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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A model of worldview formation

Mikael Stenmark

Department of Theology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
Email: mikael.stenmark@teol.uu.se

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Abstract

Worldviews can serve as a resource or an obstacle when navigating intellectual and existential challenges encountered in life. My objective in this article is to identify and analyse the various ways in which people's worldviews can shift, break down, evolve, or be strengthened by their life experiences. The proposed model of worldview formation identifies five outcomes that an encounter with what I refer to as existentially significant life events can have: worldview compartmentalisation, integration, revision, conversion, and confirmation. I will explain the content and function of these categories, provide concrete examples, and discuss their rationality.

Keywords: worldviews; meaning-making; cognitive dissonance; secular worldviews; conversion

I aim to identify and analyse the various ways in which people's worldviews can shift, break down, evolve, or be strengthened by their life experiences. I engage in dialogue with psychological research to accomplish this and will show how worldview theory can complement the theory of meaning-making developed in psychology when understanding people's entanglement with existential concerns. I propose a model for understanding how people's worldviews can serve as a resource or an obstacle in interpreting the existentially significant experiences they have in life. It is built on the assumption that people do not deny what is happening in these experiences and (more or less) acknowledge that something should be done. Hence, a certain level of conscious reflection and active engagement is presupposed.

The proposed model identifies five principal outcomes: worldview compartmentalisation, integration, revision, conversion, and confirmation. We can find paradigmatic examples of each, but there is no clear-cut line between them, so there will be cases where it is hard, if not impossible, to classify them in the proposed model. I will explain the content and function of these five categories, provide concrete examples, and briefly discuss their rationality.

The model is set up as a descriptive account that answers the question of how people can actually adjust their worldview when encountering existentially significant life events. But it is also about how they should do this, if they want to be epistemically and morally responsible agents. It is a normative model as well. It is about human intellectual integrity and responsibility. When is the way we formulate, revise, or reject a worldview an example of a rational adjudication, and when is it not? Moreover, the model is designed to encompass

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not only religious but also non-religious or secular individuals' worldview formation. For this to be possible, secular and not merely religious people must have a worldview. So, we have to address the question of what a worldview is as well, even if it is not the article's primary concern.

Meaning-making, worldviews, and cognitive dissonance

A central concept in psychology is meaning-making, and it is also a helpful concept to apply in a philosophical context. *Meaning-making* designates the process of how people understand and make sense of life events, relationships, and the self, especially in situations of stress, loss, and crisis (Burke and Neimeyer 2012, 127–133). I maintain that focusing solely on the processes of meaning-making is insufficient to understand what is happening in situations of stress, loss, and crisis. This is because people interpret the meaning or lack of meaning in their experiences through a lens of deeply held assumptions about themselves and the world they inhabit. These assumptions constitute their worldview. As I will show, these assumptions are crucial because without them, we cannot fully comprehend the options available to people when they attempt to make sense of what is happening in their lives. Since people have different worldviews, their perceptions of situations of stress, loss, and crisis, as well as the resources they have to deal with these, will differ, sometimes significantly. Thus, as we will see, worldview theory provides an essential complement to the theory of meaning-making.

What is a worldview, then? I have previously suggested that a *worldview* consists of people's basic assumptions about who they are, what the world is like, what their place in it is, and what they should do to live a good and meaningful life, which guides their actions in the world they inhabit (Stenmark 2022, 565). This account acknowledges that some worldviews are more belief-oriented, while others are more practice-oriented. Sometimes we even have to infer people's worldview assumptions (or their beliefs, values, and attitudes) from their behaviour or the practices they engage in.

Suppose we proceed based on this understanding of what a worldview is. In that case, we can say that a worldview primarily is the outcome of people's engagement with their existential concerns, that is, their questions about who they are, why they exist, what the meaning of their life is, and what attitude or stance they should take towards the experience of death, suffering, guilt, anxiety, love, friendship, forgiveness, and similar matters. This is what I have in mind when I write about experiences or life events that are existentially significant. It is not about the struggle you may have to come to terms with your mother-in-law or your new classmates, and the strategies you may develop to overcome these difficulties. Instead, the focus is on issues that matter deeply to how we understand ourselves and live our lives. Addressing existential concerns, in one way or another, is central to the core concern of what it means to exist in the world as a human being. Since these are generic human concerns, we can assume that almost everyone has a worldview. We can do that as long as we do not require people's worldviews to be comprehensive or consciously chosen. Exceptions would include small children, people deeply sunk into amnesia, those in a coma, and similar cases.

In arguing this way, I assume that substitution theory is closer to the truth than subtraction theory (Stenmark 2025, 2–3). The latter theory posits that individuals or groups who reject religion view it as unnecessary, false, or an inadequate addition to our shared view and way of life. They simply cease holding religious beliefs and participating in religious practices and organisations. So being non-religious is not to be with something else, but to be without religious add-ons to life. The substitution theory acknowledges that some individuals and groups reject religion. Still, it implies that they also consciously or unconsciously replace or strive to replace it with an alternative view and way of life. They try to come up with an alternative story of why we are here, what makes something good or evil,

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what provides meaning in life, and how we should live our lives in light of the key features of this alternative story. Self-identifying as non-religious is not merely a matter of being without religion but also a matter of being with something else. If the replacement theory is closer to the truth than the subtraction theory, almost everyone has a worldview, even if it, in many cases, consists more of fragments than constitutes a comprehensive whole.

If this is correct, worldview formation, in the sense used in this article, is about how we in our lives adjust or adjudicate the worldview we already have, which typically is something we have been socialised into through our upbringing at home, our schooling, the communities we belong to, and the people around us that – perhaps without thinking about it – we see as 'significant others'. Still, when we reach a certain level of maturity and self-determination, we can decide whether to substantially alter our worldview or even convert and adopt another one.

