

The European Worldview and Education

Education Conference in Tivadarfalvai Ukraine

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Ancaster, Ontario, Canada

13 July 2002

This conference is about working out Romans 12:1, 2 in the educational arena of life. There Paul says: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. When Paul speaks of *this world* he refers to the idolatrously twisted patterns of Roman culture. The Roman Christians were not to conform their lives to the idolatry of Roman culture. Rather the Roman church was to *be transformed by the renewing of [their] minds.* That is, their lives instead were to be shaped by Word of God as it renewed their minds.

We can restate Paul's words for the educational context like this: *Do not conform your educational practices to the patterns of your idolatrously twisted culture. Let your educational institutions be renewed and transformed by the Word of God.*

How can we heed Paul's command? One way of going about this task is by way of the concept of worldview. That is, stating Paul's words differently: *Do not conform to the worldview of your culture. Rather let your Christian schools be shaped by a Biblical worldview.*

In fact, all aspects of education will be shaped by some worldview. The purpose of education, pedagogy, curriculum, institutional structures, leadership, the various disciplines will be shaped either by the Biblical worldview or the worldview that dominates our culture.

In this first talk we will do two things. First, we will investigate the notion of a worldview. Second, we will examine the worldview that shapes Europe (both Western and Eastern) and North America, and has had a profound shaping effect on education.

What is a Worldview?

Consider the following story. In a classroom in an African Christian school, the children had always been used to sharing. The communal worldview of the African nations shaped the classroom in such a way that children shared pencils, erasers, rulers, etc. Then an American teacher came to the classroom. She began to scold the children for *stealing* other's pencils and rulers. This pencil belongs to this child and you are not to steal it. Naturally, the children were confused. Why the difference? It is because of two different worldviews at work—*one among the African children another in the American teacher.* We see the various differences in many ways but they are the fruit of a deeper difference in worldview. What is a worldview?

I will give a definition of worldview and then unpack the various elements of this definition.

A worldview is a framework of communally held religious beliefs, usually in the form of a story, that guide and direct every aspect of our societal and individual

lives by answering life's most basic and foundational questions.

Let us look at the various elements of this definition.

\$ A worldview has to do with our most *basic beliefs*. We all have many beliefs, some trivial and some important. I believe the grass is green, that I am Canadian, and that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet all of these beliefs are not equally important. Worldviews are made up of our most basic, most foundational, and most comprehensive beliefs. These are those beliefs through which we understand everything else. The metaphor of light is good here. Light is that in which we view everything else.

\$ These beliefs hold together in some kind of *framework*. In European culture, because of the influence of the Bible especially through Augustine, this framework has always been a *story*. A story has a beginning and an end. It is held together by a common theme and a narrative structure. We always recognize a story as we hear various events unfold in terms of some kind of plot in which a tension finds resolution. Since God has made our world to be historical, this world needs to be understood in terms of a story. That is, what is the beginning of world, where is the world going, what is the meaning of history? Put in terms of illustration. What is the meaning of the following event? A fox compliments a crow saying it has a lovely voice; would the crow be so kind as to sing a song. This event can only be understood in terms of the whole story. If the fox is a tone-deaf choir director putting together a forest choir this event has one meaning. If the fox is trying to get the cheese in the crow's mouth it has another. This little illustration has been expressed in a more sophisticated way by two important scholars of international significance. Lesslie Newbigin says: Alasdair McIntyre says:

\$ These beliefs are *religious*. Worldviews are not simply theoretical beliefs. Rather they are rooted in the religious nature of humankind. Human beings are created in the image of God. They are created to live in response to God. When human beings rebelled their religious nature did not change. What changed is where they placed their faith and trust. Now instead of trusting God for the meaning and significance of their lives, their faith now is directed towards some aspect of creation. When some part of creation takes the place of God, it is an idol. That is why all worldviews that are not rooted in Jesus Christ are rooted in idolatry. This is why it is important to understand the worldviews that shape our culture; they are rooted in idolatry.

\$ These beliefs are *comprehensive*, that is, every aspect of our individual and societal lives are shaped and directed by these basic beliefs. Individually, these basic beliefs shape our emotional responses, our thinking, our cultural participation, our relationships, and so on. Societally, every part of our cultural and societal life including our political structures, our economic system, our

practice of education, and so on are all shaped by these beliefs.

