

Divine Diversity in the Study of Literature and Writing

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Getting Beyond “Worldview”

In 2004, I wrote two essays published on the *New Pantagruel* website critiquing the modernist concept of “Christian worldview.” The first essay, “Christian College Professor Flunks Christian Worldview Tests,” deconstructs two online worldview tests to show that, as far as their sponsoring organizations are concerned, a person can deny the resurrection of Christ and the existence of the Holy Spirit and still have a Christian worldview if she is politically conservative. One common reaction to this article has been that the sponsoring organizations do not represent an evangelical academic perspective. This criticism may be appropriate but irrelevant. One of the organizations has had apologists Ravi Zacharias, Josh and Sean McDowell, Erwin Lutzer (pastor of Moody Church in Chicago), and the president of a CCCU institution as co-laborers. The second organization offers its test as an assessment tool for Christian secondary schools. Evangelical popular culture is not necessarily influenced by the writings of evangelical college academics on the subject of worldview.

My second essay, “Further Scandal: Christian College Professor Doesn’t Teach from a Christian Worldview,” is the more thorough critique of the concept of “Christian worldview” itself. While this essay has received less attention from bloggers, it has been critiqued in turn in a full-length article by David Naugle, author of *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Naugle criticizes me for not upholding the mission of a Christian institution by rejecting the concept of worldview:

Because of his institutional address at Huntington College, students, parents and administrators rightly assume that Prof. Heller teaches from a Christian worldview. After all, Huntington is “an evangelical Christian college of the liberal arts,” and is also a member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities which promotes Christian worldview development as a chief goal of its allied institutions. (“Scrutinizing a Scandal”)

Naugle bases his criticism on the idea that the concept of worldview is one of the “epistemic implications of the Christian gospel.” He concedes my critique of worldview-based pedagogies—“All too often, worldview advocates, despite good intentions, fail to treat texts and other artifacts with the integrity they deserve”—but he also excuses the pedagogy—“Much of Christian scholarship is still at an adolescent stage of development.” My criticism of “worldview,” on the other hand, is variously modernist and Enlightenment-based, according to Naugle. Postings on some discussion forums (no longer online) had my critiques labeled as postmodernist.

I find it notable that Naugle regards Christian scholarship as “still at an adolescent stage of development” when in a number of the basic humanities and natural sciences, Christian scholarship is among the oldest scholarship with a continuous lineage that still has current relevance. In contrast, however, the conceptualization of “worldview” dates to the eighteenth century German Enlightenment. My intention in this essay is not to reprise my criticisms of “worldview” but to argue that for the study of literature and for the discipline of writing, a good integration of faith and learning should respect the diversities of creation and of ways of knowing (or a diversity of worldviews, including of Christian worldviews).¹ Respecting these diversities will require a continual

acknowledgement of the complexities of the past. These complexities can rarely be accounted for by recourse to concepts of the “Christian worldview” or the “Christian tradition,” but the complexities can also be neglected by claiming that Christian scholarship is at an adolescent stage while overlooking the contributions of Thomas Aquinas, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, Galileo Galilei, and John Milton to both human knowledge and the Christian faith.

The Value of Diversity

Some versions of integrating faith and learning seem to me simultaneously ideal and humanly impossible. For example, in “Faith-Learning Integration: An Overview,” William Hasker writes, “There is . . . a *single* reality, *all* of which we as his [God’s] children and image-bearers must seek to understand” (236). Later Hasker adds, “To love God with all our minds requires that we *try to* think in a single, unified pattern all the truth he has *enabled* us to grasp” (238; emphases added here). This process may promise frustration—how much truth will we be enabled to grasp and what happens if our efforts do not lead us to a single, unified pattern? Yet where Hasker himself anticipates difficulties, I find the possibility for a measure of success: “Though there is a unity of truth there is nevertheless a *diversity of ways of knowing* that makes the unity of truth a difficult and demanding achievement for us humans” (237). I would argue that it is precisely *through* the diversity of our ways of knowing that we come to see that truth is larger than all of our selves and our abilities. Unified, yes, but *e unibus plurum* rather than *e pluribus unum*.

