

What is Your



Worldview?

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What is Your Worldview?

As is depicted by the graphic on the front cover, when people usually see either the good things or the bad things in the world, they are typically said to be looking through rose colored or at least colored glasses. That means everything they see of the world is affected by the way they are looking at the world – their worldview.

What is a worldview?

A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which a person believes (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of the world. These presuppositions are unquestioned by the person believing them and rarely thought or talked about unless challenged by the writings, statements, or actions of someone with a different worldview. A person's worldview is how they give reason to the facts of reality and how they tie all of life together to give purpose to their life and how they live it. An individual's worldview is his or her basis for answering such questions as:

- Who am I?
- Where did I come from?
- Where am I going?
- What is true and what is false?
- How should I conduct my life, or act?
- Does God exist and if so what is my response to Him?

Answers for the following seven questions will reveal a person's worldview.

1. **What is prime reality – the really real?** Some possible answers could be: God, or the gods, or the material cosmos (universe).
2. **What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?** Is the world created or autonomous, chaotic or orderly, or matter or spirit? Do we have a personal relationship to the world or is it entirely separate from us?
3. **What is a human being?** Are we a highly complex machine, a sleeping god, a person made in the image of God, or a “naked” ape?
4. **What happens to a person at death?** Is it extinction, transformation to a higher state, departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side,” or something else?
5. **Why is it possible to know anything at all?** Is it because consciousness and rationality developed as a part of evolution or are we made in the image of an all-knowing God?
6. **How do we know what is right and wrong?** Is it from ideas developed so we can survive culturally and physically or is it from the image of God whose character is good?
7. **What is the meaning of human history?** Is it to do the work of the gods, to create a paradise on earth, or to prepare people for life in community with a loving and holy God?

These questions boggle the mind. Either the answers are obvious, and we wonder why anyone would bother to ask such questions, or else we wonder how any of them can be answered with any certainty. If we feel the answers are too obvious, then we have a worldview but have no idea that many other people don't share it.

What is obvious to us may be “a lie from hell” for our neighbor. If we feel that none of the questions can be answered we have already adopted a skeptical worldview that can lead to nihilism – a denial of the possibility of knowledge and that anything is valuable. We cannot avoid answering such questions. While we may not consciously answer them and purposely adopt a worldview, we will answer them in some fashion and create a worldview by which we live. What is your worldview?

How does a worldview begin and how does it change?

It would seem to be obvious that we aren't born with our worldview already established. So, from where do we get our worldview? Does it come from our parents, our community, our culture, or somewhere else?

A baby begins without any worldview. All babies know is that they are uncomfortable and need something. They don't even know what they need – whether it is food, a clean diaper, or just the touch of another human being – and so they express their discomfort in the only way they can – they cry. Some person, some “thing,” or somehow that need is met and they become comfortable, so they stop crying. As a baby grows, it discovers there are different types of discomfort and reasons for it. So, they learn to make their needs known in different ways so that their world responds to their “wants.” From that process, babies develop the worldview that they are the center of the universe and everything revolves and reacts around them to meet their needs.

Eventually, this “center of the universe” worldview of a baby will clash with another worldview, whether it is the worldview of their parents, a sibling, or some other being, and they learn that their worldview must be changed. Ideally, this happens in a family as loving parents teach their child that all of their “wants” are not “needs,” that some “wants” must go unmet so someone else's need can be met, and that sometimes they must be the one to meet their own “want.” From this, a child's “center of the universe” worldview changes to a “family” worldview.

As a child continues to mature, they are bombarded with facts and lies about the world around them that must be dealt with by their worldview. Some children respond by rejecting the facts even though they can see the truth of the facts with their own eyes. That's what leads some people to still be a member of the Flat Earth Society even though pictures from orbiting spacecraft clearly show that the earth is spherical not flat. Some children accept lies as truth and incorporate them into their worldview. A child may be told that it doesn't matter what you believe just as long as you believe it sincerely with all your heart. So, if they believe that the ends justify the means, they will lie, cheat, steal, and kill to get what they want. That results in gangs killing one another in “turf” wars or killing innocent bystanders as part of their initiation rites.

Even after a child becomes an adult, their worldview is impacted by other worldviews, facts, and lies. Every adult has to decide how they are going to react to these interactions with their worldview and how they react determines how they live and what they do.

Religious and Non-religious Worldviews

Worldviews come in two varieties – religious and non-religious.

Religious Worldviews

The worldview of persons who are following a world religion tends to include the following concepts:

1. There is a universal spirit, god, deity or divine entity
2. This divinity has established an eternal moral order that, at least in part, can be known by human beings

3. People have the duty to follow eternal moral dictates
4. This human conduct has long-term significance (beyond individual death).

It is important to note that any person's religious worldview need not be, and in fact probably is not, the same as the fundamentals of any single religious tradition. A worldview is acquired on an ongoing basis, and may blend religious ideas and practices acquired from a multitude of experiences over time. A person with exposure to several religious traditions is likely to have a worldview that is "cobbled" from the varied experiences and understandings to which he has been exposed.

Religious worldviews are categorized according to the fundamentals of a particular religion, and called by the religion's name (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Moslem, Sikh, Tao, etc).

Non-religious Worldviews

In general, a *nonreligious* worldview is absent of supernatural interpretations, whereas a religious worldview permits or embraces such concepts. Along with religious worldviews, non-religious worldviews have been present and important throughout recorded history. A significant proportion of the world's people today have a non-religious worldview about life and the universe.

The worldview of non-religious people doesn't have the major elements found in the worldview derived from any religion. A non-religious worldview is devoid of any divine entity or deity's involvement in human life and devoid of considerations of an existence after death. Their views on morality must be naturalistic because there is nothing but the world to determine what is "right" or "wrong."

Non-religious worldviews are also given categories such as Agnostic, Atheist, Freethinker, Humanist, Materialist, Rationalist, Skeptic, and so on.

Worldview and Behavior toward Religion

We must be cautious about relating conduct to a particular worldview.

Many people say "I am not religious" or "I do not have a religion," while they may actually hold to a religious worldview. Images of a divine or belief in spirits or magical forces may populate their minds, and they may use what are deemed supernaturally revealed dictates to guide their actions. They may continue to believe in miracles or other metaphysical events that go along with a religious tradition, or with some blending of traditions and practices.

Holding a non-religious worldview is *not* the same as disliking or "being hostile to" religion. Non-religious people have varying stances toward religion itself and/or any particular religious worldviews. Many non-religious people see much value in religion (for *others*). Others may take a rather dispassionate view. There are non-religious people who do dislike religion. Their aversion may grow out of personal experience with a religion, or it may come from a reasoned analysis from which they have reached conclusions regarding the intrinsic worth/harm to humanity. It is important to remember that a person's worldview is their *internal* way of viewing the world and living in it. Personal worldview and "attitude toward religion" are separate characteristics.

Holding a non-religious worldview is *not* the same as not practicing religion. It is possible that a person who holds to a non-religious worldview may still attend rites and participate in traditions of a familiar religion because of family or societal expectations or material incentives and penalties, etc.

Worldview Questions

Answers for the following seven questions will reveal a person's worldview.

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Questions are from James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (4th edition) (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

If you will take some time to answer those questions, you will have a better idea of what your worldview is. Listening to how other people talk about things and comparing that to these questions will give you a little understanding of what their primary worldview is. That may help your interactions with other people and may even help you understand why some of the events we hear reported in the news are a direct result of the conflicting worldviews of the people involved.

Appendix A lists the answers that many religious worldviews would give to these questions and Appendix B shows the development of worldviews from Christian Theism through New Age and lists the answers that those worldviews would give.

The Biblical Worldview

The following presentation will develop a biblical worldview as described by biblical passages. As you follow through the presentation you will be able to write out for yourself how the biblical worldview answers the seven questions.

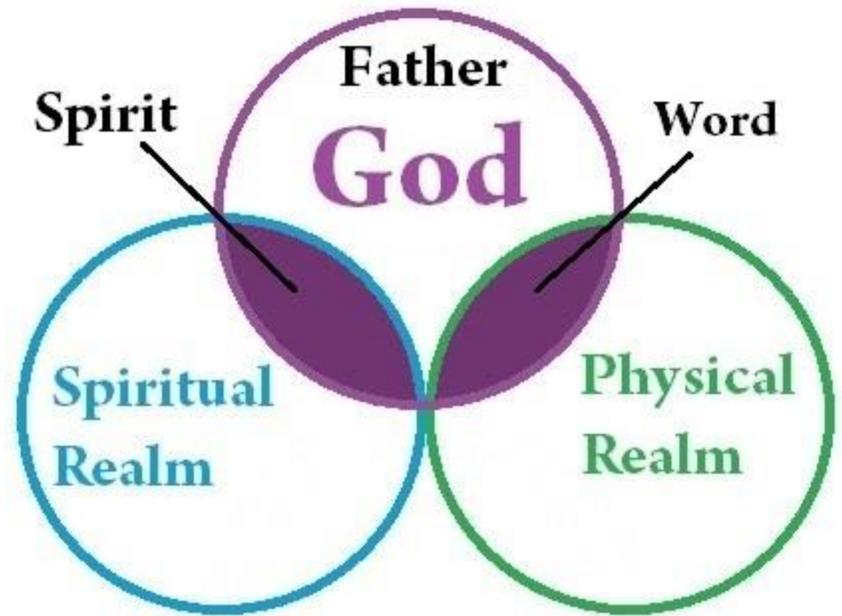
The biblical worldview begins where the Bible begins with the beginning of the world. “In the beginning God ... and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2) “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) So, before anything was created, God existed as Father, Word, and Spirit as shown in the diagram to the right. This is the Trinity as depicted in the Bible and he existed before anything else so that means he exists outside of and beyond all that he created



