

“A Precarious Dance”¹: Affirmation and Antithesis in Christian Worldview Education

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INTRODUCTION: COMMITMENT, OPENNESS, CRITICALITY

Any education worthy of the name must hold in tension certain crucial values: commitment to what one has learned and believed, openness to new ideas, and criticality toward both. Too much emphasis on commitment to one particular standpoint and we end up indoctrinating students, giving them no other option than to believe what they are taught. On the other hand, if we constantly demand openness and never give them space to develop committed beliefs, we risk leaving them unmoored, without root or identity. Maintaining a healthy tension between commitment and openness requires a certain critical stance toward both the new and the old. Yet there is danger in too much criticality as well, the danger of becoming able to tear down others' ideas while remaining unable to offer anything constructive of one's own. Students must learn to affirm as well as to deny, to assert as well as to question.

Although these tensions can be found in every area of education, they manifest differently in public, non-sectarian education, and in religious communities' education of their own members. Public schools in Western democracies aspire to be both pluralistic and liberal: *pluralistic* in the sense that students encounter a diversity of viewpoints espoused by teachers and peers, and *liberal* in the sense that students are explicitly encouraged to explore these diverse viewpoints and choose their own, without being directed toward one or another. Because of these aspirations, public education tends to emphasize openness at the expense of

commitment, teaching students to listen to and learn from others while leaving the task of building up a positive worldview to other institutions. Of course, we could question the extent to which students really have meaningful interactions with diverse viewpoints, and whether they are truly welcome to adopt any worldview, even a non-liberal one. Although these questions are not my focus at present, I mention them to show the complexity of these issues even in a supposedly secular context.

In contrast with public schooling, education within a particular religion has the explicit purpose of passing on a tradition of belief and practice, of leading students to be or become committed to a particular faith. For this reason, its most obvious danger is that of indoctrination — sacrificing openness and criticality in order to achieve commitment, or rather, conformity. Yet many religious educators are well aware of the potential for indoctrination, and seek *both* to impart their own religious doctrine *and* to realize other educational values such as appropriate criticality toward one’s faith tradition and the ability and willingness to learn from other viewpoints.² Furthermore, we must avoid over-emphasizing the unity within religious education. When students are being educated within their own faith community, they may not encounter the same *degree* of viewpoint diversity that can be found in some public schools; but they do interact with peers and teachers who interpret and practice the same faith in different ways. Moreover, they may have greater opportunities to actively engage with that diversity, precisely because of their shared foundational assumptions.³

So the tensions among commitment, openness, and criticality can be found in both secular and sectarian educational settings, though the difficulties of educating within those tensions will differ because of each setting’s goals. In order to explore this matter from the perspective of intra-religious education, I examine a specific pedagogical movement

within Christian education, which I call “Christian worldview education.” There are, of course, important questions of how public education can support students in developing their own religious or non-religious commitments, including the extent to which religion can or should be expressed, discussed, or taught within state-run schools. Although my discussion here may have implications for those debates, I do not engage them directly. Rather, my particular focus in this article is the attitudes that Christian worldview education cultivates with respect to other, non-Christian belief systems.

CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Christian worldview education developed within Reformed Protestantism, and from there spread to the rest of American Evangelicalism.⁴ It teaches students how to do “worldview analysis” in order to understand why the Christian worldview is true and all other worldviews are false.⁵ Worldview analysis may be used in several ways. In *self-analysis*, students uncover the beliefs revealed by the way they themselves actually live, and compare those beliefs with the Christian worldview in order to become more consistent with the Christian beliefs they profess to hold. In *cultural analysis*, students examine particular cultural products (novels, poems, plays, movies, TV shows, music, etc.) as well as cultural practices more generally; they seek both to understand the various worldviews on which these cultural products and practices are based and to consider how they relate to Christianity. Finally, students examine the worldviews of *other individuals*, once again in order both to understand someone else’s worldview on its own terms and to compare that worldview to the Christian one.⁶ In whatever form it takes, worldview analysis serves two aims: evangelism (converting others to Christianity) and discipleship (becoming a better Christian oneself).

