

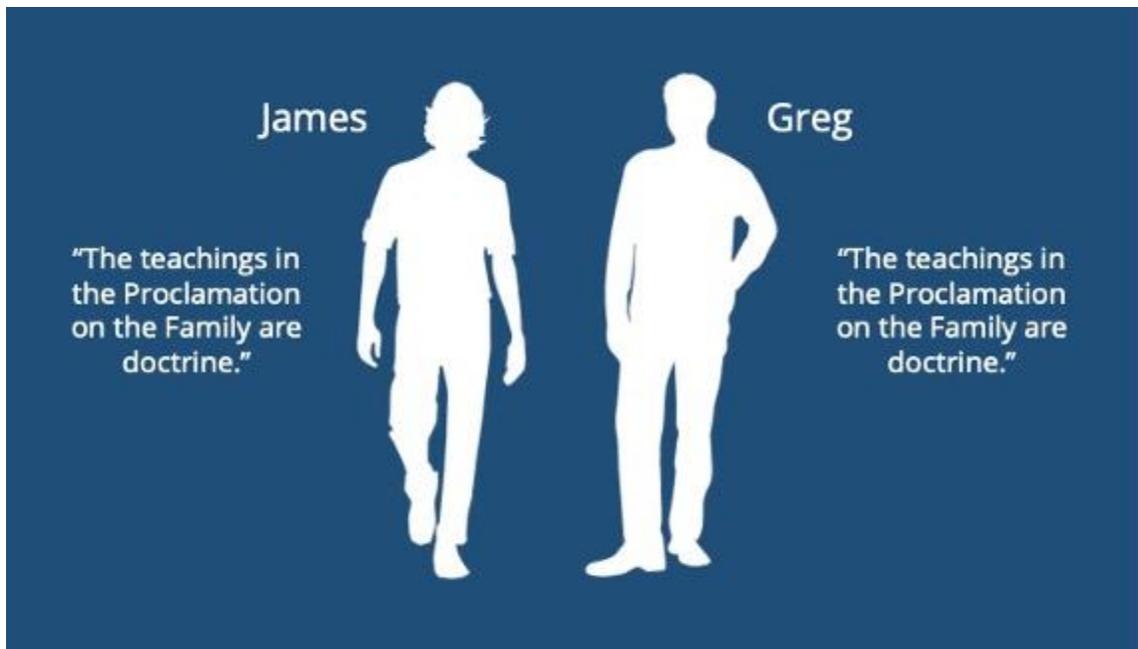
# Worldview Apologetics: Revealing the Waters in Which We Swim

By Jeffrey Thayne, 2021 FAIR LDS Conference

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## Introduction

Let's imagine two roommates, James and Greg, who both attend BYU. They live under the same roof, they are both practicing Latter-day Saints, and they both claim to believe in the doctrines taught by the Proclamation on the Family about sexuality and gender. However, despite these shared beliefs, the way they experience Church culture, policies, practices, and traditions couldn't be more different.



For James, BYU's honor code seems like a natural expression of those doctrines, an institutional scaffold that helps reinforce our moral intuitions. For him, discipleship involves participating in a community that encourages and reinforces our shared values and priorities, and helps us maintain our ideals and live out our convictions.

For Greg, the community norms those doctrines give rise to are disclosed to him, experienced *by* him as stifling and burdensome for LGBT students. He concludes that his faith requires him to engage in political and social advocacy on behalf of his LGBT friends, to make the university and the church more hospitable for those who live LGBT lifestyles.



How can two people who share the same doctrinal beliefs arrive at such wildly different conclusions? This question is relevant to those of us who want to help members maintain faith and conviction. The Gregs of this story do not always experience a crisis of faith and leave the Church, but Greg’s approach may prime him towards distrust of the Church’s policies and traditions, and sow the seeds of continued disappointment and future disaffection when the Church doesn’t change in the ways he prefers.

I believe the answer to this question is that doctrinal propositions are *not always the primary source of our most central convictions*. More often than not, our convictions form as a result of our *worldviews*.

### **Worldviews**

What is a worldview? A worldview is a set of values and assumptions about the world, through which we interpret our experiences. More specifically, worldviews shape our understanding of what human flourishing and the good life look like. Steve Wilkens and Mark Sanford explain that worldviews “tell us what we should love or despise, what is valuable or unimportant, and what is good or evil.”

Like a pair of colored lenses, our worldviews shape and inform *where* we look and *what* we see when we look there. This picture, as a metaphor for worldviews, is misleading because it implies that we could take our worldviews off and see the world as it really is. However, we can only ever trade one for another. There is no way to look at the world *except* through the lens of a worldview.