- \$ These beliefs are *communally-held*. Worldviews are not the fruit of individual insight. It is not as if each person has their own private worldview. Worldviews are held in common by communities. Human beings are created to live in community and share the entire lives together. Not only do we share a language, economic system, and various customs together, for example, we also share our most basic beliefs. That is why it is necessary to examine the most basic beliefs of our culture that we share together.
- \$ These beliefs are *universal*. This means that every person has a worldview and their lives are directed by them. That does not mean that every person is aware of their worldview or even that they have one. Many people are simply unaware of this. They are unaware of the fact that they have a worldview. They are unaware of what basic belief are shaping their lives. We must distinguish between *having* a worldview and *articulating* a worldview. All people have a worldview; but it takes a degree of self-consciousness to stop, reflect, and examine what those basic beliefs are.
- \$ These belief *answer the most basic and foundational questions of human existence*. There are certain questions about human life that have always been around. These questions are not simply philosophical questions for educated people. In fact, some answer to these questions shape our lives. Often these answers that direct our lives are assumed, adopted from our culture, and simply assumed. These questions are: 1) Who am I? What does it mean to be human? What is the meaning of human existence? 2) Where am I? What kind of world do I live in? Where did it come from? Where is it going? What is the meaning of history? 3) What is wrong? What is the source of all the problems and pain in the world? 4) What is the remedy? What is the solution to the problems of the world? How can this be achieved? 5) What time is it? What is the story that is shaping the world? Where are we at in that story?
- \$ Since worldviews are comprehensive and communally held, when there is more than one worldview, there will be a *clash*. Two worldviews cannot co-exist in any one culture because they both demand the whole of one's life. In North America a good example was the clash between the Native-American worldview and that of the invading Europeans. These worldviews viewed every aspect of the world differently and there was an inevitable encounter wherein the European worldview prevailed. This has significance for the Christian. If the Christian community is faithful there will be an encounter and clash between the Christian community and its culture. The dominant cultural worldview will always attempt to squeeze other ways of understanding the world into its mould. Christians cannot allow this. We will either serve Christ or idols in all our lives including our educational practices. Jesus' words are appropriate here: No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the

other. You cannot serve both God and _____=(Matthew 6:24).

There are some metaphors we can use to show how worldviews function.

- \$ Worldviews function like *spectacles*. Spectacles enable us to see the world properly. We often are not aware that we have our spectacles on. We don't look at the spectacles, we look *through* them. Yet they enable us to properly see the world. We can also think of, say, yellow lenses which cause us to see everything as coloured by yellow. Worldviews are like this. We look at and understand the world through the spectacles of our worldview. Sometimes we are unaware we are looking at the world through them. Nevertheless we will see the world through them. A certain experience I had impressed this on me. I was driving along with an African bishop in Canada. He looked at a building of high rise apartments and commented "What a stupid way to live." I realized that when we looked at apartment buildings we actually *saw* two different things. We interpreted what we saw in different ways. Because of the more communal nature of the African worldview he saw apartments as a stupid way to live. Because of the influence of individualism and efficiency on my North American worldview I saw a good way for people to have their own place to live and thus judged them more positively.
- \$ Worldviews function like *foundations*. All buildings have foundations. These foundations do at least two things. They provide stability and they give shape to the building. Foundations are below the level of the ground and yet they have this important function. Worldviews are like that. They provide the stability for our lives. In former communist countries, when the Communist worldview was overturned there was a sense of anxiety. The worldview that had provided stability for decades had collapsed. What would now replace it? Worldviews, like foundations, also give shape to our lives. Worldviews are below the surface level and yet function to give this stability and shape to our lives. Here is an illustration of how the Japanese and Canadian worldviews shape something as simple as child bathing differently. Japanese and Canadian mothers will bathe their children very differently. Canadian mothers set up the child's own bathtub, put the child in with their own toys, and begin to wash them from outside. Japanese mothers will take the child close to their breast and take them into the bath with them. The first comes from a worldview which sees even the baby as a distinct individual; the second comes from a worldview which sees the child as part of the family.
- \$ Worldviews function like *compasses* and *maps*. A compass provides us with the direction to take. A map gives us the lay of the land and provides direction for where we want to go. Worldviews are like that. They provide direction for us. They give us an interpretation of the world and provide direction for where we want to go. In terms of the earlier illustration, my worldview will guide me to see policies implemented that would have more apartment buildings constructed so many have can have homes. My African friend would strive to find new ways of housing that would allow the communal dimension of human life to express itself.

