

# Identifying and Responding to Naturalism in Popular Culture: *The Big Bang Theory* as a Case Study

Many of the background beliefs that our secular culture presses on us about Christianity make it seem implausible. Such assumptions “are not presented to us explicitly by argument, [but] absorbed through the stories and themes of entertainment and social media” (Tim Keller). Therefore, a key task for contemporary Christian apologists is to uncover and challenge secular premises, values, and beliefs in popular culture. In this session, we discuss how to identify and respond to naturalism in popular culture with the highly popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* as a case study.

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## I. Introduction

### A. Stories and Worldviews

- *“Stories are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.”* (Ben Okri)
- *“All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions.”* (Philip Pullman)
- *“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 move and have our being.”* (James Sire)

### B. Popular Culture as Stories of Influence

- *“Popular Culture is made up of cultural works whose media, genres, or venues tend to be widespread and widely received in our everyday world.”* (Ted Turnau)

- *“Popular Culture is a system of texts that find their way into our everyday worlds, shaping our reality”* (Ted Turnau)

## II. The Big Bang Theory (TBBB)

### A. About the show

- *“The Big Bang Theory has been the defining comedy of its generation”* (Kelly Pahl)
- *The Big Bang Theory* centres around four main characters - living in Pasadena, California, and working at CalTech University as scientists within different fields of the natural sciences - and their girlfriends/wives.
- Directors: Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. CBS in the US. 2007-2018, a total of 12 seasons. Has got iconic status, won several awards.

### B. About the genre

- *“Light, family entertainment, which aims to amuse and divert the viewers, not to disturb and upset them.”* (David Logde)
- Comedy as well as realistic fiction. Possible to relate to events and situations that are portrayed, but at the same time an exaggeration, both regarding storyline and humour. Laughter machine.
- *“Once you get people laughing they’re listening and you can tell them almost anything.”* (George Carlin)

## III. Naturalism as a worldview

- *“Naturalists tend to ‘view supernaturalism as clinging to nonscientific, non-empirical justifications for beliefs, the opposite of objectivity’”* (Carlson 2017).
- Whatever label or particular stand, naturalism is the worldview held by anyone who denies the very existence of God or gods / or: the worldview underpinning atheism, the starting point being *“The universe is all there ever was, all that is and all that ever will be”* - as claimed by Carl Sagan, the American astronomer and cosmologist, at the beginning of his famous TV-series *Cosmos*. (quoted in Lennox 2019:26-27)

#### IV. Wordview Analysis

- Content analysis informed by worldview theory
- The first two phases belong to *the preparatory stage* and includes an emotional and an aesthetic level. At *the emotional level*, the focus is on the emotional response that is created by the media message, whereas *the aesthetic level* looks at the more artistic elements of the text; the plot, music, editing, acting and so on.
- Thirdly; *the worldview level*, which is the main focus of this analytical framework. This level “combines the identification of key worldview elements and traces of influential worldview traditions and trends” (Dahle 2017:64). Focusing on underlying values, beliefs and perspectives, expressed through dialogue, plot, and characters, we can identify key worldview elements: view of values, humanity, reality, and faith (the latter defined as trust and search for meaning). These traces of worldviews, then, are then compared with different worldview patterns, both religious and secular.
- Lastly; *the normative level*, constitutes *the follow-up stage*, where the aim is to give a “relevant Christian response, critically asking whether the identified worldview elements are consistent with a biblically informed Christian worldview” (Dahle 2017:64), including pointing to elements of contact and elements of tension.

#### V. Traces of Naturalism in TBBT: Key Findings

- *Dominant naturalism*  
Big Bang and evolutionary theory are seen as interconnected and as supporting naturalism. Throughout the sitcom as a whole, religion and religious views are marginal, and when they emerge occasionally, they seem irrelevant or even heretical to the view of reality.
- *Prevalent scientism*  
The natural sciences seems to be a central belief system and a seemingly indisputable foundation for truth in the series as a whole.

- *Undermining religion / Christian beliefs*  
When portrayed, religious people in general, and Christians specifically, are described as superstitious, simpleminded, and against science. The sitcom as a whole seems to communicate a strong conflict between religion and natural science, claiming that natural science has finally rejected religious truth.

## VI. TBBT and the larger picture: Responses, Reflections and Actions.

- *Responding* by identifying (a) points of contact and (b) points of tension, when compared to the biblical worldview
- *Reflections* on how influential entertainment culture such as the TBBT is a key factor in creating ‘cognitive dissonance’ for both Christians and non-Christians:

[Many] of the background beliefs that our culture presses on us about Christianity [make] it seem so implausible. These assumptions are not presented to us explicitly by argument. Rather, they are absorbed through the stories and themes of entertainment and social media. They are assumed to be simply the way things are. They are so strong that even many Christian believers, perhaps secretly at first, find their faith becoming less and less real in their minds and hearts. Much or most of what we believe at this level is, therefore, invisible to us as belief.  
(Tim Keller)

- *Actions:* We need a threefold strategy:
  - i. *Interpretation:* We must develop resources to help see popular culture ‘worldviewishly’.
  - ii. *Teaching:* We must teach and preach the biblical message, with double listening to the Word and to the world.
  - iii. *Formation:* We must create arenas for personal and spiritual growth, to affirm faith in Christ when encountering key cultural influences.

## VII. Conclusions

### *Suggested Readings*

Carlson, Richard F.: “Naturalism”, in *Dictionary of Christianity and Science* (2017)

Dahle, Margunn S.: “Worldview Formation and the Disney Universe” JYT 2017

Keller, Tim: *Making Sense of God* (2016)

Kowalski, Dean A. *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy* (2012)

Kro, Ingvild T.: *Analyse av The Big Bang Theory* (2014)

Sire, James: *The Universe Next Door* (2009)

[https://www.cbs.com/shows/big\\_bang\\_theory/](https://www.cbs.com/shows/big_bang_theory/)

<https://deadline.com/2018/05/2017-2018-tv-series-ratings-rankings-full-list-of-shows-1202395851/>