Since some people in contemporary society no longer identify as religious, we have both religious and secular worldviews, acknowledging that some may be best described as semi-secular or semi-religious (Palmqvist and Jonbäck 2025). Hence, a successful worldview formation model must make sense when applied to the worldviews of both religious and secular people. To determine the plausibility of this claim, we first need to identify the content of secular worldviews. We will revisit this issue, but for now, I will posit that *secular worldviews* deny or doubt the existence of a transcendent, divine, or spiritual dimension of reality (Stenmark 2022, 574). Instead, they affirm or assume that reality has a different makeup and uphold its importance for how we should understand and live our lives. Accordingly, *religious worldviews* affirm or assume the existence of a transcendent, divine, or spiritual dimension of reality and uphold its importance for how we understand and live our lives. However, since secular worldviews are not institutionalised like major religions, it is unclear what the range of beliefs, values, and attitudes[1] of secular people might be. It is also uncertain whether they are clustered in groups, as they often are in particular religions or faith traditions. Generally speaking, worldview identification is more challenging and presumably more arbitrary when distinguishing between secular worldviews than when distinguishing between religious ones.

People's worldviews are challenged (and, as I will come back to in one of the last sections, sometimes confirmed) by existentially significant life events, such as experiences of severe illness, the loss of a close friend, or reading a book that presents reasons that undermine their current understanding of themselves or the world. They can handle these kinds of intellectual, moral, or emotional distress, tensions, and anomalies in different ways. In these situations, people experience what Leon Festinger named *cognitive dissonance*. It is a state of discomfort one experiences because of one's conflicting beliefs, values, attitudes, or behaviours (Festinger 1957). Crystal L. Park prefers to talk about discrepancies instead. She writes that her

> Meaning Making Model is discrepancy-based, that is, it proposes that people's perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular situation and their global meaning (i.e., what they believe and desire) creates distress, which in turn gives rise to efforts to reduce the discrepancy and resultant distress (Park 2013, 40).

For example, Eve is a Christian who believes that God is good, all-knowing, and almighty and has a plan for every person's life. But suddenly, this woman's brother dies of an aneurysm just before turning ten. Eve is not merely deeply sad about her brother's sudden death but also begins to wonder what God's purpose (if any) was with his life. He did not even get a decent chance to live it. A cognitive dissonance arises between Eve's expectation of how the world should be (if we live in the kind of world she imagines) and her experience

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of what appears to be the case. A state of discomfort arises as a result of her conflicting beliefs.

Maria, who is a non-religious or secular individual, does not, in an identical situation to Eve's, experience the same type of cognitive dissonance. Why? Because Maria does not believe that God exists, and, therefore, there is no divine plan for every person's life. There is no divine meaning of life waiting to be discovered. Instead, she believes life has meaning because we give or endow it with meaning. Insofar as we order the activities in our lives around things we desire, value, or enjoy, we render them meaningful and thus give meaning to life. But her brother's death is a vivid reminder of the severe limits of what she can endow with meaning. She is reminded that life often lacks the permanency that seems to be required to sustain meaningfulness. The event triggers in Maria a feeling that life may, after all, be quite meaningless or tragic. A state of discomfort arises as a result of her conflicting beliefs.

Hence, by adding worldview theory to the theory of meaning-making, we gain an explanation for why Eve's and Maria's meaning-making processes differ, even though they are in precisely the same (hypothetical) situation; it is that they have different worldviews. Moreover, the model appears to cover both cases of religious and secular worldview formation. Yugin Nagasawa argues that situations like those Eve and Maria experience result in the 'problem of axiological expectation mismatch'. He states that it is 'a broad problem concerning the apparent mismatch between our expectation of what the actual world should be and our observation of how it actually is' (Nagasawa 2024, 41).[2] He notices that the exception is typically, though not always, grounded in a worldview of some kind, whereas the observation is usually based on everyday experiences or scientific inquiry.

The theory of cognitive dissonance posits that people are averse to inconsistencies within their own minds. We can refer to the contrasting state as *cognitive equilibrium*. One is then in a state of comfort; one's beliefs, values, attitudes, or behaviour are consistent or even coherent. We naturally desire to be in this state but are frequently not. This explains why we feel uncomfortable when in a state of cognitive dissonance and try to avoid it by adjusting the imbalance in one way or another. On the other hand, if we were always in a state of cognitive equilibrium, we would not be able to develop as humans. It would seem that our changing circumstances and experiences – the people we meet, the news we hear, the books we read, and so on – have had no impact on our preconceived ideas and behaviour patterns other than confirming them.

Rationality in this context refers to how to handle, in an intellectually responsible or wise way, the existentially significant events (events that can cause cognitive dissonance) one encounters in life. I have elsewhere argued that it is fruitful to view rationality as a matter of seeking to do the best we can realistically manage in respect to what we believe and do, given our limited cognitive (and other relevant) resources, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves (Stenmark 1995, 35). Hence, we are interested in not merely identifying the primary ways people can and do handle cognitive dissonance but also assessing whether these options are examples of intellectually responsible or wise ways to form or reform one's worldview in real-life situations, rather than ideal ones.

In what ways can (and should) people, in light of their particular worldview, interpret and respond to significant life events? The worldview formation model I propose identifies five principal ways in which people's worldviews can shift, break down, evolve, or be strengthened by their life experiences.

Worldview compartmentalisation

One response to existentially significant life events is to hold on to one's worldview and continue living with experiences that cause stress, loss, crisis, or unfulfilled longing, but

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store what causes the upset in a separate, disconnected part of one's mind. This response is what psychologists refer to as *compartmentalisation* (Thomas et al. 2013, 719–731). It is an unconscious or conscious form of mental process in which beliefs, values, emotions, or behaviours that seem to conflict are kept separate or isolated from one another. By dissociating, for instance, the expectation of how the world should be and one's experience of what appears to be the case, the discomfort of contradiction is avoided or at least reduced.