Our worldviews cause us not only see the world differently and evaluate it differently, these beliefs also guide and direct our actions.

European Worldview

The worldview that shapes the educational endeavours in most parts of the world is the worldview that has its origins in Europe. The beliefs of this worldview are so common to us that sometimes we don't question them. Yet as Christians we have to realize they are idolatrous. We need to get some critical distance to be able to assess and evaluate them.

- \$ The European worldview is rooted in a certain understanding of the human being. There are two aspects of this understanding that are important. First, the human being is *autonomous*. Autonomous comes from two Greek words *auto*=self and *nomos*=law; thus self-law. To be autonomous means there is no law or standard beyond human beings that hold ultimate authority. Human beings are the ultimate standard for right and wrong, good and bad, worthwhile or not, and so on. Human beings define the meaning of their lives (creation) and are also the source of solving the world's problems (salvation). We see the first expression of this autonomy at the Renaissance when people began to resent the totalitarian authority of the church and sought to remove themselves from its rule. Unfortunately, in the process, the attempt was to also get out from under the authority of God and His word. We find here the seeds a later full-blown autonomy where human beings will deny God's authority in their lives. The second thing about human beings is that they are *rational*. It is the analytical and rational capacity of human beings that will allow them to achieve their autonomy. It is by reason that they can define the meaning of the world and figure out how to solve its problems. The worldview that combines these two aspects has often been called *rationalistic humanism*. Humanism expresses commitment to human autonomy; rationalistic expresses the fact that reason is the way human autonomy is realized.
- \$ Reason was equipped to carry out its task during the time of the scientific revolution. During this time the scientific method was fashioned that would enable human beings to effectively use their reason to express their autonomy. The European worldview has often been called the *modern scientific worldview* because of the central role science plays. We also might say that the impact of the scientific revolution was such that rationalistic humanism now could be reexpressed as *scientific humanism*. Science was the way of liberation for humanity.
- \$ Science was not simply theoretical. That is, science does not play its central role in this worldview simply because it gives theoretical insight into the world. Rather it is the application of scientific insight that makes science so important. Science is applied in two ways. First, science is applied to the non-human creation in

technology. This happened during the Industrial Revolution. Science and technology joined forces to give human beings remarkable power over the world. Second, science is applied to human science in the *rational organization of society*. The social sciences began in earnest around the Enlightenment. The assumption was that if physics had been successful in determining the scientific laws of the physical world, perhaps the same method would enable human beings to determine economic, political, educational, and social laws. If we could determine those laws and shape society according to them we would bring about a world of peace, justice, and harmony. The French revolution expressed it in terms of the threefold *égalité, liberté, and fraternité*.

- \$ If human beings faithfully analyse the world rationally by way of the scientific method, and if they faithfully apply their insights in technological development and organize society rationally, then they will build a *better world*. Many different ideas have been held about what characterizes this better world. For example, freedom has been important in liberal cultures, equality important in communist regimes, happiness (*bonheur*) at the time of the French revolution, material prosperity in emerging consumer cultures, and so on.
- \$ Those who hold this worldview have been filled with an optimistic sense of *progress*. That is, if human beings continue to carry out their scientific and technological task they will inevitably progress toward this better world. Progress, the confidence that the world is improving and getting better under the sure guidance of science and technology, is one of the most deep rooted and characteristic beliefs of this worldview.
- \$ This worldview is *Eurocentric*. That is, it finds its origin in the history of European culture. It has spread to the European colonies (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc.). Today the USA is the most potent expression and exporter of this worldview. Under the guise of words like *democracy* and *freedom* this religious set of idolatrous beliefs is transported around the world in the process we now call *globalization*.

Modern Worldview and Former Communist Countries

This modern European worldview has expressed itself differently in various parts of the world. But perhaps one of the most important divergences to note is between liberal and communist countries. Growing up I was taught that capitalism and democracy in the West was diametrically opposed to the central economies and communist governments of the Soviet bloc countries. Only later did I discover that these two worldviews share almost all the same beliefs and find their origin in the same place.

