

Bruce A. LITTLE*

CHRISTIANITY AS A WORLDVIEW

Abstract: The concept of `worldview` is applicable to both individual and collective existence. It is a system of conscious or subliminal beliefs that guides a subject's understanding of the world around us. It brings together practical and spiritual concerns and has even had the power to shape macro-elements such as human history. Great religions can often generate worldviews themselves. The subsequent paper aims to discuss that Christianity isn't limited to determining a set of moral and religious conduct rules, but is also a generator of its own, distinct philosophical approach to concepts such as Nature, Man, History or Science.

Keywords: Christianity, worldview, religion, science

*

There is a concept called a worldview, that is, it is a “big story or narrative” that seeks to make sense of each aspect of life.¹ It is how we view the world, how we assign meaning and value to events, ideas, and people. Everybody has a worldview even if they have not thought much about it in specific terms—it is just how they think. Some worldviews are more developed than others, but developed or not we all have a particular way we look at the world. This may come from dominant ideas in one's culture, from one's parents, education or religion. Furthermore, just because a person has a worldview, it does not mean that he always lives consistently with that view. Because of this, identifying another person's worldview is not always easy. However there are some worldviews that are known for their general view of the world. For example, there is a naturalistic worldview which attempts to explain all the phenomena of life in purely naturalistic terms – physical cause and effect only.

* PhD, Wake Forest, North Carolina, USA (Lecture given at „Dunărea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania, October 2014); blittle@sebst.edu.

¹ James Sire defines worldview as: “A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of the world.” James Sire (1988), *The Universe Next Door*, updated and expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 17.

This requires a closed system. Other worldviews attempt to explain everything by appealing to some form of determinism, mysticism or Divine agency. Atheist Edward O. Wilson speaks of the necessity of a worldview as he thinks it is impossible to do science without one.² He even speaks of Christianity as a worldview.³ In fact, it is that worldview I will consider in this paper.

I am sure that many, if not all of you, know certain things about Christianity as a religion. Maybe you know someone who is a follower of Jesus and believes the Christian message or attends religious services on Sunday. But regardless of your personal knowledge of Christianity, it is the world's largest religion according to a recent census.⁴ Furthermore, what people think they know about Christianity is not always an accurate representation of what historic Christianity has believed.

Many people tend to think of Christianity as merely something that defines how people act religiously or morally, that is, how it informs them for some religious activity. Therefore, they think that religion has nothing to do with the everyday world in which we live and has nothing to say to society on life itself. However, that is a rather new idea. If one knows anything about history, it is clear, for example, that Christianity shaped the entire Western world for centuries.⁵ In

² Edward O. Wilson speaks of worldview as consilience (unity of knowledge): "Trust in consilience is the foundation of the natural sciences. For the material world at least, the momentum is overwhelmingly toward conceptual unity." Edward O. Wilson (1998), *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A Knopf), 10.

³ Edward O. Wilson (2006), *The Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 3-4.

⁴ "Christianity is one the first rank [sic] in the list of most popular religions around the globe with more than 2.1 billion followers which is more than 31.5% of the world's entire population. It was founded about 2000 years ago in Israel. Bible is the holy book followed by Christians. Christianity is divided in three major Sects named Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant." Source: <http://www.thecountriesof.com/top-5-largest-religions-in-the-world/#sthash.WLGhnukw.dpuf>

⁵ Atheist philosopher Marcello Pera writes: "Modern science, for example, is a Western invention that has a universal value. So, too, are liberalism, separation of civil society and state or church and state, the rule of law, the welfare state, democracy, as well as the 'universal' conventions, declarations, and bills of rights. These and other institutions originate in and are characteristic of the West, particular Western Europe. They belong to specific periods of Western history, have spread and imposed themselves in other parts of the world, and claim to have universal value. The explanations that have been offered for these unique phenomena diverge, sometimes markedly. I will not enter into the merits of the solutions, although I feel obliged to mention that no serious attempt to account for these great moments in history has ignored the contribution of Christianity – direct or indirect, causal or concomitant, determinant or auxiliary, supportive or critical – thereby confirming that Christianity has been the greatest force in Western history." Marcello Pera (2006), *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity and Islam*, Foreword by George Weigel, Translated by Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books), 2. Brad Gregory writes: "This book's principle argument is that the Western world today is an extraordinarily complex,

fact, for many years Europe was known as Christendom. Christianity is not culturally neutral and for centuries it shaped how the Western world understood the world in which they lived. It shaped the laws, customs, values, and the development of science which is, in fact, the heritage of those living in Europe and beyond. Here, however, my purpose is not to show how Christianity shaped the Western culture, but rather what historic Christianity has believed about nature, man, history and science. Of course Christianity has other important beliefs, but here it is limited to these four areas.

