

A Response to Theodore Plantinga's
"David Naugle and the Quest for a Theory of Everything"
Myodicy 17 (December 2002).
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Theodore Plantinga has been broadcasting his objections to the concept of worldview for some time now. The recent appearance of my book *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, which was released in July 2002 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, and the decision of Prof. Plantinga's own institution, Redeemer University College, to have her faculty read and study my book has prompted him to take up the cudgels once again. Though he does not enjoy rehearsing his objections to the worldview concept, and fears that his Redeemer colleagues might consider him a "wet blanket" for his aversion to this notion, I for one am grateful that he has taken the time to "bare his soul" by responding so thoroughly to this issue and to aspects of my book. Since I have few colleagues of my own with whom I am able to dialog about these matters, I am grateful to Prof. Plantinga for his insights and criticisms from which I have profited. Iron sharpens iron, and though such contact may cause a few sparks to fly, the well-honed metal of his mind has certainly sharpened my own, prompting me to think more carefully about the worldview concept.

His primary criticisms are seven in number and are found in sections 9-14 of his paper. I will attempt to offer succinct rejoinders to each, and then also respond to some miscellaneous issues that Prof. Plantinga raised along the way. As he notes in his conclusion, I find the concept of worldview "very promising and useful for service to the Lord." That was and still is the case. My comments below will indicate why.

First of all, Plantinga objects to worldview because it falls prey to "visualism," that is, to "the systematic overestimation of the importance of vision in the process of human experience and thought" (section 9). Nicholas Wolterstorff faults the term for a similar reason, especially when Christian world[and life]view development is presented as the goal of Christian education.

He writes: “Notice the word *view* at the end. For all its desire to be holistic, a desire captured in the words ‘world and life,’ this perspective fails, it seems to me, in its goal. It fails to be fully holistic. It emphasizes thought, intellection, cognition. It stresses intellect. It sees the school as dealing with a *view*.”¹ Thus, for both Plantinga and Wolterstorff, it seems that the notion of worldview is too heavily dependent upon either sight and mind to be of value to the Christian community as a way of approaching Christian faith and as the goal of Christian education.

In response, I am aware of this liability associated with the term worldview, as Prof. Plantinga notes, and I do respond to it on p. 334 of my book. There I appeal to a concept called “wholesight” advocated by Parker Palmer as a holistic way of apprehending reality. This concept fuses sensation and rationality with other cognitive capacities such as imagination, intuition, empathy, emotion, and faith. It is a way of knowing that engages the whole person and the whole world. I also invoke the ancient concept of “adequatio” which suggests that everything human beings are and all that they possess is given by God in epistemic grace to enable them to know and apprehend the diversity of beings that constitute the cosmos, both spiritual and physical. People in developing worldviews worthy of the name must draw upon the whole array of epistemic resources available to them in constructing their concepts of the universe. As a multi-cognitive construct, therefore, critics need not read the term *view* in worldview in such an unimaginative, flatfooted way. It smacks of fundamentalist literalism. With a greater degree of hermeneutic sensitivity, let such critics recognize that it is intended to convey metaphorically an overall perception and grasp of the world that is not limited to sight or mind, but is derived from all of our human epistemic powers. The word Trinity doesn’t convey the biblical doctrine of one God in three persons perfectly. Yet orthodox believers well know what is meant by the term. Let’s apply the same linguistic grace to worldview as well.

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Life: Reflections on Christian Teaching and Learning*, eds. Gloria Stronks and Clarence W. Joldersma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 107.

Second, Prof. Plantinga believes that another danger associated with worldview is that it encourages “top-down theorizing in which the philosopher...gets to dictate to people in other disciplines what sorts of theories they should embrace” (section 10). The fear here seems to be a deductive one, that everything in thought and life is inferred *a priori* from “dictatorial” worldviews, no exceptions. They give orders, but are unwilling to take them. They are one-way streets, admitting no traffic in the opposite direction.

In response, let me first say that all people everywhere are deductively oriented in that their thinking and living are based on and flow forth from some kind of foundation. That foundation may be a faith commitment in God or an idol. It may be a conscious or unconscious set of presuppositions and beliefs, whether religious or secular in nature. But foundation there will be. This seems unavoidable, given the fiduciary and cognitive nature of human beings. Prof. Plantinga himself acknowledges his own belief in the role and power of presuppositions in human life (section 5). A good measure of “top-down theorizing” seems inescapable, not only for intellectuals, but for all people.

