

## ***American Politics Go Deeper Than Politics***

From Paul Von Ward  
(September 11, 2012)

A large majority of citizens think elections in the United States do not affect change in Washington's policies. They believe government decisions mostly benefit the wealthy who rig the system for themselves. So, why do so many uninformed voters support policy-empty slogans? Could it be more of an emotional exercise than a mental one?

*At some level, each of all seven-plus billion of us lives in a different reality. I can't fully get inside your mind. With our best efforts, you cannot see the world exactly like I do. However, we humans cluster into a half-dozen or so powerful existential worldviews.*

### **War of Worldviews**

The current campaign is a battleground to control reality-shaping beliefs. In a waning, but still powerful world culture—it is part of a worldwide struggle of unprovable beliefs being fought with evangelical ferocity regardless of their religious or secular bases. American politics is just a proxy war for these competing existential worldviews.<sup>1</sup>

Given the present fragmentation of species' consciousness, the worldview concept is not an academic fantasy.<sup>2</sup> It is the basis of conflicts involving access to wealth and natural resources and use of deadly weapons. It prevents creation of a human-friendly economy, maintenance of a viable ecosystem, and development of a civil political order.

In its first two centuries, the United States developed institutions to protect individual freedoms. But, with increasing technologies and population that weaken the planet's ecological health, humans need group-focused institutions to successfully live together.

Once again, America is the focal point in a global experiment: Can we treat worldviews of others as worthy of consideration as our own? Do we have the courage to submit our most sacred cosmological beliefs to a public re-examination? Can we find ways to synthesize conflicting worldviews into a bigger picture that includes all the evidence?

### **Emotion-Energized Worldviews**

The human mind lives in a cosmos of uncertainty. When we don't know the answers to existential questions (who, what, and where are we?), we make up answers that give us a sense of certainty. These assumptions foster a sense of a stability when we confront a lack of knowledge or fears created by a world that we can't understand or dominate.

On the positive side, fundamental worldviews generate a sense of personal pride. They motivate us to take on hardships or feel worthy when among people who are unlike us. They even determine how we face death. It is self-evident that belief is a tangible force.

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.vonward.com/articles/spandaworldviewarticle.html>>

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.vonward.com/selfassessmenttools/briefessayonworldview.html>>

Psychologists have identified different behavioral patterns linked to varying worldviews. For the general reader, *Scientific American* on-line has described studies that have face validity in that they link particular beliefs with behaviors. Following are some examples:

Emily Laber-Warren writes “According to the experts who study political leanings, liberals and conservatives do not just see things differently. They are different—in their personalities and even their unconscious reactions to the world around them.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesse Bering concludes that “We’re all susceptible to tales of the supernatural ... but genuine belief matters. [In a laboratory experiment a] concocted spiritual entity ... was real enough in their minds ... to affect ... behavior in an empirically demonstrable way.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Daisy Grewal “Choice is a fundamental American [worldview] belief ... Recent research suggests that thinking about our lives in terms of choices may reduce our support for public policies that promote greater equality in society.”<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to identify worldview sets that appear to be responsible for significantly different behaviors, I use a questionnaire about basic beliefs that divide people into four distinguishable groups. The groups have different psychological profiles and represent a spectrum of behavioral patterns.<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire is also used in self-assessments.

Studies like those above appear to support the hypothesis that existential assumptions shape wide areas of our behavior. They also suggest that deeply embedded beliefs are also mutable in the right circumstances. Otherwise, ideology trumps such a process.

Examples in this piece demonstrate that even the most erudite people cannot control their own emotions enough to look at their beliefs in an objective manner. No one wants to admit they do not have the whole truth and nothing but the truth. However, we cannot validate our worldviews without the help of people who don’t agree with us!

Every new discovery either obviates or modifies a previous discovery. We must avoid grounding our favorite assumptions in mental cement. Four million gene switches that reside in bits of our body were dismissed by the early Genome Project as “junk” DNA.

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=calling-truce-political-wars>>

<sup>4</sup> <<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/bering-in-mind/2012/09/04/imaginary-presidents-and-imaginary-gods-the-real-empty-chair-effect/>>

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=understanding-psychology-of-american-idea-choice>>

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.vonward.com/selfassessmenttools/worldviewarticleahpsy.html>>

With more research, “they turn out to play critical roles in controlling how cells, organs and other tissues behave.”<sup>7</sup> The truth is that yesterday’s assumptions always change.

### **Can Worldviews Be Changed**

Yes, they can, but not by the popular media we label as opinion shapers. They primarily serve to stoke the conflicts among existing mindsets. The worldviews discussed here are formed by much more intimate influencers who can exercise existential-level power.

Individual shifting to a different worldview does occur, but it happens only in a minority of believers. Such shifting usually happens when people are exposed to an environment that is inconsistent with key elements of their childhood environment. But, after some years, many return to their status quo ante, particularly when in stressful situations.

Today we can link these adult-to-child-transmitted worldviews with particular behaviors. But we do not yet understand how adult-level, abstract ideas can gain such power over our minds. To do so, we must figure out how the emotional base of the brain (as in the amygdala) becomes entrained with its mental counterparts (as in the prefrontal cortex).

