

Worldviews Matter

by **George Grant**

What a man or woman does or does not believe, is a matter of very little concern for most modern Americans. We like to think that we can separate private from public concerns, character from performance, worldview from responsibility. Alas, such an innovative posture naturally carries a fearful implication. It really means that it does not matter what anyone of us believes so long as we do not take our beliefs seriously. But throughout history, wise men and women have understood that far from being a superfluous and private affair, our inmost faith is the utmost aspect of our outmost lives.

What we do is not just affected by what we think, it is determined by it. What we think -- even when we are not fully aware of what it is that we've been thinking -- shapes our perceptions, our preferences, our prejudices, and our priorities. What we think will determine not only how we interpret what we see, hear, and feel, but how we react to those sensations. Even if we never actually think about what we think, it is at work in us in a dramatic way. In a very real sense, we are what we think.

If we are to have any hope of maintaining a civil society then it will be absolutely essential to recognize this principle: ideas matter; ideas make all the difference; ideas shape the course of human events; ideas have consequences. When we fail to see that very basic reality, we are morally and culturally hamstrung.

More than two decades ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote his landmark bestseller, *A Christian Manifesto*. In it, the seminal thinker, writer, and reformer asserted that the basic problem with most concerned parents and community leaders in our culture over the last two generations or more was that they had only "seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals." The result was a kind of hesitant hit-or-miss approach to dealing with the dire dilemmas of our society: "They have very gradually become disturbed over permissiveness, pornography, the public schools, the breakdown of the family, and finally abortion. But they have not seen this as a totality -- each thing being a part, a symptom, of a much larger problem." He said that part of the reason for this was: "They failed to see that all of this has come about due to a shift in worldview -- that is, through a fundamental change in the overall way people think a view the world and life as a whole."

In other words, according to Schaeffer, part of the reason it has been so difficult to solve the grave cultural crises of the day is that we have largely ignored the fact that changes in our society have occurred first and foremost because of changes in our thinking. We've not only failed to recognize the fact that ideas have consequences; we've failed to recognize the existence of the ideas themselves. We've failed to see the central importance of worldview to all that we are and all that we do.

When the subject of worldview comes up, we generally think of arcane philosophy. We think of some kind of ivory tower intellectual gymnastics. We think of thickly obscure

tomes, of complex logic puzzles, and of bizarre hypothetical gamesmanship. It is not exactly the sort of subject we associate with the practical nitty-gritty details of life.

In fact however, there is nothing more practical than the subject of worldview. Indeed, it is far more practical than understanding how the stock market works, how laws are passed through congress, or how e-mail messages traverse the internet. It is one of the most down to earth subjects we could ever try to tackle.

The word worldview is actually a rather sloppy English attempt at translating the German word *weltanschauung*. It literally means a life perspective or a way of seeing. It is simply used to describe the way we look at the world.

You have a worldview. I have a worldview. Everyone does. It is our perspective. It is our frame of reference. It is the means by which we interpret the situations and circumstances around us. It forms our presuppositions -- our basic outlook on all the different aspects of our faith, and life, and experience. It is what enables us to process the information that comes to us through our senses.

Alvin Toffler, in his groundbreaking work *Future Shock*, wrote, "Every person carries in his head a mental model of the world, a subjective representation of external reality." This mental model is, he says, like a giant filing cabinet. It contains a slot for every item of information coming to us. It organizes our knowledge and gives us a grid from which to think. Our mind is not a blank slate -- a *tabula rasa* as Pelagius, Locke, Voltaire, or Rousseau -- argued. It is simply not possible for any of us to be completely open-minded or genuinely objective. "When we think," economic philosopher E.F. Schumacher asserted, "we can only do so because our mind is already filled with all sorts of ideas with which to think." These more or less fixed ideas make up our mental model of the world, our frame of reference, our presuppositions -- in other words, they make up our worldview.

In his very helpful book, *How to Read Slowly*, James Sire writes: "A worldview is a map of reality; and like any map, it may fit what is actually there, or it may be grossly misleading. The map is not the world itself of course, only an image of it, more or less accurate in some place, distorted in others. Still, all of us carry around such a map in our mental makeup and we act upon it. All our thinking presupposes it. Most of our experience fits into it."

A worldview is simply a way of viewing the world. And everyone -- without exception -- has a worldview, whether they realize it or not. When a writer writes, he does so by the light of and in accord with his worldview. When a painter paints, she does so by the light of and in accord with her worldview. When a singer sings, he does so by the light of and in accord with his worldview. When a legislator legislates, she does so by the light of and in accord with her worldview. When a teacher teaches, does so by the light of and in accord with his worldview. It is not possible to separate what it is we do from how it is we think. We simply cannot escape from our worldview.

