
Pro Rege

Volume 32 | Number 3

Article 5

March 2004

Worldview: The History of a Concept (Book Review)

Tim McConnel

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

McConnel, Tim (2004) "Worldview: The History of a Concept (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 32: No. 3, 41 - 43.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss3/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

in their technical views of the future. But Fukuyama raises good arguments, and his failure to convince ought to encourage Christians to become active in developing a Christian philosophy of technology, where insights and understanding might be developed on the firm foundation of the Word of God.

Both Brooks's and Fukuyama's books are well worth

Worldview: The History of a Concept, by David K. Naugle. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002. xxii + 384 pp. Reviewed by Tim McConnel, Assistant Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

A little over one hundred years ago, Abraham Kuyper delivered his famous Stone lectures on Calvinism at Princeton University. At that time, he introduced his American audience to the notion of two "life systems" being in conflict with one another. In a footnote, he wrote, "As Dr. James Orr . . . observes, the German technical term *Weltanschauung* has no precise equivalent in English. He therefore used the literal translation, *view of the world*, notwithstanding that this phrase in English is limited by associations that connect it predominately with *physical nature*. For this reason, the more explicit phrase *life and world view* seems to be more preferable. My American friends, however, told me that the shorter phrase, *life system*, on the other side of the ocean, is often used in the same sense." In the intervening century, the form "worldview" has filled the previously existing gap, due, in no small measure, to the success of Kuyper and Orr in popularizing among English-speaking Christians what had been a continental European philosophical notion.

I was reminded of the ubiquitous status of the term recently when I saw "worldview" used in the chapter title of a book on biblical criticism. How has a German technical term, arising from the context of nineteenth-century German romanticism, come to play a prominent role in evangelical circles? David K. Naugle helps to answer this question as he undertakes a historical study of the term in his *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, which received *Christianity Today's* 2003 book-of-the-year award in the Theology/Ethics category. His purpose is not to describe or contrast various worldviews but rather to delve into the significance and development of the term itself.

The first part of the book explores the various ways in which the notion of "worldview" has entered into Christian thought, in particular in evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox circles. In the first group, Naugle details the use of worldview in James Orr, Gordon Clark, Carl F. H. Henry, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Francis Schaeffer. He gives pride of place to Orr because Orr was the first significant evangelical theologian to give an extended treatment to the notion of a Christian worldview and to argue for its opposition to the zeitgeist of the modern

reading for Christians who are interested in where technological efforts may take us in the future. Brooks will be more interesting to computer scientists and engineers. But Fukuyama's book is very well written, and thus will appeal to all those who generally would not wish to see their "too too solid flesh" melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a posthuman dew.

age. Furthermore, Orr himself influenced Kuyper's development of the concept, as can be seen in the quote above from Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism. Orr has also had an enduring effect on the American scene through the writings of Clark and Henry, both of whom were influenced by his worldview tradition.

The presence of the Dutch Reformed scholars Kuyper and Dooyeweerd in Naugle's analysis may seem out of place at first glance, inasmuch as this work is explicitly an analysis of the term's development in English-speaking evangelicalism. However, as Naugle notes, they have had a major impact on segments of the English-speaking Christian world through the Dutch immigrant community in North America. In the section on Kuyper, Naugle helpfully points out the connection in Kuyper's thought between the notion of the antithesis and the need to develop a consistent Christian worldview. Naugle notes Dooyeweerd's contribution of the notion of the religious ground motive underlying one's philosophy and worldview, but he suggests that Dooyeweerd over-distinguishes between the religious ground motive and one's worldview: "since Dooyeweerd so closely identifies the ground motive of the Holy Spirit with the themes of creation, fall, and redemption—the essence of the biblical worldview—we cannot help but wonder how much of a distinction can be made between his point of view and Kuyper's" (29). Naugle ends his overview of the role of worldviews in Protestant evangelicalism with Francis A. Schaeffer, who undoubtedly has been the greatest popularizer of the notion in the broader evangelical community during the past half-century. At the end of this chapter, Naugle raises three significant issues: the need for definition, the origin of worldview in the vocabulary of modernity, and the attendant question of the usefulness or problematic status of the term for biblical Christianity. He returns to these important issues at the end of his study.

