

The Christian Mind and the Crisis of Culture

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“Culture in Context and a Christian Mind”

There is no such person as an “unbeliever.” There are no “non-religious” people. Though many may claim the contrary, though many may protest such a designation, all people everywhere as living, thinking, feeling and acting persons are persons of faith whether they want to be or not. Human beings are creedal beings whose lives are based upon diverse confessional perspectives, whether they realize it or not.

The question, therefore, is not *whether* a person has a belief system or religious outlook or faith orientation, whether traditional or untraditional. The only real question is *which* belief system, religious outlook or faith orientation a person possesses. The only real question is the *object or content* of one’s ultimate concern and basis of trust. As theologian Evan Runner rightly and wisely has said, “Life is religion.”

In support of this contention, the German sociologist Max Weber argued a century ago that all human action is dependent upon a distinctive set of religious attitudes. One of Jacques Ellul’s most notable contributions as a French theologian and social critic was to point out that modern Western society, despite its growing secularization, was drenched in religiosity.¹

Much more recently, author Christian Smith, in his 2003 book titled *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, suggests that human beings have a peculiar set of capacities and proclivities that distinguish them significantly from other animals on this planet. Essentially he argues that human

¹ Documented in Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 273.

beings are creatures with an inescapable intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimension. They cannot avoid a fundamental orientation in life, and they cannot escape living by one or another sacred narrative. Smith severely critiques naturalistic theories of humanity, asserting that they badly misunderstand the religious character of the human. By contrast, he argues that all people are at bottom believers whose lives, actions, and institutions are constituted, motivated, and governed by narrative traditions and moral orders on which they inescapably depend.²

On biblical grounds, it is not hard to fathom why people possess this essential religious disposition and are naturally inclined toward orienting their lives around some ultimate concern/s. They are the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1: 26-27), and even after their defacement due to sin, they still carry about in their consciousness the memory of their essential religious constitution.

This is the basis for John Calvin's argument that God has not only imparted an "awareness of divinity" (*Divinitatis sensum*) but also implanted the "seed of religion" (*semen religionis*) in the human heart.³ And as Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has asserted, "*Homo sapiens*," "*homo faber*," . . . yes, but, first of all "*homo adorans*."⁴ What he means by this is that people are thinkers and makers to be sure, but before they are these things or anything else, they are primarily worshippers whose essential nature is to adore. In fact, they then do all of their thinking and all of their making in the light of what they adore and worship. Religiosity, therefore, is a non-negotiable. The chief concern is simply to determine at what target this essential spiritual disposition is aimed.

² This description of the contents of this book were taken from the publishers notes online at: <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?userid=65AW4KBLOH&sourceid=00393694018763635809&bfdate=09%2D25%2D2003+14%3A46%3A39&isbn=0195162021&itm=1> (Accessed September 25, 2003).

³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 43-44 (§1. 3. 1).

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963), 15.

At this point, worldviews as essentially religious realities enter the picture, especially in light of the way I have defined this concept in chapter 9 of my own book on the history of this concept. I suggest that the biblical teaching about the centrality of the “heart” in human life is a key to defining the notion of “worldview.” Theologian Gordon Spykman states, “the *imago Dei* embraces our entire selfhood in all its variegated functions centered and unified in the heart.” Similarly, Karl Barth affirms that “the heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body.”⁵

These theological claims about the heart as the core of the person are supported by the fact that the Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments teach that it is the seat and source of the intellect, affections, will, and spirituality as the location where we think, feel, choose and worship. Proverbs 4: 23 and 27: 19 state respectively that “from the heart flow the springs of life,” and that “the heart of man reflects man.” Jesus stated in Matthew 6: 21 that what a person values most as one’s treasure in life resides in the heart, and in Luke 6: 43-45 He adds that from it flow all our words and deeds, “for the mouth speaks out that which fills the heart.” St. Paul prayed that “the eyes of the heart” would be enlightened so that believers might understand the magnitude of their callings in Christ (Eph. 1: 18). Thus, in the OT, for the Savior, and in the teaching of the Apostle Paul, the heart is the cornerstone of human existence.

