

CHAPTER 2: An Overview of the different Worldviews

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (II Cor. 10:5)

While there are thousands of different cultures in the world today, there are only three basic worldviews forming their foundations: secular, animistic and Biblical. The secular worldview believes that man is supreme and that true reality is in the physical realm. The animistic worldview believes that spirits rule over man and that true reality takes place in the spirit realm, with the physical world subjugated to the spirits. The Biblical worldview believes that God is supreme and that He created and rules over both the spiritual and physical worlds.

In the days of Jesus, the animistic worldview would have been prevalent everywhere, except amongst the Jews living by Biblical traditions and rules. Still, the animistic worldview is prevalent in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, South America and everywhere else indigenous tribal beliefs are still held. Even Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, although considered “high religions” because they are highly structured, still have animism at the core of their belief systems. New Age beliefs are also animistic.

The secular worldview which began during the days of the “Enlightenment” in Europe in the 17th century has spread around much of the world, as well. Everyone who has had a “modern” education, has been taught a secular worldview, whether in a conservative school in rural America, or in Siberia with a communistic education or in an African university. However, in these days of “post-modernism,” various forms of animism are making fresh inroads and gaining popularity amongst young people who are disillusioned with modernity and the secular worldview in Europe and America today.

In many parts of the world these worldviews all meet. A secular education often sits uncomfortably atop an animistic worldview. Christians then often add in the parts of a Biblical worldview they have grown into. It is very difficult to “unpack” our way of thinking because thinking is just something we do—like breathing. As part of worldview discipleship, we need to understand *why* we are thinking what we are thinking and *why* we are responding the way we are responding. As Peter says in I Peter 1:13: let us “prepare our minds for action.” Are our values and beliefs Biblical? If not, then we will be at the whim of the worldly worldviews around us and sin will run rampant in our nations. But if they are Biblical, then we will be able to discern the mind of the Lord and lead the church into its rightful place of influence in its community.

The Secular Worldview

The secular worldview holds the core belief that true reality is exclusively physical. Only what we can see, hear, touch or somehow “know” with our physical senses is real. Natural powers (like gravity) that can be analyzed are real. Those things which “objective” scientific methods can identify are real. Thus, a natural power like gravity is real, but the spirit world and God do not exist. Gravity can be verified with natural scientific methods, whereas the spirit world and God cannot.

In this worldview, effectively science has become god, deciding what is true and what is not. Using science to define reality also allows the secular worldview to believe that science defines destiny. This is expressed through “faith” in technology and the conviction that what *can* be done scientifically *must* be done. I often catch myself thinking, “Science will soon have the answer to that problem,” whether I am thinking about some human disease or some environmental problem. While science can be useful, a blind faith in technology has also lead to the nuclear bomb and other technological terrors. Today the discussion is about human cloning—humankind trying to play god. But if one does not believe in God, why not “develop” toward the highest heights a human can obtain?

With scientific reasoning as its basis, the secular worldview’s question to a problem is “*how*” and “*what*”. What has occurred? How has it occurred and what can we do to make it happen again, or stop it from ever happening again? To answer these questions, *methods* are developed. Using mathematical hypotheses, methods are derived from trial and error: If I do “A” and “B” then “C” will always occur. Without this way of thinking, it would have been impossible to put man on the moon. However, over the last century, the secular worldview infiltrated society and teaching styles so thoroughly, that “methods” are seen as the answer to most of life. Thousands of books have been produced about “how to do” just about anything to do with life including: how to fall in love, how to have a good marriage, how to raise your children, how to make friends, etc. If one follows the steps or methods in these different books, one will have a wonderful life. At least that is the claim of the books. Gradually, pragmatism has become the number one value in this worldview. The question is not, “is this the right thing to do” but rather, “will it work?” If it works, then it must be right to do.

The Animistic Worldview

To best explain the animistic worldview, I will speak in extremes that will help identify the values behind the behaviors acted out in life around you. However, unless we were to come across a tribal group hidden somewhere in the forest who have never encountered secular society, we would not find people with pure animistic thinking anymore.

