

# Celebrating the Vision of Christian Education Understanding our Cultural Context

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**I**n 1643 the Puritans established Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. They articulated clearly their vision statement: *Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well the maine end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternall life, Jn. 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.*

But Harvard did not remain faithful to that vision. Today it would be hard to find another university that is more opposed to the Christian faith in the whole United States. Christian schools also articulate a vision statement that profess their commitment to Christian education. For example, Tyndale Christian School's vision statement reads: 'To see parents and children experience the benefits of a Bible-based, Christ-centred, parent controlled education in order that they might be prepared and equipped for a life of service as disciples of Jesus Christ.' How will Tyndale, how will any Christian school remain (and become increasingly) faithful to such a grand vision?

A good starting point is Romans 12:1, 2: *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.* Paul urges us to offer the whole of our bodily lives, including our educational endeavours, as living sacrifices to God. In the process we are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world. When Paul speaks of world in this way he is referring to the whole pattern of cultural idolatry that shaped the Roman world. To us the exhortation comes saying don't be conformed any longer to the idolatrous pattern of the western world that is shaping education. Rather we are to be transformed as the gospel renews our minds and our educational practices. In two successive articles in this journal I would like to open up this verse in terms of education (see Christian Teachers Journal, Vol 12. No1 February 2004).

## Our Vision for Education is Shaped by Some Story

Some story rooted in faith will shape the entirety of our lives, including our educational institutions. The only question is 'which one?' I start with an illustration. A fox compliments a crow: 'My you have a lovely voice; won't you sing me a song?' What is the meaning of this event? If you don't know the story you can imagine a number of different meanings. Perhaps the fox wants to eat the crow. Or maybe the fox is a Christian fox that has the gift of

encouragement and is intent on building up this poor crow. Maybe the fox is a tone deaf choir director establishing a choir in the forest. And so on. The meaning of the event depends on the story you tell. In this case none of these suggestions is correct. According to the Aesop's fable the crow sits perched high in a tree with a piece of meat in its mouth. There is a famine in the forest and all the animals in the forest want that meat. The fox compliments the crow. The foolish crow opens its mouth to sing and the meat falls out. The fox scoops it up and runs away. The moral of the story is 'don't be deceived by flatter.' The point of this little exercise is to point out that an event only takes meaning in light of the fuller story. A story has a beginning, an end, and a narrative or thematic unity that binds all the parts together.

Two important Christian thinkers put it this way:

*I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story do I find myself a part?' (Alasdair MacIntyre)*

*The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part? (Lesslie Newbigin)*

By story these men are talking about the meaning of history and the world. God created the world to be a dynamic and historical world. The world has a beginning in creation; it has a goal in the restoration of the creation in the kingdom of God; and its history has meaning according to God's directing rule. Christians believe that the Bible tells the true story – or as Newbigin puts it the real story – of the world. If it is not this story that gives meaning to our lives, including education, it will be another.

A few more things about these stories is important. These stories are religious, that is, they are rooted in faith. Human beings are made to serve God. If their faith is not anchored in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, it will be placed in something else. The Bible calls this an idol. Moreover, these stories are communal, that is, they are always shared together in a community. Finally, these stories are comprehensive, that is, they shape and guide the whole of our societal, cultural, and individual lives – whether we know it or not!

These stories function like spectacles that enable us to see or maps that show us the way in which we should go. They operate in our lives like compasses that provide us with direction or lights that illuminate our path. My favourite metaphor is that these stories function like the foundation of a building. Foundations give shape and stability to the building. So some overarching story will give shape and stability to our lives. Furthermore,

foundations are often unseen and we are unaware of the foundations that shape the building we live in. So with stories: we are often unaware of the foundations that are shaping our lives.

Which foundation, which story is shaping the Christian schools in Australia? Some story is indeed playing such a role. Some story will shape the entire educational enterprise including the purpose of education, the curriculum, the pedagogical methods used in the classroom, the way we evaluate children, school leadership, the way the classroom is set up, the structures that shape the school, as well as the content of all the various disciplines that are taught. *Some* story will shape these aspects, the only question is *which one?*

## The Modern Story and Education

If it is not the biblical story that is shaping education, it will be the reigning cultural story. Lesslie Newbigin suggests that understanding that story rooted in religious confession is one of the most important things that church can do today. He says:

*Incomparably the most urgent missionary task for the next few decades is the mission to 'modernity' ... It calls for the use of sharp intellectual tools, to probe behind the unquestioned assumptions of modernity and uncover the hidden credo which supports them...*

What is that story? The story that has shaped the western world for over 200 years is modernity. It is a story in which we are moving toward the goal of a better world through the achievements of autonomous humanity especially by the use of science and technology. The trouble is that modern story is collapsing into postmodernity; even though modernity continues to shape our societal institutions more and more western folk are having trouble believing this story anymore.