The differences come from what took place in the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. By the 19th century all the elements of the worldview described above were firmly in place. The Industrial Revolution was an attempt to bring about societal changes that would enable society to conform to these modern beliefs. The Industrial Revolution seemed to confirm European

confidence. Those societies that industrialized became increasingly prosperous. However, all was not well. As Charles Dickens's novels and Karl Marx's descriptions tell us life was miserable for the large majority.

The problem was this: European belief was in progress by science and technology. Yet the misery of the vast majority of people in industrialized countries challenged that belief. The belief in progress had to either be abandoned or revised. It was not abandoned; rather it was revised and given expression in two forms, two ideologies. The first form was *liberalism*. Men like Malthus and Ricardo held a certain form of social darwinism. That is, there was indeed progress, society was getting better. However, like in the natural world of evolution there were necessary casualties. Progress came at a cost. Freedom must be maintained. The laws of economics and politics must be allowed to shape society in a better way. Survival of the fittest would lead to a new and better society. This concern for freedom (especially of the market) was given expression (in a softer modified form) in the 20th century by the USA, Canada, and Western Europe. The second ideology to protect the doctrine of progress by science and technology was *Marxism*. Karl Marx also argued that humankind was progressing by science and technology. However, for him this progress took place by way of revolution. The lower classes would continue to revolt and through a series of revolutions we would be led to a better world of equality. This ideology was embodied in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.

Both of these worldviews believed that human beings were autonomous and rational; both had supreme confidence in the power of science; both believed science needed to be applied to the non-human world in technology and to society in the rational organization of society. Both believed in progress toward a better world. However, they differed at two points. First, *how* society was to be scientifically and rationally ordered. *That* it was to be rationally organized was not in question; *how* made the difference. Communist countries believed a centrally based command economy and a communist political system were more rational than a capitalistic economy and democratic political system. Second, *what* this better world looked like differed. The French revolution had proclaimed *egalite, liberte, fraternite*. For liberal countries it was *liberte*, freedom that was most important. For communist countries it was *egalite* or equality. We might diagram how these two worldviews both shared the same basic beliefs and yet differed at certain points in the following way.

Postmodern Reaction

In the last few decades there has been a challenge to the modern worldview especially in North American and Western European countries. This has been called various things but perhaps the word *postmodern* has become the most common.

- \$ The postmodern reaction strikes at the deep commitment to progress in the modern worldview. Many no longer believe that we are advancing toward a better world through science, technology, and the rational organization of society. The communist version has shown its failure in dramatic ways. The liberal version, now the unchallenged expression of the powerful European, modern worldview, is also failing in dramatic ways. Postmodern dissidents argue that the modern worldview is destroying the world's resources, is producing a growing gap between rich and poor, is producing increasing military buildups, is causing

increasing social and psychological problems. It is not delivering on its promises to build a better world.

- \$ The postmodern reaction also challenges the view of humanity as rational. From a Christian standpoint, when aspects of creation are suppressed in favour on one part, it is like pushing down a tightly coiled spring. It will finally spring back. The modern worldview upheld reason but in the process suppressed human emotionality, imagination, passion, body, and more. Today each of these aspects of human functioning are given a new lease on life. The rational dimension is now often blamed for the problems in the world.

- \$ The postmodern reaction also challenges the ability of science to give us one certain truth. Increasingly the subjective factors that shape our knowledge have been highlighted. All human thinking is shaped by worldviews, cultures, religion, and many other factors. Therefore, there is not one truth established by science but many truths of various communities. Postmodern society celebrates pluralism and relativism.

- \$ One final aspect of this postmodern world should be mentioned. With the removal of communism from the global scene, liberalism has become the unchallenged power. (Perhaps Islam will prove to be its equal and more in the future but at the moment it does not have the military or technological power to challenge liberalism.) In the liberal countries of the world material prosperity and a consumer culture have been developing in the 20th century. The economic dimension of human life has dwarfed other aspects of human society. Consumerism now presses all of human life into its mould. It is primarily this consumer worldview that is now sweeping the world in globalization.

