

1 NEW AGE ISSUES AND YOUR WORLDVIEW

SUSAN'S STORY:

I decided that when I grew up, I would never go to church. My parents were converted in a revival meeting when I was six years old and became devout members of their church. We went to church twice on Sunday and on Wednesday nights for prayer meeting. But life in our home was far from perfect. My father would fly into sudden rages, or sometimes he would not speak to us for days. We were required to obey many “do’s” and “don’ts,” but there was very little peace or happiness in our home. Even as a young teenager, I saw the inconsistencies in what my father purported to be on Sunday and how he lived at home. Christianity seemed, to me, to be something restrictive and joyless. Our lifestyle seemed, to me, to be inferior to that of our non-churchgoing neighbors.

TOPICS _____

Understanding Your Worldview

Applying Tests to Your Worldview

Seeing New Age Issues as a Worldview

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR WORLDVIEW?

Dr. Ronald H. Nash has identified five basic clusters of beliefs that form a worldview. They are . . .

BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

What does your worldview say about God? Does God exist? Is there one God? Many gods? What is God's nature? Personal and loving? An impersonal force? Whatever your belief about the concept we call *God*, it will shape your total worldview.

BELIEFS CONCERNING ULTIMATE REALITY

Is the universe eternal or did it have a beginning? Was it created by an almighty, transcendent God who continues to sustain it, or was it a product of mere chance? Is the natural world all there is? Is there design and purpose in the universe, or is it a product of chaos and chance? Are supernatural events possible? Do spirit beings exist?

BELIEFS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

Is knowledge about the world possible? Is sense experience reliable? What is the place of reason in discovering knowledge? Can we know God? Is truth absolute or relative? Can faith and reason coexist? Your views about how one gains knowledge are crucial to your development of a coherent worldview.

BELIEFS ABOUT ETHICS

What is the basis upon which one determines whether a certain act is morally right or wrong? Is morality a cultural factor or a universal value? Are moral values objective or subjective? Are we accountable for our actions? How you answer these questions will reveal your ethical beliefs and inform your worldview.

BELIEFS ABOUT HUMAN NATURE

Are humans merely physical beings and the product of evolutionary processes, or are they complex, created beings possessing body, soul, and spirit? Are they determined or free? Is this life all there is? Do humans survive after death? Will they spend eternity in heaven or hell? What is the human nature like?

UNDERSTANDING YOUR WORLDVIEW

Your worldview is, quite simply, a set of views or beliefs about life and the universe. It is your comprehensive conception or understanding of the world and your environment from a specific standpoint. It consists of what you believe about the most important issues in life. Sometimes this is called one's "philosophy of life." Your worldview influences your everyday life in many ways. It guides you in the decisions you make and how you relate to others. It is the foundation for discovering meaning in your life.

Dr. Ronald Nash, a Christian philosopher, emphasizes that in order to interpret and judge reality, we must have a cohesive worldview which in some way forms a system.¹ Look carefully on the preceding page at the five basic clusters of beliefs identified by Dr. Nash as being the necessary ingredients of a cohesive worldview system. What we believe in each of these areas must be compatible with what we believe in the other areas, or our worldview is inconsistent. If our beliefs are contradictory, we do not have a reliable worldview.

Susan's story at the beginning of this lesson illustrates that a person's worldview or philosophy of life may be inadequate or inconsistent. Her father considered himself a devout Christian, but his lifestyle was inconsistent with the Christian way of life he professed. Many people have been turned away from Christianity by people whose Christian worldview did not measure up. Perhaps this was your experience.

Our worldview must provide meaningful answers to difficult questions of life, such as:

"Why has this bad thing happened to my family?"

"What should I do with my life?"

"Why did my child die?"

"Is abortion always wrong? Is it ever justified?"

"What is the best decision for me in this circumstance?"

"Should I stay with an unfaithful spouse for our children's sake?"

"In a given situation, does the end justify the means?"

"How can I realize my fullest potential?"

When I was young, I mulled over and over in my mind the concept of

eternity. I could not grasp the idea of timelessness. *How*, I asked myself, *could something always have existed? How can something continue forever?* Some questions are unanswerable to our finite minds. Some things may remain mysteries. It is important for us to have a worldview which helps us come to grips with such questions.

APPLYING TESTS TO YOUR WORLDVIEW

How does one evaluate a worldview to determine whether it is logically consistent? Dr. Nash has identified four major tests one should apply to any worldview to determine its coherence. These are 1) the test of reason; 2) the test of outer experience; 3) the test of inner experience; and 4) the test of practice.² If a worldview fails any of these tests, it needs to be reexamined carefully. Following is a summary of his discussion of these tests:

1) THE TEST OF REASON

This is the test of *logic* or of *non-contradiction*. It states, for example, that *A* (which can be anything) cannot be both *B* and non-*B* at the same time in the same sense. A belief (*A*) cannot be true (*B*) and false (non-*B*) at the same time in the same sense. A *round* object cannot also be *square*. The two concepts *round* and *square* are contradictory. A logically-consistent worldview must hold together logically both in its parts—its individual propositions—and as a whole.

