

Excerpt from *Why Become a Christian? A Spiritual Memoir*

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Chapter 3

Gaining Intellectual Faith

In 1978, when I read James Sire's *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (1976, first edition), this book helped me gain *an intellectual faith* to support my young *saving faith* in Jesus Christ. At that time, Sire was a senior editor at Inter-Varsity Press and I was struggling over Becoming Born Again because I did not want this to result from *blind faith*:

- ✓ Should I heed God's "call" or not?
- ✓ Would this be any different than my Religious Legalism experience as a Catholic?
- ✓ Did I truly want to give up my Self-development lifestyle of doing-my-own-thing?
- ✓ How could I defend my decision to others?

My poem below conveys the key differences among worldviews, which I learned from Sire's 1976 book. Whenever I'm the least bit tempted to consider a non-Theistic worldview, I read this poem. I hope it helps you avoid alternative worldviews: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ."¹

I also hope it inspires you to read this chapter to gain a stronger intellectual faith to support your saving faith in Jesus: "In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."²

Check Your -ism To Know Your Worldview

When you're weary and beyond despair
Because troubles have beset you all around,
And you wonder why and have no answer,
Check the -ism that you've embraced.
Is it Theism? Deism? Naturalism? Nihilism?
Existentialism? Humanism? or New Age thinking?
Each worldview has a different influence
On your perception of the situation
And on your source of hope for salvation.

If you know that Sovereign God is with you,
Personally caring, watching, planning
His Greater Purpose to fulfill
Even in the midst of trouble and despair,
Never leaving or forsaking you, but
Filling you with hope from knowing He is always there
Making good come from what befalls you to fit His Will,
Then, rest assured, for personal **Theism** is your -ism.

If you sense that Creator God is out there somewhere,
Having fashioned everything and everyone

And set it all in thoughtful motion,
Running like precision clockwork,
Till war or death or other tragic loss disrupts
And makes you question where this Clockmaker is
When needed most,
Then, trust in fate, for impersonal **Deism** is your -ism.

If your god is Mother Nature,
What you see is what you get,
The Creation without Creator,
Governed by the natural law of consequence,
With survival of the fittest as the master plan
To comfort you through trials and pain
As you wonder what you did to deserve this,
Then, trust in godless **Naturalism** as your -ism.

If you have no god and believe nothing truly matters
And see life as empty and without meaning,
Happening all around without direction or purpose,
While you're buffeted back and forth in a giant void
With neither hope nor the promise of it,
More a victim than an agent of your own destiny,
Then, fateless **Nihilism** is your -ism.

If you believe you're totally responsible for choosing what to do,
And choose living life to the fullest
Each and every moment of your existence,
Being the sole agent of your own destiny,
Responsible for the consequences you experience,
Not as victim needing rescue, but as Rescuer of your plight,
Then, be this responsible, for secular **Existentialism** is your -ism.

If Human Reason is your god and self-fulfillment is your goal,
And your purpose lies in figuring out how to
Be fully functional or self-actualizing,
So you can be at cause instead of at effect,
Master of your destiny, captain of your fate,
In control of what happens and responsible for it,
Feeling good about yourself and others because all are OK,
Then, keep on developing Self, for **Humanism** is your -ism.

If the world is only what you perceive it to be,
And reality is your subjective creation of it,
Neither good nor bad, right nor wrong,
Altered by your present state of consciousness,

Created in your own image and imagination
As by a god in a world of like gods,
All part of the pantheistic god in all matter,
Then, **New Age** thinking is your -ism. (© William A. Gray 2002)

Learning about Sire's fifth edition (2009), I purchased it and discovered that he had a new way of looking at worldviews and provided a more systematic comparison of them. I discuss this below to build up your *intellectual faith* in the worldview of **Biblical Theism**, so you won't have *blind faith*.

Your Heart's Orientation Really and Truly Matters

In the first edition of his book, Sire discussed worldviews as a "set of intellectual presumptions." In the fifth edition, Sire considers worldview to be a "commitment, a fundamental orientation of the **heart**" because Biblical Theism is based on this, unlike other worldviews.

