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Worldviews on the Air: The Struggle to Create a Pluralistic Broadcasting System in the Netherlands (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Hiemstra, John L. *Worldviews on the Air: The struggle to create a pluralistic broadcasting system in the Netherlands*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1997. Reviewed by Fred Van Geest, Assistant Professor of Political Science.

The main significance and value of *Worldviews on the Air* may be twofold. First, the book gives Christians and others who desire political change good reason to be optimistic. It clearly suggests that ideas and values can be fundamentally important catalysts in political change. As the case study of broadcasting policy in the Netherlands reveals, despite many obstacles, the Kuyperian vision manifested itself in actual policy. We should take care to be cautious though. It would be naive to think that political change is merely a matter of disseminating and campaigning for policy options based on a Kuyperian or other worldview. Hiemstra clearly does not believe it is this simple.

Secondly, when reading the book, Christians who desire and strive for a just civil and political society will be struck by the possible contemporary relevance and wisdom of Kuyperian political thought and the “pillarized” institutions of Dutch society. Hiemstra hints at this in the preface to the book, and the value of these institutions in allowing for true religious freedom and justice among different communities is constantly implied throughout. Reading Hiemstra’s excellent and thorough discussion of the Kuyperian approach to school choice (presented as a mini-case study to illustrate Kuyperian ideas) and broadcasting is interesting and inspiring and leads one to consider the possibilities of alternative policy frameworks in North America.

The general characteristics of such a framework are presented in the second chapter which contains a very good exposition of Abraham Kuyper’s neo-Calvinist political ideas and their relation to Dutch pillarization. A core Kuyperian idea, described by Hiemstra as “structural pluralism” (18, 24-25, chap. 7), stands out as an alternative to the inadequate, North American, liberal view of pluralism as a way of accommodating religious and ideological divisions in modern society.

For those interested in the theoretical issues raised by *Worldviews on the Air*, it may be helpful to know that the book is a modified version of Hiemstra’s Ph.D. dissertation and, as such, focuses on a fairly narrowly conceived research question. The central concern of the study is to ask “whether the worldviews of the various actors in the Netherlands played a positive role in devising Dutch social structures and policy between 1917 and 1970” (4). These social structures, or “pillarized” institutions as they are referred to, are the

result of “worldview communities” which “had been allowed to develop and operate their own, distinctive institutions of civil society” (4).

In the opening chapter, Hiemstra places the central research question in theoretical context by saying that the influence of worldviews in the development of structures and policies “is virtually always characterized either to be merely functional and useful for controlling the masses or else negative and socially divisive” (4). For the scholarly reader, it is unfortunate that it is not until the very last chapter (which Hiemstra declares a “theoretical afterward for social scientists”) that the main theoretical approaches to understanding the development of pillarization are outlined. Although the general reader may have little interest in what these theoretical approaches have to say about pillarization, for the scholarly reader they are central to the research task at hand and would seem more appropriate in the opening of the book as the theoretical issues are framed. Although the reader may wish to read the last chapter after the first, the theoretical context is nonetheless adequately presented.

Hiemstra answers the central question in the affirmative. He arrives at his conclusion by virtue of a very detailed historical review of the development of Dutch broadcasting policy. This review of the role of worldviews in broadcasting policy is preceded by a chapter explaining how the Kuyperian worldview was also reflected in the Dutch school struggle. The chapter on the schools issue is helpful background for understanding the Kuyperian worldview but is not essential to the progression of the book or directly related to the book’s main conclusions, except in the sense of confirming the conclusions derived from the main study.

That Hiemstra arrives at the conclusion he does is not very surprising. It does not seem controversial to argue that worldviews would influence proposals for social institutions and public policies. Hiemstra takes a worldview to be “a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic make-up of our world” (6). Although the term worldview is not frequently used in the social sciences, the concept is readily used in understanding public policy. It is more commonly spoken of as ideas and values though. Ideas, values, and presuppositions are understood by many modern social scientists to be

a key determinant of public policy and are not always thought of in negative terms. Where Hiemstra contributes constructively to research in this area is in suggesting that worldviews are not just another explanatory variable which we can add to the list. His case study shows how worldviews structure the way people approach political problems and are intricately related to other variables.

Ideas, values, and presuppositions play only a part among a large number of interrelated policy determinants. Hiemstra does briefly acknowledge that there are other influences on human action, "such as political power, technological development or societal differentiation" (131). But, these variables, while intertwined with worldview influences, receive much less attention from him. It is not that he thinks these other variables are unimportant; rather he seems to argue that they are fundamentally related to worldviews as they affect the development of public policy. The difficulty for the reader may be in seeing exactly, (or even partially) how they are related. One gets the impression that Hiemstra sees worldviews as an overarching factor of great significance. He clearly demonstrates their great significance in the case study by showing how worldviews shape human action. However, some ambiguity over the relationship to other interrelated variables remains.

Hiemstra's desire to assert worldviews as important in political and policy analysis stems from his belief that modern social science has been based on assumptions that seem to rule out the significance of worldviews as explanatory variables or lead us to incorrectly understand how they work. In particular, Hiemstra suggests that many (most?) social scientists believe secularization and modernization "travel together," consider themselves religiously neutral, and are committed to developing "reliable objective knowledge" that is universally valid (150-51). If

these charges are true, the argument that worldviews are not recognized as prominent explanatory variables is more plausible. However, these charges may no longer be valid for many (most?) social scientists today. Postmodern thought, which has made extensive inroads into political and policy analysis, rejects any value/fact dichotomy, the universal validity of ideas and "reliable objective knowledge." To the extent that postmodern values and assumptions characterize political analysis today, Hiemstra may appear to be setting up a dated, "straw man" in arguing that modern social science denies or diminishes the significance of worldviews. On the other hand, to the extent that "objective" social science is still attempted in practice, Hiemstra's critique is valid.

However, rather than viewing Hiemstra's research in contradistinction to other current political analysis, I would be inclined to see it as a confirmation of the widespread thinking in social science today that ideas, as they are manifested in religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and worldviews, are of fundamental importance in politics and in determining institutional and policy development today, as well as in the past. Although Hiemstra does not make reference to it, there is extensive research today on these matters. Perhaps it is beyond the scope of the book, but his analysis could be strengthened by reference to this literature and by carefully identifying the ways in which he believes the concept of worldview extends beyond a narrow deterministic approach religion or ethnicity, for instance.

In sum, for those curious about the nature of worldviews and public policy development, for those who need to be encouraged about political change, and for those who are interested in how to accommodate diversity and maintain just relations in an ideologically and religiously differentiated society, this book is well worth reading.

Frame, John M., *Contemporary Worship Music, A Biblical Defence*. (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1997). 212 pp. \$10.99 paperback. Reviewed by Syd Hielema, Instructor of Theology.

The worship wars that have exercised many North American churches during the past fifteen years or so appear to be diminishing, and this welcome movement towards calm is furthered by publications such as John Frame's *Contemporary Worship Music, A Biblical Defence (ABD)*. Frame's contribution provides, for the most part, a balanced and fair apologetic for the inclusion of contemporary music styles in worship. His credentials for writing this defence are sound: professor of apologetics and systematics at Westminster (West)

Theological Seminary, classically trained musician and worship leader. His defence of contemporary music places him among those who, as he notes in the book's dedication, "swim against the current of Reformed opinion for the sake of the Reformed gospel."

The primary strength of ABD lies in its solid rooting in a biblical common sense that rises above the dogmatic stridency so easily engendered by polarized debate. This sensible approach is evident in a number of areas. Frame recognizes the importance of tradition in