

Christian Scholarship: the difference a worldview makes

Richard J. Mouw

Recently I re-read an account that Mark Noll published a few years ago in *Christianity Today*, of an interview that he had conducted with Jaroslav Pelikan. Before pursuing his distinguished scholarly career at the University of Chicago and Yale, Pelikan had taught at church-related schools, including Valparaiso University. Pelikan told Noll that in thinking back over his pilgrimage, he had come to the conclusion that his decision to work in a secular university context was the best service he could perform to the church. Christian institutions are too skittish about scholarship, he observed. They put too much pressure on their scholars to give the church what it wants rather than what it needs. When this is the case, Pelikan suggested, in order to serve the church well “you may have to leave its payroll.” Not that he likes having to say this kind of thing about churches. “But,” Pelikan challenged, “show me one where it is not true.”

I found this comment troubling when I first read it, and it bothers even more today. There is obviously much truth in what Pelikan says about the plight of the Christian scholar. Christian communities have not always treated their scholars kindly. But in spite of the element of accuracy in Pelikan’s comment, it is not fair as an overall assessment of the possibilities for Christian scholarship. There are many of us in Christian academic institutions who have been strongly supported in our scholarly efforts, even when we have explored topics and themes that have challenged some of the prevailing assumptions in our sponsoring constituencies.

Most troubling, however, is the fact that Pelikan’s remarks give the impression that things are quite healthy for scholars in secular institutions. In trying to think about why I am especially bothered now about what Pelikan said in his conversation with Noll, I realize how my own views about the role of Christian academic institutions have changed in a rather basic way during the past decade. At the outset of my academic career I saw the larger secular academy as an exciting and vital arena of important activity. I operated with a “catch-up” kind of motivation as a Christian scholar. To be sure, I saw secular teaching and scholarship as often guided by a distorted understanding of reality. This was why, in my view, it was so important for some Christian scholars to work in schools that were explicit about their faith commitments; we needed to engage in the kind of undistorted teaching and scholarship that would help Christian institutions become the kinds of exciting and vital arenas of important activity that we had experienced during our studies in the secular academy.

I now operate with a rather different view of who needs to do the catching up. My mood regarding the secular academy has become much more pessimistic and my attitude toward Christian institutions has become much more upbeat in recent years. This assessment of the state of higher education gives special poignancy to my topic here—the exploration of the connections in church-related institutions of higher education between our teaching and scholarship and a Christian worldview.

*What might the
Christian worldview
look like in the
context of higher
education?
Can it be discerned?
and how can
it best be
transmitted?
No question is
more pertinent
—and more
intractable—
for the church-related
school.*

no loom?

Speaking to a national gathering of seminarians in the Spring of 1985, Neil Postman quoted from a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. These lines were written much earlier in this century, but Postman considered them to set forth a prophecy that is being fulfilled in our time:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts. . .they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric. . .

Postman is well known for his thoughtful critique of our present-day “technopoly,” so it is not surprising that he would apply these words of poetic prophecy to the high-tech information systems that have come to play such an important role in our lives. We are, he insists, “awash in information,” but we have lost our grasp of the grand narratives—the looms of transcendent meaning—that can help us to weave our “meteoric shower” of disconnected pieces of information into a coherent account of how we might live together as flourishing human beings.

But Edna St. Vincent Millay’s prophecy can also be applied to much of what characterizes higher education these days. Indeed, there are many of our contemporaries who celebrate the absence of any loom that can combine the fragments of our intellectual lives into a coherent whole. The rejection of the “tyranny of the meta-narrative” is for such folks one of the triumphs of post-modern existence.

