

A Basic Worldview Catalog



THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR

JAMES W. SIRE

FIFTH EDITION

*For any of us to be fully conscious
intellectually we should not only be able
to detect the worldviews of others
but be aware of our own—
why it is ours and why in light of so many options
we think it is true.*

OTHER BOOKS BY JAMES W. SIRE

How to Read Slowly

Scripture Twisting

Beginning with God

Discipleship of the Mind

Chris Chrisman Goes to College

Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?

Jesus the Reason (Bible study guide)

Habits of the Mind

Václav Havel

Naming the Elephant

Why Good Arguments Often Fail

Learning to Pray Through the Psalms

A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics

Praying the Psalms of Jesus

Deepest Differences with Carl Peraino

A Basic Worldview Catalog

THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR

JAMES W. SIRE

FIFTH EDITION

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois



InterVarsity Press, USA

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, USA

World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com

Email: email@ivpress.com

Fifth edition ©2009 by James W. Sire. First edition ©1976 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the United States of America. Second edition ©1988 by James W. Sire. Third edition ©1997 by James W. Sire. Fourth edition ©2004 by James W. Sire.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press, USA, is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at <www.intervarsity.org>.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. NIV. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. Distributed in the U.K. by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd. All rights reserved. "NIV" is a registered trademark of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790.

Design: Cindy Kiple

Images: deep space: Phil Morley/iStockphoto

open door: Nicolas Lorán/iStockphoto

ISBN 978-0-8308-7742-3 (digital)

ISBN 978-0-8308-3850-9 (print)

To Marjorie

Carol, Mark and Caleb

Eugene and Lisa

Richard, Kay Dee, Derek, Hannah, Micah, Abigail and Joanna

Ann, Jeff, Aaron and Jacob

whose worlds on worlds

compose my familiar and burgeoning universe

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION	9
1 A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE: Introduction	15
2 A UNIVERSE CHARGED WITH THE GRANDEUR OF GOD: Christian Theism	25
3 THE CLOCKWORK UNIVERSE: Deism	47
4 THE SILENCE OF FINITE SPACE: Naturalism	66
5 ZERO POINT: Nihilism	94
6 BEYOND NIHILISM: Existentialism	117
7 JOURNEY TO THE EAST: Eastern Pantheistic Monism.	144
8 A SEPARATE UNIVERSE: The New Age—Spirituality Without Religion	166
9 THE VANISHED HORIZON: Postmodernism	214
10 A VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE EAST: Islamic Theism	244
11 THE EXAMINED LIFE: Conclusion	278
INDEX	287

PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

It has been more than thirty-three years since this book was first published in 1976. Much has happened both in the development of worldviews in the West and in the way others and I have come to understand the notion of worldview.

In 1976 the New Age worldview was just forming and had yet to be given a name. I called it “the new consciousness.” At the same time the word *postmodern* was used only in academic circles and had yet to be recognized as an intellectually significant shift. Now, in 2009, the New Age is over thirty years old, adolescent only in character, not in years. Meanwhile postmodernism has penetrated every area of intellectual life, enough to have triggered at least a modest backlash. Pluralism, and the relativism and syncretism that have accompanied it, have muted the distinctive voice of every point of view. And though the third edition of this book noted these, there is now more to the stories of both the New Age and postmodernism. In the fourth edition I updated the chapter on the New Age and substantially revised the chapter on postmodernism.

In the fourth edition I also reformulated the entire notion of worldview. What is it, really? There have been challenges to the definition I gave in 1976 (and left unchanged in the 1988 and 1997 editions). Was it not too intellectual? Isn't a worldview more unconscious than conscious? Why does it begin with abstract ontology (the notion of being) instead of the more personal question of epistemology (how we know)? Don't we first need to have our knowledge justified before we can make claims about the nature of ultimate reality? Isn't my definition of *worldview* de-

pendent on nineteenth-century German idealism or, perhaps, the truth of the Christian worldview itself? What about the role of behavior in forming or assessing or even identifying one's worldview? Doesn't post-modernism undermine the very notion of worldview?