It is important to note that the Christian religion is informed by both the Old and New Testaments of Christian Scriptures. Consequently the literature, when speaking about Christian beliefs, speaks of the Judeo-Christian system of belief. I will follow that idea here which means that in a real sense Christianity does not begin with the person called Jesus Christ, it ends with him. Furthermore, I am not arguing for the truth of Christianity (although I do believe it is true) or for a particular variety of Christianity, only what has been traditionally believed about these four categories by Christians at least for the first 500 years and beyond.⁶

A Christian view of nature

A Christian view of nature begins with the belief that all that is, excluding God who is eternal and without cause, was created by God out of nothing. This is according to the first two chapters of Genesis and repeated elsewhere in the Christian Scripture. An early ecumenical Christian creed reads: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible.”⁷

Although there have been different ways of understanding how this was done, one thing that is not in debate is that this means God and Nature are not the same thing. It was *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) not *ex Deo* (that is to say out of God) or *ex material* (out of existing material) that all things were created. The Christian worldview of nature is unique from other religions in that it believes creation was created good and then became disordered or corrupted. The cause of the disorder is human sin which is the result of disobedience to God’s command as explained in the

tangled product of rejections, retentions, and transformations of medieval Christianity, in which the Reformation era constitutes the critical watershed.” Brad S. Gregory (2012), *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2.

⁶ As history reveals, there have been divergent understandings of some Christian teachings and what is offered here is a basic view, generally accepted and reflected in the ecumenical documents of the first 500 years of the Christian Church.

⁷ The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

first three chapters of Genesis. Furthermore, although creation is good, it is not to be worshipped because it is not God, nor a part of God.

Furthermore, the Christian view of nature includes the notion that Man has been given custodianship of Planet Earth, therefore he is to be responsible how he uses and cares for it. Because of this Christianity is concerned about the proper use and care of our planet. This is the basis for what is known as Creation Stewardship. Although it must be acknowledged that Christians have not always been consistent in this area.

The Christian view of nature affirms that nature is not autonomous, but under the rule of God. This means that God is directly involved with mankind, taking interest in the affairs of men and supervising the unfolding of human history. Some might conclude that if God has control over history, then He is responsible for everything that happens in nature including all evil. But Christianity believes that evil came in to the world by the act of human will which chooses to go contrary to God's law given to humans. That means man, not God, is responsible for the evil as experienced in this world. As St. Augustine said, "So what need is there to ask the source of that movement by which the will turns from the unchangeable good to the changeable good? We agree that it belongs only to the soul, and is voluntary and therefore culpable; and the whole value of teaching in this matter consists in its power to make us censure and check this movement, and turn our wills away from temporal things below us to enjoyment of the everlasting good."⁸ According to early Christianity it was agreed that God was not the only causal agent working in the world. Man is also a causal agent because of the power of the soul to choose this or that. This kind of human freedom of the will is known today as libertarian freedom (until recent discussions, scholars simply referred to it as free will). Therefore, man is responsible to God for his actions meaning that man will give an account to God in a future day of judgment as Immanuel Kant believed. This explains something of why there is evil in the world and why man, not God is responsible. In order to understand this more fully it is important to see Christianity's view of man.

A Christian view of man

According to the Old Testament's creation story, on the sixth day God created the animals and mankind, creating both male and female. Both are said to be created in God's image (Gen 1:26). The narrative in the third chapter of Genesis gives the account of how the good creation became corrupted by an act of the human will. In that same chapter it is said that God would send a redeemer, who according to Christian tradition is Jesus Christ, to redeem fallen humanity that man and

⁸St. Augustine, *The Problem of Free Choice*, 3.1.2.

Creation might be restored to the original good state. According to Christianity, human beings are significant and of worth because they are made in the image of God and are corrupted because of sin and hence do evil things. Because man is created in the image of God we can see human beings creating beautiful works of art, performing amazing acts of courage and goodness while at the same time we see other human beings committing unspeakable acts of great cruelty and mayhem.

Early this summer I was in Krakow, Poland and I visited Auschwitz and Birkenau death camps. As the story was told I was amazed that in the same lecture, I heard of great cruelties by human hand as well as great acts of bravery and self-sacrifice by other human beings. One example was of a priest, Father Kolbe, who volunteered to be murdered in place of another young prisoner at Auschwitz.⁹ How do we account for such opposites in human behavior? The Christian view would answer it by saying that the goodness of man comes from his being made in the image of God and the evil from his being a corrupted being by an act of his choosing to disobey God. In all of this, according to Christian teaching, the hope for mankind is in the historic figure of Jesus Christ who became a true person in order to be man's redeemer through the Cross and Resurrection and who will one day bring peace to this Earth by his kingdom. All those who have believed in Christ as savior will enjoy the blessings of this kingdom on Earth. So, this gives the overview for the basis of the Christian view of history.