Animists believe there is a spiritual reason behind everything that happens. In other words, there are spirits controlling everything. In effect, human beings have little free will because of the spiritual forces. The best we as humans can do is discover what particular spirits are behind something and then try to influence them to

do what we want. To influence the spirits, fetishes, charms or amulets may be worn on the person or hung over the door. Usually at the direction of the witch doctor, or some other local expert, fetishes can be made from just about anything: pieces of a certain plant, bones, teeth, hair or other body parts of an animal or a human. Even the Bible can be used as a fetish—left open on a certain page near the bed to be sure no demon can attack during the night.

Fatalism is the end result of believing that spirits are in total control. There is no point in trying to change things or improve things because the spirits will decide what happens anyway. Using safety precautions like seat belts in cars or making sure that vehicles are loaded safely is useless because the spirits will decide the outcome.

I was once traveling from Guinea to Senegal, West Africa, in a taxi that the designers created to hold 7 people. At one point on the journey, there were 17 people, plus all their luggage and market goods, in or on top of that old Peugeot. With a load more than double the amount the car was built for, I was not surprised when the axle broke. The owner of the car, however, acted shocked even though it was apparent the axle had been welded back together probably after some similar episode in the past. After all, there is no reason to learn from past experiences when bad spirits caused it, anyway. Often we hear of bad accidents involving overloaded trucks or boats where dozens or maybe even hundreds are killed. If you ask for the reason: “it was the will of the spirits.” In India, a problem might be attributed to “karma,” in the Middle East, “Allah” or in other parts of the world any of a thousand different names for the spirits. I used to smile at guests who would visit West Africa and remark about how “Christian” the city would look because of all the cars with some slogan about Jesus or God on them. Little did they know, these were posted on most cars as a fetish to keep the spirits satisfied and, thus, the cars safe from accidents.

The spirits can be present in any form of creation, but snakes, by far, get the No. 1 suspicion for harboring spirits probably over most of the world. In Liberia they were also thought to be in cats, dogs, owls and egrets. The black-colored dogs and cats got the most blame. But the egret (a white bird who likes to sit on the backs of cattle to eat bugs), is thought to be the spirit of the cow. In Mali I was warned about not jogging through a particular forest because demons lived in the branches of the trees. In West Africa it is believed that there are whole cities of people, witches and other powerful wicked beings living under the sea, conspiring to take captives and do other evil things. Rivers, lakes and mountains can also be filled with spirits.

Most African animists believe that the spirits are their own people (grandparents, parents, cousin, neighbor, etc.) who may have not been treated properly in life and have returned in revenge to torment them. Consequently, the living must gain power over the spirits in order to prevent trouble in their daily lives. Anything negative that happens has been caused by someone cursing them and sending a spirit to do evil, or because the spirit felt like doing it because the animist had not done anything good for the spirit. If appeased, the spirits can bring health, wealth and power. Otherwise, they can bring sickness, destruction of crops, loss of

jobs, and death. The animist must learn how to manipulate the spirits through gifts, charms and sacrifices if they want to survive. Ignoring the spirits is not an option.

Politics and sports events are filled with witchcraft because of this belief system. During elections children are at risk for kidnapping to serve as human sacrifices—even in the most “western-looking” African countries. Sports teams are “blessed” by shamans or other spiritual leaders and then sent out to represent their nation in a contest that sometimes seems more like a fight between spiritual powers, than a game between neighboring teams.

Lest we think this animistic behavior only happens in Africa or Asia, let me also mention that American baseball players often talk about their “lucky charms.” Without them, then cannot play successfully. A Swiss friend once claimed that Swiss athletes are treated and blessed by “spiritual” healers. According to him, those that refuse this treatment are ostracized by other players or not allowed on teams.

In the West there are many superstitions. For instance:

- We get 7 years bad luck for breaking a mirror
- We must “touch wood” when we say something that we are wishing to happen or not happen, otherwise the opposite of what we want might occur;
- It is bad luck to walk under a ladder or to open an umbrella inside a building;
- Carrying a rabbit’s foot is good luck;
- We should toss a pinch of salt over our shoulder if we should spill salt (to keep something bad from happening).