Christian worldview education typically teaches worldview analysis using two kinds of “worldview categories.” First, students learn about the various worldviews that are prominently found in the world today. In addition to *specific* worldviews, Christian worldview education often teaches a set of “worldview questions” or areas of human thought and endeavor. Students learn about the specific worldviews in large part by learning how each of them answers the worldview questions. In fact, one textbook even contains an actual table: the top row lists six worldviews (Christianity, Islam, Secularism, Marxism, New Spirituality, and Postmodernism), the leftmost column lists ten disciplines (Theology, Philosophy, Ethics, Biology, Psychology, Sociology, Law, Politics, Economics, and History), and the boxes contain single words or brief phrases summarizing each worldview’s approach to each of the disciplines.⁷ Not all instances of Christian worldview education are quite so reductive, but all do make use of certain universal questions or categories to explain particular worldviews.⁸

It is important to note that Christian worldview education exists at both scholarly and popular levels. The first consists mainly of books and academic journal articles written by professional scholars and directed toward other scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students. These books and articles commonly treat issues such as the nature and purpose of Christian higher education; worldview analyses of artistic creations such as novels, poems, and movies; and the relationship between the Christian worldview and the academic disciplines of philosophy, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. Writers at this level are not intentionally elitist, any more than scholars in any other area of scholarship. But most of their writing is neither accessible nor interesting to the vast majority of Christians.

At the same time, a second, more popular level of Christian

worldview education consists not only of books but also of DVDs, homeschooling curricula, summer camps, and other programs. These materials aim to reach ordinary believers who are neither professional scholars nor higher education students. Of course, these two levels are not wholly dichotomous; books written for an undergraduate audience might be accessible to advanced high schoolers with an experienced teacher, and discussions of Christian worldview pedagogy in a higher education context may prove relevant for Christian high school teachers as well. But the differences between the two levels are noticeable in the sources referenced, the writing and teaching styles employed, and the conclusions drawn. In addition, in popular-level Christian worldview education, the Reformed roots of worldview thinking are hidden or even missing altogether; instead, the Christian worldview is portrayed as a sort of “mere Christianity” (or, more accurately, mere Protestantism).⁹ Unsurprisingly, although the scholarly level of Christian worldview education holds considerable sway among Christian academics and students of higher education, it is the popular level that is most widely known among American Evangelicals more generally.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its popularity, Christian worldview education has received considerable critique, not just from liberal, secular scholars, but from Christian thinkers as well. In particular, numerous authors have challenged the idea that Christianity is *merely* a worldview or set of propositional beliefs, pointing out that it is instantiated in various practices and institutions and, more deeply, that Christian faith is most importantly a fundamental orientation of the heart, not just cognitive assent to particular truth claims.¹⁰ For purposes of this article, I do not claim that worldview analysis is the only or even the best way to approach Christian education; if nothing else, it is certainly inadequate if young Christians are not also involved in a multigenerational local congregation.¹¹ Yet, shortcomings notwithstanding, the way Christian worldview

educators approach the tension between openness and commitment is fruitful and deserving of careful study.