At the same time, I do *not* believe that worldviews are cognitive tyrants. In fact, I maintain that they sustain an interactive relationship with outside influences and can be affected and changed. I point this out quite clearly on page 208, which Prof. Plantinga acknowledges, though he doesn't seem to think I make much of it. I suppose if that is all I had to say on the matter, that would perhaps be true. However, in two other places, I carefully describe how worldviews are shaped and reshaped by external input (pp. 270-71). I also indicate how adherents of various worldviews must be in dialog with others who hold alternative perspectives in order to ward off myopia and provincialism (pp. 326-27). As I mention in concluding these respective discussions, worldviews are always works in progress as a result of our ongoing participation in life (p. 271), and through the exercise of “dialogical imagination” (Mikhail Bakhtin) by which alternative viewpoints are exchanged, an ever-increasing understanding of reality will be achieved (p. 327). Therefore, worldviews fulfill a foundational role in

human experience, but they certainly are not, and perhaps shouldn't be, omnipotent.

Third, Prof. Plantinga offers a criticism related to the first one, namely, that if we insist on understanding Christianity as a worldview, we will wind up neglecting the biblical emphasis on hearing. Worldview visualism offsets the auditory emphasis in the Bible, along with its related concern for obedience (section 10).

In response, biblical worldview advocates could emphasize very simply the spiritual significance of hearing and doing as a central component of a biblical worldview, thereby solving the problem! All it takes is a little explanation or clarification, and the apparent criticism falls by the way side. For whatever it is worth, and it may not be worth much, a computer search of the New American Standard Bible indicates that 377 verses contain the word "hear" (Hebrew: *shama*; Greek: *akouo*), and 616 verses contain the word "see" (Hebrew: *raah*; Greek: *blepo*; *horaο*). It would seem that sight as well as hearing must be an important biblical experience!

Fourth is the common argument against worldview because it allegedly promotes relativism (section 11). The term *Weltanschauung* did indeed grow up in the relativistic context of German idealism and romanticism (see chapter three of my book). As a result, many Christians have looked askance at the notion because of this particular unsavory association. How can it be used wisely in relation to Christianity as an avowedly anti-relativistic religion?

In response, and as Prof. Plantinga points out, I am well aware of this criticism, and I give it quite a bit of attention in my book. In fact, the whole of chapter nine is devoted to dealing with it. In this chapter, my point is that since one's understanding of the term "worldview" is determined by one's worldview, when conceived in a Christian way, "worldview" sheds its relativistic nuance and takes on suitable hues and tones. In four relatively well-developed sections in chapter nine, I show that worldview in Christian perspective connotes a divinely wrought objectivity, and is a function of the human heart which itself is bound up in issues of sin and spiritual warfare, grace and redemption. In short, I show how

the concept of worldview is a piece of “Egyptian gold” (St. Augustine) that can be cleansed of its pagan associations, and brought unto the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10: 5). The biblical authors did this regularly, appropriating Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman notions, and employing them in Scripture itself! Hence, I concluded and conclude that worldview is a concept that is structurally sound, and though tarnished perhaps by previous relations, can be renewed in Christ.

Furthermore, to say that the origin of the word “worldview” in German thought automatically disqualifies for Christian service is an example, I think, of the genetic fallacy. This mistake in thinking occurs when someone irrelevantly attacks the *genesis* of a view (or in this case, term), and not the view (or term) itself. Reject this, the faulty reasoning goes, because it comes from a bad source. However, something’s origin does not always tell us about its present state. We cannot refute an idea just because of the place from which it hails. A new context can make all the difference in the world! Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Certainly.

Fifth and most seriously, Prof. Plantinga believes that a worldview is a “theory of everything,” and as such claims too much, in two ways especially. First of all, given the limitations of the human intellect, a T.O.E is simply impossible. He uses a common golf ball to explain why. Just as no one can see it all at once, much less its insides, so “the same limits present themselves when it comes to planet earth” (section 8). God in His omniscience is capable of such a worldview, but we are not. As he says, “I maintain that we are finite intellects and that our experience always remains partial.” But worldview thinking leads us to believe that “we could have a total experience or vision or comprehension of reality. We cannot” (section 12).

But even if it was possible to have such a worldview or T.O.E., and this is his second complaint, Prof. Plantinga asserts that worldview advocates really don’t have a view of the *whole* world. He states that even in his own neo-Calvinist colony there in Ontario, there is much talk about how a Reformed worldview extends to the whole of life. However, the adherents of this community

have really not worked out the implications of their religious convictions in a number of vital areas (food being one important example). As a result, they turn to secular sources for insight into these neglected domains. As he says, “The comprehensive worldview isn’t all that comprehensive” (section 12). His worldview oriented community, despite their rhetoric, really don’t have a *world* view after all!

