

Escaping Margaret's World: The Importance of Worldview for the University

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In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and his fellow authors tell the story of Margaret Oldham, a therapist in her early 30s. A woman with an outstanding academic record and professional success, she sums up her sense of the meaning of life like this:

“I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don’t think about it a whole lot,” she says. “I tend to operate on the assumption that what I want to do and what I feel like is what I should do. What I think the universe wants from me is to take my values, whatever they might happen to be, and live up to them as much as I can.”

Hear this well. “I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don’t think about it a whole lot.” Remember, Margaret is a well-educated therapist with graduate degrees in psychology. Unfortunately, her sentiment is common in pragmatic North America among the educated and uneducated alike. Even more sadly, it is also common among Christians.

If the biblical story tells us the truth about the way the world is (and I believe it does), then this position is dangerous and downright irresponsible. Margaret holds certain assumptions about the world, including the nature and purpose of human life. Almost certainly she has adopted the default beliefs of our culture—humanist beliefs that she began to imbibe from her birth and theoretically deepened in her graduate education.

At least to some degree, these beliefs have distorted and twisted the way the world is because they do not tell the truth about what it means to be human. And this understanding of what it means to be human—her anthropology—will shape the counsel she dispenses from start to finish.

If she fundamentally misunderstands what it means to be human, her therapy may be unhelpful or even dangerous. I worked for three years in a psych hospital while going to seminary and saw first hand the damage a humanist view of the person can do in therapy.

Human situation

Margaret's situation illustrates the position we all find ourselves in. We live as part of a community that has been shaped by an idolatrous story that has given direction and form to every part of culture.

According to the biblical story, wisdom is a matter of serving the Lord God and conforming ourselves to the design and order of his good creation. Foolishness is serving an idol or idols that corrupt our life in God's world. Walking in the way of the Lord brings abundant life whereas serving idols brings death and destruction.

And so the service of our cultural idols is a dangerous path. To follow Margaret, and "just sort of accept the way the world is" is simply perilous.

Margaret's acceptance of the world means also that she doesn't want to think about it a whole lot either. By contrast, Lesslie Newbigin sees an urgent need for clear thinking about the way the world works. It is one important way of equipping us for faithful living in God's world.

"The most urgent missionary task for the next few decades is the mission to modernity," he writes. This mission "calls for the use of sharp intellectual tools to probe behind the unquestioned assumptions of modernity and uncover the hidden credo which supports them."

"Credo" is the Latin word for "I believe," and is the root of our word creed. A credo is our deepest religious beliefs about the world. Newbigin calls us to investigate the credo, the religious beliefs, of Western culture. Further, he believes they are hidden and must be uncovered. Even though they exert a powerful influence in shaping the way we think and act, they are simply assumed—taken for granted rather than adopted intentionally.

Newbigin issues his passionate and clarion call to probe our cultural credo in the larger context of his call for a "missionary encounter" with Western culture. A missionary encounter is about a clash of ultimate and comprehensive stories—the biblical story and the cultural story. It requires a church that believes the gospel and is committed to shaping its entire life by the biblical story.

When this happens, the foundational religious beliefs shared by the cultural community are challenged. As the church lives fully in the biblical story in the entirety of its life, it encounters the reigning idolatrous assumptions that shape its culture. The church offers the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its contemporaries. It issues a call for a radical conversion, an invitation to

turn from the idolatrous beliefs of its cultural story and to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel.

The role of the university

Newbigin recognises that if the church is going to be faithful in its calling, it needs “sharp intellectual tools” to examine the religious credo of its culture. Surely here is the proper context for university education—the bigger mission of the church to embody the gospel in all areas of life.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is one thinker who places Christian university education as an important element in the mission of the church. He suggests the American church has accommodated itself to American civil religion. Instead of an encounter with culture, the church has accommodated itself to the religious beliefs of its context.

In contrast he calls for “a new vision” of Christian higher education that is “religiously alternative education”—a calling to serve the Christian community in its mission. “The Christian community exists not for its own sake but for the sake of all people,” he says.

Thus, “the mission of the Christian college is determined, at bottom, by the fact that it is a project of and for the Christian community.” And if the Christian community is to share in God’s work of renewal in the modern world, its young members will need an education pointed toward equipping them to contribute to that calling.”

This is the religiously alternative education Wolterstorff calls for. If he is correct, and I believe he is, then the role of worldview studies will be essential for the Christian university.

A Christian university is called to transmit to its students the insight needed to equip them for service in God’s world. Christian scholarship may not neglect the foundational religious beliefs that are diminishing human life. Worldview studies can play an important role in helping to dig down to the credo that is foundational for human life.

Michael W. Goheen is Geneva Professor of Worldview Studies at TWU. His new book co-authored with Craig Bartholomew ‘Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview’ has just been published by Baker Publishing. This article is adapted from a closing keynote address he gave at the conference ‘Mission, Worldview, and the Christian University’ at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, ON on 10 January 2009.