The famed Spanish artist Pablo Picasso believed that the modern world in which he lived was a place of randomness, fragmentation, and impersonal force. He was a political ideologue at heart. He espoused a radical sort of moral revolution. His worldview was reflected in his art -- most notably his large abstract canvasses in the years following the New York Armory show. He created a body of work that evoked randomness, fragmentation, and impersonal force. He lived, painted, and sculpted in a manner consistent with his ideology -- so that he helped to usher in a kind of modernist revolution. In essence, his worldview necessitated Cubism.

The great German composer Johann Sebastian Bach believed that the world in which he lived was a place of beauty, goodness, and truth. He was a pious reformer at heart. He espoused a progressive sort of covenantal recovery. His worldview was reflected in his music -- most notably in his concertos composed during his tenure as choirmaster in the city of Leipzig. He wrote, played, and performed in a manner consistent with his theology--so that he helped to usher in a kind of baroque reformation. In essence, his worldview necessitated Classicism.

The infamous political economist Karl Marx believed that the world in which he lived was a place of injustice, inequality, and He was a disgruntled rebel at heart. He espoused an angry sort of dialectical materialism. His worldview was reflected in his policies--most notably in his strident manifestoes written just prior to the outbreak of innumerable Socialist revolutions. He plotted, schemed, and brooded in a manner consistent with his dogmas -- so that he helped to usher in a kind of twentieth century insurgency. In essence, his worldview necessitated Communism.

The prolific English architect Christopher Wren believed that the world in which he lived was a place of order, simplicity, and theological profundity. He was an awestruck naturalist at heart. He espoused a candid sort of practical spirituality. His worldview was reflected in his architecture -- most notably in the parish churches he designed following the Great Fire of London. He created, planned, and built in a manner consistent with his principles -- so that he helped to usher in a kind of Georgian renaissance. In essence, his worldview necessitated Traditionalism.

Look at the work of writers as diverse as Jane Austen and Walter Scott, Mark Twain and James Joyce, or Tom Clancy and Stephen King and you will discover the same thing: writers write out of a particular perspective of life, out of their own peculiar worldview. Ideas have consequences. Good ideas have good consequences. Bad ideas have bad consequences. And inconsistent ideas have inconsistent consequences.

Ideas and behaviors will often have unintended consequences, undesired consequences, or second and third order consequences. Follow a particular line of thought by adhering to a particular form of behavior for any length of time and there will be a string of consequences. There will be a kind of worldview domino effect. One consequence will lead to another and another and another and another.

This is worldview thinking at its most practical level. Let your mind dwell on forbidden fantasies and before long your thought life will be marked by unfaithfulness. That inevitably creates restlessness and discontent. That may lead directly to adultery. That may in turn result in separation or even divorce. The ripple effect of consequences may not end there: children are affected. Neighbors and friends are affected. On and on and on it goes. Worldviews matter. Ideas have consequences.

This is what Apostle Paul was pointing out as early as the first century when he wrote to the Roman Christians to warn them of the slippery slope we all inevitably venture down when we excuse aberrant behavior. Sin begets more sin, deeper sin, more perverse sin.

This is precisely why the Founding Fathers made certain to ground their work toward building a great society of freedom and liberty on the unambiguous ideas of the Christian worldview. Throughout history that worldview had prompted the world's most remarkable flowering of art, music, literature, architecture, prosperity, and progress. For all its many failings, no other civilization had known the kind of justice, equality, independence, affluence, charity, development, compassion, beauty, advancement, mobility, and maturity as Christendom had. The American pioneers wanted to perpetuate -- and perhaps even enhance -- that legacy for the sake of their children, their children's children, and for all the succeeding generations that would come afterward. They were careful to avoid the errors of pagan worldviews which had, throughout the history of the world, continually unleashed the horrors of brutality, tyranny, misery, and injustice.

G.K. Chesterton once quipped that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed." Other nations find their identity and cohesion in ethnicity, or geography, or partisan ideology, or cultural tradition. But America was founded on certain ideas -- ideas about freedom, about human dignity, and about social responsibility. It was this profound peculiarity that most struck Alexis de Tocqueville during his famous visit to this land at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He called it "American exceptionalism."

Alas, that exceptionalism is disappearing at an alarming rate -- and where it remains, it is under fierce attack. Having rejected the Christian worldview of art, music, literature, law, and science, we will no longer be able to harvest the fruit of Christian ideas and ideals. Instead, we will be forced to live with the consequences of Pagan ideas and ideals. And that is not a pretty sight -- it never has been and it never will be. We shall soon see, like never before, that worldviews really do matter.