
James W. Sire (1933-2018)

Unlikely Academic and Humble Apologist

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James W. Sire passed away on February 6th, 2018. He was a humble but key figure in contemporary intellectual evangelicalism. This article introduces and reflects on his life, his influence, and the influential worldview-thinking which he helped to birth.

Background and Life

The unlikely academic

James Sire's role as an influence within the academy and on evangelical thinking was not at all something you would guess from his background. He grew up on a ranch at the edge of the Nebraska Sandhills. Here he learned hard manual work. He didn't love it but found he could do it. Nor was his conversion spectacular. Sire received his faith through his family and his local church. In the midst of struggles, it remained with him all his life. His academic career in cultural analysis and apologetics wasn't obvious either. In college he wanted to enter chemistry but discovered that he loved poetry. In the end, he graduated with two majors, both in chemistry and English: "Ah, but utterly unqualified for any significant job!"¹

Studying in a secular college, Sire was committed to growing his Christian faith. He found help in becoming a member of a church that offered solid biblical teaching, alongside joining Inter Varsity Fellow-

ship which took the life of the mind seriously. His involvement with Inter Varsity shaped much of his interests, and later his career. In college he had been part of ROTC, the Reserve Officers Training Corps, obliging him to spend two years of service in the US Army in Korea and Japan. After 16 months in service, he returned home on a stretcher, not after any dramatic military incident, but due to an appendectomy.

Literary criticism

After Sire's clerical work in the army with paperwork of no intrinsic interest, he found it a relief to be able to work hard at reading literature. He joined Washington State College (now: University) and found he "had not only a knack for literature, but an even greater knack for literary criticism".² Sire's interest lay especially in the relationship of Christianity and literature³, thus doing his master's thesis on "Ambrose Bierce: His Concept and Use of Time", a work which he completed in one year.

The concept of "worldview"

James W. Sire did his PhD at Missouri University, where he was introduced to the concept of worldview by Professor Donald B. Clark as a tool for understanding literature. This concept became for Sire the central element in how to relate

Christian faith to culture.⁴ His dissertation topic was on "Miltonic Criticism and the Problem of the Readers' Belief"⁵. During his six years at Missouri, he was also actively involved in the Inter Varsity student work.

Sire chose his first employment at Nebraska Wesleyan University (Lincoln) where he would teach literature. He would do that from a worldview standpoint, tracing Western intellectual history from Homer to the present. Thus, "[students] not only learned about the literature itself, but also about its intellectual contribution to Greek and Roman thought, Platonism, traditional Christian theism, Enlightenment rationalism, nihilism, modern existentialism, and the persistence, as well, of intelligent Christianity."⁶ This literature course from Beowulf to the present became the basis for his famous *The Universe Next Door* ten years later.

Editor at IVP

At an Inter Varsity missionary conference in Urbana in 1967, he was asked to become editor for Inter Varsity Press (IVP). He joined in 1968 and remained full time with IVP until 1998. Without any previous experience with publishing, he made a significant contribution in that role: "Not only did he author over twenty books, but his thirty-year career at IVP also included contracting and developing works by Francis A. Schaeffer, Os Guinness, Calvin Miller, Rebecca Manley Pippert, J. I. Packer, John White, J. P. Moreland, and others"⁷

James Sire is most well-known for his book *The Universe Next Door* (1976), itself a very unlikely bestseller. Who would have guessed that a book so heavy on ideas, for the supposedly few intellectually minded Christians, would be such a success? In addition, it is a very rare phenomenon

for a book to see every new edition out-selling the previous. It has now sold around 400.000 copies and been translated into 20 languages!