While my arguments against the concept of worldview have been criticized as postmodern, some early modern literary texts suggest that recognizing the diversities of

divinely-created knowledge is the way to a greater understanding of God himself.² One of these is John Donne's "Expostulation 19," part of his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, in which Donne discusses the nature of God in a manner worth considering with the subject of literature and faith and learning integration:

My God, my God, thou art a direct God, may I not say a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that thou sayest. But thou art also (Lord, I intend it to thy glory, and let no profane misinterpreter abuse it to thy diminution), thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too: a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments, such sinews even in thy milk and such things in thy words, as all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creeps; thou art the dove that flies. Oh, what words but thine can express the inexpressible texture and composition of thy word; in which, to one man, that argument that binds his faith to believe that to be the Word of God is the reverent simplicity of the Word, and to another, the majesty of the Word; and in which two men, equally pious, may meet, and one wonder that all should not understand it, and the other as much that any man should. So, Lord, thou givest us the same earth to labor on and to lie in; a house and a grave of the same earth; so, Lord, thou givest us the same Word for our satisfaction and for our inquisition, for our

instruction and for our admiration too. (1306, emended to indicate when “Word” is capitalized in the 1623 text)

“Expostulation 19” continues for several pages of exuberant overstatement. Stemming from the foundational Heraclitean and Johannine idea that God is the Word (John 1:1-3, 14), Donne shows that if God is the Word (a metaphor) and if God is expansive and ineffable, then God becomes, in a sense, Literature. The Word becomes plural—“what words but thine can express the inexpressible texture and composition of thy word”—and the plurality of words is literary—figures, metaphors, hyperboles, allegories, elocutions, and “voyages,”³ among others. It would be idolatry to invert Donne’s assertion, to say that literature is God, because literature itself is insufficient to express all there is of the Word. Donne avoids this idolatry, but it becomes evident in late Victorian literature.

For the majority of literature I teach in my upper-level courses, there is no inevitable difficulty in integrating learning and faith. The integration comes ready-made; most of English literature from Caedmon’s hymn (the earliest extant English poem, circa 680) to James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) has been written by writers who self-identify or self-reveal as Christians. (Boswell presents the uncommon case of a non-Christian writing the biography of a Christian subject.) However, as Donne suggests, the one faith does not lead to one understanding. One man sees the “reverent simplicity of the Word”; another sees “the majesty of the Word”; one man wonders that anyone would not understand the Word; another wonders that anyone understands it at all.

Two Problems of Holding to a Single Worldview

Implicit in this divergence of views that Donne identifies within Christianity are three potential problems. The first is that a reader may have a too-exclusive view of

Christianity. This rarely arises in the classroom, though I have encountered occasional comments that medieval drama and *Mariette in Ecstasy*, Ron Hansen's novel about life in a convent, are not really Christian because of their Roman Catholic theological assumptions. For the medieval drama, it helps to remind the students that the plays date from before the Reformation and that they established dramatic genres which continued in the Protestant drama after 1517. Furthermore, while I disagree on some doctrines with Roman Catholicism, such as transubstantiation and the existence of purgatory, these doctrines can be justified by applying literalist hermeneutics to such passages as Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. The divergent beliefs held by Christians can often be supported by applying a different hermeneutic to a biblical passage, and I suspect the basic cause for a too-exclusive view of the faith is to take one part of a paradox as an entire truth. This is what Donne would seem to caution against.

