

Kennedy, Simon P. *Against Worldview: Reimagining Christian Formation as Growth in Wisdom*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2024. 126pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 8pp. (back matter).

In 1985 Al Wolters published *Creation Regained*, a little book on worldview that has proven to be seminal for many over the ensuing years.¹ In around one hundred pages Wolters outlines basic concepts that help Christians analyze, evaluate, and act in the world. Forty years later, in about the same number of pages, Simon Kennedy, an Australian scholar of history, religion, politics, and theology, wrote *Against Worldview*. He is especially concerned about the pervasive use of the concept of worldview in education. Kennedy levels the following charges: the worldview concept is vague, difficult to put into practice, too dogmatic, too deductive, reductionistic, and overly focused on apologetics.

To demonstrate the critique of vagueness, Kennedy surveys a series of worldview definitions. This survey, however, reveals the kind of misunderstanding that bedevils Kennedy's book. Al Wolters's understanding of worldview, to take one of the thinkers cited by Kennedy, cannot be reduced to a single sentence and then pronounced vague. Kennedy could come to this conclusion only by neglecting the totality of Wolters's book. Kennedy never engages with Wolters apart from citing and dismissing his definition of worldview. There is no interaction with basic worldview concepts (such as structure and direction), with the thinkers who influenced Wolters (such as Dooyeweerd), or with Wolters's heirs (such as Bartholomew, Goheen, and Koyzis). The failure to engage major worldview thinkers with specificity is a major weakness of this volume.

In arguing that the worldview concept is difficult to put into practice, Kennedy observes that at his college he needed to have a learning outcome tied to worldview for each of his courses. He protests: "How do you frame a Christian worldview learning outcome for a course on, for example, Greek and Roman poetry? Or what about a course on the history of World War II?" (9). There are academic disciplines in which worldview shaping is difficult, but the questions Kennedy poses are not difficult. Are there no ethical, moral, or theological issues raised in a history course on World War II? Does Hesiod's *Works and Days* provide no opportunity to discuss the origin of suffering or the meaning of work? Does Lucretius's *De rerum natura* offer no opportunity to contrast naturalism with biblical supernaturalism? To ask these questions is to answer them.

Kennedy repeatedly criticizes worldview thinking as "dogmatic" and "deductive" whereas, in his view, education should be primarily inductive. This is a curious critique. How would this critique land if the term *worldview* were substituted with the term *theology*? To be sure, since worldview concerns itself with general revelation as well as special revelation, there are certainly areas of worldview thinking that should be taught more provisionally. But as stated, Kennedy's critique applies only to the misuse of the worldview in education; it does not apply to proper use.

Finally, Kennedy repeatedly calls worldview a "combat concept." He maintains that worldview is too apologetically oriented to be useful in education. Kennedy seems to be trading in a false dichotomy. Worldview can be used to highlight the differences between a Christian worldview and non-Christian

¹ For the most recent edition, see Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

worldviews, but this does not mean that this is its only function. This alleged problem is pronounced in Kennedy's analysis due to his own selection of worldview thinkers. He chose to highlight people who use worldview as a "combat concept" while ignoring those who use it more constructively. This selectivity especially mars the chapter that purports to provide a history of Christian worldview. A focus on different figures in the latter part of the chapter would complicate his thesis.

Herman Bavinck is one worldview thinker that Kennedy appreciates. Kennedy draws appreciatively on Bavinck's defense of realism. However, he dissents from Bavinck's worldview approach, citing three objections. "First, the assertion that knowledge of the world depends on a unifying overarching religious belief does not help us make sense of the educational project." Second, "Christians and non-Christians do not have a different epistemological status when it comes to the sciences and scholarship. Nor is a Christian closer to the truth than a non-Christian in the study of any subject, other than theology and ethics." Third, "There can be a Christian worldview without elements of that view becoming necessary for true access to knowledge" (56). These three negations reveal that Kennedy is not simply opposed to the politicization of worldview or the reduction of worldview to apologetics. He is opposed to the idea of Christian worldview because he is opposed to the idea that Christianity is comprehensive in its claims across the academic disciplines and that it stands in an antithetical relationship to competing non-Christian claims across those disciplines.