Others agree that we do live in an age of cognitive fragmentation, but they consider this to be a tragic state of affairs. One obvious case in point for this kind of assessment can be seen in the pessimistic picture that Alasdair MacIntyre sketches in the concluding paragraph of his much discussed book *After Virtue*. We are living, says MacIntyre, in “the new dark ages.” But this time around, he argues, “the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.” Our only hope is to engage in “the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained.” Thus we wait, he says, “for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”

I must confess that part of me is drawn these days to this kind of apocalyptic scenario. I am tempted by MacIntyre’s “Benedictine” option: Since the rest of the academy has lost its moorings, I sometimes ask myself, why don’t we withdraw into strong, faith-based academic communities where we sustain a different vision of the intellectual quest in our internal communal lives?

But I also have some misgivings about embracing this analysis in the stark form set out by MacIntyre. For one thing, this scenario fails to recognize the historic intent of the actual “Benedictine” option. The monastic tradition in Roman Catholicism was never seen simply as an abandonment of everything that existed beyond the boundaries of the abbey. Monastic communities existed to keep certain communally-based virtues alive in a manner that would strengthen the larger Church, and even the larger human community. The monasteries formed a subset of a broader system of “orders,” all of which were seen as making a contribution to the overall scheme of things.

This is how I am inclined to view the role of present day religiously-based academic institutions. Indeed, this is in broad terms what I take Mark Schwehn to be calling for in his important study of the contemporary crisis in academic vocation. Academic communities of the past were undergirded by such “spiritual” virtues as humility, faith, self-denial and love. These qualities have been sustained in traditionally rooted academic settings by affections, liturgical practices, and symbol systems that are intimately intertwined with religious convictions; and, as Schwehn boldly states his case, “their continued vitality would seem to be in some jeopardy under wholly secular auspices.” Indeed, Schwehn strongly suspects that “most of our present-day academies” are “living off a kind of borrowed fund of moral capital.” But this does not lead Schwehn to advocate a thor-

oughgoing pattern of withdrawal on the part of religiously based academic communities. Maintaining separate institutions is only one of several strategies that we must attend to. But it is indeed a centrally important one.

Not that we should abandon secular institutions altogether; certainly Schwehn's analysis would not support such an approach. This is precisely the point where it is helpful to think of the formation of separate religious "orders" in the academy. Maintaining academic communities that are organized around a common set of beliefs and spiritual practices is one very important strategy. But it is also crucial to sustain networks of Christian scholars who work in other, more "secular," academic settings—especially when good patterns of communication and mutual edification are established with those scholars who are pursuing their vocations in distinctively religious institutions.

This notion of maintaining various "orders" of Christian scholarship is fairly close to George Marsden's in his *The Soul of the American University*. Near the end of his book, Marsden pleads that the scope of such celebrated themes as pluralism and academic freedom be broadened to create room in higher education for considering "substantive religious concerns." He hopes that typically secular faculties can be more welcoming to committed religious scholars. But Marsden also rightly questions whether the secular emphasis on pluralism can be consistently expanded—at least on any grand scale—to accommodate academic activity based on substantive religious convictions.

Christian scholars must work diligently, Marsden is convinced, to create contexts for pursuing a collective Christian scholarly enterprise in which Christian intellectuals operate with a clearly Christian understanding of reality. This means, he insists, "that religiously committed scholars who are already present at many universities will have to overcome their own longstanding inhibitions about relating faith to scholarship and establish academic credibility for expressed religious viewpoints." But it also means that we must strengthen the task of scholarship in explicitly Christian academic institutions.

The present situation calls, then, for strategies which aim at both the maintenance of healthy Christian academic institutions and the provision of support systems for Christians in secular institutions. Our strategic diversity will not be adequate in the present crisis, however, if we fail to work together to encourage genuinely Christian ways of thinking about teaching, learning and research. And central to this project—or so I will argue here—is the diligent exploration in church-related institutions of the ways in which a Christian worldview can give shape to our scholarship and teaching.