Popular travelling lecturer

For Sire, the popularity of *The Universe Next Door* resulted in many invitations and speaking engagements in both US, Canada, and Europe. He found that this kind of lecturing across university campuses was close to his heart. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was active in Eastern Europe, seeing the practical outworking of atheistic ideology: "Never has it been so clear to me that a society that has rejected God is a society that has rejected people too".⁸

The IVP's travelling records indicate that Sire visited 315 different campuses, giving 1676 lectures to some 67200 different people. After his retirement, he continued the lecturing, adding 12 more campuses in the US, 9 more in Europe and 9 more in Korea.⁹ Many of Sire's subsequent books, emerged out of these speaking engagements. Some came directly from the topics he lectured on (*Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?*), and some from reflections on his lecturing and debating experience (*Why Good Arguments Often Fail, A Little Primer in Humble Apologetics*).

The humble apologist

"Humble apologist" sounds like an oxymoron. Apologetics is often expected to be confident, and challenging, sometimes even triumphalist. James Sire models the humble apologist he proposes. This is visible in his short biography. It is completely free from self-glorification, and very honest about his background and course of life. Always surprised at the turn of events, very (maybe too) modest about

his own competence, Sire abounds in self-irony. Rather than recording his successes – of which there must have been plenty in his career – he rather recounts his failures as lessons for becoming a better apologist. "There is more than a little confession in these books."¹⁰

Commenting on his *A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics*, Sire states wryly that the title "rather overdoes my own humility"¹¹. His own proposal for a redefinition of apologetics is as follows: "Christian apologetics lays before the watching world such a winsome embodiment of Christian faith that for any and all who are willing to observe there will be an intellectually and emotionally credible witness to its fundamental truth."¹² If this holistic approach is followed, it can do much for the credibility of the Christian faith – and the respect for apologetics – in our culture.

Beyond reason

His latest books on apologetics – *Echoes of a Voice*¹³ and *Apologetics Beyond Reason*¹⁴ (both published in 2014) – focus on "signals of transcendence" rather than on apologetic arguments as such. He claims that all of reality, rightly understood, points to God. He finds it more interesting to argue *from* God, rather than *for* God. He has become more personal and experiential in his approach. This should not be understood as a break with his past, neither with his worldview thinking nor with his classical apologetics approach, but rather as an expansion and development of these key perspectives. Good apologetics needs to be aware of the limitations of all legitimate approaches and to explore multiple ways of reaching out to people.

Significance and influence

Meeting and listening to his humble man-

ners, his sense of humour and his self-irony, it was easy to underestimate James W. Sire. However, looking back on his contribution to contemporary evangelicalism and Christian apologetics, his influence can hardly be overestimated.

"Midwife" for other authors

In addition to the influence of Sire's own books, his wide lecturing, and as a top-class apologist in his own right, he has been a significant "midwife" – as indicated above – for many important evangelical authors:

"He was instrumental in the writing careers of Francis Schaeffer and Os Guinness, two giants of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism. Both applied the Christian worldview skilfully to apologetics and social criticism. He edited Guinness's first book – his unmatched critique of the counterculture, *The Dust of Death* (1973). In the case of Schaeffer's *Death in the City* (InterVarsity Press, 1969), Sire shaped a manuscript from a series of explosive lectures Schaeffer gave at Wheaton College."¹⁴

In very critical decades, Sire became "a keystone in the intellectual renewal of evangelicalism in the 1960s and 1970s, championing the work of Francis Schaeffer and contributing his own landmark books on world views", according to Andy Le Peau, former associate publisher for IVP.¹⁶

Father of "the Christian worldview movement"

Sire can also appropriately be seen as the father of the Christian worldview movement. "Loosely defined, this movement is made of writers, speakers, and educators who advocated that Christianity be understood and promoted philosophically. C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer were key as

well, but Sire consolidated the Christian [world]view in a clear and captivating way.”¹⁷ We will now look closer at his worldview thinking.

Seminal worldview thinking

As we have seen, Sire picked up the concept of worldview in his study of English literature and found it a helpful tool for connecting the Christian faith to his studies. He came to see it as a significant key for understanding the relationship between the Christian faith and culture in general.