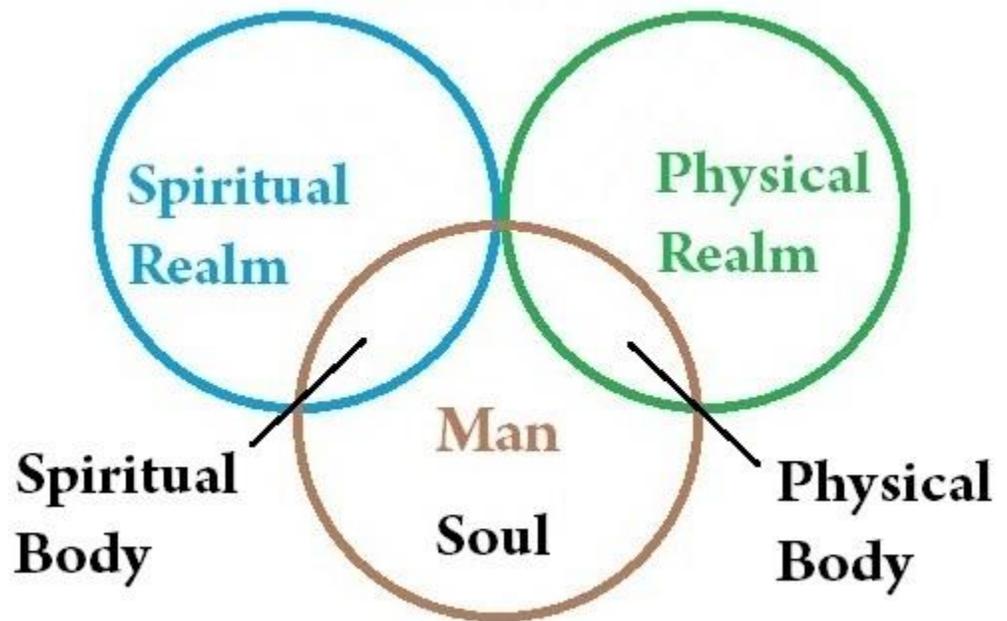
“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? ... On what were its footings set or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4 – 7) So we know God created the spiritual realm before he created the physical realm because angels were present at the laying of the earth’s foundations. This is depicted in the diagram to the right.



There is one and only one God who created everything in the physical and spiritual realms and is self-existent. (Genesis 1:1 – 2; Exodus 3:14; Deuteronomy 6:4) He exists beyond and outside of all that he has created, including time. Thus he is all-powerful and all knowing; being able to interact with the spiritual and physical realms of the universe he created, and knowing everything of the past, present and future all at the same time. “Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you.” (Deuteronomy 32:6) God has revealed himself as the Father who is the source of life. As the Father, God reigns with providential care over his universe, his creatures, and the flow of human history according to his own purposes and by his will determines what will be done and when.



“Then God said, ‘let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26 – 27) “And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) This shows that man was made in the image of God and therefore had a part in the spiritual realm and in the physical realm as well as a soul which is his mind, will and emotions.



“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ ... Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for she was taken out of man.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” (Genesis 2:18 – 25) This completes what was said in Genesis 1:27 and describes the process God used to make man and woman in his own image.

God gave man the freedom of will to choose to accept God as the one who had the right to control man’s life or to disobey and try to be god for himself like Satan apparently had previously. And thus he gave him one command: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the

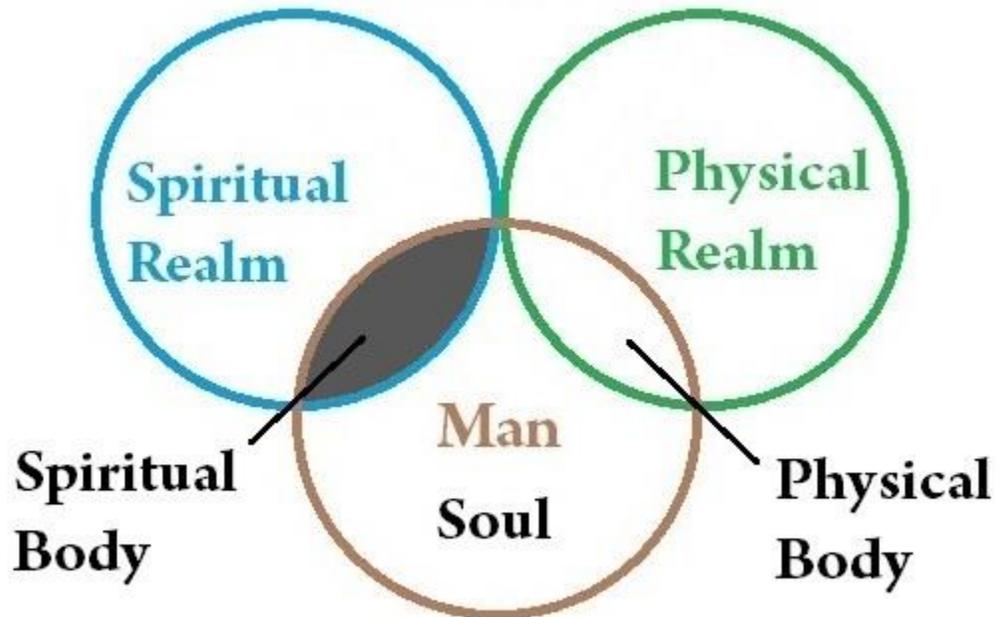
knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:16 – 17) Satan tempted Eve and Adam who was there with her by asking “Did God say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” Eve corrected his statement that it was only from one tree that they must not eat or they would die. Satan replied that “‘You will not surely die.’” When Eve and Adam ate of the tree, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” (Genesis 3:1- 1-7)

They did not die physically but a change had come about in their lives. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

(Hebrews 4:12) Although Adam and Eve hadn’t died physically, they had died to the reality of their spiritual self. When God came walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, he called out to Adam asking “Where

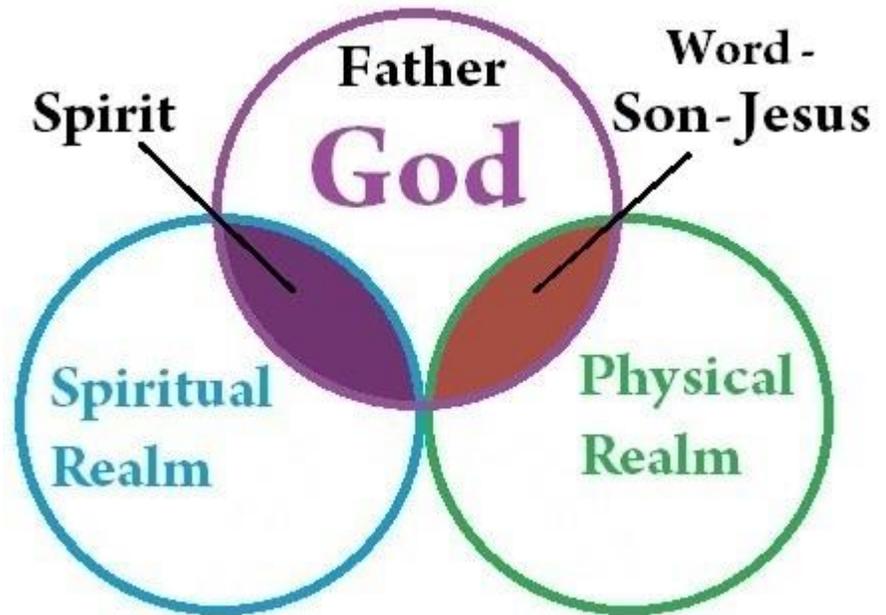
are you?” Adam replied “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” God asked “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” Adam blamed Eve and she blamed the Serpent (Satan). God cursed the serpent to crawl on its belly all its life and said “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.” Then he promised a Messiah from the seed of the woman that would make things right between God and man, saying: “He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:8 – 15) Adam and Eve had died to their spiritual side and the spiritual realm. Thus they had lost the intimate relationship they had experienced with each other and with God from their creation and they were ashamed that their disobedience of God’s one command had caused this death. By their disobedience, they had tried to be god for themselves, deciding what was right and wrong, and had not let God be in control and trust his perfect goodness which he had shown them through his creation and the love he had shown them. From that time forward, as they procreated, their children all inherited their deadness to their spiritual side and their separation from God, their Creator. This is what some people call “original sin” and it is the problem that God addressed with Adam and Eve when he told the serpent (Satan) that he would put enmity between the serpent’s offspring and the woman’s offspring. When God said “he will crush your head and you will strike his heel,” it was the promise of a future person born of a woman who would overcome the problem Satan had tempted Adam and Eve to create by disobeying God. (Genesis 3:15)

Finally God told Adam that “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:17 – 19) Although man did not immediately die physically, God pronounced that he would eventually and his physical body would return to the earth from which it was formed.



“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12) “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21 – 22) “The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

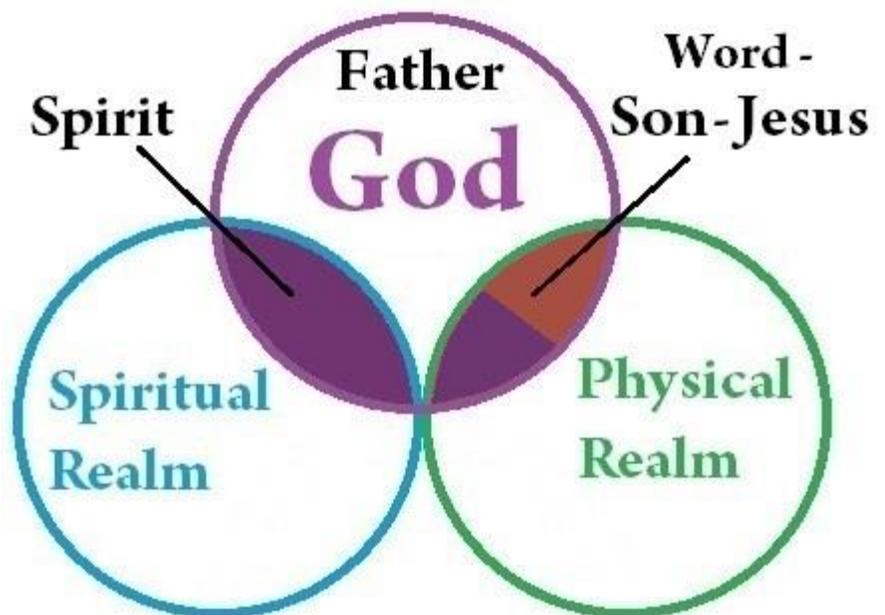
At the beginning of his gospel account, John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ... The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1 – 4, 14) “Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.” (1 Corinthians 8:6)



“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” (Galatians 4:4 – 5) God sent an angel to announce to Mary that God had chosen her to bear a son whom she would call Jesus because “he will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32 – 33) When Mary asked how it could happen since she was a virgin, the angel answered “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

So, the Word became flesh, born of a virgin without the seed of man or woman but by the creative power of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Word became a human who was named Jesus and that was born without inherited (original) sin so that he could destroy what Satan’s temptation had caused.