These so-called superstitions are in reality the remnant of animistic beliefs. Salt or a rabbit’s foot give some kind of “spiritual” control over us. We may have forgotten where it came from, but many people will act out these animistic beliefs. Hollywood has helped to maintain animistic belief systems (stories of witches, vampires, ghosts, etc.). More lately, the American and Canadian national park systems have begun teaching Native American animistic belief systems as values for taking better care of creation. While there is a valid place for understanding these cultures and belief systems, as Christians we cannot accept them as our values.

The Biblical Worldview

The Bible teaches us that there is one God. He created the physical world, the spirit world and man. God is Spirit, yet he became man in the person of Jesus Christ. He is totally involved in *all* areas of life—both *physical* and *spiritual*. Man in his stubborn rebellion (and probably with more than a little help from Satan) has developed worldviews that have moved from this central truth to extremes that barely hold any memory of truth in them.

There are spiritual reasons for some things that happen—but spirits do not cause *all* things that happen. If I decide to throw a rock at my friend, it is my decision. As a believer, no spirit can *make* me do it unless I *allow* myself to be possessed and controlled by spiritual forces. If I throw the rock, I am making a decision of my will and then physically doing it. My friend is not being attacked by

spirits, but by *me*. If I get in a car accident because I fell asleep at the wheel, it may be because I was too tired to be driving. Our bodies need sleep and I may have neglected myself so I physically could not stay awake. The accident would be a natural cause of my decision to drive when I should have been sleeping. If I harm someone else in that accident, they have not been harmed by spirits, but by *me*.

There are also physical reasons for some things that happen. In our Liberian neighborhood, there were two wells for drinking water. One well was provided by an international relief organization. It was a sealed well with a pump. The water was clean and safe to drink. No one got sick from drinking the water. The other well was dug by hand and had no top. A bucket on a rope was used to draw the water. Occasionally, children would drop things into the well, or a rat or lizard would fall in and drown. People drinking from this well were regularly sick with diarrhea. It is easy for us to see the physical reason why the open well water was not safe to drink. I have yet to meet a person coming from an animist background who would think any relief agency (including the UN) is more powerful than the spirits. And I would agree with them. Yet, the agency well is clean. If it isn't because the agency is more powerful than the spirits, it must be because the real reason for the clean/dirty water is physical.

At the same time, all things do not have physical causes. We live in a world that is physical, but there is a spiritual realm, as well. The Bible tells us, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (I Peter 5:8). We do have a spiritual enemy.

And in Phil. 1:6 Paul tells us that God will be faithful to complete the work he has begun in us. God is at work in us—not just on Sundays, but everyday—to perfect our character and provide for us. He has not changed. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). He still heals and works miracles in our lives. He has not left us to live this life alone, but wants to be intimately involved in every aspect of our lives. If we have a problem, we do not need to run to the nearest "self-help" book, but rather should look to him to be our provider and our wisdom. Everything, including our work, shopping, and playing, should be done to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31).

The animistic or secular worldview would call us to go to one extreme or the other in seeking solutions to the problems of this life. However, the biblical worldview is somewhere in the middle, between these two extremes. (See diagram.) Some things have physical causes; some things have spiritual causes. As Christians, we need to ask God for the gift of discernment to understand what is happening. If someone is sick because they are drinking water from a dirty well, we are to pray for their healing. At the same time, we need to recognize that they are going to get sick repeatedly unless the physical reason for their sickness is solved. Or if someone gets sick, besides praying for their healing, we should ask the Lord if it is also an attack of Satan. One day, I started coming down with malaria symptoms. In this case, it was

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Unfortunately, when the pressures of this life rise, we normally fall back to the comfort zone we come out of. If we come out of an animistic background, we will tend to see everything with a spiritual cause behind it. If we come from a secular background, we will normally attribute physical causes to our problems. Since I come from a secular background, if I get a headache, the first thing I will do is look for aspirin. It probably will not cross my mind to pray for healing, let alone ask God why I am having a headache. On the other hand, if people are falling asleep during my sermon in Africa, it will most likely be immediately attributed to a “demon of sleep attacking the people,” rather than my style of speaking or perhaps the fact that they were up all night at a prayer meeting. Instead of relying on our simple, easy answers based on the comfort of our perspective worldviews, we need to exercise the gift of discernment. Remembering to ask the Lord “why” something has happened,

instead of letting our old worldview control our thinking, is the first step toward developing a mind like Christ and beginning to think biblically.

