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The Disruption of Evangelicalism: The Age of Torrey, Mott, McPherson and Hammond (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell

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Therapeutic Approach in Moral Education: A Critical Assessment

Abstract:
This study aims to critically assess the so-called therapeutic approach in moral education, which emerged in the postwar twentieth century, in the western part of the world. The proponents of the approach used different terms to express its essence: value clarification method, or sometimes the decision-making method or the critical thinking method. These philosophies of education have the common feature of a personalistic, non-directive, or client-oriented approach to the individual. Therefore, I will refer to them here as therapeutic.

There are many advocates, but some of the most notable should be named: Carl Rodgers, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Sidney B. Simon, Louis Raths, and Merrill Harmin. For a proper understanding of these approaches, it’s necessary to review first the cultural-ideological context of their origin. After that I will analyze and evaluate their key tenets, which I consider problematic. Specifically, we will scrutinize these problems: (1) the problem of process at the expense of content, (2) the problem of devaluation of the educator’s authority, (3) the problem of blurring of moral concepts and standards, (4) the problem of value pseudo-neutrality and indoctrination, (5) the problem of individualism, subjectivism, and relativism.

Key words: Moral, education, therapeutic, method, indoctrination.

Historical and cultural context
Education, in the sense of therapeutic clarification of values (and all related concepts), was in many ways a reaction to the postwar crisis of values and culture in general. The coming generation openly distanced themselves from the “moral” culture of their parents. In addition to freedom of expression, emancipation of human rights, and emphasis on autonomy, the prevailing sentiment of the flower children was resistance towards the “stale” culture that priggishly preached, commissioned, and taught. The culture of their fathers—
because of the horrors of war that were still fresh in their memories—had lost its moral legitimacy and become more of a source of shame than something to pass along pedagogically. From such a background it was not surprising, therefore, that in the 1960s there arose a method that emphasized discussion, openness, engagement, no guidelines, and so on. The goal of the method was neither the formation nor transmission of any kind of specific “bag of virtues,” in the words of Lawrence Kohlberg, or other moral material; it was indoctrination, which was considered one of the cardinal defects of all traditional educational approaches. Teachers and educators of this new type were given the task of helping students think independently and critically, based on the psychological assumption that if the individuals themselves identified their own values, the internalization of those values would be easier and more durable than if they were mediated by some adult. The students were thus guided to discover, classify, and develop their own values, that is, to construct their own moral universe.

Experimental findings by developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Kohlberg conveniently arrived just in time. Although their theories of the moral and cognitive development of the individual were not originally intended to be educational, their application to pedagogy was soon found. Different variations of Kohlberg’s famous micro-story dilemmas were used in lessons as a tool for clarifying moral categories and values, a tool which was expected to both move the students to a higher stage of moral development and teach them independent moral judgment and argumentation.

How does the method work in didactic practice? For illustration, I present two mini-stories: Kohlberg’s now famous “Heinz’s Dilemma” and “Sharon’s Dilemma” from the just-as-well-known teacher’s handbook of Simon and his colleagues:

A fatally ill woman lived in Europe. She suffered from a special kind of cancer. There existed a medicine that was recently discovered by a pharmacist from the same town. To produce the medicine was very expensive, and the pharmacist charged ten times more than it cost him to make. Heinz, the husband of the sick woman, borrowed from everyone he could and still had only half of the cost of the medicine. He begged the pharmacist to lower the price or allow him to pay it in installments. But the pharmacist wouldn’t budge. Desperate, Heinz broke into the pharmacy at night and stole the medicine.

Sharon and Jill were best friends. One day they went shopping together. Jill was trying on a sweater, when she suddenly put her jacket on over it and left the store. The guard arrived immediately afterwards, stopped Sharon and asked the name of her friend who had fled the store. At the same time, she threatened to call the police if Sharon wouldn’t give the name.

The questions for discussion are obvious: Was Heinz’s theft wrong or not? Should Sharon betray her friend or not? The discussion has to be well-controlled didactically in order to fulfill its task. Therefore, the authors present the following instructions. (1) Recapitulate the basic facts of the story and ask a clear yes/no question. (2) Give the students enough time to think through the question and answer independently, ideally in writing, and with justification. (3) Next, the students say their answers aloud. If it happens that most of the group agree, S. B. Simon recommends adding “balancing” information. For example, if most of the class vote for giving the name, the teacher can draw attention to the implications that this judgment would have on the girls’ friendship, or bring a new variable into the story—for example, what if Jill was from a weak social background, and so on. (4) The teacher is to lead the discussion in a fundamentally non-directive manner. No interfering unless necessary, only steering it by means of questions—either stimulating (if the discussion lags), or regulatory (if the discussion gets off track) or clarifying (to break down concepts or motives, etc.). Teachers must also avoid the temptation to express their own opinions (even though the students request it) because that usually ends the discussion. (5) The conclusion of the discussion should contain a summary of the arguments (for and against), as well as a re-stating of the beginning and ending opinions. Did the students change their view?
For what reason? And so on. Of course, the stories and strategies can also be subject to thematic changes and adapted to the age and circumstances of the group.

The method spread quickly and gained popularity. In addition to Simon's handbook, which became a bestseller, many other similar textbooks were published. By the 1980s, however, the first problems and criticisms had appeared. I will not here critique Kohlberg’s theory as a diagnostic tool for identifying stages of moral development (others have already done that), but rather I will present a critique of the didactic application.

Critics admit that this method brought about some contribution to the moral educational discussion. If it is used prudently, that is, with sensitively chosen topics appropriate to the age and maturity of the children, circumstances, etc., this method can help make them sensitive to moral reality, sometimes even bringing them to a first “awakening” —from, for example, the typical adolescent egocentrism, or even narcissism. From the viewpoint of the content of the selected topics, this method proved to be very attractive, especially in the critical teen years—what adolescent isn’t interested in topics like sex, drugs, relationships, murders, or cannibalism (eating the last survivor of a shipwreck on a deserted island). Non-directive and group strategies entertain, engage, or activate and thus motivate and stimulate students—all results that are seen as the greatest didactic currency of this approach. But the criticism is massive.4

**Process at the Expense of Content**

This therapeutic approach to moral education suffers, above all, from the “subordination of content for the benefit of the process,” says James Hunter: The presentation of certain moral content (content-based instruction) is secondary and completely overshadowed by questions about the “process whereby morality is acquired.”5 The ideological source of this approach is the anthropological assumption of the innate goodness of human nature, the belief that people are unproblematically good—both ontologically and morally. In the 20th century we first saw this dominance of process over content in Carl Rogers’ personalistic concept of client-centered therapy. Rogers says that people should accept themselves as “streams of becoming” in a life-long process of self-actualization. Fully actualized individuals would then see themselves as a “fluid process, not a fixed and static entity […], a continually changing constellation of potencies, not a fixed quantity of traits.”6 Later Rogers explicitly states that the process of self-realization applies to education as much as to therapy. “The teacher,” says Rogers, “becomes a facilitator in the process of the students’ self-definition […], a resource-finder […].” He would want the quality of his relationship to the group to be such that his feelings could be freely available to them, without being imposed on them or becoming a restrictive influence on them.”7

This emphasis was enthusiastically corroborated by many educators. William Glasser, for example, in his book *School Without Failure*, bluntly condemns education aimed at specific moral content as preaching: “We teach mindless conformity to school rules and call the conforming child ‘responsible.’”8 Simon, Howe, and Kirshenbaum speak in a similarly unequivocal way when they say that contents of a traditional curriculum are “out-dated, moralistic” and strive after the “inculcation of adult values into the youth,” and as such are “indoctrination.” They, in contrast, seek a higher goal, “the facilitation of the process of moral judgment.”9 The same appeal comes from the constructivist camp. A school that would present any kind of “objective morality” is compared to an “army camp,” and the teachers to “drill sergeants.” Proper education should consist of drawing out values only “as the need arises,” say Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan. They continue, “we are talking here about a process and not a product. In
this process, children wrestle with questions, what to believe to be good and bad, right and wrong. They form their own opinions and listen, listen to the opinions of others. They construct their own morality out of daily life experiences.”10 The last thing a teacher should do is to “dictate moral norms to the children.”11 Instead, a teacher should “cooperate with the children by trying to understand their reasoning and facilitating the constructive process.”12

However understandable the resistance to traditional moral content is, and however welcome the appeal for a helpful pedagogical climate, the unilateral emphasis on the procedural side of moral formation has had the effect over time of emptying the contents of moral education as such. The logic of the problem is simple: If the teacher only therapeutically “recognizes, accepts and validates”13 students’ moral feelings and perceptions without resorting to criticism (because it would improperly interfere with the students’ process of self-actualization), it’s inevitable that sooner or later the teacher will agree with a completely immoral construction on the side of the student, a result which has also been confirmed in pedagogical practice. Thomas Lickona recalls, from his clinical research, the experience of a 9th-grade teacher who, within the framework of ethical education, used the technique of “voting on values.” The teacher began the discussion with the question “Who of you has ever stolen something from a store?” Most of the students raised their hands. “Don’t you think that stealing is bad?” Lickona comments that the teacher forgot for a moment that such a question violates the rule of value neutrality. “We have a right to material things,” answered one of the students, and the others nodded in agreement. The teacher remained clueless.14

In addition to similar narrative testimonies, there are many empirical studies that unsurprisingly support the idea that the suppression of the content of education leads logically to its emptying of content, and ultimately to its malfunctioning.15 If the individual is not exposed to moral content, there is nothing to develop; moral development simply does not appear.

Devaluation of the Authority of the Educator

The imperative of therapeutic non-instruction is not only a matter of the teachers’ didactic manner or conduct in the classroom; it basically concerns their social role. Proponents of the methods described above encourage educators to programmatically abdicate their traditional role as ones who instruct, interpret, and present moral content. We have seen a shift in the understanding of their role—teachers should act as facilitators or consultants, sometimes as assistants. They still have the responsibility of organizing classroom activities and academic discipline, but the way of accomplishing it is different under the therapeutic conception. In 1963 Jean Piaget said that the “imposition of the authority” of an adult is, in an educational context, “absurd” and “immoral.” In his judgment, an adult should only be an “elder collaborator and, if he has it in him, a simple comrade” to children.16

The same philosophy applied in Kohlberg’s experimental community (Just Community)—“students and teachers participate equally in the creation and enforcement of rules.”17 Parents are also encouraged to take the same approach: “To achieve [the] parental goal of raising responsible children who grow into responsible men and women, parent-child relationships need to be based on democratic principles […] of mutual respect and equality.”18 To this, James Hunter observes that the term “democracy” is used here, but it is losing its specific historical meaning. The original—Greek—usage of the term expressed a way of organizing the political life of a society where the roles and relational responsibilities between the people (démos) and those who lead them, were defined in a concrete way. But educational therapists use the term democracy without that context, and here it describes the process of social organization without any further identification. Thus, it becomes a code or charm legitimizing the right of individuals to participate and make decisions in any context.19 The consequences are predictable. The established structure of pedagogical authority loses its social significance.
Blurring of Concepts and Standards

The growing reluctance to convey any kind of moral content, however objective, accompanied by the phenomenon of weakened teacher authority to safeguard the content, had the effect of eroding moral terminology and, ultimately, moral standards as such. As in theory, so in practice, the normative distinctions for seeing and clarifying good from evil were lost. The concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, did not completely disappear, but they were redefined, a result that caused a fatal confusion of terminology and was a source of misunderstanding.

When, for example, Kohlberg talks about morality or immorality, these are always relative terms, defined according to the level of moral judgment the individuals are capable of using in this or that period of their development. So as people evolve and become more “moral,” their morality is not the same as becoming good. For example, if selfishness or other character flaws appear in the judgment or behavior of individuals, these are considered the result of developmental or cognitive immaturity, or general inadequacy in their cognitive functionality. Thus, the concept of good and evil has lost its ontological status, and with that also its objective meaning, and gradually also its meaningful referential framework in language, a loss that Alasdair MacIntyre very aptly pointed out.

In the therapeutic context, the concepts of good and evil have slowly become outdated and incorrect, precisely because they have lost their ability to relate to anything that would be considered as moral reality. Adam Philips notes that the therapeutic approaches have literally developed a “phobia” to the word evil. I have personally observed a similar fate for the word guilt. The fact that there is a pathological form of this “emotion” has led to its stigmatization and the subsequent neglect of its healthy form. At the same time, the psychological strength of guilt is, in terms of healthy moral development, irreplaceable. It has the “power” to save people from their tendency towards wrong behavior and also to motivate them towards correction, when a wrong has been committed. But this potential is dependent on a shared consensus on the concepts of good and evil. By eliminating it, educators and therapists have made the concept of guilt powerless and forbidden. The guilty one needs therapy, not punishment.

Hunter adds that neologisms such as the word prosocial are an unconcealed attempt to avoid the encumbrance of the old moral categories. In principle, the meaning remains the same—socially positive or negative behavior matches with the statement “what you did is good/bad,” but the hard emotional tip of the concepts is broken off, and in addition the teachers are enabled to distance themselves from terminology that sounds judging or condemning. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the fact that the frequent use of the term prosocial didn’t used to be contrasted in literature with the word evil, nor with antisocial. Rather, it was contrasted with the somewhat amorphous word negative, in discussions about the deficiencies of pro-socialism, but never to talk about evil.

If the moral concepts still appear in linguistic usage, they do so only as categories of meaning that individuals construct on the basis of their experience. Teachers, then, have the task of encouraging students in that construction of moral reality, for example, by programmatically creating the opportunity for students to vote on rules for classroom behavior or the values that will become the code of the group. But what happens when the students—in their predictable invention and creativity—vote, say, that someone who doesn’t cheat is a “chicken” or maybe that they don’t wish to do certain school activities that require effort, such as grammar lessons or PE, on the grounds that these activities don’t belong to their value system?