I took these challenges to heart. The result was twofold. First was the writing of *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, published at the same time as the fourth edition of *The Universe Next Door*. Here I addressed a host of issues surrounding the concept of worldview. Readers who are interested in the intellectual tool used in the fourth edition and this one will find it analyzed at much greater depth there. To do this, I was greatly aided by the work of David Naugle, professor of philosophy at Dallas Baptist University. In *Worldview: The History of a Concept* he surveyed the origin, development and various versions of the concept from Immanuel Kant to Arthur Holmes and beyond, and he presents his own definition of the Christian worldview. It is his identification of worldview with the biblical notion of the heart that has spawned my own revised definition, which appears in chapter one of the fourth edition and the present book.

Readers of any of the first three editions will note that the new definition does four things. First, it shifts the focus from a worldview as a "set of presuppositions" to a "commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart," giving more emphasis to the pretheoretical roots of the intellect. Second, it expands the way worldviews are expressed, adding to a set of presuppositions the notion of story. Third, it makes more explicit that the deepest root of a worldview is its commitment to and understanding of the "really real." Fourth, it acknowledges the role of behavior in assessing what anyone's worldview actually is. To further emphasize the importance of one's worldview as a commitment, in this fifth edition I have added an eighth worldview question: *What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?*

Nonetheless, most of the analysis of the first four editions of *The Universe Next Door* remains the same. Except for chapter three on deism, which has been significantly expanded to account for the diversities within this worldview, only occasional changes have been made in the presentation and analysis of the first six of the eight worldviews examined. It is my hope that with the refined definition and these modest revisions the powerful nature of every worldview will be more fully evident.

Finally, there is one major worldview now affecting the West that I have not treated in any of the previous editions. Since September 11, 2001, Islam has become a major factor of life not only in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia but in Europe and North America as well. The Islamic worldview (or perhaps worldviews) now impinges on the lives of people around the globe. Moreover, the term *worldview* appears in daily newspapers when writers try to grasp and explain what is fueling the stunning events of the past few years. Unfortunately, I am not personally prepared to respond to the need for us in America to understand Islam's understanding of our world. So I have asked Dr. Winfried Corduan, professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University and author of a number of books but especially of *Neighboring Faiths*, to contribute a chapter on Islamic worldviews.¹

One final comment on my motivation for the first edition. It has triggered numerous negative comments especially among Amazon.com reviewers who complain that the book displays a pro-Christian bias. They want an unbiased study. There is no such thing as an unbiased study of any significant intellectual idea or movement. Of course an analysis of worldviews will display some sort of bias. Even the idea of an objective account assumes that objectivity is possible or more valuable than an account from a committed and acknowledged perspective. C. S. Lewis, writing about his interpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, once commented that his Christian faith was an advantage. "What would you not give," he asked, "to have a real live Epicurean at your elbow while reading Lucretius?"² Here you have a real live Christian's guide to the Christian worldview and its alternatives.

Furthermore, I first wrote the book for Christian students in the mid 1970s; it was designed to help them identify why they often felt so "out of it" when their professors assumed the truth of ideas they deemed odd or even false. I wanted these students to know the outlines of a "merely" Christian worldview, how it provided the foundation for much of the modern Western world's understanding of reality and what the differences were between the Christian worldview and the various worldviews that either stemmed from Christianity by variation and decay or countered Christianity at its very intellectual roots. The book was immedi-

¹Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

²C. S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 65.

ately adopted as a text in both secular institutions—Stanford, the University of Rhode Island and North Texas State, for example—and Christian colleges. Subsequent editions have been edited to acknowledge readers with other worldviews, but the Christian perspective has, without apology, not been changed.

In fact, the continued interest of readers in this book continues to surprise and please me. It has been translated into nineteen languages, and each year it finds its way into the hands of many students at the behest of professors in courses as widely divergent as apologetics, history, English literature, introduction to religion, introduction to philosophy and even one on the human dimensions of science. Such a range of interests suggests that one of the assumptions on which the book is based is indeed true: the most fundamental issues we as human beings need to consider have no departmental boundaries. What is prime reality? Is it God or the cosmos? What is a human being? What happens at death? How should we then live? These questions are as relevant to literature as to psychology, to religion as to science.

On one issue I remain constant: I am convinced that for any of us to be fully conscious intellectually we should not only be able to detect the worldviews of others but be aware of our own—why it is ours and why, in light of so many options, we think it is true. I can only hope that this book becomes a steppingstone for others toward their self-conscious development and justification of their own worldview.

