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Christian Education and Worldview

Richard Edlin

Abstract

What we believe as Christian educators is conveyed in many different ways to our students. The concept of worldview has been used in recent years to describe the comprehensive approach to reality that provides the foundation for how we understand the world and how we teach our students. Christians assert that worldview is a deeply religious concept, and that, particularly in education, we need to understand and critique our own worldviews to ensure that we are offering education that is faithful to our calling to celebrate the lordship of Christ over all of creation rather than an education that is an unconscious and culturally idolatrous adaptation of pagan norms for living that we have imbibed from the world around us. This paper offers a brief reflection upon the concept of worldview, suggests ways that unfaithful worldview concepts may have infiltrated our teaching, and suggests foundational perspectives that are biblically faithful which could be adopted as cultural shaping, God-honouring alternatives in our own lives and in our classrooms and lecture halls.

One does not have to look too hard to come across the term *worldview* in contemporary culture. Recently, while travelling in Asia, this author saw a large newspaper advertisement from a leading banking organisation touting its worldview (*diversity of approach*) as one of the reasons that potential customers should bank with it. Christians have long used the word, perhaps made popular by bestselling books such as Sire's *The Universe Next Door* (1976) and *Naming the Elephant* (2004), Walsh and Middleton's *The Transforming Vision* (1984), Wolter and Goheen's *Creation Regained* (2005), Colson and Pearcey's *How Now Shall We Live* (1999), and Pearcey's *Total Truth* (2004).

Traditionally, worldview has been seen as the background or pre-theoretical perspective to our thinking and acting that directs how we live.

Wolters (2005) refers to worldview as a comprehensive framework of a person's basic beliefs about things, and the National Institute for Christian Education (NICE) (2006) in one of its study guides refers to worldview as one's basic beliefs about things. It might be helpful to use spectacles as a metaphor for worldview. We are not really aware of our spectacles when we look at things, but they are the instrument that enables us to see the world the way we do. However, although the spectacles analogy is useful, it is also inadequate, because worldview is not just a matter of seeing, but more fundamentally it is a way of *being* in the world.

Readers can embark upon an exploration of worldview from the metanarrative perspective of Bartholomew and Goheen (2004, 2008) or the more analytic, question-driven pattern of Colson and Pearcey (1999), Pearcey (2004) or Wolters and Goheen (2005), or from a recognition of both as Sire (2004) articulates in his refined definition of worldview. Whichever paradigm is preferred, worldview very quickly moves from the pre-theoretical to the articulated—a transition which enables educators to consider the central issue of the accuracy of the alignment of their operational worldview with their professed worldview (see the figure below) in the classroom.

At the core of every worldview is religion, or heart commitment. Paul claims in his sermon in Acts 17 that God has made every human being to be a God-seeker. Paul uses the same Greek etymological root for the word "seek" that describes a passionate, driven search as used in Luke 19 to describe the dedication to task that Jesus had in seeking out the lost, and that Jesus also demonstrates in John 7:18 in seeking the Father's glory. Human beings are inescapably hardwired to seek after God. Plantinga (2002) powerfully reflects on this fundamental reality in his useful book, *Engaging God's world: A Christian vision of faith, learning and living*:

In a famous prayer at the beginning of his Confessions, Augustine addressed the summum bonum of the world: "O Lord," prayed Augustine, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

What Augustine knew is that human beings want God. In fact, humans want union with God: they want to get "in" God, as Jesus prays in John 17:21. Until it's suppressed, this longing for God arises in every human soul because it is part of the soul's standard equipment. We have been endowed by our Creator with a sensus divinitatis (a "sense of divinity"), wrote John Calvin, and everywhere in the world, even when it expresses itself as idolatry, the sense of divinity is the seed of religion. God has made us for himself. Our sense of God runs in us like a stream, even though we divert it toward other objects. We human beings want God even when we think that what we really want is a green valley or a good time from our past, or a loved one. Of course we do want these things and persons, but we also want what lies behind them. Our "inconsolable secret," says C. S. Lewis, is that we are full of yearnings, sometimes shy and sometimes passionate, that point us beyond the things of earth to the ultimate reality of God. (pp. 6–7)

Other terms also have been used to describe worldview with its core belief/religious foundation. Francis Schaeffer used the term integration point. Neil Postman wrote his book *The End of Education* in 1995. Postman, who was not a Christian but was a powerful commentator on contemporary culture, regularly used the term "god" in his book in the sense of a source of authority powerful enough to give direction and cohesion to life. Jochemsen (2006), at the Christian Education International Congress in Nicaragua, used the term spirituality. Contemporary commentators of many philosophical persuasions use the term "metanarrative" to discuss a similar concept, summarised in a helpful way from a Christian perspective by Bartholomew and Goheen (2004) who describe it as "That which makes sense of life as a whole" (p. 20).