The obfuscation of moral language is also evidenced by pedagogical practice based on the therapeutic approach. Critics point out that
the fundamental misgivings and dangers of the method of moral dilemmas consist in their implicit relativization of moral principles. If students are programmatically exposed to unsolvable moral situations, they can get the impression that all morality is “unsolvable,” i.e., problematic, controversial, and ultimately relative. Students who are confronted with one extreme situation after another in which it isn’t clear whether they should steal, lie, kill, or eat each other, in the end become convinced that concepts such as good and evil are completely vague—evidence of a very sophisticated form of indoctrination because it is carried out on a latent level. But is the starting point of the premise of this approach correct? Is it possible to apply conclusions derived from extreme situations to non-extreme situations? From abnormal to normal? From exceptional to common? Let us consider the example of Heinz’s dilemma. In a life and death situation, stealing seems acceptable, even moral. What would it be for a person who puts morals (not stealing) above human life? Does it follow from these extremes that stealing is permissible—even under ordinary (or all) circumstances? The answer is obvious (at least I hope so). And I believe that neither Kohlberg nor any other supporters of the critical method would agree with a conclusion of unrestrained robbery. Nevertheless, the method of moral dilemmas really leads to such a conclusion, even if the teacher is not aware of it.

Kilpatrick wonders how a dilemma about theft could help young teenagers overcome the temptation to steal money from their parent’s wallet. He says that most of the moral situations faced by both children and adults are not dilemmas: most moral choices are unambiguous. We simply have to do what we know we should do, and not do what we know we shouldn’t. The time spent in school would be much better used by considering (and practicing) virtues such as friendship, loyalty, and honesty rather than focusing on unsolvable situations where truthfulness seems wrong, friendship is separated from honesty, and cannibalism is legitimized. Kilpatrick further notes that the method of dilemmas, especially when applied to children at an early stage of moral and cognitive development, is “woefully inadequate,” because it comes out of the assumption that children already have the “ABCs of morality,” and are therefore able to cope with questions requiring a higher level of moral judgment. In other words, Kilpatrick is arguing that before children are exposed to moral complexity (remember Sharon: “Is it right to be loyal to a friend, or truthful to the authorities?”), they should be taught the basics of morality (“Is it right to steal this sweater?”). If that doesn’t happen, the youth are put into moral confusion because they are instilled with the preconceptions that (a) suppress the basic moral intuition that some things are really and unproblematically good and some bad; and (b) lead to a contradiction between moral theory and moral practice. However possible it is to instill and hold the theory of the relativity of moral norms, it cannot be meaningfully applied in practice. We start teaching children from the time they’re in the sandbox that there are some things they cannot do to others, and we say the same thing to criminals in court.

Value Pseudo-neutrality and Indoctrination

Critics of therapeutic pedagogy point to the fact that, in spite of their claim that the therapeutic approach is completely value-neutral, the reality is the opposite. Kilpatrick presents an example of a favorite didactic strategy, “VV,” which is Value Voting. The exercise begins with innocent questions like “How many of you like to go for walks in the countryside?” or “How many of you love picnics?” or “How many of you love yogurt?” But soon there appear questions like “How many of you approve of premarital sex?” or “Which of you are for legalizing abortion?” or “How many of you are in favor of having homosexual couples married by priests, ministers, and rabbis?” Kilpatrick points out that the authors of the method have made no effort to separate the heavy-value questions from the light ones. They are intertwined as though there were no significant differences between them. The exercise is designed to give young people the impression that “all values are questions of personal taste—as in the case of yogurt,” says Kilpatrick. This kind of design is not only not neutral, it is “indoctrinat-
ing” because it deliberately and somewhat deceitfully instills the doctrine of value relativity. Whether or not it is the teachers’ intention, if this method is used in pedagogical practice, it does indoctrinate (although students/teachers usually are not even aware of it).

Proponents of the therapeutic method understandably don’t like to be associated with such a—for them almost vulgar—word and vehemently defend themselves. Indeed, resistance to indoctrination was one of the central motives of the alternative approach. But the problem is that they defined the term indoctrination very vaguely. It didn’t occur to them that they also held a set of specific values and doctrines that they perforce communicated to children by whatever indirect method. Once the term is defined, it becomes clear that their approach fulfills every criteria of indoctrination. The definition of Downey and Kelley, to which Kohlberg referred in one of his apologies, is an illustration of the problem. The triad of indoctrinating criteria—questionable content, questionable method, questionable goals—is so general that even its proponents fall into it. They communicate notoriously questionable content or doctrine—values are relative. They use questionable methods—the therapists’ preferred non-directive methods of teaching. Non-directiveness, however, doesn’t guarantee anything. Teachers may (and often do) indoctrinate in a non-directive way. That is, in effect, an effective trick. Intentional? asks Kilpatrick. I won’t be as mistrustful as my colleague here. I use the adjective “effective” as opposed to “intentional” because I am not presuming that there is any premeditated or manipulative intent. On the basis of my own pedagogical experience and personal interaction with fellow teachers, I have come to the conclusion that few teachers actually seek to relativize moral values on the part of their students. Rather, I think that users of the therapeutic method simply haven’t anticipated the implications of their theory. There is nothing more practical than good theory. If, however, the theory is dubious, the practical consequences will be dubious too, even though the way is lined with good intentions.

Not only the teacher but also the student is outwitted here. They were promised a tool to “stimulate” moral thinking, which would lead to greater moral competence, but in reality they were subjected to the process of methodological relativization of values. It is woven into the therapeutic textbooks, not in a neutral way but skillfully (and probably unintentionally) hidden. Despite the rhetoric of value neutrality that it proclaims in theory, practice shows that the therapeutic educator is anything but neutral.

**Individualism, Subjectivism, Relativism**

In light of what has been said, it is unsurprising that therapeutic pedagogy has earned accusations of moral subjectivism, accompanied by individualism and eventually leading to moral relativism. Conservative theoreticians and practitioners of education have been thoroughly heard from in this respect. See, for example, Kilpatrick’s bestseller, *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*, first published in 1992. In the title, the author makes a deliberate reference to the earlier book by Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. In it, Flesch clarifies the reason for the failure of certain didactic experiments carried out in America in the postwar years. Briefly, the traditional phonetic method of language teaching was replaced by the “look-say” method, in which the focus of reading acquisition was transferred from teachers to students. The authors of the project promised greater engagement of students, which would lead to more effective acquisition of reading skills. The reality was just the opposite, and the project was a total failure, but before it ended (for a certain time it had the approval of the federal authorities), it produced a whole generation of nearly illiterate “readers.” Kilpatrick says that something similar happened in the area of
moral education. In his judgment, the dramatic decline in moral literacy, which can not only be documented statistically but also seen with the naked eye, is the consequence of implementing a bad method. A whole generation of children have been fooled by its moral relativism and are now unable to recognize the good from the bad.

Proponents of therapeutic pedagogy defend themselves against the accusation of relativism. They say that their method “definitely promotes the values of thinking, feeling, choosing, communicating, and acting” as well as “rationality, justice, creativity, autonomy, and equality.”30 Alfie Kohn denounces the “rampant individualism and self-assurance” that threaten society as a whole and argues for “community cooperation” as a key goal of moral education.31 Abraham Maslow similarly explains that “valuelessness” is the “greatest disease of our time.”32 The term democracy also often appears as a non-negotiable value that should be promoted by moral or civic education. (There is even a subject called Education to Democracy or Democratic Thinking—as opposed to totalitarian thinking). The same goes with respect, tolerance, empathy, and the so-called Golden Rule. So, no relativism?33

It is good, however, to ask all these sets of values these questions: Where are they coming from? On what ontological basis do they stand? How are they anchored or validated? One way to avoid meta-ethical problems is simply to assert that they are values of the type of universal maxims or ideals that are self-validating or self-evident, and that no further justification is needed. But such an evasive maneuver doesn’t work in education. From the earliest age, children are wired in such a way as to need to know the reasons for their actions, or the actions required of them. The instruction “you should” do this or that, or behave in this way or that, calls forth a child-like natural and unaffected desire to know why. It’s true that there are “why” questions and developmental stages that really don’t need an answer, such as “Why shouldn’t I touch the burner?” But others literally cry out for an answer: “Why should I be brave?” “Why must I control myself?”

Most educators know this fact very well; and therefore, if possible, they look for good answers or fundamentals, which would give meaningful justification for moral values and rights—including therapeutic educators. But on what basis? Moral ideals are rooted “neither in the conventions of social life or public discourse, nor in an external or transcendent standard inherited from any particular moral tradition,” explains Hunter; and, he continues, “rather, these ideals are rooted in the rights (the desires, feelings, needs and potentialities) of the autonomous individual. The self, in brief, is both the source of all moral sensibility and the final object of moral accountability.”34 Rodgers can in many ways be considered the father of this concept:

The individual increasingly comes to feel that the locus of evaluation lies within himself. Less and less does he look to others for approval or disapproval; for the standards to live by; for decisions and choices. He recognizes that it rests within himself to choose; that the only questions that matters is “Am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?”35

Elsewhere he adds,

Everyone possesses the capacity to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature. [Moral capacity] exists in every individual and awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed. [...] Whether one calls it a growth tendency, a drive toward self-actualization, or a forward-moving directional tendency, it is the main-spring of life.36

In psychotherapeutic circles, Maslow speaks similarly about people. Everyone has an “inner core,” which “as much as we know of it so far, is definitely not ‘evil,’ but is either what we adults in our culture call ‘good’ or else it is neutral,” he explains.37 “Self-realization” and “self-fulfillment” are, in his judgment, “instinctive.” Let Maslow speak more extensively about human nature:

Man demonstrates in his own nature a pressure towards fuller and fuller Being, more and more perfect actualization of his human-ness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be “pressing
toward” being an oak tree, or a tiger can be observed to “push toward” being tigerish, or a horse toward being equine. Man is ultimately not molded or shaped into humanness or taught to be human. The role of the environment is ultimately to permit him or help him to actualize his own potentialities.  

Fathers of liberal education like Rousseau would have rejoiced: no molding, no teaching, permission, letting the potential itself be actualized… What potential? “Creativeness, spontaneity, selfhood, authenticity, caring for others, being able to love, yearning for truth are embryonic potentialities belonging to his species-membership just as much as are his arm and legs and brain and eyes.”

The therapeutic educational concepts are, in their theory, true echoes of this anthropology. Again and again we read that “learning is a process whereby meaning, ethical or otherwise, must be actively invented and reinvented, from the inside out.” Or, write other authors, “The individual who is autonomously moral follows moral rules of the self. Such rules are self-constructed, self-regulating principles”—hence the didactic emphasis on autonomous decision-making and choice, which are so characteristic of this kind of education. True values “represent the free and thoughtful choice of intelligent humans interacting with complex and changing environments.” But the values must be chosen freely, else they’re not “right”; or, at least, they are “chosen from among alternatives,” but mainly, “after independent consideration.” The imperative for free choice has become so inviolable that educators have been encouraged to “help the children look for value, as long as [emphasis mine] the children make the decisions. It is also possible that the children decide not to develop values. The teachers’ responsibility is to support even such a decision.” Kohn adds pregnantly, “children must be invited to reflect on complex issues, to recast them in the light of their own experience and questions, to figure out for themselves—and with one another—what kind of person one ought to be.” In other words, a value can become one’s own only through choice.

Pedocentrism of this type necessarily leads to moral subjectivism and relativism, as is well illustrated by the handbook of one of the therapeutic education programs with the title Growing up Caring. Let’s consider two examples. In the chapter on cheating in school, a student discovers a picture of a girl during an exam looking over the shoulder of her classmate, with the accompanying text: “Cheating, in any form, is bad for your self-esteem.” In another chapter in the book is a photograph of a young girl who is stealing from a store, while the next picture shows two other people watching her and recording it on camera. The accompanying text says, “One way to test the impact a decision will have on your feeling of self-worth is to imagine a picture being taken of you implementing your decision.” The ethical argument of these instructions is clear—the children are not led to believe that cheating or stealing are objectively wrong because they violate a universal law. Cheating is wrong because it calls forth an unpleasant feeling or threatens the self-confidence of an individual. Such an argument is almost amusing to someone who grew up under a totalitarian regime in the seventies and eighties. In a culture deformed by Communist ideology, people felt downright happy if they could manage to steal from the state-owned property, or at least get around some law. After all, the best people—from a moral perspective—were usually “illegal” or in prison or exile. Things are different now in both the East and the West. The “feeling” argument no longer works today—the number of individuals whose self-esteem would be lowered by being exposed as a person who committed an unethical act is rapidly declining everywhere.

Subjectivism, which is behind the therapeutic concepts of pedagogy, has a direct connection with the “cultures” of ethical utilitarianism and emotivism (sometimes called expressionism). In utilitarianism, moral discourse determines the logic of expediency and usefulness; in emotion-
alism, the logic of psychological well-being. In both cases, it is the individual I who arbitrates moral prudence. In this frame of reference, the most important moral act is that of choice, making a decision—not a decision for something, just making a decision, period, and deciding it yourself—Jean Paul Sartre in pedagogical robes.

The results? Therapeutic pedagogies have achieved their goals; and in doing so, they have become part of the problem they wanted to solve. The therapeutically raised generation is truly autonomous, at least to the extent that they have ruled out any commitment that would go beyond the borders of subjective choice and personal well-being. It is the logical result of programmatic questioning of objective moral reality. If I am being convinced that the final arbiter of moral values is me or my feelings, eventually I will believe it. If I am methodically urged to self-identify my existence through free choice, I will eventually do it. Who would have expected that, entirely freely, I would choose evil? But it could have been expected—at least since Zimbardo and Milgram.46

But before them, Dostoyevsky already said it; and before him, Aquinas, Augustine, Paul of Tarsus, and many others.