Obviously, there is a real danger here of coming up with a set of "packaged" answers that we impart to students in a formulaic manner. This is not the project I mean to encourage. I am not very interested in having Christian teachers simply "impart" a worldview to their students. Rather, what I have in mind is a complex process wherein both teachers and students are engaged in forming a Christian worldview, as they work together to explore the ways in which Christian answers to basic worldview questions can shed light on the complex and ongoing investigations that are the stuff of the scholarly enterprise.

process

Worldview formation, then, is a process. And it is more than a cognitive process; it also encompasses the ways in which we develop as beings who feel and do. This is regularly noted by Christian writers. Arthur Holmes observes that worldviews originate "at the prephilosophical level. . . with the beliefs and attitudes and values on which people act." And Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton argue that a person's "worldview is never merely a vision of life. It is always a vision for life as well;" our worldview also shapes "our valuings."

In pointing to the more-than-cognitive dimensions of worldviews, I do not mean to say that in higher education we can avoid thinking in the process of worldview formation. But neither can we ignore the larger process of what it means to develop and appropriate a Christian worldview. As I have served as a visiting lecturer on many college campuses over the past three decades, I have

conducted an informal survey of viewpoints about the transmission of Christian traditions. On a given campus I have often explicitly asked the question of key educators: What would you identify as the key areas or programs on this campus that are designed to pass on to your students what you see as the best of the Christian tradition? The answer I was most familiar with was the one regularly given on Calvinist campuses: we pass on the tradition primarily in the classroom. This perspective was set forth to me in a graphic manner by a high level administrator at Calvin College when I was being interviewed for a philosophy position there many years ago. The college emphasized the need for a Christian worldview to be set forth in every class, he told me. Christianity was as important in chemistry and philosophy courses as it was in chapel talks and Old Testament classes. This meant, he said, that the real business of Christian liberal arts education would not be radically changed on the campus even if the chapel building were to burn down on the same night that the entire theology faculty dropped dead.

A second answer that people have given to my question is that the tradition is passed on in the patterns of student life. On such a view, the content of the classroom does not matter as much as the larger "extra-curricular" programs of campus and off-campus activity: the quality of life in residence halls, "cohort" groups, cultural events, organized efforts to serve the disadvantaged, athletic activities, attitudes that are formed regarding courtship, friendship, vocation, possessions, and the like.

A third answer focuses specifically on the importance of worship in an academic community. This perspective often looms large where a commitment to worship has taken clear architectural shape. On one campus that I visited, I happened to pose my question to a theologian while we were standing in a very attractive worship center. He pointed to our surroundings and said with considerable passion: "This is what makes this campus Christian. If this building were not here there would be nothing Christian for the students to 'get' from us. This sacred space sanctifies everything else that we are doing on this campus."

There was a point in my amateur sociologizing on this topic where I thought that these three answers pretty much exhausted the options. I was caught up short, though, when I asked my question on a Mennonite campus. I had given lectures at several Mennonite schools and had decided that the main emphasis in such settings was on the patterns of student life. The Mennonites had not seemed to give a lot of attention to a philosophically oriented worldview approach, nor did they seem very interested in sacred liturgical spaces. But they did have a strong emphasis on engaging students in programs of social service as an important supplement to the standard curricular offerings.

When I posed my question to a professor who had been hosting me, then, I fully expected a type-two answer. Instead he pointed to a very different emphasis: "How do we pass on our traditions? Oh, that's an easy one. We insist that every student get serious exposure to Mennonite history. And not just in a detached way. We want them to know about the stories of people who have been faithful to the vision under difficult circumstances, so that when the time comes for them to make the basic choices, they will have models from the past as points of reference." This perspective does indeed capture another emphasis: passing on the traditions through community narratives, the stories of saints and hero/heroines whose lives have embodied the virtues that are featured in a given tradition.

There could well be other distinct answers. Nor do I mean to imply that the ones I have briefly noted here are mutually exclusive. My guess is that most Christian colleges are working to promote some sort of combination of one or more of the strategies mentioned. Indeed, that is precisely what I want to encourage. No one of these answers is sufficient by itself to capture what a well-rounded program of Christian liberal arts education is all about.