The first edition of *The Universe Next Door* (1976) defined worldview as “as a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world”.¹⁸ The book included seven worldviews, following the intellectual development of the modern West as it moves away from classic Christianity. The chapter titles display the story he wants to tell, where nihilism – and subsequent responses to nihilism – appear as the logical consequences of this move:

1. A Universe Charged with the Grandeur of God: Christian Theism
2. A Clockwork Universe: Deism
3. The Silence of Finite Space: Naturalism
4. Zero Point: Nihilism
5. Beyond Nihilism: Existentialism
6. Journey to the East: Eastern Pantheistic Monism
7. A Separate Universe: The New Consciousness
8. [The examined life]

Successive editions added chapters, as new worldview trends became increasingly influential in the West.

7. A Separate Universe: The New Age – Spirituality Without Religion
8. The Vanished Horizon: Postmodernism
9. A View from the Middle East: Islamic Theism

The strength of *The Universe Next Door* is not just the story it tries to tell, but the rich references to literature, philosophy, and art throughout. It invites the reader to reflect deeply on the big issues, to listen to culture, and to explore and compare different worldview perspectives.

Redefining the concept

Reflecting more deeply on the worldview concept, Sire felt a real need for a significant revision. We can find his argument for this revision in his *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (2004), where he integrates insights especially from David Naugle’s *Worldview: The History of a Concept*¹⁹. Sire now proposes the following redefinition of worldview:

”A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundations on which we live and more and have our being.”²⁰

We see how the pre-theoretical worldview element is key in his redefinition, especially in the terms “commitment”, and “basic orientation of the heart”. Equally important is seeing worldviews expressed both as “rational systems”, “master stories” and “ways of life”. This also relativizes the rational aspect, although this remains the main focus of *The Universe Next Door*.

Sire is also aware that intellectual analysis has its limits. His *Chrisman Goes to College. And Faces Challenges of Relativism, Individualism and Pluralism* (1993) "reflects my growing awareness that the categories of sociological analysis can illuminate for apologists a fuller picture of the culture(s) we address than those of mere intellectual analysis"²¹.

The Universe Next Door can be seen to foreshadow some of the ideas of Charles Taylor's monumental classic *A Secular Age*:²²

- both tell the story of the modern West as it is moving away from its Christian past
- both illustrate this story with references to literature and art
- both point out that the secular perspectives are no default or neutral starting points, they are "faith" positions, constructions, "worldviews", or "social imaginaries"
- both see "the [naturalistic] closed universe" as an influential intellectual development

Of course, Taylor's 900-page volume focuses on the development of "secularity" and digs deeper both into this concept and into the social settings and frameworks for thinking, thus exploring our "non-thoughts". Even if it needs to be complemented by other perspectives, Sire remains very helpful as an introductory guide, providing us with a key map of the (post)modern marketplace of worldviews. But like any map, it will always have its limitations and will need to be corrected and nuanced when confronted with the real world of cliffs, woods, and roads. We should never mistake the map for reality.

Critique

Some influential recent thinkers, like J. K. A. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*²³, critiques a naïve worldview approach which sees worldviews as intellectual systems that define how we think and act. Smith claims the influence goes the other way. We are shaped more by our practices, our "guts", and by what we love and worship, than by our ideas. Smith is careful to point out that he is not against the worldview concept per se, but rather a naïve understanding and use of it.

It is true that some versions of worldview thinking can have a too limited, cerebral approach, and that is certainly a danger. However, as philosopher Douglas Groothuis points out, "the idea of a worldview was never meant to replace systematic theology, liturgy, or the corporate confession of the church. The principal strength of worldview is for apologetics and cultural criticism. Yes, some of the recent books on worldview are superfluous, but that is not the fault of James Sire."²⁴

Interestingly, although Smith advocates action, practice and liturgies as the most basic level, his books are still about *ideas*. Some of the best parts of *Desiring the Kingdom* is where he expounds and contrasts the "liturgies" of the modern mall and those of the Christian church. The very fact that he sees the need for expounding these liturgies is an implicit concession that the practices do not explain themselves. They need to be grasped intellectually in terms of the bigger pictures. This is in fact an argument that practices, liturgies, and worship – and ideas, theology, and worldviews – all belong together. It seems likely that both Sire and Smith would have agreed on this.

