

Worldviews Shaping North America and Africa

North America

Within any group of people, a dominant set of ideas—or those that exert the greatest influence—form the culture. The predominant set of ideas, or worldview, shaping all post-industrial societies, including North America, is referred to as *naturalism, secularism* or *post-modernism*.

The roots of this worldview category go back to a series of dramatic events that occurred in eighteenth-century Europe, a period commonly referred to as “the Age of Reason,” or “the Enlightenment.” The modern scientific method was perfected during this period. Great mysteries of the physical universe were being resolved, one by one, with breathtaking speed. These breakthroughs led to new technologies which laid the foundation for the industrial revolution. Enlightenment thinkers developed such enchantment with the successes of science that a belief began to grow that through unaided human reason man could understand the workings of the entire physical universe. Like the serpent’s deception of Adam and Eve, a prideful confidence began to grow that man—through science and reason alone—could become like God and understand all reality.

The *biblical* worldview had been deeply influential in shaping European culture throughout the Middle Ages. But with the advent of the Enlightenment, it began to slowly erode and was eventually dislodged from its prominent position. As the Enlightenment wore on, the European mind claimed to have come of age. God was slowly banished as a superstitious holdover from the Dark Ages. Enlightened people had sufficient understanding of the natural world through reason and science. There was no need for spiritual reality—for gods, angels, or demons.

Naturalism rests on the presupposition that the universe is comprised of one substance and one substance only—physical matter. The spiritual or supernatural realm is either nonexistent or unknowable. The physical universe is a closed system. Every effect *must* have a *natural* cause. Indeed, everything can—and must—be explained through the impersonal workings and chance combinations and interactions of matter.

Naturalism assumes a strict division between facts and values. Facts are objective and publicly verifiable truths. Values, on the other hand, are subjective, personally constructed meanings. Science exists in the realm of fact—in the “real” world of the five senses. Religion, spiritual belief and faith exist in the realm of the personal, subjective and emotional. Humans learn what is true through human reason and scientific inquiry. The spiritual world is unreal or unknowable. It is the realm of subjective belief, fantasy and religion. “At best,” explained one observer, “religion paints a coat of ‘value’ over the otherwise valueless ‘facts’ disclosed by science.”¹ Because naturalism is the dominant worldview of the modern West, this mindset permeates nearly every area of modern life and thought.

FACTS	VALUES
Objective public reality Science and reason	Subjective personal belief Religion and faith

According to Richard Keyes,

For modern secular man, meaning, purpose and value have become regarded as private, personal, and disconnected from anything beyond the subjectivity of the individual. Meanings, like our tastes for food, are personal and therefore immune from falsification... In modern, secular thought, the natural world is no longer seen as meaningful because of its relatedness to God—it just exists as a bare, independent fact. If we want to attribute some kind of meaning, purpose or value to it, that is our choice. It is a free country. But we are ever to be aware that these come from our sentimental and inevitably biased subjective addition.²

Ideas have consequences, and the practical outworking of these naturalistic assumptions have resulted in a culture whose primary values are choice, tolerance, radical individualism and pragmatism—values reflected both outside the Church as well as within. Since there is no universal right and wrong, “if it feels good—do it.” If it works, it must be good. Because God is absent as a practical daily reality (even for many in the North American Church), the greatest good is whatever pleases or brings the greatest enjoyment or comfort. Life, for many, has become radically self-centered, boring, confused, scattered, disorganized, fractured and without purpose.

Africa

Africa is comprised of many nations, each with its own distinct culture, each shaped by the dominant worldview held by her people. Speaking very generally, African worldviews are associated with fatalism, spiritism and ancestor-worship. These three pillars are foundational to a worldview category known as *animism*. Like all false worldviews, animism is a distortion of the truth. And as with all such distortions, when it becomes the dominant belief-system of a group of people and is acted upon, the real-life consequences are both tragic and destructive.

How can you explain the genocide in Rwanda, or the descent into chaos of clan warfare in Somalia? How can you account for the repeated raping of women and the rampant promiscuity that fans the flames of the HIV AIDS pandemic? These are not merely moral problems. They are spiritual problems. They are the natural consequences, in large part, of a distorted view of reality—a worldview that leads to injustice, poverty and a breakdown of social order.

To illumine the animistic worldview, let’s contrast a list of fundamental beliefs that are common to a traditional African mindset with those of the Judeo-Christian, or biblical worldview.

African Traditional Mindset	Biblical Worldview (Mindset)
Women are inferior to men	Women are made in the image of God and have equal worth with men. While the roles of men and women differ, their value before God is the same.
Work is a curse	Work is part of our dignity
Tribalism: my tribe is superior to your tribe	Community: each race/tribe is equal in value but wonderfully unique, and that uniqueness is to be celebrated
Fatalism: We are poor and there is nothing we can do about it. History is something that happens to us. This leads to a “dependency” mentality that is outward looking, waiting for someone or something else “from the outside”	Freedom: We were made to create history. God created humans with freedom and personal responsibility.

to solve problems.	
Time: focus on the past; backward looking	Time: celebrate the past, enjoy the present, plan for the future; forward looking
Corruption: The gods are capricious and can be “bribed” through various acts or sacrifices.	Justice: The living God’s character is unchanging, which is both just and good. He takes no bribes.
The life of an individual is not significant	Individual human life is significant
“Zero-sum:” Limited good; resources are fixed and limited. If my neighbor prospers, it must be the result of him doing something wrong to me, such as stealing.	Positive Sum: Wealth is created.
Capriciousness of the universe: The universe is chaotic and unpredictable.	The universe is governed by natural laws; it is orderly

The list above is not meant to be exhaustive, nor are these assumptions equally held by all African cultures. Yet until such unspoken and often unexamined assumptions are addressed, Africa will continue to suffer. What Africa needs above all else is not money nor outside resources—or even new technologies or technical know-how. What is desperately needed is for the animistic assumptions listed above to be replaced by a worldview that fits with reality as God made it—a worldview where truth, beauty and justice penetrate the very fabric of society. When this happens, Africa will be transformed.

Copyright © 2007 By Scott Allen (sallen@fhi.net) and Darrow Miller (dmiller@fhi.net)

¹ John F. Haught, “The Darwinian Struggle: Catholics, Pay Attention,” *Commonwealth*, September 24, 1999, pp. 14-16.

² Richard Keyes, “A Crisis of Meaning,” *Finding God at Harvard* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 84-85.