In the previous chapter I emphasized the fundamental importance of one's heart because the Bible consistently emphasizes this. Below are additional examples.

God decided to flood the earth when the "Lord saw that man was very sinful on the earth. Every plan and thought of the **heart** of man was sinful always."³ God turned Pharaoh's heart hard so Moses could lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt: "The Lord said to Moses, 'When you return to Egypt, make sure you show Pharaoh all the works that I have placed in your power. But I will make his **heart** hard so that he will not let the people go.'"⁴

After the Exodus, God wanted heart-felt loyalty and obedience from His Chosen People (Israel): "Love the Lord your God. Work for Him with all your **heart** and soul. If you do, He will give the rain for your land at the right times, the early and late rain."⁵ God told Joshua what he must do to lead God's people into the Promised Land (Canaan): "Be strong and have strength of **heart**. For you will bring the people in to take this land which I promised to their fathers to give them."⁶

God chose David to replace Saul as king of Israel because of David's whole heart for God: "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. A man looks at the outside of a person, but the Lord looks at the **heart**."⁷ Because David had a heart to build the Temple in Jerusalem, this influenced his son Solomon to build it: "Now it was in the **heart** of my father David to build a house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to my father David, 'Because it was in your **heart** to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your **heart**. But you will not build the house. Your son who will be born to you will build the house for My name.'"⁸

Many Psalms describe the importance of the heart. For example: "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your **heart**."⁹ And, "Your Word have I hid in my **heart**, that I may not sin against You."¹⁰

You cannot imagine how thrilled I was to learn about James Sire's new focus on a "commitment, a fundamental orientation of the **heart**" in his fifth edition, for Jesus is in the **heart** of Born Again Christians and in *His Becoming, Behaving, Being Model I* discuss throughout this book.

Many of Solomon's writings (called "wisdom literature") describe the importance of the heart. For example: "For their **hearts** make plans to hurt others and their lips talk about trouble."¹¹ And, "Be-

cause a sinful act is not punished in a hurry, so the **hearts** of the sons of men are given completely over to sin.”¹²

In his 2009 book, Sire contends that everyone has a worldview: “So long as we live, we will live either the examined or unexamined life. It is the assumption of this book that the examined life is better.” To help you understand this, below I compare how different worldviews answer *Eight Basic Questions*, according to Sire.

Why eight questions, discussed in the sequence below? Sire explains: “I placed question 1 (*What is prime reality – the really real?*) first for a good reason. I take metaphysics (or ontology) to be the foundation of worldviews. Being is prior to knowing. If nothing is there, then nothing can be known. So, in defining theism, I began with God, defined as infinite and personal (triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good. All else in theism stems from this commitment to a specific notion of what is fundamentally there. Question 2 asked about the nature of the external universe, and questions 3 and 4 about the nature of human beings and their destiny. It was not until question 5 that ‘how we know’ was dealt with. Then came ethics – how we should behave – in question 6, and finally an overall question about our human historical significance in question 7. Now question 8 focuses on the end towards which we live our lives.”

My discussion below focuses on those worldviews that have been relevant to my journey, when I Became Born Again and even now.

Question 1. What is Prime Reality – the Really Real?

According to Sire, **Theism** says: “Prime reality is the infinite, personal God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. This God is triune, transcendent [beyond His Creation], immanent [with us], omniscient, sovereign and good.” This is Sovereign God Almighty, with these unique attributes:

- Infinite – the Alpha and Omega who created all reality out of nothing (*ex nihilo*)
- Self-existent – always existing (I AM WHO I AM in Exodus 3:14)
- Personal – not a force or energy like the Big Bang Theory claims
- Triune – Father, Son, Holy Spirit in one Godhead (the Holy Trinity)
- Transcendent – beyond His Creation (not literally in each rock or cow as Hinduism claims)
- Immanent – personally present with us (Emmanuel)
- Omniscient – all-knowing and thus the source of all knowledge
- Sovereign – in ultimate control of His Creation
- Good – provides the absolute standard of morality (right and wrong)

In contrast, **Deism** views God as an impersonal Prime Mover or First Cause, which created the universe and then left it to run on its own – much like a clockmaker creates a clock and winds it up to run on its own. This impersonal Clockmaker lacks the qualities listed above, and therefore is not worshipped for loving us and caring for us – for demonstrating loving-kindness and faithfulness to us. This impersonal Creator simply created a Clockwork Universe and then left it alone to run on its own.