Wilkins and Sanford have written a fantastic book called *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories that Shape Our Lives*. Written from a broadly Christian perspective, they identify a series of non-Christian worldviews that sometimes shape Christian thinking, worldviews such as consumerism, nationalism, or naturalism. They argue that worldviews are more than lists of propositions. Worldviews, at their core, are rooted in *stories*.

### **Worldview stories**

Stories give us characters, and in every story, the characters have goals, desires, or aspirations — the things that the characters are striving for. By setting forth the goals and aspirations of the characters, stories also describe the conflict that drives the story, or the *problem* that stands between the characters and their aspirations. Worldview stories also set forth the expected, anticipated, or hoped-for resolution to the conflict. In all of these, they shape our understanding of human flourishing and the good life. These stories also define the villains or antagonists of the story.

#### **Worldview stories provide:**

- Character's aspirations / desires
- The central problem / conflict
- The expected / anticipated resolution
- View of human flourishing / good life
- Villains / antagonists

So what is the Gospel worldview, or the Gospel story? Well, as characters of this story, we are sons and daughters of God with a divine destiny. Our goal is salvation and exaltation — to return to live with God again to lay hold upon all the blessings of eternity. What stands between us and our desires? That is, what's the conflict that drives this story? We (the protagonists) have been alienated from God through sin. What is the anticipated, expected, hoped for resolution? We find redemption through Christ by making and keeping covenants and participating in sacred ordinances, and

by so doing lays hold upon the fruits of the Spirit in our day-to-day life. We become reconciled with God and commune with Him in holy temples.

## **The Gospel Worldview / Story**

### **Character's aspirations / desires**

Salvation and exaltation, return to live with God

### **The central problem / conflict**

Alienation from God through sin and rebellion

### **The expected / anticipated resolution**

Redemption thru Christ by making & keeping sacred covenants

### **Human flourishing / the good life**

Fruits and gifts of the Spirit & temple worship

### **Villains / antagonists**

Sin, vice, and the Adversary

When we embrace and internalize this worldview and its story, we see human flourishing and the good life as bound up in the fruits and gifts of the Spirit, and in temple worship — regardless of our life circumstances, or the trials we face. The villain of the story are sin, vice, and the Adversary who entices us towards sin and rebellion.

## **Confessional vs. convictional beliefs**

It is in the translation of these stories into our lives that we form our convictions. To be clear, convictions here are more than mere stated beliefs. Wilkins and Sanford argue that our stated beliefs — that is, our *confessional* beliefs — can be at odds with our convictional beliefs. Confessional beliefs are those doctrinal commitments that we profess to hold to. Convictional beliefs are those values that are reflected in how we live.

In their book, Sanford and Wilkins explore *consumerism* as an example of a worldview that competes with the Gospel story. Consumerism is a worldview that depicts us as consumers, built to enjoy — and our aspirations are a life of material comfort. What stands in the way? Scarcity or lack of money. The hoped for resolution is improved employment and income, the accumulation of wealth, and increased material comforts and enjoyment. In this worldview, human flourishing is found in material consumption. The villain of this story is anything that gets in the way of

material comfort and prosperity, be it income inequality, unemployment, underemployment, etc.

## The Consumerism Worldview / Story

### Character's aspirations / desires

A life of material comfort and enjoyment

### The central problem / conflict

Scarcity of goods and lack of money

### The expected / anticipated resolution

Improved employment, accumulation of wealth

### Human flourishing / the good life

Material consumption and economic prosperity

### Villains / antagonists

Income inequality, unemployment, underemployment

It is possible for a Christian to openly confess that their aspirations are discipleship, sacrifice, and service, and yet *live* as if their highest priority is material comfort instead. Their *confessional* beliefs (the doctrines they claim to believe in) may diverge from their *convictional* beliefs, which are handed to them by an undetected consumeristic worldview. In the same way, in the example above, both James and Greg share a *confessional* belief in the Church's doctrines on the family, but Greg's *convictional* beliefs may be informed by something else. We will get to what that "something else" is in a moment.

## Hidden Worldviews

Sanford and Wilkens explain that our questions and discourse can often be informed by "hidden worldviews" that sneak into our thinking and shape our convictions:

*"It is not the worldviews that begin as theories or intellectual systems that mold the lives and beliefs of most people. Instead, the most powerful influences come from worldviews that emerge from culture. They are all around us, but are so deeply embedded in culture that we don't see them. In other words, these worldviews are hidden in plain sight.*

*[W]e are more likely to absorb them from cultural contact than adopt them through a rational evaluation of competing theories. ... Because of their*

*stealthy nature, these worldviews find their way behind the church doors, mixed in with Christian ideas and sometimes identified as Christian positions.”*

In a similar way, I believe that many Latter-day Saints today struggle with their faith *not* because they’ve learned about something Brigham Young said or did, or because they’ve discovered some nasty facts surrounding polygamy, or some of the eccentricities of Book of Mormon translation. Many *think* that their trials of faith center on these questions, and some of them may be right.

