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The Return to Worldview: reflections from the UK

My first degree was in the natural sciences during which I accumulated knowledge, but thought little about the nature of that knowledge. The normative view that I unconsciously absorbed was a positivist realism that simply assumed that the world was exactly as scientists saw it. And that was how I held my Christian faith as well. Truth was what I read in the pages of Scripture (or at least what I was told that I read there by my Christian gurus). The notion of interpretation in either science or Christian faith never crossed my mind.

And then I came across Thomas Kuhn (1962) and his notion of scientific paradigms. My good fortune was to have the opportunity to study a module on the philosophy of science as part of my science degree. Suddenly it dawned on me that my assumed, common-sense realism might actually be naïve. I was introduced to Imre Lakatos' (1970) notion of a scientific research programme, which was his attempt to square the circle between Kuhn's seemingly subjective paradigm notion and Karl Popper's (1992) more objective idea of falsification. I even found out that there are anarchic philosophers who thought that science was a human construction (Feyerabend, 2010). Maybe what I thought were literal, objective descriptions of reality might be fictions of the human mind?

As I moved from learning science to teaching science, two further challenges impacted on my developing thinking. The first was that education might itself be more problematic than I thought. When training to teach, my professor, Paul Hirst, was a leading figure in the London School that pioneered the notion that *sophisticated* education (the version he advocated) was purely rational whilst Christian education (the vocation that I believed I was called to) was *primitive* because it rested on contested beliefs (Hirst, 1981). The second was that I did not yet know how to rescue my Christian faith from the bog of relativism into which it seemed to be sinking. My response was simply to get on with the job. I threw myself into extra-curricular Christian activity, invested time and energy in Christian schools' work organizations like *Youth for Christ* and started to teach Religious Education as a way of sharing my Christian faith.

However, a nagging concern for intellectual coherence drew me into further academic study. One of the formative encounters was with Lesslie Newbigin's work, who alerted me to Michael Polanyi's (1958, 1966) ideas about personal and tacit knowledge. Polanyi set-out to challenge the prevailing positivist view of science. One of his core arguments was that, as humans, scientists approach the task of knowing by deploying what he called a *fiduciary framework*, by which he meant a framework of beliefs and attitudes drawn from our learning, background and experience that mean we often 'know more than we can tell'. Polanyi was the final nail in my coffin of scientific naïve realism. All knowledge is personal, framed by a fiduciary framework. Inspired as he was by Polanyi, Newbigin became my first step in rehabilitating my confidence in Christian truth as public truth. Drawing on his missionary experience of religiously plural India, he enabled me understand that the danger lay not in encounter with other belief systems, but in the rationalists' attempts to exclude religious belief from the world of public knowledge. The threat came from the universalizing approach to rationality and the resulting imposition of particular fiduciary frameworks in the name of a believed neutral

rationality, not in the encounter with those who offered alternative truth claims to my evangelical Christianity.

It was at this stage that the notion of Christian worldview came to the fore of my consciousness. There were many influential authors, but names like Abraham Kuyper, Arthur Holmes, Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, Al Wolters, David Naugle, James Sire, Elmer Thiessen, Ruth Deakin, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen regularly figured in the bibliographies of my essays. Nicholas Wolterstorff introduced me to the idea of control beliefs and Peter Berger, through his use of the term plausibility structures, made me aware that the notion was also important in secular studies of knowledge. My favourite expression to describe the worldview concept is Brian Hill's (2004) RIBS (reasonable initial bets), echoing Alvin Plantinga (1983) notion of warranted beliefs.

On its own however, this notion of worldview did not overcome the looming spectre of relativism. It certainly meant that Christians were on the same level as everyone else in having as much justification as anyone else in a free society to educate from within our own Christian worldview. The myth of neutrality was shattered. But the notion of public truth was still elusive. It felt as though all education was primitive and anything aspiring to be sophisticated, in the sense of appealing to universal human rationality, was delusional. I became concerned that Christian educators were abandoning both the public domain and the notion of public truth and retreating into a pillarized approach where others were left to get on with 'their worldview thing' as long as Christians had the right to do 'their Christian worldview thing' in their schools. The important missing piece in this jigsaw appeared when I encountered the notion of Christian critical realism (e.g. Wright, 2013). This understanding of knowledge affirms the notion of a truth out there to which all humans are accountable, accepts that human knowing is worldview-framed so is always an interpretation of that reality, but, importantly, acknowledges that a process of critical debate and judgment-making is characteristic of the human condition and makes the public search for truth not just possible, but necessary. Critical realism had two particularly important consequences for my understanding of being a Christian educator. First it affirmed the importance of Christians seeking to influence *all* education and not just that in Christian institutions. Second it highlighted the importance of the virtue of epistemic humility for learning in the plural Agora that constitutes modern education.

The continuing relevance of the worldview notion in the UK context was highlighted by the recent publication of a tract from the influential Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (Clayton et al., 2018). Entitled *How to regulate faith schools*, it records the main conclusions of a project based at Warwick University that reviewed policy towards religious schooling from a philosophical standpoint. The report highlights some very important questions about the civic responsibilities of schools and their accountability to wider society in raising democratic citizens who contribute to the common good of society. It also, rightly in my view, stresses the importance of pupils learning about and experiencing religions and cultures different from their own so that they are not simply entrapped in their parents' cultural preferences.

