LECTURE #2: BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORLDVIEW CONCEPT (PAUL COPAN)

I. NON-THEOLOGICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL USES OF THE TERM

A. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was the first person (we know) who used the word “worldview” (in his Critique of Judgment [Die Kritik der Urteilskraft] in 1790). He used it only once. He spoke of our “intuition of the world” (Weltanschauung), i.e., the sense perception of the world. (Kant also used the term Weltbegriff—world concept.) Kant was known for his distinction between noumenal (the way things really are, which we don’t have access to) and phenomenal (things as they appear to us, which is all we have access to). Of course, to say that the noumenal exists and to say that we can’t say anything about it is to say at least two things about it!

B. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911): During the movement of German Idealism and Romanticism this term came to be used “to denote a set of beliefs that underlie and shape all human thought and action.” For Dilthey specifically, a worldview’s role is to present the relationship of the human mind to the riddle of the world and life, and the root of any worldview is life itself (given the certainty of death, the cruelty of nature’s processes, and a general transitoriness). Like Kant, Dilthey believed that inherent in our own minds and thinking is a kind of filter, grid, or process (a set of mental categories) that shapes the reality that confronts us. The structure of the worldview is rooted in the human psyche (intellect, emotion, and will, respectively). The “macrocosmic” picture of the world/universe reflects the “microcosmic” picture found within human beings trying to understand the world. For Dilthey, all views of reality (metaphysical systems) are a “condition of the soul.”

C. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) declared truth just a matter of perspective, reflecting one’s time, place, and culture. It is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonymms, and anthroporphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.”

D. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) in his later years argued that each person’s perspective is shaped by language (he spoke of the term Weltbild [world picture]). We can’t know whether our beliefs match up with the way things really are. He claimed not to have a metaphysic (a view of the way things really are), but a hermeneutic (“how we

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1 Kant regularly used Anschauung of the world as sense perception. See David K. Naugle, Worldview: The History of a Concept (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 59.
can understand and use language”). Some people have claimed that “male-gendered” language has shaped the way people do theology or philosophy—that certain masculine ideals (rationality, power, etc.) are praised, but typically feminine ones (emotion, empathy, relationality) are diminished.

E. Michael Foucault (1926-1984) used the words *episteme* (Gk. knowledge) and *worldview* (sometimes synonymously) as an inescapable set of rules or ways of reasoning within any slice of history; these dictate what counts for knowledge.⁵ But in the end, a worldview or “truth” is simply a power play.

II. THEOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION OF THE “WORLDVIEW” IDEA

A. PROTESTANT USE OF “WORLDVIEW” Theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) and then later J. Edwin Orr helped blaze the trail for thinking worldviewishly.

1. JAMES EDWIN ORR (1844-1913) was a Scottish Presbyterian theologian who utilized the German term for a specifically Christian setting. His goal (using Kant’s term *Weltbegriff* [world concept]) was to provide a complete, coherent, and rationally defensible exposition of Christianity—a Christian view of things,⁶ that is, “the widest view which the mind can take of things in an effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology.”⁷

2. ABRAHAM KUYPER (1837-1920), influenced by Orr, was a Renaissance man—a journalist, politician (prime minister of the Netherlands [1901-1905]), educator (founder of the Free Univ. of Amsterdam), and theologian. He gave a series of lectures on Calvinism, in which he proposed this particular theological view as a complete belief system, declaring Christ’s sovereignty over all creation: “there is not a square inch of the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” Kuyper emphasized Calvinism/Christianity as a total life system, which has implications for politics, science, art, and religion.

   He spoke of “two life systems” in competition with one another—modernism (which is built upon autonomous human beings and reasoning detached from God) and Christianity (which requires bending the knee to Christ). Oftentimes the facts are the same, but they are interpreted through radically different lenses.