But it seems to me that many of those who struggle with these historical questions do so because they’ve *first* embraced unquestioningly, and often wittingly, other worldviews with stories that tilt them towards doubt. Having done so, the historical questions provide a *pretext* for a faith crisis that has been in the works long before they ever realized it. And the true reasons for the crisis are often beyond their ability to articulate — they are merely living out the story handed to them by their worldview.

### **The Joshua Tree Principle**

We often don’t always have a shared language for talking about these competing worldviews. Let me share a story that is told by a graphic designer named Robin Williams:

*“Many years ago I received a tree identification book for Christmas. I was at my parents’ home, and after all the gifts had been opened I decided to go out and identify the trees in the neighborhood. Before I went out, I read through part of the book. The first tree in the book was the Joshua tree because it took only two clues to identify it. Now, the Joshua tree is a really weird-looking tree and I looked at that picture and said to myself, ‘Oh, we don’t have that kind of tree in northern California. That is a weird looking tree. I would know if I saw that tree, and I’ve never seen one before.’ So I took my book and went outside. My parents lived in a cul-de-sac of six homes. Four of those homes had Joshua trees in the front yard. I had lived in that house for 13 years, and I had never seen a Joshua tree. ... Once I was conscious of the tree, once I could name it, I saw it everywhere.”*

This is what I sometimes call the Joshua tree principle. If we cannot name something, it is often invisible to us. And our own worldviews are often invisible to us *precisely* because we don’t have names for them. And so by giving names to these worldviews, and showcasing them with examples, we’ve done perhaps a *third* of the necessary work. We will have revealed to many who are struggling something about their own thinking that they, before, did not fully notice or realize. For some, this

unveiling and revealing might even be enough to show them the source of their difficulties and the path back into faith and conviction. For others, it might at least be a start on that journey.

### **Expressive individualism**

Let's look at a worldview in depth. *Expressive individualism* is a worldview that gives self-expression a privileged place among human goods, and treats the social freedom to engage in self-expression as a paramount virtue. Like all worldviews, it hands us a story. In this story, we aspire to become *who we truly are*. The conflict of this story is aptly illustrated in the writings of humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, who argued that the threat of judgment from others creates a split between our private and public selves. Because of cultural norms, family expectations, or religious conventions, we hide our "true selves" from the world.

Therapeutic healing, in Rogers' view, requires us to break free from the shackles of 'oughts' and 'thou shalts,' and embrace what we have hidden from others. The expected, hoped for resolution to this conflict is that we step into and assert our true selves. Carl Rogers explained: "Over against these pressures for conformity, we find that when clients are free to be any way they wish, they tend to resent and to question the tendency of the organization, the college or the culture to mould them to any given form."

#### **The Expressive Individualist Worldview / Story**

##### **Character's aspirations / desires**

To become our truest selves, to live authentically

##### **The central problem / conflict**

Judgment & evaluation from others leads us to live falsely

##### **The expected / anticipated resolution**

Break free of stifling norms and expectations

##### **Human flourishing / the good life**

Living in communities that celebrate our uniquenesses

##### **Villains / antagonists**

Norms that make us feel judged and evaluated

Human flourishing, then, is defined as living in a community that *celebrates* our uniquenesses and differences — a community that doesn't evaluate our choices or have an agenda for our lives. The villain of the story is anyone who makes us feel

self-conscious or evaluated for our self-expression. In this way, expressive individualism leads us to be suspicious of any religious mores, cultural norms, or societal institutions that discourage self-expression.

In its most extreme forms, expressive individualism presumes that there is no greater moral authority than the self, to decide what the “good life” or human flourishing looks like *for us*. Expressive individualism makes an idol of personal autonomy and free choice, unfettered by stifling religious conventions. From this view, community norms and religious precepts that lead people to *evaluate* our choices — especially choices that we see as the outgrowth of our natural selves, our *true* selves — hinder personal development.

Let’s put the expressive individualist story and the Gospel story side-by-side. The expressive individualist story takes place in three stages:

1. First, the protagonist finds herself in a community of oppressive norms and expectations. This could be a community culture that discourages rocket building in favor of coal mining. This could be a religious community that discourages embracing LGBT lifestyles. Whatever the case may be, the community does not celebrate their unique preferences, desires, or aspirations.
2. Next, the protagonist breaks free of the constraints of her family, community, or faith, embraces authenticity and self-expression, and becomes the person she wants to be, to be true to her heart. She embraces whatever parts of themselves they were formerly hiding from the world, be that rocketry or an LGBT lifestyle.
3. Finally, the protagonist returns, revisits, or reinvests in his community, for the purpose of remaking the community’s norms to accommodate the new version of themselves. They seek reconciliation by re-inventing the community in their image. For example, they might engage in social advocacy to dismantle norms that discourage LGBT lifestyles. Or they might start a rocket science club in their school.