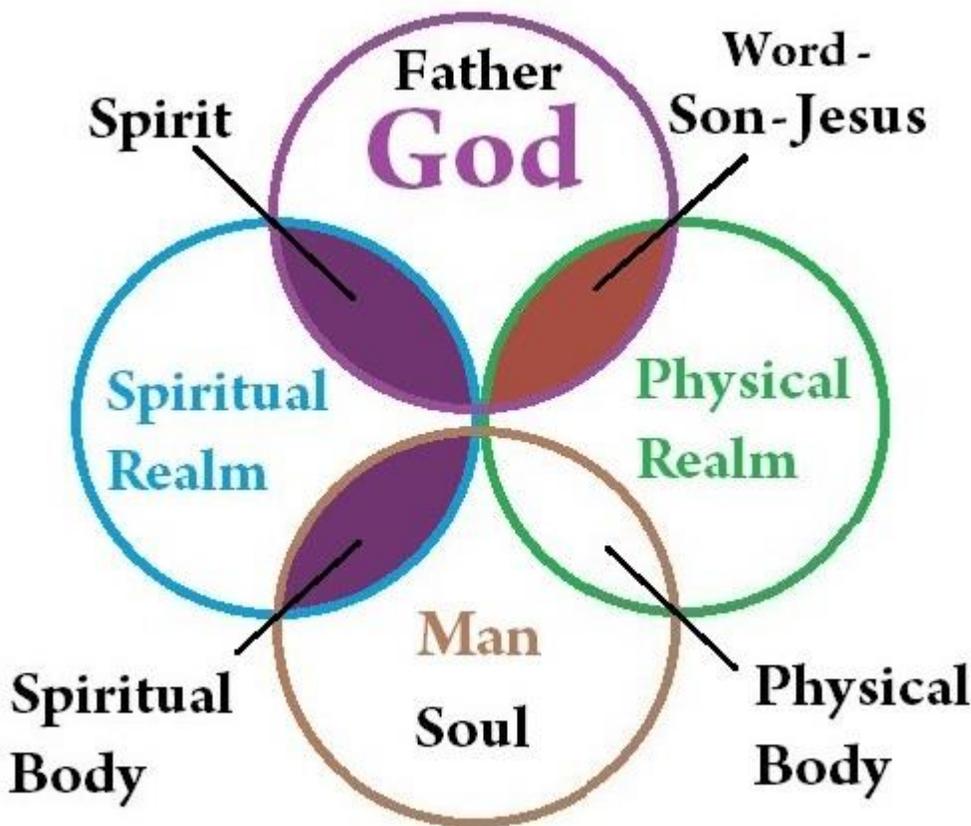
In becoming a man, Jesus gave up some of the glory he had before the beginning of the world. “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:5) As a child, Jesus learned the Scriptures and “grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” (Luke 2:40, 52) At his baptism he was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit. “You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning



in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37 – 38) “When all the people were begin baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:21 – 22) “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:10) Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying himself completely with mankind yet without sin.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5 – 8) “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:17 – 18) “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ... Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father living in me who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.” (John 14:9 – 11) “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15 – 17) “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

After Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected, he appeared to his disciples that evening in a room which they had locked for fear of the Jews. He said to them “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21 – 22) Paul proclaimed “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you.” (Romans 8:9 – 11) By his substitutionary death on the cross as the perfect sinless sacrifice, Jesus made it possible for every person to have a right relationship with God. That’s why Jesus told Nicodemus, a member of the ruling Sanhedrin who came to visit him at night to question all that



Jesus was doing, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

By his resurrection from the dead with a glorified body, Jesus proved that he is God and that everything he said is true. Before Jesus allowed himself to be crucified on a cross to pay the penalty of death that every person deserves for trying to be god for their own life, he told his close disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:1-3) The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers about this return. “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thessalonians 4:15 – 17) To the Corinthian believers, Paul wrote: “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:6 – 10)

As he promised, Jesus will someday return in power and glory to judge the world and to complete his mission to free mankind from the enslaving power of disobedience of God. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matthew 25:31 – 32) “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. ... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. ... The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. ... If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Rev 20:11 – 15) When their life is judged, they will have missed the way and the life (John 14:6) that leads to being with Jesus forever and will be sent to spend eternity separated from God and his love (the second death).

So the question is – do you believe Jesus is God and that he died on a cross to pay for your sin of trying to be God for yourself? If you believe that, will you ask Jesus to be the Lord of your life and make his death apply to your life so you can live for eternity in God’s love?

Now, how would you say the biblical worldview answers the worldview questions?

What is prime reality – the really real? Some possible answers could be: God, or the gods, or the material cosmos (universe).

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us? Is the world created or autonomous, chaotic or orderly, or matter or spirit? Do we have a personal relationship to the world or is it entirely separate from us?

What is a human being? Are we a highly complex machine, a sleeping god, a person made in the image of God, or a “naked” ape?

What happens to a person at death? Is it extinction, transformation to a higher state, departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side,” or something else?

Why is it possible to know anything at all? Is it because consciousness and rationality developed as a part of evolution or are we made in the image of an all-knowing God?

How do we know what is right and wrong? Is it from ideas developed so we can survive culturally and physically or is it from the image of God whose character is good?

What is the meaning of human history? Is it to do the work of the gods, to create a paradise on earth, or to prepare people for life in community with a loving and holy God?

The final question is for every person to answer: What is your worldview? I hope you will choose the biblical worldview and acknowledge Jesus is God, accept his death as making it possible for you to have a right relationship with God and ask Jesus to be the ruler and guide of your life.

Appendix A – Religious Worldviews

Buddhism

What is prime reality – the really real?

Generally recognizes the existence of “supernatural” or god-like beings, but adherents do not believe in an omnipotent creator God. All Buddhists recognize a transcendent truth and some conceive this in terms of a “Buddha Nature” which infuses everything.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

Nothing is permanent. The creation is cyclical, having no start and no end. For Buddhists, it is part of the wheel of suffering to which we are attached through rebirth. Creation is seen as just part of this wheel.

What is a human being?

Individual selves do not truly exist. Buddhists have to try and convince themselves that they have no personal worth or significance even though daily life makes them live as if they do have significance.

What happens to a person at death?

At death, each life continues in some other form—human, divine or animal, depending upon the results of behavior in the last life. The goal of Buddhism is to extinguish the flame of wanting or attachment to the sense of self so that rebirth does not occur and Nirvana (pure nonexistence) is attained.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

There are Four Noble Truths: life is full of suffering, suffering is caused by craving, suffering will cease only when craving ceases and that can be achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path which consists of right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. There is no consideration about why it is possible to know these things and follow them.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Right and wrong is not determined by people. They are a function of Karma (cause and effect). There is no appeal, no mercy, and no escape from Karma except when a person achieves a state of pure nonexistence (Nirvana).

What is the meaning of human history?

There is no meaning to history.

Venerated Literature

Sacred are the teachings of the Buddha, handed down in a collection of writings known as the “Three Baskets” (*Tri-Pitaka*) and comprising the discourses of the Buddha, the rules of discipline for Buddhist monks and nuns, and further knowledge—the “great teaching basket.” Three versions survive: one in the Pali language (used by southern Buddhists), and two Mahayana versions in Chinese and in Tibetan (used by northern Buddhists). The Mahayana versions include later books not recognized as authoritative by southern Buddhists.

Prophets and Founders

The Buddha was an Indian Prince, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in the 5th century BC. He became known as the “Enlightened One” (the Buddha) when he understood the cause of suffering and the way to end suffering.

Rites of Birth and Death

Buddhists invite monks and nuns to attend such events and to read the scriptures, but the main ceremonies are generally from older traditions. In Theravada Buddhism, funerals are occasions for teaching about suffering and impermanence and for chanting paritta (protection) in order to gain and transfer merit for the sake of the deceased.

Hinduism

What is prime reality – the really real?

There is one Godhead or Divine Power, with innumerable forms. Three major forms are: Brahma, creator of each universe; Vishnu, sustainer and defender; and Shiva, destroyer and re-creator. Vishnu has ten main forms or avatars, which come to the help of the universe. These include Krishna and Rama.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

Creation is cyclical. From the destruction of a previous universe, Brahma arises to create a new universe; Vishnu sustains it through a cycle of birth, growth and decline; Shiva destroys the universe and the cycle begins again.

What is a human being?

The eternal soul (*atman*) of man is a manifestation or “spark” of Brahman that is mysteriously trapped in the physical body. The physical body is ultimately an illusion with little inherent or permanent worth.

What happens to a person at death?

At death, bodies are cremated and the ashes thrown on to a sacred river. The River Ganges is the most sacred river of all.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

Knowledge only comes from Brahman.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Depending upon the Karma — the consequences of action in this present life — at death, the soul (*atman*) is reborn in either a higher or lower physical form. Through devotion or correct behavior it is possible to ascend through the orders of reincarnation, achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and be reunited with the Divine Power.

What is the meaning of human history?