How did a Theistic worldview become reduced to a less complete Deistic worldview? *Faith in* a Sovereign God (who has the attributes listed above) became *beliefs about* a Creator (according to one’s own concept). God’s Creation (everything that came into existence out of

nothing – *ex nihilo*) became viewed as a finely tuned Clockwork Universe without any further divine intervention.

According to Sire, Deism became **Naturalism** when “matter” (the Cosmos) replaced the Creator. Naturalism claims: “Prime reality is matter. Matter exists eternally and is all there is. God does not exist.” In sum, the *natural* Cosmos created itself by some sort of unexplainable matter/energy interchange (perhaps a Big Bang) – but no Naturalist really knows how this happened by chance, nor knows why. Naturalism attempts to describe what *is*, but cannot explain what *ought* to be (moral standards of right and wrong). Proponents of Naturalism include Carl Sagan, whose TV shows popularized its foundational tenet: “The Cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be.”

The Deistic and Naturalistic worldviews are basically a modification of Theism, with personal Sovereign God removed in these proponent’s answer to this first question. This omission of God influences their answers (tenets, presuppositions, beliefs) to the remaining seven questions below.

New Age is an entirely “Separate Universe” according to Sire, because: “This worldview is highly syncretistic and eclectic. It borrows from every major worldview. Though its weirder ramifications and stranger dimensions come from Eastern pantheism and ancient animism, its connection with naturalism gives it a better chance to win converts than purer Eastern mysticism. Like naturalism the new consciousness denies the existence of a transcendent God. There is no Lord of the universe unless it is each of us. There is only the closed universe ... *peopled* by beings of incredible *personal* intelligence and power, and *human consciousness is not contained by the skull*... Also borrowed from naturalism is the hope of evolutionary change for humanity. We are poised on the brink of a new being. Evolution will bring about the transformation.”

Because the New Age Movement has roots in three separate worldviews (Naturalism, Animism and Pantheism), with input also from Transpersonal Psychology, it is not easily compared to the previously mentioned worldviews. For example, here is Sire’s answer to Question

“Self-is-god” is both the uni-verse-maker and the universe itself, as each New Ager imagines it to be. Sire notes a flaw in this belief: “Because of its absolute subjectivity, the I-am-God or I-am-the-Kosmos position remains beyond any criticism external to the subject.”

1 (his answer lapses into Q2 and Q3): “If the transcendent God is the prime reality in theism and the physical universe is the prime reality in naturalism, then in the New Age the **self** (the soul, the integrated, central essence of each person) is the prime reality.... Just exactly what this self is, is problematic. Is it idea, or spirit, or a *pyschomagnetic* field, or the unity that binds the diversity of cosmic energy? Proponents of the New Age do not agree, but they do insist that the self – the consciousness-center of the human being – is indeed the center of the universe.”

.....(jump to Question 8)

Question 8. What Personal, Life-orienting Core Commitments are Consistent with Each Particular Worldview?

According to Sire: “**Christian theists** live to seek first the kingdom of God, that is, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Jesus came, not only to provide the final Atonement for our

eternal salvation, but to proclaim and model the Kingdom of God on earth (*present salvation* here): “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”²² Jesus did this by embodying in His earthly existence the presence of the Father’s Kingdom. Jesus could do this because He is fully God and fully man.

When we *think* like Jesus did (“have the mind of Christ”) and *act* like Jesus did (e.g., “Love your neighbor as yourself” Mark 12:31), we *become* the “likeness” of Jesus, who is God Himself in earthly form. We can think, act and become more like Jesus in these ways:

By “seeking first His Kingdom and His Righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) so that other things will be given to us: Basic necessities such as food and clothing (Maslow’s basic needs). The Fruit of the Spirit to guide our inner Being: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”²³ And, Spiritual Gifts to be used to edify others, such as: teaching, prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpretation, healing (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).

