

## Our changing worldviews....Part 1

The '*Flammarion woodcut*' is an anonymous engraving that appeared in a book of illustrations by Camille Flammarion in 1888. It depicts medieval cosmology. A man, dressed as a pilgrim and carrying a pilgrim's staff, has found a point where the sky and earth do not touch. He is able to peer through the sky as if it were a curtain to look at the hidden workings of the universe. One of the elements of the cosmic machinery bears a strong resemblance to traditional pictorial representations of the "wheel in the middle of a wheel" described in the visions of Ezekiel.

This is a good image to consider what or who has shaped your view of the world? This can be somewhat understood by how we answer *four questions*: Who am I? How did I get here? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Our traditional Western worldview has come to us as a story (e.g. through the book of Genesis). Our worldview has also been shaped by our family story. Different events affect our family and this shapes our story and this can change our worldview.

Susan was sixty years of age, and she presented herself at the Social Security desk to make arrangements for receiving her pension entitlements. During the ensuing conversation with the social worker, she was advised that some of her personal details did not match those in her official government file. As the conversation emerged, she was advised that the man she had always believed was her father was not in fact her birth father.

Faced with the reality that there was no one alive who could explain this to her, she became distraught. She screamed out, "*Well who the hell am I?*" It is not difficult to imagine Susan's pain and confusion, nor her subsequent feelings. Disbelief, confusion, a sense of dislocation, anger and a deep questioning, would be very normal in such a circumstance.

Every culture has a story to explain how the world came to be. From this story particular cultural attitudes and customs develop. These sacred stories relate events from the remote past and are known as myths. While the details will be described, it is the meaning or message that is critical or 'true'. A myth seeks to convey a profound spiritual truth. It tells how the group began, how and why it developed its values and customs, and how they impact on the present day group.

Myth, together with ritual, creates a religious experience and gives ultimate meaning and purpose to the participants. An example of this can be seen when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and led most of the population into exile. The Jewish people retained their identity and purpose through remembering the mythical story of the Exodus through which they had come to understand that God had led their people in earlier times out of slavery in Egypt via a crossing of the Red sea, to freedom in Canaan. The exiles in Babylon and their descendants came to see their suffering through the focus of that myth.

Obviously during that time, some people would have questioned the validity of the myth. Some would have become disbelievers, unable to connect their present life with the story that had been handed on. The Hebrew scriptures reflect this challenge. Traditions have been able to retell their myths so long as those hearing it are disposed to understand that the myth is not a claim to literal accuracy, but to 'meaning making'.

If something like what happened to Susan, happened to you, it would be natural to feel confused, bewildered, angry, disconnected, or questioning of your identity. If you had harboured some suspicion that all was not right, you might be relieved that you had the chance now to discover the truth.

We are not unfamiliar with this kind of experience because issues of identity are raised at critical periods of our lives such as during adolescence, mid-life, retirement and the onset of old age, after marriage, after a tragedy or loss, or after a profound experience that leaves with a sense of disbelief or awe. At such times, new questions about God are normal as we seek to adjust to a new sense of ourselves and our world.

Our worldview can change as a result of questioning or after study or research. Most often we don't choose it; rather, it 'happens' to us'. When John Lennon took his sabbatical, many people were critical that he was wasting his talent and his opportunity to make money. In the interview he gave five years after starting that sabbatical he revealed that what he had quickly learned was that he was not a songwriter. He said "I am John Lennon. I do write songs, but that is not who I am".

We are always trying to make sense of our story. Sometimes we don't feel we can tell everyone or anyone about our uncertainties. Sometimes even the closest of friends do not share this with each other.

Our Worldview (story) is developed from many sources. As we grow, we learn that some of the sources are inadequate or wrong! Since our relationships, values and faith are affected by how we answer the big questions, then abandoning a past story can have huge consequences. Some are too afraid to search or to change, even though they know the old story doesn't 'work' any more.

Who am I? How did I get here? Why am I here? Where am I going? As the 'Flammarion woodcut' engraving suggests, looking 'outside' can reveal a totally different 'world and it is worth reflecting on what might happen or has happened when someone's world view is shattered? Nicolas Copernicus claimed, "*I swept man out of his proud position as the central figure and end of the universe, and made him a tiny speck on a third-rate planet revolving about a tenth-rate sun drifting in an endless cosmic ocean.*" His novel 'De Revolutionibus' outlining his theory that the earth was not the centre of the universe, was placed on the Index of forbidden books in 1616 and only removed in 1835.