But I want to make a more specific point here with reference to the worldview discussion: each of these strategies is an important aspect of worldview formation. There is an unfortunate tendency in those circles where explicit attention is given to worldview issues to construe the propagation of a worldview in almost exclusively cognitive terms. I speak from experience on this topic, since I have

been guilty of this tendency myself. There was a time when I viewed the efforts of people working in the areas of, for example, campus worship and student life as irrelevant—in some cases maybe even inimical—to what I was attempting to accomplish in the philosophy classroom. There were a number of factors that influenced me in this regard. For one thing, I was reacting against the very real presence of anti-intellectualism in the evangelicalism that nurtured me. In response to those Christians who strongly tended to underestimate the importance of liberal arts education, I tended to overdo my enthusiasm for the kinds of things that happen in college classrooms. But my views about such things were also formed in an educational environment where we gave little thought to larger questions about the overall formation of character in higher education, which meant that many of us dug into turf-defending postures without looking at the larger territory in which our tussles were occurring.

For these and other reasons, I operated for quite a while in my academic career with the deeply ingrained assumption that the process of transmitting a worldview was for all practical purposes a purely cognitive affair. I now see that this was a myopic way of viewing things. A more adequate view of the process is nicely illustrated in Daniel Shaw's fascinating anthropological study of an initiation ceremony staged by the Samo people of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. In this elaborate celebration, called *kandila*, the Samo community dramatizes its military prowess by carrying out a series of mock raids. As Shaw demonstrates, however, these rites also exhibit "a complete array of cultural values upon which Samo relationships and ideology are based"—kinship patterns, gender roles, intertribal relations, the nature of supernatural powers, and so on. While these cultural values are displayed in this ceremony, though, they are not explicitly articulated. The Samo people do not possess, Shaw tells us, "a systematic ideology, neatly developed and organized" which they are capable of discussing. It is up to the analyst to "exegete" their cultural system, in order to explicate the "Samo worldview" by studying "the principles, values, fears, and glory [that] are enacted and affirmed" in this elaborate initiation ceremony. This is a compelling example of the way in which a worldview can be propagated and reinforced in ways that are less than fully cognitive—in this case through ritual enactment, symbolization and dramatized narrative. And it should be obvious that it has relevance for discussion of various transmission strategies on Christian college campuses. Worldviews are transmitted by means of extra-curricular campus activities, worship services, and programs of social outreach. When we give specifically cognitive attention to formulating worldview themes, we are explicating that which is already in an important sense present—as what Shaw refers to a "deep structure" and "worldview meaning"—in these other kinds of events and processes.

Having said all of that, I do want to emphasize the importance of cognitive articulation. The Samo people do indeed have a worldview without being able to talk about that worldview. The anthropologist's task of analyzing the tribal worldview is an important service, especially under present conditions. As Shaw observes, the Samo people are experiencing increasing contact with other cultural systems. As they interact with persons possessing different worldviews, it is important for them to be more articulate about the meanings that guide their lives. It is also important for those with whom they come in contact to understand the Samo cultural system.

Parallel considerations can be brought to bear on the task of worldview explication in the Christian community. The apostolic writings contain a clear mandate on the subject: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). There can be no question that it is possible for Christians to possess a profound hope that is embedded in the deep structures of their lives without being able to provide a clear account of the content of that system of meanings. But the obligation to explicate becomes an urgent one when members of the community regularly interact with people possessing different worldviews. And in liberal arts education it has to happen. Exposure to different ways of viewing reality is essential to the process of higher learning. If there really are different worldviews, and if we regularly encounter that diversity, then worldview explication is of the utmost importance.

four questions

Thus far I have been tossing the term “worldview” around with some abandon. I must now assign it some content. In simple terms, a worldview is our understanding of our place in the larger scheme of things. People inevitably operate with some sort of worldview, even if they, like the Samo people, cannot give an explicit account of their sense of what reality is all about.

