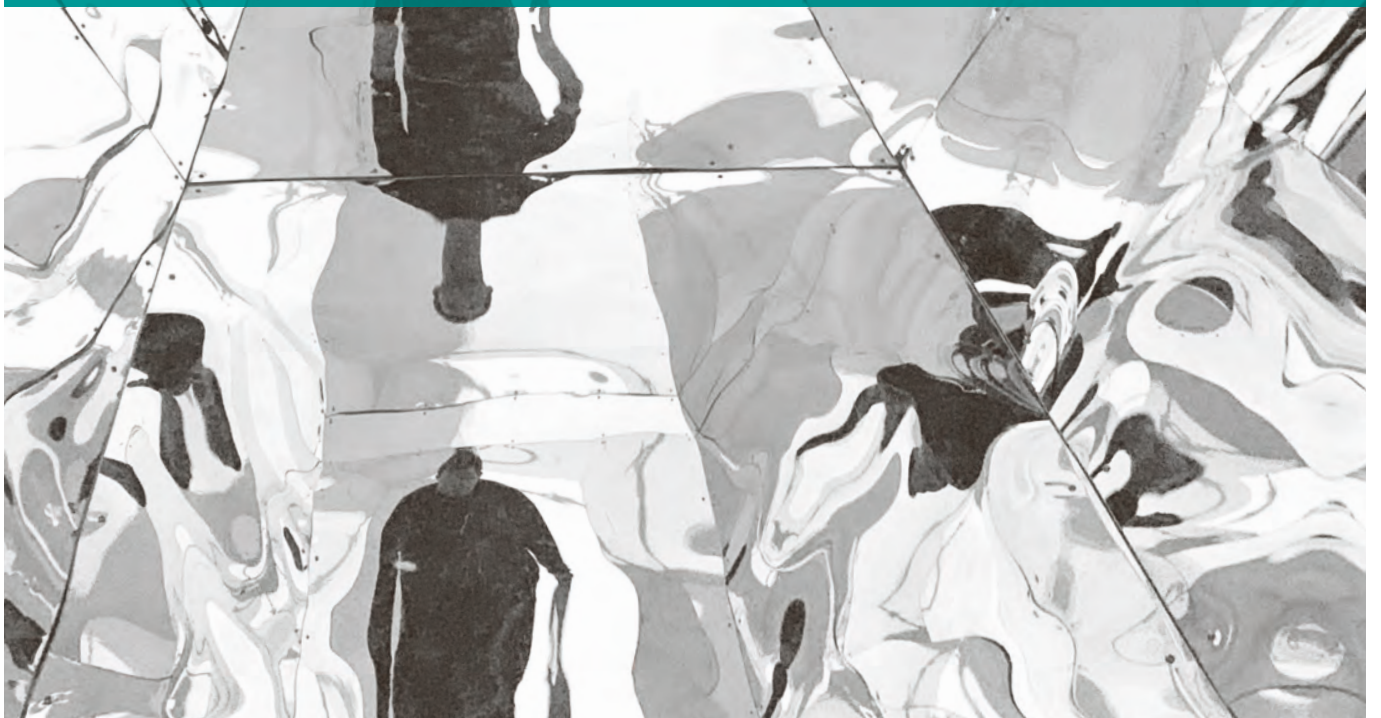




# WORLDVIEW, CURRICULUM, AND PEDAGOGY:

*A Dialogue With David Smith*

By Dr David I. Smith and Chris Parker



A recent routine email conversation between Chris Parker (CTJ editor) and David Smith at Calvin University about an article submission, led to the following dialogue about the place of worldview, curriculum, and pedagogy in Christian education. At the end of the exchange, both Chris and David made the observation that maybe the dialogue could, itself, become an article. And, well, here it is:



David,  
**G'day from Down Under. Just a scheduled follow-up email to check that your CTJ article is still on track?**  
**Also, I am currently deep reading *On Christian Teaching*—really appreciating lots, and being forced to mull over some. Thanks for your work on it!**  
Chris



Hi Chris,  
Flattery will get you everywhere! Getting folk to “mull over some” is my life’s mission, I think, so glad to hear it’s having that effect. It’s meant as a stimulus, not a blueprint or a program.  
The article is about a third written. I hope to make the deadline. Crazy times right now.  
Blessings,  
David