Eve would respond in this way if the cognitive dissonance that arose between the content of her Christian worldview and her brother's premature death led her to compartmentalise the unwelcome thought that God might not have a particular purpose for every individual's life. She tries to push that thought out of her mind or keeps it in a different mental 'room' than the place occupied by her Christian worldview. Maria would adopt the same strategy if the cognitive dissonance that arose between the content of her secular worldview and her young brother's death led her to compartmentalise the unwelcome thought that the meaning she can endow life with lacks the permanency required to take care of all her needs for meaning. She tries to keep that thought isolated from her secular worldview. By separating her expectations of how the world should be (if we live in the kind of world she imagines) and her experience of what appears to be the case, the discomfort of contradiction is avoided or at least reduced. She pushes away the fear that she lacks enough control over her circumstances to give her life sufficient meaning. Maria deals with the situation by storing the conflicting beliefs in different subsets or compartments of the mind, so they are not easily recalled together.

Is compartmentalisation a rational worldview formation strategy? Compartmentalisation is not necessarily emotionally harmful or intellectually irrational. Sometimes you need to put a conflict aside in order to tackle another, more urgent challenge. In other situations, what you are going through is so dramatic that the only way to cope is to compartmentalise. In the case of trauma, it may be an effective defence in managing the beliefs and feelings associated with traumatic experiences.[3] Deeply upsetting memories are then often kept in a separate and sealed-off section of the mind. The solution is not to always avoid compartmentalisation but to cultivate awareness to recognise when, how, and why we compartmentalise.

However, to assess the rationality of compartmentalisation, I maintain that it is essential to distinguish between two distinct ways of using this strategy to handle worldview-challenging events. The first is when we compartmentalise to avoid thinking about conflicting beliefs, values, emotions, or behaviours because we do not really want to change our worldview; we are content to be the religious or secular people we are, or it is too hurtful to change our fundamental orientation in life. We may fear that change would cause depression or broken family bonds. The second is when we compartmentalise because, for now, we do not know how to resolve the conflicting beliefs, values, emotions, or patterns of behaviour. We acknowledge that things do not fit together but postpone inquiry about how to reach cognitive equilibrium. We consciously choose to live with an anomaly, tension, or distress because we do not know how to resolve it. We do this temporarily or for an extended time, believing in or hoping for a solution. We can name the first the 'feeling-happiness' strategy and the second the 'postponement' strategy.

For purely psychological reasons, the feeling-happiness strategy may sometimes be a sound response. To stay sane and not get panic attacks or deep depressions, compartmentalisation may be the only effective defence in managing the thoughts and feelings associated with, for instance, traumatic experiences. But philosophers would worry that this strategy is too close to wishful thinking to be an intellectually responsible solution to cognitive dissonance in many situations in life. People of integrity should value truth more

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than their own happiness, and truth sometimes comes at a harsh cost. It is possible, as Peter Loptson points out in his discussion of various views of human nature, that:

> The truth might be dangerous, unwelcome, politically incorrect, or offensive. It might corroborate or reinforce the prejudices or power of people who may be viewed as already having too much of both. A view isn't necessarily mistaken if it issues from people whose interests it will most conveniently serve, just as it isn't refuted just because it diminishes our self-esteem. On the other hand, of course, the truth may well do none of these undesirable things. If we really want to know what people are fundamentally like...we will be willing to accept what we think honest inquiry shows (Loptson 2006, 5).

It is not uncommon for secular intellectuals to emphasise that embracing their non-religious worldview has these consequences. They see themselves as willing to sacrifice their dreams, even their happiness, to accept harsh reality for what it is. Alex Rosenberg describes his scientistic worldview in this way. He is ready to provide people with 'an uncompromising, hard-boiled, no-sense, unsentimental view of the nature of reality, the purpose of things, the meaning of life...' (Rosenberg 2011, ix).[4] It contains, for instance, nihilism: the view that nothing is morally right or wrong, and that all we have are biological adaptations, as that is all science can discover.

However, this objection to wishful thinking – or, more neutrally expressed, prioritising our emotional life over our intellectual life – does not appear to apply in the same obvious manner to the postponement strategy. This is so since it is unclear when we should, so to speak, close the inquiry. The philosopher Hilary Putnam provides an interesting case of this second kind of compartmentalisation. He describes the tension between philosophy and religion in his life (or as it was expressed at one point in his life) as follows:

> As a practicing Jew, I am someone for whom the religious dimension of life has become increasingly important, although it is not a dimension that I know how to philosophize about except by indirection, and the study of science has loomed large in my life. ... Those who know my writings from that period [the 1950s] may wonder how I reconciled my religious streak, which existed to some extent even back then, and my general scientific materialist worldview at that time. The answer is that I didn't reconcile them. I was a thoroughgoing atheist, and I was a believer. I simply kept these two parts of myself separate (Putnam 2008, 3).

We can perhaps say that his response was to live in two distinct worlds: the academic-philosophical and the Jewish-religious, keeping them strictly separate in his mind and life, thereby reducing the discomfort of contradiction. When he wrote these words in *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), which he quotes in *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (2008), Putnam says he had replaced his scientific materialism with humanism, yet he still struggled with these issues. We can express this cognitive dissonance in this way. Roughly, the core beliefs of a scientific materialist worldview or scientific naturalism are:

(1) There is nothing beyond, before, or alongside nature, which means that everything that has existed, exists, and will exist is part of nature (*naturalism*).
(2) Matter or physical particles are the ultimate basis of everything that exists in nature (*materialism*).
(3) Only science can give us genuine knowledge of reality (*scientism*).