OPENNESS AND COMMITMENT IN REFORMED CHRISTIANITY: AFFIRMATION AND ANTITHESIS

Educators in the Christian worldview movement aspire to teach students two attitudes in relation to culture in general, and non-Christian worldviews in particular. These attitudes are ‘affirmation’ and ‘antithesis.’¹² *Affirmation* involves explicitly recognizing and celebrating whatever is good, true, and beautiful in human cultural activity, including in non-Christian worldviews. For example, students might examine popular movies for instances of self-sacrifice, forgiveness, hope in the midst of suffering, and other Christian themes.¹³ Or a Zen Buddhist haiku may be read as a window into “God’s marvelous creation and the glories inherent in each moment.”¹⁴ Even so, the same writer emphasizes that the author of the haiku is a Buddhist, not a Christian, and that Zen Buddhism is fundamentally opposed to Christianity.¹⁵ This is a moment of *antithesis*, which means highlighting and analyzing the opposition between the Christian worldview and various non-Christian worldviews, both in the abstract and as these manifest in particular works of art and cultural practices.¹⁶ For Christian worldview education, it is not enough to merely enumerate differences among worldviews in a neutral way, as one might do in a liberal, pluralistic public classroom; antithesis emphasizes the conflict between Christianity and all other worldviews.

Two key theological concepts of the Reformed Christian worldview underlie the importance of affirmation and antithesis. First, thinkers in this tradition emphasize “common grace,” the many good gifts of God that are shared by Christians and non-Christians alike; this is distinct from special or saving grace that belongs to Christians alone. Common grace

includes natural goods, such as rain and sun; relational goods, such as children and friends; and especially cultural goods, such as science, the arts, government, and education. The concept of common grace opens Christians up to affirm the goodness of many aspects of cultural activity, including the efforts of non-Christians. Furthermore, it leads them to see all aspects of human creativity as enabled by God the Creator. According to sociologist and Christian intellectual James Davison Hunter, “Affirmation is based on the recognition that culture and culture-making have their own validity before God that is not nullified by the fall. It isn’t just that the social order is preserved because the rule of sin is restrained . . . but that goodness, beauty, and truth remain in this fallen creation.”¹⁷ He elaborates in a way that underscores the relevance of affirmation to worldview-based Christian education:

people of every creed and no creed have talents and abilities, possess knowledge, wisdom, and inventiveness, and hold standards of goodness, truth, justice, morality, and beauty that are, in relative degree, in harmony with God’s will and purposes. These are all gifts of grace that are lavished on people whether Christian or not.¹⁸

At the same time as Christians affirm that the world and human culture are good, they also believe that the world is fallen and humans are sinful. In particular, the Reformed tradition emphasizes the doctrine of “total depravity,” which means not that *everything* humans do is evil, but rather that the taint of sin touches every aspect of human existence. As Hunter says, “Antithesis is rooted in a recognition of the totality of the fall.”¹⁹ Although it is individuals, not cultures or ideas, who are depraved, the effects of that depravity can be felt in all that humans do. For this reason, many aspects of cultural and intellectual activity — including certain artistic expressions and philosophical assumptions — are fundamentally at odds with a Christian worldview. Therefore, Christians

cannot affirm everything about human culture, but will seek to reveal the antithesis between Christianity and other competing belief systems.

Yet Hunter emphasizes that "antithesis is not simply negational. Subversion is not nihilistic but creative and constructive."²⁰ Therefore, antithesis involves not only showing the conflict between Christian and non-Christian worldviews but also developing the Christian worldview as an appealing alternative to other patterns of thought and behavior. In this way, antithesis leads back to affirmation, recognizing much that is praiseworthy in non-Christians' pursuit of art, scholarship, justice, and other areas of human culture. Similarly, affirmation always leads directly to antithesis: it does not merely recognize the goodness in non-Christians' cultural activities, but also resituates that goodness in the context of God's gracious gifts. When united in this way, affirmation and antithesis assert that hopes can only be fulfilled and meaning-making can only be explained on the basis of Christianity. Thus, these two attitudes cannot exist independently of one another, but each must continually bleed into the other.²¹

Both the interconnectedness of and the enduring tension between affirmation and antithesis can be seen more clearly by means of contrast with two other attitudes which often masquerade as affirmation and antithesis but are in fact perversions of them. These are 'negation' and 'synthesis.' As Hunter explains:

unlike "antithesis" which is constructive opposition, representing a contradiction and resistance but with the possibility of hope, the concept and practice of "negation" have become expressions of nihilism. It offers nothing beyond critique and hostility. It is antagonistic for its own sake. This, it would seem, is contrary to the gospel. "Synthesis" is problematic because it presupposes a blend-

ing and an accommodation with that which it opposes. “Affirmation,” by contrast, does not require assimilation with its opposition to validate actions or ideas generated by the opposition of which it approves.²²