David,  
**Well, you probably won't be surprised from our previous chats that it is Chapter 7 that is causing me the most pause and reflection. Good pause; good reflection—but your emphasis shift here from a more 'traditional' (perhaps read 'worldview') posture in Christian education to a pedagogy-sympathetic-to-Christian-virtues approach is still buzzing around in the old grey matter. Thanks, it's a good thing to have buzzing!**  
**In regards to the article, I have a healthy suite of submissions on this theme already. Given this and your current busyness, I wonder if the article that you have started could be, down the track, adjusted in a way that would speak more generally on reflections on Christian education (without the direct reflection on Corona).**  
Chris



Chris,  
If you have enough stuff already for your issue, a later deadline would indeed help me, and I can easily pivot the material.  
I am glad you said “emphasis shift”—the book is not meant to negate the importance of worldview (or build a virtue ethics approach as an alternative), in fact in some important ways I understand all of what I am saying as a radicalization or following through to logical conclusions of a worldview approach (see e.g. the first full paragraph on p. 30). Within worldview discussions themselves there has been recurring criticism of treating worldview as something that only happens in words or ideas, going back decades. If we really want education grounded in a Christian worldview, then the learning practices and processes and not just the ideas have to be thus grounded. Virtues are part of this, though only part (the importance of Christian virtues is also, I take it, part of a Christian worldview and articulations of worldview become dubious without them). And if we want students to be formed in a Christian worldview we need to face the fact that people are not formed only by words or by people talking to them. If there is a key shift away from some versions of a worldview approach it amounts to doubting whether teaching people explicit worldview frameworks through direct instruction can do enough of the work of formation or free us from teaching Christian ideas through pedagogical practices that undercut them. Some articulations of a worldview approach don't seem to me to take sufficient account of how folk learn or of the gap between what the mind learns and how the life is shaped.  
It's probably also fair to say that I am a little less persuaded than some that we know exactly what a Christian worldview is. Specific articulations of Christian worldview seem to keep getting mixed up with politics and social locations. In my own Reformed tradition, articulations of “Creation-Fall-Redemption” sometimes give a lot of time to those structural ideas but a lot less time than the apostle Paul would to the cross. Current events here in the US are a further reminder of how complicated all of this is. We need to continue to figure out how much of Christian worldview is really white, privileged worldview or Western, post-Enlightenment, Christianized worldview. It is not very long in historical terms since the conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing

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position was pro slavery (the abolitionists we now like to write books about were the exception, after all, God clearly gave Abraham instructions on how to look after his slaves, Paul returned Onesimus, and the Bible never speaks against slavery) and moves against slavery were decried as an attack on a Christian worldview. It will not suffice to simply say “but they were not real Christians like we are”. There are currently Christians who see rejecting concern about the environment/climate as a key part of Christian worldview, and those who think the opposite. This is one area in which taking account of social imaginary might help. Your/my worldview (according to most of the more rigorous accounts) is not made up only of the list of key Christian beliefs that you/I articulate in public. It’s a mess of beliefs, assumptions, emphases, and ways of being postured in the world that are shaped by faith but also by gender, social location, moment in history, etc. It’s not all conscious, and actual on-the-ground Christian worldviews are not necessarily entirely Christian. So how do we grow and learn amid complexity? What does that process look like? Can Christian teachers learn to teach Christianly without over-investing in the correctness of their current cultural diagnosis, while still being committed? And can we do that and still think worldview is really important?

Because it’s not that worldview does not matter. There is a powerful moment in the film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* in which Sophie is debating with her Nazi interrogator. He argues that she and the other White Rose students are showing ingratitude to their country and those fighting for them at the front, that they are misguided, that the state cares for them and has provided their education. He apparently wants to get her to compromise so he can avoid having a young German woman executed. Sophie has been arguing that the state is destroying human worth and rejecting God. At one point she says to him “it’s not us that have the wrong worldview, it’s you who have the wrong worldview.” What makes it powerful is that on that declaration hangs whether she will live or die. Because of it she will die on the guillotine within days, in hope of resurrection. Worldview matters absolutely. But what process of formation led to her being able to utter that declaration? Was it just instruction in ideas? More likely it was also the model of her dissident parents, the poetry she read, the work she did with children with disabilities, her friendship circle, her reading the Bible, and so on. And quite likely she believed some things that most current American evangelicals would not think were part of a proper Christian worldview (because German Christians in 1943 and American Christians now do not see the world in quite the same way). So worldview matters absolutely, but it’s embedded in a whole human process of formation in an embodied time and place. And learning a worldview is not the same thing as having someone explain a worldview.