This story is rooted in what we might call a **rationalistic humanism**. This is the confidence, indeed the faith, that autonomous human beings are capable of solving the problems of the world and bringing about a new world of freedom, prosperity, justice, and truth with their own rational resources. Human beings are the source of their own redemption, as well as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, good and bad, true and false. And it is especially our rationality that can deliver the goods.

It works itself out in the following way. Our reason, disciplined by the scientific method, is capable of understanding and changing the world. Science enables us to do two things: control the non-human creation by

technology and rationally organise society – politics, economics, education, etc. If we faithfully follow this path we will progress by our own powers to build a better world of happiness, freedom, material prosperity, truth, and justice.

This rationalistic humanism is not something that has simply dropped out of the sky. It is the product of a long historical process. Often these glasses are simply plastered to our heads. We are enabled to take a look at those glasses by stepping back and looking at the historical process that produced them. Rationalistic humanism

has its roots in classical or pagan Greek culture when the pre-Socratic philosophers rejected religious myths and turned to autonomous reason to understand the world. This developing humanism was preserved for a thousand years during the medieval period in a synthesis with the Christian faith. It emerged at the time of the Renaissance (14th c), was salted by the gospel at the Reformation (15th c), and given a tremendous thrust forward in the Scientific Revolution (16th - 17th c).

Rationalistic humanism came to mature expression in the Enlightenment (18th c) and was given social embodiment in the social, industrial, and political revolutions of the next centuries. Yet this rationalistic humanism is under attack today and fighting for its life.

One way of seeing how powerful this story is to look at the way we tell our history and label its eras. There is an African proverb that says 'Until lions have their historians the hunter will always be the hero of the story'. What is the hero of the way we tell the Western story? Consider the following labels: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment. Who named these eras and why? A little sign did not pop up indicating that we were now entering such and such an era! These labels tell a story. Something was born again during the 14th century Renaissance. That same something developed until 350 years later it became the light of the world. This hero was suppressed so that a thousand year time period could be called 'middle', a time between two much more important time periods. Of course, the hero is rationalistic humanism. It emerged in the 'classical' period, was suppressed by the church culture of the 'mediaeval' period, and re-emerged, was born again in Northern Italy during the Renaissance. It developed until it finally became the light of the world at the Enlightenment.

In keeping with Newbigin's call to uncover the hidden credo or confession of faith of our culture, we might express this faith commitment in

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the form of a creed. I have fashioned it on the form of the Apostles' Creed to make us more vividly aware of its religious nature.

***I believe in Man. I believe in the ability of man apart from God to solve the problems of our world and build a better one.***

***I believe in Science Almighty. I believe in the power of human reason disciplined by the scientific method to understand, control, and change our world.***

***I believe in Technology and a Rational Society, its only begotten sons which have the power to redeem our world.***

***I believe in the spirit of Progress. I believe that a science based technology and a rationally organised society will enable me to realise my ultimate human goal – freedom, happiness, justice, and the comforts of material abundance. To this I commit myself with all my resources, time, and money. Amen.***

What is the place of education in this confessional story? Education as we know it today developed much of its form during the Enlightenment. The goal was to pass on a unified body of universal scientific knowledge to equip a world of rational citizens. This would enable humanity to build a more rational world leading to freedom, justice, truth, and material prosperity. Much of the school as we know it is a product of the idolatrous spirit of rationalistic humanism. It was one of the tools that would enable humanity to realise their dream of building the kingdom of man.

## **The Postmodern Challenge and Education**

This modern worldview is failing today. While understanding what is being called 'postmodernity' is difficult we can point to three areas that are important for education. The first is our changing attitude toward the modern story of progress. While modern humanity was confident that they were building a better world through science and technology, today we are not so sure. Many counter developments seem to speak powerfully against such a faith. The primary developments are environmental destruction, growing poverty, the nuclear threat, economic problems, psychological disturbances, and social disorders, all – so it is believed by postmodern man – to be caused by the modern world we have built with science and technology. So confidence has given way to scepticism. Jean-Francois Lyotard has given us the most famous definition of postmodernity: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.' Metanarratives are big stories of progress, whether they be

the liberal, democratic, capitalist story that has shaped the western world or the communist story that has shaped Russia and its satellites. Lyotard is saying that we simply don't believe these stories any more.