Any given pedagogical situation may call for a greater emphasis either on antithesis, if students have embraced the prevailing cultural standpoint too unthinkingly, without examining its relationship to the Christian worldview; or on affirmation, if students are too quick to condemn the efforts of non-Christians, without looking for how God may be working even through those who do not acknowledge Him. Christian worldview educators, like educators in any setting, may decide at any particular moment to pull harder on one end of the rope than the other. However, this can lead to problems when they try to evaluate one another’s efforts. To someone who is unfamiliar with the details of the pedagogical situation, one teacher’s attempt at affirmation may look like a capitulation to synthesis, while another teacher’s carefully articulated antithesis may appear mere negation.²³

Avoiding these pitfalls requires a deep sense of humility, which can itself be cultivated by the very challenge of living in the tension of affirmation and antithesis. As Christian worldview educators reflect on their own struggles to appropriately emphasize both affirmation and antithesis, they will be slower to judge others who are striving toward the same goal; they will first take time to gather more information about students’ backgrounds and the overall arc of instruction, before declaring that someone else has succeeded or failed in this difficult pedagogical dance. In addition, recognizing just how hard it is to do this well will lead them to seek the perspectives of their colleagues, to help them see when they may have gone too far in one direction or the other.

Furthermore, living in the tension of affirmation and antithesis

can also teach Christian worldview educators and their students to adopt a stance of humility in their pursuit of evangelism. It might appear that humility and evangelism are incompatible; but on the contrary, humility is in fact indispensable for evangelism. The close connection between humility and evangelism rests on another key doctrine of Reformed Christianity, that of sovereign election. Because Reformed Christians believe God chooses those who will be saved and causes them to believe in Him, they do not have to force anyone to convert. They tell others about the Christian faith, and strive to persuade them of its truth, relevance, and beauty (all of which constitute evangelism); but they can humbly trust the ultimate outcome of these efforts into God’s hands. Such humble trust in God frees Christians to engage in both affirmation and antithesis, while the challenge of doing so in turn reinforces their humble reliance on God.

Thus, the struggle to live in the tension between affirmation and antithesis, and the humility that this struggle gives rise to, enables Christian worldview education to maintain the educational value of openness to learning from others without sacrificing the complementary value of commitment to Christianity. Of course, it is far easier to *talk* about living in the tension between affirmation and antithesis than it is to actually *do*. In the final section, I examine one example of Christian worldview education at the popular level to see whether it does in fact display both affirmation and antithesis toward other worldviews.

AN EXAMPLE OF POPULAR-LEVEL CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW EDUCATION: *THE DEADLIEST MONSTER*

J. F. Baldwin’s *The Deadliest Monster*²⁴ sits squarely at the popular level of Christian worldview education: it is intended primarily for high schoolers to read independently, and it is written in a conversational tone,

making frequent use of anecdotes and personal stories. For this reason, *The Deadliest Monster* is a good place from which to begin to consider the degree to which Christian worldview education succeeds or fails at imparting affirmation and antithesis. Like most Christian worldview education, its purpose is not to explain Christianity to non-Christians, but rather to teach Christian students how to think about their own and others' worldviews; in other words, it serves as a model of the kind of attitudes toward others that Christian students are expected to adopt.

From the first few pages of *The Deadliest Monster*, a kind of antithesis is unmissable. The book's starting point is the question, "What is the nature of man?"²⁵ Baldwin argues that there are only two possible answers to this question, and those answers are mutually incompatible: "Men either are basically good or inherently sinful — they cannot be both."²⁶ According to Baldwin, the answer to this question divides all worldviews into two camps, which he names after two classic monster stories, *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. To illustrate the Frankenstein camp, Baldwin summarizes ten "rival worldviews;" each summary drives steadily toward the point that every non-Christian worldview depends upon the claim that man is capable of saving himself. The rest of the book consistently reinforces this antithesis between "the Frankenstein crowd" and "the Hyde crowd" by showing the implications of the belief in man's inherent goodness or sinfulness for ethics, psychology, education, government, church-state relations, and more.