In Place of Conclusion: The Abolition of Man

Many of the problems of the therapeutic approach were uniquely dealt with by C. S. Lewis in his book The Abolition of Man, subtitled Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools. Lewis’s treatise crosses lines not only in its form—concise, intense, brief, and all with typical Lewis readability—but most of all in that Lewis almost prophetically predicted the moral problems that came later. Most observers or critics—including those I refer to here—normally analyze the results of some phenomenon, but Lewis, with unprecedented foresight, presented a description of what was yet to come. Therefore, he deserves special attention in the conclusion of this paper.

The text of the book is based on three lectures Lewis gave in 1943.47 Lewis is reacting to a textbook on the English language which—so it wouldn’t offend anyone—was hidden under the designation “green book” by the pseudonymous authors “Gaius and Titus.” It was a book written in 1939 called The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing, by Alex King and Martin Ketley. Lewis analyzes the way in which the authors of the textbook subvert the students’ values—not only the moral ones. When a value statement is made, such as “that waterfall is beautiful,” the authors teach that it is only the subjective statement of a specific feeling on the part of the observer, not a statement about objective reality. We think we’re saying something important about something real, but we are actually only saying something about our own feelings, claim the authors. Lewis argues that such subjectivism in value judgments is flawed because some subjects and some acts are actually real; that is, they are objective and deserve an evaluation, whether positive or negative. A waterfall is objectively beautiful, a villain is objectively evil. Understandably, an ethics which doesn’t believe in the reality of objective moral values will avoid the concepts of good and evil. But if we replace “good” with predicates like “necessary,” “progressive,” or “impressive,” we are using just a trick of language, a linguistic ruse, says Lewis, who explains with the questions “necessary for what? progressing towards what? effecting what? In the last resort they [Gaius and Titus] would have to admit that some state of affairs was in their opinion good for its own sake.” In other words—it is good to call things by their right names and cultivate an “ethics without predicates.”

According to Lewis, this ethics has been well taught by good teachers from time immemorial. Lewis reminds us of the thinkers of antiquity such as Plato, Aristotle and Augustine, who, in one way or another, cultivated “ordinate affections,” that is, teaching people to love that which ought to be loved and to hate that which ought to be hated—to love good and hate evil. Although moral feelings and values are real, they don’t develop automatically in people, says Lewis. Hence the need for education. Those who don’t have these moral capacities are lacking the very thing that would make them specifically human. They would be, in Lewis’s words, “men without chests” or “without hearts.” The Gaius and Titus book
produces such people by undermining the fact that people are capable of contact with objective reality (moral, aesthetic or other) and thus taking away from them that which is humanly the most valuable. (If such people were asked, “Do you think there is something real outside of you—truth, goodness, beauty, the noumena?” they would answer, “No—there’s only you, the subject, your impression, phenomena, illusion.”)

What will happen with the human world when we explain away and thus domesticate moral reality? In the last part of his book, Lewis gives an unbelievably accurate sketch of the contours of the modern dystopia that should soon emerge if this demoralizing trend were to continue. The power of human beings to do exactly what they wish will grow with the so-called “conquest of nature,” that is, the development of the natural sciences. However, every new power acquired by Man is, at the same time, “power over man,” says Lewis. Therefore, it is good to ask whose power grows with every further sublimation of nature. Lewis predicts that if the dream of some scientists becomes a reality and we humans “take control of nature,” it will mean the supremacy of hundreds of people over billions of others. The final stage of conquest will be conquest of one’s self, that is, human nature. Human nature will be the final bastion of the natural world that will be conquered. The victorious ruling minority will become a caste of Conditioners, that is, people who will have control tools (he mentions eugenics, genetics and psychology) and who will knead, form, and cut out the nature of the succeeding generations however they want: “The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists,” warns Lewis, I remind the reader, in 1943. He adds, “The methods may (at first) differ in brutality. […] The belief that we can invent ideologies at pleasure, and the consequent treatment of mankind as mere specimens, preparations, begins to affect our very language.” Man’s conquest of Nature turns out to be Nature’s conquest of Man. Man’s power over everything destroys him.

Lewis called the process of conquering, when people sacrifice one thing after another, and finally even themselves, in order to gain power over nature and human nature, a “magician’s bargain.” Faust’s metaphor illustrates the fact that modern “science” has the same goal as the ancient magic, which is the submission of reality to the wishes of humankind—to command the wind and the rain, to gain that hideous strength, which is in fact to become a god. To achieve their goal, they use magic and science to do things that have long been considered “disgusting and impious.”

The same applies to moral values and principles. If they are conquered, people will have the power to freely modify, design, and even produce them. Moral values and ethics are not things that determine a person, but things that persons themselves determine however they see fit, a situation that means the end of them. And this is the “tragi-comedy of our situation,” Lewis concludes: we call loudly for precisely those qualities that we ourselves have subverted: “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes
2. Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child (London: Kegan Paul, 1932); also Lawrence Kohlberg, Essays on Moral Development II (San


5. See Hunter, 177-178.


11. Ibid., 132.

12. Ibid., 78.


20. Cf. Ibid., 183.

21. MacIntyre's book, with the title After Virtue, first published in 1981, presents a “disturbing hypothesis” about the current state of moral discourse. Entire and coherent conceptual systems have disappeared, according to MacIntyre, and in their place we have only fragmented sayings and partial beliefs. The cause is not the decline of morality in a superficial sense, but the deeper decay of meaningful moral language into which these fragments could be put and rationally developed. MacIntyre believes this decline is connected to the expansion of modern individualistic morality. He shows that moral emotivism has degraded every moral statement into a mere expression of individual preference. All statements like “it should be” or “it's right” can be decoded and reveal someone's will behind them. In continental philosophy, the parallel to emotivism is primarily Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of morality. MacIntyre opposes both concepts and argues that they are only a reflection of the state of moral language after its decline in modernity, especially in the Enlightenment.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 81-82.


31. Howard Kirschenbaum, Advanced Value


35. Ibid., 188.

36. Rodgers, 119.

37. Ibid., 9.

38. Maslow (1959), 130.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.


42. De Vries and Zan, 46.

43. Louis E. Rathes et al., Values and Teaching, 2nd ed. (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1978), 41.

44. Ibid., 48.

45. Kohn, 435.

46. Hunter, 122-123.

47. Much has been written about the so-called prison experiment of Philip Zimbardo (it was even filmed), and likewise about Stanley Milgram's study of human conformity. For details on Zimbardo, see, for example, the home page of the Stanford experiment <http://www.prisonexp.org/>. On Milgram, see his Obedience to Authority. The goal of these experiments was to study why, how under what circumstances people choose evil.

48. I will not burden the text with heavy referencing. All the quotations are taken from Clive Stapes Lewis, Abolition of Man, Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools (London: Oxford U. Press, 1943; New York: Touchstone, 1996).

49. Ibid.

50. I am referring to C. S. Lewis's That Hideous Strength (London: Random House, 1945), which narratively portrays this problem.

51. Lewis, Abolition of Man.
“We see and understand things not as they are but as we are.” —Anthony de Mello— *Awareness* (1990)

Christian mystic Anthony de Mello illustrates today’s postmodern view of reality. He seems to say that truth and reality are autonomous, subjective constructions in the eye of the beholder. Thus, Truth claims cannot be judged as true in all contexts for all times but are relative to some frame of reference like personal perception, language, or culture.

The idea that subjectivity influences the way we interpret the world is not new; neither is the idea that subjective factors influence the methods, discoveries, and applications of human collective efforts. Over the last half-century, the bastion of objective reason has been crumbling at its Enlightenment foundation. Fatal blows have come from insights in psychology and the philosophy of science. Although modern positivistic science has been mortally wounded, I believe an integrative approach can be taken between a strong relativistic position on truth and an absolutist one. The Christian faith as a worldview legitimizes the assertion that there is a “real world” as well as the belief that we perceive it through interpretive lenses, which I will be calling “interpretive frameworks.” These frameworks can yield a plurality of views, including imperfect ones.

The goal of this paper is to explore the conflict between the relativistic and absolutist positions on truth, using insights from cognitive psychology, philosophy of science, and Christianity. First, I will highlight how subjectivity takes place at the level of the individual, as described by schema theory. Second, I will show that the same cognitive process lies at the heart of human social efforts via shared interpretive frameworks often called “paradigms.” And third, I will address the glaring implication of such subjectiv-
ity. If individuals and groups interpret the world via their own subjective frameworks, the result is relativism, which is antithetical to objective absolute truth that stands firm across all times and contexts. I will argue that Christian worldview philosophy helps resolve the apparent conflict based upon the biblical insight that the way we see and understand reality stems ultimately from the condition of our heart.

Interpretive frameworks are fundamental to human nature, and embracing their role in human functioning poses no threat to a biblical view of truth and reality.

Individual Subjectivity: Cognitive Schema Theory

At the heart of schema theory is the relative nature of human sensory perception. The claim that the process of perception is not an exact match of the original sensation from the external world originates with Immanuel Kant. This idea was given experimental support in the late 1800s by the founder of psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, who researched psychophysics in Germany. For example, I use this demonstration to illustrate how perception is relative. I place two buckets of water in front of the class, one with ice. I ask a volunteer willing to get his or her hand wet, to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, the temperature of the bucket without ice. This contains cold tap water, and the student usually rates it as a 3 or 4. Next, I have the student rate the ice water—using the same hand—which usually receives an emphatic rating of 1! I then instruct the student to quickly put his or her hand back into first bucket and rate the water anew. The student surprisingly says, “It feels like a 6 or 7.” This response reveals that perception is relative and is more dependent upon the current skin temperature than upon the temperature of the stimulus. The point is that, at an individual level, we are bound by an interpretation process that is relative to individual experience.

Over the years this idea has been used to explain a variety of phenomena—especially in memory research and cognitive development. The result has been a theory explaining that subjective interpretive frameworks are used to see and understand the world. Today we call this theory “schema theory,” the name originating from Kant. Over the last century, key European psychologists, including Frederick Bartlett and Jean Piaget, have articulated and applied this idea. Bartlett concluded that memory is a reconstruction of interaction with the environment that involves pre-set schemata or frameworks that guide both memory storage and recall. Piaget took the idea of interpretive frameworks beyond memory processing and articulated an entire theory of cognitive development based upon their role in organizing all experience.

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When the “cognitive revolution” took place in American psychology in the late 1960s, the mantle was taken up by many, including Ulrich Neisser, who speculated that mental cognitive schemata result from actual physical processes in the nervous system.

Schema theory has even been explanatory in the research areas of artificial intelligence, neural network theory, and neuroscience, by theorists including Michael Arbib. Arbib believes that schema theory is the best explanation for going beyond the structure of the brain to an understanding of the function of it.

In recent decades, many researchers have confirmed that schemata serve as frameworks that guide interpretation. This confirmation has been shown in domains such as story recall, text comprehension, and speed of recall, linguistics, visual learning, cultural differences in cognition, computational cognition, and problem solving and has been applied widely in various disciplines, including education.

The work by Wundt, Bartlett, Piaget, Neisser and Arbib shows how our cognition is an inherently subjective process. It is the interplay of an individual’s sensation and perception and the re-
ality of his or her environment. However, the role of interpretive frameworks does not end here at the individual level, but it extends to how meaning is shared and understood collectively. The same cognitive process lies at the core of human social efforts. Shared interpretive frameworks function in ways that yield collective subjectivity.

**Collective Subjectivity**

Humans are social creatures, dependent upon the structures of family, society, and culture. Given this social dependency, it makes sense that the use of interpretive frameworks would have a social counterpart seen in groups.

The idea was anticipated first in the 1930s by Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural view of cognition. Vygotsky claimed inter-dependence between individual cognition and the social context in which it takes place. This view, that a type of collective interpretive framework guides group or social functioning, has been articulated in disciplines beyond the social sciences, most notably in the history and philosophy of science.

Over the last half-century, much investigation has looked at the social structure of science. The findings have underscored the role of subjectivity in scientific activity, in contrast to the modernist mindset, which sees science as a purely objective endeavor. The overarching consensus of this work has been that groups of scientists function under a type of conceptual structure that orients their work. This structure is subject to non-science-related influences, such as aesthetics, persuasion, and personalities. Although there is controversy as to who should get credit for the originality of some of his concepts, none can deny that Thomas Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has been one of the most important works published on the topic in the last half-century.

**Human Science Guided by Paradigms**

Kuhn articulated a new way for understanding scientific progress. He argued that a linear progression of discovery upon discovery—accumulating objective knowledge—was insufficient for describing how science actually works. He proposed a model describing science as unpredictable and irregular. Rather than a vertical, linear process, he suggested more of a horizontal one of skips and jumps within a single plane, motivated not by anything objective but by subjective, socially-driven factors, such as personality, prestige, and aesthetics. He even used the religious term of “faith” and the metaphor of “conversion” to describe how an individual scientist jumps allegiance from one view to another.

Kuhn’s basic concept for describing science centers on the notion of a paradigm. A paradigm is a collective conceptual framework that includes a complicated mixture of assumptions, theories, and hypotheses accepted by the group that establish a type of unconscious perimeter within which scientific investigation takes place. Progress is better seen as growth in depth rather than growth in breadth. Science is like digging a well straight down within a defined perimeter.

Although not always known by those working in it, the perimeter of the paradigm is limited. Nature, however, is not so limited; therefore, some discoveries do not fit within the boundaries of the tight-knit paradigm. Someone digging near the edge may accidentally dig beyond the boundary. Kuhn calls such findings “anomalies.” They are often ignored and swept under the rug by those who discover them—unless they recur enough to create a crisis within the paradigm: a state of tension for anomalies that can no longer be ignored. When the paradigm can no longer provide a comprehensive explanatory framework, that paradigm must give way to another paradigm in order to accommodate the new data. This giving way shifts the discipline to a completely different and seemingly incompatible paradigm. Kuhn calls this change a “paradigm shift,” or a “revolution”—a process of demolition and reconstruction—in contrast to the traditional modernist view of gradual, vertical, linear, and harmonious progress.