For reading literature, a second potential problem is that a reader's commitment to the unity of the Christian faith can lead him to distorted readings that elide the differences between his faith and the author's faith. This may account for a broad range of mistakes, some of which may arise from a generous impulse of wanting to find and affirm a commonality of Christian belief. The resulting misreadings are evident at the most professional levels of the discipline, such as when a scholar at a Conference on Christianity and Literature tries to treat Flannery O'Connor as if she were a Protestant. During a recent semester, I made a similar error in class when I criticized Sir Philip Sidney for an inconsistency with his Calvinist faith. In *The Defense of Poesy* (1580), Sidney asserts that human "wit" (an earlier word for the imagination) is only distorted by human will rather than by the corruption of the Fall; this seems to contradict a Calvinist

perspective on the totality of human depravity. A student responded that I had earlier stated that there had been some range of Calvinist belief between the Elizabethan Anglicans and the separatist Puritans. In the next class session, I corrected my analysis when a student's report identified the theology of Philip Melanchthon as a source for Sidney's idea.

The diversity of Christian beliefs belies the use of "tradition" in current religious and political discourse. Those most ideologically (or at least most verbally) committed to the "Christian tradition" seem rarely able to articulate the development of that tradition in any coherent, historically accurate manner. One result now is a sort of compromised cultural stasis borne of overvaluing a false, idealized past for its own sake and of devaluing the present as if it cannot coexist with faith. One result of this may be seen in the art museum at a conservative Christian university in which the most recent work is from the early nineteenth century. This institution is known more for its graduates' preaching styles rather than for their cultural influences.

The actual Christian tradition, insofar as it can be articulated—or better yet, *the literary and artistic histories of the Christian faith* indeed have something to teach the person interested in literary merit and integrity, but only if we recognize and value the range of interests, theologies, languages, and styles that has shaped those histories. Flannery O'Connor has described the failed Christian novelist as one who does not recognize this range in the Christian tradition:

[Students] think that inevitably the writer, instead of seeing what is, will see only what he believes. It is perfectly possible, of course, that this will happen. Ever since there have been such things as novels, the world has been flooded with bad

fiction for which the religious impulse has been responsible. The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality. He will think that the eyes of the Church or of the Bible or of his particular theology have already done the seeing for him, and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting himself as little dirty in the process as possible. (“Novelist” 162-163)

What O’Connor describes here is a Christian writer who substitutes her theology, her worldview, or her sense of the Christian tradition for the world itself—created by God, affected by sin, and in the process of its redemption.⁴

The Large Problem of Moral Evaluation

The third and most time consuming problem for valuing a diversity of beliefs is to know when and how to make a moral judgment about a work of literature. An appropriate moral judgment would have to acknowledge that Sir Thomas More envisions an oppressive government as ideal within his *Utopia*, that Edmund Spenser’s treatment of the Irish in *The Faerie Queene* is racist, and that the ideology of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* would justify slavery. One difficulty I have with integrating faith and learning is to figure out how to value the literary work and the Christian writer at the same time that it is necessary to acknowledge his or her moral failings.

While I was an undergraduate at a Christian college in the 1980s, moral criticism was widely treated as extraneous to the literary analysis of a text, and historically, this point of view was put forward by the American New Critics of the 1950s, most of them identified as Christians. They were, of course, reacting to moral criticism done poorly.

Since the 1980s, the establishment of a variety of theoretical foundations for literary criticism has led to a renewed general acceptance of moral analysis. These theoretical approaches could include Marxist theory, feminist theory, African American theory, postcolonialism, gender studies, and ecocriticism. Because most of these theoretical approaches have arisen from the political left, they have been slow to gain a wide acceptance from Christians. However, Christian literary scholars have applied and critiqued these theoretical approaches, as occurs in Crystal Downing's *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art* (2006) and in the essays edited by Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* (1991).