⁶ Sire, Naming the Elephant, 32.
⁷ The Christian View of God and the World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 4. Orr opposed (a) theological liberalism (via Friedrich Schleiermacher), which emphasized a theology of feeling and identified religion with the conditions/affections of the heart (“a feeling of dependence”). The cognitive/rational dimension was ruled out of spirituality. (b) Continental theology (esp. Albrech Ritschl’s), which divided/demarcated between the spiritual and theoretical/scientific (shades of Kant). Positive facts were separated from (and preferred over) personal, subjective religious values.
Kuyper emphasized creation, fall, and redemption. His view can be summarized by these important themes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1: GRACE RESTORES NATURE:</th>
<th>God’s redemption in Christ achieves a salvation that is COSMIC in scope. All things will be renewed and reconfigured to achieve their divinely-given purpose.</th>
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<td>#2: GOD IS SOVEREIGN AND ORDERS ALL ASPECTS OF THE UNIVERSE BY HIS LAW AND WORD:</td>
<td>Everything has a place and an identity as God’s creation, and one sphere (e.g., science) shouldn’t usurp the rightful place of others.</td>
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<td>#3: WE HAVE A “CULTURAL MANDATE”:</td>
<td>Genesis 1-2 speak of human’s working in the world (as co-regents with God) for His glory and the benefit of mankind.</td>
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<td>#4: THERE IS A DUALISM BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS:</td>
<td>Believers acknowledge the redemption and kingship of Christ; unbelievers do not. These commitments have significant ramifications for all of life.</td>
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3. HERMAN DOOYEWEERD (1895-1977) had a more philosophical bent than the previous two thinkers. He insisted that all human endeavor stems not from the worldview but from the spiritual commitments of the heart. Like Kuyper, Dooyeweerd spoke of (a) man converted to God and (b) man averted from God. So the commitment one makes based on either will be decisive for all life and thought. For him, theory and practice “are a product of the will, not the intellect; of the heart, not the head.” Dooyeweerd too emphasized that creation, fall, redemption in Christ in communion with the Spirit shape the entirety of the believer’s life and thought.

4. FRANCIS SCHAEFFER (1912-1984) (author of The God Who Is There, He Is There, and He Is Not Silent, and Escape from Reason) sought to show how a worldview detached from the trinitarian God leads to nihilism/despair and rational inconsistency and a practical life that contradicts the theory (e.g., John Cage’s “chance” philosophy wasn’t carried out in practice when he collected mushrooms).  

Schaeffer notes that philosophy is the only unavoidable occupation. Everyone has a worldview. Christianity, Schaeffer said, is a unity of thought—a whole system that can stand up to severe scrutiny. The Christian faith is a total world and life view—not simply bits and pieces. He writes about worldviews and presuppositions: “Let us remember that every person we speak to . . . has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not . . . It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice . . . A man may try to bury the tension and you may have to help him find it, but somewhere there is a point of inconsistency. He stands in a position which he . . .

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8 Schaeffer didn’t get the analysis right every time, incidentally. For example, he saw Renaissance “humanism” as a human-centered philosophical movement away from God rather than (what it really was) a liberal arts curriculum (humanitatis—the “humanities”) that actually took the Christian worldview seriously—even if it utilized classical literature and images to express Christian themes.

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cannot pursue to the end; and this is not just an intellectual concept of tension, it is
what is wrapped up in what he is as a man.”

Schaeffer uses two illustrations to make his point:

The first is illustrated by a discussion group Schaeffer was leading at
Cambridge University, attended by a young Sikh:

He started to speak strongly against Christianity, but did not really understand the problems of his own beliefs. So I said, “Am I not correct in saying that on the basis of your system, cruelty and noncruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?” He agreed. . . . The student in whose room we met, who had clearly understood the implications of what the Sikh had admitted, picked up his kettle of boiling water with which he was about to make tea, and stood with it steaming over the Indian’s head. The man looked up and asked him what he was doing, and he said with a cold yet gentle finality, “There is no difference between cruelty and noncruelty.” Thereupon the [Indian] walked out into the night.

The point Schaeffer makes here is that persistent questioning exposed the inner contradiction within an alternative belief system.

The second illustration comes from Jean-Paul Sartre, who denied that there are any ethical standards binding upon all human beings. Yet when he signed the Algerian Manifesto—a protest against the continuing French occupation of Algeria—this exposed a conflict between what he professed and his actions:

[Sartre] took up a deliberately moral attitude and said it was an unjust and dirty war. His left-wing political position which he took up is another illustration of the same inconsistency. As far as many secular existentialists have been concerned, from the moment Sartre signed the Algerian Manifesto he was regarded as an apostate from his own position, and toppled from his place of leadership of the avant-garde.

Schaeffer tried to show that Sartre couldn’t live with the logical conclusion of his system: “The more logical a man who holds a non-Christian position is to his own presuppositions, the further he is from the real world; and the nearer he is to the real world, the more illogical he is to his own presuppositions.”