In addition to the many acknowledgments contained in the footnotes, I would especially like to thank C. Stephen Board, who many years ago invited me to present much of this material in lecture form at the Christian Study Project, sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and held at Cedar Campus in Michigan. He and Thomas Trevethan, also on the staff of that program, have given excellent counsel in the development of the material and in the continued critique of my worldview thinking since the first publication of this book.

Other friends who have read the manuscript and helped polish some of the rough edges are C. Stephen Evans (who contributed the section on Marxism), Winfried Corduan (who contributed the chapter on Islam), Os Guinness, Charles Hampton, Keith Yandell, Douglas Groothuis, Richard H. Bube, Rodney Clapp, Gary Deddo, Chawkat Moucarray and Colin Chapman. Dan Synnestvedt's review of the fourth edition sparked

my vision for a fifth and provided guidance, especially for the chapter on deism. Recognition, too, goes to David Naugle, without whom my definition of a worldview would have remained unchanged. To them and to the editor of this edition, James Hoover, goes my sincere appreciation. I would also like to acknowledge the feedback from the many students who have weathered worldview criticism in my classes and lectures. Finally, which rightly should be firstly, I must thank my wife Marjorie, who not only proofed draft after draft of edition after edition, but who suffered my attention to the manuscript when I had best attended to her and our family. Love gives no better gift than suffering for others.

Responsibility for the continued infelicities and the downright errors in this book is, alas, my own.

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

*But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life:
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.*

MATTHEW ARNOLD, "THE BURIED LIFE"

In the late nineteenth century Stephen Crane captured our plight as we in the early twenty-first century face the universe.

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist."

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."¹

¹From Stephen Crane, *War Is Kind and Other Lines* (1899), frequently anthologized. The Hebrew poem that follows is Psalm 8.

How different this is from the words of the ancient psalmist, who looked around himself and up to God and wrote:

O LORD, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory
 above the heavens.
 From the lips of children and infants
 you have ordained praise
 because of your enemies,
 to silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens,
 the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars,
 which you have set in place,
 what is man that you are mindful of him,
 the son of man that you care for him?
 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
 and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
 you put everything under his feet:
 all flocks and herds,
 and the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air,
 and the fish of the sea,
 all that swim the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Ps 8)

There is a world of difference between the worldviews of these two poems. Indeed, they propose alternative universes. Yet both poems reverberate in the minds and souls of people today. Many who stand with Stephen Crane have more than a memory of the psalmist's great and glorious assurance of God's hand in the cosmos and God's love for his people. They long for what they no longer can truly accept. The gap left by the loss of a center to life is like the chasm in the heart of a child whose father has died. How those who no longer believe in God wish something could fill this void!

And many who yet stand with the psalmist and whose faith in the Lord God Jehovah is vital and brimming still feel the tug of Crane's poem. Yes, that is exactly how it is to lose God. Yes, that is just what those who do not have faith in the infinite-personal Lord of the Universe must feel—alienation, loneliness, even despair.

We recall the struggles of faith in our nineteenth-century forebears and know that for many, faith was the loser. As Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote in response to the death of his close friend,

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all
And every winter change to spring.
So runs my dream; but what am I?
An infant crying in the night;
An infant crying for the light;
And with no language but a cry.²

For Tennyson, faith eventually won out, but the struggle was years in being resolved.

The struggle to discover our own faith, our own worldview, our beliefs about reality, is what this book is all about. Formally stated, the purposes of this book are (1) to outline the basic worldviews that underlie the way we in the Western world think about ourselves, other people, the natural world, and God or ultimate reality; (2) to trace historically how these worldviews have developed from a breakdown in the theistic worldview, moving in turn into deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, Eastern mysticism, the new consciousness of the New Age and Islam, a recent infusion from the Middle East; (3) to show how postmodernism puts a twist on these worldviews; and (4) to encourage us all to think in terms of worldviews, that is, with a consciousness of not only our own way of thought but also that of other people, so that we can first understand and then genuinely communicate with others in our pluralistic society.

That is a large order. In fact it sounds very much like the project of a lifetime. My hope is that it will be just that for many who read this book and take seriously its implications. What is written here is only an introduction to what might well become a way of life.