However, what we see as primary and secondary influences could be an interesting discussion!

Worldviews at NLA Gimlekollen

Many institutions and organizations could rightly claim that they have been influenced by James Sire and his worldview thinking. The prestigious Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA), and the influential Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), are only two of many that could be mentioned. However, I will offer my own institution, NLA University College – and especially its Gimlekollen Campus – as a clear example of an institution where worldview thinking in general, and James Sire’s literature specifically, have been crucial.

Worldview-thinking has been a key element in establishing and developing Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication (now NLA University College, Gimlekollen). The school has a classical Christian basis and vision, but at the same time a student body with all views and none on religion. How can the Christian faith be an integral part of the curriculum of such disciplines as journalism without coming across as sectarian, dominating, and exclusive? How can Christians respect the plurality of worldviews present in the classroom, and still be explicit in holding to and arguing their own worldview convictions?

The worldview approach offers a unique way of relating to the plurality of worldviews without losing one’s own identity. Worldview thinking allows for highlighting the big existential questions, contrasting different secular and worldview perspectives, and including the Christian perspective. A course called *Media, Ethics and Worldviews*²⁵ was developed. This course chose – and still uses – *The Uni-*

verse Next Door as a basic text-book²⁶. Thus, a plurality of perspectives is introduced, showing how they differ in answering the big questions – especially concerning ethics and values, how they all challenge one another, and how Christianity is still a relevant option, and even can be argued for in the marketplace of ideas. The worldview approach also helps dismantle the myth of secular “neutrality”, which is often assumed both in political discourse, mainstream media, and the academy.

The worldview approach was also the basis for the *Communication and Worldviews* programme, which we have termed “missionary-training for those who stay at home”. The point is that understanding different worldviews is fundamental for Christian communication and apologetics in a pluralistic context. James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door* has been a key part of the basic curriculum of that course as well. The worldview-perspective is also central in the textual analysis of contemporary factual and fictional media messages, both in our academic programmes, and in the Damaris Norway²⁷ approach to popular culture.

Even the third academic field at Gimlekollen, *Intercultural Communication*, makes use of the worldview-concept, being one of several tools for anthropological exploration. In this context, one becomes acutely aware that Sire’s book is written for a Western context and audience. But three things need to be pointed out in this context.

Firstly, Sire was completely aware of that he is expounding the Western history and context, he did not aim for a global book of worldviews.

Secondly, the tools of worldview analysis are helpful in all cultures. This is made evident by a scholar such as Paul Hiebert,

e.g. in his masterful textbook *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*²⁸.

Thirdly, the process of globalization, and the influential institutions of media and the academy, makes the Western (secular) worldviews relevant and experientially felt across the globe. The requests we receive – at Gimlekollen – from major churches and Christian institutions in the Global South to offer training in media awareness, literacy and critique²⁹ brings that out clearly. This is increasingly seen as an acute need of the church across the globe, where people are living in the midst of an ongoing flow of – often secular and secularizing – factual and fictional media messages. An introduction to Western worldviews will therefore be helpful

across the globe, helping a global audience to think critically and deeply, both about the media messages, and about their own faith. Of course, influential local worldviews will need to be added in new contexts.

In conclusion, it seems clear that we stand in great debt to James W. Sire both as an evangelical thinker, a cultural analyst, an apologist, and a public communicator. This is both true for the evangelical world in general, for people involved in the current apologetics renaissance at large, and for my own institution NLA University College Gimlekollen specifically. I can only hope we will also emulate the winsome and humble character of James Sire himself, which ultimately points us to his Master, Jesus Christ.