Christians and Secular Thinking

In Europe and America the church has been greatly affected by the secular worldview. In extreme cases, there are Christians in these parts of the world that hardly believe in the spirit world, and have a difficult time believing God can provide for them. They believe “God helps those who help themselves” and would probably expect to find that saying in the Bible (which it is not). They have difficulty believing God heals anymore, that He will speak to them through visions or dreams; they do not believe in demons or ever expect to see an angel. They have let their spiritual life be shoved aside so that they live it only as something private. This causes many Christians to leave God out of their Monday through Saturday life. Functionally, they are atheists at work, in the sports club, at the supermarket, etc. God has nothing to do with their normal, everyday life. It is not appropriate to classify one particular church or denomination as having this problem. This invasion has occurred across the board. Even in the most “spirit-filled” churches, some individual members are quietly living their lives this way.

The secular worldview and its belief in systems, methods and technology to run life have also influenced the church. God’s truths have been reduced down to a list of methods. We can find books and teachings on “how to do” just about anything: how to witness; how to receive the Holy Spirit; how to pray; how to have a quiet time; how to cast out demons; how to receive healing; how to see church growth . . .” You name it, it’s there. The Bible has been quantified and analyzed to the point that it is easy for trust to be placed in methods, rather than in God.

From there, it is a simple step to somehow believing that we can control God because he is somehow dependent upon us to do His will. For example, let’s consider Jesus’ command for us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20). When combined with Mark 16:15, this scripture is often reduced to the thought, “go and preach the gospel to the whole world and then I will return.” *Gospel* is usually assumed to mean “gospel of salvation”, in other words, “the good news about salvation.” So, if we give everyone the opportunity to hear about salvation so they might make a choice and we plant a local church that can continue preaching about salvation, we have done what is necessary. Methods and proper techniques are produced and the church is convinced that once the world has “heard the gospel,” Jesus has to return.

In the first place, Jesus does not *have* to do anything, no matter what we have done. Secondly, there is no such phrase in the Bible as “the gospel of salvation.” It is the “gospel of the kingdom.” Salvation is the entryway into the kingdom, but it is not the kingdom in its wholeness. We are to preach the gospel of the kingdom as Jesus did—affecting all of life. Thirdly, Jesus said we are to “make disciples.”

Remember that it took Jesus three years to make 12 disciples. *Jesus is talking about a lifestyle, not a technique or method to make him return.*

Animistic influences on Christians

One day I asked one of our new team members in Liberia to lead worship for our local meeting. She decided to teach us a new worship song so she wrote it out on our whiteboard. I walked into the room, saw the board and panicked. “What pen did you use?” I asked as I ran my finger over the words to see if would erase. Since she was new, it was unlikely she would know the difference between a whiteboard marker and a permanent marker. Sure enough, she had used the wrong pen. As her husband and I quickly worked with kerosene to remove the writing before the board was ruined she remarked, “The devil must not want us to learn this song.”

This is a simplistic, but common example, of seeing “spirits” as the cause of everything that happens. In this case, because she is a Christian, she identified the spirit involved, as “Satan.” According to her worldview, he was the cause of the error. I will not deny that Satan can cause us to “pick up the wrong pen.” However, the problem with her perspective was that it allowed her not to have to take any personal responsibility in the issue. If Christians believe that evil spirits are the cause of *everything* they don’t like or is wrong in their lives, they never have to do anything to correct their character or solve their problems, except pray. It is often difficult to accept responsibility for personal sins and there is the danger that we unconsciously give “glory” to Satan or other demons by blaming them for things we should take responsibility for ourselves.