The Gospel narrative can *also* be expressed in three stages:

1. The protagonist comes to acknowledge the ways in which she has alienated herself from God through sin.
2. The protagonist seeks redemption and reconciliation with God through Christ, by making and keeping sacred covenants.
3. She ends up becoming a disciple, and serving Christ, and enjoying the fruits and gifts of the Spirit.



This isn't to say that all examples of expressive individualism are bad. Individualism is a wonderful thing if you are a bookworm or theater nerd in a high school that prioritizes athleticism. Or an aspiring rocket scientist in a community that expects you to become a coal miner (if you have read that book or seen that movie). Sometimes we need to re-evaluate community norms that stifle legitimate self-expression, and be more deliberate in valuing and celebrating individual differences. However, as a *worldview*, these stories set forth different values and priorities for us. Where expressive individualism makes community norms the central hurdle of the story, the Gospel makes *sin* the central hurdle of the story.

### **Worldviews affect our vocabulary**

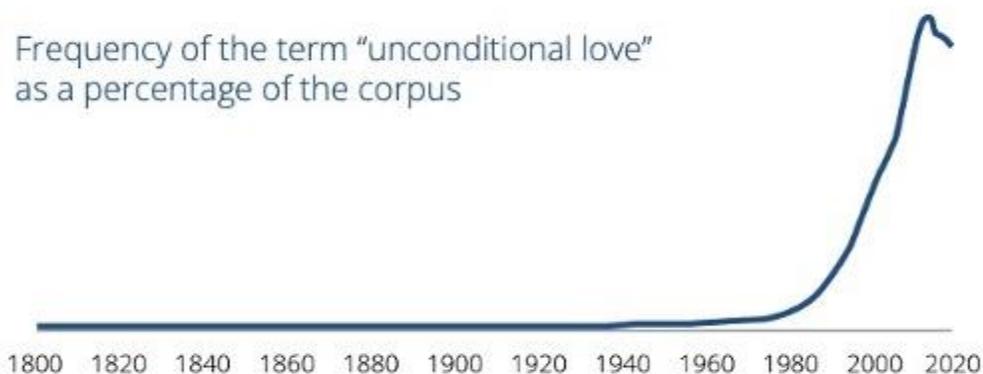
Worldviews, and their stories, not only shape our values and assumptions, they can also shape our vocabulary and how we experience the world. And here's where we circle back to James and Greg, from earlier. The reason why James and Greg have such different experiences in the Church — despite superficially similar doctrinal beliefs — is because Greg has embraced expressive individualism as his core worldview.

**Expressive individualism can influence how we define and experience *love*.** Expressive individualism defines love as the absence of judgment, and also as an affirmation and celebration of whatever ways you differ from the community. Carl Rogers argued that human flourishing requires spaces of *unconditional positive regard*, therapeutic contexts in which individuals feel no hint or threat of evaluation or judgment. Only in such no-judgment zones can

individuals freely experiment with and step into their “truest” selves and become who they were built to be.



As useful as this might be in a therapeutic context, as these ideas found expression in *popular* culture, the term “unconditional positive regard” was unwieldy and a bit niche. So it was shortened to “unconditional love.” This term “unconditional love” was rarely used prior to the advent of humanistic psychology. It began to be used in the 1960s, and exploded in the 1990s and 1990s as humanistic psychology became popular. And because of this, the term has some undeclared baggage and smuggles into our discourse some unwitting assumptions about the nature of love.



from Google ngram viewer

Basically, many people, including many Latter-day Saints, have come to see *love* and *discernment* as opposites. Just as a therapist who evaluates his client's decisions is not providing "unconditional positive regard" (according to Rogers), so it is that when parents, friends, teachers, or Church leaders *evaluate* someone's choices in light of the Restored Gospel and the covenants they have made, they are not providing "unconditional love" (according to an expressive individualist worldview).

### Definition of "love" (from an expressive individualist view)

*Love and discernment are opposites*

Love involves withholding judgment and evaluation

Any time you evaluate someone's choices, you aren't providing "unconditional love."