I wish Prof. Plantinga had offered a more concise definition of the notion of a “theory of everything.” That would help me know exactly what it is he thinks I may be promoting. After all, his critique of my book is titled “David Naugle and the Quest for a Theory of Everything.” I have been aware of the T.O.E notion over the years, but I have not given it much thought. I must say that I have never thought of worldview in this way.

It does not appear to me, however, that he is using the T.O.E. expression in an overly technical way. With the help of my student research assistant Grant Daves, I was able to read through several articles and one or two books on the T.O.E concept. As a result, I discovered very quickly that it is *the* coveted goal in the discipline of physics. It is the quest for a theory that would unite Einstein’s theory of relativity with quantum mechanics and account for all physical phenomena. Recently, String and M-theories have been proposed as the best prospects to resolve this dilemma (Michael J. Duff, “The Theory Formerly Known as Strings,” *Scientific American* 278 [Feb. 1998]: 64-69). In any case, here is what a T.O.E. should be able to do:

For any theory to be truly a theory of everything, the natural world must come about as a direct result of the theory. This means that the theory should predict quantities such as the masses of the “fundamental” particles, and their charges. It should also correctly describe the interaction of these particles. It should reveal what space and time are made up of, and how they came to exist in the universe in the way that they did. A theory that does these things would be a great achievement, but a full-blown theory of everything should go one step further. It should explain what particles are and what mass is. It should also explain why the particles that we observe exist and why space-time has the configuration that it does. In short, it should be the ultimate answer to any question that is posed about the nature of the universe (Summarized from P. C. W.

Davies and Julian Brown, *Superstrings: A Theory of Everything?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, p. 5).

For Stephen Hawking in his book, *The Theory of Everything: The Origin and Fate of the Universe* (Beverly Hills: New Millennium Press, 2002), the quest for a theory of everything is an attempt to combine all the partial theories of physics (including the ones mentioned above as well as such matters as the big bang, black holes, and space-time) into a comprehensive thesis that explains everything. If such a theory is ever discovered, Hawking says, "It would bring to an end a long and glorious chapter in the history of our struggle to understand the universe. But it would also revolutionize the ordinary person's understanding of the laws that govern the universe" (p. 163). It should be something that in time all people, not just scientists, understand. But once it is understood, "Then we shall all be able to take part in the discussion of why the universe exists. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason. For then we would know the mind of God" (p. 166).

Now Prof. Plantinga says that it is worth asking whether or not I have a theory of everything in mind when I talk about worldview. He raises the question because I do use words like comprehensive, all-embracing, and holistic to describe a Christian worldview. However, I can confidently say that in the technical way described above, I am obviously not in hot pursuit of a T.O.E. Since this is not what I mean, let me explain what I do mean when I refer to a Christian worldview as a coherent, comprehensive concept. I use this language as a way of combating the perennial menace of Platonist and/or Thomistic dualism which is an erroneous way of dividing God's unified world into competing parts: sacred/secular, time/eternity; faith/reason, and so on. Sin has certainly sliced and diced God's world into many fragments and warring factions. Things are no longer the way they are supposed to be, as Neal Plantinga says. But redemption in Christ Jesus has reunited the parts back into a whole once again. As a result, a Christian worldview embraces the whole of life. It is a way of recognizing God's creation in its totality. He rules over it all.

Thus a biblically based view of things doesn't neglect reason in favor of faith, or denigrate time in favor of eternity, or oppose the sacred to the secular. Instead it unifies these alleged adversaries into one overall, comprehensive Christian view of life. A Christian worldview is a vision of the unity of God's creation restored through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Period. That's it. Prof. Plantinga even mentions early on in his essay that this is really what worldview thinkers are getting at in "hanker[ing] after" a T.O.E. (section 1). He is right, though they typically don't call it such! And that is what I mean too!

In any case, we believers should be about the business of tracing out the lineaments of our basic beliefs in all relevant areas. That we have not yet been done this in every domain, as Plantinga points out, is unfortunate since it spawns unfaithfulness. However, it can and it should be a task that serious Christian communities undertake for their own blessing, the progress of the kingdom in the world, and certainly for God's glory.