So we have to think about pedagogy and formation, not just what affirmations or commitments we want to get to.

But I wrote a book on this, so I should get back to work 😊.

Thanks for the consideration re schedule. Let me know when you want the piece.

Blessings

David



Hi David,

My response to your really helpful reflections is, “yes!”.

I guess I continue to hold on to a romantic, optimistic notion that all our teachers will have a “more rigorous account” of what we mean by worldview. In the fullest sense—and perhaps what the original proponents meant—your worldview is far more than, and perhaps far from, a mere set of beliefs, notions, logical schemas, etc. I see worldview as a helpful notion that describes the default, presuppositional, pre-theoretical, inarticulate way in which we respond to life and world. The ‘gut’ response that we tend towards that has been formed by a raft of experiences and messages that we have been marinating in since birth (the cultural storytelling from family, church, society). As such, I don’t like to use the phrases, biblical worldview, or Christian worldview—there is perhaps no such thing. It is people that have a worldview. The Bible doesn’t have a worldview. A doctrine or a systematic theology is not a worldview. Neither is a particular approach to life issues or a political stance. A philosophy or theology is not a worldview! However, your philosophy is shaped by your worldview, or is expressed via your worldview—it can’t not be.

I know that you know all this. But I will keep going, even though I might be embarrassing myself.

I, therefore, prefer to speak of having a worldview shaped by the Bible. Many things shape, or form, our worldview. Narratives, in all the ways that you want to slice a definition, are powerful in forming us. Practices, habits, ‘liturgies’ (thanks Jamie Smith) are also powerful in shaping us (and therefore our worldview\*). This, then, is why I am loving *On Christian Teaching*, and always love your conference talks, because pedagogies are in the mix of the things that have a powerful formational influence—and we should not, must not, neglect this.

However, in teaching, it is not only our pedagogies and liturgies that have forming effects. Education, by its nature, has students engaging in the realm of ideas and rationality. The presuppositions about life and world that have been woven into the curriculum content also have a



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is for many a better way to help them understand  
that things are not neutral.

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significant formational influence. In Christian education, in our pursuit of forming faithful disciples of Christ with a worldview that is more shaped by the truth of the world and the nature and purpose of human life from the metanarrative of the Bible, and less shaped by the narratives of life, world, and purpose from secular cultural storylines, we don't seek to just teach a politically correct Christianised set of beliefs (what we are pro and what we are against as Christians). No! What we seek to do—in this space of curriculum and ideas etc.—is to lean into discipling in discernment. We seek to teach the skill of recognising the counter-biblical storylines. To do this we may need to, at times, explicitly explore and unfold how the biblical narrative might push us towards answering some of the big questions of life and world. This should never fall into a mere statement of 'what the Bible says' (and the diabolical proof texting sometimes evident), or a simple suggestion of a standard (politically influenced) stance on hot topics.\*\* It might be helpful, at times, in this pursuit to explore schemas and structures (e.g. Creation-Fall-Redemption), though never as an end in themselves, and never presented as 'this is the Christian worldview'. Hence why I used the word "emphasis". I don't hear you suggesting that we shouldn't consider worldview. I see your exploration of Taylor's notion of 'social imaginaries' in the context of pedagogies not too far away from this deeper definition of worldview I'm wanting to hold on to. However, there are social imaginaries woven into curriculum/content that also need to be explored and considered. But would it be fair to say that you are emphasising an exploration of the formational influence of pedagogy in this book? Great. An emphasis on Christian worldview—particularly in the flavour that you describe in your email—needs to be addressed. Teaching a squeaky clean Christian worldview through content, while using classroom practices and liturgies that are dissonant with the biblical narrative of life and community, may actually be damaging and not just underwhelming. Likewise, beautifully imagined classroom practices and liturgies that resonate with the biblical narrative and, indeed, the gospel of grace, while at the same time unfolding content steeped in undiscerned secular presuppositions, may also be unhelpfully promoting a dualism at best, and a works-based pietism at worst.