Kuhn points to a gestalt switch (like a 3D Necker cube drawing) as an analogy to describe this process, where a single set of data can be perceived in two completely different ways—but only one way at a time. Kuhn’s description underscores the idea that humans are subjective in their collective interpretation of even scientific
facts, guided by a collective interpretive framework.

Frameworks Do Not Yield Relativism

So far, we have seen two similar descriptions of how humans understand and experience the world, both individually and collectively—via individual and shared interpretive frameworks: cognitive structures of belief and expectations that guide the interpretation of reality. Each description highlights subjectivity in contrast to the objectivity of traditional modernism.

The subjective and non-cumulative process discussed by Kuhn, and also by others such as Polanyi22 in the 1960s, took direct aim at modernism’s objective impartiality and began, in part, to usher in postmodernity. The knee-jerk reaction by many in science, as well as in Christianity, has been to resist the sea change to postmodernism. Some have critiqued this change as relativism and anti-science.23 Christians have resisted such new ideas too because of the danger of runaway relativism. Such a view seems to undermine the Christian conviction of absolute truth’s flowing from an almighty sovereign God, who is objectively real.

Granted, the views presented allow for relative interpretation by individuals and groups, but I believe that neither should be classified as endorsing postmodern relativism, which denies the existence of absolute truth. Correctly understood, interpretive frameworks, such as schemata and paradigms, are each quite compatible with objective, absolute reality.

Schemata: Basis For Relativity?

Taking the ideas from cognitive psychology or philosophy of science to an extreme, we find that it does look like postmodern relativism. Yes, human perceptual systems “construct” an understanding of the world that does not always match reality. Yes, humans mentally construct schemata that guide perception. Yes, collective thinking or paradigms seem to be exclusively mind-dependent and subjective—apart from the objective

Correctly understood, interpretive frameworks, such as schemata and paradigms, are each quite compatible with objective, absolute reality.

Looking closely, however, we find that neither view negates reality itself. Rather than seeing these conflicting paradigms as supporting the idea that reality is only in the eye of the beholder, we should conclude that the interpretation of reality is what is in the eye of the beholder. This latter statement more clearly highlights the role of our imperfect perception and cognition as they interact with the real world, rather than claiming that reality itself is malleable.

Our view should be that a real world exists, and that experiences, based firmly in that real world, can nonetheless be interpreted and understood differently, given the particular framework (i.e., schema or paradigm). John Searle articulates a similar view. He presents a satisfying alternative to the old modernist view as well as to the prevailing postmodern constructionist and deconstructionist views, which both deny any ultimate reality.24 Searle suggests that two types of facts exist: “brute” facts, which are independent of what humans think about them (such as that Mount Everest has snow), and “social” facts, which are humanly constructed and conceived individually or institutionally (such as a piece of paper is a $5 bill). This position affirms that which cognitive schema theory and philosophers of science, like Kuhn, contend: that a true reality exists and that humans develop interpretive frameworks with which they interpret that reality.

Illusory Schema Conflict: When relativity is an illusion

One important point to highlight is that sometimes what looks like relativism is only an illusion. Regarding the function of schemata as they guide individual understanding, I see two aspects of the process that can yield what I term “illusory schema conflict.” The first deals with multiple exemplars of a single concept, while the other draws attention to the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single exemplar.

Let me illustrate the first with the tallest
mountain question. If I asked, “What is the tallest mountain on Earth?” most would say Mount Everest in Nepal and China—it stands over 29,000 feet above sea level. However, is Mount Everest really the tallest mountain on Earth? If we invoke different schemata to define the concept of “tallest mountain,” there can be a plurality of correct answers:

- Tallest from its base below sea level (under water): Mauna Kea in Hawaii, 33,480 feet.
- Tallest rising from ocean floor: Mount Lamlam, Guam, 37,820 feet from the Mariana Trench.
- Tallest from center of the earth: Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador, over 20 million feet.

The use of different schemata underscores the role of definition and context. Interpersonal misunderstandings are often caused by this type of schema conflict. Two different interpretive frameworks are correctly used, but they come to disparate conclusions. These differences show that sometimes differences may be due not to whether someone is wrong or right but simply to the fact that more than one point of view is viable.

The second type of schema conflict occurs when differing schemata are derived honestly from a single exemplar. An illustration of this is the ancient parable from India about six blind men walking who encounter an obstacle in their path. As each reaches out to touch what is in his way, the six have an awful argument because none can agree on what it is. One says it’s a spear, another says it is a hose, while yet another claims it is a fan. The fourth declares it is a wall, but another claims it is a pillar, and the last is convinced it is a rope with a brush on its end. What they have encountered? The moral derived is that there are many ways to describe an elephant and that individual perception is limited. Some argue that this parable illustrates relativity—that each man experienced his own truth, valid for him and not the others. However, I suggest a more cryptic meaning. Yes, each man’s framework was different from that of the others, but the six views actually come together to form a more complete whole.

This way of looking at the story highlights a distinction between the two types of schema conflict. The first, illustrated by the mountain story, affirms the multiplicity of truth, mediated by context, while the elephant story shows that a grand truth may lie behind multiple interpretations. This latter example emphasizes how seemingly differing views may actually come together to provide a more complete understanding. The apostle Paul makes a similar point in Romans and I Corinthians when he explains that although there are many separate parts of the body, they function together as a whole.25 This principle applies not only to the physical body and the Church of Jesus Christ but also to human cognitive function.

In both cases of illusory schema conflict, the conflict seems to reveal incompatible ways of understanding when, in actuality, the conflicting schemata or views can be shown to be simultaneously totally true.

This raises the question of whether we, individually or collectively, are capable of seeing beyond our own interpretive frameworks to perceive the whole. No doubt, this perception of the whole might be possible, but probably not in all circumstances because we have been created with limits: normative limits imposed simply by the fact that we are created creatures and by the intrusion and distortion of sin.26 Both types of limitations probably play a role in obstructing our view of the whole. I speculate that some portions of our limited view, specifically those due to the distortion of sin, are potentially fixable, or at least partially, via sanctification; but post-consummation, some of these limits will be entirely gone, and we will experience knowledge of the true-for-all-time, uber-framework.

An Uber-framework?

An uber-framework is the idea that there exists an overarching metanarrative that gives ultimate meaning to varying and sometimes seemingly disparate cultural and/or individual narratives. Several Christian scholars have argued for the existence of such a superior framework.27 For example, Roy Clouser makes a case for an
An overarching framework that subsumes both pure Aristotelian objectivity and Kantian subjectivity and provides a third alternative: that ultimate knowledge lies with God alone. Clouser suggests that there exists an overarching uber-framework, albeit in the mind of God alone, that subsumes all others.28

This idea has been articulated by many in the context of worldview philosophy, particularly by Christians who believe that in God lies ultimate truth, or the true worldview of worldviews—the uber-framework. In my judgment, the concept paradigm that we have described thus far in the context of the philosophy of science is identical in essence and function with the concept of worldview that has been articulated by many Christian philosophers.

**Christian Worldview Philosophy**

In David Naugle's in-depth look at the concept of worldview, he traces the idea of an overarching worldview that explains all reality—back to the Reformation writings of John Calvin and then, in the late 1800s, to Scottish theologian James Orr and Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper.29 As the more well-known of these two, Kuyper’s version will be described briefly.

**Kuyperian Worldview Philosophy**

Kuyper is known for applying Calvinism to everyday life, focusing on the sovereignty of the God of the Bible over all aspects of reality: cosmos, culture and thought. Calvin believed that God revealed Himself to humans via the created order, as well as through the Bible, the infallible and inerrant words written under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Of these two revelations, Calvin gave priority to the Bible when he used the metaphor of the Scriptures being spectacles through which humans are to interpret and understand the rest of God’s creation.30 In other words, Calvin claimed that God, as sovereign creator of all things, is the ultimate source of all knowledge and Truth and that the Bible is a direct filter for Truth. Kuyper believed that people can and should understand Christianity as a holistic and comprehensive philosophy of life rather than as just one compartmental aspect of human experience.31, 32

This is where Kuyper highlights worldview as a type of interpretive framework. The term itself is translated from the German word Weltanschauung, which means “a particular way of looking at the world.” The term originates with Kant, as we saw with the term schema.33 Since his time, it has come to mean a set of underlying assumptions that define the spirit of the age or the particular way a culture manifests itself in literature, art, philosophy, and science. Kuyper used the term to suggest that multiple worldviews can co-exist and be in conflict with one another while competing for people’s allegiance.

In his day, Kuyper identified two opposing “faiths,” or worldviews, that were in direct conflict: modernism versus Christianity. Kuyper suggested that the conflict resulted ultimately from Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. The Fall produced an antithesis, or tension between God and idolatry (or evil), that is manifested in all human endeavors. Relating this antithesis to science, for example, Naugle states,

Kuyper argues [that]… regenerate people with a Christian worldview produce a … theoretical interpretation of science, and non-regenerate people with a non-Christian worldview produce an idolatrous science …. Scientific reason is not the same for all people. It depends upon whether or not the scientist has or has not been religiously renewed. There is not a neutral scientific rationality leading to certain objective and shared conclusions. Instead, scientific theories are a function of the religious backgrounds and philosophical orientations of the scientists or theorists.34

It is important to point out that the conflict is not in the science itself but in the conclusions
made (i.e., interpretation and application).

Kuyper is basically arguing that collective interpretive frameworks function in society. His argument is similar to our earlier description of collective cognition as seemingly relative. But Kuyper’s Christian worldview philosophy is clearly based on a belief that there is a real creator, God, who is objectively manifest in the material creation as well as in the Bible. Both realms are objectively true. But seeming relativity comes into Kuyper’s thought when he claims that there are different interpretations of that reality: “abnormal” and “normal,” as he termed them. Those who are regenerated by the power of God’s Holy Spirit are given a new outlook, which allows them to understand that the cosmos is in an abnormal state due to sin and in need of redemption through Jesus Christ, but those who are unregenerate see all as normal and see the need for Christ as folly. The result is a difference in interpretation of a single reality, not a difference between two constructed realities that are mutually exclusive.

One implication from Christian Worldview philosophy is that God’s reality is the uber-framework—the true paradigm or schemata, the only correct interpretation—and that human access to the framework is only possible by regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The reverse implication is that without God’s action, flawed frameworks or wrong schemata, paradigms, or worldviews exist, leading to framework errors at all levels.

Another implication is that because the Holy Spirit’s regeneration focuses inwardly, we may need to consider that our interpretive frameworks are more than cognitive. Recently, some have begun to critique the idea of worldview as a static, theoretical, and cognitive process and to direct us to see our interpretive frameworks as coming from the heart—which encompasses our identity more holistically. For example, Jamie Smith suggests that when talking about worldview, we need to move to a more non-cognitive, affective model, which includes our cares, concerns, motivations, and desires. Based upon insight from Esther Meek, Naugle argues that “the heart needs to be rooted in the physical body…and anchored in the ebb and flow of the real world,” meaning that knowing with the heart, which is the center of human consciousness, involves the totality of our being. This is where our individual cognitive schemata intermingle with our collective paradigms and worldviews and guide us in holistic biological, psychological, and social consciousness.

Conclusion

The interpretive frameworks we have looked at (cognitive schemata, paradigms, and worldviews) seem to all function in a common way—as filters to help us understand the world around us. This way of human perception seems to be by design. God created us to gain individual and social knowledge through interpretive frameworks. These frameworks provide a starting point as well as an important heuristic for our exploration and progress in fulfilling the cultural mandate.

One aspect of this design is clear: there are limitations. We are limited perceivers but will someday be freed from at least part of the limitation. Human nature is restricted in that we are creatures created by God and, as such, will never apprehend fully the true uber-worldview, which is known by God alone. We all are affected by the distortion of sin, which implies that some of the subjectivity of our cognitive perceptions is due to sin. This distortion explains why errors happen at all levels of our interpretive frameworks.

The Christian’s hope is that Christ’s redemptive work of restoration will yield for us a more complete way of knowing at His second coming. As the apostle Paul said, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully.” We have confidence that part of the limitation in our ability to know will be removed.

Perhaps without sin’s effect upon our interpretive frameworks, we may share a common perceptual organization, language, culture, paradigm, and worldview. Having a shared interpretive framework seems consistent with the biblical theme of restoration. Recall that the origin of multiple languages and culture groups came from God’s judgment of sin at the Tower of Babel. Perhaps God will bring “heart” and “cognitive” unity to all the diverse nations who occupy the new Jerusalem by establishing a common
set of interpretive frameworks for all its citizens.

The biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is the human entrance into God’s true worldview, the uber-framework, where God’s people will know more fully, which may mean to know in the same way from percept to thought to culture. When that day arrives, we all, including Anthony de Mello, will no longer see and understand things as we were, but will see and understand them as God intended, as they truly are.

Endnotes


9. Ibid.


31. A full description of Kuyper’s philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper. For summaries of his ideas in English, see Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948); Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980).
2007), 240-280.
38. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 64.

41. See Genesis 1:28.
42. See Phelps, *Imago Dei*.
43. I Corinthians 13:10, 12, English Standard Version
44. See Genesis 11.
Craig Bartholomew’s IVP Academic publication, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* (2017), is indeed a magisterial systematic introduction to the cloud of witnesses (and many fellow travelers) who have articulated a basically biblical, Jean Calvinian, committed world-and-life vision on how to live before God’s face until Jesus Christ comes again to complete historically the Kingdom-Rule of God (Psalm 110, Acts 1:3, Hebrews 10:19-12:29) in this world, which belongs to the holy Triune Sovereign Creator God revealed in the Scriptures.

A difficulty of passing on such a Reformational-perspective pair of glasses from one older generation to the next younger generation is that its visionary contour is less defined than a philosophical one, and it is also often subverted by the primal Way-of-life which always underlies us humans, who consciously have (or do not have) a “Weltanschauung.” To “retrieve and renew” a life-guiding (Kuyperian) tradition is not like excavating certain ideas as if they be stones and then rebuilding anew the old ruined house we once lived in, especially if Edward Shils is correct in saying, “A tradition once it has receded from regular usage cannot be deliberately restored.” The usual resulting “Neo-” character of such a maneuver tends, in my judgment, to be artificial, at best a beautiful bouquet of cut flowers.