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But, and again roughly, according to the received Jewish worldview:

(4) God has always existed and is the creator of the world and, consequently, of nature (*monotheism*).
(5) God has created humans in God's image (*the Imago Dei*).
(6) Because humans are created in God's image, we can know some things about God through our reason alone, but primarily through God's self-revelation in the Torah (*natural* and *revealed theology*).
(7) The Jews are God's chosen people (*the Jewish covenant*).[5]

Let us assume that these are the beliefs Putnam embraced, and he rightly concluded that they cannot all be true (though they may all be false). For an extended period, Putnam did not reconcile these conflicting beliefs and the behaviour patterns they supported; instead, he kept them separate in his mind and life. The conflict was mitigated but not fully resolved when he replaced his scientific materialist worldview with a humanistic one. (We will return to his final stance later in the text.) According to such a worldview, there exist things and properties beyond those that science can discover, such as persons, self-consciousness, free will, intentions, dignity, and values (Putnam 2004). Moreover, there are other kinds of knowledge beyond those provided by the sciences, such as hermeneutical knowledge, introspective and interpersonal knowledge, or first- and second-person knowledge. Humanism (in contrast to secular humanism) does not take a stand on whether nature is all that exists because its focus is on affirming human freedom, dignity, and equality. Given scientific naturalism, it is impossible for the Jewish worldview's beliefs to be true. Given humanism, it is at least possible that they are true. Hence, one way to reduce discrepancy or cognitive dissonance caused by existentially significant life events is through worldview compartmentalisation. I maintain that it is not evident that Putnam's compartmentalisation strategy is irrational. He knows there is a conflict and highly values the merits of both the scientific materialist worldview and the Jewish worldview. However, he does not know how to resolve the conflict, so he postpones the decision, hoping to find a solution one day.

Worldview integration

Another response to the discomfort caused by conflicting beliefs, values, emotions, or behaviours is to reduce the discrepancy through a meaning-making process that leads to a changed understanding of one's experience. We can refer to this response to anomalies, tensions, or crises as *worldview integration* or *restoration*. Challenging existentially significant life events are reinterpreted to fit one's present worldview, and in this way, the discomfort of contradiction is avoided or at least reduced. One changes the perception of the situation to fit one's worldview.

For instance, Peter is non-religious and does not think that there exists a transcendent, divine, or spiritual dimension of reality, but believes that science has shown that nature is all that exists and ultimately consists of merely physical stuff. Still, his religious friend Thomas convinces him to join him on a retreat where they meditate and practice silent prayer for extended periods. Towards the end of the retreat, Peter has a religious experience in which he experiences the presence of something non-mundane and spiritual, something beyond words, yet still feels as if he is in the presence of a divine Thou or a deep conscious stream of love. This event shakes his worldview to its foundation. However, once home, he reconsidered what had happened. Peter reinterprets what at the time had seemed to be genuine experiences of God as hallucinations caused by deprivation due to a limited amount of food, sleep, physical movement, and sensory impressions during the meditation sessions.

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He now believes that his mind was simply playing tricks with him. The cognitive dissonance between his expectation of how the world should be (his worldview) and his experience of what appeared to be the case (the religious experience) is reduced by adjusting his view of the event that happened at the retreat. By altering the perceived meaning of the event, the distress or tension is reduced, and Peter's secular worldview is restored.

It does not necessarily have to be an experience or an event that causes cognitive dissonance; it could just as well be a particular view of reality or a claim about what is true that one encounters in life. In the worldview integration scenario, the experience, the event, the view, or the claim is reinterpreted or reappraised to fit one's current worldview. For this reason, the following case also illustrates worldview integration.

Amir is a Muslim who believes that God created the world and all living things, and in particular, created humans for a reason: to praise and obey God, and to be God's vice-regents on earth, living righteous lives. His friend Hani is an atheist and tells Amir that the belief that we live in a created world is incompatible with science. Hani lent Amir a couple of books on evolution written by Richard Dawkins. Amir is struck by Dawkins's argument that evolutionary theory shows our world was not designed by God. He feels that his whole worldview is under serious threat, and he considers the drastic option of abandoning his Islamic worldview. However, he is also aware of the great merits of Islam in other respects. So, he decides to examine the blind watchmaker argument more closely before drastically changing his worldview. The outcome is that Amir reinterprets Dawkins's case not as evidence of a universe without design, but as indicating that one way evolution could have occurred is through a blind, unconscious, and purposeless process. But another way this could have happened is that God consciously guided the biological processes so that complex life forms would eventually evolve. Dawkins's argument shows that being an intellectually fulfilled atheist after Darwin is possible. However, it does not entail that one cannot be an intellectually fulfilled theist, Islamic or otherwise, because theistic evolution is also compatible with science. The cognitive dissonance is reduced through a meaning-making process that leads to a changed understanding of the significance of Dawkins's argument. It is reinterpreted to fit Amir's pre-existing beliefs, and in this way, the discomfort of contradiction is avoided, and his religious worldview is restored.

Hence, worldview integration is a second way to reduce discrepancies between our worldview commitments and the existentially challenging life events we face. The integration strategy is a more self-evident example of rational management of one's worldview than compartmentalisation, though the final verdict on whether such a move is rational depends on the specific details of each case.

Worldview revision

A third response to the discomfort people experience from conflicting beliefs, values, attitudes, or behaviours is to reduce the discrepancy through a meaning-making process that changes their worldview. Our experiences are not reinterpreted to fit our present worldview; our worldview is modified to encompass these experiences. Challenging existentially significant life events leads to a modification of the worldview, and in this way, the discomfort of contradiction is avoided or at least reduced. Accordingly, this option can be called *worldview revision*. This outcome of cognitive dissonance in this case is pretty evident and straightforward, but I will provide some examples nonetheless.

Let us first return to Putnam. His initial response to the conflict between his scientific naturalism and religious worldview was to adopt the postponement–compartmentalisation strategy. He did not reconcile such a scientistic worldview with his religious worldview; instead, he kept them separate in his life and mind. I would argue that his second response exemplifies a worldview conversion (which I will discuss further in the next section): he

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rejected scientific naturalism and adopted humanism instead. Given my reconstruction of these views, his move migrated the conflict but did not fully solve it. However, in *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, he tells us he has now found a way to reconcile these two sides of himself. It is a religious orientation that takes inspiration from two other Jewish philosophers, namely Wittgenstein and his idea in *Lectures on Religious Belief* (1938) that 'for a religious person *theorizing* about God is, as it were, beside the point' and from Martin Buber's remark that 'Man receives [from God], and what he receives is not a "content" but a presence, a presence as strength' (Putnam 2008, 6). The mismatch between the two worldviews he embraces, which he has not fully reconciled, is now resolved by revising his understanding of the Jewish-religious worldview.