A good, and rather uncomplicated, formulation of some of the questions that are addressed by a worldview is laid out by Leslie Stevenson in his much reprinted philosophy textbook *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. Stevenson himself does not use the term “worldview”; instead, he describes how several distinct theories of human nature—Platonist, Christian, Freudian, Existentialist, and so on—each exhibits at least four components: each stipulates some characteristic that it associates with essential humanness; each presupposes a general conception of reality; each offers a diagnosis of what is presently wrong with human beings; and each provides a prescription for correcting these defects. Stevenson’s four components correspond exactly to the four questions that Walsh and Middleton insist must be answered by any worldview, except that they state the questions in an even simpler form: Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What is the remedy?

These are the questions that I have in mind when I insist on the importance of forming a Christian worldview in the context of Christian liberal arts education. Christian scholars must give explicit attention, I am convinced, to providing a Christian perspective on human nature, a Christian account of the larger reality in which human beings find themselves, a Christian understanding of what it is that presently plagues the human condition, and a clear sense of what the Christian message sets forth as the remedy for our most basic ills.

I am deliberately setting forth here a minimalist understanding of a Christian worldview—a kind of “mere Christianity” account. I do this out of strong conviction: in urging the people who teach and learn at Christian colleges to engage in worldview formation, I do not want to impose unreasonable philosophical and theological demands on them. My motivation here is in good part “pastoral.” There is a discernible tendency on Christian college faculties for philosophers and theologians to dominate the worldview agenda in a way that intimidates persons from other disciplines. This is unfortunate, and I want to dissociate myself from such an approach.

I must confess that it does make me a little nervous to downplay the role of professional philosophers and theologians in this project; I have, after all, spent most of my career emphasizing the importance of philosophy and theology. So I must quickly add that I do consider philosophers and theologians to be an important part of the conversation, although I think they will serve us all best by acknowledging the value of approaching the question of worldview formation in a less technical way.

I have been greatly helped in my own thinking about this subject by an important set of distinctions proposed by Arthur Holmes. Holmes distinguishes between “theologians’ theology” and “philosophers’ philosophy” on the one hand, and “world-viewish theology” and “world-viewish philosophy” on the other. The first set of terms points to the kinds of topics that professional theologians and philosophers talk about when they are addressing people within their own disciplines. The second set refers to the kinds of topics that are dealt with when scholars are wrestling with questions that are raised when we think about how a worldview applies to various topics: how a view of human nature speaks to theories in literary criticism or therapy, how we are to understand the fundamental issues concerning work and leisure, technology and the natural order, friendship and sexuality, education and politics.

Holmes does not mean to denigrate the more guild-oriented discussions in philosophy and theology. Such analyses, although difficult for the uninitiated to grasp, have an intrinsic value. But he does want to highlight the importance of a somewhat different kind of discussion, where intelligent folks grapple with basic philosophical and theological questions as they emerge for people immersed in variety of disciplines, vocations and life-situations. In such discussions, properly construed, all of the participants have an important kind of expertise to contribute.

mere Christian answers

I will not discuss in detail each of the four worldview questions listed above. But I do want to offer some brief elaborations on this set of questions. I take the appropriate "mere Christian" answers to these questions to be fairly straightforward. The biblical answer to the Where are we? question is set forth with elegant succinctness in Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." This proclamation in turn also points to the Bible's understanding of who we are: each human being is a created being, fashioned after the image and likeness of God. But, of course, we have messed up that which God originally declared to be good. Therefore, the biblical answer to the What's wrong? question is: we are sinners, alienated from God in a manner that also distorts our relationships with each other and with the non-human creation. And the remedy? Salvation that is made possible by the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ.

These are rather simple answers, but they do have an important bearing on our consideration of various theories and perspectives in liberal arts education. For example, that we understand reality as created by a holy God suggests a distinction between Creator and creation that rules out not only a thoroughgoing naturalism, but also the various animisms and spiritual monisms that have currency among many contemporary devotees of New Age thought and neo-paganism. Our understanding of human createdness and sinfulness stands in stark contrast to assumptions about human nature as set forth by, say, Freudians and Marxists. The biblical perspective on salvation and the afterlife differs significantly from conceptions of human flourishing that are taken for granted in various ethical and therapeutic schemes. And so on.