Evidence of affirmation is harder to find. To be sure, Baldwin bases his description of the correct, Christian view of human nature on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, even while acknowledging that its author, Robert Louis Stevenson, was "what may best be described as [a] 'modern pagan.'"²⁷ In fact, he even says that, "The story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is uncannily like the biblical description of unredeemed man."²⁸ But this

is the only time he makes substantive use of the work of a non-Christian in an approving way. Throughout the book, non-Christians and their worldviews are responsible for everything from euthanasia to the self-esteem movement.

This inability to affirm what comes from non-Christians poses problems for Baldwin’s antithesis, as well. Recall that Hunter’s formulation of antithesis goes beyond merely emphasizing the opposition between Christian and non-Christian worldviews; it requires presenting the Christian worldview as a viable alternative to non-Christian patterns of thought and behavior. Baldwin attempts to do this in the final chapter of *The Deadliest Monster*, by showing how the belief that man is inherently sinful — when combined with the belief that Jesus saves sinners — leads to a life of heroic selflessness. But without a thoughtful, sensitive exploration of what non-Christians hope for, aspire to, celebrate, and love, it is unclear how Christianity offers a genuine alternative to the worldviews they already hold.

Most concerning, the lack of affirmation in *The Deadliest Monster* leads students to become self-congratulatory for their ability to arrive at the correct worldview. To his credit, Baldwin recognizes this problem and attempts to address it directly. However, his recommended antidote — “remember what kind of monster you are”²⁹ — leaves much to be desired. Not quite two pages reminding students that “we have this advantage [i.e., believing in Christianity] not because we’re clever, but simply because God changed our hearts” pale in comparison to the rest of the book, which incessantly proclaims the intellectual and moral failings of every other worldview. Baldwin is not wrong to remind students that their salvation depends on God’s grace, not their own intelligence. Rather, this legitimate reminder would carry more weight if accompanied by examples of the good intellectual and cultural gifts that God gives to non-Christians as

well as to Christians. Such examples would teach students how to humbly recognize the God-given insights of non-Christians, and to draw on those insights for both evangelism and personal growth.

In closing this section, I want to emphasize that my concern here is *not* that Baldwin portrays a fundamental conflict between Christianity and all other worldviews. There is good precedent for believing that such an opposition exists, both in the tradition of Christian worldview education and in the Bible itself.³⁰ Nor is it inherently problematic that Baldwin simplifies matters that are enormously more complex; all teachers must simplify to some extent.³¹ Rather, my worry is that in over-emphasizing antithesis at the expense of affirmation, Baldwin has slid into the territory of negation and the pride it engenders.

That said, it remains an open question to what extent this erring on the side of antithesis is a particular feature of Christian worldview education at the *popular* level. Anecdotal evidence, at least, suggests that some Christian professors of higher education may tend to err on the side of affirmation instead.³² The questions of whether this is in fact the case, as well as in what ways popular- and scholarly-level Christian worldview educators might be able to work together and thereby balance one another, will have to wait for another time.

CONCLUSION

In this article I used the particular example of Christian worldview education to explore the educational challenge of balancing commitment to a particular viewpoint and openness to other views. I described the types of worldview analysis that Christian worldview education uses to equip students for both evangelism and discipleship. I further explained that Christian worldview education aspires to teach students two interconnected attitudes, affirmation and antithesis, with respect to other

worldviews. These attitudes both require and in turn produce a deep sense of humility. Finally, I examined one instance of Christian worldview education at the popular level, J. F. Baldwin’s *The Deadliest Monster*, arguing that this work fails to exhibit affirmation, and that this failure undermines its attempt at antithesis as well.