What would it take, God willing, to foster a vital Kuyperian tradition in the consciousness of the coming generation that is not handicapped by being “Neo-Kuyperian”? I will offer two suggestions for our discussion: (1) A Kuyperian world-and-life vision has a supple, not analytically defined but imaginative, literarily composed character; and (2) our program should be to discover anew, reformingly embody, and freely share the Kuyperian-spirited constellation of insights with our neighbors, focused on their actual needs.

My own practice is to talk about a “committed world-and-life vision” instead of the truncated *Weltanschauung,* worldview. Talk about...
“worldview” omits the element of life praxis—which Kuyper’s original Dutch phrase “levens-en-wereld beschouwing” highlighted! The odd term of “life-system,” which Kuyper used in the 1898 Stone lectures, shows the importance of “life” to him; but “system,” I think, overstates the kind of cohering form belonging to a synaptic vision.4 I use “vision” partly because of Ezra Pound’s wise dictum, “Don’t be viewy,”5 vague, muddled, obscure, “worldviewish.”

However, I do believe it is proper for a committed world-and-life vision tradition not to be theoretically conceptually exact. The intelligible contour presented by S.G. de Graaf’s Verbondsgeschiedenis (1936)6 has an unmistakable redemptive-historical visionary Gestalt that is richly biblical, but strict theological jargon I find absent. Thomas Cole’s painterly series of four large canvases narrating our human Voyage of Life (1842)7 convincingly articulates the Horatio Alger American Dream world-and-life vision of greatness that is Neo-Idealistically attractive and hollow as hell. Bertolt Brecht’s oeuvre depicts and champions a pragmatistic survival ethic that promises an everlasting bitter-sweet meaning in a kind of inverted Nietzschean tradition.

That is, it helps me to understand the bulky nature and power of the Kuyperian tradition if I realize that the cosmic scope but non-philosophical rigor to its perspective has the nature of literate precision. Literary precision is not analytically tight, but the right word like “woebegone” or “bluster” can call up a florescent peacock tail of nuances that nevertheless can catch precisely a rich reality at hand. When Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth utters “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (Macbeth, V.1), she is not everyday swearing and is also not just carefully confessing “I committed intentional first degree murder.” But the theatrical saying has a bloody, down-to-earth, cry-to-heaven, spirited specificity that is not scientifically precise but is aesthetically lucid, engaging, overwhelming (as in Jesus’ parables, with the crooked tax collector praying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” [Luke 18:9-14]).

Now, if a committed world-and-life visionary tradition—Nietzschean, American Dream, or Christian Kuyperian—“is the structured transaction of passing on wonts from practiced to inexperienced human hands,”8 “we have a sure guide to the enormous challenge we face, because “the wonts” of the Kuyperian tradition are as varied as creaturely life.

We will need the daily practice of attent, connecting Bible reading at family meals; a regular healthy diet of body-building grains and greens, without a constant gratuitous sugar caress; an expectant Sunday worship service with a church year of solid Scriptural preaching, earnest liturgical confession of sin to be forgiven, and joyful, communion-building celebration of the eucharist. We need to be learning a trade that fits our gifts and enjoy a week of work that somehow serves good to somebody and helps pay our bills; a habit of wide reading in cultural history and current affairs with wise mentors nearby; a circle of friends with the custom to play games together uncontaminated by a competitive mania, where there rises time for intimate conversation—it takes an encyclopedic range and ensemble of exercised human activities to show-and-tell, to engender and spread a committed world-and-life vision with a special (Nietzschean, American Dream or) Kuyperian cachet, beyond telling about it. To chant “square inch” and “sphere sovereignty” will not keep alive the blessing of a reforming Kuyperian tradition, since its concatenated wonts are not reducible to a few pregnant ideas.9

Would teaching and learning the Reformational Christian philosophical systematics—of Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, Zuidema, Mekkes, K.J. Popma, H. van Rieseen, H. Evan Runner, Robert Knudsen, Peter Steen, Sander Griffioen, Edward Schuurman and others, which was and is a like-spirited conceptual deepening of this very Kuyperian committed world-and-life vision—help the living propagation of the Kuyperian

How about proposing that artistry should be the underwear, at least of the well-dressed Kuyperian readied for service in God’s world.

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of which are conducive to instilling and practicing a vital Kuyperian merciful and just Kingdom of God tradition among us.

Kuyperian Christian schooling would do well, it seems to me, to make wearing such underwear training a priority, since the arts are among the best resilient, subtle, and invigorating carriers of world-and-life visions.15

Could we perhaps tweak the “retrieve and renew” formula to discover and absorb, in order to give away the Kuyperian tradition as a task for promoting shalom? That is, a world-and-life vision is not so much a deposit you can pick up and refurbish, as it is an on-going, blood-coursing, world-wide, holding-patterned communal consciousness one inhabits or not.

As I understand it, a “Christian world-and-life vision is a thetical orientation and not a judgmental condemnation; [it is] a program for doing good for the commonweal and not a plan of attack on enemies.”16 So it is a joy to give-it-away to wandering people who may be at a loss, provided you do not come on as Proverbs 27:15 puts it, “like the dribbling drivel of a leaky roof on a day of pounding rain.”

If you be a person whose inescapable Way-of-life has not yet sprung a self-conscious world-and-life vision, to be introduced to the all-encompassing Kuyperian tradition, as Craig Bartholomew’s book does it, can be an exhilarating, eye-opening, and life-integrating experience. If you are holding onto an un-Christian world-and-life vision-ary tradition, it may take something more like a risky, complete blood transfusion to effect the change in life-orientation. If you meet Kuyperian progeny while breathing a different Christian world-and-life vision (Anabaptist Mennonite, or Roman Catholic), you may notice blind spots in the Kuyperians yet be willing to supplement your resident perspective with certain Reformational biblical strengths.

The most difficult encounter happens, I think, when someone who once had accepted the Reformed contours but because of some accidental affront or mistaken assumption willfully decided to reject its vision or let it atrophy. You cannot argue such disenchanted people into embracing the Kuyperian tradition again; even try-
ing to make them jealous of its healing grace for distracted people is a tough row to hoe.17

How is the elderly generation to transmit the Kuyperian tradition live to the up-and-coming generation and take pains to avoid the “Neo-” at-avism which deforms a percolating visionary tradi-
tion into a cliché? I learned from colleague Bill Rowe that the handing on of wonts should take place face-to-face, seasoned person before novice and novice before mentor. The written record of the Kuperian tradition should best become oral, spoken, with time for response. And I learned from colleague Peter Steen that a good teacher necessarily simplifies the matter at hand, but in such an encouraging way that the student can complicate what is shown-and-told, so as not to parrot back what is at stake, but own it one’s self.

You become an aide to a Kuyperian senator in the legislature; you apprentice yourself as an aspiring playwright in the Redeemer Roy Louter writing workshop. I learned the Kuyperian fish business from watching my Father (who had never read Kuyper) swiftly fillet flounders so close to the bone you wasted not a pinch of flesh, and then tried it hundreds of times over years of Saturdays and summers.

To transmit well the Kuyperian world-and-life vision takes time—for feedback, corrections, revised examples, and the random meaningful asides by the tradition-giver. I learned a major life-giving (Kuyperian) guideline on being “critical” from Vollenhoven. I was berating Kuyper for being too taken by Idealist Schelling and Neo-Classical Winckelmann’s thought on the practically salvific power of beautiful art.18 “Ja, zeker,” said Vollenhoven, “maar hij had te veel te doen (“Yes, sure, but Kuyper had way too much to do.”), implying that a charismatic leader can’t be right about everything.

One should not, I believe, overvalue the Kuyperian Christian tradition because, like any world-and-life vision, its developed formatting of one’s consciousness that brings to the fore structural features of our life world (What is there? How? What’s wrong? Why?) is always meshed with the matter of directional choice, or where are we headed? What Spirit drives you on in your world-and-life vision?19 Unless a win-

some and wise Holy Spirit suffuses and gentles the Kuyperian tradition, what does it really profit us and our neighbors? However, if we as a community live the Kuyperian world-and-life vision reformat., constantly tapping into its wisdom-gospel biblical roots (although it is not mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-17), the lived, liv-
ing Kuyperian Christian consciousness can be a protective hiding place to catch one’s breath in our mortal struggle as God’s people with the evil principalities and cultural powers that would de-

One last comment: let me emphasize that a committed world-and-life vision is not just simpli-

fied lay philosophy, as if the philosophical meat is just cut up in tiny bite-size bits so that untrained thinkers can swallow it. No! And as to the role that literary studies and critical art history do and could play in lively carrying on the Kuyperian tradition, Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment novel is as complicated and intricate as Bakhtin’s philosophical aesthetics, but Dostoevsky’s all-encompassing vision and texture is of a nature different from philosophy. Dostoevsky with imaginative story is priming a mentality of compassion rather than exposit-
ing the fascinating intermeshing of life and re-

So, while Reformational philosophers argue over their hamburger to gain wisdom for bearing their neighbors’ doubts and burdens, Kuyperians tell stories, doodle sketches, sing songs, formulate manifestoes, and start an Institute for Christian Studies, Redeemer College, Citizens for Public Justice, Christian Courier, Flagship Gallery...and remain Kuyperian vegetarians. According to the prophet Isaiah, as I read him, both Covenantal Jesus Christ-following diaconal meat-eaters and vegetarians will feast with “well-aged wines” together on the new earth (Isaiah 25:6-9). (I could mention, I have never met an over-weight Seventh-Day Adventist vegetarian....)
Endnotes


7. *Voyage of Life: Childhood, Youth, Manhood, Old Age* (Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art), each canvas more than 4x6 feet.

8. “Footprints in the snow,” 239.

9. Craig Bartholomew touches on the hazard that “worldviewish thinking” may reduce the full-orbed lived character of the Kuyperian tradition to a mere view-finder pair of glasses (*Contours*, 118-124). Also, “Unformed persons do immense damage to the Kuyperian tradition, shouting about sovereignty and grace while failing to manifest grace and humility in their lives” (*Ibid.*, 318).


15. One might remember that Abraham Kuyper’s conversion was triggered by Charlotte Yonge’s novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (Bartholomew, *Contours*), 16.


Dear Dr. Walicord,

I often read *Pro Rege* with interest, as it contains important articles on matters of significance which are pertinent to our calling to discipleship. The vision of Kuyper that the whole of human life is to be brought into subjection to Christ is one that is frequently voiced with approval. It is a vision which inspires and motivates many of us world-wide in our efforts to be faithful in all that we do.

It was a surprise, then, to read your review of Gary North’s book, *Christian Economics in One Lesson* (http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss1/6/). While I do not pretend to any expertise in economics, I wish to challenge the approach you have taken in your review because I believe it is taking a mistaken path, one which does not do credit to the Lord whom we serve.

While you start with Kuyper’s famous rallying cry, in what follows you espouse an understanding of economics which is radically different from that of many of Kuyper’s spiritual followers. You seem to hold that both Kuyper’s followers, and Kuyper himself, are inconsistent in applying biblical principles to economic life, given that you state that biblically consistent publications in economics and politics are a “rarity in our day and age.” This does not ring true for those of us who are familiar with, for instance, the works of Bob Goudzwaard, Jim Skillen and Alan Storkey. Their vision for economics and for politics is pervasively informed by the Scriptures, while being academically thorough in their analysis and proposals for reform. You do not refer to these authors and their work, while asserting that economics is under-served in the application of biblical teaching to that subject. There are others who have also worked on developing a biblically faithful approach to economics within the Kuyperian tradition: to name but a few, Tony Cramp, George Monsma and John Tiemstra. Many of these draw on the work of Christian

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Chris Gousmett is currently the Corporate Information Manager for the Hutt City Council. He studied Hebrew and Philosophy at the University of Otago, and completed a Master of Philosophical Foundations degree, focusing on philosophical theology, at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. He has a Ph.D. in Patristic theology from the University of Otago, with a thesis on the inter-relationship of philosophical anthropology and the structure of eschatological thought in the Patristic writers. His interests are in Reformational philosophy and theology, the history of thought, including history of science, and political and social theory. He has preached in a number of churches and some of his sermons are available at https://hearinganddoing.wordpress.com/
economists working in the Kuyperian tradition in earlier generations, such as T. P. van der Kooy. While these authors (and others also working in the same Kuyperian spirit) may not be well known, and are certainly not as numerous or as influential as we may like, it would be doing a disservice to them and their potential readers (who otherwise may not be spurred to seek them out) to describe biblical works in economics as a “rarity.” There have also been a significant number of authors writing on politics in a biblically faithful approach, such as Bernie Zylstra, Paul Marshall, Jonathan Chaplin, Sander Griffioen, David Koyzis, Romel Bagares, Rockne McCarthy and Richard Mouw, and again those of earlier generations: Jan Dengerink, Herman Dooyeweerd, Antheunis Janse, and others.

Would it then be correct to assume that you place these thinkers in the category of the “biblically inconsistent” or who only pay “lip service” to God’s Word, or are part of the “sometimes biblically inconsistent, ivory-tower transformationalist crowd”? Is that why you do not mention their work even in passing, hurrying on to laud the works of Gary North, whose views are inescapably incompatible with those of the writers mentioned above?

You mention that Kuyper’s inconsistencies led to the democratic-welfare state in the Netherlands. Whether the modern Dutch welfare state can be attributed to (or blamed on) Kuyper is probably debatable, but clearly you see a connection between the beliefs he espoused and the eventual emergence of the welfare state. Leaving aside the historical validity of this connection for others to explore, it is true that Kuyper had significant concern for the welfare of the poorer folk of his day, as can be seen from his stirring address at the First Christian Social Congress in The Netherlands in 1891 (The Problem of Poverty, translated by Jim Skillen). The politics and economics of Kuyper cannot easily be slotted into “socialist” or “capitalist” or other categories, since he made strenuous efforts (however unsuccessfully at times) to be biblical in his approach. He must be given credit for his achievement in pursuing that goal and for his influence in this regard such that nearly 100 years after his death his work is still being studied for guidance in how to live faithfully before the Lord in every area of life.