By yielding our will to His Will like Jesus did, most notably in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed so fervently not to be crucified that He sweated blood (“My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”²⁴ Jesus prayed this three times, then willingly endured His crucifixion as the “Suffering Messiah” prophesized by Isaiah.

By “giving thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”²⁵

Theists have faith in Bible-based *orthodox Theism* – which is faith in a very personal yet Sovereign God, who has revealed who He is through “general revelation” (the divine design of His Creation) and through “special revelation” (the Bible and Jesus Christ’s life).

There is *no orthodox Deism* – because each Deist believes the impersonal Creator is whatever this Clockmaker is thought to be. Sire describes two kinds of Deists in history:

Cold Deists “use their own autonomous reason to determine their goals in life.” Two well-known proponents are Albert Einstein (who saw a “higher power” behind the universe) and Stephen Hawking (who uses the term God as the embodiment of the laws of physics). Neither of these intellectual giants extended this reasoning into a coherent philosophy involving God to guide how they actually lived their daily lives.

Warm Deists “may reflect on their commitment to a somewhat personal God and determine their goals in accordance with what they believe their God would be pleased with.” This is exemplified in a 2005 study of teenagers, who expressed the following beliefs:

- God created the world and watches over humans.
- God wants people to be good, as taught by most religions.
- Happiness and feeling good about oneself is the central goal of life.
- No need to involve God except to resolve problems.
- Good people go to heaven after they die.

Notice the absence of faith in a personal Sovereign God, who warrants our reverence, praise and obedience. The God of the Bible has been replaced by one’s own concept based on human reason and individual beliefs. Do these teenagers know their Deism has replaced Theism? Probably not – for this replacement is too subtle.

Naturalism claims there is no God. This belief emerged once Deism (belief in an impersonal First Cause) replaced Theism (faith in a personal God). Sire explains this in detail, and also how Naturalism as a worldview provided the foundation for **Marxism** (which seems to be fading) and for **Secular Humanism** (which dominates education and provides a framework

for most scientific studies of human beings). Sire raises three questions for which Naturalism provides inadequate answers (*italics mine*):

1. “Did naturalism give an adequate reason for us to consider ourselves *valuable*?” “Could a being thrown up by chance be *worthy*?”
2. “If I am only a thinking machine, how can I *trust* my thought?”
3. “Perhaps chance or the nature of things only built into me the *feeling* that I am free but actually am not?”

The **New Age** worldview also raises questions about how one actually lives – questions for which New Age provides totally inadequate answers:

1. How can one live a daily life, from moment to moment, in a state of god-consciousness (Self-as-god) without being in a constant state of altered consciousness, or without bumping into objective reality when not on a mind-altering trip? It seems that a New Ager (a) must always live in his/her “subjective reality” or in agreed-upon “objective reality”; or (b) must live in both simultaneously.
2. If Self-is-god, why worry about ethics? Why not allow the grossest cruelty to be imagined and enacted, because this would be neither good nor evil – but simply “what is”? The problem with this belief is that New Age could give rise to a series of Hitler’s or serial killers or terrorist bombers – but “so what”?
3. If New Agers are both the universe and the universe-maker, why are “spiritual guides” (mediums, shamans, Ouija boards, tarot cards, etc.) needed to help Self-as-god become one with the cosmic universe? Using spiritual guides or any kind of assistance contradicts the belief that Self is both universe and universe-maker.
4. How can mankind know what “really is” if we can only know what we experience privately and individually? Sire contends this issue is primary because “either the self is god and the New Age is a readout of the implications of that, or the self is not god and thus is subject to the existence of things other than itself.”

Nihilism arose because Naturalism cannot answer Questions 1, 6, 7 adequately: “The fears that these questions raised [about Naturalism] in some minds led directly to nihilism, which I am tempted to call a worldview but which is actually a denial of all worldviews.” Nihilists believe that “Human beings are conscious machines without the ability to affect their own destiny or do anything significant; therefore human beings as valuable beings are dead.”