Is this a theory of everything? I suppose if Prof. Plantinga and others wants to call it that, they can. But that is certainly not the way T.O.E. is understood in the relevant literature. What I am concerned about, no more, no less, is an attempt to understand as much of God's creation as possible from a biblical point of view. It is faith seeking understanding. It is taking God's sovereignty over all things seriously. It is a humble attempt to live faithfully and obediently in all areas of human existence *Coram Deo*. So, in conclusion to this matter, I would say that talk about T.O.E. as a way of criticizing worldview is misleading and misplaced.

Sixth, Prof. Plantinga also objects to the use of worldview because "it systematically overestimates the amount of unity and uniformity among Christians" (section 13). When Christians speak of "the" Christian worldview, it creates the impression that all believers since Bible days have believed the same thing, or at least they should. The concern, it seems, is about a worldview-induced uniformitarianism.

In response, let me say first off that unity among believers, presumably in orthodoxy and orthopraxy, is a Christological ideal grounded in our Lord's high

priestly prayer with evangelistic implications: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me (John 17: 20-21, NASB). Unity in a Christian worldview may not be such a bad thing after all!

That there is progressive revelation in Scripture, and a progress in doctrine in Church history doesn't seem to count against worldview advocacy in any serious way. This fits comfortably within the categories of a biblically based worldview, which itself is, as I have said before, always a work in progress, always reforming!

Be all this as it may, I would like to go on record as clearly affirming, nonetheless, the value of Christian worldview pluralism, just like Arthur Holmes does in his *Contours of a Worldview* (Eerdmans 1984). I see great value in the fact that different Christian traditions have contributed remarkable insights into the nature and practice of the faith, and that these insights need to be appreciated, harvested, and applied. My own recognition and advocacy of Christian worldview pluralism is tacitly on display in the first two chapters of my book where I trace the history of worldview thinking not only in Protestant Evangelicalism, but also in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. I make the appeal at the end of the latter chapter that, without compromising convictions, each tradition profit from the wisdom that each has to offer the other, especially in this matter of worldview development. That I recognize the contributions of multiple sources to understanding Christianity can also be seen in Appendices A and B in which I summarize a number of significant expressions of a Christian worldview, and offer an extensive bibliography of books and articles that I was not able to deal with in the text of my book. As B. B. Warfield once said, a Christian ought to be like a busy bee, gathering honey wherever it may be found!

Seventh, and finally (though Prof. Plantinga mistakenly numbers it as his sixth point), is the “Bultmann problem” (section 14). What is this problem? According to Prof. Plantinga, it is that his wide use of the worldview theme subverts the current neo-Calvinist and evangelical use of this notion. That is,

Bultmann believes that "...the worldview of Scripture is mythological and is therefore unacceptable to modern man whose thinking has been shaped by science..." (quoted by Plantinga, section 14). What must happen, according to Bultmann, is that the Scriptures must be "demythologized," thereby jettisoning the old-fashioned worldview husk and saving the existential (Heideggerian) kernel of the gospel for today. The point is that believers today obviously do not have the same worldview as first century Christians, and vice versa. The gospel message of the Church, therefore, is bound to an outmoded worldview.

In response, I say that this is true only at a scientific level, but not theologically. Believers today and believers in New Testament times still share the same basic theistic outlook. The ancient and contemporary Church believes in God, creation, sin, Christ, redemption, and so on. These common views establish a basis for the communion of the saints throughout the ages! Our faith has endured over time. We still say the Apostles' Creed today, and still mean it! That we may not have the same view of the circulatory system, or of the solar system, or that we use electricity and radios is just not that important. What matters is that there is a core set of Christian beliefs that define mere Christianity. These beliefs have been and still are believed by the elect. As Prof. Plantinga himself says in his own response to the Bultmannians, "the Word of God is not to be equated or identified with the cosmological and physiological assumptions of the writers of the Bible" (section 14). Amen! So, how Bultmann's arguments as such pose a serious problem for the use of the term worldview for Christians escapes me.²

To conclude, these are my responses to Prof. Plantinga's concerns about worldview and about my book. I am grateful for this opportunity to respond. This discussion needs a wider audience. I hope that perhaps some day, at least an

² By the way, if anyone is interested in looking at Bultmann's use of *Weltanschauung*, see Hans Hubner, Der Begriff 'Weltanschauung' bei Rudolf Bultmann." In *Wandel und Bestand Denkanstosse zum 21 Jahrhundert*, 395-408. Paderborn, Germany: Bonifatius, 1995.

article in *Books and Culture* may be written. Perhaps even a conference on the theme of worldview may be held one day, perhaps in Dallas or in Ancaster!

Pax Christi,

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