These theoretical approaches—Marxism, feminism, and so on—generally coincide with the self-identifications of the critics: Marxist analyses are done by Marxists, feminists readings are done by feminists. Thus, one may suppose, there could be a specifically Christian theory for the study of literature. Yet I think that committing oneself entirely to a Christian literary theory can be too much like an imitation of the other theoretical approaches, resulting in yet more readings based on personal identity. My reluctance is not that I am opposed to Marxist, feminist, or ethnic readings, but I am opposed to exclusivity: a Christian's reading of a text should be able to attend to issues of class, issues of race, and processes of semiotic analysis without having to commit oneself entirely to Marxism.

If there is going to be a Christian literary theory, however, I think it will have to begin with the ethical approaches of the readers, which give shape to their moral analyses. This is the direction Alan Jacobs, a professor of English at Wheaton College,

takes when he tries to form a Christian literary theory in his book *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (2001):

We need not shy away from evaluating *any* everyday pursuit according to what the fourteenth-century English theologian Richard Rolle (along with many others) calls “the law of love.” “That you may love [Jesus Christ] truly,” says Rolle, “understand that his love is proved in three areas of your life—in your thinking, in your talking, and in your manner of working.” This division should be of particular interest to people engaged in academic pursuits, because our thinking (including reading) and talking (including writing) pretty much *are* our “manner of working.” How might we begin to consider academic tasks in light of this “law of love”?

To consider the problem more specifically: My work, as a teacher and scholar of literature, is largely occupied with the interpretation of texts. What would interpretation governed by the law of love look like? This is a question that has all too rarely been considered; but it is raised by Augustine in his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*. (10)

If there is going to be a Christian literary theory, I think the direction that Jacobs sets out is largely correct. Fundamental to a Christian reading of any text should be an approach of grace or charity, and such an approach should not be too quickly dismissive of the texts with which we have philosophical or moral disagreements. We could rather ask ourselves what problem is a particular writer identifying in this world, and though we may not agree with his solution, can we not agree on his diagnosis? I have taught Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* with something like this approach, using Miller’s

commentary on the play to show his theological insights on human lostness, even if Miller explicitly denies a divine source for salvation in his essays.

While I have emphasized literature by writers identified as Christians in this essay, most literature is by authors who are not identified as Christians, and some students are too quick to dismiss the value of any such literature. This largely results from a moral judgment based on the too-limited version of the Christian worldview I identified earlier. I have tried to address this problem with my opening lessons in English 151, Perspectives on Literature. One short lesson examines the fragments of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus to show them as the source for the discussion of the “logos” in John 1. This can be followed with a discussion of Paul’s allusion to Cleanthes’s “Hymn to Zeus” in his sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17).⁵ A longer lesson is a study of *Oedipus Rex* to show how discussion of the play has developed the meaning of “hamartia,” the Greek word translated as “sin” in the New Testament. Aristotle treats “hamartia” as an act of injustice, which in the play is the murder of King Laius. Later Greek writers treat “hamartia” as a tragic flaw, which can be identified in the play as Oedipus’s *hubris*. Greek commentaries on the play have developed the concepts of sin that we find are used in the Bible. Students benefit from a reminder that the language used in the New Testament was not the language of a Christian culture. Some worldview approaches to teaching literature are too dismissive of literature from non-Christians. I would like to approach all literature as if it were on a level playing field, to be judged equally so that literature by non-Christians is not presumed guilty and so that literature by Christians is not presumed innocent.

Many readers who are Christians mistake the necessity for moral judgment to focus primarily on the sexual content of a work. One novel which I frequently teach in Perspectives on Literature is Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. Its plot involves a young black teacher, Grant Wiggins, who is cajoled into teaching a prisoner, Jefferson, how to be a man before he is executed for a murder he did not commit. In 2004, this novel was banned from the curriculum of Louisiana College, a state Baptist college not affiliated with the CCCU. The reason was that the novel has a short scene of Grant being intimate with his girlfriend Vivian, fondling her breasts before the text implies their sexual consummation.