Now, I realise that I just hyperbolised those positions to make my point; forgive me. I guess I am just wondering if both need to be considered, especially in light of this deeper (redeemed?) definition of worldview. I am wondering if an overemphasis of one over another can be problematic.\*\*\*

As I already confessed, I probably have a little bit of an overly romantic view that when our teachers here in Australia speak of a biblical-worldview education they mean what I am speaking of. Some would probably tend towards an approach similar to what you describe. However, many would be attempting curriculum design in sympathy to what I am describing. The National Institute for Christian Education has a 40-year history of encouraging a rich, deep, nuanced approach to biblical worldview education among Christian Education National schools.

Anyway, just some unedited quick thoughts. I have found the writing of this helpful. It was perhaps more for my sake, so don't feel obliged to reply.

Chris

\* I envisage this deep definition of worldview including the full spectrum of how we engage with the world—passions, will, desires, cognitions, etc.

\*\* I suspect that this is much more an issue in the highly polarised North American context where Christian faith and living has been, unhelpfully, significantly entangled with right-wing politics. It is quite different here in Australia. It's not that we are completely immune from it, but it's far less pronounced.

\*\*\* Forgive my over simplification of dividing teaching and learning so neatly into pedagogy and curriculum—it's never that neat. I am just using them here as shorthand to avoid complication.



Chris,

Quick reply for now (just settling down to a glass of wine with my wife). I think we are exactly on the same page in everything you said. One of my fears for the book is that some people want a program to follow that displaces their last program, so are looking for the Smith approach that's all about pedagogy, as opposed to the old approach that was all about curriculum. The reason I am focusing on pedagogy (as I try to make clear in the last chapter) is not because it is the only thing we need to look at. It is because few have been paying attention to it and fewer still in ways that I find at all compelling. I want to take a magnifying glass to an area that we have neglected. That implies nothing about other areas being important or otherwise.

We do have a bit of a culture here of evangelical groups going round with questionnaires and creating stats to prove that Christians don't have a biblical worldview. It usually turns out you have to agree with their very specific theology to count as having a biblical worldview. So that's part of the

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context too. Meanwhile, in Reformed circles, some have heard so much about worldview they have become inured to the term—and often what they heard was a simplistic Creation-Fall-Redemption offered as the Christian answer to every problem, and they rightly sense that life is more complicated and painful than the application of formulae to stay in the safe zone allows. So I do find it helpful to steer clear of that language much of the time, in the interests of communicating in ways that slip past people's defenses and jaded spots, and to use talk of worldview sparingly and when it matters. I like your summary, and your note at the end matters a lot—I don't see curriculum and pedagogy as in the end distinct, and a chunk of chapters 4 and 5 I could easily spin as being about curriculum (and they are certainly also about worldview).

Blessings  
David



David,

**I really appreciate this response. I wouldn't say that I have "fears" for the book, but you have well tapped into an unsettledness I have by sharing yours. I think there is a tendency here in Australia to chuck the worldview baby out with the bathwater because the new "Smith approach" says we can. This is perhaps driven by a few factors. First, "worldview stuff is too hard", and thinking creatively about my pedagogy is fun! Second, the understood notion of worldview is often the simplistic one that you spoke of, and teachers become, often subconsciously, suspicious of its helpfulness and at times embarrassed to be presenting it. Third, teachers are not immune from an attraction to fads and the 'new', and well, "we are a bit bored with worldview".**

**I appreciate your point about wanting to avoid the language of worldview and choosing your context and audience carefully. Especially in your setting. I'm concerned that a move away from the language of worldview might also bring with it a movement from, or at least a de-emphasis of, some of the crucial notions of worldview. Perhaps I am naive, but I would love to see a redeeming of the language and a revitalised rigor in defining it, and all this within a holistic approach to Christian education that sees all aspects of teaching and learning (and school life) being informed by the biblical metanarrative centred on the gospel of grace.**