²From Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850), poem 54.

In writing this book I have found it especially difficult to know what to include and what to leave out. But because I see the whole book as an introduction, I have tried rigorously to be brief—to get to the heart of each worldview, suggest its strengths and weaknesses, and move to the next. I have, however, indulged my own interest by including textual and bibliographical footnotes that will, I trust, lead readers into greater depths than the chapters themselves. Those who wish first to get at

A worldview (or vision of life) is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it. This vision need not be fully articulated: it may be so internalized that it goes largely unquestioned; it may not be explicitly developed into a systematic conception of life; it may not be theoretically deepened into a philosophy; it may not even be codified into creedal form; it may be greatly refined through cultural-historical development. Nevertheless, this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and interpretative framework by which order and disorder are judged; it is the standard by which reality is managed and pursued; it is the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns.

JAMES H. OLTHUIS

“On Worldviews,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*

what I take to be the heart of the matter can safely ignore them. But those who wish to go it on their own (may their name be legion!) may find the footnotes helpful in suggesting further reading and further questions for investigation.

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

Despite the fact that such philosophical names as Plato, Kant, Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche will appear on these pages, this book is not a work of professional philosophy. And though I will refer time and again to concepts made famous by the apostle Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin, this is not a work of theology. Furthermore, though I will frequently point out how various worldviews are expressed in various religions, this is not

a book on comparative religion.³ Each religion has its own rites and liturgies, its own peculiar practices and aesthetic character, its own doctrines and turns of expression. Rather, this is a book of worldviews—in some ways more basic, more foundational than formal studies in philosophy, theology or comparative religion.⁴ To put it yet another way, it is a book of universes fashioned by words and concepts that work together to provide a more or less coherent frame of reference for all thought and action.⁵

Few people have anything approaching an articulate philosophy—at least as epitomized by the great philosophers. Even fewer, I suspect, have a carefully constructed theology. But everyone has a worldview. Whenever any of us thinks about anything—from a casual thought (*Where did I leave my watch?*) to a profound question (*Who am I?*)—we are operating within such a framework. In fact, it is only the assumption of a worldview—however basic or simple—that allows us to think at all.⁶

What, then, is this thing called a worldview that is so important to all of us? I've never even heard of one. How could I have one? That may well

³For a phenomenological and comparative religion approach, see Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000); see also David Burnett's *Clash of Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2002), which focuses on religious worldviews.

⁴A helpful collection of essays on the notion of worldviews is found in Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen and Richard Mouw, eds., *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989); the essay by James H. Olthuis, "On Worldviews," pp. 26-40, is especially insightful. Worldview analysis in general has recently been criticized not only for overemphasizing the intellectual and abstract nature of worldviews but for the implicit assumption that there is such a thing as *the* Christian worldview. Because any expression of a worldview, Christian or not, is deeply imbedded in the flow of history and the varying characteristics of language, this criticism is sound. Each expression of any general worldview will bear the marks of the culture out of which it comes. Nonetheless, Christians, especially Christians, in every time and place should be seeking for the clearest expression and the closest approximation of what the Bible and Christian tradition have basically affirmed. See Roger P. Ebertz, "Beyond Worldview Analysis: Insights from Hans-Georg Gadamer on Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 36 (Fall 2006): 13-28. Ebertz remarks: "The resulting worldview . . . is not absolute and ahistorical. Nor is it a set of bare theological claims. It is rather a richly fleshed-out perspective that incorporates discoveries from the past and the present, as well as insights from believers and non-believers" (p. 27). The description of the Christian worldview that constitutes the next chapter should be understood in that light.

⁵In the third edition of *The Universe Next Door* I confessed that long ago I took T. S. Eliot to heart. He is credited with saying, "Mediocre poets imitate; good poets steal." The title for this book comes from the two last lines of an e. e. cummings poem, "pity this busy monster, manunkind: listen: there's a hell/of a good universe next door; let's go." See e. e. Cummings, *Poems: 1923-1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954), p. 397.

⁶As Charles Taylor says, "[A]ll beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never before formulated" (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007], p. 13).

be the response of many people. One is reminded of M. Jourdain in Jean Baptiste Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, who suddenly discovered he had been speaking prose for forty years without knowing it. But to discover one's own worldview is much more valuable. In fact, it is a significant step toward self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-understanding.