Many of us who read Goudzwaard, Skillen, and Storkey with appreciation also have some acquaintance with at least the basic approach, if not the details, of the views of Gary North and others in that line of thought. It is not an approach which appeals to us, not because we are closet Marxists or humanistic in our thinking but because we read the Bible in a different way from North. Those in the Kuyperian tradition have clearly demarcated their views from the Marxists and other humanist thinkers. Indeed, Antheunis Janse frequently emphasised that the common error of Marxists, Socialists, Capitalists and others is that the economic side of life was elevated to a position of dominance over everything else, supplanting the Lord of Glory, who alone rules over all of life. This criticism would apply to the Austrian school of economics of Hayek and von Mises, who, it appears, have influenced Gary North more than other thinkers.

Those who differ from North you describe a number of times as “biblically inconsistent” while North is described several times as “biblically consistent” or “consistently biblical.” You do not state anywhere what “biblically consistent” means, but it seemingly does not apply, in your view, to those who hold views which differ from those espoused by North. Perhaps you could enlighten us as to what you consider “consistency” with Scripture means and why you seem to privilege this term over others such as “faithful to Scripture.” Surely consistency means more than following the principles of a tight logical system, which appears to originate more from humanist economic and political theories than from Scripture. One of the criticisms of the approach taken by North and those who follow him has been the way in which Scripture is interpreted in a rigid and fundamentalistic manner, which pays scant attention to context (textual, historical, social, political, etc.) that urges the application of OT law immediately to our contemporary situation. North’s approach is not the only one which claims to bring the insights of the whole of Scripture to bear on contemporary life in a way which is faithful to the one True King. It would
seem to me that North is significantly less successful in this task than many others, including those already mentioned.

I would be interested to hear from you how different North’s approach is from that of Hazlitt, whose book, which he has re-written, was the stimulus for your review. You clearly say that North takes Hazlitt’s libertarian work and puts it into a Christian context. You say that the book has been re-written on a biblical-moral foundation instead of a foundation in humanistic pragmatism. Those who follow Kuyper and Dooyeweerd would question whether a libertarian work can be used as the basis for a Christian approach without doing serious distortion to both. Frankly, the presuppositions and approach taken by libertarian economists are hardly compatible with a biblical view of life. Is this then not just another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanistic views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay? Such a synthesis cannot be authentically either humanistic or Christian. While North and others of that school are more than happy to critique the foundational principles of socialists and Marxists, they seem strangely reticent to apply the same depth of critique to the foundational principles of capitalism (and not just the pragmaticist avoidance of morality). It raises the question as to why North did not write a book from scratch instead of adopting and adapting one originating from an unbiblical perspective.

The differences between North and the Kuyperian tradition can be seen, for instance, in the latter’s approach to the Bible, in which the task of government is understood positively. North objects to government “intrusion” into the social order. Following North, it seems, you speak negatively of the government multiple times, using such terms as “intrusions,” “excessive intrusions,” or “violation of property rights.” Such polemics are unhelpful when what we need to know is how we should understand the proper task of government, and what principles and policies would be best to enable free and prosperous human life, without the distortions of free-market (neo-liberal) policies that benefit, above others, the wealthy, the multi-national corporations, and the financiers, who often do their utmost to avoid paying any tax at all, let alone the minimal amount they seem to pay.

What unfortunately is communicated by the kinds of polemics you offer against government and its “intrusions” and “violations” is support for those who seek to avoid contributing to the public coffers to fund the activities of government, while the extremes of their wealth sits alongside the economic hardship and struggles of millions in the same society who have to do without adequate food, clothing, employment, education, shelter and health care, to mention but a few of their needs.

Can you not see that the constant reiteration of the theme that anything governments do in relation to the economy is “intervention” or “intrusion” contributes to a denigration of government per se and fosters not positive civil virtues in citizens but fear and suspicion? I struggled to find anything positive said about government in North’s book. There seems to be a Manichean spirit running through his works, which makes government (in any form, since it seems that all he can say about government is to attack its every action as “intrusion”) something to be feared and resisted, while an economy free from regulation is extolled as good and desirable. For North, it seems, taxation is always “theft.” Can there be any good thing done by government (apart from protecting the economy from any interference) and can any form of taxation be anything but “theft”? It seems not from what you say.

Perhaps you could provide a positive description of the task of government, which is “God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:4). Can there be a legitimate government that does more than the barest possible minimum (whatever that minimum)? Can you explain why the
Scriptures throughout speak of God’s relationship to the creation and the people within it in political terms—God “rules”; he is “King”; he issues laws—if government is so lacking in legitimacy? Surely disparaging government is to speak slightingly of the King not only who gives us government but who also adopts that imagery for his own relationship with us (not exclusively, of course, but extensively).

The focus for those who take a different line, more closely aligned with that of Kuyper, is not the extent to which government engages with society (as if there were a simple measure of more or less, with the “correct” level somewhere on that scale) but the appropriateness of the engagement that should take place. There is no doubt that there is an appropriate task for government in Christian political theory and practice. In addition to the clear teaching of Scripture in which government is spoken of as God’s servant, it is also clear that the phenomenon of government is grounded in the creation order, as there is nothing that can exist save that which has been provided for by God in his order for creation. This is so, despite the fact that government (and every other area of life) has been distorted and contaminated by human sin—the creational order in which it is founded still remains in place, sustained by God in every way. Were there no basis in the creation order for the phenomenon of government, then it could not exist. Clearly, then, government is not merely legitimate but helpful for us. That many governments around the world are tyrannical, despotic, or otherwise corrupt does not detract from the fact that government is a gift from God for the good of humankind. It is the way it is used and abused that needs correction, and all too often we find that it is rampant, free-market capitalism through neo-liberal ideology which prop up the worst forms of government around the world for its own economic benefit. It has been said of some of the repressive anti-democratic dictatorships which imposed free-market ideology while engaged in brutality against unions or others who protested the actions of the government, that “people had to be imprisoned so that the market could be free.”

You say that compassion for the poor is not compatible with government-forced redistribution, and that this is theft in violation of the commandment “You shall not steal.” At this point your support for minimal government, minimal tax (if any), and no redistribution simply undercuts any claim to be presenting a Christian faithful concern for the whole of society, not just for those who have managed to secure massive amounts of wealth. You suggest that compassion for the poor and distribution of funds should be voluntary. Unfortunately, this is not what we find with the massively wealthy—they do not support the poor. In fact their wealth is often garnered through enterprises which pay wages so low it is almost impossible to live on them, and from manipulating their finances to minimise whatever taxes they cannot completely avoid. The kinds of political and economic views you espouse here are of one piece with those who advocate rampant neo-liberal free-market economics and are a poor reflection of the depth and richness of insight into economic and political realities which has been presented by the various authors mentioned above (along with others I have not mentioned).

The focus on “theft” seems to arise from North’s contention that the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal,” is the principal basis for any sound economic perspective. This seems to place far too great a burden on a few words (four in English, two in Hebrew). There are many more substantive discussions of economic life in the Old Testament, which surely indicate that economics goes far beyond simply a proscription of theft and exaltation of property rights. And to extend that proscription to rejection of the right of governments to raise funds by taxation is simply unsupportable by sound exegesis. This fact can be seen even more starkly in North’s claim in his book that the sin of Adam and Eve in taking the fruit of the tree was a breach of the prohibition against theft—in fact he says that this first prohibition in the Bible is the prohibition against theft and promotion of property rights. This view is simply astonishing. Surely the sin of Adam and Eve involves more than theft? That this is not a misreading of North is confirmed by the fact that he makes the same comment three times in
his book, each time expressing the view that the sin of Adam and Eve was theft. While they did steal the fruit, what was involved was not simply a breach of God’s property rights (which is what North makes it seem) but a life-encompassing breach of covenant, which affected Adam and Eve in every way. Their sin was a religious change of orientation of the heart away from obedience to God towards a false authority, a false pretence to autonomy, which established idolatry at their very core. Seeing it simply as “theft” fails to do justice to the depth and extent of their disobedience.

It would be of interest to those who follow Kuyper’s line to know more about your reasons for considering Gary North to be consistent in applying the Scriptures to economics, and whether you consider Goudzwaard, Skillen and Storkey to be inconsistent, ivory-tower thinkers, along with Kuyper. Surely you have not dismissed their views in a cavalier manner without considering their work carefully, but since their views are not compatible with those of Gary North, I would be interested to hear what it is exactly that you find unsatisfying in their approach.

You have commended North’s book to any interested Christian who wants to be a responsible citizen and an obedient child of God in all areas of life. For the reasons given above, I suggest that rather than a biblically faithful presentation of political and economic life, North’s book presents a narrow, constricted, and suspect perspective that fails to do adequate justice to the breadth and depth of life in all its complexity or to the drastic consequences of sin in all its horror and power. It does not present a vision that opens up Christian discipleship in all of life, but to the contrary, it distorts the teaching of Scripture in significant ways and reduces its view of economics to a very constricted vision. There are many books by other Christian authors that do a much more effective job in presenting the calling for faithfulness to God in all of life and specifically for economics. I would encourage you to give them due consideration and reflect on the limitations they expose in the approach taken by North.

Yours in Christ,
Chris Gousmett
Reply to Dr. Chris Gousmett’s Open Letter

Dear Dr. Gousmett,

Let me begin by thanking you for taking the time to write a review of my review, so to speak. I have to say that I find it a little difficult to reply to your extensive letter because it is filled with innuendos, platitudes, and very loose references to Scripture without cogent, exegetically-sound arguments. It is clear that you do not like the free-market view and that you prefer the approach of forced governmental redistribution when it comes to social issues. To answer all your claims and assumptions would require an extensive reply for which, frankly, I neither have time nor enough space in this publication. Therefore, I will try to reply in a more general way.

Please allow me to provide a short excerpt of my biography before I answer some of your concerns to help you understand my views.

Raised in Europe, I was indoctrinated with statism and “big government socialism” from an early age. This happened in school, through the media, and through many other venues. We were constantly told how great it was to have government provide everything we needed. It was often added how evil the U.S. social system was and that people there were dying outside of hospitals due to lack of finances and the absence of public health insurance. Growing up, I believed all of this because it was all I had ever heard. Not once can I remember even hearing a critical view of such a worldview and essentially grew up a Marxist. I promoted and defended this view. When I was confronted with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ and became a believer in my mid-teens, I began to see the world and everything in it with new eyes. This was, of course, a long process, but essentially, I came to understand the antithesis, the incompatibility of light with darkness, of the world with the Kingdom of God. Through this, I learned that I had to rigorously re-think everything in biblical terms. I had been made new in the eyes of God through Jesus Christ, and this “newness” had to play out in every single area of my life and thinking—or to say it in Dr. Kuyper’s great words, in “every square inch” of my existence. As I went through university, law school, and later graduate school, this antithesis between the world and God’s Kingdom became even clearer to me, and I learned that classrooms are a battlefield for the minds of future generations. I was forced to decide either to push back or to abandon my Christian convictions. In line with

Dr. Sacha Walicord is Associate Professor of Business Administration at Dordt College.
my conscience, I decided to push back. Later, as an economics professor, I had to search for a biblical view of economics. I quickly understood that God’s Word assigned very limited powers to government, but I still needed more clarity on the matter. To be perfectly honest, I did not find this clarity among colleagues of your persuasion—not at all. I found among them, what seemed to me, little to no commitment to sola scriptura and a strong presuppositional, faith-like commitment to both theological and political liberalism. This, of course, is only my very subjective perception, but I did not see them defending the integrity of Scripture against secular onslaughts. On the contrary, it seemed to me that for them the enemy was not theological liberalism but theologically conservative, Bible-believing Christians, whom they would often condescendingly call “fundamentalists,” “prooftexters,” or “biblicists.” It seemed to me that they would defend their views not with sound biblical exegesis but with lofty philosophical jargon, which the average Christian in the pew would never be able to follow. It looked as though they were seeking to constitute something like a “new priesthood” or a theological “uber-class,” which “ordinary” Christians and pastors needed in order to understand the complex teachings of Scripture.

Reading your letter, and considering the derogatory emails that were written to my superiors and colleagues by your like-minded friends, without including me in the discussion, in reaction to my little book review, I have to admit that it certainly feels like the mindset I just described. It appears that a difference of opinion—especially publicly—is not taken well by proponents of your persuasion.

In regards to the content of your letter, I have to admit that I was taken aback by the incoherence of your argument and your almost disingenuous misrepresentations of Dr. North’s and my own views. To give you an example, your claim that we were against taxes and government altogether is expressly wrong and a blatant misrepresentation of the truth. Furthermore, you claim that we were proponents of humanist libertarianism, which is utterly ludicrous because North states exactly the opposite at length in his book (see Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1!), as do I express in my book review. North goes to great lengths to explain Hazlitt’s weaknesses and the fallacy of humanist libertarianism. I have no problem with discussing opposing views, but I do not appreciate misrepresentations of views and strawman arguments. Moreover, I was quite surprised to read the following statement in your letter: “Frankly, the presuppositions and approach taken by libertarian economists are hardly compatible with a biblical view of life. Is this then not another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanists views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay?” You are absolutely correct, but what is your purpose in telling me this? Both North and I (even in my short review) have in clearest terms distanced ourselves from a humanist libertarianism. In fact, that is what North’s book is all about, to defend the free market as biblical and not from a humanist standpoint (have you really read the book?). And yet, I do have to ask you why you do not express a similar warning against statism/socialism in your letter. After all you seem to find it necessary to point out several times that you are not of the socialist persuasion. Help me understand how your own statist view, for which at no point you provide a coherent biblical defense, is not—to put it again in your own words—“another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanists views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay?”