Another area where Christians living in a culture with an animistic worldview need to be careful is the area of “believing for things in the spirit.” Of course, we are to have faith and believe for those things we have not yet seen, but when a person is still trapped in the mindset of believing *everything* is caused in the spirit realm, there is room for error. Once I was teaching in a church in Africa and as part of the seminar, they were to design a practical, physical project they could realistically expect to do to help their community. One group came with a project that was way beyond their scope financially and physically. They told me they were designing the project in the spirit and would “receive it in the spirit now” for the community. I doubt the community appreciated this “sacrifice” on their part and I am sure nothing practical ever came of it. Another time I was talking to a minister who told me he had a new car. When I asked to see it, I was told he had received it in the spirit, but would soon be able to show it to me.

What is wrong with these two pictures? After all, “we live by faith” (II Cor. 5:7) and faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). This seems to be clear. However, for someone from an animistic culture, there is already a strong sense of the spirit in everything so it is easy to step too far in this direction. We need to understand that to deny what is present (or what is *not* present) in the physical realm is to live a lie. Seeing and receiving everything

through the spirit realm is not how God has created us to live as humans. It robs us of the fullness of life that God intends us to live and it leaves us an easy prey for the enemy to cause unbelief and doubt in our lives when our physical experience does not line up with our spiritual expectations. James tells us to “consider it pure joy. . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4) God has not promised us that we will have no problems and will receive everything we want. God created us as both physical and spiritual beings to live on this earth in wholeness, enjoying the physical world around us and having a spiritual relationship with him. We are to believe in faith and work physically toward changing the world around us.

Discernment

One evening I was sitting on the steps in front of our house in Liberia. There were no moon or city lights to dim the lights of the stars, so it was especially spectacular. One of my Christian Liberian friends came and sat there with me and started asking me about man traveling to the moon. I casually answered his questions, until finally he confessed to me, “I don’t believe man has ever been on the moon. I mean, how could he really get there? It’s impossible. It must just be a story like we see in the movies.” I was shocked. After all, I grew up in the 60’s when we all saw men going into space. I still remember sitting in my grandmother’s living room as we watched man’s first steps on the moon. Of course, it happened!

I thought about it for a moment and realized his worldview was limiting him in picturing man walking around on moon, while mine easily adapted to it. Then I thought of an area where my worldview is limited. It is commonly believed by West Africans that there are whole communities of witches and other demonic manifestations living under the sea along the coast. These witches and demons come from the water to do harm to the people living above water. They may kidnap victims and imprison them under the sea as well, forcing them to become slaves or fellow witches. There are published testimonies of people who have become Christians after their escape from this underwater world. I answered my friend, “I believe man has been to the moon. However, I confess I have a really difficult time with believing there are witches living in cities under the sea along the coast here in West Africa. You believe that, don’t you?”

He nodded, “Yes, of course.”

I took a deep breath and then I confessed, “Well, I don’t care how hard I try, my worldview can’t get around that one. I just cannot bring myself to fully believe it. I can accept you believing it, however. How about if I believe man went to the moon and you believe people are living under the sea?” He laughed and agreed.

When pressure comes or we are faced with things we do not understand, we will easily retreat in our minds to what is comfortable for us. Someone coming out

of an animistic background, will see spiritual causes for strange things, while the person with a secular background will see physical reasons first.

In a village in Africa there once was a man, sick from malaria. A friend of his and the white doctor discussed the causes of the sickness:

Tribesman: This man is sick because someone worked sorcery against him.

White Doctor: This man is sick from malaria because he was bitten by an infected mosquito.

Tribesman: Yes, he was bitten by a mosquito, but who sent the mosquito?

Who is right? The answer is determined by our worldview since it is our worldview that explains life to us. If that worldview has not been disciplined and renewed, we will not have the spiritual discernment to think as Christ (I Cor. 2:14-16). It is so easy, so comfortable, to allow the old way of life with its animistic or secular influences to affect the living of our lives today. But Paul tells us we should “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we [should] take captivity every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). We need to discover what those wrong thoughts are so we can see our minds renewed and begin to think as Christ. Our goal should be to grow toward a biblical worldview and to leave behind those things of our old life, including the old ways of animistic or secular thinking, in order to live a life of freedom in our hearts and minds, no longer captive to sinful thought patterns.