Worldview themes, then, need to be seen as foundational to the business of higher learning, and not as a mere pious gloss on a project that is capable of standing on its own. And Christians are not alone in thinking this way. In his commencement address last spring at Kenyon College, the Cambridge University literary critic George Steiner posed a poignant question to his hearers: "Can we have a liberal program in the humanities. . .that does not at least face the question of a theological foundation?" Steiner confessed that he is worried that "the teaching of the humanities without a metaphysical basis" will reinforce the "current mood of compromise and decline" in our "anything goes" culture. We ought to take courage from the fact that a non-Christian would use the language of theology to give such forceful expression to world-viewish concerns.

It would be wrong to give the impression, though, that being concerned about worldview issues is, as such, evidence of a healthy frame of mind. In our present cultural context, attention to worldviews is a thing to be celebrated. A legitimate paraphrase of George Steiner's reference to our "anything goes" culture is that we live in a time when any worldview goes. The postmodernists' story of how we got to this place intellectually is by now a familiar one. The Enlightenment project has failed. The notion that there is a neutral "universal reason" which can itself generate norms that are binding across cultures and nationalities has been discredited. We are now obligated to expose the ways in which the appeal to such "metanarratives" is a camouflage for what is in fact an exercise in hegemonic control, an imposition of "the tyranny of wholes." The positive project that emerges out of this negative expose is the encouragement of co-existence among a variety of mutually incompatible worldviews. Some of these worldviews are associated with the different ways of "knowing" generated by our racial, ethnic and gender diversity. Others are embraced by a postmodern appropriation of premodern conceptions of reality, such as goddess religion, native American metaphysics, and Eastern mysticism.

The reality of this cultural condition was illustrated in practical terms for me recently in a conversation with the leader of a well-known evangelical ministry to university students. He described a whole new set of challenges in attempting to evangelize and disciple today's students. It used to be that a student would make a clear choice between Christianity and a secularist perspective or a non-Christian religion, he said. But these days a student thinks nothing of participating in an evangelical Bible study group the night after attending a meeting of a New Age meditation group—and with no sense that there is anything inappropriate about moving back and forth between these two very different ways of viewing reality. Shortly after this conversation I experienced this

phenomenon in even more specific terms. I was paired with a liberal theologian on a radio talk show, and we discussed the resurrection of Christ. He insisted with some fervor that the Gospel accounts of the risen Christ had no basis in historical reality and I, of course, disagreed with equal fervor. One of our callers was Heather from Glendale. "I'm not what you would call, like, a Christian," she reported. "Actually, right now I am sort of into—you know, witchcraft and stuff like that? But I agree with the guy from Fuller Seminary. I'm just shocked that someone would, like, say that Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead!"

In contrast to this widespread pattern of somewhat indiscriminate borrowing in order to construct a worldview, Christian academic leaders need to bear witness to a very different way of being world-viewish. There is much that should be said about how we are to do this. I can only touch on what strike me as some important emphases in the remainder of my discussion here. Specifically, I want to emphasize three themes that seem to me important for the process of Christian worldview formation in our current climate: coherence, particularity, and depth.

control beliefs or worldview?

In the mid-1980s some of us from the Dutch Reformed tradition got together to talk about the relevance of worldview to scholarship in the social sciences. In those discussions Nicholas Wolterstorff expressed some misgivings about the feasibility of using the worldview notion to connect religious conviction and scholarly inquiry. We all possess a rather large set of beliefs, he observed. By what criteria do we choose, "from a person's entire corpus of assent, those of his beliefs which constitute his worldview"? Better to work, Wolterstorff argued, with the idea of "control beliefs" as he had set it forth in his *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. In that fine little book, Wolterstorff had urged Christian scholars to look at the ways in which some of their beliefs, including beliefs that were uniquely associated with their Christian commitment, could guide them in the weighing of scholarly theories and claims. Such a view, Wolterstorff suggested, is also less likely to encourage us to think that Christian thinking on any given subject must on the whole be very different than non-Christian thinking on the subject.