On this basis it seems to me that life proceeds “kardiologically,” out of a vision of the heart. And that’s what I think a worldview is! It is a vision of the heart, a vision of God, the universe, our world and our selves rooted and grounded in the human heart. To say it in other words, the heart of the matter of worldview is that worldview is a matter of the heart with its deeply embedded ideas, its profound affections, its life-determining choices, and its essential religion. What first flows into the heart and shapes its essential content, eventually flows out of the heart as one’s fundamental vision of reality,

⁵ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 227; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Harold Knight, J. K. S. Reid, R. H. Fuller (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), III/2, p. 436.

constituting the “presuppositional basis of life.”⁶ As heart-based, foundational, unifying, centers in human experience, it is no wonder, then, that people are so deeply attached to their convictions and traditions, to their customary ways of understanding and living in the world. It is no wonder that most people take them for granted, having never considered looking at the world in any other way. Worldviews, whether held consciously or unconsciously, are, indeed, religious constructs upon which people stake their very lives, and in some cases are the beliefs for which they are willing even to die.

There are of course a number of alternative, competing worldviews that adorn the 21st century cultural landscape. The differences between them, I believe, help explain the fierce clashes of civilizations and the culture wars that mark out time. More and more people are beginning to realize that the conflicts we are experiencing today at every level are actually conflicts between underlying worldviews.⁷

How important, then, it is to have a working knowledge of these diverse visions of the human heart that are shaping private experience and public life. To know where people are coming from worldviewishly, and to understand the reasons why they think what they think, do what they do, promote what they promote, and live the way they live is absolutely indispensable for intelligent, skillful living in the world today. We need to become worldview savvy. As Os himself once said, “To think intelligently today is to think worldviewishly, to come to grips with the mosaic of meaning systems that make up modern thinking.”

This task is absolutely indispensable especially for folks like you who have vital, life and world shaping positions of leadership in our government and political process. I can hardly think of another sphere of life and service where

⁶ A felicitous expression I heard in a lecture by David Aikman at The Oxbridge Conference sponsored by the C. S. Lewis Foundation in the summer of 1998, celebrating the centennial of the birth of C. S. Lewis. Here is a definition of a presupposition based on its etymology: *pre-sub-ponere* = that which is posited (believed) underneath (taken for granted) in advance (a priori).

⁷ James H. Olthius, “On Worldviews,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, ed. Paul Marshall, et. al., Christian Studies Today (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1989), p. 26.

worldview clarity, worldview wisdom, worldview shrewdness, could be more relevant or useful.

So, if we had world enough and time, we would do well to explore in some detail such basic concepts of life as theism, deism, naturalism, nihilism, atheistic and theistic existentialism, pantheism, panentheism, polytheism, new age mysticism, premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. But since we don't have enough time or world to investigate all of these options, let me instead recommend a helpful book, and then offer a cameo description of our culture in a worldview context.

The book I recommend is the recently released fourth edition of James Sire's *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, published by InterVarsity Press. With over a quarter million copies in print to date, this standard reference work has established itself as a premier textbook in the field. In it, Sire explains in reasonably clear prose many of the aforementioned belief systems and offers some cogent critiques of them as well. Its worldview maps clarify the bewildering terrain of contemporary culture, and provides a way of thinking that can illuminate the road ahead.

Now if we are going to understand our culture in a worldview context for the present and future, then we need a little historical perspective. For over a millennium and a half from the time of Christ to about the seventeenth century, the Christian faith provided the basis for the intellectual and spiritual unity of the West. The break up of this cultural consensus began initially in the Renaissance with the rebirth of Greco-Roman culture, and intensified in the Enlightenment with scientific revolution and the rise of deism that, with a boost from Darwinian evolution, soon gave way to an all-pervasive naturalism. For the past 150 to 200 years, Western thought and culture has been dominated more or less by this disenchanting world outlook, along with various consequences and responses.