Naugle next turns to the presence of worldview thinking in contemporary Catholicism and Orthodoxy. While he concedes that neither tradition has made much use of the term "worldview," he points out, nevertheless, that they both exhibit an approach that is similar in terms of seeing

the Christian faith as encompassing all of life. In particular, he points to John Paul II as a “worldviewish” pope and sees orthodoxy as being lived out as a “sacramental worldview.” He also notes that the creation-fall-redemption schema is affirmed by all three traditions. Thus, in spite of significant differences, there is an underlying unity. He concludes, “Protestant evangelicalism, more than any other Christian tradition, has deployed the idea of worldview most extensively. While it might be too much to say that it is a characteristic of evangelicalism, it is certainly a prominent feature *within it*, especially in the Reformed context” (54).

After setting the stage in this manner, Naugle comes to the heart of his project: the exposition of the history of the worldview concept. He begins “A Philological History of ‘Worldview’” by noting the universal acknowledgement that *Weltanschauung* was first used in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. There it seems to refer to the sense perception of the world and has no great significance. However, the term was quickly picked up and developed by others, including Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Novalis, Hegel, and Goethe. In fact, its use became so pervasive throughout the nineteenth century that by the time of Orr and Kuyper, it was a commonplace in European thought.

Naugle continues with “A Philosophical History of ‘Worldview,’” splitting it between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He details the use of “worldview” in Hegel, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and in Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Davidson, and the postmodernists Derrida, Berger and Luckmann, and Foucault in the twentieth century. As can be seen from this list, the term has been used by a wide variety of thinkers over the past two centuries, and Naugle notes the variety of ways (sometimes incompatible) in which the term has been used and how it has been seen by some as a peculiarly modern construct.

The fruitfulness of and the controversy over the concept of “worldview” have come about largely from its application to disciplines other than philosophy. Naugle focuses his attention on “A Disciplinary History of Worldview” with chapters on the natural and social sciences. In the former, he looks at the writings of Polanyi and Kuhn. Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shifts in particular has had a further cross-disciplinary impact. In the chapter on social science, Naugle looks at Freud and Jung in psychology; Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann [again!], and Marx and Engels in sociology; and Kearney and Redfield in anthropology.

After wading through this wealth of detail and analysis, one arrives at Naugle’s personal contribution to the discussion in his chapters of theological and philosophical reflections on “worldview.” In these, he attempts to answer the questions that he raised at the end of his discussion of the Christian use of the term, namely

“usability.” We start by adapting Kearney’s argument that the notion that one develops concerning “worldview” is dependent upon one’s worldview itself. Naugle accepts that there is no “neutral” concept of “worldview,” but he sees that claim as an opportunity to develop an explicitly Christian *Weltanschauung*. In so doing, he states that the denotation of the term is itself relatively uncontroversial; what is at stake are the implications and connotations of the term. Therefore, he spells out four implications for worldview that result from his “theological reflections”: the objective existence of God, the subjectivity of the human being as God’s image and likeness, the catastrophic effect of sin on the human heart and mind, and redemption by God through the person and work of Jesus Christ in human history. The background of the biblical message of creation, fall, and redemption can be clearly seen in his delineation. His conclusion is that “Within this biblical framework the term *Weltanschauung*, or ‘worldview,’ assumes appropriate Christian meanings, and any harmful implications associated with the word historically are muted. Through this process of Christian naturalization, the concept as a valuable piece of ‘Egyptian gold’ receives a new identity and is made useful for service in the church and acceptable to her Lord” (290).

With the chapter on “Philosophical Reflections on ‘Worldview,’” Naugle at last attempts to define the term. He writes, “I will propose that a worldview might best be understood as a semiotic phenomenon . . . I will also propose that a worldview as a semiotic structure consists primarily of a network of *narrative* signs that offers an interpretation of reality and establishes an overarching framework for life. . . . Finally, I will propose that a worldview as a semiotic system of world-interpreting stories also provides a foundation or governing platform upon or by which people think, interpret, and know.” “Semiotic” has to do with signs and symbols, and how they convey meaning. Thus, a worldview uses a particular set of narrative signs to establish a symbolic universe, or a way of understanding reality. Naugle carries the reader through a discussion of worldview and narrative, worldview and rationality, worldview and hermeneutics, and worldview and epistemology. He concludes, “A worldview, then, is a semiotic system of narrative signs that creates the definitive symbolic universe which is responsible in the main for the shape of a variety of life-determining, human practices” (329-330).