I have some sympathy for the concerns Wolterstorff raises. I agree that much of our faith-and-learning activity, when properly conducted, will consist in thinking carefully about how this or that belief bears on an issue of scholarship, rather than in grand comparisons between macro-systems of thought. Furthermore, like him I am convinced that it is inappropriate for Christian scholars to take it for granted that we will consistently disagree with non-Christians on the issues that we face in the intellectual quest.

But I am not prepared to reject the worldview concept in favor of simply talking about a set of control beliefs. It seems important to me to emphasize the way in which our beliefs cohere, how they hang together. The above-mentioned tendency of people these days to operate with sets of inconsistent beliefs, happily assenting to a belief out of one system of thought on Wednesday evening and relying for guidance on a belief out of an incompatible system on Thursday morning—this widespread habit of mind today compels me to emphasize the coherent shape of a belief system. And this is helped along considerably, I suggest, by a worldview orientation.

exclusion as faithfulness

In his writings, Wolterstorff has helpfully insisted that it is better to talk about how we weigh theories in the light of our Christian beliefs, rather than stressing the need to devise theories as Christians. When we weigh a theory that is presented to us from a non-Christian source, we may discover that it is an adequate one for a Christian to adopt. To insist at the outset that we must devise theories is to give the misleading impression that we as Christians must inevitably walk a different theoretical path than our non-Christian colleagues.

All of this is important to say. But it is also necessary to be clear about the fact that the particularity of a Christian worldview can—and likely will, on occasion—lead us to reject theories and claims for uniquely Christian reasons. To make that point is not to contradict Wolterstorff: he is

Careful to “insist that in the case of conflict between one’s Christian convictions, on the one hand, and something presented for one’s acceptance in the pursuit of science, on the other, often it is science that ought to give way.”

Certain theories and claims in the scholarly life will be excluded for us, then, because of our desire to be faithful to Christian understanding of reality. This is not an emphasis that sits easily in our relativist climate. We are conducting our teaching and scholarship in an environment in which it is deeply offensive to talk about how our convictions exclude other ways of thinking about life. I have been paying a lot of attention in my own writings in recent years to the need to incorporate both conviction and civility into our dealings with other people and groups in our pluralistic culture. My tendency, in talking to conservative Protestants, has been to emphasize the civility side of the equation. But convictedness is also important—indeed, in the final analysis it is far more important.

Problems of pedagogy loom large here. How do we transmit a Christian worldview to our students in a way that their worldviewishness is characterized by convicted civility? At a minimum, doing so requires that we ourselves model both civility and conviction. This means at least two things: we cannot hide the fact that our worldview does in fact exclude other ways of understanding reality; and we invite them to consider this worldview by immersing themselves in the life of a community in which this worldview takes on flesh. Wes Avram, of Bates College, put it nicely in a recent book review in *Pro Ecclesia*: Christian orthodoxy

cannot simply be asserted. It must be recovered within communities of discourse shaped in the form of orthodox praxis. It must be explicated, explored, enhanced, and enticed away from self-congratulation toward self-emptying in loving action. That being the case, what is decisively at issue for Christianity today is little different from what has always been at stake. The postmodern voice of orthodoxy must be a voice that not only defends, asserts, and responds; . . . it must be a voice that invites and waits patiently, holding fast to a confident openness without losing itself among foreign discourses.