So what is a worldview? Essentially this:

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

This succinct definition needs to be unpacked. Each phrase represents a specific characteristic that deserves more elaborate comment.⁷

Worldview as a commitment. The essence of a worldview lies deep in the inner recesses of the human self. A worldview involves the mind, but it is first of all a commitment, a matter of the soul. It is a spiritual orientation more than it is a matter of mind alone.

Worldviews are, indeed, a matter of the heart. This notion would be easier to grasp if the word *heart* bore in today's world the weight it bears in Scripture. The biblical concept includes the notions of wisdom (Prov 2:10), emotion (Ex 4:14; Jn 14:1), desire and will (1 Chron 29:18), spirituality (Acts 8:21) and intellect (Rom 1:21).⁸ In short, and in biblical terms, the heart is "the central defining element of the human person."⁹ A worldview, therefore, is situated in the self—the central operating chamber of every human being. It is from this *heart* that all one's thoughts and actions proceed.

Expressed in a story or a set of presuppositions. A worldview *is not* a story or a set of presuppositions, but it can be expressed in these ways. When I reflect on where I and the whole of the human race have come from or where my life or humanity itself is headed, my worldview is being

⁷See my *Naming of the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), especially chap. 7, for an extended development and justification of this definition.

⁸See David Naugle's extended description of the biblical concept of heart (*Worldview: The History of a Concept* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], pp. 267-74). The NRSV translates *kardia* as "mind"; the NIV translates it as "heart."

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 266.

expressed as a story. One story told by science begins with the big bang and proceeds through the evolution of the cosmos, formation of the galaxies, stars and planets, the appearance of life on earth and on to its disappearance as the universe runs down. Christians tell the story of creation, Fall, redemption, glorification—a story in which Jesus' birth, death and resurrection are the centerpiece. Christians see their lives and the lives of others as tiny chapters in that master story. The meaning of those little stories cannot be divorced from the master story, and some of this meaning is propositional. When, for example, I ask myself what I am really assuming about God, humans and the universe, the result is a set of presuppositions that I can express in propositional form.

When they are expressed that way, they answer a series of basic questions about the nature of fundamental reality. I will list and examine these questions shortly. But consider first the nature of those assumptions.

Assumptions that may be true, conscious, consistent. The presuppositions that express one's commitments may be true, partially true or entirely false. There is, of course, a *way things are*, but we are often mistaken about the way things are. In other words, reality is not endlessly plastic. A chair remains a chair whether we recognize it as a chair or not. Either there is an infinitely personal God or there is not. But people disagree on which is true. Some assume one thing; others assume another.

Second, sometimes we are aware of what our commitments are, sometimes not. Most people, I suspect, do not go around consciously thinking of people as organic machines, yet those who do not believe in any sort of God actually assume, consciously or not, that that is what they are. Or they assume that they do have some sort of immaterial soul and treat people that way, and are thus simply inconsistent in their worldview. Some people who do not believe in anything supernatural at all wonder whether they will be reincarnated. So, third, sometimes our worldviews—both those characterizing small or large communities and those we hold as individuals—are inconsistent.

The foundation on which we live. It is important to note that our own worldview may not be what we think it is. It is rather what we show it to be by our words and actions. Our worldview generally lies so deeply embedded in our subconscious that unless we have reflected long and hard, we are unaware of what it is. Even when think we know what it is and lay it out clearly in neat propositions and clear stories, we may well be

wrong. Our very actions may belie our self-knowledge.

Because this book focuses on the main worldview systems held by very large numbers of people, this private element of worldview analysis will not receive much further commentary. If we want clarity about our own worldview, however, we must reflect and profoundly consider how we actually behave.

