



CHRISTIAN HERITAGE COLLEGE

A Christian Worldview

Worldview: A Definition

The term “worldview” is defined in the *Concise Macquarie Dictionary* as “the philosophy of an individual or group, with an interpretation of world history or civilisation”.

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the term refers to a “philosophy of life” or “conception of the world”.

The term “worldview” is a translation of the German *Weltanschauung* which appears to have originated with Immanuel Kant. The term was popularised by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who drew attention to the process by which people perceive and make sense of the world around them. Dilthey saw people beginning with a pre-theoretical understanding which he called a *Weltbild* (i.e. world-picture), which in time gave rise to a more reflective and systematically formulated *Weltanschauung*.

The concept of worldview was introduced into Christian thought by Dutch neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper (Kuyper 1931) who initially favoured the more cumbersome “world- and life-view”. Both scholarly and popular discussion in recent decades however have increasingly favoured the shorter term.

Contemporary applications of the concept of worldview have stressed the “perspectival” nature of worldviews. For example:

- ‘perceptual frameworks’ or ‘ways of seeing’ (Walsh & Middleton 1984, p. 17)
- ‘the grid of presuppositions through which we see the world’ (Schaeffer 1984, p. 19)
- ‘the collection of presuppositions or convictions about reality which represent (one’s) total outlook on life’ (Hoffecker & Smith 1986, p. ix)
- ‘a reflective conceptual scheme which provides the unifying perspective on one’s beliefs, attitudes, values, feelings and ways of looking at the world’ (Holmes 1983, pp. 32-33)
- ‘a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality’ (Nash 1992, p. 16)

Worldviews, whether held by individuals or social groups, presuppose answers of some kind to ultimate questions such as

- What is ultimate reality?
 - What is the nature of the physical world?
 - What is true and how do we know it?
 - Is there right and wrong, and how do we know it?
 - What is the nature of humankind?
 - What happens after death?
 - What is the meaning, purpose and direction of human history?
 - What is the basis of human society?
- (Holmes 1983, p. 55ff.; Sire 2004, pp. 17-18)

It can be argued that all people have a worldview, or at least that all who have attained a degree of maturity in their relations with the wider world presuppose some kind of answers to these questions. Moreover our answers to these questions will tend strongly towards internal coherence. And since they reflect ways of answering ultimate questions, worldviews are inherently religious. That is, they are founded on what we believe about ourselves and the world in which we live; about our values, our destiny, and the meaning of our lives (Walsh & Middleton 1984, pp. 32-33).

Analysis of the diverse ways that people answer these questions can provide a means for identifying and exploring worldviews encountered in our culture – in its music, its movies, its literature, its scholarship, and so on. Analysis of worldviews can highlight key features both of the worldviews which make up western culture and those of the non-western alternatives which are increasingly encountered in our culture.

A Christian worldview

A Christian worldview might be understood as one which responds to the kinds of questions posed above in ways which reflect Christian belief.

It is possibly more meaningful to speak of a Christian worldview than to speak of the Christian worldview, for the very diversity of past and present expressions of Christian belief and practice make it evident that beyond certain essentials there is a range of possible perspectives which can sustain a claim to be Christian. At the same time, it can be argued that in the midst of diversity there remains a coherent core of Christian belief without which the term would be meaningless.

In proposing the notion of “an agreed, or common, or central, or ‘mere’ Christianity”, C.S. Lewis suggests that the term “Christian” should be taken to mean “one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity”, a usage that he sees as consistent with its original literal Biblical meaning (Acts 11:26), identifying one who accepted the teaching of the apostles (Lewis 1960, pp. 8-11).

Lewis insists that using the term “Christian” in this way is not to make a value judgement but rather to make a simple statement of fact about the content of a person’s belief. That is, the term Christian is not a term of approbation or criticism but one which is simply descriptive, which distinguishes belief which is consistent with the apostolic teaching from other perspectives which could not sustain a claim to be Christian, and indeed may well have no interest in doing so.

What then are those essential presuppositions which Christians might hold in common, or broadly agree upon? There have been many attempts to provide succinct answers to this question. Indeed Lewis’ book *Mere Christianity* (1960) is itself an extended response to this question.

James Sire’s celebrated *The Universe Next Door*, now in its fourth edition, also attempts to answer the question in a way that responds directly to the “worldviewish” ultimate questions listed above.

The eminent American philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga (Plantinga 2000, p. vii) offers a minimalist answer. He writes of “classical Christian belief” as

. . . what is common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church, what unites Calvin and Aquinas, Luther and Augustine, Menno Simmons and Karl Barth, Mother Teresa and St. Maximus the Confessor, Billy Graham and St. Gregory Palamas.