For Christians, it is crucial that our worldview be biblically grounded because, paradoxically, not only does the Bible shape one's worldview, but one's worldview shapes one's hermeneutics (how we read and interpret the Bible). Therefore Christians need constantly to be subjecting their conscious and

unconscious patterns of being to the searching glare of scripture. Consider two examples of the way well-intentioned individuals limit God and his Word when this examination does not take place. One example is linked to the Western mindset and the other example to the Oriental mindset.

The West and Platonism

How do teachers check that their students know what they have been teaching? They give them a test. But this notion, that to "know" something is primarily a cognitive activity, is platonic in origin. The Bible uses the term to know in a much more holistic sense where one does not really know anything unless it is both cognitively understood and then acted upon. Hence Adam "knew" his wife Eve and they had a son. It required action. Jesus (John 8:32) said that we would know the truth and the truth would set us free, but in John 14:6 he made it clear that to know the truth was to enter into a personal relationship with him. In both of the John passages, knowing is much more than cognitive understanding of an idea. Knowing, like true Christianity, is grounded in an active relationship with our God. To know the truth, is to know him who is truth—which is so much more than just an idea in our heads! Dr Al Greene (1998, p. 121), one of the fathers of the modern Christian education movement, conveys the meaning of this countercultural view of knowing quite simply: "In the Christian view, knowledge is active. The truth must be done to be known...[it] inevitably demands a response, an answer to the God who speaks to us in creation." Biblical scholar Lowell Hagan (2003) employs his understanding of the original texts of scripture to express it this way:

The Hebrew word for knowing means to know by experience, by practice. Knowing was not separated from doing. Knowing something always involved practising it; to truly know meant to know by experience. (p. 35)

We see this same understanding of "knowing" in God's instructions to Joshua. At the beginning of his leadership of Israel, Joshua (Jos 1:8) was reminded of the application side of obedience when to know God's word was described to Joshua by God himself as being to read it, to mediate upon it, and then to do it. As this example of the overwhelming, paucity of the Greek concept of knowing demonstrates, when one's worldview leads one to interpret scripture through pagan spectacles

or presuppositions, we can develop an idolatrous worldview and erroneous educational practices and thus diminish the extent and authority of God's Word in our lives and culture.

The Orient and Confucianism

In the East, where the Confucian tension between shame and honour is a worldview pillar, biblical models of authority and leadership can become supplanted by cultural traditions. Thus senior pastors in churches, or principals in schools, or even people who just happen to be older than oneself, automatically are deemed to be wiser and at times almost beyond criticism. Therefore, as the author's experience among fine and dedicated Christians in Asia has demonstrated, the biblical concepts of office, mutual accountability and sovereign spheres which presuppose a much more interactive and accountable view of authority can be overlooked or ignored.

Official versus Operational Worldview

In both of the above cases, what really occurs may be called cultural idolatry, that is, cultural presuppositions supplant biblical norms for framing worldview. Even for fervent Christians, dualistic thinking ends up shaping how one knows and lives. Despite declaring that we seek to live in conformity with Jesus as revealed in the scriptures, our actual lifestyle can demonstrate an unwitting allegiance to the idolatrous worldview perspectives that are foundational to contemporary postmodernity. This debilitating reality can be true even when it is denied. For example, as educators, we are very familiar with the distinction between the official or stated curriculum on the one hand, and the actual or operational curriculum on the other. The former is what is officially declared to be a school's curriculum style in accreditation documents for example, but the operational curriculum is actually what happens in the classroom—which may or may not have much resemblance to the declared position. It is the same with worldview. Christians can claim to operate out of a worldview which asserts to be biblically faithful, when at the same time, because of our sinful lack of discernment, we are actually being deceived by cultural idolatry and our operational worldview might not be God-honouring at all. This is what happened to Peter in the scriptures. Just after having declared Jesus to be the Messiah, our Lord had to rebuke Peter and tell him to "Get behind me, Satan" (Mk 8:33). Despite the

genuineness of Peter's love and intentions, operationally Peter advocated a course of action that would have diverted Jesus from his true ministry and purpose.

So as Christians, particularly Christians involved in education, what are we to do about worldviews and in particular about this tension of the common mismatch between our professed and our operational worldview? Edlin and Thompson (2006) have suggested three core characteristics that Christians would do well to cultivate in order to critique and renovate worldviews so that they are more faithful to scripture. They call the outcome a reformational worldview—not reformational in a denominational sense, but in a "way of being" sense that is consistent with the "all of the Bible for all of life" perspective of the leaders of the protestant reformation.