A Christian view of history

According to the Christian view, human history is lineal. It is not circular where history simply repeats itself endlessly, nor is it spiraling downward in some Nietzschean fashion. It has purpose and meaning as it is going towards a particular end assured by God's providence. The old prophet Isaiah writes of God: "I am God, and there is not like me, declaring the end from the beginning... My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose."¹⁰ Human actions are important and they contribute to the flow and shape of human history, but ultimately God is in control of history reaching its end purpose. The Bible narrates this history and gives clues how history is directional. This assures that mankind is not at the mercy of some impersonal force, but of a God of purpose, mercy, and justice. According to

⁹ This is from a piece written by Dean Stroud. "One of the men selected to die in the "starvation pit" pleaded not to be among those killed because he had a family. At that moment a Catholic priest, Father Maximilian Kolbe, volunteered to take the man's place. He had no family, he said, and no one awaiting him. He would die in the man's place." Source: <http://furtherglory.wordpress.com/2012/07/22/father-kolbe-the-catholic-priest-who-died-in-place-of-another-at-auschwitz/>

¹⁰ Isaiah 46: 9-10 (*The English Standard Version*)

the Christian tradition, the focal point of history is what is called the Incarnation where the Son of God takes on human form in a real time/space event. The restoration of human history is when Christ returns and establishes his Kingdom on this Earth for all the redeemed, a rule of peace and rightness.

A Christian view of science

Contrary to what many are led to believe today, Christianity is not against science as science. In spite of such controversies such as the Galileo controversy, scientists and philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead and Michael B. Foster argue that “the Christian culture within which science arose was not a menace but a midwife to science.”¹¹ In fact, according to one source the disagreement between the Church and Galileo was not a confrontation between science and religion, but rather Galileo’s attack on part of Aristotelian philosophy.¹²

Historians generally agree that Christianity gave birth to what we call science today. On the account of Creation, the Christian views are that the world is rationally structured and that it operates according to certain laws or principles universally under the governance of God. Even before men had powerful telescopes it was possible to understand much about the motions of the bodies in our universe because of the mathematical ordering of the universe. The reasoning was that if God created the universe and God was a rational being, then the universe could be rationally understood. That meant that the world was intelligible – the assumption on which all of science operates.

The fact remains that many of the greatest scientists embraced the Christian religion.¹³ In fact, one of the most important figures in the history of the Enlightenment was theist Francis Bacon. According to premier biologist Edward O. Wilson, Bacon was the grand architect of this dream based on science.¹⁴ His method put science on its present course. Yet, as theist, Bacon believed that Christianity was

¹¹ Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton (1994), *The Soul of Science* (Wheaton: Crossway Books), 20.

¹² Pearcey and Thaxton, 39.

¹³ Some of the better-known scientists are: Francis Bacon (1561-1627); Johannes Kepler (1571-1630); Blaise Pascal (1623-1662); Isaac Newton (1642-1727); Max Planck (1858-1947); Gregor Mendel (1822-1884); Edwin Schrodinger (1887-1961); Francis Collins (1950-). These are only a few who stood in the Christian tradition as scientists.

¹⁴ He posits: “Among the Enlightenment founders, his spirit is the one that most endures. It informs us across four centuries that we must understand nature, both around us and within ourselves, in order to set humanity on the course of self-improvement.” Edward O. Wilson (1998), *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 23.

as important to mankind's restoration as was science.¹⁵ In fact, he thought that Christianity was essential to the proper use of science. He wrote: "Let the human race only recover its God-given right over Nature, and be given the necessary power; then right reason and sound religion will govern the exercise of it."¹⁶ All of this points to the fact that proper science and true Christianity are not in conflict.

In general, according to the Christian worldview, all of this gives meaning to life. It assures we are not alone in the universe and that there is more to reality than the physical. The Christian worldview is true to what is. It gives sense to what is. The Christian view of history gives meaning to the place of mankind in the universe as well as to the individual person. It speaks of man as both broken and yet significant. His choices mean something as he is more than a physical machine-like being living in a material-only world. He has worth and significance not because of what he does, but because of who he is as a creation of God. The Christian worldview has an understanding of the world that makes science a reasonable endeavor as it sees the universe as a structured reality, rationally ordered. Christianity is more than telling what to do or how to live, it also tells us why. In brief, Christianity is not something that is added to this world. It is a complete way of understanding the world. It is true to what is.

While there is more to Christianity than what has been discussed here, considering these four areas show that Christianity is not just a religious system. It is a total worldview. It was the worldview that built the European and the United States culture even if over the last several decades it has lost wider influence. There are many books examining this fact: scientists, sociologists, historians, and theologians alike. In the end, whether people like or accept Christianity as a religion, the fact is that if one lives in the West, he lives in a culture originally shaped by the Christian worldview—namely that there is a God who is there and He has not been silent. In light of this, it would seem that the wise man would give serious consideration to Christianity before rejecting it out of hand.

¹⁵ He wrote: ". . . I (like an honest and faithful guardian) may hand over to men their fortunes, their understanding now liberated and come of age. And from this an improvement of the estate of man is sure to follow, and an enlargement of his power over Nature. For man by the Fall fell both from his state of innocence and his dominion over creation. Both of these however can even in this life be to some extent made good; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and science." Francis Bacon (1994), *Novum Organum and Other Great Pars of The Great Instauration*, translated and edited by Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court), 292.

¹⁶ Francis Bacon (1994), *Novum Organum and Other Great Pars of The Great Instauration*, translated and edited by Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court), 131.