5. OTHER PROTESTANT FIGURES AND THEIR DEFINITIONS OF “WORLDVIEW”:

James Olthuis (Canadian philosopher): “A worldview (or vision of life) is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it . . . this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and

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10 Ibid., 110.
11 Ibid., 58.
12 Ibid., 134.

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interpretative framework by which order and disorder are judged; it is the
standard by which reality is managed and pursued; it is the set of hinges on which
all our everyday thinking and doing turns. 13 Albert M. Wolters (Canadian
theologian): “In its simplest terms, a worldview is a set of beliefs about the most
important issues in life.”

B. THE CATHOLIC USE OF “WORLDVIEW”: 14 The Handbook of Catholic
Theology (1995) says that the Vatican has not “taken a position directly on the topic of a
worldview.” 15 However, Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) was known as a “worldviewish
pope” who has had much to say about the Christian worldview. He has gone through the
ravages of World War II and Communism (being Polish); he saw much suffering and
dehumanization. He defended the value of human life, opposed Western individualism,
and a capitalism detached from moral values. The key problems we have metaphysical
ones—those rooted in atheistic ideologies. He articulated three worldview convictions:

#1: Humans are characterized by their search for the truth. His Fides et
Ratio (“Faith and Reason”): “All men and women are in some sense philosophers
and have their own philosophical conceptions with which they direct their lives.”
Human = “the one who seeks the truth”—unlike animals (who try to survive
and reproduce). 16
#2: Human culture is based upon and is the outgrowth of particular
philosophical and religious commitments: Culture is the product of the cult—
how people worship and what their religious affections are determines what they
make and how they live. From a human vantage point, culture guides events and
shapes the future—forces still under God’s providential care.
#3: A radical transformation must take place at the cultural level and the
basic ideas that make it up: This springs from the previous two convictions. A
vibrant “Christian humanism” is needed to help restore human dignity and rescue
it from the ravages of dehumanizing technology and science and geopolitical
crises. We can move forward confidently, crossing the “threshold of hope,”
because of the triune God’s involvement in creation and redemption through his
incarnate Son, who makes all things new.
RCism has traditionally offered helpful insights into the Christian worldview
(e.g., G.K. Chesterton). Lawrence Cunningham: Catholic Christianity is “a mode of
being in the world and, as such, it is a certain way of looking at the world from a
particular point of view.” 17 There are four key components to consider:

1. CREATION: The created world as a gift, filled with grace and meaning.
   (a) The world isn’t self-sufficient/self-explanatory; it was created by a free and
generous God who is the ultimate reference point for all reality. (b) There is a

14 I am using Naugle’s analysis in chapter 2 of Worldview for Catholicism and Orthodoxy.
15 S.v. “worldview,” 748.
qualitative distinction between Creator and creature. Pantheism (“everything is God/divine”) and animism (a certain power or life-force in objects) are to be rejected. (c) **The created world is very good in all aspects—material and spiritual.** Gnostic-like belief systems (which deny the goodness of the material world) and various Eastern philosophical views that call the material world illusory are to be rejected. (d) **The world is the proper sphere of human activity given to man and woman is a gift**—to be received with gratitude and pursued as a stewardship. Cunningham writes that “Catholicism is at its best when it is openly world affirming, sacramental, iconic, and earthy.”

2: SIN: There is **sin/fallenness** in the world—a rupture that can only be healed by Christ’s death and resurrection. Now we shouldn’t embrace a completely negative/pessimistic view of human nature/creation. Nor should we embrace an overly optimistic view that human effort and ingenuity can create a utopia. We must have a realistic view, taking sin seriously but being filled with hope.

3. REALISM: This brings balance to a number of features of life: (a) **the world:** it shouldn’t be abandoned OR worshiped; (b) **human beings:** they’re neither completely perfect NOR totally depraved; (c) **evil:** though very real, its existence doesn’t destroy meaning and purpose; (d) **Jesus Christ:** He was fully God AND fully man (which has spiritual and material implications for life); (e) **cultural environment:** believers must both live in AND contribute significantly to it.