SEVEN BASIC QUESTIONS

If a worldview can be expressed in propositions, what might they be? Essentially, they are our basic, rock-bottom answers to the following seven questions:

1. *What is prime reality—the really real?* To this we might answer: God, or the gods, or the material cosmos. Our answer here is the most fundamental.¹⁰ It sets the boundaries for the answers that can consistently be given to the other six questions. This will become clear as we move from worldview to worldview in the chapters that follow.
2. *What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?* Here our answers point to whether we see the world as created or autonomous, as chaotic or orderly, as matter or spirit; or whether we emphasize our subjective, personal relationship to the world or its objectivity apart from us.
3. *What is a human being?* To this we might answer: a highly complex machine, a sleeping god, a person made in the image of God, a naked ape.
4. *What happens to a person at death?* Here we might reply: personal extinction, or transformation to a higher state, or reincarnation, or departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side.”
5. *Why is it possible to know anything at all?* Sample answers include the idea that we are made in the image of an all-knowing God or that consciousness and rationality developed under the contingencies of survival in a long process of evolution.
6. *How do we know what is right and wrong?* Again, perhaps we are made in the image of a God whose character is good, or right and wrong are determined by human choice alone or what feels good, or

¹⁰Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, chap. 3.

the notions simply developed under an impetus toward cultural or physical survival.

7. *What is the meaning of human history?* To this we might answer: to realize the purposes of God or the gods, to make a paradise on earth, to prepare a people for a life in community with a loving and holy God, and so forth.

Earlier editions of this book listed only seven questions, but these do not adequately encompass the notion of a worldview as a *commitment* or *a matter of the heart*. So I am adding the following question to flesh out the personal implications of the rather intellectual and abstract character of the first seven questions.

8. *What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?* Within any given worldview, core commitments may vary widely. For example, a Christian might say, to fulfill the will of God, or to seek first the kingdom of God, or to obey God and enjoy him forever, or to be devoted to knowing God or loving God. Each will lead to a somewhat different specific grasp of the Christian worldview. A naturalist might say to realize their personal potential for experiencing life, or to do as much good as they can for others, or to live in a world of inner peace in a world of social diversity and conflict. The question and its answers reveal the variety of ways the intellectual commitments are worked out in individual lives. They recognize the importance of seeing one's own worldview not only within the context of vastly different worldviews but within the community of one's own worldview. Each person, in other words, ends up having his or her own take on reality. And though it is extremely useful to identify the nature of a few (say, five to ten) generic worldviews, it is necessary in identifying and assessing one's own worldview to pay attention to its unique features, the most important of which is one's own answer to this eighth question.¹¹

Within various basic worldviews other issues often arise. For example: Who is in charge of this world—God or humans or no one at all? Are we as

¹¹For an approach to worldview analysis with an even more individual and personal focus, see J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d. [reprinted 1981]). Bavinck examines alternate worldviews from five foci: (1) I and the cosmos, (2) I and the norm, (3) I and the riddle of my existence, (4) I and salvation, and (5) I and the Supreme power.

human beings determined or free? Are we alone the maker of values? Is God really good? Is God personal or impersonal? Or does he, she or it exist at all?

When stated in such a sequence, these questions boggle the mind. Either the answers are obvious to us 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 to consider, then we have a worldview, but we have no idea that many others do not share it. We should realize that we live in a pluralistic world. What is obvious to us may be “a lie from hell” to our neighbor next door. If we do not recognize that, we are certainly naive and provincial, and we have much to learn about living in today’s world. Alternatively, if we feel that none of the questions can be answered without cheating or committing intellectual suicide, we have already adopted a sort of worldview. The latter is a form of skepticism which in its extreme form leads to nihilism.

The fact is that we cannot avoid assuming some answers to such questions. We will adopt either one stance or another. Refusing to adopt an explicit worldview will turn out to be itself a worldview, or at least a philosophic position. In short, we are caught. So long as we live, we will live either the examined or the unexamined life. It is the assumption of this book that the examined life is better.

So the following chapters—each of which examines a major worldview—are designed to illuminate the possibilities. We will examine the answers each worldview gives to the eight basic questions. This will give us a consistent approach to each one, help us see their similarities and differences, and suggest how each might be evaluated within its own frame of reference as well as from the standpoint of other competing worldviews.

The worldview I have adopted will be detected early in the course of the argument. But to waylay any guessing, I will declare now that it is the subject of the next chapter. Nonetheless, the book is not intended as a revelation of my worldview but an exposition and critique of the options. If in the course of this examination readers find, modify or make more explicit their own individual worldview, a major goal of this book will have been reached.

There are many verbal or conceptual universes. Some have been around a long time; others are just now forming. Which is your universe? Which are the universes next door?