Naugle’s “Concluding Reflections” includes both the dangers and benefits of the concept of “worldview” for Christians, philosophically, theologically, and spiritually. Because of its focus on the metaphor of sight, its use poses the possibility of an “alienating objectivism.” On the other hand, “a philosophically sophisticated, God-centered conception of a Christian worldview spares believers from a naïve fideism, a scandalous anti-intellectualism, and a cultural obscurantism” (341). Perhaps the greatest danger is

the spiritual one, of an overly enthusiastic pursuit of the esserly entangled in unwanted implications resulting from the origin and development of the term in the context of modernity. He remains cautious in his conclusions, but he clearly and persuasively answers his third question with his argument that the term can be “baptized” and put to Christian use.

the spiritual one, of an overly enthusiastic pursuit of the esserly entangled in unwanted implications resulting from the origin and development of the term in the context of modernity. He remains cautious in his conclusions, but he clearly and persuasively answers his third question with his argument that the term can be “baptized” and put to Christian use.

That “worldview” is an important and much-used concept in contemporary evangelicalism hardly needs to be stated. Naugle has done the church and academy a great service by carefully studying the origins and history of the term and by further reflecting on both the fruitfulness and pitfalls engendered by its use. As can be seen from the preceding summary, the book can be broken easily into three major sections: an introductory part, which details the impact of “worldview” thinking on Christian thought; the main part, which develops the history of the term in its various contexts; and a final section of reflections on “worldview,” with a view to defending its use by evangelicals and to further developing a proper understanding. As such, Naugle’s overall thesis is that Christians can make use of the term and concept of *Weltanschauung* without being nec-

the spiritual one, of an overly enthusiastic pursuit of the esserly entangled in unwanted implications resulting from the origin and development of the term in the context of modernity. He remains cautious in his conclusions, but he clearly and persuasively answers his third question with his argument that the term can be “baptized” and put to Christian use.

One of the endearing features of the book is the inclusion of a prologue and epilogue, both based on the Narnia tales by C. S. Lewis and used to illustrate what is meant by “worldview.” Many readers will also find the stories to which Naugle refers to be elucidated by connecting them to the notion of worldview. Moreover, Naugle gives an intriguing series of quotations prior to the Foreword, from the diverse group of William James, Richard Weaver, G. K. Chesterton, and Karl Barth. These quotations, together with the Narnia prologue, aptly help to set up the ensuing discussion.

Worldview: The History of a Concept would be an excellent resource for anyone seeking a better understanding of the term, particularly its historical development in various fields. It would be appropriate for use in an upper-level philosophy course or for a seminary course dealing with philosophy and apologetics. It is especially recommended to those who make use of the concept of “worldview” in their teaching. You may not agree with all of Naugle’s analysis and conclusions, but he raises important issues and helps us to think through what it means to develop a genuinely Christian world-view.

Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*. Yale University Press, 2003. xiii + 426 pp. ISBN: 0-300-09578-3. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History, Dordt College.

Put simply, historiography is the writing of history. Accordingly, the history of historiography is the history of the writing of history. And the history of historiography is a fascinating subject, addressing as it does the changing character of our historical awareness as well as the depth and extent of our historical understanding. Writing the history of historiography is a formidable task. Donald R. Kelley’s *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* is a continuation of his earlier *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (same publisher, 1998). It is, perhaps inevitably, a book about books. Kelley’s work stands in the line of George Peabody Gooch’s *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (1913, second edition, 1952), Herbert Butterfield’s *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (1955), Eric Cochrane’s *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (1981), and Norman Cantor’s *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (1991).

This present volume is a remarkable achievement. The

many references Kelley provides to authors and books are not a defect but a fount of instruction. The easy flow of the prose rests on foundations of very considerable learning and scholarship. In commencing his discussion of the modern period of western historiography in the late eighteenth century with Herder (where else?), Kelley adopts an organizational strategy towards his subject matter that reflects a dominant feature of the period itself—the rising power and dominance of nationalism. Accordingly, for a substantial part of this volume, Kelley focuses on the development of national historiographical traditions—the German (112-140, 173-197, 265-272), British (81-111, 225-253), French (141-172, 198-224), and Italian (259-264). Understandably enough, American historiography emerges as an interweaving of indigenous and diverse European (and not least German) influences (280-303). All this is a mighty story, and the author handles the complexities with deftness and subtlety. He addresses for us the misconception that “historical-mindedness” arose preeminently out of a conservative reaction to the French Revolution. The roots of this awareness lie in the