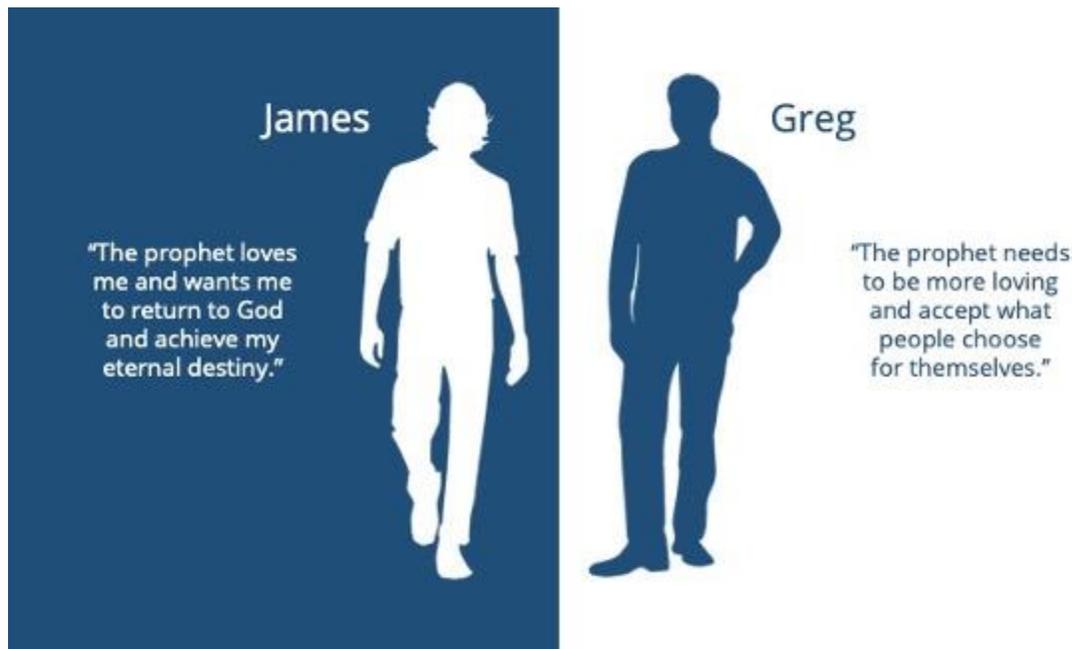
As a consequence, any attempt to reinforce a community's distinctive norms is taken to be *unloving*. In this view, love means celebrating uniquenesses and differences, encouraging others to live out their differences, and facilitating that in whatever ways we can. The purest expression of love, in this view, looks a lot like *social advocacy*. And because worldviews shape how we experience the world, when expressive individualism is absorbed as our guiding worldview, anything short of *affirmation* doesn't "feel" like love to us.

I want to be crystal clear here. We should be patient with others, refrain from needless criticism, and help those who wander feel wanted and valued within our congregations. God is patient with us, and so we should be patient with others. We should create a community where God's abiding love is unmistakable — a bonfire of redeeming love that warms those who have felt alienated from God. Those who sin should feel welcomed, loved, and wanted in our congregations and communities. And any time we falter in this regard, we should take corrective action.

However, this open-hearted Christian humility, compassion, and charity is fundamentally different from the expressive individualist notion of affirmation and

celebration. In a Christian worldview, love is all about genuine concern, with an aim towards the salvation and exaltation of souls, through repentance, forgiveness, and transformation through Christ. In a Christian worldview, love is not indifference, and indifference is not love. Self-righteous judgment, self-serving condemnation, prideful nitpicking, moral grandstanding, etc., are all lapses in love. But so is apathy towards, or even celebration of, choices that contradict divine teaching.’

So it is that while James experiences a community of loving concern at Church, Greg experiences a community of unloving judgment. Their experiences are the same but are *experienced differently by each* because of the worldview lenses through which they are seeing the world. Similarly, when James and Greg hear President Nelson encouraging members to stay on the covenant path, James hears this as *love*, and Greg hears this as a *lapse* in love, as a threat of judgment should he or others *deviate* from the covenant path.



The “Rogerian” baggage of the term “unconditional love,” and the subsequent linguistic drift in our definition of love, can go a long way towards explaining why President Nelson, in 2003, and Elder Christofferson, in 2016, both warned against the term, with a preference towards divine love, abiding love, infinite love, or love unfeigned. Unlike a Rogerian therapist who imposes no expectations on the client, our God — a being of infinite, pure, abiding love — has tremendous expectations of us and an agenda for our lives and eternity.

**Expressive individualism can influence how we define terms like *Zion*.** Latter-day Saints who embrace expressive individualism often define *Zion* as a place where no

one feels self-conscious for being who they are, where their differences are celebrated by everyone in the community. I would submit that, from a scriptural perspective, Zion is a place where God's laws and teachings are no longer merely aspirational ideals, but have become shared commitments and community norms.