1. Appreciation of the inherent goodness of creation

When God made the world, he said over and over again, "It is good." And it is still good. Human fashioning of creation, or the fruits of human stewardly endeavours (for example, governments, buildings, cultures, Apple iPhones and so on) is also a godly calling. If it were not so, then Jesus the sinless Son of God, could never have come to earth and lived in the culture, learned carpentry skills etc., as a first century Jew. As Paul reminded his hearers in Athens in Acts 17, every human thought and action is a faithful or unfaithful response to the inescapable reality that life's central driving force is the search to know God. Thus the daily experience of Christians faithfully exercising this calling in every aspect of life should be one of celebration, gratitude, wonder, and responsive discipleship. In pedagogy, curriculum design, discipline, school organization, strategic planning, relationships between stakeholders, classroom layout etc—in fact in every aspect of the life of the Christian school—this humble obedience to God's creative, sustaining authority and faithfulness to his covenant promises through Christ should be the starting point for Christian education.

The core of this inherent goodness of humankind as originally created derives from the foundational declaration made by the triune God as recorded in Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, "Let us make man in our own image." As God's image bearers, humanity was made good, creative, talented, and

lordly with the capacity and authority to make moral choices and exercise stewardly responsibility over creation. Good Christian teachers recognise this when they encourage students to discover and nurture all of their giftedness in responsibly creative ways which in themselves speak of the wonder and glory of God. It is not just the natural world of mountains, trees and streams in the old hymn *How Great Thou Art* that declare God's glory. The teacher-led shaping in school by young image-bearers of their God-given creative capacities such as the construction by a child of a table in a woodwork project or a well-constructed essay in a history class or the description of repeatable formulae in math or physics, or a sensitively executed piano piece also all redound to God's glory as these young image bearers reflect their Creator in their cultural constructs. This same concept was at least implicit in the comment by the Christian Olympian Eric Liddell, as portrayed in the movie *Chariots of Fire* when he claimed that God took pleasure in Liddell's exercise of his athletic prowess.

2. The devastating impact of sin across the whole of creation

To say that humanity was created good is not to assert that humankind stayed that way. The scriptures declare that Adam and Eve used their God-imagined freedom and dominion to disobey God and set in train a continuous and disastrous pattern of human rebellion which continues in unbroken line (except for Jesus) from Adam to the 21st century. Since the Fall in the garden of Eden, human life has been characterised by a tempestuous rebellion against God. This has impacted all of creation which groans under God's judgement and longs for restoration. We live in the light of this unbearable tension daily in every aspect of creation—marriages break up, bodies decay, governments war, parents abort, power corrupts. In education, the Fall is evidenced when students bully the vulnerable, teachers advocate competition and individual advancement over interdependent community, and political leaders insist that job-related subjects are the most important ones to teach so that economic rationalism, with its insatiable appetite for human sacrifice (Brian Walsh, personal communication, January 2002), dominates educational planning.

However, though sin distorts, it does not eradicate the stamp of God's character and goodness in creation. God did not intend for his initially good creation to be consigned to the scrap heap. The opportunity to reach out for restoration was on the way!

3. Christ's comprehensive restoration of all creation.

The gospel truly is good news. God has said "Yes" to his world and "No" to sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For further discussion of this point, see *The Cross and Our Calling* (Redeemer University College, 2003 pp. 1-3). God is reclaiming all things – trees, rocks, elephants, kangaroos, kiwis, governmental structures, music, art, literature, sports, history, economics, space and aviation, technology, the imagination, and education; and he calls and empowers his people to be transformational witnesses to this gospel in the twenty-first century in all these things. Because of this gospel, with Christ at its center, reformational Christians in their everyday lives as God's ambassadors, live this worldview in hope, calling to all people everywhere to repent and live lives of obedient service to and worship of their Creator. All other options ultimately lead to despair, cynicism, and death.

The glory of Christian education is that it explores the meaning of this restoration. As children in faithful Christian schools learn about the world and their places and tasks in it, they should be led to discover the glorious hope of the Christian for lives of fulfilled service now and for eternity as they are challenged with the celebration of the lordship of Christ over everything. Consider a few examples of what this worldview position may mean in the life of a Christian school.

- The scientific method will be shown to be an appropriate but faith-committed tool for investigating aspects of God's world, but it will not be enthroned in the Christian school as the source of all truth.
- In social studies, the family will not be shown as an outmoded, social engineering experiment created by lawmakers, but as a divine construct with specific God-given form and authority in all cultures and times.
- How well children use their abilities, rather than the mere norm-referenced achievement gained by

individuals through the use of their gifts, will be used as a suitable measure of satisfactory progress in school report cards.