We can also learn from the Putnam case that cognitive dissonance is not always best described as a conflict between a worldview and a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, or patterns of behaviour, but rather as a conflict between two worldviews. People can hold two rival worldviews simultaneously.

Let us once more return to Eve's situation. Instead of compartmentalising her conflicting beliefs, she could have revised her Christian worldview. Because of her brother's death and perhaps other events she recalls, Eve may have come to question her belief in 'meticulous' providence, which holds that God has a plan for everyone and every aspect of their lives. Instead, she conceives God's providence in a 'looser' way. She realised that one consequence of believing, as she does, that God has given us significant free will is that God could not have planned the outcome of all our free choices, as they would not then be freely chosen by us. So that creatures like humans should exist, have children, and rejoice in God's creation is certainly part of God's plan. However, there may not be a specific plan for every individual, because much of what happens in human life is a consequence of our (or previous generations') free choices, not God's.[6] As a result of this dramatic experience, she has revised her Christian worldview.

The biologist Richard D. Alexander is non-religious and holds a secular worldview. Part of that worldview is a common conviction that a normal part of the functioning of every human individual is, now and then, to assist someone else in realising that person's own interests at the actual net expense of unselfish individuals. Alexander, like many of us, probably believed that people can genuinely care about and help others, even if it is to their own disadvantage. However, he has learned that a new theory in evolutionary biology contradicts what he and others have traditionally believed and been taught about morality and human values. He writes:

> What this 'greatest intellectual revolution of the century' [the development of the gene-centric theory of evolution] tells us is that, despite our intuitions, there is not a shred of evidence to support this view of beneficence, and a great deal of convincing theory suggests that any such view will eventually be judged false. This implies that we will have to start all over again to describe and understand ourselves, in terms alien to our intuitions, and in one way or another different from every discussion of this topic across the whole of human history (Alexander 1987, 3).

Alexander now thinks that we are genetically predisposed to be selfish. He has stopped believing that we can act genuinely altruistically. Instead, he adopted the self-view that we and others are (more or less) predisposed by our genes to pursue our own self-interest. In his case, cognitive dissonance is resolved by revising his secular worldview.

Worldview revision could also involve changes in one's attitudes or behaviour. So both religious and secular individuals have, during the last thirty years of their lives, changed their attitude towards people who identify as LGBTQIA+. Some Christians have changed their attitudes towards people of other religions. Secular humanists have begun to include

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rituals or ceremonies of various kinds as an essential part of their worldview.[7] They now think that non-religious people also need to articulate times of profound experience and transition, and that this is an essential part of what makes us human. As a result, they begin to participate in various humanistic ceremonies. One more example: in their attempt to promote non-patriarchal forms of religious practice, some individuals and the organisations they belong to have changed their prayers and liturgies.

Even if I have typically exemplified the model of worldview formation by focusing on changes in beliefs, belief revision is merely one outcome that existentially significant life events can have. As I just illustrated, practices can change too, so we can and sometimes should revise them. Moreover, our emotions can shift as well due to what is happening in our lives. It is possible that Thomas Nagel's worldview could change in such a way that the 'fear of religion' he confesses to having could be replaced with a regret that God does not exist (Nagel 1997, 130). He would then no longer be a relieved atheist but a reluctant one. At least we have the possibility of belief, practice, and emotive revision of our worldview.

Many psychologists see changes in our meaning-making or worldview formation as not merely a cognitive process but also an emotional or affective one. The account I have given is fully compatible with this view. Our ability to reason is affected by emotion, and sometimes that is a good thing; sometimes it is not. However, some argue that changes in what we believe and do are driven more by affective, or emotional, factors than by cognitive or intellectual ones.[8] This would imply that changes in the beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices that shape our worldviews are driven by emotion rather than intellect. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt has famously introduced the Elephant and the Rider metaphor to illustrate this view (2006). Haidt writes that our emotional side is the Elephant, and our rational side is the Rider. Perched atop the Elephant, the Rider holds the reins and seems to be the leader. But the Rider's control is precarious because the Rider is so small relative to the Elephant. Whenever the Elephant and the Rider disagree about which direction to go, the Rider is going to lose. The Rider is overmatched. It is essentially the Elephant (emotion) that steers how people move among the five outcomes, not the Rider (reason).

Is this view compatible with the worldview formation model I have presented? My short answer would be negative when the model is understood in its normative mode. This is because it presupposes that there are intellectual reasons for worldview changes that, often but not always, should determine how we move among the five identified outcomes of worldview formation. More importantly, it seems to me that Haidt's way of thinking creates a false dichotomy, since feelings or emotional responses can themselves be reasons, and sometimes good ones. Feelings can be inappropriate or appropriate, senseless or make sense, unfitting or fitting, even if one cannot say that they are true or false. Thus, how people respond emotionally to significant existential life events can be rationally assessed, just as their intellectual responses can, because each depends on matching up with the world in the right way.

In summary, worldview revision is another way to reduce discrepancies between our worldview commitments and the existentially challenging life events we face. The revision strategy is, by and large, a non-controversial example of rational worldview formation, although the final verdict depends on the specific details in each case.

Worldview conversion or replacement

A fourth response to conflicting beliefs, values, attitudes, or patterns of behaviour represents a conversion to a new worldview.[9] In this situation, the increasing mismatch between our worldview and our experiences becomes too great, leading us to abandon our old worldview, convert, and adopt a new one. Conversion typically involves significant cognitive dissonance, where people reconcile conflicting beliefs, values, attitudes, or

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behaviours to arrive at a new, unified sense of wholeness. It is a transformative experience that involves a far-reaching reorganisation of one's beliefs, a radical shift in understanding reality and one's identity, and a re-evaluation of how to live in the world. Indeed, the changes must be significant enough to warrant talk of conversion, rather than revision. As Paul Faulkner points out, we talk of conversion only when there is such a substantial break that 'it makes sense to speak about a "before" and "after," or an "old" and a "new"' (Faulkner 2019, 824). It is a meaning-making process that leads to lasting changes in behaviour and outlook on life. The change of worldview never happens in some people's lives; in others, it may happen once or possibly twice. For instance, it occurs when a Muslim becomes a Christian, a secular humanist becomes a Buddhist, or vice versa.