Time is cyclical. The world passes through various stages, from birth to growth to decline. We are currently in Kali Yuga, the age of decline. The world will eventually be destroyed, only for a new world to appear in the distant future.

There are thousands of Hindu gurus, reflecting the huge variety of teachings. A guru, or teacher, is someone who has gained enlightenment through knowledge and practice. A Hindu wanting to follow a particular path of prayer, meditation and devotion usually has a guru.

Venerated Literature

There are many sacred books, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* are seen as the most important.

Prophets and Founders

There are thousands of Hindu gurus, reflecting the huge variety of teachings. A guru, or teacher, is someone who has gained enlightenment through knowledge and practice. A Hindu wanting to follow a particular path of prayer, meditation and devotion usually has a guru.

Rites of Birth and Death

Before birth and in the first months of life, there are many ceremonies. These include: reciting the scriptures to the baby in the womb; casting its horoscope when it is born; cutting its hair for the first time. At death, bodies are cremated and the ashes thrown on to a sacred river. The River Ganges is the most sacred river of all.

Islam

What is prime reality – the really real?

There is but one God, Allah (Arabic term). Allah is indivisible, transcendent, has no equals, and is the creator and sustainer of all. He is similar to nothing and nothing is comparable to him. Worship and obedience belong to Allah alone. Joining other gods with Allah is an unforgivable sin. Anyone who joins other gods with Allah has strayed far away from the truth and committed shirk (apostasy). Allah and his creation are distinctly different. It is not a part of him and he is not a part of it, although his essence is everywhere present in his creation. Still, only Allah is to be worshipped and not his creation either directly or indirectly.

“Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.” (Surah 112)

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

Allah is the creator. He simply says “Be” and all things exist. “He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms (or Colors).” (Surah 59) Allah guides his creation and has a purpose for all forms of life within creation. Allah created angels and Satan (one who disobeyed) in a realm other than this world.

What is a human being?

Humans are a creation of Allah and basically pure, but they are weak, forgetful, and easily swayed from the truth, so they need guidance. At birth, the call to prayer is whispered into the baby's ear. After seven days the baby is given a name, shaved, and baby boys are circumcised. At a person's death, the body is washed as if

ready for prayer and then buried as soon as possible. Cremation is not allowed.

What happens to a person at death?

There is one life only. After death, the individual awaits the Day of Judgment when all will be brought back to life and judged. Paradise awaits those who have lived according to the will of Allah (shari'ah). Those who have failed to do so face punishment (burning in hell). Those who commit shirk (apostasy) will also go to hell.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

It is only possible to know anything because Allah has revealed it. God began by revealing the names of all the animals to Adam. (Surah 2:29) Allah has spoken to humanity through many prophets, including Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, and Jesus, but Muhammad is the last. Allah is the supreme lawgiver, and his laws are for the whole of creation, not just for human beings. The *Qur'an* (Koran) is seen as the infallible word of Allah, which the Angel Jibra'il (Gabriel) dictated to Muhammad over 23 years from 610 – 632 CE (AD). What was dictated to Muhammad was written down by his scribes and has been preserved without change in its present form today. [The final compilation was completed about 650.] Muslims believe that the Qur'an was written by Allah before time began.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Islam means to be in submission to Allah. There have been numerous prophets who came to remind people of Allah's will. Moses revealed it to the Jews and Jesus revealed it through his life and the gospel (Injil), but those have been corrupted. The final prophet is believed to be Muhammad who lived from 570 to 632 CE (AD). Also considered worthy of obedience is the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (his sayings and actions, his approvals and disapprovals). The Sunnah is collected in books separate from the Qur'an and are known as hadith books. While the Qur'an is 100% the word of God revealed to the Prophet, not every hadith is authentic. Early Muslim scholars have classified hadith into various categories ranging from different levels of authenticity to false hadith.

What is the meaning of human history?

Time is linear. Allah will restore the world at the end of time through a coming human leader known as the Mahdi and will announce the Judgment Day. All will be judged on that day for their actions in submitting to Allah, obeying the Shari'ah and advancing the Ummah (people of Islam). The Mahdi will bring about the destruction of the infidels (those not submitting to Allah).

The Five Pillars of Islam

1. Shahadah: Confession of faith. "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger."
2. Salat: Prayer. All Muslims are to pray five times every day, facing Mecca.
3. Zakat: Tithing. Muslims must give at least 2.5 percent of their total wealth to the poor and needy.
4. Sawm: Fasting. During the holy month of Ramadan (celebrating the giving of the Qur'an), Muslims are to refrain from food, water, and sex from sunrise to sunset. The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, and months begin when the first crescent of a new moon is sighted. Since the Islamic lunar calendar year is 11 to 12 days shorter than the solar year, Ramadan migrates through the seasons.
5. Hajj: Pilgrimage. If at all possible, at least once in a lifetime Muslims are to travel to Mecca to engage in rituals of prayer and worship at the central shrine in Islam's holiest city.

The Prophet

- Most Muslims believe that Muhammad was sinless, but not divine.
- Most Muslims believe that the prophet was illiterate.
- The prophetic status of Muhammad is not to be questioned.
- Muhammad provides the greatest example for all aspects of life.
- The traditions about the prophet are known as hadith.
- Allah gave the prophet permission to have 12 wives.

Other Major Muslim Beliefs

- Islam started with Adam, not with Muhammad.
- People are saved by the will of God through obedience to God's law, Shari'ah.
- Though humans are imperfect, they are not fallen through original sin.
- Those chosen by God for salvation will enter paradise. Only God knows whom he has chosen.
- The damned will burn in eternal torment in Hell.
- All countries and peoples should follow Islam and Islamic law.
- Muslims are to engage in jihad, which usually means private spiritual struggle.
- Jihad sometimes demands defense of Muslim territory and military aggression.
- Muslim males can marry up to four wives.

Judaism

What is prime reality – the really real?

One God (YHWH, whose name must not be pronounced) has created all things and, through his special covenant with the Jews, has guided human life and destiny.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

God is the creator and the Book of Genesis says he created in six days and rested on the seventh. God will end creation in his own time.

What is a human being?

All humans are descendants of Adam and Eve who were created by God in his image.

What happens to a person at death?

There is one life only. Individuals await the Day of Judgment when God will raise every person to life and judgment. Some Jewish people believe that the soul is judged immediately after death.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

All knowledge comes from knowing God.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Right and wrong are known by the written law (Torah) and the oral law (Talmud). There is one life only.

What is the meaning of human history?

Time is linear. A "Chosen One of God" (Messiah) will come when either the world has become a better place or when it has reached the point of greatest trouble. The coming of this Messiah will herald an era of world peace.

Venerated Literature

The Hebrew Bible has three parts: The Torah (Five Books of Moses), the Prophets and the Writings such as Esther and the Psalms. The Torah contains laws, doctrine and guidance on way of life, as well as accounts of the early history of the Jewish people and their relationship with God.

Prophets and Founders

Through the covenant with Abraham (considered the patriarch) and his descendants, God chose the Jews as his special people. This covenant was reaffirmed and consolidated with Moses, when God gave Moses the Law by which the Israelites were to live.

Rites of Birth and Death

Baby boys are circumcised eight days after birth. The names of girls are announced in the synagogue on the first Sabbath after birth. Burial takes place within 24 hours of death and cremation is very rare. The family is in full mourning for seven days and, for eleven months, the special prayer Kadish is said every day.

Festivals and Calendar Events

Passover or *Pesach* celebrates the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (the seder meal in the home is observed); *Shavuot* marks the giving of the Law to Moses; *Rosh Hashanah* is the New Year festival, and *Yom Kippur*, the day of repentance, *Chanukah* (*Hanukkah*) celebrates the survival of the Jews.

Sikhism

What is prime reality – the really real?

There is one God, who is the true Guru (teacher). He is creator, sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal. Unbounded by time or space, he both transcends and indwells the universe. God is the abstract principle of truth and has never known an incarnation and cannot be defined. However, God is personal in that he can be loved and honored, and he makes himself known to those who are ready.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The world was created by God. Man is the highest of God's creation but all life is good.

What is a human being?

Humans are the highest order of creation but they are separated from God because of self-centeredness and their willful ignorance of God. Attachment to this world means rebirth, so that release from this world is the highest goal.

What happens to a person at death?

Each individual has many reincarnations, but being born a human means the soul is nearing the end of rebirth. God judges each soul at death and may either reincarnate the soul or, if pure enough, allow it to rest with him.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

Knowledge only comes from knowing God.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Since man is separated from God by self-centeredness and willful ignorance of God, this is the source of all human misery and unhappiness. Consequently, people are bound up in a process known as the transmigration of the soul (reincarnation). The position of a person in their next reincarnation is dependent of Karma, the idea that one's thoughts, words, and deeds have a direct impact on their next reincarnation. The goal is to break this cycle.

What is the meaning of human history?

Time is cyclical, and beliefs associated with time are similar to those of Hinduism.

Venerated Literature

The Guru Granth Sahib, a collection of writings and hymns by some of the ten Gurus of Sikhism, plus material from Muslim and Hindu writers. It was compiled mid-16th century and was made the eleventh and final Guru of Sikhism at the death of the tenth Guru in 1708.

Prophets and Founders

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was the first Guru of Sikhism and was followed by nine more human Gurus. The tenth and last was Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1780), who appointed the Scriptures, the Granth Sahib, as the final Guru. Sikhism is a syncretism of Hinduism and Islam.

Rites of Birth and Death

At birth, the Mool mantra, the core teaching of Sikhism, is whispered into the baby's ear. The baby is named at the gurdwara, or place of worship. The Guru Granth Sahib is opened and the first letter of the first word on the page gives the first letter of the baby's name. At death, the body is cremated and the ashes thrown onto running water.

Festivals and Calendar Events

Baisakhi celebrates the foundation of the Khalsa; other major festivals include the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism; the Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur; and the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh.

Information on these worldviews adapted from "*The Universe next Door*" by James W. Sire and from studies done by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention

Appendix B – Change from Christian Theism to New Age

Christian Theism

This worldview dominated the Western world until the end of the seventeenth century (1601 - 1700).