Appendix

James W. Sire: A Selective Annotated Bibliography

This bibliography will focus on his apologetic books, which comprise the bulk of his literary production.³⁰

Program for a new man: An alternative to B.F. Skinner, Aldous Huxley & Herbert Marcuse (1973). This book enters the intense intellectual debate of the time, challenging some major views on humanity (i.e. naturalist, mystic and Marxist perspectives). He analyses the positions, critiques them, and shows how a Christian view of human beings is superior to the alternatives.

The Universe Next Door. A guide to worldviews (1976)³¹ This is his classic introduction to the most relevant worldview alternatives in the West. The list of worldviews tells his version of the history of the modern West, moving away from its Christian roots and ending in nihilism. The 20th century worldviews attempts different, but ultimately unsuccessful, routes out of the despair.

How to Read Slowly. A Christian guide to reading with the mind (1978). This book is based on Sire's specialty as a scholar of literature. Here he first argues for the importance of reading, and then explains how to read literature "worldviewishly". This means identifying and evaluating the fundamental views of reality expressed by the authors.

Discipleship of the Mind. Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think (1990). Here Sire first draws up a worldview perspective on the Christian mind, which gives a unique perspective on reality, human beings, and knowledge. Then he applies these in three areas: technology, the sciences (human and natural), and human culture.

Chris Chrisman Goes to College. And Faces Challenges of Relativism, Individualism and Pluralism. (1993) This book focuses on the challenges for Christians entering the secular academy. It is based on Sire's own experience as a student and is both practical and theoretical. He focuses on the importance not only of ideas – and history of ideas, but also of sociological analysis for understanding key challenges to the Christian faith.

Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All? (1994). This book, based on one of Sire's most popular lectures³², tries to move people from postmodern relativism to a place where truth is taken seriously. In the end, he attempts to show that the Christian worldview better explains the character and value of rational thinking than the understandings the intended readers have absorbed from their culture(s).

Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling (2000). The book describes what an intellectual life should look like for a Christian with that calling. Sire sees the main Christian intellectual virtues as “the passion for truth, the passion for holiness, set in the framework of humility”.

Václav Havel: The Intellectual Conscience of International Politics (2001). Here Sire applies the concept of worldview as a tool for analysis on a key contemporary political and cultural figure. The apologetic conclusion is that a Christian understanding of God would better undergird Havel's admirable ethical insights and values than his own notion of “Horizon of Being”.

Why Do Good Arguments Often Fail? Making a More Persuasive Case for Christ (2006). After presenting examples of bad arguments (common logical fallacies), Sire's focus is on why even good arguments fail to convince. He looks at various reasons, such as the apologist himself, misreading the audience, misunderstanding the problem, and the spiritual blindness of the listener(s). He illustrates all of these by his own experiences (and failures) as an apologist. He finally offers two examples that seem to work, first Paul's speech in Acts 17:22ff, and then his own “Why Should I Believe Anything?”

A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics (2006) belongs together with the former book and redefines apologetics by bringing it into the wider picture of life and witnessing. Sire then delineates what he sees as the value, the limits, and the contexts of apologetics, before he offers what he finds to be the best arguments of apologetics. He illustrates each chapter with a “snapshot” of his own – not always successful – experience as apologist.

Deepest Differences: A Christian-Atheist Dialogue (2009). This book was initiated accidentally by a discussion in a book-club, and subsequently developed into an extended e-mail correspondence between Sire and an atheist acquaintance. It is an open and respectful exploration on issues like minds and brains, science and morality, faith and reason, God and violence, doubt, and rhetoric.

Rim of the Sandhills (2012) is Sire's short memoir, beginning with his roots as a Nebraska rancher, and tracing his education, his career as a teacher and finally his role as an editor of Inter Varsity Press. This latter role opened a door for him as international travelling lecturer and apologist for the Christian faith. This book has the same humble, humorous tone as many of his other works, and ends with “A Final Apologetic: Why I am Still a Christian”.