It seems to me that your entire letter seeks to build a strawman argument, with secular “robb-er-baron-capitalism” on one side and an infallible “oh-so-compassionate and selfless” government on the other. It appears that you are not of the socialist persuasion. Help me understand how your own statist view, for which at no point you provide a coherent biblical defense, is not—to put it again in your own words—“another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanists views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay?”

It seems to me that your entire letter seeks to build a strawman argument, with secular “robb-er-baron-capitalism” on one side and an infallible “oh-so-compassionate and selfless” government on the other. Then you attack this made-up,
quasi-capitalist position and immediately claim victory. In agreement, I do not like the straw-
man-capitalism that you describe, but the utopian statism/socialism that you present as a solution cannot exist as it is in stark conflict with human nature. Fallen man will not suddenly become perfect and selfless as soon as he becomes a government redistributor of other people’s wealth. If you give fallen humans unbridled power of the sword, they will abuse it every time. Statism and socialism were never about compassion for the poor but about power for the elite and bureaucrats, who want to control every area of people’s lives—or to say it in Gideon J. Tucker’s famous words, “No man’s life, liberty, or property is safe while the legislature is in session.”

Also, your use of isolated passages of Scripture (prooftexting?) is quite troubling to me. In typical liberal manner you keep calling for “sound exegesis,” but you do not provide any—even remotely sound—biblical exegesis yourself. In fact, you seem to quote Kuyper more than Scripture, and even then, you are more trying to interpret his views in your favor than actually quote him. You use Scripture where it fits your argument but revert to lofty philosophical jargon and appeal to emotion where Scripture does not support your views—when you repeatedly and in quite dramatic fashion refer to the plight of the poor, seeking to make your case for big government by appealing to the readers’ emotions. Furthermore, you use Romans 13:4 to make the case for extensive government responsibility as government’s being “God’s minister to you for good” while not allowing the rest of the passage to explain just what precisely this “good” is—only because it does not seem to fit your argument. That is not exegesis but eisegesis—you are trying to force your own preferences unto the text of Scripture. Thereby you are neglecting a fundamental principle of Reformed biblical interpretation, namely to let Scripture interpret Scripture. It is this very passage (Romans 13) that explains what this “good” is, but you fill the term with your own preferences. If you want to allow a government to extend its power to whatever government thinks is “good,” you have clearly opened the door to all sorts of tyranny. The argument of tyrannical govern-
ernments and dictatorships throughout history has always been, “We know what is good for you.” You seem to make the opposite case, that the free market view with a very limited government is prone to oppression and tyranny. Accordingly, you write, “It has been said of some of the repressive anti-democratic dictatorships which imposed free-market ideology while engaged in brutality against unions or others who protested the actions of the government, that people had to be imprisoned so that the market could be free.” Do you understand the self-defeating nature of your own argument here? Take note how your statement begins! It begins with the words “repressive anti-democratic dictatorships.” Dictatorships are governments...the same institution that North and I say must be limited in its power and which you want empowered to run society for us.

As one reads your letter, you sound increasingly hostile to wealthy/productive people. At some point you write “[Y]ou suggest that compassion for the poor and distribution of funds should be voluntary. Unfortunately, this is not what we find with the massively wealthy—they do not support the poor.” May I ask how you justify such a blank statement? Is there any sound data to back up such a conclusion, or is this just another speculation on your behalf? Furthermore, I wonder why the default mode in your circles seems to be to call on Caesar to help the poor and not to call the church to pick up her God-ordained diaconal duty. I think this is quite telling. God calls us, as Christians, to care for the poor. He does not call us to call on the government to care for the poor. As one reads your letter, one cannot help but observe that you revert more and more into a language of class warfare with “the (evil) wealthy” on one side and “the (good) poor” on the other. This is, of course, a false dichotomy and seeks to stir up emotions rather than state facts. Such an emotionalized argument builds on a breach of the Tenth Commandment and seeks to stir people’s emotions against a group of people based on their income and not based on their moral quality. This strategy is highly divisive and wrong.

In your letter you continuously mention the names of your favorite scholars and criticize me
for not mentioning them. This is a rather strange criticism since I was reviewing a book by Gary North. Why would I then mention Goudzwaard, Skillen, Storkey, and others? I like much of Dr. Goudzwaard’s criticism of Marxism in his 1972 ICS lectures, but these men are not the ones I would go to for sound biblical economic solutions. Also, since you are complaining about my ignoring them, let me ask you why these and other like-minded thinkers have never (at least to my knowledge) published an objection to Gary North’s extensive publications on the topic of biblical economics? North has published a comprehensive economic commentary on the Bible, which is available free of charge on the internet. He has been criticizing these men’s economic approach in print for over 50 years. Where is the response? I am not aware of any, but I might be wrong.

Let me unequivocally express that I will continue to teach my students whatever approach I find in God’s Word. At the end of the day it is not Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, or North that we will all be accountable to but to the God of the Bible. Over the years it has become clear to me without a shadow of a doubt that the Bible teaches a very limited role of civil government (Rom. 13:1-7 etc.) and a strong protection of private property (Ex. 20:15, Matt. 20:15, Acts 5:4 etc.). Furthermore, I do believe in the validity of taxes as long as they are under 10 percent (1 Sam. 8:10, 14) and as long as they are used for tasks assigned to the civil government in God’s Word. Therefore, whatever civil government is authorized to take according to God’s Word is not theft and whatever civil government is authorized and called to do according to God’s Word is not sinful intrusion. My question for you would be this: can the government ever steal, or is this by your definition of government impossible because it is, well, the government? In that case we will have to change the commandment from “Thou shalt not steal” to “Thou shalt not steal—with the exception of government” or “Thou shalt not steal—except by majority vote.”

I am always stunned that as some colleagues in academia seem to be more than willing to accept grants, donations, and salaries from capitalist donors and parents, while at the same time they try to indoctrinate the very same capitalists’ children with statist and socialist ideas—especially those from biblically conservative families. That, to me, is the peak of hypocrisy and dishonesty. It has become so en vogue to push socialism and other liberal causes in academia that not being inclined to do such often means not to be taken seriously as an academic. Everyone, it seems, who dares to object will be shouted down, intimidated, and slandered. I learned that again with my short book review in Pro Rege, and yet I will not be intimidated.

In closing, I would like to leave you with my most important appeal. Critical to our families, churches, schools, and cherished institutions is the fact that our Reformed heritage, which stems from an unwavering faithfulness to the Word of God, must be renewed in every generation. Constantly, we must battle against compromise in regards to our historic faith, lest liberalism creep in, which, unabated will always end in apostasy in the next generation. Our very college is named after the great Dutch synod of 1618, when our Christian ancestors valiantly stood against the theological errors of their day. Four hundred years later, the battle has remained unchanged for us.

Thank you again, for interacting with me through Pro Rege. I am afraid that this exchange could easily develop into an endless back-and-forth between us. Therefore, in case you insist on continuing this exchange, I would be open to a friendly formal debate with you on our campus if a sponsor for such a debate can be found. Whatever disagreements you might have with Dr. North, I encourage you to take up with him. Considering that we are talking only about a simple book review, we have already invested a lot of time and words.

Every blessing!
Rev. Sacha Walicord, Ph.D.
BOOK REVIEWS


John Walton’s first two “Lost World” books aimed to illuminate the opening chapters of the Bible. Convinced that the rich imaginative universe of the biblical writers is often occluded in contemporary debates about human origins, Walton sought to supply the “ancient cognitive environment” that gets lost in translation. Both books were popular and provocative, challenging modern assumptions about the Genesis account as well as the larger project of Old Testament interpretation. Walton’s burden is to remind modern readers that the strangeness of Scripture demands our respect. His careful work with Ancient Near Eastern sources often reveals the vast distance between the biblical text and our modern outlook, even as it seeks to build bridges for our understanding.

For this third book in what has become an unintended “Lost World” series, J. Harvey Walton (son of John Walton) takes aim at the Israelite conquest of Canaan, as described in the biblical book of Joshua, with the elder Walton in a consulting and editorial role. The authors’ basic argument is that modern interpreters have misunderstood and misapplied these texts in Joshua. This is the case for cultured despisers of religion, who condemn the conquest as genocide, as well as for Christian apologists, who legitimize the conquest as divine judgment. The interpretive failure, the authors opine, is multi-dimensional. Lacking a proper picture of what the Bible is (an ancient document), we adjudicate the text by modern conceptions of progress and goodness. Ignoring the literary intent of Canaanite depiction, we judge the Canaanites as “doomed for their sin.” Lacking historical appreciation of ancient conquest narratives, we miss the literary and theological significance of Joshua’s genre. Lacking a nuanced conceptualization of the key word kherem (Joshua 2:10, 6:17-18), we mistranslate it as “utterly destroy” instead of “remove from use.”

The authors argue that what is actually happening in the Canaanite conquest narratives recapitulates the creation account in Genesis: the establishment of cosmos from chaos, the institution of order in a non-ordered realm, and the clearing of a space in which God can dwell with his people. In other words, the Waltons do not attempt to construct an apology for the conquest so much as situate it within its ancient context. The authors argue that portrayals of the Canaanites fit an ancient trope, borne out by other sources, that of the “invincible barbarians” who must be expelled. This is a literary device used to demonstrate that the land is not procured by the might of the Israelites alone, but by divine assistance. The need to justify the conquest of the Israelites, they point out, is not felt by the ancient author: “The Canaanites are being destroyed by Yahweh because that is always the destiny of invincible barbarians” (147). Thus readings of the conquest as commensurate to Canaanite evil miss the point just as much as readings that paint the conquest as genocide. Both are poor interpretations of what is actually going on in the book of Joshua.

Although Israel’s compliance with the kherem command did involve military violence, the authors argue that the concept is neither implicitly nor comprehensively destructive. Understood in context, it has to do with the clarifying of covenantal identity: its purpose was to “forfeit the right to administer the territory and instead turn the site over to the deity for the deity’s own use” (240). Thus the modern application of this has “nothing to do with killing people,” for in the new covenant, “the element of land is recapitulated by the believers themselves” (239-240). In the final chapter, the authors seek to draw a parallel between the kherem command and
the mortification passages in the New Testament (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 5:24, Colossians 3:8-9). To practice kherem in a new covenant context means to de-center our prior identities and to re-center on the covenant community in Christ. Rather than taking over territory or pronouncing judgment on those outside our covenantal community, Christians kherem themselves, “not as a punishment but to make space for God to carry out his purposes through their lives” (252).

I take the positive contributions of this volume to be twofold. First, the authors provide a plausible alternative for kherem that is worthy of consideration. Here, kherem signifies the removal of Canaanite identities from use in the land so that the land and the people in the land may be co-identified with Yahweh. In the authors’ assessment, this process includes not just military conquest but also conversion (e.g. Rahab is an example of kherem, not an exception to it).

Second, the authors illuminate the conquest narratives by placing them alongside other ancient conquest accounts. To call descriptions of the conquest “hyperbolic” is not exactly accurate, since these narratives belong to a specific ancient genre that seeks a particular perlocutionary effect. The recognition of these contexts give coherence to the conquest accounts so that we are able to appreciate the literary and theological significance of what is being narrated in Joshua, rather than starting with questions that are foreign to the text.

Nevertheless, many readers may feel that the authors’ systematic dismantling of the traditional interpretation of the conquest is strained. The Walton argue that depictions of Canaanite evil are intended to critique Israel rather than condemn the Canaanites, and they claim that the conquest narratives are concerned with driving out the forces of chaos and establishing cosmological order rather than with judging sin. Yet, in both cases, it is difficult to see why it cannot be all of the above. That the authors are accurate in what they affirm does not necessarily rule out what they deny.

As the work of two authors, The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest is both like and unlike the earlier two “Lost World” volumes by John Walton. It is built on the same interpretive assumptions and follows the same basic method. Structurally, it organizes its argument around twenty-one propositions, each of which stands as the title of short chapters that cumulatively make the case. This can be a benefit to most readers: the sometimes dense material is mitigated by the efficiency of each chapter’s aim. The argument, thus constructed, is relatively easy to follow.

At the same time, this third volume is also unlike the earlier volumes: largely penned by the younger Walton, the prose is less practiced, and this less-practiced prose sometimes pulls the book towards overly ambitious pronouncements. That, together with the elder Walton’s interpretive minimalism, results in a reading of the conquest that is simultaneously spare in its interpretations of particular texts and provocative in its larger interpretive project.

Indeed, what makes the volume most potentially problematic is not the revisionary approach to the Israelite conquest but the methodological denials that are made along the way. The authors take aim at many targets tangential to their task, such as Christopher Wright’s missiology (Israel is not “expected to bring the nations into the covenant” [75]), Walt Kaiser’s principilizing hermeneutics (principles are extracted from their context so as to become “essentially arbitrary” [95]), and any number of attempts to derive ethics from Scripture (God’s purpose in giving us Scripture “does not include teaching us to be moral”[98]).

With chapters as short and pithy as they are, these dismissals cannot help but resemble strawmen. The authors seem to indicate that most attempts to move from the Bible to theology are misguided, even as they advance their own proposal in the book’s final chapter, an attempt that in practice is difficult to distinguish from any number of hermeneutical approaches on offer (including Kaiser’s!).

Indeed, the desire to distance their approach from moralism leads to some strange conclusions, such as this: “We must not conflate the Bible’s status and function as Scripture with its status and function as literature. Providing us with moral knowledge is not its purpose as Scripture; consequently, any moral knowledge we can derive
from it does not carry the authority of Scripture, but rather only the authority of human wisdom” (100). I am simply not sure how to understand statements like this. That divinely-inspired moral direction can and should be derived from Scripture is the testimony of the Great Tradition and, more notably, of Scripture itself (2 Timothy 3:16). In the authors’ effort to ensure that we mind the gap between the ancient context and our own, I worry that they are in danger of leaving us with Lessing’s “ugly ditch” between history and faith.