What is prime reality – the really real?

God is infinite and personal (triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good.

Infinite – beyond scope or measure. God has no twin but is the be-all and end-all of existence. He is the only self-existent being.

Personal – not a mere force or energy. God has the two basic characteristics of personality – self-reflection and self-determination. God knows himself to be (self-conscious) and is self-determinate (thinks and acts). Since God, the ultimate reality, is personal that means people are like him, not the other way around. God is not only personal but triune, that is, within the one essence called “God” are three personages (Father, Son [Jesus] and Holy Spirit), co-equally and co-eternally God.

Transcendent – beyond us and our world. God bears a relation to us and the rest of creation but he is much more than that. He is as far beyond what he has created as we beyond anything that we create.

Immanent – God is present every place his creation is.

Omniscient – all-knowing, knows the end even from the beginning.

Sovereign – God is concerned about all the actions in his universe. Nothing is beyond his interest, control, and authority.

Good – This means that there is no sense in which goodness surpasses God or God surpasses goodness. It is the essence of his nature. God and goodness are interchangeable.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

God created the cosmos (universe) ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of natural causes in an open system.

Ex nihilo – means “out of nothing” and indicates that God did not create it from pre-existing chaos or material or from himself. God spoke and the material of the universe was formed.

Uniformity of natural causes in an open system – The universe is not chaotic but orderly. Since it is an “open” system, it is not preprogrammed and running without input and the watchfulness of God. Humans and God both make choices which affect the operation of the universe.

What is a human being?

Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, freedom of choice, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity. The image of God is where man derives the basic characteristics he possesses. It means we are like God but are not and will not be God. We are eternal creatures just like God. Humans were created good but through choice disobeyed God and defaced all of

creation. Since all humans are descended from Adam and Eve, we all inherit their fallen nature and must be changed in order to be restored to a right relationship with God. Jesus came to earth as a human and died to make it possible to restore all humans to a right relationship with God, something humans cannot do for themselves.

What happens to a person at death?

At death, the eternal part of humans either goes to be with God or is separated from God. Since humans are created in God's image, they have an eternal nature. At death, that eternal nature will either be with God or separated from God for eternity based on each human's decision to believe that Jesus is God and that his death can restore them to a right relationship with God.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them. The foundation of human knowledge is the character of God as creator. Since we are made in his image and he knows all things, we can sometimes know some things, as God enables us to discover them or has revealed them to us.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Morality, right and wrong, is defined by the nature of God. Since God is good by nature, anything that he wants done is good, the right thing to do, and anything else is bad, the wrong thing to do. Whatever God has revealed as the way he wants humans to act is the right and anything else is the wrong.

What is the meaning of human history?

History is a linear, meaningful sequence of events beginning with God's creation of the universe and leading to a judgment of each human's acceptance or rejection of God's right to direct all of his universe including humans. History is linear – not reversible, repeatable, or cyclic. It is directed toward an end that has been determined by God, its creator and controller. The exact sequence of events is not predetermined but based on the decisions of humans and God. Thus, things that happen are the result of human actions as well as the action of God. But judgment has been determined as the final outcome and will occur whenever God decides it is the appropriate time.

Deism

Deism is a product of the Age of Reason. God was first seen as rational and thus his universe was seen as rational, orderly, and knowable. On this basis, scientists began investigating the *form* of the universe and found it to be like a huge, well-ordered mechanism or a giant clock whose gears and levers worked with perfect mechanical precision. This was the birth of science as it is known today. It held sway over the intellectual world of France and England from the late seventeenth into the first half of the eighteenth century (1675 – 1750). It was preceded by theism and followed by naturalism.

What is prime reality – the really real?

A transcendent God, as a First Cause, created the universe but then left it to run on its own. God is thus not immanent, nor fully personal, not sovereign over human affairs, not providential. Deism reduces God to a transcendent force or energy that set the universe in motion but has no further relation to it. To the deist, god is not personal but a distant force. The fact that this leaves humanity in a lonely state was not recognized by the early deists.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The cosmos God created is determined because it is created as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system; no miracle is possible. This type of universe is “closed” in two senses. First, it is closed to miracles because the force that created it is not personal and thus cannot be interested in changing anything in it. Second, since it is “closed” it is locked in cause and effect and therefore man can do nothing to change his own environment. There is no hope of man improving his situation.

What is a human being?

Human beings, though personal, are a part of the clockwork of the universe. Humans have no essential relation to a creator God, as an image to an original, and thus we have no way of transcending the system in which we find ourselves. Deists recognize that human beings have intelligence, a sense of morality, and a capacity for community and creativity, but it is just an autonomous nature just like the rest of the universe. We are what we are with no hope of becoming anything different.

What happens to a person at death?

Since man lives in a closed system of cause and effect, there is nothing after death.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

The cosmos is understood to be in its normal state, not fallen or abnormal. We can know the universe and thus God by studying it. The God that would be discovered is an impersonal force, not a person who loves his creation.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Since the universe is normal, it reveals what is right. This effectively destroys ethics. If whatever exists is right, then there is no evil. Good becomes indistinguishable from bad. Deists wanted to preserve the ethical content of Christianity but could find no suitable basis in their system for it. The ethical statements of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are simply natural law put into words.

What is the meaning of human history?

History is linear because the course of the universe was determined at its creation. Deism is not a widely held world view because of its inconsistencies including the following: (1) Even though deists were interested in ethics, their worldview could not support it. (2) Their idea that the universe was knowable would require an infinite mind to hold all the details. (3) Since the universe is a closed system, it is impossible to maintain human significance. (4) Since human personality is a “fact” of the universe, it would take a personal God to create it. Deism lives on in some scientists and humanists in universities around the world.

Naturalism

Naturalism is a further reduction of God by rational thinking. In theism, God is the infinite-personal Creator and sustainer of the universe. Deism reduced God by removing personality.

What is prime reality – the really real?

Matter exists externally and is all there is. God does not exist. God is dead. Naturalism further reduces God by

removing his existence. Matter is the ultimate reality. Carl Sagan stated the naturalist position as “the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. This is similar to the deist position. The difference is that the universe may or may not be thought of as a machine (clockwork) since it is more complex and mysterious than a machine image can explain. The system is still closed so there can be no interaction from the outside and thus no miracles or supernatural events. This should make the universe deterministic and thus humans would have no free will or responsibility for our actions.

What is a human being?

Humans are complex “machine;” personality is an interrelation of chemical and physical properties that is not yet fully understood. Early naturalists like Julian Huxley, although accepting that man is a machine, said that man is unique among the animals because we alone are capable of conceptual thought, employ speech, possess a cumulative tradition (culture), and have had a unique method of evolution. Most would also add that our moral capacity makes us different. Even though proposition 2 would rule out free will, many naturalists still hold that man has at least some sense of self-determination.

What happens to a person at death?

Death is extinction of personality and individuality. The Humanist Manifesto II states, “As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body.” The only “immortality” for humans is to continue to exist through their progeny and in the way their lives have influenced others.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

The only reason humans can know anything is a result of the uniqueness of their brains. The ability to “know” things comes from chemical reactions in the brain. There was no consciousness prior to the evolution of man.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Ethics and morality is only related to humans. Values are manmade, based on human need and interests, and thus a characteristic of culture. Morality only has meaning in its specific culture. Subcultures exist within cultures so ethics are thus chosen and personal. What is “right” for one person is not necessarily “right” for another. This is cultural relativism.

What is the meaning of human history?

History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without any overarching purpose. History begins with the origin of the universe, a process that is unknown but strictly a natural effect of some cause. Man is a product of evolution. There is not end of time. Although evolution arose out of naturalism and is taught in most school texts, it is not strictly a naturalist theory because many theists have attempted to fit it into their worldview. Thus we have theistic evolution which says that God started the process of evolution that resulted in the universe as we know it. At the point where humans developed self-consciousness, history takes on new significance but still has no inherent goal.

The persistence of Naturalism comes from its impression of being honest, objective, and coherent.

Nihilism

Strictly speaking, nihilism is a denial of philosophy, the possibility of knowledge, and that anything is valuable. If taken to its logical conclusion, it denies the reality of existence itself. It is more of a feeling than a philosophy. You might think that such a worldview would not be widely held, but twentieth century writers holding this worldview include: Frederick Nietzsche (philosopher), Ernest Hemmingway, Douglas Adams (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*; *Life, the Universe and Everything*; *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*), Kurt Vonnegut, and Franz Kafka.

What is prime reality – the really real?

Matter exists externally and is all there is. Nihilism begins with the naturalist position and concludes that there is nothing but matter – therefore, no God. God does not exist. God is dead.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. Since it is a closed system, there is nothing that can be done to change what is happening or will happen because it depends on what has happened before.

What is a human being?

Human beings are conscious machines without the ability to affect their own destiny or do anything significant; therefore, human beings have no value. Since everything depends on what happened before, there is nothing that a human can do to affect their own destiny. Therefore, all actions are meaningless.

“I can do anything I want, but what I want is the result of past states of affairs over which ultimately I had no control. I did not freely select my particular genetic makeup or my original family environment. By the time I asked if I was free to act freely, I was so molded by nature and nurture that the very fact the question occurred to me was determined. That is, myself, itself, was determined by outside forces. I indeed ask such questions, I can act according to my wants and desires, and I can appear to myself to be free, but it is appearance only.”

What happens to a person at death?

Death is just the end of a meaningless existence.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

We can't know or be sure of anything, not even our own existence. Since reality is a closed system, for us to have any confidence of the truth that we are in the box, we need to stand outside the box or have some other being outside the box to provide us with information to prove we are in the box. But since there can be nothing outside the box and we cannot transcend the box, nothing is knowable.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Reason cannot establish values, and the belief that it can is an illusion. Cultural relativism is the norm for nihilism just as it is for naturalism.

What is the meaning of human history?