In sum, **Nihilism** says that life is an *illusion*, without meaning or purpose. There is no hope, only despair waiting for whatever is to happen to us – and feeling guilty about the guilt we have because we are not agents in our own life. Because everything is totally bleak, Nihilism poses psychological problems for its proponents: Nietzsche ended up in an asylum and Hemingway committed suicide. No wonder that Sire titled this chapter “Zero Point.”

Fortunately, I never succumbed to Nihilism. I only mention it here to describe the “slide” from Theism to Deism to Naturalism to Nihilism. And to encourage you to buy Sire’s book to read how this “slippery slope” has continued from **Nihilism** (pessimism) to **Existentialism** (more hopeful) to **Eastern Pantheism** (being “one” with the Cosmos) to **New Age** (Self-as-god).

Sire also describes **Postmodernism** where truth depends on one’s language, which symbolically stands for other things. For example, do “protestors” have a legitimate cause, or are they really “terrorists” or “anarchists” or “freedom fighters” or “revolutionaries,” who broke away from the nation of their origin, like the colonists did in The Revolutionary War to form

the United States of America. The main problem with the Postmodern worldview is that language is not easily agreed upon, as symbolized in the preceding examples.

Sire has Winfried Corduan describe **Islamic Theism** because of recent interest in its influence since the bombing of the World Trade Towers on Sept 11, 2001.

Conclusion:

Theism Provides the Best Answers for All Eight Essential Questions

James Sire concludes *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (2009) by emphasizing that there are many worldviews a person could *choose to believe and live by*, and then says: “Truth is ultimately the only thing that will satisfy. But to determine the truth of a worldview, we are cast back on the first three characteristics described above: internal consistency, adequate handling of the data, and ability to explain what is claimed to be explained. Still, subjective satisfaction is important, and it may be lack of it that causes us to investigate our worldview in the first place.” (emphasis mine)

I agree with Sire. The lack of “subjective satisfaction” in trying to live in accordance with all aspects of **Humanism** (based on a combination of *warm* Deism and Naturalism) made me realize that **Christian Theism** is the only worldview that meets all four criteria for being intellectually acceptable enough to live by:

Only Theism is internally consistent – this is called *reliability* in science. No other worldview provides documents that match the reliability of Theism’s historical records (the Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.), which are consistent in their message over the 1,500-year period the Old and New Testaments were written by over 40 authors, from all walks of life, in three languages, on three continents.

Only Theism adequately handles all the data – to answer all eight questions posed by Sire.

Only Theism explains what it claims to explain – this is called *validity* in science. Theism provides more historical evidence to validate its worldview than any other worldview can or does. Theism is based on unmatched documented historical evidence for an *intellectual faith* that supports a Believer’s *saving faith* in Jesus Christ. Other worldviews lack validity.

Only Theism is subjectively satisfying for daily living, as Jesus proclaimed: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly.” (John 10:10 NKJV) You can subjectively experience this *present salvation* (more abundant life) by whole-heartedly embracing *saving faith* in Jesus Christ.

Lessons Learned: I agree with Sire’s last words: “To be a Christian theist is not just to have an intellectual worldview; it is to be personally committed to the infinite-personal Lord of the universe. And it leads to an examined life that is well worth living.” When I seriously examined my life in 1977-78, I finally had to admit that as a humanist I did not know the “way” to Become all I wanted, and the “truths” proclaimed by humanistic psychology were untrue, and my “lifestyle” was not working. These hard lessons learned over ten years made me ready and willing to consider what Jesus proclaimed: “I am the **Way** and the **Truth** and the **Life**.”²⁶

My analytic mind has examined this for over 30 years, especially when inevitable tribulations arise. Each time I reach this same conclusion: No other worldview can provide an adequate Way or Truth or Life compared to Bible-based Theism (Christianity):

No worldview but Theism produces more abundant Life (True Liberty) through faith in **Jesus** (who He is and what He did).