The consequences of these vocabulary shifts are tremendous — they effect how we perceive and experience efforts to reinforce the distinctive norms of the Latter-day Saint community, and to what extent we believe those norms should reflect our teachings about chastity, marriage, and gender. For example, while James sees robust norms that encourage chastity as part and parcel with the “Zion experience,” Greg begins to believe that we cannot achieve Zion until same-sex couples can freely *express* their sexual preferences — their *true* selves — in Church or at BYU without ever fearing judgment from those around them.

### **Understanding discipleship**

Let's flesh out the Gospel alternative to expressive individualism a little bit more. Whereas expressive individualism assumes that we flourish most in a context where no one else has an agenda for us, we belong to a religious community that *does* have an agenda for us. We call it the *covenant path*. And the guide-rails and signposts on that covenant path may not always dovetail our personal inclinations. I like to refer to the alternative to expressive individualism as *Christian discipleship*, which I see as a willingness to be *disciplined by Christ* — and also by institutions that bear His divine authority and name.

### **Christian discipleship**

... is a willingness to be *disciplined by Christ*

... and by institutions that bear his authority and name

... recognizes a higher authority than the self

As Latter-day Saints, we strive embrace a Gospel worldview in which commitments to community can transcend personal aspirations, where higher duties such as parenthood, priesthood service, and personal covenants take precedence over personal preferences. From the view of expressive individualism, individuals are the sole experts on what the good life looks like for them. But from a Christian perspective, we are *not* always the expert on what human flourishing looks like for us. There is a higher power, a divine moral sovereign, who we trust more than the self to know what our eternal destiny looks like. C.S. Lewis expressed this well when he wrote,

*“The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. ... Our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. The more I resist Him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and natural desires. ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.”*

Here, C.S. Lewis depicts us as subject to a divine sovereign who has an agenda for us — an agenda that we do not necessarily, right now, have for ourselves. Human flourishing is not centered primarily on self-expression, but just as much on *submission*, and *sacrifice*, and living beyond ourselves in pursuit of commitments, duties, and covenants. It can involve a very different future for ourselves than we currently imagine or wish for — and, in fact, when Christ is done with us, we might wish or want very different things for ourselves. As Alma the Younger put it immediately after his conversion:

*“Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; And thus they become new creatures.”*

In short, Christ can change the desires of our hearts — the things we value, prize, prioritize, and most earnestly seek after (and at times wait for) in our various life circumstances. Genuine, lasting conversion involves something more than asserting our uniqueness in the world, which is the rubric of expressive individualism. It involves a change in our values and priorities, so that they more closely resemble God’s values and priorities.

To be crystal clear, I am not saying that discipleship means that community norms are exempt from scrutiny, or that discipleship involves blithely complying with all existing community norms. That’s *traditionalism*, not discipleship. Traditionalism can be a counterfeit of discipleship. The expressive individualist says, “Follow your

heart.” Salvation is found in being true to ourselves. The traditionalist says, “Follow the rules.” Salvation is found in following the rules. In contrast to both, the Savior said, “*Follow thou me.*” Salvation is found in *Him*.

<b>Expressive individualism</b>	<b>Traditionalism</b>
“Follow your heart” Salvation is found in authenticity	“Follow the rules” Salvation is found in rule-following

### **Discipleship**

“Follow thou me”  
Salvation is found in Christ  
and His sacrifice

And as we follow Him, we allow him to *change* our hearts, and we also at times set forth to change our communities for the better. But what that *looks* like will be different, depending on the worldview we embrace.

### **How we absorb worldviews**

Worldviews are a funny thing — we rarely step into them knowingly. We passively absorb them as part of the zeitgeist of our times. If you want to change a person’s worldviews, you don’t necessarily write books. Creating a “worldview identification book,” like the tree identification book earlier, can help us learn to see the invisible — and that’s great. But we absorb these invisible worldviews in the first place most often through our *entertainment*. It’s in the music we listen to, the movies we watch, the novels we read.

Like the air we breathe, if movie after movie, show after show, book after book, song after song, tells us stories that follow the expressive individualist template above, we can internalize that story as a default without ever realizing we are doing it. And the way our own faith traditions appear to us can be changed by that story, as well as our priorities and values. Most who embrace expressive individualism have never heard of Carl Rogers, and have merely imbibed on our cultural assumption — handed to us from Disney and other Hollywood studios — that human flourishing involves being

true to ourselves, true to our hearts, or asserting our uniquenesses against a world that would suppress them.

