⚖ Secularism

⚡ Marxism

🧘 New Spirituality

🚫 Postmodernism

We will examine six dominant worldviews: Christianity, Islam, Secularism, Marxism, New Spirituality, and Postmodernism. Each of these six worldviews claims to present the truth. Then we'll examine each worldview as expressed in 10 key academic disciplines to see whether they are, in fact, true. 