



# Defusing Polarized Thinking

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## WORLDVIEWING, NOT WORLDVIEWS

Human beings and their communities develop particular ways of perceiving the world around them. Scripture presents a variety of worldviews, all of which hold assumptions about how God interacts with the world. Two different worldviews lead off the very beginning of the biblical text. In Genesis 1–2:4a, creation becomes ordered by a God who brings structure and categorization to chaos, with seven distinct days and a hierarchy of created beings, with humans as the crowning achievement of this order. Immediately after this text, a different worldview is presented (Genesis 2:4b–24). This account does not count days or created objects, but rather depicts an intimate God who seeks out human beings for relationship. Through these Scriptures, people of faith have inherited a tradition of diverse worldviews—and these worldviews continue to expand and change over time.

Worldview, as a noun, implies that we “have” a worldview and that it is coherent and whole. Changes in worldview—especially those that disrupt how we have come to make sense of the world—can feel very threatening. Yet as we encounter new events or discover inconsistencies in our meaning making, we adjust our worldviews smoothly. So it’s helpful to

think about *worldviewing* as an active and dynamic process, rather than worldview as an object that remains the same.

We don’t perceive the world directly but rather experience the world through a process of worldviewing that brings order to the onslaught of sensory data around us. At a deeply unconscious level, we are always answering five questions:

1. What is real or not real?
2. How is the real organized?
3. What is valuable or not valuable?
4. How do we know about the world?
5. How should we act?

Our answers to these questions operate as a (more or less) coherent system that influences what we see (and don’t see), and how we respond to the world. Most importantly, our worldviewing gives us a sense of the moral order of the world, our obligations to others, and what we can expect or require from others. For many, worldviewing is informed by the teachings of faith traditions.

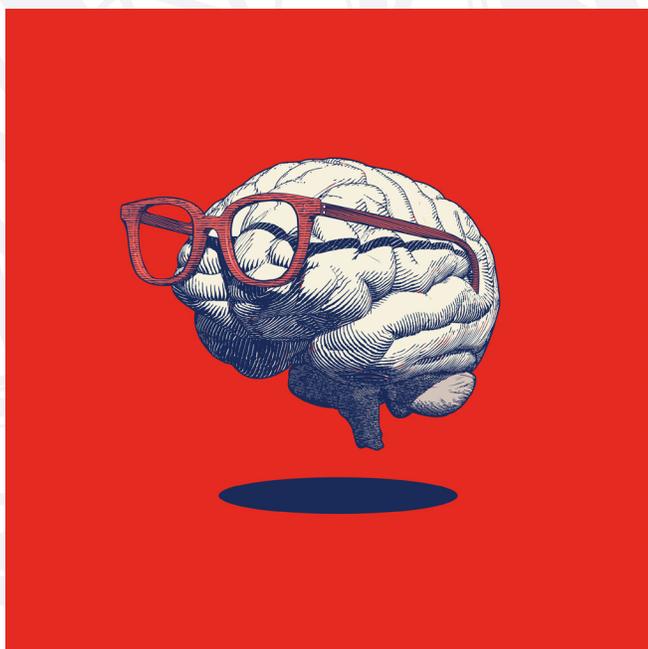
## REFLECTING ON THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR MORAL ORDER

The moral ordering that emerges from our worldviewing process is complex. We value multiple things that sometimes contradict each other. When faced with a particular problem, we often create a hierarchy of values to arrive at our response. For example, Jesus valued ministry and teaching with others as well as time alone with God in prayer. When the crowds became overwhelming, Jesus prioritized solitude (Luke 5:15–16).

It is often the case that people hold the same values but rank them differently. If we can start with identifying values we share, then we can explore why we are prioritizing them differently. Perhaps we can even find ways we can live together by focusing on ways to respect each other’s priorities.

## RECLAIMING OUR WORLDVIEWING SKILLS

Sometimes, changes in the world around us are so big that we fall into worldview rigidity as a defense against anxiety and identity threat. This rigidity is amplified when leaders or influencers claim that changing our understanding of the world is a threat to our very existence. In such cases, worldview becomes an unchanging reality—an object—rather than a process that adjusts over time.



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Rather than immediately tackling the biggest worldview conflicts our communities are facing, we can ease into fruitful reflection with the following kinds of questions:

- When did you first question or doubt something your community or family told you was true about the world? How did you reconcile what you had been taught with what you came to believe?
- Did you ever experience a time when you believed two things, but something happened, and you discovered that both could not be true? What happened?
- Have you ever encountered a situation for which you just didn't have an explanation? How did you make sense of it?

Leaders can use these worldviewing questions to guide reflection both personally and with congregations. To move further, think of a prior experience when you altered your sense of the world. Then reflect on these questions:

- How did your sense of what is real or not real change?
- Did you change your understanding of what is valuable or not valuable?
- Did you adjust your expectations about how the world is organized?
- Did you accept a new form of knowledge?
- Did you change your sense of how you should act?

As reflected in Genesis, Scripture testifies to the potential for members of the same community to hold different worldviews. Rather than reinforcing worldviews as rigid and unchanging, faith leaders can cultivate worldviewing as a process through which God's Spirit continually invites us to a new awareness of the world, one another, ourselves, and God.

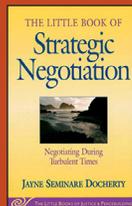


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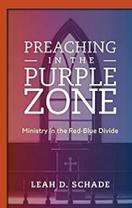
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## RESOURCES



**Jayne Seminare Docherty**, *The Little Book of Strategic Negotiation: Negotiating during Turbulent Times* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005)

For more examples of strategies for managing worldviewing in conflict situations.



**Leah D. Schade**, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019)

This book includes sample sermons for addressing controversial issues and tips for writing powerful sermons that invite dialogue.

**Peter Schulte**, "Polarity Management 101: The Solution to Unsolvable Problems," *Triple Pundit*, December 29, 2016 (<https://www.triplepundit.com/story/2016/polarity-management-101-solution-unsolvable-problems/20846>)

This is an excellent resource on polarity management that includes some ideas about our current tensions around managing equally important values.