If codified, naturalism as a worldview or underlying set of working assumptions would consist of these essentials: (1) That the physical cosmos is all there is; God does not exist; hence, naturalism is also atheism. (2) That the universe operates uniformly according to natural law in a closed, determined,

cause-effect system. (3) That human beings have evolved accidentally from the lower primates and that mind and personality are exclusive functions of the biological organism. (4) That death is the extinction of the person. (5) That ethics are established entirely by human beings, are relative, situational, and subject to change. (6) That history is a linear, but purposeless process with an uncertain future. (7) That science is the omni-competent epistemology, and its technological offspring are the hope of the survival of the race.⁸

Richard Dawkins, who is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, is one of the most notable, contemporary proponents of naturalism, especially in its scientific, evolutionary form. If T. H. Huxley was formerly known as Darwin's bulldog, today Dawkins is regarded as his pit bull. Though he rebels against Darwinianism's moral implications, Dawkins great foundational scientific truth is that the universe and the life that it has unintentionally spawned are without any ultimate purpose. Human existence, along with everything else, must be regarded as one huge cosmic futility. The universe's utter indifference to human life is captured nicely in these brief lines from poet Stephen Crane:

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist."
"However," replied the universe.
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."⁹

In a recent collect of his own essays titled *A Devil's Chaplain* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003), Dawkins cites George Bernard Shaw's disturbing but honest response to this dreary atheistic evolutionary outlook which he records in his book, *Back to Methusaleh*: "When its [Darwinianism's] whole significance dawns on you, your heart sinks into a pile of sand within you. There is a hideous fatalism about it, a ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honor and aspiration."

⁸ This list roughly follows James W. Sire's discussion of naturalism in *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3rd ed (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), chp. 4.

Even more bone-chilling is Dawkins' citation of H. G. Wells who acknowledges the murderous implications of this philosophical viewpoint, as Wells summarizes it in his scientific utopian fantasy, *The New Republic*:

And how will the New Republic treat the inferior races? How will it deal with the black? ... the yellow man? ... the Jew? ... those swarms of black and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people, who do not come into the new needs of efficiency? Well, the world is a world, and not a charitable institution, and I take it they will have to go.... And the ethical system of these men of the New Republic ... will be shaped primarily to favor the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity — beautiful and strong bodies, clear and powerful minds.... And the method that nature has followed hitherto in shaping the world, whereby weakness was prevented from propagating weakness ... is death.... The men of the New Republic ... will have an ideal that will make the killing worthwhile.¹⁰

The nihilistic spirit of despair that flows naturally from naturalism of which Shaw speaks has settled on contemporary life like a musty blanket, engendering all kinds of frenzied activity to find some semblance of meaning in the chaos. Wells's articulation of the genocidal implications of naturalism have manifested themselves repeatedly in recent tyrannical regimes, making the twentieth century the bloodiest century in the history of the human race. More people have been killed in the name of various modern atheistic ideologies than in all of the religious wars combined. Such is the unspeakable legacy of this lethal worldview.

Now it is true that most people in the US and elsewhere are theists of one sort or another, and would forswear this *metaphysical* naturalism and its implications. Most Gallup polls indicate that approximately 95% of the population believes in God or a universal spirit of some kind. How, then, can we account, for the essential take over of a naturalistic worldview in public life? While there are several factors to consider, one clue is found in the domain of the university.

The fact of the matter is that the most influential intellectuals in America and globally are genuine naturalists, and naturalism itself as a worldview constitutes the unquestioned paradigm of the major universities of the world.

⁹ Quoted in Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Cited in Stephen M. Barr, "The Devil's Chaplain Confounded," *First Things* (August-September 2004), pp. 25-26.

Universities as significant, culture shaping institutions are responsible at least in part for the naturalization of our culture. As Philip E. Johnson explains, “The agnostics rule America, quite regardless of the popular piety to which politicians pay lip service, because their metaphysics (i.e., scientific naturalism) rules the universities, and the universities control the social definition of knowledge.”¹¹

To the extent, then, that university trained leaders in business, education, law, science, the arts, and politics are trained in their areas of specialization on the basis of naturalistic assumptions, then through their influence, naturalism has come dominate just about every major aspect of public life and popular culture. As a result, it has generated what we typically refer to as a thoroughly secular society shorn clean of any substantial divine influence. Except in the fringes of private life where institutionalized and personal religion flourishes, God is dead and remains dead in the public square.