Worldview conversion is a profound shift, a dramatic change in how the world is perceived and what we truly care about in life. It can be described as a gestalt switch: the world is seen in a radically different way. Thomas Kuhn provides several examples of large-scale changes – gestalt or paradigm shifts – within the scientific community, describing them as akin to a religious conversion (1970, 204). The Copernican revolution is one in which a geocentric theory was replaced by the heliocentric theory, which posits that the Earth and the other planets orbit the Sun. In Kuhn's case, it is a dramatic change (a revolution) within the scientific community.[10] Similarly, throughout human history, communities, tribes, and villages have converted to new religions. Still, I focus here on individuals and how they handle cognitive dissonance arising from the increasing mismatch between their worldview commitments and life experiences.

Broadly speaking, conversion can occur suddenly or gradually, but it must involve a break from a previous worldview to a new one. Sudden conversions are dramatic and often characterised by an immediate, overwhelming shift in identity and conception of the world, as exemplified by the biblical story of Paul, who persecuted Christians but experienced the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and became a deeply devoted Christian afterwards (Acts 9). Through a meditation session, we can also imagine that someone suddenly experiences reality in a new way, realising that her old way of understanding herself and the cosmos was gravely mistaken. Gradual conversions occur over a prolonged period, during which the individual's worldview is typically slowly undermined in response to experiences of intellectual, moral, and emotional distress or tension.

One may initially ignore these anomalies but later feel a buildup of evidence or circumstances that cannot be ignored. When the buildup becomes too much, one leaves one's current worldview and converts to a different one. But this does not typically mean that, for instance, a converting Christian gradually accepts some Islamic beliefs and practices alongside her Christian ones. Instead, she becomes a Muslim. As Lara Buchak emphasises, it is crucial to understand that what is happening in a conversion is not merely a continuing shift of beliefs or practices. It is a matter of 'a significant break rather than parts of an ordinary, continuous process' (Buchak 2023, 742). The key point is that conversion, unlike ordinary changes in belief and practice, resolves the tension that is built up and involves a drastic epistemic and practical reorientation of one's life. Still, the conversion can occur over a prolonged period, during which the Christian studies the Qur'an, engages with Muslims, and reflects on the differences between the two religions. But at one point, her perception changes. A shift from one way of seeing her old religion to a wholly different one occurs, involving a conversion to Islam. She is now convinced that the old religion is wrong and the new is right. In a worldview conversion, one's fundamental orientation to life is called into question, and the conflict is resolved by adopting a new orientation.

However, one should not always view conversion as a direct consequence of cognitive dissonance, as a buildup of crises, counter-evidence, or anomalies that lead to a shift from one worldview to another. In some cases, it might be more like suddenly falling in love.

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You encounter something that causes a radical change in your life. The philosopher Janet Soskice's conversion to Christianity seems to be of this kind. She writes that in her case,

> faith came from a dramatic religious experience. ... I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and so personal that I could not doubt it. I had not, as far as I know, been looking for God or thinking of God, or enjoying a particular good or an especially bad day... I was turned around. Converted (Soskice 2009, 78–79).

Theories of conversion in religious studies are developed to understand the transition from one religion to another or from a secular life to a religious life. One concern in worldview studies is whether such terminology is too biased and foreign to describe someone who shifts from religious to non-religious or converts from one secular worldview to another. If we consider that the term has too strong religious connotations, we can talk about worldview replacement, substitution, or shifting rather than worldview conversion.

However, the problem for worldview studies presumably runs deeper than a linguistic one. When someone converts, we assume that a distinguishable new alternative is available. So, a Christian can become a Buddhist (interreligious conversion), a Lutheran can convert to Catholicism (intra-religious conversion), or a non-religious individual may become a Muslim (religious conversion). But what does someone who no longer identifies as religious convert to? There appears to be no readily identifiable alternative. Worldview studies (or the substitution theory it typically presupposes) suggest that this is just how it appears. It posits that this person shifts to some kind of secular worldview. That may be true and provide sufficient warrant for using the term 'conversion'. Still, further research must consider the extent to which secular conversion differs from religious conversion. Nevertheless, to avoid the somewhat problematic religious connotation of the term, I will, in what follows, speak mainly about shifting worldviews or worldview substitution.

However, philosophers can offer psychologists and other scholars interested in conversions or substitutions – beyond just religious ones – concrete examples of secular worldviews. This is because secular philosophers have given more thought than non-religious people in general to what can serve as a substitute for religion in their lives and, specifically, in their understanding of reality. The philosopher Thomas Nagel is an interesting and illuminating case. He asks, 'What, if anything, does secular philosophy have to put in the place of religion?' (2010, 4) and writes: 'I am resistant to the broad acceptance of scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view. Theism is one form that such resistance can take, but I believe that there must be secular alternatives' (2010, preface). Neither is Nagel fully satisfied with secular humanism since it 'is too limited an answer': it can make sense of our lives but not sense of everything (Nagel 2010, 17). An adequate secular worldview must be more comprehensive than secular humanism and less reductionistic than scientific naturalism. For instance, the non-religious worldview he seeks rejects an epistemology in which science sets limits on what we can know (in contrast to scientific naturalism). It also affirms an ontology that contains a natural teleology, according to which the existence of value is not a random side effect of life but rather part of the explanation for why there is life at all (in contrast to secular humanism) (Nagel 2012, 122). Nagel does not give the secular worldview he hopes to develop a name because of the inadequacies of other options, but we can call it 'teleological naturalism'.