When Kennedy outlines his alternative to worldview, he proposes that *wisdom* can replace *worldview*. He gets some important things right. For instance, he concludes, "The world is made with wisdom as a part of its structure, meaning that human action needs to be concurrent with the structure of reality in order to be wise" (80). Nonetheless, there are two fundamental flaws in Kennedy's approach. First, wisdom already plays a significant role in the thought of major worldview thinkers. For instance, Al Wolters's *Creation Regained* devotes a significant portion the chapter on creation to unpacking the Bible's teaching about wisdom and to identifying its significance for a biblical worldview. Craig Bartholomew is a noted scholar of both OT wisdom literature and worldview. His writings often relate the two. But Kennedy failed to recognize the significance that wisdom has for the worldview concept, and he does not interact with any of this literature. Second, Kennedy distinguishes between "practical wisdom" and "spiritual wisdom." He acknowledges that both are united in Christ, but he claims that in "life under the sun" they are often separate (85). Education outside religious instruction is focused on practical wisdom. This distinction, so fundamental to Kennedy's rejection of the worldview concept, is foreign to Scripture. Kennedy cites many verses in Proverbs as examples of practical wisdom, but Proverbs 1:7 signals that this practical wisdom cannot be separated from the fear of the Lord.

Kennedy then relates his *wisdom not worldview* approach to education. He argues that teachers should be free to teach their disciplines according to the best recognized standards of those disciplines without asking how those disciplines can be taught from a Christian worldview. On the one hand, Kennedy says that he is not arguing for the secularization of Christian education (103). On the other hand, he denies that "the Bible speaks to everything that we may teach about in the classroom" (105). He claims, "Aside from the teaching of the Bible and doctrine, the Scriptures offer limited resources for the Christian teacher. Because of this fact, we need to use the Bible with great care. It is not

something we should force into space where it doesn't fit" (105). Kennedy provides an example of the Bible's alleged irrelevance to parts of life: "I distinctly remember the day when someone pointed out to me that the Bible does not mention this thing called a 'Nintendo 64'" (105). This comment reveals a superficial understanding of how the Bible relates to life. The Bible also doesn't mention genetic engineering or artificial intelligence, but this does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about these technologies. It seems that Kennedy is reacting to superficial, proof-texting approaches to faith and learning without really understanding deeper worldview approaches to education. In other words, his rejection of worldview does not seem to be fully informed.

This failure to understand basic worldview concepts also displays itself in Kennedy's misunderstanding of the role of Creation, Fall, and Redemption in worldview analysis. Kennedy says that teaching civics, biology, Greek mythology, and history can be ruined by forcing them to conform to a "theological narrative framework" such as Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation (104). This statement reveals a misunderstanding of how the Creation, Fall, Redemption categories serve as an analytical tool. Kennedy wants to replace worldview with wisdom, but a fundamental aspect of wisdom is asking how given artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts conform to or deviate from the creation order (Creation and Fall). The wise person also needs to discern how best to conform to creational norms in a fallen world (Redemption). Far from imposing an alien "theological narrative framework" onto various academic disciplines, this kind of analysis is inescapable for faithful Christian engagement of the academic world.

Simon Kennedy is correct that the term *worldview* has proliferated in discussions of Christian education. There is certainly much that flies under the banner of worldview that deserves critique, and some of Kennedy's critiques legitimately apply to some who claim the worldview label. Nonetheless, Kennedy's critique falls short on three grounds. First, he has not substantively engaged the thought of the best worldview thinkers. Second, his protest against the intrusion of worldview into the academic subjects and his assertion of the Bible's irrelevance to much of academic life reveals a superficial approach to the application of the Bible to life as well as lack of awareness regarding the theological issues raised in the teaching of the various academic disciplines. Third, Kennedy's rejection of the antithesis between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world is an overreaction to the apologetic emphasis of some worldview thinkers.

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