Perhaps the difficulties I found with the volume may be no more than those of a theologian wanting to bring canonical theology to bear on biblical specialists who are zealous for close readings of particular texts. But hard disjunctions seem methodologically commonplace throughout this volume. We are given a picture of striking discontinuity between the testaments, between holiness and morality, and between creation and covenant. On the last pair, the authors write, “When the Israelites are unfaithful to the Torah, they are not breaking God’s universal moral law; they are breaking the covenant” (103). Why not both? Does not the covenant reveal something about the character of the Creator and the grooves of creation? Related to this is the authors’ repeated insistence that the Canaanites cannot be depicted as guilty since they are not in covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Does not Yahweh’s sovereignty extend to the nations? Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right by the Canaanites, just as surely as by the inhabitants of Sodom (Genesis 18:25)? This may not be an immediate concern of the world of the text, but isn’t it a concern we must address as we live in front of the text? And surely the larger canonical context has something to say on God’s relationship with the nations, the accountability and guilt of all humanity, and the general contours of God’s design for flourishing. These canonical dimensions do not replace the meaning of ancient texts in their context, but they do fill them in sometimes surprising ways.

In the end, this volume advances the conversation on the conquest narratives in some important ways. As a part of the Waltons’ larger project in restoring lost worlds of meaning, it is a gift to interpreters. The question is whether the methodological underpinnings of their approach can sustain the weight placed upon them.

Covering the period between 1900 and 1940, The Disruption of Evangelicalism is the fourth book in InterVarsity Press’ series titled “A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements, and Ideas in the English-Speaking World.” Once the series ends with the eventual publication of the fifth volume, some will see the series as completing the development in evangelical history-writing that began with George Marsden’s The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience (1970). This book’s author, Geoffrey Treloar, is director of learning and teaching at the Australian College of Theology, Sydney. He is an authority on the historiography of the New Testament scholar Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828-89).

In this fourth volume, Treloar’s subject is English-speaking evangelicalism in the period following the high points of the nineteenth century and the post-1945 era of the Billy Graham Crusades. This period was marked by what Treloar labels as “disruption.” It was a time when the previously unresolved problems within evangelicalism were not only not resolved but became more fully apparent. These include evangelicalism’s inadequate ecclesiology, its tendency towards cultural superficiality, and its intellectual deficiencies, all of which were already manifested in the nineteenth century and, in the early decades of the twentieth century, came home to roost.

While not offering “potted biographies” as such, Treloar finds exemplars of these divergent tendencies in the lives and work of Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928), John R. Mott (1865-1955),
of evangelism worldwide in the twentieth century (17). Hammond is the odd one out, an Irishman who is among those responsible for the strongly protestant and Reformed character of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney in Australia (199-200).

The three North Americans all share with Hammond an important quality: they all anticipate leaders and developments that were to be prominent in the post-1945 era. R. A. Torrey looks back to Dwight L. Moody, but in his global outreach he anticipates J. Edwin Orr and especially Billy Graham and his Evangelistic Association, founded in 1950. Similarly, the fascinating figure of John Mott, the grand strategist of global missions at the time of the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, can be seen as anticipating the phase of the ecumenical movement that commenced with the World Council of Churches gathering at Amsterdam in 1948.

Even more prescient is the controversial figure of Aimee Semple McPherson. As a celebrity-revivalist Pentecostal, McPherson was in many respects a harbinger of the charismatic, revivalist mega-church enterprises of the late twentieth century. Treloar refers to her “creative use of modern communication technologies, entertainment[,] and spectacle” (216). Acting on the assumption that music and technology are religiously neutral, this strain of revivalist evangelicalism has promoted mega-churches whose apparent success is actually attributable to their aping of contemporary pop-culture with its narcissistic mores. For the time being, their attendance figures are generally seen as indications of success; yet they are not the solution to ever-increasing secularisation but a mark of it, even as they drain the life out of many a faltering local congregation.

A mark of this entire series is its indebtedness to the famous evangelical “quadrilateral of priorities,” as defined by David Bebbington: “conversionism,” (the belief that lives need to be changed), “activism” (the energetic advocacy of the gospel), “Biblicism” (an emphatic commitment to the Bible), and “crucicentrism” (a strong emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross). This formula guides Treloar also; however, recognising the disruptive stresses and strains impacting evangelicalism in this era, he argues that the biblicist-crucicentric emphasis became more dominant in the early twentieth century (6-7, 192, 201, 226).

Of course, the deeper problem was that the over-emphasis of the “quadrilateral of priorities” in the life of evangelicalism left it deeply vulnerable on a variety of fronts. Evangelicalism lacked an integral basis. As I have argued elsewhere, this left evangelicalism with serious cultural and intellectual deficits. The resulting weaknesses were painfully exposed in the nineteenth century. The higher critical biblical scholarship emanating from Germany, as well as a wholly naturalistic evolutionism, had presented evangelicalism with challenges that it was ill equipped to surmount. All too often, in attempting to face these challenges, evangelicalism only ended up making faces at them.

In this volume, Treloar ably describes an evangelicalism past its peak influence (11), ill at ease with political complexities (107-108), and, after 1919, confronting an “unreceptive culture” in which it had little or no traction (229, 245).

One of the most important portions of Treloar’s work is where he breaks new ground in paying close attention to evangelical responses to the First World War and its impact (117-172). From 1914 and 1917, evangelicals proved to be remarkably susceptible to pro-war state propaganda. Indeed, the level of evangelical cultural naivety could be stunning. Evangelicals actually believed that the end of the Great War would presage a great worldwide revival—an expectation that was utterly unfounded and soon dashed. They seemed to have little insight into the spiritually wasting impact of protracted battlefield carnage. If they had consulted the autobiographical writings of Richard Baxter (1615-1691), they would have known better. The willingness of evangelicals to sign up to a “war for righteousness” and their all too frequent
acceptance of the supposedly “neutral” features of contemporaneous western culture serve to raise confronting questions about the entire sequence.

One problem with this series, including Treloar’s book, is that it is light on the overall relationship of evangelicalism with its surrounding culture. Why?

Arguably, the answer lies in the point of departure exhibited across the entire five volume series. These volumes are written from within the perspective of evangelicalism itself. As a consequence, the series tacitly assumes the validity of the reductionism implicit in Bebbington’s “quadrilateral.” It views evangelicalism from within and according to this frame of reference. To make the point in another way, this series is valuable in that it provides an insight into how some evangelicals now view the history of evangelicalism on its own terms.

That said, after reading this series, we are left asking the following question: How different would it be if we were to abandon a historiography of evangelicalism as here restricted by the reductionism implicit in the “Bebbington quadrilateral” and re-write the story from the standpoint that all of life is to be lived Coram Deo, before the face of God? In other words, how would the structure of the narrative change if we were to critically reassess the history of evangelicalism from a standpoint that acknowledges that Christ’s call to discipleship—“Follow Me”—knows no limits, no sacred/ secular dichotomies or intellectual boundaries, and includes every lawful calling and human activity?

If we were to take this step, we could acquire a sharper view of our history as the people of God in the world, of our calling as we confront our current predicament, and of the challenges that will soon be upon us.


Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms is an important work. Matthew Tuininga is Assistant Professor of Moral Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. This book is not a “quick read.” It requires a sustained effort across more than nine full chapters, and although Tuininga’s readers will learn much from him, they will need to study this work with every critical faculty keenly engaged and be fully alert to the fraught interplay between envisioning Calvin sympathetically in his context, and using his work and reputation in order to validate the “two kingdoms” thinking of certain later reformed thinkers.

The current resurgence of “two kingdoms” thinking owes much to David VanDrunen’s A Biblical Case for Natural Law (2006) and Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms (2010). These works confirm the continuing strength of scholasticism in some circles. VanDrunen is the Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, CA. VanDrunen’s early work was on Thomas Aquinas. Tuininga’s work is that of a disciple of VanDrunen (viii, 19).

This book purports to be presenting Calvin in his own terms and in his own context, but in reality it does something else—it presents Calvin in terms compatible with Tuininga’s and VanDrunen’s commitment to their “two kingdoms” standpoint. In short, while Tuininga claims to be holding the Calvin texts and his latter-day “two kingdoms” standpoint apart (9), in practice his “two kingdoms” commitment exerts a strong gravitational pull over his discussion of the Calvin texts. The “two kingdoms” standpoint does not necessarily presume to set aside Christ’s kingship over all human culture. Rather, it makes the distinction between the church as an institution, and the surrounding culture in which it is situated, so sharply that the terminology of “two kingdoms” becomes a matter of course. As a consequence, it may be inferred, or even asserted, that the followers of Jesus Christ have and share much in common with the thinking and conduct of unbelievers.
Accordingly, while Tuininga does not set out to defend liberal democracy, he is keen to demonstrate how, what he repeatedly calls “Calvin’s two kingdoms theology,” offers Christians a way of understanding how they might participate in contemporary liberal democracies that they do not control (3-5, 322). To this end, Tuininga provides his readers with a full overview of Calvin’s reformation setting (23-60), and the attempted reformation in France (61-91), as prelude to a detailed discussion of Calvin’s teachings on the kingdom of Christ, its spiritual character, covenant and law, the responsibilities of the civil magistrate, and resistance to tyranny (92-354). This is the backbone of the book, and the reader will find here much that is instructive and worthy of further reflection.

At the same time, he or she will need to be fully alert. A key difficulty is that Tuininga repeatedly insists on finding Calvin’s “two kingdoms theology” in passages where Calvin does not use that terminology himself. The result is misleading, and readers would be well advised to check passage after passage for themselves. For example, Tuininga states that “Calvin’s two kingdoms paradigm” pervades his discussion of Micah 4:3 (178), but when we consult his commentary on this—“the nations will beat their swords into ploughshares”—passage, we find that Calvin says “the scripture speaks of God’s kingdom in two respects,” but nowhere in this particular discussion does he use the term “two kingdoms.” Similarly, with respect to Calvin’s exposition of Joseph’s policy in Egypt as presented in Genesis 47:22, Tuininga tells us that “Here Calvin’s two kingdoms distinction guides his logic”; but again Calvin does not employ any explicit “two kingdoms” language at this juncture (315). Perhaps a further example will suffice. With regard to Calvin’s commentary on Romans 14:17—“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy on the Holy Spirit”—Tuininga insists that “Calvin’s two kingdoms distinction” is evident (157), but again, the explicit use of a “two kingdoms” wording is not to be found.

In short, there is a serious problem here. While Tuininga may present himself as leaving the advocacy of this “two kingdoms” doctrine until his conclusion (355-78), his commitment to this doctrine greatly colors his presentation of Calvin, to such an extent that he arguably over-interprets Calvin in his own favor. This question must be asked: if we had never previously encountered the “two kingdoms” doctrine at all but had diligently studied the aforementioned passages from Calvin’s commentaries, would we have found that doctrine to be as ubiquitous in Calvin as does Tuininga? The point here is not that the use of this term is always verboten, but that it is overemployed by Tuininga in order to support his thesis.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that Calvin’s thought was not free from problematic Hellenistic tendencies. His anthropology exhibited Platonic or Neo-Platonic influences (151-7). He had his own notion of “natural law” (369-72), a pliable concept that may function within a scholastic-dualistic natural/supernatural or secular/sacred framework. The presence of such tendencies, the legacy of centuries of Christian intellectual accommodation that the Reformation did not eradicate in an instant, confirms the need to exercise caution when we interpret and appropriate Calvin’s writings.

Of course, Calvin wrote in the Latin and French of his day, and some translators may be inclined to use “kingdoms” in the plural, where others might simply use the word “twofold.” The latter can on occasions be overly stretched to mean “two kingdoms.” In the Ford Lewis Battles edition of Calvin’s Institutes (1960), at Book III.19.15, the section heading is given as “The Two Kingdoms.” However, this expression does not appear in the original as a heading or in the text to which it refers. Calvin’s intention here is to stress the “twofold” governance to which man is subject—“duplex in homine regimen.” In his translation of Book IV.20, Battles guides us well by using the term “twofold” and does not employ the term “two kingdoms.” Interpretation and inclination are in play at such points. For example, Elsie Anne McKee, in her fine translation of the 1541 French edition of the Institutes, (2009) uses the term “two kingdoms in people” at the start of chapter 16, while the original reads “deux
regimes en l'homme,” and not specifically “deux royaumes.”

That the kingdom has a “twofold” character, in the sense of having come but not yet being fully realised, is something to which Calvin often refers, as Tuininga frequently observes (139, 179-81, 280, 358), but in Tuininga’s hands this consideration is too readily utilized to support his “two kingdoms” reading. By contrast, it is not irrelevant that half a century ago the American scholar H. Harris Harbison, in some of the most satisfying and stimulating paragraphs written in English on Calvin’s view of history (Christianity and History, 1964, 279-287), focused on Calvin’s understanding of the kingdom of God without ever having recourse to “two kingdoms” terminology.

While Tuininga tries to overcome the dualistic tendency in “two kingdoms” thinking (1, 92, 182, 356), it inevitably comes to expression. He rightly draws attention to the distinction of the church as an institution, and the church as the people of God, as also found in Abraham Kuyper (373, 375-6). However, while Tuininga is comfortable with the church as an institution coming to visible and corporate expression, beyond the pale of the institutional church it is apparently only as “individual Christians” that we are called to witness “to the righteousness of the kingdom” (376). Presumably there is a place for the seminary. However, the Christian political organisation, or the Christian university, and much more besides, are not in contemplation. There are issues here way beyond the scope of this review, but many will find this approach to be hopelessly inadequate in the face of the increasingly strident neo-paganism evident across the western world.

In his final book (2003), Heiko A. Oberman lamented the baleful impact on Calvin studies of those who oriented their research projects to their latter-day theological agendas. He was right, and it is also right for us to remind ourselves that the scriptures only ever speak of one kingdom of God.
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