4. EXPERIENCE OF TIME: God has acted in history—through creation and unique historical events. The past is important. RCism seeks to **cultivate a Christian memory** (remembering past saints, holy days throughout the church calendar, etc.), encouraging a sense of connectedness with the past (“the communion of saints,” who have shared in the same spiritual realities we do). The celebration of the Eucharist (cp. 1 Cor. 11) serves to connect **past** (“the Lord’s death”), **present** (“whenever you eat”), and **future** (“until he comes”).

5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: Catholicism is viewed as a way of life—a way of being (habitus) in the world that is rooted in the life of the divine Trinity.

C. THE EASTERN ORTHODOX USE “WORLDVIEW”:

1. WORLDVIEW CATEGORIES: Although Eastern Orthodoxy doesn’t use “worldview” in its vocabulary, it has traditionally thought worldviewishly. James Steve Counelis says that worldview “is what the Orthodox theological enterprise is all about.” The incarnation—the great “theandric mystery”—is central for “the

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18 Ibid., 4.

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roots and the presuppositions of a truly Christian ‘humanism,’ of a Christian vision of the world.”\textsuperscript{19}

2. THE PLACE OF LITURGY/WORSHIP: Orthodoxy emphasizes the importance of worship to learn theology. Daniel Clendenin notes, “While Westerners tend to learn their theology from books in the library, Orthodoxy specializes in learning theology from the liturgy and worship in the sanctuary.”\textsuperscript{20} For the Orthodox, Christianity is a liturgical religion. Doctrine is understood in the context of divine worship. “Orthodoxy” seeks to link right belief and right worship. Worship comes first, doctrine and church discipline follow.

3. A SACRAMENTAL APPROACH TO THE WORLD: Alexander Schmemann writes that Orthodoxy stresses the sacramental way of perceiving the world. Humans have a priestly role in the world in relation to creation, fall, and redemption. Creation is the sacrament of God’s presence and blessing.

Using Richard Niebuhr’s terms (Christ and Culture), we can say that Orthodoxy opposes two extremes: (a) the “Christ against culture” approach (avoiding culture and the material world for the sake of the “spiritual realm”), and (b) the “Christ of culture” approach (a “liberal” view in which the world is the only thing that matters). God isn’t opposed to the material world. He created it. All that exists is a gift of God; God’s creation reveals who He is in order to promote humans’ worship of God.

4. HUMANS AS PRIESTS OF CREATION: Our relation to creation is that of a priest. We are to thank and bless God, which is the fulfillment of our human nature. We aren’t primarily thinkers (homo sapiens—thinking man) or makers (homo faber), but worshipers (homo adorans—worshiping man). Humans are first and foremost priests. The world was created as one all-embracing eucharist, and we are created as priests of this cosmic sacrament.

5. THE LOSS OF PRIESTLY LIFE IN SIN: Not surprisingly, the fall into sin was over food! Although Christ told Satan said that “man shall not live by bread alone” (Matt. 4), Adam and Eve sought to live by bread alone rather than according to God’s word. Genesis 3 meant a loss of the sacramental, revelatory perspective on reality. Humans were meant to live eucharistically—acknowledging God as the source of the world and its gifts and receiving them with gratitude. However, in the fall humans lost their awareness of their priestly role and looked elsewhere for satisfactions. Instead of being priests of the world, humans became its slaves. Humans stopped being hungry for God and God alone and sought to live life non-eucharistically in a non-eucharistic world.

\textsuperscript{19} “Relevance and the Orthodox Christian Theological Enterprise: A Symbolic Paradigm on Weltanschauung,” Greek Orthodox Theological Review 18 (Spring-Fall 1973): 35.
\textsuperscript{20} Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 7-8. \textbf{Note:} theandric means “divine-human” (from theos = God; anēr = man).

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In the fall, humans turned the world into a non-sacramental object; creation lost its meaning.

6. RENEWAL OF THE PRIESTLY LIFE IN REDEMPTION: God didn’t leave humans in bondage to confused longings and unsatisfied desires. Christ’s coming into the world returns to humans their priestly vocation and creation as sacrament. Christ is the source and satisfaction of these hungers. He completes what God intended from the beginning. Through the Eucharist (food again!), the restoration of life in Christ is celebrated and accessed. In this liturgical act, the Eucharistic and priestly function of human beings is fulfilled, and our identity is disclosed.

SUMMARY: Without minimizing differences between the three branches of Christendom, each can help inform and support one another in cultural engagement and in thinking worldviewishly about a culture lost in hedonism, nihilism, and soul-corroding scientism.

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