The pursuit of daily life on the basis of ideas taken solely from this world to the exclusion of the influence of God and His Word is the essence of this secular mindset. Some secularists may be thoroughgoing naturalists who deny God’s existence altogether. But curiously enough, other secularists may be contemporary deists who do believe in God at least as the transcendent Creator, but don’t think He is involved immanently in history or human affairs.

Even more ironically, some secularists are Christians who unfortunately compartmentalize their religion and keep God pietistically sequestered in the private, spiritual spheres of their lives far from public influence. It is quite common for many serious believers, often times at the encouragement of their own churches, to divide their lives into sacred and secular domains and to live bifocally. As Will Herberg wrote in his book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, “...the secularism that permeates the American consciousness is to be found within the churches themselves and is expressed through men and women who are sincerely devoted to religion.”¹²

¹¹ Philip E. Johnson, *Objections Sustained: Subversive Essays on Evolution, Law, & Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 115

In a culture that excludes religion and in a religion that excludes culture, many Christians today tacitly assume the legitimacy of such a dualistic lifestyle. Though they believe, enthusiastically so, nonetheless, they function as practical atheists in the bulk of their lives. Despite their rejection of *metaphysical* naturalism and their genuine commitment to Christian theism, nonetheless they live as *methodological* naturalists.

Consequently, in our culture, a wall of separation has grown up, not only between God and government, but also between God and education, God and science, God and technology, God and law, God and business, God and economics, God and the arts, God and entertainment, God and athletics, and between God and the real business of every day life. These and other areas of public culture are devoid of theistic influence, but instead are characterized by an all-encompassing and increasing humanism, relativism, pragmatism, hedonism, eroticism, materialism, paganism, and so on with frightening results.

The resulting breakdown of marriage and family, the desecration of the environment, pornography, drug and substance abuse, sexual immorality, the devaluing of human life, the increase of crime and violence, psychological disturbances, destructive habits and addictions, cultural infighting, the rise of bureaucracy, the loss of respect for tradition, political malfeasance, corporate corruption, educational decline, ecclesiastical scandal and so on all suggest a culture in crisis.

Perhaps it is even a culture under judgment. While historians have used spatial and organic metaphors in evaluating the course of civilizations (rise-decline-fall or born-growing-decaying-dying), it is interesting to note that the Bible employs the theological concepts of idolatry and judgment as a framework for ascertaining the condition of a culture and its future. It depicts them as either humbly submissive or arrogantly rebellious toward God and His commandments. The former brings life, blessing and a hopeful future. The latter results in cursing, death and an impending judgment. American idolatry makes it a suitable

¹² Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, rev. ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1960), p. 271, quoted in Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, p. 273.

candidate for a day of reckoning. As the prophet Hosea stated long ago, “With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction” (Hosea 8: 4 RSV).

There have been several responses to our culture’s critical condition. Postmodernists have replied with a stringent, deconstructionist critique of modern scientific, economic and technological culture. Others have turned for solace to new age spirituality, mysticism, and even the occult. Radical Islamic terrorists, as we have already seen, have sought to stop the spread of the influence of liberal secular culture by attempting to impose the rule of Allah on infidels through jihad. The first of these responses has terminated in pessimism,¹³ the second in irrationalism, and the third in calloused violence.

There is the need for a fourth way. And there is a fourth way, and this is it. Out of obedience to the call of the gospel and in the light of this current crisis of culture, devoted followers of Jesus Christ, recognizing their biblical responsibility and the current need, ought to be motivated to develop a substantive and powerful Christian mind and to figure out appropriate, God-honoring ways of speaking historic Christianity into contemporary culture. They ought to be about the business of being transformed by Scripture in the spirit of their minds, and learning how to be salt and light in a wise and skillful way on behalf of the kingdom of the God in the context of their daily callings in life. They ought to be in serious pursuit of cultivating a biblical worldview as the vision of their hearts whereby they seek to image God effectively in all aspects of life under the Lordship of Christ.