In the past I ignored this scene while teaching the novel, but last year, I had my students read another essay by Flannery O'Connor to help them address the purpose for the scene:

If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor and other places where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene. He would seem to prefer the former, while being more of an authority on the latter, but the similarity between the two generally escapes him. He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our

innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite. Pornography, on the other hand, is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purpose, and so far disconnects it from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake. ("The Church" 147-148)

To apply what O'Connor suggests here, we have to consider contexts in order to make a proper moral judgment. Later in Gaines's novel, Vivian and Grant argue, and Vivian chides him for the selfishness of his sexual behavior. Thus, within the novel itself a moral judgment is made of Grant's behavior, a judgment which accords with Christian values. While I do not examine the scene of sexual intimacies in class, I can allude to it to set the foundation for discussing Grant's failures to make and keep commitments. Separating the scene of intimacies out for moral criticism would be to overlook the ways by which Grant's behavior is already represented critically within the novel.

Respecting Diversity in Writing

Most of this discussion has been about the reading and analysis of literature, but the majority of the students I teach are in my Academic Writing and Research classes. One of my explicit emphases in these classes is the ethical responsibilities of the writer. I try to define intellectual honesty beyond simply using documentation to avoid plagiarism. When the focus of the writing is on argumentation, I believe that intellectual honesty begins with doing the necessary work to understand what other people have to say. From this follows being fair to the sources by accurately representing other people's

viewpoints. Documentation is an implication of intellectual honesty, not its starting point. I am persuaded that some of the problems non-Christians have with Christians today stem from some Christians' failure to maintain intellectual honesty when listening to and responding to other people's arguments. I want my writing students to learn to value intellectual honesty, not only by not plagiarizing—a relatively easy accomplishment—but also by developing their abilities to listen and to critique.

This is a reason I have based the research paper assignment on Supreme Court cases. I usually try to show the students that our sense of justice cannot be limited to the hot button political issues which seem to motivate evangelicals. Our sense of justice must also include respecting the dignity of individuals, hoping to see recompense for injustice, and respecting the rights guaranteed by the Constitution. I feel I have accomplished an extension of a student's understanding of her faith when she recognizes that for a Christian sense of justice, she opposes a warrantless search of a home for narcotics.

If the passage from John Donne's "Expostulation 19" shows me anything, it is that the Christian faith paradoxically has parameters and is unlimited. As much as I am able, my goal as a professor is to represent this paradox through the study of literature and of writing.

Notes

¹For this essay, a reader may conclude that nothing here serves as a criticism of speaking of a Christian worldview rather than the Christian worldview. However, I find the idea of a personal worldview still problematic, partly because I do not think it accounts for the processes of thought. I prefer the term “habits of thought” over “worldview.” “Habits of thought” has been given academic significance by Christian literary scholar Debora Kuller Shuger in her book *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Toronto, 1997).

²In my book *Penitent Brothellers*, I discuss a rarely studied pamphlet by Thomas Middleton, *The Two Gates of Salvation*, to show that in Middleton’s Calvinist perspective permits a range of possibility for God’s work in people’s lives, limited only by divine prerogative (23-34). I should note that while I reject “worldview” and while I think the implications of these early modern texts lead away from the concept, these early modern Christian writers (and I) would all confess to the doctrines of the Apostle’s Creed. I argue in my second *New Pantagruel* article that because the Apostle’s Creed has been confessed by Christians *across times and cultures*, it does not form the foundation for a single Christian worldview.

³While a “voyage” is not a figure of speech like “metaphor” or “hyperbole,” the image of a voyage is common in early modern literature to represent the range of God’s interaction with humans, as can be seen in both Middleton’s *The Two Gates of Salvation* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

⁴Journalist Steve Turner discusses these three doctrines in relation to human creativity in chapter five, “The Bible,” in his 2001 InterVarsity Press book *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts*.

⁵The argument I am making here has a long genealogy. Similar arguments appear fully developed in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* (1580) and in John Milton’s *Areopagitica* (1644).

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