A fun exercise is to ask: What sorts of plots and stories would populate our movies if self-discipline, moral-centeredness, and personal sacrifice were treated *at least* as important as self-expression? If, in addition to stories of protagonists learning to assert their own preferences and to be themselves, we also had more stories of protagonists who relinquish some of their personal, self-centered aspirations for the sake of their family and community, and find meaning and purpose in committing themselves to a cause that is greater than themselves? Stories where community norms are not the villain, but play an essential role? Today, I extend an invitation to fellow writers and artists throughout the Church to explore these questions.

### **Additional worldviews**

Alright, so here, I've touched on **expressive individualism**, and contrasted it with **Christian discipleship**. Expressive individualism is one of many such worldviews that can be explored. Another related worldview is **therapeutic deism**, a worldview which presumes that purpose of religion is to help us be fulfilled, happy, and healthy. It offers us a central story where our lives were full of pain and hardship until we embraced religion. Because of our religious commitments, we are now content and happy. This can lead us to prioritize low-demand, high warmth religious traditions and to see trial and struggle as signs of divine disfavor, or as a sign that our religion traditions are yet imperfect.

### **The Therapeutic Deism Worldview / Story**

#### **Character's aspirations / desires**

To be content, happy, fulfilled, and healthy

#### **The central problem / conflict**

Life is full of pain and hardship

#### **The expected / anticipated resolution**

Religious practice will lead us to be content, and healthy

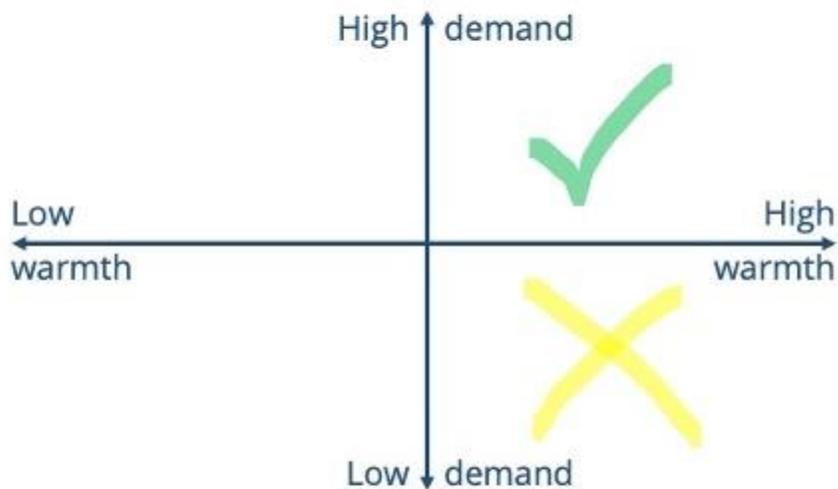
#### **Human flourishing / the good life**

A comfortable life without conflict

#### **Villains / antagonists**

Pain, hardship, high expectations

We can contrast therapeutic deism with **Christian theism**, the belief that God is our divine moral sovereign, and that religion is more than about securing fulfillment and contentment in life — it is just as much about holiness, moral discipline, and becoming like God. In this view, we can recognize the necessity of pain and suffering as part of our sanctifying experiences, and see religion not as an escape *from* or cure *for* our trials but as a lens that provides meaning and purpose *in* our trials. Christian theism is, I believe, rightly consider a high warmth but also *high demand* faith tradition.



Someday, if I'm ever invited back here, I'll explore therapeutic deism in much greater detail, and why apologists should be aware of it.

Another worldview is **scientism**, which gives us a central story where humankind progresses through history only by abandoning religious superstitions in light of scientific enlightenment. In this cultural story, societal progress is continually stymied throughout history by religious institutions and traditions. The dedicated efforts of scientists help move society forward in spite of these backwards influences. This worldview primes us to be suspicious of claims to revelation and to view empirical methods as the source of all reliable truth.

## The Scientism Worldview / Story

### Character's aspirations / desires

Societal progress, scientific advancement, & technology

### The central problem / conflict

Religious traditions and superstitions hold us back

### The expected / anticipated resolution

Dedicated scientists and scholars dismantle superstitions

### Human flourishing / the good life

Scientific enlightenment, accumulation of knowledge

### Villains / antagonists

Religious superstition and religious authorities

Ben Spackman has spoken in this forum about the dangers of **fundamentalism**. He uses the term in a very specific way, with a very specific meaning. I'll use the term in a different sense here, to refer more broadly to a worldview that assumes that divine instruction can never change. It hands us a story where direct revelation established divine teaching, and where communities subsequently depart from that original teaching and thus fall into apostasy. This story has kernels of truth — profound truth. It is, after all, a worldview narrative at the heart of our history as members of the Restored Church of Jesus Christ. But as the *only* story, it can prime us to reject ongoing revelation if it appears even slightly different from our past interpretations of historical revelation. This is how you get Denver Snuffer, Alan Rock Waterman, and their followers.