This uncertainty has been expressed by many scholars but perhaps when we hear it from the voice of a Christian school student it becomes more alive. Here is how one student expressed it several years ago:

***Generation X is our title. It's what I am. It's how I feel. We're a generation of people who will soon inherit a planet that our forefathers (and mothers) have trashed into uselessness. Our world, or at least the human race, probably won't survive until the year 2100, because our parents wanted more, they wanted it faster, and they wanted it better.***

A second aspect of the postmodern situation is the changing mood in knowledge. Increasing numbers of people do not believe that scientific knowledge is universally valid. Numerous subjective factors shape our knowledge and this can only mean that our knowledge is culturally relative. Moreover while we used to believe that scientific knowledge was liberating, that is, it would liberate humanity

from bondage, we increasingly believe that this same scientific knowledge is oppressive. Furthermore, it is hard to believe that scientific knowledge is true; it may be useful but not true. Finally, scientific knowledge is no longer a unified body of knowledge. It has become increasingly fragmented.

A final aspect of postmodernity is its growing economism or consumerism. If there is no story to give meaning to life then what is the purpose of it all? Many have simply turned to a pursuit of consumer goods and experiences to fill the void. The growing dominance of the market and global capitalism have fed this consumerism.

We might express this in a postmodern confession of faith:

***I don't believe there is one story of the world that is true for everyone. I don't believe science gives us the truth. I believe that all 'truth' is relative to the culture and time period. I believe there are many stories none of which are true for everyone. I believe in tolerance in which no one may make an imperialistic claim for truth.***

***I don't believe there is one story that gives meaning to the world. I believe that consumption will give meaning to my life. I believe that the abundance of consumer goods and experiences, and the leisure time to consume***

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them will make me happy. To this end I commit myself with all my money, time, energy, and resources. Amen.

It is obvious that these three changes are going to reshape education. If (in modernity) education was guided by the story of progress toward a better society by science and technology but we no longer believe that story then what is the purpose of education? If (in modernity) education was to pass along a unified body of universal knowledge that was true and liberating, yet today we more and more question that such a thing exists, what should we be teaching – and why?

This has been put well by Brian Walsh. Quoting Ussher and Edwards he says:

*Historically, education can be seen as a vehicle by which modernity's 'grand narratives', the Enlightenment's ideals of critical reason, individual freedom, progress and benevolent change, are substantiated and realised (Ussher and Edwards). Take away this story of civilisational progress and modern mass education loses a central dimension of its raison d'être.*

So what is the purpose of education in a postmodern world? Neil Postman in his book *The End of Education* ruefully suggests the ruling trinity in education today is economic utility, consumerism, and technology. That is, the end goal of education is to produce a student who has knowledge and skills that have economic utility and enable him or her to function in a consumer world. Put another way, the school is the vendor of useful information and marketable skills that enables the student to compete or survive in the jungle of the market. After all, the market rules – or as Margaret Thatcher once put it 'you can't buck the market'. It has become an idolatrous power and education must submit to it. Our education must serve this god.

How much of the Christian school is shaped by this story? How much of our pedagogy and curriculum is still shaped by the modern story? Why are we educating our children – or better, why do parents want their children educated in our Christian schools? Is it to give them the knowledge and skills to get a better job and be 'successful', defined, of course, by our cultural story? How much do our Christian schools differ from the public schools that embody the humanist cultural story?

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## Worldview: A Short Annotated Bibliography

Bartholomew, Craig and Michael Goheen, 2004. **The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story.** Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

*In this book, to be released in November 2004, we tell the story of the Bible from creation to consummation. It is written in a lively storied way and emphasises the comprehensive scope of salvation and has a chapter on our place in the biblical story. It is meant to be a telling of the biblical story for worldview purposes.*

Carrell, Brian. 1998. **Moving Between the Times. Modernity and Postmodernity: A Christian View.** Auckland, New Zealand: DeepSight Trust.

*A fine, well-written and quite simple introduction to modernity and postmodernity as a culturally formative worldview. He refers to numerous sources and includes a good bibliography.*

Chaplin, Jon et. al. 1986. **An Introduction to a Christian Worldview.** Open Christian College: England. 196 pages.

*This is a simple, very clearly written introduction to a Christian worldview. It was written to guide university students through a world view course in a "distance-learning model" or correspondence model. It is meant to be used along with two textbooks (Walsh and Middleton, *Transforming Vision* and Wolters, *Creation Regained*—both listed below) but it can stand by itself. It covers six areas: the nature of a worldview; the biblical worldview: creation; the biblical worldview: fall and redemption; the problem of dualism: a Christian failure; the modern secular worldview; living out the biblical worldview today.*

Christian Reformed Church. 1988. **Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony.** Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications. 22 pages.

*This is a delightful little confession of faith. It is shaped by an understanding of Scripture as one unfolding story of redemption and it addresses the problem of a secular western society. It is doxological and confessional in form. We use it heavily in family worship. There is a study version as well that discusses in brief form many current issues, e.g. Feminism, Evolutionism, Money, Abortion and Euthanasia, Distortions of Sexuality, etc.*

Also on internet: [www.crcna.org/crbe/crbe\\_ourworld.htm](http://www.crcna.org/crbe/crbe_ourworld.htm)

Goheen, Michael. 2001. Charting a Faithful Course Amidst Postmodern Winds, in *Living in the LambLight: Christianity and Contemporary Challenges to the Gospel*, ed. Hans Boersma. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing. 17-31.