What Nagel calls scientific naturalism would be essentially the same secular worldview that Putnam named 'scientific materialist worldview' (see the earlier section on compartmentalisation). So, Putnam shifted his allegiance from scientific naturalism to humanism, but, due to compartmentalisation, he also embraced a Jewish-religious worldview. On the

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other hand, Nagel rejects religions such as Abrahamic forms of theism. He also discards scientific naturalism. Although he is more sympathetic towards secular humanism, Nagel does not think it will suffice either. What needs to be developed and put in place of religion is rather some form of teleological naturalism. As a young philosopher, Nagel may have been socialised into accepting scientific naturalism (or its contemporary counterpart, logical positivism) as the worldview he should adopt. But he eventually replaced it with a teleological naturalist worldview.

I have identified distinct secular orientations people can adopt when leaving their religious beliefs and practices behind (secular replacement or substitution) and at least three secular worldviews non-religious individuals might switch between (inter-secular replacement or substitution). But since most non-religious people are what I elsewhere referred to as 'secular nones' – individuals who self-identify as non-religious but lack affiliation with an organised secular group or community[11] – it should presumably come as no surprise that they are uncertain about which worldview they embrace. As the group of religious nones – individuals who self-identify as religious but lack affiliation with an organised religious group or community – continues to grow, we may see similar developments in their religious worldviews. Identifying people's secular and religious worldviews would become increasingly difficult. They are religious or secular people in their own unspecified way.

How to assess the rationality of worldview conversion or replacement? This is a complicated issue for at least two reasons. The first issue concerns whether replacing one worldview with another is an instance of incommensurability. The second issue concerns whether the changes in belief that occur when replacing one worldview with another are similar to ordinary belief shifts, or whether conversion is a drastic epistemic reorientation for which different norms of rationality apply. These are issues that cannot be fully addressed in a brief section of an article, so I will limit myself to identifying the main options and outlining some of their consequences.

In Nancey Murphy's analysis of theism and naturalism, she adopts Alasdair MacIntyre's account of tradition. She argues that each worldview is a tradition that incorporates its own standards of rationality (Murphy 2008, 49–58). Still, the superior worldview can provide resources to better characterise and explain the failings and intellectual crises of the rival worldview than the inferior worldview can. In Kuhn's terminology, we have a case of incommensurability here, but one that nevertheless can be rationally adjudicated (Kuhn 1970, 148–150). A stronger case for incommensurability would be to argue that no rational adjudication between worldviews is possible because they cannot be compared appropriately, since the disagreement is too deep. Therefore, a shift in worldview is a leap of faith. So neither the term 'rational' nor 'irrational' can be applied; it is rather a case of a-rationality. Indeed, if strong incommensurability applies, then it would be unreasonable to think that someone who wants to assess the rationality of a worldview conversion has adequate cognitive means to do this. The first issue then concerns whether there are impartial, unbiased, or worldview-transcendent norms of rationality that can be applied to assess a conversion from one worldview to another. Scholars of worldview studies could answer this question in various ways, which would impact their verdict on whether people who convert from one worldview to another can (and if they can) make a rational, wise, or well-informed choice in the circumstances they find themselves in.

The second issue concerns whether we should treat everything we believe or are convinced of in the same way, whether the same norms of rationality apply to all situations involving belief. We noticed that the phenomenology of conversion seems to indicate that a significant break occurs in the individual's life, to such an extent that it makes sense to speak of a 'before' and 'after', or an 'old' and a 'new'. It involves a profound reorganisation of one's beliefs, identity, and life. Because of these 'costs', it is perhaps not surprising, as

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Buchak points out, that adherents of a worldview initially respond to counter-evidence in a seemingly dogmatic way. They aim at worldview integration or revision rather than converting to a different one. If so, a change in belief concerning the core assumptions of a worldview differs in kind from ordinary changes in belief. Moreover, one would not consider a change in a single belief to be a conversion unless that belief was deeply ingrained in such a way that the change resulted in a broader shift in the individual's overall way of thinking and living. But, arguably, according to the evidentialist theory of rationality, rationality requires that one's beliefs shift in proportion to how one's evidence shifts. However, perhaps this applies only to ordinary belief shifts, rather than shifts in worldview? When it comes to drastic reorientations of one's life, it may be reasonable to apply different norms of rationality than when, for instance, adjusting one's belief to the evidence that the train leaves in ten rather than five minutes.

Elsewhere, I have made a similar point, based on the idea that not everything we believe influences us equally (Stenmark 2024, 49–51). Some beliefs are more peripheral, and we can let go of them without much impact on our lives. Others are of great importance, and changing or abandoning them can have far-reaching effects on how we perceive and live in the world. Therefore, I argue, a rational person must consider how central a belief is to her life, and it is not rational to treat all beliefs equally. It is reasonable to require stronger reasons to abandon beliefs that are core to our identity than for those that are less significant, as such decisions should not be determined solely by the available evidence.

Therefore, assessing the rationality of worldview replacement first depends on whether we think worldviews are incommensurable and, second, on whether the same norms of rationality should always guide changes in belief. This means that more work is needed in the epistemology of conversion before we can determine whether rejecting a worldview and shifting to another constitutes rational adjudication. It is also important to consider when it does not, particularly when worldview integration or revision would have been a more reasonable response.

Worldview confirmation or reinforcement

I have identified and analysed some principal ways in which people's religious or secular worldviews can shift, break down, and evolve through their life experiences. Significant life events that pose existential challenges may lead to compartmentalisation, integration, revision, or even conversion to a different worldview. However, our worldviews are not always challenged; sometimes they are reinforced, even confirmed, by our life experiences. Therefore, a model for understanding how worldviews can serve as both a resource and an obstacle in interpreting existentially significant experiences would be incomplete if it did not acknowledge that these experiences can also strengthen them.[12] Using terminology inspired by Nagasawa, we have a scenario of 'axiological expectation match'. Our expectation of how the world should be and our observation of how it actually is seemed to align. Our changing circumstances – such as the people we meet, the news we hear, or the books we read – do not challenge our pre-existing ideas, values, and behaviour patterns; instead, they confirm them. Therefore, *worldview confirmation* must also be included in a model of worldview formation. In life, we encounter both worldview-challenging and worldview-supporting events.