European Worldview and Christianity

What can be said about the Christian faith in this development? Christianity has, in fact, been a very important part of the development of European culture and worldview. We might describe the relationship between idolatrous humanism and the Christian faith in the following way. The humanistic worldview is a parasite on the Christian worldview. In many ways the humanist worldviews lives and flourishes by reshaping and twisting aspects of the Christian faith to suit its own purposes. The history of European culture shows both a competition and coalescence of the Christian and humanistic worldviews. We might say that the humanist worldview is a Christian heresy. A few examples would help to clarify this.

- \$ It is the Biblical worldview that understands the world in terms of a story. That is, the world is made to develop toward a goal. There is meaning to history as it moves toward that final goal. The only worldviews today that are in the form of a story are those that have been influenced by the Bible (Christianity, Islam, and Humanism). All other worldviews are static. The whole humanistic worldview is in the form of a story. We are moving toward the goal of a world built by

autonomous human beings through science and technology. Progress and meaning in history are aspects of the Biblical story. In the Bible the goal of history is the kingdom of God. But it does not come through the autonomous efforts of human beings but through the mighty acts of God who rules history. Humanism takes the structure of a goal in history and meaning defined by that goal from the Bible.

§ The "better society" of humanism is a twisted version of the kingdom of God. The various aspects of humanistic kingdom of man find their source in the Bible. Throughout European history we see at various points truth, justice, freedom, equality, happiness, and peace as goals of humanistic endeavour. These things have been uprooted from their Biblical context and rewritten in a humanist context. They are given new meaning. There is also an attempt to find a foundation for each of these in human reason.

European Worldview and Education

Our worldviews will shape the whole educational enterprise. The modern worldview we have elaborated has shaped education. In fact, education plays an important role in this understanding of the world. It was during the Enlightenment that the modern worldview reached maturity. It was at that point that Europe was converted to this set of beliefs. This was also the time when education as we know it today was shaped. The goal of the Enlightenment was to apply reason to society to build a better world. Part of that would involve setting up schools where the sciences could be developed to achieve this end. The whole structure of the school, its purpose, pedagogy, and curriculum were shaped by this worldview. Its purpose was to train children to be part of a more rational society, pedagogy was based on the understanding that human beings were first and foremost rational creatures, the curriculum were the made up of disciplines that would help build the kind of world Enlightenment thinkers envisioned. It is important to take the time to reflect on how this idolatrous worldview has shaped education and then to reflect on how much Christian schools have been shaped by that worldview rather than a Biblical one.

Today the postmodern reaction is bringing new debates into the educational realm. Since postmodern folk now distrust progress, schools can't contribute to it. Rather the school is to train children with skills and information to enable them to participate in the global market. Child-centred classrooms now no longer treat children simply as rational individuals. New debates rage about what should be taught; it is asserted that the old curriculum is shaped by Eurocentric values and this is unacceptable in a pluralist world.

I suspect that postmodern educational theory is not too popular in the Ukraine. I suspect the main battle will be with the modern European worldview.

Let me close with a story that took place about a year ago. I was lecturing in a state university in Sevastopol, Ukraine to a large group of law students. The topic of my lecture was "Marxism, Capitalism, and Christianity: Three Ways to Shape the Public Life of Society." About a half hour into the lecture a student raised his hand and asked "Why have you come over here to give us Christian propaganda?" I responded: "I have come over here and seen the disastrous results of your belief that Marxism or Communism could provide the right beliefs to build society. Now I see in your capital of Kiev that capitalism is flooding in and is more and more shaping the public life of your society. It too will fail just like Communism. Both of these worldviews are built on

the sand of human effort. I believe that only a society (politics, economics, education, and more) built on the rock of the Biblical worldview will survive and flourish. In Daniel 2 Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a statue with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and feet of iron. A stone cut without hands rolled down a mountain and destroyed the statue. Daniel interpreted this dream. The statue was a symbol of various world powers. Each metal represented a different world empire. The stone cut without hands is the Kingdom of God. It destroyed all the other empires and grew to fill the earth. I believe that the kingdom of God will be the only kingdom that will stand the test of time. All others will fail. Christianity is not only a religion about what happens when we die. It gives us a comprehensive understanding of the world and shapes the public life of culture. I believe Christianity is the best foundation on which to build society. I ended, This is what I believe, what do you believe. I leave that question with you. I believe that the gospel is the best light in which to carry out education. Which light do you believe to be best?