And, of course, we can rely on more than our own human efforts in this process. A few years ago one of my Fuller students told me about her dramatic conversion to the Christian faith. She had been raised in a secular environment, and after college joined a New Age cult. The group’s guru taught that all major religions contained aspects of the one Truth. Each member was assigned a major religious teacher as an aid to meditation. She was assigned Jesus. As she studied the Gospel accounts, she became convinced that Jesus’ claims about his own person and work conflicted with the teachings of the cult. When she talked to the guru about this, he encouraged her to follow the Truth wherever it was leading her. This young woman, now an ordained Presbyterian pastor, left the cult and pledged herself to the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ. An excluding message had broken through to her, even as she was practicing an inclusive worldview.

the depths of reality

I also think it is important to emphasize the way in which Christian worldview formation makes us sensitive to the depths of reality. Albert Borgmann, a Roman Catholic who teaches philosophy at the University of Montana, wrote an excellent book a few years ago in which he discusses the ways in which the postmodern consciousness often limits its attention to the surfaces of reality. He addresses this malady with a call to rediscover “the eloquence of things” in their particularity, to recognize “the things that command our respect and grace our life” to find “the depth of the world.” A similar call, issued explicitly to Christian scholars, was sounded a few years ago by the Lilly Endowment’s Craig Dykstra, in an address to the Indiana Academy of Religion. Dykstra encouraged an emphasis in Christian liberal arts education on the kind of “formation of character” that aims at shaping persons “who see deeply into the reality of things and who love that reality—over time and across circumstances.”

This emphasis on deep seeing and deep loving of reality in its complexity is, I am convinced, an important component of worldview formation today. In a review of a study of sexuality that she

Distinguished teacher
and writer
Richard Mouw
is President of
Fuller
Theological
Seminary. His
most recent
book is *Uncommon
Decency: Christian Civility in
an
Uncivil World.*

once wrote for *The New York Review of Books*, Martha Nussbaum argued that the author's approach to his topic was fundamentally misguided. Discussions of sexuality, she insisted, must be "more attentive to particular histories. . . more humble before the mystery and complexity of living." We need to learn from Plato, she suggested, how to combine explanatory clarity with a deep regard for particularity. Professor Nussbaum's remarks have relevance to much more than the study of the erotic; her call, for example, for a sense of humility "before the mystery and complexity of living" applies to the process of worldview formation.

To be sure, one person's intellectual humility can be another person's intellectual despair. In their fascinating account of recent developments in cultural anthropology, George Marcus and Michael Fischer observe that most of their colleagues have abandoned any hope of getting a comprehensive understanding of human nature, and have instead slid "into atomistic nihilism where it becomes impossible to generalize from a single ethnographer's experience."

The process of Christian worldview formation requires something like ethnographic sensitivities, whereby we look into the complex depths of created reality without getting into what Marcus and Fischer describe as an obsessive "hunkering down on detail." To use Craig Dykstra's formulation again, we must look deeply into the world while at the same time loving a reality that stretches across time and diverse cultural contexts.

Martha Nussbaum cited Plato as an exemplar of what it is like to live humbly in the presence of particularity and complexity. Those of us who are involved in Christian worldview formation might well follow her suggestion by taking at least one of our cues from a passage that occurs about mid-point in Plato's *Meno*. Socrates' friends are discouraged at this stage in the discussion, because they have been looking for a unified definition of virtue—but instead, all they have come up with is a "swarm" of virtues. When they complain to Socrates, he tells them not to get discouraged by swarms. In spite of appearances to the contrary, "all nature is akin." This means, he says, that there is nothing to hinder us, having tackled just one small assignment in the intellectual quest, from going on to find out about all of the rest, as long as we do "not weary in seeking" (*Meno*, 81A, my paraphrase).

Christian scholars can take heart from similar sentiments, expressed more boldly in the Scriptures. There too we learn a worldview in which all reality is akin. This means that Edna St. Vincent Millay's prophecy, taken literally, is false: there does exist a loom to weave all facts into a single fabric. But we also learn from the Scriptures that there is Someone holding the loom, a teaching that has profound significance for liberal arts education: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." ❀