Returning to some of the previous cases I discussed. It is reasonable to assume that before Hani tries to convince Amir that his Islamic worldview is mistaken, by giving him some of Dawkins's books, his own already secular worldview was confirmed when he read these books himself. Similarly, Thomas may have taken the experiences he had during the meditation sessions as confirmation of his own religious worldview, in contrast to Peter, who afterwards reappraised their significance, reinterpreting them as a mere product of his

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own mind. In each case, we have, on the one hand, an example of worldview confirmation (Hani and Thomas) and, on the other, one of worldview integration or restoration (Amir and Peter).

However, in the loose sense in which I use the term, confirmation also covers cases in which one's worldview is merely *reinforced* or *deepened* by what happens in life. By continuing to participate in a congregation's meetings and to talk with fellow Christians, a person might gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the richness of the Christian worldview. Individuals who identify as 'spiritual but not religious' may, through frequent practice of yoga and Reiki, find time and time again that energies trapped and manifest in physical disease and spiritual malaise are unblocked by engaging in these techniques. Thus, their continued practices reinforce their already accepted spiritual worldview. A young non-religious person who undergoes a coming-of-age ceremony may gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the content of the secular humanistic worldview – what it means to live a life guided by humanistic values, by science and reason alone, without any belief in religious superstition or divine revelation.

Hence, in a stronger or weaker sense, worldview confirmation is another way in which worldviews can change or evolve. Often, it is an example of a rational worldview formation in response to significant events an individual experiences in life, even if the final verdict depends on the specific details of each case.

Concluding remarks

A central idea in psychology is that people engage in a process of meaning-making. This process involves understanding and making sense of life events, relationships, and the self, particularly during times of stress, loss, and crisis. Furthermore, our health and well-being depend on our ability to make sense of the challenging life experiences we encounter. I have argued that focusing solely on the process of meaning-making is insufficient because people interpret the meaning – or lack thereof – of their experiences through a lens of deeply held assumptions about themselves and the world they inhabit. These assumptions constitute their worldview. Thus, worldview theory is an essential complement to the theory of meaning-making. Because people have different worldviews, their perceptions of stress, loss, and crisis, as well as the resources they possess to manage these situations, can sometimes vary significantly. I have provided several examples to illustrate this. My primary objective has been to develop a model of worldview formation. I have proposed five principal ways in which people's worldviews can shift, break down, evolve, or be strengthened by their life experiences. These are worldview compartmentalisation, integration, revision, conversion, and confirmation.

A core idea has been that these five options can account for the struggles of both religious and secular people with existentially significant life events. Still, especially when discussing worldview replacement, a distinguishable secular alternative must be available. But it is unclear what some who no longer identify as religious actually shift allegiance to. A challenge when studying non-religious people is identifying what that alternative is, in contrast to the religious worldviews they reject. This difficulty complicates efforts to categorise secular identities and understand their guiding beliefs and values. One question that warrants further empirical and philosophical exploration is, then, to what extent secular worldview shifting differs from religious ones. The development of secular studies as a complement to religious studies (both being a part of worldview studies) faces its own challenges. However, I have noted that contemporary philosophy offers concrete examples of what a secular worldview might look like and how to distinguish among secular worldviews, such as scientific naturalism, teleological naturalism, and secular humanism. This is possible because some contemporary secular philosophers have debated what the appropriate substitute for

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religion is. Their disagreements offer valuable insights into some of the secular worldviews that non-religious individuals can adopt. Therefore, a shift or conversion from, for example, scientific naturalism to secular humanism appears possible.

Notes

1. The attitudes I have in mind express people's emotional dispositions towards things, properties, processes, and states of affairs in the world. Belief, on the other hand, is an epistemic attitude, so epistemic attitudes are not what I mean by 'attitudes' here, because these attitudes are assumed to be essentially emotional.
2. Nagasawa argues that the systematic presence of evil in the world creates a mismatch problem for not only many theists but also, somewhat surprisingly, many atheists.
3. 'The advantages of compartmentalization in dealing with trauma', https://medshun.com/article/are-there-benefits-to-compartmentalization-of-trauma (accessed in October 2025).
4. See also Dawkins (2004, 13).
5. Josua L. Golding (1999) provides a fuller account of what it means to embrace a traditional Jewish worldview.
6. This revised stance is close to the one Peter van Inwagen (1988) argues for.
7. 'Naming ceremonies | Non-religious rituals and symbolic actions', https://humanists.uk/ceremonies/namings/blog/naming-ceremonies-rituals-and-symbolic-actions/ (accessed 24 October 2025).
8. Many thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing out this tension between my model and some of the psychological theories that I did not originally discuss.
9. Within psychology, it is typically religious conversion that is in focus. One prominent example is Lewis R. Rambo's model of religious conversion. He identifies seven stages of conversion as context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo 1993).
10. Alastair MacIntyre (1988, 349–360) maintains that moral traditions similarly centre themselves around core assumptions, and moral communities experience a process like the one Kuhn describes. Nancey Murphy (2008, 49–58) has developed a similar approach to understanding theological traditions and naturalistic traditions.
11. Notice that I, on this point, reject the received view of religious nones! On such a view, religious nones are people who lack affiliation with an organised religious group, organisation, or community – whether they are still religious or have become secular individuals (see, for instance, Pew Research Center 2024). Instead, I think a more adequate terminology is symmetrical with respect to religious and secular worldviews. It acknowledges that not only religious but also non-religious people can belong to a support group, organisation, or community, or lack such affiliation. I have written more on this topic elsewhere (Stenmark 2026).
12. This is also pointed out and exemplified in Ballard (2017).

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