

The Worldview Struggle Surrounding Christian Schools

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Every fall Christian school administrators look forward to filling empty classrooms with students, empty teaching positions with faculty, empty athletic facilities with winning teams, and empty coffers with welcome tuition money. Yet a pervasive vacuum can chill our hallways despite high achievement in all these areas of effort. None of them ultimately addresses our mission; none of them reaches our highest goal. Only a fully developed Christian worldview can fill our empty students....

In 1989 the state of California issued a new Science Framework to provide guidance for the state's public school science classrooms. That document gives advice to teachers about how to handle students who approach them with reservations about the theory of evolution:

At times some students may insist that certain conclusions of science cannot be true because of certain religious or philosophical beliefs they hold.... It is appropriate for the teacher to express in this regard, "I understand that you may have personal reservations about accepting this scientific evidence, but it is scientific knowledge about which there is no reasonable doubt among scientists in their field, and it is my responsibility to teach it because it is part of our common intellectual heritage. (Hartwig & Nelson, 1992)

A flourishing Christian education movement requires that every Christian educator must approach his or her vocation with more than a surface analysis of what this statement symbolizes for our field. Its real importance lies not in its promotion of evolution over creation, though that is no small matter in its own right. No, the real danger in the Framework's advice resides in the picture of knowledge it presupposes: empirical knowledge gained by the hard sciences is the only knowledge we can have about reality and thus the only knowledge that deserves the backing of public institutions.

The Framework states that nonempirical claims outside the hard sciences, such as those at the core of ethics, political theory, and religion, are not items of knowledge but rather matters of private feeling. Note carefully the words associated with science: "conclusions," "evidence," "knowledge," "no reasonable doubt," and "intellectual heritage." These deeply cognitive terms express the view that science and science alone exercises the intellectual right (and responsibility) to define reality. By contrast, religious claims are described in distinctively noncognitive language: "beliefs" and "personal reservations."

In such a culture, we now live and move and have our being as Christian educators. Among other things, we are in the knowledge business, imparting it to students and providing tools necessary to obtain it. We are not in the "belief business," passing on a mere set of beliefs, a religious "tradition" to our students. So we must understand how our secular culture defines the nature and limits of knowledge. With this in mind, I want to characterize this culture more thoroughly. [Dr Moreland expands on these points and offers some implications for Christian schools. Editor]



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The Secular Environment Surrounding the Christian School Movement - A Three-Way Worldview Struggle

Currently, a three-way worldview struggle rages in our culture among ethical monotheism (especially Christianity), scientific naturalism, and postmodernism. I cannot undertake here a detailed characterization of these worldviews, but I want to say a word about them and their role in shaping the task of the Christian school (Johnson, 1995, 2000).

First, scientific naturalism takes the view that only the physical cosmos that science studies exists. Scientific naturalism has two central components, one metaphysical and one epistemological. Metaphysically, scientific naturalism implies that everything that exists is composed of matter or emerges out of matter when it achieves a suitable complexity. Among other things, this implication amounts to a denial of the soul and the possibility of disembodied existence after death (Moreland & Rae, 2000).

Epistemologically, it implies that physical science is the only, or at least a vastly superior, way of gaining knowledge (Moreland, 1989).

The Christian teacher sensitive to worldview issues must meet these two components head on. We must show our students that a number of things that exist are not physical: God, human souls, consciousness, virtues (such as love and kindness), aesthetic beauty, various kinds of normative judgments, the laws of logic, mathematical numbers, theories (yes, theories are mental entities in people's minds!), and so forth. We must also show that knowledge can be gained outside the hard sciences. Immaterial reality and nonempirical knowledge constitute two key items of focus for the Christian teacher sensitive to worldview struggles.

Today, a decided pecking order resides between science and the humanities. This has to stop. Science offers one way to gain knowledge. But today people have the idea that it is the only way. Disciplines such as art, theology, history, and literature are viewed as providing mere opinions and not knowledge. We must work hard to elevate the humanities, theology, biblical studies, and other disciplines outside the hard sciences to the level of those sciences in order to promote them as sources of knowledge and truth.

The second worldview is postmodernism (Groothuis, 2000). This worldview contains a very complicated set of ideas, and no short characterization of it would be entirely adequate. Still, we may safely say that postmodernism is a form of cultural relativism. According to postmodernism, truth/falsehood, real/unreal, right/wrong, rational/irrational, and good/bad are dichotomies relative to different ethnographic communities. What is true, real, and so forth for one community may not be so for another.

We must stand firmly against postmodernism. Two things anchor Christian teaching in light of the threat of postmodernism: the nature of truth and the objectivity of rationality. First, we need to teach students what truth is. Both common sense and biblical teaching undergird what is called a correspondence theory of truth. Truth does not become reality according to the way one thinks, says, or believes. Instead, truth consists in a relationship of correspondence between a proposition (sentence, statement, belief, hereafter simply proposition) and reality. The proposition "grass is green" is true only if things are really the way the proposition asserts, namely, if grass is actually green. "Unicorns live in Montana" is true only if unicorns actually live in Montana.

The second notion currently under assault by postmodernists is that of objective rationality. In secular contexts, when Christians take a position on something (say the resurrection of Jesus or a pro-life stance regarding the unborn), many claim that they are biased, not objective, and thus disqualified from claiming the support of evidence and



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reason for their stance. If we accept such a conclusion, it will have the effect of cutting off at the knees any attempt by Christians to support with argumentation anything that follows from a Christian worldview.

What can be done about this issue? We must redouble our efforts at restoring the value of objective reason, rationality, evidence, argumentation, and the like to the Christian community. We must convince our students and parents that Christianity carries the very voice of truth and reason in culture. We should display banners at our schools that celebrate intellectual virtues, such as knowledge, wisdom, truth, and reasoning together, and we should promote the life of the mind whenever possible. Elsewhere, I have provided a rationale and strategy for doing this (Moreland, 1997).

Before leaving the topic of postmodernism, I cannot resist the urge to make one more point. We must help our students avoid the contemporary notion of tolerance associated with postmodernism. To do this, we need to help them distinguish between two different principles of tolerance: the classical and the contemporary principles. According to the classical sense of the principle of tolerance, a person holds that his own moral or religious views are true and those of his opponent false. But he still respects his opponent as a person and his right to make a case for his views. Thus, one has a duty to tolerate a different moral/religious view, but not in the sense of thinking that it is correct. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The classical principle teaches that people will continue to value and respect their opponents, to treat them with dignity, and to recognize their right to argue for and propagate their ideas.

Strictly speaking, in the classical view, one tolerates persons, not their ideas. In this sense, even though someone disapproves of another's moral/religious beliefs and practices, she will not inappropriately interfere with them. However, adherents of this view judge opponents' views to be wrong and dedicate themselves to doing everything morally appropriate to counteract those views, for example, using argument and persuasion. It should be clear that the classical sense of tolerance is really an absolutist position inconsistent with postmodern relativism. If one does not consider another position morally or religiously false, what is there to tolerate? Surely, a person is not just tolerating the fact that she doesn't like the view in question, but that she judges it mistaken.

The contemporary version of tolerance, popular in the general culture, goes beyond the classical version by claiming that one should not even judge other people's viewpoints as wrong. In this view, absolute truth vanishes, no view may claim superiority over another, and one exhibits intolerance if he judges that his view enjoys truth while an opposing view suffers falsehood. This second notion of tolerance is postmodern and has no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus. However, rejection of the contemporary principle of tolerance does not mean abandonment of tolerance itself. We must assure our students of this fact, and we should teach them about the classical principle of tolerance as a means of providing this assurance.

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