What kind of mind is a Christian mind that can speak effectively to and be lived out faithfully in our culture? Here are several defining traits.

First, a Christian mind is a theological mind. Its focus is on the Trinitarian God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — who is the Creator, Judge, and redeemer of the world. He is sovereign over all aspects of reality, life, thought and culture and is the ultimate reference point and basic principle of explanation for all the

¹³ Radical NT scholar John Dominic Crossan has described the postmodern condition in these despairing terms. “There is no lighthouse keeper. There is no lighthouse. There is no dry

particulars in heaven and on earth. God makes the world make sense, and knowing Him is the basis for knowing everything else, recognizing that all things exist for His glory and worship and also for our good.

Second, a Christian mind is a biblical mind. It is drenched in the content of the metanarrative of Scripture and its plot-forming themes of creation, the fall humanity into sin, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God in its redemptive focus, the church and her sacraments, the second advent, and the new heavens and the new earth. A Christian mind inhabits this story and this story inhabits a Christian mind. It is the interpretive framework by which believers understand the world, know their place, and make their way within it.

Third, a Christian mind is a humanist mind. It is concerned not only about God but also about people. It refuses to view others in utilitarian terms on the basis of what they do or produce. Rather it sees them on the basis of who and what they are. After all, people are the image and likeness of God; they are crowned with glory and majesty; they are fearfully and wonderfully made. Christ's incarnation unmistakably confirms the worth and dignity of the whole person — body, soul and spirit — and calls Christians to love others even as they love themselves.

Fourth, a Christian mind is a moral mind. It acknowledges an objective moral order in the universe anchored in God's own character of love and justice which is made known through natural and special revelation. It is knowledgeable of and obedient to this divinely ordained moral code, and is also concerned with the cultivation of virtue and the shunning of vice. It abhors hypocrisy in itself and others, and is sensitive to matters of good and evil upon which human well being and the course of history depends.

Fifth, a Christian mind is a selfless, serving, sacrificial mind. Paul's words from Philippians 2: 3-5 suffice here. "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests but

land. There are only people living on rafts made from their own imaginations. And there is the sea." See his *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975), p. 44.

for the interests of others. Have ***this mind*** in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2: 3-5a).

Sixth, a Christian mind is an aesthetic mind. It recognizes that God is not only true and good, but also beautiful, and thus is concerned about beauty and the arts. A Christian mind recognizes the manifestations of God's beauty in the tints, textures, tones, tastes, and touches in the world He created. It teaches that as His image and likeness, believers have the capacity to create something beautiful and to take great delight in it (Abraham Kuyper).

Seventh and finally, a Christian mind is a joyful mind. It ought to be characterized a deep, sustained experience of spiritual gladness! This is the will of Christ for His disciples: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full (John 15:11). It is a mind afire with faith, hope, and love that comes from knowing, loving, trusting, and serving the Creator and Redeemer of the universe. It is a joy that results from having a growing, rich, fruitful Christian mind!

Our decisive moment in history calls for the rigorous development of this kind of a Christian mind — a theological, biblical, humanist, moral, selfless, serving, sacrificial, aesthetic, and joyful Christian mind. A Christian mind is finely attuned and richly responsible. It knows how to pay attention, and it knows what to do. A CS Lewis points out, the gospels teach that Jesus wants the heart of a child, but the head of a grown up! In evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature, said St. Paul (1 Cor. 14: 20).

A first step may be to repent for failing to fulfill this biblical mandate previously. A second will be to make a commitment to undertake this task vigorously. Such an obedient commitment honors God, blesses you, edifies the Church, and has a renewing effect in the world.

Like faith and religion itself, everyone has a mind. As a matter of fact, every mind is a function of one's religion and faith. So, again, the only real question is what kind of faith and what kind of religion and what mind do you have and are you going to have?

Your future and the future of the church and the future of your culture and your world, in part, depends upon it. Heed, then, this exhortation from St. Paul: “Let this mind be in you, then, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2: 5).

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