One might suppose that, because it is so difficult to educate on the basis of *both* affirmation and antithesis, the project of Christian worldview education is fundamentally untenable. I do not think such a conclusion is justified. First, recall that the tension between commitment and openness exists in public, non-sectarian educational contexts as well. So we cannot escape this challenge merely by avoiding intra-religious education. But more importantly, both the difficulty and the necessity of living in the midst of this tension demand not despair, but rather further study into how to do this *well*. For, after all, education is truly educative only when it is neither entirely closed nor wholly uncommitted, neither mired in the mud nor floating in midair but standing firmly on solid ground. Only then can we move forward; only then can we dance.

1 James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), xiii.

2 Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3 For instance, students might agree on the importance of the Eucharist or the Atonement while disagreeing about how to interpret these doctrines. Or they might argue about how to apply Scripture to various governmental policies while agreeing that their faith *should* impact their politics. Examples could be drawn from other religions besides Christianity as well.

4 David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 3–32.

5 In this way, Christian worldview education differs markedly from other, non-sectarian uses of “worldview” in the context of religious education, such as in Jacomijn C. van der Kooij, Doret J. de Ruyter, and Siebren Miedema, “‘Worldview’: the Meaning of the Concept and the Impact on Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 108, no. 2 (2013): 210–228.

- 6 These types of worldview analysis are modified from James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 158–183.
- 7 Jeff Myers and David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews* (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Ministries, 2015).
- 8 Another example that is less reductive while still applying universal categories to all worldviews discussed is the list of “basic questions” in James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 22–23.
- 9 For a critique of this “mere Christianity” approach in Christian worldview education, see Lori Kanitz, “Improving Christian Worldview Pedagogy: Going Beyond Mere Christianity,” *Christian Higher Education* 4 (2005): 99–108.
- 10 See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Sire, *Naming the Elephant*; and Katherine G. Schultz and James A. Swezey, “A Three-Dimensional Concept of Worldview,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 22 (2013): 227–243.
- 11 James K. A. Smith is particularly helpful on this point. See especially *Desiring the Kingdom*, 223–225.
- 12 I cannot point to any particular Christian worldview educators who formulate their intentions in these terms. Rather, I offer an idealized account of what I infer to be their aspirations.
- 13 See David V. Urban’s discussion of Roy M. Anker’s analysis of the *Star Wars* films, “Balancing the Antithesis: An Enduring Pedagogical Value of Worldview,” in *After Worldview: Christian Higher Education in Postmodern Worlds*, ed. J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael Stevens (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2009), 122.
- 14 Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 174.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 16 Urban’s discussion of his own use of antithesis in the classroom also provides several illuminating examples. “Balancing the Antithesis,” 123–126.
- 17 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 232.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 234.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 21 In Hunter’s words, affirmation and antithesis are two movements in a single dialectic. See *ibid.*, 231–236.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 332n7.
- 23 Again, the exchange between Urban and Anker in *After Worldviews* provides a brief but intriguing window into this dynamic.
- 24 J. F. Baldwin, *The Deadliest Monster: An Introduction to Worldviews* (New Braunfels: Fishermen Press, 1998).
- 25 Baldwin, *The Deadliest Monster*, 20. Baldwin uses “man” rather than “humans” or “humanity,” and I have preserved this usage in my discussion.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 23.

29 Ibid., 63.

30 See Elmer J. Thiessen, “Refining the conversation: some concerns about contemporary trends in thinking about worldviews, Christian scholarship and higher education,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2007): 144–148.

31 David Lewin, “Towards a Theory of Pedagogical Reduction: Selection, Simplification, and Generalization in an Age of Critical Education,” *Educational Theory* 68, no. 4-5: 495-512.

32 Urban, “Balancing the Antithesis,” 120–123; see also Smith, *Awaiting the King*, xi–xiii.