However its central premise, namely that the risks to children's autonomy outweigh parental rights to determine the educational culture of their children, is problematic. The concern for autonomy is legitimate, but a view of autonomy that resonates with Hirst's neutral, rationalistic notion of sophisticated education is uncritically adopted. Pupils, it is argued, should 'become the authors of their own lives' (p. 18). This means, it is argued, that it is illegitimate for schools to act 'with the

intention that they should endorse any particular view about how to live their lives' (p. 17) or to include practices that 'form children's developing identities and create deep attachments' (p. 26). The assumption appears to be that these risks to autonomy exist only in 'faith' schools. However, picking on so-called 'faith' schools because they are deemed to be directive, whilst assuming the non-directive nature of non-faith (sic) schools, ignores all the epistemological insights of the worldview discussion that has been so influential in the last fifty years. This is astonishing in what purports to be a comprehensive review of the philosophical discussions of policy on faith schools. The question of whether non-faith schools are implicated in the transmission of worldview is simply not addressed. The educational aspirations (or goods as the report calls them) advocated, which include this controversial view of autonomy as free choice, are simply asserted (p. 13), presumably because they are deemed to be rational, objective and neutral. Nor is the worldview position of the authors declared. Since completing the project, the post-doctoral research fellow for the project has been appointed as the Education Campaigns Manager for Humanists UK. It is possibly significant that one of the core campaigns that she is now responsible for is to persuade the UK Government to remove public funding from religious character schools. One might wonder whether an undeclared humanist worldview influenced her research and led to the decision to exclude any consideration of relevant literature from the Christian and other religious communities.

Of course, the notion of worldview is not without its critics. Amongst Christian commentators, James KA Smith (2009, 2013) has been particularly influential in challenging the over-cognitive approach to learning that can result from a distorted obsession with worldviews. He describes this approach as as 'a steady diet of ideas, fed somewhat intravenously into the mind through the lines of propositions and information' (2009, 42). He argues that learning is ultimately about shaping our desires, not accumulating propositions, an activity that reduces humans to the level of 'brains on a stick' (2011, p. 241). Rather he sees education as a process of induction into what he calls cultural liturgies, which give an orientation (telos) to life and shape people's desires. Smith's contribution is highly significant in challenging the notion that worldview education is about absorbing abstract, disembodied ideas through the systematic study of pillarized systems of belief that are pre-determined by institutional authorities. Rather, he argues that it is about the orientation and shaping of human desires. Of courses ideas and beliefs are important in such education, since these are the lenses through which we understand the world. But it most certainly is not simply a catechetical induction into a set of systematised beliefs. Smith seems to consider Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which he describes as 'an orientation and understanding of the world that is absorbed and shaped at the level of practice' (Smith & Smith, 2011, p.10), as closest to his understanding of worldview. He therefore asks: 'What if we thought of the goal of Christian education and formation, not in terms of the acquisition of a Christian "worldview" but instead as the acquisition of a Christian *habitus*?' (2013, p.84).

In the light of this, an interesting recent development in the UK is the publication in September 2018 of the Final Report from the influential Commission on Religious Education¹. Its remit was to review RE in England, which is, although a compulsory subject in all publicly funded schools, in a perilous state with many schools ignoring it. The Commission made many recommendations, but of particular interest here is its suggestion that the focus of the subject should be worldviews. This is the first time that this word has featured in Religious Education policy in the UK. Currently the subject can be described as Religious Studies where children learn about different religions. The aspiration

of many is that it should contribute 'to personal autonomy by informing children about the range of ways of living their lives available to them' (Clayton et al., p28). This might be described as the 'spectator's guide to worldviews' approach where information is king and the teacher presents children with a brochure of options from which they freely choose a personal lifestyle and become more tolerant of others through being better informed. Some interpret the switch to worldviews language by the Commission as a welcome extension of the scope of the information offered by including non-religious worldviews. Yet others object to the watering down of the religious content. Academic critics see the worldview concept as hopelessly imprecise (e.g. Hand, 2012). Yet all these discussions largely assume the information conveying, religious studies model.

In my view, the report is actually recommending something very different; something much more revolutionary. It states that: 'Worldviews should not be understood as merely sets of propositional beliefs. They have emotional, affiliative (belonging) and behavioural dimensions' (p. 72). The word is also used in two senses; first as 'institutional systems of making meaning' and second as 'the individual process of making sense of life' (p. 72). The report is at pains to present the real-life complexity of worldview affiliation and move away from the idea that there are fixed, pillarized institutional systems that pupils can choose from by learning information. The understanding here is much closer to the notion of habitus than it is to the traditional conception of the Christian worldview as a fixed, monolithic system which is applied to the world. But given the struggles that many have had with the term worldview, I doubt that producing a report about habitus would have had much purchase with British teachers.

As a Christian educator, I welcome this turn to worldview in public education as a missiological blessing. Demographic change in England means that the majority now designate themselves as non-religious. Religious commitment of any sort simply doesn't make sense to most people. Learning that humans are shaped by their habitus, makes this subject relevant to all. It's not just the study of that increasingly weird group of people who are religious. Nor is it about having the information to make personal autonomous decisions. Rather it is about understanding how we are all shaped by our desires and of the importance of taking responsibility for the person that makes us. We are all inheritors of the communities which have nurtured us. We are knowers who are all interpreters. That makes us all responsible for critically evaluating our own habitus in engagement with those from other habitus. The autonomous learner is not then a free chooser of a worldview, but is rather a reflexive inhabitant of a habitus. Understanding that fact puts pupils in public education in a position to engage with the alternative habitus offered by the Christian Gospel.

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ⁱ Here I declare an interest, having served on the Secretariat for the Commission. That meant I was an observer at all Commission meetings, but never a participant in the decisions made.