History has no meaning. Naturalism moves logically into nihilism if the existence of a closed system and the non-existence of a God or anyone who can transcend the closed system are seriously believed and followed.

This leaves people in despair of ever seeing themselves, the world, or others as having any significance because nothing has meaning. Why aren't most naturalists nihilists? It is because they are inconsistent. They affirm a set of values and have friends who affirm a similar set, but don't ask how they know what they think they know.

Reasons nihilism is unlivable.

From meaninglessness, nothing at all follows, or rather, anything follows. If the universe is meaningless and a person cannot know and nothing is immoral, any course of action is open. One can respond to meaninglessness by any act whatsoever, for none is more or less appropriate. Suicide is one act, but it does not "follow" as any more appropriate than going to a movie.

Every time nihilists think and trust their thinking, they are inconsistent, for they have denied that thinking is of value or that it can lead to knowledge. At the heart of the nihilist's one affirmation is a self-contradiction. *There is no meaning in the universe.* For this statement to be true, it must be false, but then it wouldn't be true.

In attempting to live by nihilism, a pint of limit is reached. To deny God, there must be a God to deny. To practice nihilism, there must be something against which to do battle. A nihilist is a parasite on meaning. He runs out of energy when there is nothing left to deny. A cynic is out of business when he is the last one around.

Nihilism leads to the death of art even though much of modern art has nihilism at its core. Art is given structure and meaning by the artist, but because it has meaning it cannot be nihilistic. A junkyard, the garbage in a trash heap, or a pile of rocks just blasted from a quarry has no structure or meaning. But as soon as an artist creates one of them to show what the world is like, it becomes meaningful and thus is not nihilistic. Therefore, nihilism leads to the denial of all art.

Nihilism poses severe psychological problems. A person cannot live with nihilism because it denies what every fiber of their being screams for – meaning, value, significance, dignity, and worth. Attempting to live this way lead to an asylum for Nietzsche and suicide for Hemingway. And the artist Kafka lived an almost impossible life of tedium writing novels and stories that boil down to a sustained cry: "God is dead! God is dead! Isn't he? I mean, surely he is, isn't he? God is dead. Oh, I wish, I wish he weren't."

An example of nihilism from *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

In the beginning God created the earth, and he looked upon it in his cosmic loneliness.

And God said, "Let us make creatures out of mud, so mud can see what we have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God. And he went away.

This is not a satire on theism's view of the origin of the universe and human beings. It is a satire of naturalism's view because it shows our human dilemma. We have been thrown up by an impersonal universe. The moment a self-conscious, self-determining being appears on the scene, that person asks the big question: What is the meaning of all this? What is the purpose of the cosmos? But the person's own creator – the impersonal forces of matter – cannot respond. If the cosmos is to have meaning, we must manufacture it for ourselves.

Existentialism

The most important goal of existentialism and every other important worldview since 1900 is to transcend nihilism. Existentialism takes one of two forms: atheistic existentialism, which is an offshoot of naturalism, and theistic existentialism, which is an offshoot of theism.

Atheistic Existentialism

What is prime reality – the really real?

Matter exists externally and is all there is. God does not exist. The cosmos is composed solely of matter, but to human beings, reality appears in two forms – subjective and objective. The objective world is the machinery of the universe, the spinning electrons, the whirling galaxies, the falling bodies, the rising gases, and flowing waters. It can be known by careful observation, recording, hypothesizing, and checking hypotheses by experiment. The subjective world is the realm of the mind, of consciousness, of awareness, or freedom, and of stability. Science and logic do not penetrate this realm.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.

What is a human being?

For human beings alone existence precedes essence; people make themselves who they are. Through some event or process that is unknown, man acquires consciousness and self-determination. After that, humans define what it means to be a human. As we make ourselves “to be” by subjectivity, we see the objective world as absurd. Our dreams, visions, desires, and values run up against a universe that does not respond to our wishes. We are strangers in a foreign land and the sooner we learn to accept that, the sooner we transcend our alienation and pass through the despair of nihilism. Nothing is of value in the objective world in which we become conscious, but while we are conscious, we create value. By grounding human significance in subjectivity, it places it in a realm divorced from reality. The objective world keeps intruding. Death, the ever-present possibility and the ultimate certainty puts a halt to whatever meaning might otherwise be possible.

What happens to a person at death?

When we die, each of us is just an object among other objects (non-existence). The toughest fact to transcend is the ultimate absurdity – death. We must not forget our bent toward non-existence, but live out the tension between the love of life and the certainty of death. (Camus)

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

Humans can know things because of their subjective nature.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Ethics and morality are only related to human subjectivity. Ethics is a system of understanding what is the “good.” The “good” is whatever a person chooses, so it is part of subjectivity. It is not measured by a standard outside the human dimension. That makes any action, passionately chosen, a “good” action and leads to the inability to distinguish a moral from an immoral act.

What is the meaning of human history?

History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without any overarching purpose.

Atheistic existentialism goes beyond nihilism only to reach solipsism. Solipsism is from the Latin *solus* (alone) plus *ipse* (self) and is a theory which states that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing. Many would say this doesn't really go beyond nihilism but is just putting on a mask called value which is stripped away by death. Atheistic existentialism, as a response to nihilism, creates meaning from human affirmation. As long as naturalists who cannot or refuse to believe in god are searching for a way to find meaning in their lives, atheistic existentialism will be a strong worldview.

Theistic Existentialism

Theistic existentialism is a response to liberal Christianity which has lost its theology completely and settled for a watered-down gospel of morality and good works. It was originally proposed by Søren Kierkegaard in the middle nineteenth century as a response to the dead orthodoxy of Danish Lutheranism. It was picked up two generations after his death by Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr (German theologians) as a way of putting God back in the picture and called neo-orthodoxy. Other theistic existentialists were Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Julius Wellhausen.

What is prime reality – the really real?

God is infinite and personal (triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good. Although this is the same as in Christian theism, it is concluded from a totally different perspective. Christian theism begins by assuming God exists and people are defined in relationship to God. But theistic existentialism begins with humans at the point of their self-awareness. At the moment of a person's self-awareness, they look around, check their own desires against the reality they find, look for meaning to their existence, and find that they are not blessed with answers. The fact of human love and compassion gives evidence for a benevolent deity but the fact of hatred and violence point in the other direction. Rather than account for the absurdity of the universe on the basis of the "fall" as the Christian theist would do, the theistic existentialist concludes that the person must make a "leap" of faith in the existence of a good God who loves. To be sure, if the Judeo-Christian God exists, we had better acknowledge that because then our eternal destiny depends on it. But, say the existentialists, the data is not all in and never will be, and so every person who would be a theist must step forth and choose to believe. Since God will never reveal himself unambiguously, each person, in the loneliness of their own subjectivity and surrounded by a lot more darkness than light, must choose by a radical act of faith, then the propositions of Christian theism flood in.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

God created the cosmos ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of natural causes in an open system.

What is a human being?

Human beings are created in the image of God, can know something of God and the cosmos and can act significantly. We were created good but now are fallen and need to be restored by God through Christ. As in atheistic existentialism, the theistic existentialism emphasizes the disjunction between the objective and the subjective worlds. Theistic existentialists emphasize the personal as of primary value. The impersonal is there; it is important; but it is to be lifted up to God. To do so satisfies the self and serves to eradicate the alienation so strongly felt by people when they concentrate on their relationship with nature and other people.

What happens to a person at death?

For human beings death is either the gate to life with God and his people or life forever separated from God.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

God can and does communicate with us but not in an unambiguous fashion. Knowledge is subjective. The whole truth is paradoxical. Which of seemingly contradictory statements are to be lived out as truth? “Love your neighbor; hate your neighbor.” Don’t commit adultery; have every sexual liaison you can.” For the atheistic existentialist there is no objective guide for which to choose. For the theistic existentialist, the Bible sets the standard.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

Ethics is transcendent and based on God’s character.

What is the meaning of human history?

History as a record of events is uncertain and unimportant, but history as a model or type or myth to be made present and lived is of supreme importance. In this area, theistic existentialism takes two steps away from traditional Christian theism. The first step was to distrust the accuracy of recorded history and the second was to downplay the factual nature of the bible in favor of religious meaning. The first step occurred during the mid-nineteenth century along with the naturalist position that miracles were impossible. Thus, accounts of them must be false, not necessarily lies by people wishing to deceive, but simply stories put forth by people of primitive mindset. This undermines what the Bible says about itself and thus calls into question the truth of its whole message.

The conclusion that the Bible was historically untrustworthy could have led to an abandonment of Christian faith, but instead, it led to a radical shift in emphasis – the second step away from Christian theism. The truth of an account was not what was written but what the people believed about it, so the accounts are “religiously” true. Thus, the “fall” did not take place back in the Garden of Eden, but is something each person reenacts in their own life. (Each enters the world like Adam – sinless – and then rebels against God.) Likewise, the resurrection of Jesus may or may not have occurred in space and time, but it doesn’t matter. The reality behind the resurrection is the New Life in Christ experienced by the disciples. All supernatural doctrines are likewise “demythologized,” among them the creation, redemption, the resurrection of the body, the second coming of Christ, and the Anti-Christ. Instead of being taken literally, they are symbolic of human nature and our relationship with God.

Theistic existentialism will remain a strong worldview as long as there are those who would be believers, but yearn for a faith that does not demand too much belief in the supernatural or the accuracy of the Bible.

Eastern Pantheistic Monism

Superstition is a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, or trust in magic or chance. Naturalism used rational, reasoned thinking to overcome the superstitious thinking of the Middle Ages which believed in magic and supernatural happenings. But purely rational thinking led to the empty despair of nihilism. To overcome the despair of nihilism, existentialism said that reason wasn’t to be totally trusted. But it also has its problems. Our Western way of thinking seems to end in a maze of contradictions, acts of intellectual suicide, and despair. Therefore, the generation that were college aged young adults, reacted to this by retreating from the Western thought which they saw creating the following: Western technology that made modern warfare like Vietnam possible, gross economic inequities that oppressed the masses of people, and

Western religion (Christianity) which they saw as supporting those in control of technology and the economic system. At the same time as they retreated from Western thought, Eastern thought, with its anti-rationalism, syncretism (merging of different beliefs and practices), quietism, lack of technology, uncomplicated lifestyle, and radically different religion, was being brought into the country by Indian gurus, some university professors who had done studies in Eastern countries, and students who came to the United States from Eastern countries to get college degrees. United States students who were disillusioned by what they saw in Western thought were drawn to a radically different way of thinking that appeared to be an answer to what they were seeking.