## The Fundamentalist Worldview / Story

### Character's aspirations / desires

Purity of static doctrine and practice

### The central problem / conflict

Deviations from historical revelation / apostasy

### The expected / anticipated resolution

A return to the "fundamentals," a re-prioritization of early texts

### Human flourishing / the good life

Puritanism / pruning accreted impure ideas or customs

### Villains / antagonists

"New" revelation, "new" scholarship

We can also explore the ways in which **nationalism** and other political worldviews set forth stories that shape our convictions and priorities in ways that distort how we live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ — stories that center on the *state* as the primary authority in our lives, and the locus of our salvation from the ills that plague our society (or the world).

There are others I could include here, such as **hedonism**, which treats pleasure, satisfaction, and personal fulfillment as life's highest goods, and that pain and suffering are inherent evils to be avoided. Or **secular humanism**, which centers our attentions on *human* efforts and activity, as opposed to God's activity in the world, as the source of progress and salvation.



Expressive individualism  
Therapeutic deism  
Scientism  
Fundamentalism  
Nationalism  
Hedonism  
Secular Humanism  
... many others

## Conclusions

I want to emphasize that even though these are all narratives that can compete with the Gospel narrative or the Gospel worldview, one can be a practicing, believing Latter-day Saint while embracing these various alternatives as their central worldview. And this is precisely, I believe, why many are having a faith crisis today — they have already been proselyted into competing worldviews, and just do not yet know it. As unwitting adherents to a foreign faith, but active participants of this one, they may start to find many of the things we do and teach to be strange and problematic.

When a person embraces *expressive individualism* as their central story, they might find it unjust that the temple garment interferes with preferred styles of dress. An uncritical adoption of *therapeutic deism* might leave someone wary of temple

worthiness requirements and the attendant social risks of failing to meet them. An uncritical embrace of *hedonism* might lead someone to feel like their religion is failing them when they experience episodes of depression. An uncritical embrace of *scientism* might lead someone to implicitly elevate social scientists over prophets and apostles as the primary authorities on the good life and human flourishing. And so on.

### **Expressive individualism**

"Garments and modesty standards are stifling."

### **Therapeutic deism**

"Temple worthiness standards are burdensome."

### **Hedonism**

"Depression and heartache means the Gospel has failed."

### **Scientism**

"Social scientists are the sole experts on human flourishing."

Although ostensibly "inside" our faith, they view our practices and teachings through worldview lenses that predispose them to view our teachings and practices with some measure of suspicion. I'm not trying to universalize this interpretation to everyone. My case is simply that many are having a crisis of faith precisely because they are straddling two worlds and do not even realize they are doing so. Uncomfortable maintaining that posture, but not equipped with the language to articulate their predicament, they fixate on historical stuff that — for many of the rest of us — might pose few problems at all, but for someone who is already feeling out of place, might give them precisely the pretexts they need to leave.

Our critics sometimes accuse us of being unwilling to question. I believe we *should* ask far more questions than we often do, and that real critical thinking involves asking questions *about our questions*. What cultural and worldview assumptions are baked in the questions themselves? How are the terms defined? Why these questions, and not others? How do our worldviews inform what we accept as admissible answers to our questions? I believe that when we learn to think critically about our questions, we can become more discerning and thoughtful Latter-day Saints.

## Asking questions *about our questions*

What cultural and worldview assumptions are baked into the questions?

How are the terms of our questions defined?

Why *these* questions, and not others?

How do our worldviews inform what we accept as admissible answers to our questions?

Today I extend an invitation: we need more people working on articulating these competing worldviews, providing labels for them, critically examining them by comparing and contrasting them with Gospel perspectives. We desperately need an improved vernacular and vocabulary on these matters, a “worldview identification book” — or many such books — to help make what is invisible to us *visible*. In other words, we need more people thoughtfully challenging the cultural presumptions of our day. And more especially, we need thoughtful writers and creators to explore how these worldviews find expression in our entertainment and media, and what it would look like if alternatives found similar expression along the way.

I want to end today with a witness of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the powerful story it tells about who we are and where we are going. We lived with God before, we stepped into mortality for glorious purposes, and each and every one of us has been alienated from God to some degree through sin. Through Christ, we can find redemption and reconciliation. We travel that journey by making and keeping sacred covenants. And the end, the goal, the *telos* of all of this — at least in the here and now — is to enjoy the fruits and gifts of the Spirit in our day to day lives. I want to share my witness of the Savior and His role in this story. We like to think of ourselves as the protagonists of the Gospel story, but the hero of this story is and always will be *Him*. And I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

**JEFFREY THAYNE**

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