*In this short essay, given first as a lecture in the LambLight lecture series at Trinity Western University, I interpret postmodernity as God's judgement on western idolatry.*

Speech version on internet: [www.genevasociety.org/goheen.html](http://www.genevasociety.org/goheen.html)

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1978. **Christ and Cultures**, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 31, 1-22.

An excellent paper dealing with the problem of gospel and culture from a missiological perspective.

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1999. **A Walk Through the Bible**. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.

This is a brief (85 short pages!) walk through the story of the Bible. They were originally eight radio addresses given on the BBC.

Sampson, Philip. 1994. The Rise of Postmodernity, in **Faith and Modernity**, eds. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden. Oxford: Regnum Lynx Books.

This is an excellent introductory article to the rise and nature of postmodernity. Thankfully it is free of jargon.

Tarnas, Richard. 1991. **The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View**. New York: Ballantine Books. 514 pages!

Tarnas is not a Christian as far as I know. However, his telling of the development of the western world view from the Greek world view to the postmodern mind is brilliant. It is both profound and yet written in the form of a story.

Walsh, Brian and Richard Middleton. 1984. **The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View**. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press.

This is an outstanding introductory book to a Christian world view. The pattern is very similar to Chaplin above. After answering the question of what is a world view they proceed to discuss a biblical worldview, the modern worldview, and the biblical world view in action. In the section on world view in action they discuss the gospel and culture, worldview and scholarship, and a Christian philosophical framework. This is one of the two standard texts for a Christian world view –Walters being the other one.

Walsh, Brian and Richard Middleton. 1995. **Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age**. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press. 220 pages.

This book began as an update of their former book in which they only dealt with the modern worldview. However, the radical shift from modernity to postmodernity did not allow them to update that book. This whole new book is the result. The book is made up of two sections. In the first they describe the postmodern worldview. This is the best introductory description of postmodernity I have seen. In the second part they offer a biblical response to postmodernity. The level is much more difficult than their first book.

Walters, Albert. 1985. **Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 98 pages.

This is the best book I know of that articulates a biblical worldview. It is short (98 pp.) and dense, but it is clearly written. It is more difficult than Walsh and Middleton but introduces more important distinctions within a biblical worldview. Walters analyzes creation, fall, and redemption as the most basic categories for a Christian worldview. He introduces the very important distinction between (creational) structure and (sinful or redemptive) direction. Unfortunately Walters does not discuss western culture. There is a plan to revise this book and place it in a more narrative context (Forthcoming 2005).

Goheen, Michael. 2004. The Gospel and the Idolatrous Power of Secular Science, in **Pointing the Way: Directions for Christian Schooling in a New Millennium**, eds. Jill Ireland, Richard Edlin, and Ken Dickens, Sydney, Australia: National Institute for Christian Education, 33-54.

This article exposes the myth of secular scholarship by surveying its historical development from Aquinas to postmodernity in the light of Scripture. A missionary encounter between secular scholarship and the gospel, described as 'subversion', is offered as a faithful way forward, with some brief implications for the Christian school teacher.

Goudzwaard, Bob. 1979. **Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 270 pages.

This is a profound analysis of western culture. He argues that the crisis of western culture is due to the fact that the idol of progress shapes capitalist society. Western culture has relied on economic growth and scientific advance to build a better world but it is failing. Goudzwaard offers an analysis and solution. (He has other, and easier, excellent books analysing the religious foundations of western culture.)

Greidanus, Sidney. 1982. **The Use of the Bible in Christian Scholarship**. *Christian Scholar's Review*, 11,2. 10 pages.

This brief paper addresses the problem of the use of the Bible in Christian scholarship. His concern is to steer a path between the twin problems of biblicism and dualism.

Also on internet: [www.cccu.org/resourcecenter/resID.952,parentCatID.152/rc\\_detail.asp](http://www.cccu.org/resourcecenter/resID.952,parentCatID.152/rc_detail.asp)

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1989. **The Gospel in a Pluralist Society**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 244 pages.

This is Newbigin's most important work. In the first chapters he masterfully critiques the rationalistic epistemology that lies at the base of western culture and provides a Christian alternative. He then goes on to discuss various problems of mission in western culture. (Newbigin has a number of other books dealing with aspects of western culture.)

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1986. **Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 150 pages.

In this book Newbigin asks the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary (understood much more broadly than cross-cultural missions) encounter between the gospel and post-enlightenment western culture. After profiling western culture and describing biblical authority, he proceeds to a dialogue between the gospel and science, the gospel and politics. He ends by asking what the believing community must be. Newbigin's profile of western culture in chapter two is masterful.