Pantheistic monism differs from other Eastern worldviews like Hare Krishna. Monism holds that only one impersonal element constitutes reality whereas other Eastern thought accepts that reality is ultimately personal, not impersonal. Pantheistic monism is basically the worldview that underlies the teachings of the Hindu Vedas (2000 to 500 BC) and Zen Buddhists (a Japanese sect that teaches self-discipline, meditation, and attainment of enlightenment by direct intuition by means of non-logical statements) so it is a mixing of Buddhism and Hinduism.

What is prime reality – the really real?

Pantheism is the belief that all is god. So in pantheistic monism, god is the “one,” infinite, impersonal, ultimate reality. That is, god is the cosmos and all that exists; nothing exists that is not god. Brahman is the “one,” the unity, the essence or soul of the cosmos.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

Atman is Brahman; that is, the soul of each and every human being is the soul of the cosmos. If anything that is not god appears to exist, it is illusion and does not really exist. It is not our separateness that gives us reality, it is our oneness – the fact that we are Brahman and Brahman is the “one.” *Some things or people are more at “one” with the one than others.* There is a hierarchy of being. Matter is the least real, then vegetable, then animal and finally humans. There is also a hierarchy of humans. The Perfect Master, the Buddha, or a guru are the humans who are nearest to attaining oneness with the “one.” *Many (if not all) roads lead to the “one.”* Getting to oneness with the “one” is not a matter of finding the one true path because each person’s path is unique to them. Differences between paths is not important, but being headed in the right direction on your own path is important. Realizing oneness with the “one” is not a matter of belief but of technique, and even those vary even while requiring quiet, solitude meditation on intellectually content-less words or phrases such as *Om* or *Om Mane Padme Hum*.

What is a human being?

Atman is the essence or soul of any person. To realize your oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond personality. Personality demands self-consciousness and self-determinacy, and these involve duality – a thinker and a thing thought. The goal of being is to become one with the impersonal “oneness” of the universe thus losing all personality. This is the direct opposite of theism, in which the personality of God is what gives people their personality. This explains why Eastern thought so often leads to quietism and inaction. To be is not to do. Meditation is the main route to being and this by removing oneself from all action and thought.

What happens to a person at death?

Physical death is the end of an individual embodiment of Atman, but the soul Atman is indestructible. The soul Atman is then reincarnated, that is, it becomes another individual, physical embodiment of Atman. So death is no big deal. Nothing of value perishes; everything of value is eternal in the soul Atman.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

From the statement *Atman is Brahman*, it follows that human beings in their essence are beyond knowledge. Knowledge, like personality, demands duality – a knower and a known. Reality is being “one.” Language requires duality (speaker and listener, subject and predicate) so it cannot convey the truth about reality. Thus, everything that is thought or expressed is one-sided, only half of the truth – lacking completeness and unity. Just as there can be no true statement, there can be no lie. The only thing that is relevant is whatever is useful - for attaining oneness with Braham.

How do we know what is right and wrong?

To realize oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond good and evil. This is the biggest problem in Eastern thought. Good and evil demand duality. Reality is being “One,” so good and evil have no meaning. Yet, Eastern thought retains the concept of morality in its teaching of karma. Karma is the idea that one’s present embodiment of Atman is the result of past action. It is the Eastern version of “you reap what you sow”. If you do things that keep you from attaining oneness with Brahman, then that could be classified as “sin.” There is no God to cancel the “sin,” so it must be worked out in the next incarnation, perhaps by being something in a lower category.

What is the meaning of human history?

To realize oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond time. Time is unreal. History is cyclical. History is like the water in a river. If you are looking at it from a single point, it appears to flow in one direction. But if you look at the entire life of the water as it moves from river to ocean to vapor to rain back to the river, it is seen as cyclical.

New Age

Eastern pantheistic monism was one way for people to escape naturalism’s descent into the despair of nihilism without buying into either atheistic or theistic existentialism. But Eastern thinking is foreign to Westerners and requires a radical reorganizing of the Western idea of reality. Most people, after looking into Eastern thinking, turn away from it and search for another way to achieve meaning and significance in their lives. This new worldview, called New Age, began in the late 1960s with the musical “The Age of Aquarius,” gained the beginning of a following in the 1970s with stories in *Time* and other major magazines, and more in the 1980s as the interest in psychic phenomena gained wide attention. It bloomed into wide acceptance during the 1990s and is now a major world view.

Today, people are grasping for a handle on reality that will give them hope, and the New Age is nothing if not hopeful. In fact, its best known spokesmen are euphoric in their writings. Basing much of their hope on evolution, a leftover from naturalism, many are predicting the coming of a New Man and a New Age (thus the name New Age). Jean Houston of the Foundation for Mind Research in Nyack, NY, says: “It’s almost as if the species [humanity] were taking a quantum leap into a whole new way of being.” She concludes that if we learn “to play upon the vast spectrum of consciousness, ... we would have access to a humanity of such depth and richness as the world has not yet known, so that our great-great grandchildren may look back upon us as Neanderthals, so different will they be.” Other people such as George Leonard, editor of *Look* magazine, John N. Deboice, vice-president of First National Bank of Chicago, and actress Shirley MacLaine have accepted and promote New Age concepts. One major branch of New Age thought, which has appeared to die down if not die completely since the early 1970s, is the use of drugs as a method of achieving new states of consciousness.

The New Age worldview borrows from other worldviews we have studied and even from animism, a worldview we haven’t examined. Since it is a mixture of views, it does not have a unified system of beliefs that easily fit the framework of our examination. Thus, any statement of our framework is tentative and subject to change.

What is prime reality – the really real?

If the transcendent God is the prime reality in theism and the physical universe the prime reality in naturalism, then in the New Age the self (the soul, the integrated essence of each person) is the prime reality. In Eastern pantheistic monism, Atman is *Brahman*, means the individual loses one's self in the whole like a drop of water is lost in falling into a pail of water. In New Age the same thought would be stated, *Atman is Brahman*, meaning that the consciousness-center of the individual is the center of the universe. Satan's old claim that by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that a person can become god is exactly where New Age begins. They see the external universe existing not to be manipulated from the outside by a transcendent God but be manipulated from the inside by the self. Because of this, for some, imagination is the same as reality: *All and everything that one can imagine exists*. This would mean that you even create things you hate. Shirley MacLaine says, "To take responsibility for one's power would be the ultimate expression of what we called the God-force," and sees that as the meaning of the Exodus statement, **I AM THAT I AM**. One of the dangers of New Age thought is self-deception. Following New Age thought can deceive a person into believing something that leads them to actions that cause their death.

What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?

The cosmos, while unified in the self, is manifested in two dimensions, the visible universe which is accessible through ordinary consciousness, and the invisible universe (or Mind at Large) which is accessible through altered states of consciousness. In this picture of the universe, the self is surrounded by the visible universe to which it has direct access through the five senses and which obeys the "laws of nature" discovered by natural science. Second, the self is surrounded by the invisible universe to which it has access through such "doors of perceptions" as drugs, meditation, trance, biofeedback, acupuncture, ritualized dance, certain kinds of music, aroma therapy and so forth. Each person is seen as an island universe in a sea of island universes. But, because each island universe is somewhat like each other island universe, communication between island universes and genuine comprehension is a reality. Mind at Large is variously called "expanded or alternative consciousness" (actress Shirley MacLaine), "A separate reality" (anthropologist Carlos Castaneda), "Clairvoyant Reality" (psychic theorist Laurence LeShan), "other spaces" (psychologist John Lilly), "other realities" (George Leonard, sociologist and editor of *Look*), "another order of reality" (quarterback John Brodie), or "Universal Mind" (psychologist Jon Klimo). This Mind at Large does not obey the laws of the visible universe. The conscious self can travel across the surface of the earth hundreds of miles and do so in the twinkling of an eye. Time and space are elastic; the universe can turn inside out and time can flow backwards. Extraordinary power and energy can surge through a person and be transmitted to others. Physical healing can be effected and – if we are to include the black art users of psychic abilities – enemies can be struck dead and sent mad or caused physical, emotional or mental suffering. Another characteristic of Mind at Large is that special beings seem to populate this realm, sometimes called "allies," "helpers," "guardians," or "entities of the night." These are similar to the psychic term, "familiars" which is used of guides in the spirit world.

What is a human being?

A human being is the center of their own universe. This is the essence of being god.

What happens to a person at death?

Physical death is not the end of the self. Human beings are not just physical bodies, but are a unity beyond the body. Perhaps the most well-known student of death, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in the 1970s studied near-death out-of-the-body experiences and acquired her own spirit guides who have assured her that death is just a transition to another stage of life. The ultimate basis for the belief that death is just a transition to another form of life is the idea that "consciousness" is more than one's physical manifestation. If one is the all or the maker of the all, and if this is "known" intuitively, then a person surely has no need to fear death.

Why is it possible to know anything at all?

As was stated about the prime reality, *All and everything that one can imagine exists*. This means that anything the self perceives, imagines, or believes exists because the self is in charge of the reality of its universe. Thus the New Age worldview offers a radical and simple answer to the problems of distinguishing between appearance and reality. It flatly claims there is no distinction. Appearance is reality. There is no such thing as illusion. But there are two forms of perception, one for the visible universe and one for the invisible. Perception of the visible universe is called ordinary consciousness or “straight thinking.” Space is three dimensional, time is linear, yesterday is gone, today is here, tomorrow is on the way. In ordinary consciousness some actions appear good, other less good, others bad, and still others downright evil. Of course, we assume these actually are as we perceive them. But, since we create our own universe, those are subject to change.