A sense of the challenge this new thinking offered, is expressed by German philosopher and scientist, Johann Goethe (1749-1832). *“Of all discoveries and opinions, none may have exerted a greater effect on the human spirit than the doctrine of Copernicus. The world had scarcely become known as round and complete in itself when it was asked to waive the tremendous privilege of being the center of the universe. Never, perhaps, was a greater demand made on mankind - for by this admission so many things vanished in mist and smoke! What became of our Eden, our world of innocence, piety and poetry; the testimony of the senses; the conviction of a poetic - religious faith? No wonder his contemporaries did not wish to let all this go and offered every possible resistance to a doctrine which in its converts authorized and demanded a freedom of view and greatness of thought so far unknown, indeed not even dreamed of.”*

Galileo observed with his telescope that the earth, Venus and Jupiter each orbited the sun. This did not ‘fit’ with biblical passages that declared the earth to be immovable. He was silenced by the Vatican. Initially, these positions of Copernicus and Galileo were difficult for scientists and church people to accept because it demanded an entirely new worldview. We can refer to Susan’s feelings, to understand these reactions.

Although it had sometimes been questioned, until 1919, the scientific worldview was that there was one galaxy, and the universe was eternal. That changed with the observations of astronomer Edwin Hubble who, with the aid his telescope, estimated that there were ‘thousands’ of galaxies. Later, with a larger telescope, he confirmed that the galaxies were moving away from the Milky Way galaxy, and the further away they were, the faster they were travelling. He concluded that the universe must be expanding and therefore it must have had a beginning point. This meant it was not fixed and static. Einstein had done mathematical calculations to support this, but he refused to believe that everything was not fixed and planned. “God does not play dice”, he famously said. Like New Testament Thomas, he refused to believe, until he looked through Hubble’s telescope himself seven years later! One can imagine the thoughts and emotions that ran through Einstein as he saw what he had not wanted to be true!

It is good to reflect on what sources have shaped our worldview? Some of these will have been general sources, such as the Bible, the Church, school, priests or pastors, nuns, brothers, teachers, family, friends, the media etc. There are also particular sources who acted representatives of the general sources. For example a narrow unenquiring teacher may not have shared information with us that another teacher did with other children. We know that priests in different parishes have communicated very different theologies.

There is a report of dialogue between two American churches, one Catholic and one Presbyterian. The dialogue is probably not real, but it highlights that different theologies, different denominations or different religions, can affect our worldview.

Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church: *All dogs go to heaven.*  
Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church: *Only humans go to heaven/ read the bible.* Our Lady of Martyrs: *God loves all his creations/ dogs included*  
Beulah Cumberland: *Dogs don't have souls/ this is not open for debate*  
Our Lady of Martyrs: *Catholic dogs go to heaven/Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor*  
Beulah Cumberland: *Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul*  
Our Lady of Martyrs: *Free dog souls with conversion*  
Beulah Cumberland: *Dogs are animals/ there aren't any rocks in heaven either*  
Our Lady of Martyrs: *All rocks go to heaven*

We gain our worldview from these sources. As the sources learn new information they may change their stance. The theory of evolution, first proposed by Darwin in 1850, was such a challenge for Christian churches. The Catholic church does not see evolution as incompatible with the Bible, because it does not hold that the Bible should be read literally. Some other Christian denominations share this view. The more fundamental churches hold to 'creationism' (the literal description of creation in the Bible) or intelligent design' (there were no random processes in creation, rather the creator designed the world as it is).

What we have to ask is whether there is anything learned in our 'old story' that has left us disconnected in the light of the discoveries of modern science? For many adult Christians today, the abandonment of regular worship, the 'relaxation' of moral attitudes by so many people, especially the young, and the refusal of the hierarchy to respond to some pastoral needs such as the provision of regular Eucharist, invites much reflection. Sexual abuse in the church has shattered the faith (worldview) of many people.

Like it or not, there is a new worldview developing? How is this affecting us? What questions does it raise? What feelings does it leave us with?

Brian Traynor CP  
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