It is important to emphasize, however, that while the presence of a contradiction in a worldview will alert us to error, the absence of contradiction does not guarantee the presence of truth. Other criteria are needed to do that. Let us look now at the *test of experience*, which we will divide into the test of *outer experience* and the test of *inner experience*.

2) THE TEST OF OUTER EXPERIENCE

By *outer experience* we are referring to our experience of the world outside us—what we perceive. It expresses what we know to be true of the physical universe. In our day, any worldview which claims that the world is flat or that the earth is the center of the solar system would fail this test. Examples of other beliefs which fail the test are: 1) pain and death are illusions; 2) human beings are innately good; and 3) humans are making constant progress toward perfection. Our worldview must fit what we know about the external world.

3) THE TEST OF INNER EXPERIENCE

What do you know about yourself? You know that you think, hope, experience pleasure and pain, and have certain beliefs and desires. Are you also conscious of moral right and wrong? Do you experience a feeling of guilt or shame when you fail to do what is right?

Humans have memory of the past, are conscious of the present, and look forward to the future. We can hear beautiful music and then replay it in our minds. We can dream dreams and imagine things that do not actually exist. We can make plans and carry them out. We have the capacity to love, to empathize, and to share someone else's sorrow or joy. We know that someday we will die. Many people are convinced that they will experience life after the death of their body.

Think about your own inner experience, your feelings, thoughts, and impressions. Are there any "gray areas" that do not quite fit into your general philosophy of life? If your worldview is inconsistent with what you know about yourself, it is clearly defective.

4) THE TEST OF PRACTICE

As we have illustrated, a person's worldview should pass the test in the laboratory of life. Ask yourself this question: Can I live *consistently* in harmony with the system I profess, or am I forced to live according to beliefs borrowed from a competing system?

Dr. Nash tells the story of the gangster Mickey Cohen, who responded to the invitation at a Billy Graham crusade and made a profession of faith in Christ. However, in the months that followed, his life showed no evidence of Christian regeneration. When questioned about this, Mr. Cohen made it clear that he was not going to leave his career as a gangster. He stated that just as there are Christian movie stars and Christian politicians, he wanted to be known as the first Christian gangster!³

Unlike the example given here, Christianity is replete with testimonies of lives changed as people leave their non-Christian practices and pattern their lives after the example of Jesus Christ. The test of practice indicates overwhelmingly that when people truly experience salvation in Christ, their daily lives bear witness of this.

SEEING NEW AGE ISSUES AS A WORLDVIEW

What do New Age issues have to do with your personal worldview? As we have indicated, everyone has a worldview, although not all worldviews are clearly defined or expressed. The five issues we will explore in the remainder of this study represent some of the major New Age beliefs.

As we look at each New Age issue, we will relate it to its area of worldview belief, and you will have an opportunity to examine it within that context. We will also contrast each issue with what the Bible teaches on the subject. For example, in the category of the test of reason, we will see that it is logically impossible for contradictory beliefs about God to be true. If the Bible's view of God is true, then a New Age belief, such as pantheism must be false. If the Bible is true, then the New Age belief about karma and reincarnation must be false. If the biblical account of Jesus is true, then the New Age picture of Jesus must be false.

In Lesson 7, we will apply the four tests of a worldview (reason, outer experience, inner experience, and practice) to the five New Age beliefs or issues we address in the next five lessons:

ISSUE 1: *TRUTH IS RELATIVE* (WORLDVIEW OF THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE)

ISSUE 2: *THE SPIRIT WORLD IS REAL* (WORLDVIEW OF ULTIMATE REALITY)

ISSUE 3: *WE ARE REINCARNATED BEINGS* (WORLDVIEW OF HUMAN NATURE)

ISSUE 4: *CHRISTIANITY IS OPPRESSIVE* (WORLDVIEW OF ETHICS)

ISSUE 5: *I AM GOD* (WORLDVIEW OF GOD)

SUSAN'S STORY REPRISED

My crisis experience came when I was seventeen. My mother had been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, and my parents turned to the church for comfort. People began to pray, and my mother was completely healed. Not

only was my father dramatically changed by this experience, but I, too, saw Christianity in a new light. I will never forget the night my entire family publicly made a total commitment of our lives to Jesus Christ. Then we began to know the real and enduring peace and joy that only He can bring.

History has demonstrated that a person's worldview is not fixed for life. Just as a person can rise from a childhood of poverty to a position of wealth and influence, so can a person change worldviews. Some people who were once naturalists have changed as new scientific discoveries point to a Grand Design in the universe. People who once were committed humanists have become disillusioned with the human condition and have turned to other conceptual systems to find a better way.

We greatly desire, today, to get in touch with our spiritual selves, to fill a spiritual void within us that, although we may not realize it, only God can fill. In the search for more meaning in life, many people are turning to the New Age worldview. But can it pass the test? We will endeavor to answer this question in the following pages as we look first at Issue 1.