Classical Christian belief, argues Plantinga, has two core components. Firstly there is a *theistic* component: a belief in a personal God. But secondly, there is also a uniquely *Christian* component:

. . . that we human beings are somehow mired in rebellion and sin, that we consequently require deliverance and salvation, and that God has arranged for that deliverance through the sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was both a man and also the second member of the Trinity, the uniquely divine son of God (Plantinga 2000, p. vii).

That such beliefs are common to the great traditions of the Christian faith – that there is both a recognisable unity within the diversity, and a diversity within unity – is evident in the celebrated, if controversial, work of H. Richard Niebuhr, which demonstrated the varying modes of engagement with culture exemplified in five of the great Western Christian traditions: the Catholic, the Lutheran, the Anabaptist, the Calvinist, and the liberal/modernist (Niebuhr 1951). Albert Wolters has usefully elaborated Niebuhr's typology, by demonstrating that each of Niebuhr's models represents a variation in its response to the philosophical question of the relationship of grace and nature (Wolters 1989, 1990).

Christian worldview and the Christian college

A Christian worldview, as the term has come to be used at Christian Heritage College, is more reflective of the breadth and variety of classical Christian belief demonstrated by Niebuhr and Wolters than it is of any more limiting or denominationally defined formulation. It is to be acknowledged of course that in both cases their work has neglected the Orthodox traditions. However, while noting the breadth of classical Christian belief, it is undeniable that some traditions, such as the Catholic and the Calvinist, provide more substantial resources for the aspiring Christian scholar than others may do.

These are important resources, all the more so for aspiring Christian scholars of the charismatic or evangelical perspective who do not have access to a breadth and depth of scholarly resources within their own particular Christian tradition.

It might also be noted that the term "worldview" carries with it the sense, not merely of a particular perspective, but also of an all-encompassing system of belief; hence the project of Christian scholarship is vitally interested in the applications of classical Christian theism to various areas of life and inquiry. The Christian scholar who is interested in philosophy and culture will have a particular interest in exploring the contributions of Christianity to Western culture, as well as in identifying and understanding other worldviews which are to be encountered with varying degrees of frequency in Western culture past and present. Christian scholarship is particularly interested in comparing the effects of a Christian worldview as a way of seeing with the implications of secular or naturalistic presuppositions of the modern and postmodern west. Moreover as Western culture is no island, some understanding of the presuppositions of the world's other great religious and philosophical traditions is also an essential element of an appreciation of the cultural world around us.

One feature of Christian belief, and indeed of western culture more generally, is the dialectical tension between two goals of the human mind, represented metaphorically by Athens and Jerusalem. According to Jeffery Hart, Athens represents a "philosophic-scientific approach to actuality, with the goal being cognition", while Jerusalem represents "a scriptural tradition of disciplined insight and the aspiration to holiness" (Hart 2001, pp. x-xi).

Hart suggests that Western civilisation has not answered the question posed by these two cities with an "either-or" response, but rather with a "both-and", in an unceasing dynamic and creative tension which is formative of the Western tradition (Hart 2001, p. xi). Christian scholarship shares in, and is characterised by, the Athens-Jerusalem dialectic, which is never resolved in favour of one or the other.

It follows that one of the key concerns of Christian scholarship is the issue of the relationship of faith and reason which is often, but not universally, thought of in terms of the integration of faith and learning (Millis 2004).

A foundational element of a distinctively Christian higher education will be the exploration of strategies for faith-discipline integration (Heie & Wolfe, 1987), and indeed of models of Christian scholarship more broadly (Marsden, 1997).

Christian colleges such as CHC are committed both to academic freedom and to freedom of belief more generally, and thus will not require of their students that they believe or personally hold to a Christian perspective. A Christian college will however be committed to excellent teaching about Christian perspectives so that students know, understand and can discuss what they have freely chosen, to believe, not to believe, or to suspend judgement upon, and in turn can examine how a Christian perspective might impact on life, culture and scholarship.

Christian higher education will therefore continually engage in critical analysis of different worldviews and perspectives in terms of their implications for the topic under consideration. This means that CHC students are continually confronted with philosophical issues such as questions of cosmology, anthropology, teleology, epistemology, ethics and so on. Most undergraduates are never introduced to these questions, whereas CHC is committed to ensuring that students at least know what the questions are, and are accustomed to reflection on them. It might be argued that this is an indicator of a quality education. But the object of such inquiry is not self-congratulation, but rather an understanding of the world and its predicaments, and how Christian faith might engage in dialogue with them

That CHC is thoroughly committed to explore and communicate the distinctive ways in which Christians answer life's ultimate questions is a reflection of the Christian mission of the College. In this way the College contributes to the diversity of Australian higher education, which already provides many options for those without a particular interest in exploring Christian perspectives. The College brings to its mission and to the practice of Christian scholarship a diversity of resources in terms of the breadth of theological background and denominational experience which is to be found in the faculty of CHC. The range of faculty backgrounds includes Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal (e.g. Assembly of God, Christian Outreach Centre, and other independent charismatic backgrounds), Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Baptist and Uniting Church.

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