Echoes of a Voice: We Are Not Alone (2014) deals with sudden, unexpected, strange experiences of what Sire calls “signals of transcendence”. Reality is wider than the

narrow materialist understanding allows for. He claims the “signals of transcendence” are echoes of a voice, the voice of Jesus, calling us to follow him into God’s new world. The book follows the author’s journey to this conclusion.

Apologetics Beyond Reason. Why Seeing Really is Believing (2014)³³. In this book Sire claims that, rightly understood, everything in this world points to God. He redefines apologetics to be essentially not an argument, but rather a call to grasp the truth of Christ and commit to him. In a very personal engaging way, Sire attempts to show that literature, thinking, and the arts all point ultimately to God. The best argument still is Jesus himself, who answers the deep enigmas of human existence.

Notes

1. *Rim of the Sandhills* (self-published eBook Kindle, 2012) loc. 1074.
2. *Ibid.* loc. 1467.
3. *Ibid.* loc. 1527.
4. *Ibid.* loc. 1531.
5. *Ibid.* loc. 1578.
6. *Rim of the Sandhills*, loc. 1654.
7. Inter Varsity Press at <https://www.ivpress.com/press-releases/2018/james-w-sire-a-keystone-in-the-intellectual-renewal-of-evangelicalism-dies>. Accessed 25.05.18
8. *Ibid.* loc. 1975.
9. *Ibid.* loc. 1989.
10. *Ibid.* loc. 2113.
11. *Ibid.* loc. 2113.
12. *A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p 26.
13. *Echoes of a Voice: We Are Not Alone* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2014).
14. *Apologetics Beyond Reason. Why Seeing Really is Believing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).
15. Douglas Groothuis at <https://douglasgroothuis.com/2018/02/17/james-sire-some-personal-reflections/> . Accessed 25.05.18.
16. Inter Varsity Press at: <https://www.ivpress.com/press-releases/2018/james-w-sire-a-keystone-in-the-intellectual-renewal-of-evangelicalism-dies>. Accessed 25.05.18.
17. Douglas Groothuis at <https://douglasgroothuis.com/2018/02/17/james-sire-some-personal-reflections> . Accessed 25.05.18.
18. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p 17.
19. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
20. *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) p 122, and *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 5th ed 2009) p. 20.
21. *Apologetics Beyond Reason. Why Seeing Really is Believing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p 19.
22. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
23. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).
24. <https://douglasgroothuis.com/2018/02/17/james-sire-some-personal-reflections>. Accessed 25.05.18.
25. This is now developed into two courses at NLA Gimlekollen: “Journalistic ethics” and “Journalism and worldviews”.
26. Through Damaris Norway I have made a series of ten short educational videos in Norwegian, where I introduce Sire’s historical overview of secular and religious worldviews in the West., originally as a resource for journalist students at NLA University College Gimlekollen: See <https://www.damaris.no/livssyn/>.
27. www.damaris.no, especially visible at www.snakkomtro.no.
28. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2008).
29. My colleagues at NLA Gimlekollen Lars Dahle and Margunn Serigstad Dahle have been active internationally with media engagement training, esp. through the Lausanne Media Engagement Network, see <http://engagingmedia.info>.

30. Sire's devotional books are also worth mentioning:

- *Jeremiah: Meet the 20th Century. 12 Studies in Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975).
- *Beginning with God: A Basic Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981).
- *Meeting Jesus. 13 bible studies for individuals or groups* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988).
- *Learning to Pray Through the Psalms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005).
- *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

31. See my video series on Sire's worldview catalogue introduced in footnote 26 above.

32. You can watch his lecture at Veritas, see <https://vimeo.com/9024187> (from UC Santa Barbara 1998) (50:58).

33. You can listen to a radio interview on the book at "The Mind Renewed" (1:04:49), see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bwtDwUhXfc.