Meanwhile, we’re ignorant about how such embedded beliefs can be consciously modified in a way that supports continual expansion of one’s worldview perspective. What role does experiencing incontrovertible evidence play? What emotional state is most conducive to reshaping life-long beliefs? Can one regularly reevaluate them?

Neuroscience is making some progress mapping the complex neuronal networks involved. In the future we may be able to develop approaches that engage people in learning to transfer their own belief-based existential emotions to new beliefs.

But the species is very pressed to find ways to live together on a path that leads to a different global future. While searching for a neuroscience holy grail, society can’t wait.

Some evidence suggests that at any age of consciousness one can become an active participant in changing his or her assumptions about how the world works. This means the worldviews of any group (whoever they are) cannot be changed without their willing participation in the process. In order to create a climate suitable to basic-belief changes in others we must be willing to submit ourselves to the same conditions.

A recent social media event is relevant here: On Marc Kuchner’s blog—in reaction to Bill Nye’s YouTube comments about teaching evolution to nonbelievers—Patrick Donadio suggests “that you can’t change someone’s opinion by trying to force—push—them to change. You can change their view by inviting—pulling—them to change.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/science/far-from-junk-dna-dark-matter-proves-crucial-to-health.html?ref=science>>

<sup>8</sup> <[http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/2012/09/02/bill-nyes-dont-teach-creationism-video-dissected-by-business-communication-expert/?WT\\_mc\\_id=SA\\_CAT\\_EVO\\_20120903](http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/2012/09/02/bill-nyes-dont-teach-creationism-video-dissected-by-business-communication-expert/?WT_mc_id=SA_CAT_EVO_20120903)>

Progress toward a more inclusive and validated view of the human scope of knowledge starts with descriptions of the basic worldviews of all major cultural groups. How they fit into the human story must be documented. Unproven assumptions in worldviews like creationism, accidentalism, scientism, spiritualism, materialism, etc. must be identified.

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*I sadly write this on 9/11 as a former U.S. diplomat learning of the assassination of our ambassador and other embassy staff members in Libya. I believe these and innumerable other worldview-caused deaths are due to the failure of the three Abrahamic religions to re-examine the real basis of their ethereal supernaturalism.*

*All professionals who seek to explain history and its effects on human behavior and fail to continually correct their interpretations based on new data are parties to such wars.*

### **Big Picture Needed**

To reconcile such species-threatening worldviews, we need a broader canvas on which to project a bigger picture of the tangible evidence that undergirds them. It must have room to encompass evidence ignored by all participating groups: religious devotees, laboratory scientists, spiritual gurus, atheists, humanists, secular skeptics, and others.

It is imperative that we distinguish consensual identification of facts from assumptions. The global storehouse of unexamined historical evidence keeps expanding the human story. Everyday, new discoveries undermine long-held scientific and religious beliefs. They demonstrate that our conventional human story is too often based on blind faith.

Given my own early theological background, over the years I have tried to engage scholars steeped in the notion of divine realms to consider alternative approaches to evaluating their sacred texts. Almost all find it impossible to look at their sacred texts with the same set of historical lens they use in their other historical research.

Some of these theologians want to reform the behavior of some of their co-believers, but they cannot bring themselves to re-examine assumptions that underlie their actions. This bifocal (faith or test) way of perceiving aspects of our reality lies in our worldviews.

In a parallel vein, secular scholars look at the same religious texts as lacking historical value because they believe that the texts dealt with supernatural matters instead of real history. The result is that both religious and secular scholars have chosen to propagate their respective models of history that omit vast areas of relevant historical evidence.

I recently made a presentation<sup>9</sup> along these lines at a small academic history meeting. Its advertised aspiration was a bigger picture of human history. Group discussion of my paper on anomalous evidence relevant to their presumptive story stirred personal fears.

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.vonward.com/ibhapresentationnotes.html>>

The group leaders' amygdala-based, defensive reaction<sup>10</sup> demonstrated the same type of emotionally-grounded worldviews as those of the religious groups mentioned above. Regardless of educational, social, or economic level, our subconscious knows when we have unprovable assumptions underpinning our public persona. The fear of being wrong leads to all sorts of defensive, inappropriate, and destructive personal and social acts.

My next effort this year to understand how our worldviews divide us and how we might bridge these gaps will be as a participant in the Paradigm Symposium<sup>11</sup> in Minneapolis in October (from 18 to 21). This conference will focus on evidence that challenges some of the more narrow history highlighted in the above described meeting.

Given the presenters at the Paradigm Symposium, it should be more open to integrating material presented from opposing worldviews. What is needed in any future, historically-oriented conferences are exchanges among both academic and independent scholars.

A tenet of my alma mater Harvard Kennedy School is that leaders "... are expected not only to master specific subjects and apply that learning in other areas, but also to know when to apply [it] to open-ended questions that have no single right answer."<sup>12</sup>

**We need a New Sense of the World Order before we can have a New World Order!**

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.vonward.com/selfassessmenttools/worldviewcasestudy.html>>

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.paradigmsymposium.com/index.html>>

<sup>12</sup> Harvard Kennedy School *Magazine*. Summer 2012. p. 27.