- Ecological concern will become important in a Christian school and although a concern for unborn generations will be one motivating force for conservation, the prime motivator will emanate from the desire to be obedient stewards before God in our exercise of dominion over his creation.
- Discipline and pastoral care will be exercised complementarily in the Christian school—not for the primary purpose of punishment, retribution or behavioural change, but as a loving way of seeking a heart change that embodies justice, grace, restoration, and a closer conformity to the image of Christ.
- The Christian school will encapsulate its studies in a frank, honest exploration of 21st century culture from the perspective of a profound and believable hope in a contemporary culture of cynicism. Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen and Heemst capture this thought this way (2007, p.16):

Many of the spectacular forces of Western progress today—unprecedented marvels of human achievement such as contemporary market forces, technological development, scientific progress, the state, and power unleashed—have become elevated to a status not unlike the position of privilege occupied by the stunning stone idols on Easter Island. Most basically, against this backdrop we seek to help build the capacity of all of us, from all walks of life, to participate in implementing actual solutions. But we do so inspired by a deep hope, for it is our unwavering, enduring conviction that there is real hope for our troubled, mired world—genuinely concrete hope that deeply engages global poverty, environmental destruction and widespread violence.

Alternative Worldview Descriptions

Many readers will note the pattern of Creation-Fall-Redemption that underlies the three-fold description of a Christian worldview used in this article. Several authors such as Graham (2003), Fennema (2005), Greene (1998) and others have usefully expanded this motif in an educational setting beyond the few examples given above. Great value can also be gained by considering in an educational context the multi-act play motif for a Christian worldview used by scholars such as N. T. Wright (1992), Bartholomew and Goheen (forthcoming,

2008) and Rod Thompson (2005) in giving a fuller understanding of a biblically shaped worldview.

Taking Action

As has been noted, understanding and knowing a biblical worldview and its directive force for Christian education must be evidenced in action. Consider the following possibilities.

- At a staff meeting, divide the teachers into groups of three or four. Give each group a piece of paper and tell them to design an imaginary classroom for 26 13 year old children studying geography. After providing each group with an opportunity to explain their pattern of resources, desk layout etc, then ask them what worldview assumptions about teaching and learning and the nature of the child are displayed in their chosen design.
- Get together with a group of colleagues and watch the movie *Dead Poets Society*. First, identify and critique the worldviews evident in the conflicts in the movie and which result in a severe clash of teaching styles and values. Second, discuss how, from a worldview that is biblically authentic, Christian educators could handle the educational situations depicted in the film. One could then apply the issues raised in discussion about the movie to one's own school setting.
- It has been said that if you wish to learn what a school really believes to be important and what its real goals are for education, don't read the mission statement or values document (which only show you the official goals and objectives). Instead, study how schools inform parents of students' progress in student report cards. This study will to elucidate what schools really believe to be important and to determine schools' actual or operational goals and worldview. In this context, collect and make anonymous (obliterate names etc) the report cards of two or three Christian schools. From the report cards, work backwards and try and deduce the key vision perspectives and goals of these schools. Then compare what the report cards reveal about what these schools value with what is said in the same schools' vision statements. Next, conduct the same activity for your own school.
- Finally, we need to grasp hold of teacher training with a new urgency and worldview-directed commitment. Many teachers in Christian schools (and Christian teachers in public systems as well), like the Christian parents they seek to serve, have

not been trained or equipped to view education from a biblically authentic worldview perspective. Because there is no neutrality in education, if Christian educators are not reflecting a God-honouring worldview in their understanding of their subject areas, in their pedagogy, and in their school structures, then they will be reflecting and nurturing children in an idolatrous worldview. It therefore behoves Christian school communities to give the very highest priority to dynamic and sustained professional development activities that retrain and nurture teachers in education from a Christian worldview perspective. Only then will Christian education have the capacity to achieve the God-honouring goals and life outcomes in children that Christian school stakeholders desire and about which God can take pleasure and say “Well done good and faithful servant.”

Conclusion

Discussion of the concept of worldview and its relation to education may seem by some classroom practitioners to be somewhat esoteric and ivory tower. Nothing could be further from the truth. Because worldview determines both how we think and teach, and what we think and teach, its examination is central to developing God-honouring education for Christian educators in every educational context. In particular, for the Christian school setting, Doug Blomberg (2005) sums it up well, and gives worldview an appropriately elevated place, when he concludes that “[Christian] schools must distinguish themselves...by articulating a solid worldview orientation that transcends a commitment to academic excellence in its adherence to a way of life” (p. 4).

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