**Hope it was a lovely wine and chat with Julia. I picture you with a glass of red at the end of a hard work day?**

Chris



Chris,

Folk will always be doing bad things with babies and bathwater. I am pretty sure in the ITEC19 conference talks that I explicitly told people this was not a negation of worldview approaches, but hearing is always selective. Another angle on all of this is this: a few months back I led a session for new faculty. One faculty member said to me afterward, "I have heard a lot of talks about worldview and I was kind of on board but I never really got it. I get it now because you showed how it actually makes a difference in concrete examples." That is very close to the heart of what I am driving at. My overall project is not only about pedagogy, it is pedagogically driven; ironically, it grows out of trying to figure out how to actually teach people about worldview. Often we have tried to teach teachers to think about worldview by having theologians and philosophers talk to them, and as one of the subgenre of human being that thrives on that stuff I would be the last to say that is all bad. But I think it is never going to help every kind of teacher to learn. Focusing on concrete issues in pedagogical design is for many a better way to help them understand that things are not neutral and that there are more and less Christian choices. We can then help them tease out what commitments/imaginings are at stake in the choices they are making. That is the piece that still does not feel like it quite fits when you talk about "thinking creatively about my pedagogy" versus "worldview stuff". The last thing I am doing is pedagogical creativity seminars. What I am doing IS thinking about worldview stuff but the medium of learning is a focus on concrete pedagogical moves and use of narrative examples. I hope that there is not a single pedagogical example in the book that is described just because it is creative. The purpose of every single example is to show how concrete pedagogical moves are not neutral with regard to worldview. My bet is that this is a better learning pathway for many if not most teachers than the traditional "you need a Christian worldview" talk. So I share the goal, but I am adjusting the learning approach. Maybe some of what they are a bit bored with was in fact boring. So how do we help them connect the core idea of anti-positivism or anti-neutrality with their actual practice? Maybe we do indeed need to redeem the language (some days I am up for that), or maybe a new one that gets at the same issues will be just fine (some days that seems more worth playing with). I am finding that "social imaginary" feels like interesting news to folk who are tired of worldview, even though it can let us think about very similar things. Worldview is only a little over a century old, comes out of German philosophy as an extension of Kant

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[not out of the church], and has a built-in temptation to privilege the detached gaze (view) and the global (world) over the active and concrete that I think may well be at odds with Jesus' understanding of "truth". It is not a perfect term, nor is it the only tool the church has ever used to think about the normative frames in which things exist.) I guess in the end I care more that teachers start realizing that the specific choices they make with images, titles, classroom layouts, topics, homework, etc. (all of which is curriculum) have visions of the good at stake in them and are not just efficient technique, than I care about whether we shift to a fresh term.

I am about to start teaching my summer grad class on curriculum and pedagogy. We start with a sweep through four centuries of curriculum looking for how social imaginary/worldview are reflected in it. And we also move on to working with Wayne Au's model of curriculum as "complex environmental design," which sees curriculum as made up of choices in language and symbols, behaviors, time, aesthetics, physical materials, and power. Curriculum is not just made of ideas. And all of those things are things that Christian faith frames in particular ways. If I can get teachers to think well about how their choices in those areas are Christian or not it seems to me I have got further toward teaching them how to do worldview thinking than if I only succeed in teaching them how to critique ideas.

(I also worry about the issue I mention on p. 146: there is some evidence that engagement with worldview literature doesn't necessarily lead to seeing teaching itself as something that needs to be informed by faith. There are some pressing empirical questions about what the traditional worldview approach in fact achieves.)

I wish we could discuss this over a beverage.

It was indeed a red, with some Stilton.

Blessings

David



David,

Can I please join your summer grad class!?

Chris



Chris,

I am afraid it had a max enrolment limit of 24, and currently has 37 students, so we shut the door tight!

David

David,



Chris



Chris,

Maybe we should rework some of this as a dialogue and publish it in *CTJ* ...?

David



David,

Ha. Snap. I had the exact same thought!

Chris

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David is director of the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning and professor of education at Calvin College in Michigan, USA. He is also editor of the *International Journal of Christianity and Education*. He has written widely on the relationship of Christian faith to education, including in his most recent book, *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom*.



Chris is editor of the *Christian Teachers Journal*, and associate lecturer with the National Institute for Christian Education. He is the author of the book *The Frog and the Fish: Reflections on Work, Technology, Sex, Stuff, Truth, and Happiness*. If you can't find Chris he is probably out trail running or playing with wood in his workshop.