Perception of the invisible universe is supposed to be composed of three, six, eight or more different states of consciousness which are variously called: “oceanic feeling” (Freud), “nirvana” (Buddhists), “satori” (Japanese Zen), “altered states of consciousness” or ASC (Masters and Houston), and “cosmic vision” (Keen). Two of these terms are more universally accepted than the others – altered states of consciousness and cosmic consciousness. The purposes of cosmic consciousness are at least three fold: perceive the wholeness of the cosmos, experience becoming one with the whole cosmos, and experience going beyond oneness with the cosmos to realize that the self is the generator of all reality and in that sense is both the cosmos and the cosmos-maker. The problem with altered states of consciousness is that achieving it is not always a euphoric trip. Often the experience is a “bad trip” which causes fear and is described by adherents as experiencing the demonic or as hell. To avoid this, many adherents urge the presence of a guide, especially during early attempts. [Bad trips point up a contradiction in their thinking. If the self is god, it is in control of creation and should just be able to destroy hell and create heaven. And what need would god have for a guide?]

How do we know what is right and wrong?

The core experience of the New Age is cosmic consciousness, in which ordinary categories of space, time, and morality tend to disappear. So right and wrong are the creation of the self in its own universe and has no direct bearing on anyone else. A consequence of New Age thought is that it frees a person to believe anything they want. The only criteria for the rightness or wrongness of a belief is whether it brings the desired result.

What is the meaning of human history?

History has no meaning since every person’s universe is their own to create. History would be nothing more than a recounting of what had been created.

This worldview is heavily dependent on subjectivity so each person’s view of the new Age can be quite different from everyone else’s view. This makes it a hard worldview without any doctrine and hard for anyone to define. It also encourages a lot of teachers each expounding their own view and gathering their own following of believers.

Postmodernism

It is rather easy for us to consider the worldviews already discussed from a distance. Probably few who read this article are deists or nihilists or even existentialists. These can be safely tucked away in the cupboard of tried and forgotten worldviews by most of us (even though many of us can find elements of one or another in our own thinking). The situation is quite different with respect to postmodernism, the last worldview we’ll consider, because it describes the basic mindset of turn-of-the-century Western mankind. We are all immersed in the sea

of postmodernism whether we know it or not, and its presuppositions are rooted so deeply in our thinking that even those who are Christians often reveal postmodern attitudes. *Described*

What is postmodernism, anyway? In the 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard presented "a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies" to the Council on Universities of the government of Quebec. This report was published as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. This book, a standard text in understanding postmodernism, gives a clue as to the nature of this worldview in its very title. Postmodernism isn't really a philosophy, for philosophy traditionally has been a tool used to understand the reality in which we live. Postmodernists believe that can't be done. So postmodernism is more a condition or mood than a philosophy. In short, postmodernism is a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. But it's also an era, a historical time period which began somewhere between the late 19th and late 20th centuries. In this article we'll concentrate on postmodernism as a mood rather than as a time period. *Historical Background*

By "Enlightenment rationalism" we're referring to the ideal of knowledge which was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. It formed the intellectual basis of what we call *modernity*. Two issues were important in the Enlightenment: criticism and power (*criticism* referring here to close analysis). The object was, as one writer says, to free people from "myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature." Truth wasn't found through revelation but through scientific investigation and reason. Knowledge now had to be dispassionate, objective, and certain. Everything now had to conform to the rules of computation and utility; it had to be measurable, and it had to be functional. Reason was in effect reduced to one *kind* of reason, that of mathematics or scientific precision.

Postmodernists believe that when knowledge was reduced to computation, something was lost.

There were several problems with Enlightenment rationalism. First, newfound knowledge gained through science and the resulting development of technology led people to think that man could solve the major difficulties of life without any transcendent help. It was found, however, that reason didn't have the potency it was thought to have. With all our learning and technology, we still didn't have the power we desired over our lives. Natural disasters and major wars such as the two World Wars in this century made people realize that we *aren't* able to fix everything that ailed us simply through reason.

These and other factors such as new mysteries discovered by science served to undermine our ability to really know what is true. In fact, postmodernists veer away from the classical understanding of truth, that is, the correspondence of propositions with external reality. Some very influential postmodernists now espouse pragmatism, the belief that workability is all that can be hoped for. This, I would venture to say, is how many if not most Americans think today.

Another postmodern characteristic regarding truth is this. In keeping with its rejection of the individualistic attitude characteristic of modernism, postmodernism holds that truth isn't found in the workings of the individual mind, but in the group. As one writer noted, "Truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in community and the well-being of the community as a whole." Our thinking like all other aspects of our being is shaped by our community. Politically and sociologically this means, for example, that the individual is expected to conform in his or her thinking to that of the larger group.

Still another problem which resulted from the secularized nature of knowledge and from the loss of confidence in knowing truth in general was the loss of the knowledge of *ultimate* truths. There can be no "totalising metanarratives," that is, no big stories or explanations of the way things are which encompass everything. This can be both liberating and frightening: liberating in the sense that one needn't feel bound by any system of thought; frightening in the sense that we are in the dark about what is true. This is a bit like eating in a cafeteria where one can choose from a variety of foods without having any confidence in the nourishing value of any of it.

A second problem with Enlightenment rationalism was the separation of fact from value. The mathematical mindset of Enlightenment didn't permit the intrusion of judgments about value; that was something separate. What grounds were left, then, upon which to make judgments? Thus the ethical dilemma of postmodernism: How does one make judgments without having any grounds for judgment? One writer argues that the Holocaust itself was a model of Enlightenment thinking. "In the world of the death camps," says author Thomas Docherty, "everything was rationalized." There was the desire to master nature seen in determining which races and kinds of people should survive and which shouldn't. The process was very orderly and efficient. The tools of technology, also, were used efficiently to advance the Nazi cause. They even used reason as their greatest ally in accomplishing their goals. Thus, the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism could be put to fundamentally evil purposes.

Third, with the secularization of reason in the Enlightenment there developed a growing pessimism about the future. With no transcendent Being to consult, who was to know where history was going? And who was to say whether the direction being taken was truly *progress*? "No longer do we know with any certainty the point towards which history is supposedly progressing," says Docherty. "Humanity has embarked upon a secular movement whose teleology is uncertain."

Postmodernism, then, leaves us without knowledge of ultimate truths, with no basis for value judgement, and with no basis for confidence in the future. In general, then, the postmodern mood is pessimistic. How, then, do we know what we should believe and do? With no knowledge of why we're here or where we're going to guide us, and no grounds for determining value coming from some transcendent source, people have grown to believe that we must simply choose for ourselves what will be true for us. The *will* is now introduced into knowledge. The questions postmodernists ask are: "What do *I* choose to believe?" and "What do *I* choose to do?"

The postmodern mindset has shown itself in several areas of life. One is a change in understanding language. Language is now thought to be socially constructed; it conveys what the group says it does. Literature, then, is understood as reflecting the biases of a writer and his cultural group: the writer was obviously saying what would benefit himself or his group. It's up to the reader, then to *deconstruct* the text to find the *real* meaning. Since the writer is trying to perpetuate his will on the reader, the reader adopts a suspicious mindset and looks for political demons behind every tree. Since the meaning of a text is determined by the reader, a text can have as many interpretations as readers.

In art, there was a move to the abstract, because it was thought that we couldn't accurately represent the essence of whatever the object is being painted, for instance. Those things which couldn't be represented accurately had to be presented abstractly. Also, since there are no rules anymore in general, there are none which define or delimit good art. The artist discovers what she's doing as she does it.

Architecture was one of the first areas in which postmodernism showed its face. With the demise of a modernism which always looked to the future, and, again, the loss of any rules, architecture moved from a functionalistic, forward-looking style to an eclectic style. Old buildings are restored, since the past can be appreciated, too. Several different styles can be mixed together. As one writer said, "postmodern design is historically and stylistically pluralistic."

Earlier I spoke of the fact that even Christians espouse postmodern beliefs without realizing it. It is so much a part of the thinking of young people today that even some in the church accept without even thinking about it a "true for you but not for me" mindset. A young woman who taught high school Sunday School at an evangelical Baptist church in Dallas told a newspaper reporter that *she* believed what the Bible taught, but that it wasn't necessarily true for everyone. Perhaps she doesn't understand the claims of Scripture, but more likely she has fit Christianity into the framework of "my truth, your truth." *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Although Christians can learn from postmodernists (especially with respect to the excesses of the Enlightenment), it's important to see the fundamental differences between postmodernism and Christianity.

Most importantly, we *can* know ultimate reality because "it" is a "He" who has revealed Himself and His will. The result is that we *can* know truth even though not the exhaustive truth which the Enlightenment thought possible. We *do* have an idea of where history is going, and we *do* have a basis for moral judgment.

Internal Weaknesses

Postmodernism cannot long survive. Besides being devoid of anything upon which to build a philosophy of life, it also reveals internal problems. While we might like to take an aesthetic approach to truth--in other words, judge by style rather than by substance--we want others to treat us in keeping with universal canons of truth and morality. Also, it is impossible, we now know, to make a clean break between fact and value. Even the most precise and objective scientists must make value decisions with respect to the very work they do. In other words, one project must be chosen over others, and such choices reflect certain values. Furthermore, postmodernism strips us of all stability beyond what our immediate culture can give us. But since even a cultural group can't know ultimate truth but can only choose its values based on a pragmatic viewpoint, there is ultimately no stability in one's cultural group either.

As I've noted, postmodernism is a mood rather than a full-fledged worldview. Something must fill the vacuum created by the demise of modernism. This is what excites some Christian thinkers. For now the door blocking out the supernatural has been thrown open, providing an avenue for Christians to announce the good news that in Christ is found truth, value, and hope for the future, indeed, for all the human race.

Information on these worldviews adapted from "*The Universe next Door*" by James W. Sire and from studies done by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention