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Wolters, Albert M. "On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, edited by Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, Richard J. Mouw. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989, pages 14-25.

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## On The Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy

Albert M. Wolters

In a discussion of worldviews and the social sciences, it is perhaps not amiss to begin with a paper which focuses on the history of the concept “worldview” and on traditional views of the relationship of worldview to philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The history of a concept (the Germans speak of *Begriffsgeschichte*; the nearest Anglo-American equivalent is probably “history of ideas”) is significant because it allows us to observe the matrix in which an important idea first arose, and the ideological company it has since kept. This is especially important for a tradition like that of Dutch neo-Calvinism, which maintains that there are close ties between intellectual history and the spiritual struggle in which Christian academics are involved.

Similar considerations apply to the importance of dealing with the relationship of worldview to philosophy, even at a conference devoted to the social sciences. Although Positivism continues to have a powerful impact on many social scientists, including Christians, the intellectual heirs of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck have a special appreciation for the crucial role philosophy—or at least many of the issues traditionally associated with philosophy—plays in both research and theorizing in the special sciences. The importance of philosophy is especially apparent in the social sciences, and in scholarship that seeks to bring the Christian faith into integral connection with the scientific enterprise. A significant, and perhaps dominant, strand in the tradition represented by the Free University of Amsterdam and its

younger Reformed sister institutions has always been that philosophy is a key link between faith and scholarship, like the gearbox which connects the motor of a car to its wheels.

I propose, therefore, to discuss the history of the idea of worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, and to sketch various conceptions of its relation to philosophy.

### History of the Concept of Worldview

In a more detailed preliminary paper on the place of worldview in the history of ideas,<sup>2</sup> I come to conclusions which may be briefly summarized as follows:

(1) The German word *Weltanschauung*, first coined by Kant, became a key word in the thought-world of German Idealism and Romanticism. It was transmitted via Fichte to Schelling, Schleiermacher, A. W. Schlegel, Novalis, Jean Paul, Hegel, and Goethe. By the 1840's it had become a standard item in the vocabulary of the educated German, denoting a global outlook on life and the world—akin to philosophy but without its rational pretensions.

(2) In the 1830's the notion of *Weltanschauung* began to penetrate other languages. By the end of the nineteenth century (when the word reached a crescendo of popularity in the German-speaking world), it had made its way into virtually every speech community in the Western world, either as a calque (*Lehnübersetzung*) or as a loanword. In English we have assimilated the German word in both ways: the Anglicized equivalent, "worldview" is documented since 1858, and today the loanword, *Weltanschauung*, is often used as well.

(3) Ever since Kierkegaard, philosophers have reflected on the relationship of the new idea of "worldview" to the ancient one of "philosophy." Are these two words for the same thing, or do they refer to different things? In the posing of this problem, "philosophy" usually retains its ancient association with rational and scientific thought, with its claims to universal validity, whereas "worldview" has connotations of a more personal and historically relative point of view.

### The Relation between Philosophy and Worldview

By and large, we can distinguish five ways in which the relationship between worldview and philosophy has been construed:

- a) *Worldview repels philosophy.* In this model of the relationship between worldview and philosophy, there exists an unavoidable tension between the two poles of the relationship—between theoretical philosophy and existential worldview. Yet both poles are equally legitimate and necessary, and we must not seek to resolve the paradoxical tension between them. This model is put forth by existentialism. It was initially proposed by Kierkegaard in 1838 in his *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer*, and finds its most sustained expression in Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. Other thinkers who adopt this model are Theodor Litt and G. A. van der Wal.
- b) *Worldview crowns philosophy.* According to this model, a worldview is not alien to philosophy but is instead its highest manifestation. The goal of philosophy is to address the highest questions of meaning and value, and these it must deal with on the level of worldview. This conception was widely held in Germany around the turn of the century and was defended by the leaders of the Baden School of neo-Kantianism, Rickert (1896-1920) and Windelband (after 1900). A similar model is espoused by Wundt.
- c) *Worldview flanks philosophy.* According to this model, philosophy and worldview are to be kept rigorously separate. Whatever legitimate place worldview may have, it must not be confused with scientific philosophy, or allowed to compromise its neutrality and value-free nature (*Wertfreiheit*). The chief spokesman for this point of view was Heinrich Rickert after 1920. Rickert's conception of worldview proved to be enormously influential: it influenced famous essays by Edmund Husserl and Max Weber, and defined the sense of the terms *Weltanschauung* and *weltanschaulich* (worldview-ish) as used by such diverse thinkers as Nicolai Hartmann and Martin Heidegger.
- d) *Worldview yields philosophy.* This fourth model is the second one stood on its head, as it were. Philosophy, it claims, does not *produce* a worldview but is instead *produced by*, and gives expression to, a worldview. This way of construing the relationship between worldview and philosophy is associated with Dilthey. It became quite influential and was a dominant factor in the development of, for example, Karl Mannheim's views on the sociology of knowledge.
- e) *Worldview equals philosophy.* The final model is complete identification. Worldview is simply reduced to scientific philosophy, and thereby shares the latter's traditional claims to rationality and universal validity. We find such an identification, or reduction, in the Positivist

philosopher Theodor Gomperz and, more significantly, in the works of Friedrich Engels. For Engels (whose usage differs from Marx on this point), Dialectical Materialism is the truly scientific *Weltanschauung*, and therefore a virtual synonym for “philosophy”. Because of the authority Engels enjoys in the world of Marxism-Leninism, this is the standard conception of worldview (more commonly called “world outlook” in official English publications) among Soviet philosophers today.

These are, in broad outline, the chief models of the relationship between worldview and philosophy held during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would be a mistake to suppose that these five models are restricted to a particular time and place, however, with no relevance for contemporary reflection on worldview and philosophy. The concept “worldview” has again become popular in recent years, and many of these basic models are being revived. For instance, there is in recent years much talk about philosophy’s task of constructing a worldview—which is strongly reminiscent of model (b), Worldview crowns philosophy. Or again, in a fascinating article entitled, “Philosophy as World View and Philosophy as Discipline”, the Norwegian analytical philosopher Anfinn Stigen seeks to relate Oxford philosophy and the worldview implicit in ordinary language, which he does along the lines of our model (c), Worldview flanks philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The paper in this volume by James Olthuis can be said to represent model (d), Worldview yields philosophy. We have seen that adherents of Dialectical Materialism continue to keep model (e) alive, Worldview equals philosophy, and, while I have not noticed any recent expositions of the Kierkegaardian paradigm, there are no doubt admirers of Jaspers and others who are prepared to contribute to the renewal of worldview discussions in the spirit of model (a), Worldview repels philosophy.

In the typology we have been discussing, “philosophy”, because of its traditional associations with pure rationality and theoretical neutrality, is a kind of symbol for critical inquiry in general—in a word, for science or knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) as a whole. Accordingly, the five paradigms reflect different attitudes toward the relationship between worldview and not only philosophy but also science. This comes out explicitly in many of the works referred to above. Consider, for example, Rickert’s term, “*wissenschaftliche Philosophie*” (scientific philosophy), or Husserl’s phrase, “*Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*” (philosophy as a strict science). Likewise, Max Weber and Karl Mannheim, along with Karl Jaspers in his capacity as a psychia-

trist, each applied one of our worldview-philosophy models to the social sciences.

### Worldview as Personal and Private

What is it about the idea of “worldview” that has caused it to become such a pervasive category in post Enlightenment thought, and even made it into a competitor of “philosophy”? This is a difficult question but one we Christians cannot avoid if we want to be spiritually critical of the concepts and categories to which we are heirs as we take our stand in the Western intellectual tradition. I confine myself to a number of brief observations:

(1) It is striking that the term *Weltanschauung* was coined and popularized in the context of German Idealism and Romanticism, during that great efflorescence of the modern spirit that has dominated subsequent intellectual history. The rapid spread of the concept and its cognates seems to be part of the pervasive influence of precisely that phase of German thought.

(2) A basic feature of that seminal period was the “rise of historical consciousness,” a new awareness of the value of the historically singular. In reaction against the Enlightenment—indeed, against the whole millennial tradition of Greek intellectualism—a great reversal of values occurred wherein the universal was depreciated in favor of the particular, the abstract in favor of the concrete, the eternal in favor of the temporal, the identical in favor of the unique. Whereas previously the Western intellectual tradition had been oriented to the enduring essence (*ousia*) of things, it now became oriented to the historical development (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of things.

(3) Generally speaking, we can say that the Greek word *philosophia* belongs to the thought-world dominated by *ousia*, and the German word *Weltanschauung* belongs to the thought-world dominated by *Geschichtlichkeit*. The two terms do have some features in common: *philosophia* and *Weltanschauung* both share a cognitive orientation to the whole, and both are associated with the optic metaphor of *viewing* (Greek *theorein*, German *anschauen*). Where they differ is that the former places emphasis on the universal, abstract, eternal, and identical character of that viewing, whereas the latter places emphasis on the particular, concrete, temporal, and unique character of that viewing. Basic to the idea of *Weltanschauung* is that it represents a point of view on the world, a perspective on things, a way of looking at the cosmos

from a particular vantage point which cannot transcend its own historicity. A “worldview” tends to carry the connotation therefore of being personal, dated, and private. This is not universally the case (notably in Engels’ usage), but does seem to be at the root of the powerful attraction the idea of *Weltanschauung* has had for the modern West. A worldview may be more than individual—it may be collective (that is, held by everyone belonging to a given nation or class or period). But even so it does not escape particularity, for it cannot transcend the experiences and perspectives of that particular nation, class, or period. Thus “worldview” forfeits all claim to universal validity, and becomes enmeshed in the problems of historical relativism.

(4) Whereas *philosophia* is highly theoretical and therefore reserved for an intellectual elite, *Weltanschauung* is broadly pre-theoretical and therefore available to the mass of people. Furthermore, because philosophy is associated with science, worldview is considered to be non-scientific—which can be interpreted positively as *prescientific*, or negatively as *unscientific*.

(5) It is striking that the two primary features of *Weltanschauung* that we have highlighted, namely, that of being historically individual (private) and non-scientific (for the masses), also characterize the modern conception of *religion*. It is not surprising, therefore, that worldview has often been associated with religious faith, understood in the sense of a highly personal and pre-theoretical commitment.

I suggest, in conclusion, that the notion of worldview has intimate historical and systematic connections with modern humanistic views of history, science, and religion; it is, in fact, virtually defined by those views. This leaves us with a crucial question: Can Christians who are fundamentally critical of the spirit of modernity—particularly as it manifests itself in historicism, the autonomy of science, and the privatization of religion—salvage the idea of *Weltanschauung* and use it for our own systematic purposes?

Particularly for Christians who stand in the tradition of Dutch neo-Calvinism this question cannot fail to be acute, for it is precisely on these key issues of history, science, and religion that Abraham Kuyper and his followers took an uncompromising stand against the spirit of their age. Yet there in an apparent paradox here, for it is also true that Dutch neo-Calvinists have given great prominence to the idea of worldview. The idea of *wereldbeschouwing* (or its equivalent *levens-en wereldbeschouwing*, “life- and worldview”), was of crucial impor-

tance to the program of Christian cultural renewal promulgated by Kuyper and his followers, not least in the academic enterprise. They, too, explicitly raised the question of the relationship of worldview to philosophy. Their answer to this question was central to their entire conception of the reformation of scholarship.

In what follows, I shall sketch briefly the role the idea of worldview has played in the thought of a number of leading neo-Calvinist thinkers. I return in the conclusion to the question of the apparent incompatibility between the notion of *Weltanschauung* and a fundamental religious critique of modernity.

### Worldview in the Neo-Calvinist Tradition

It was Abraham Kuyper, the unquestioned leader of neo-Calvinism, who used the notion of “world (and life) view” to express his vision of a broad Christian revitalization of culture on the basis of Calvinism. Calvinism, he insisted, was not just a theology or a system of ecclesiastical polity but a complete worldview with implications for all of life, implications which must be worked out and applied in such areas as politics, art, and scholarship. This vision was a large part of the rationale for the foundation of the Free University of Amsterdam and its program of a specifically Christian engagement in scientific studies. Moreover, as a worldview in its own right, Calvinism (which for Kuyper simply meant the most consistent form of Christianity) could be pitted against other culturally formative “isms” of the day, such as Liberalism, Darwinism, Socialism, and Positivism, all of which Kuyper saw as secular competitors to the Christian view of the world. As the early Kierkegaard had done before him, Kuyper seized upon the notion of worldview as a category which allowed him not only to present Christianity as an alternative to the ideologies of the nineteenth century but to present it in a such manner that it would provide cultural leadership in the modern world. *Weltanschauung* was a concept in many ways eminently suited (unlike theoretical “philosophy” or Marxist “ideology”) to Kuyper’s overall thought.

In Kuyper, however, the idea of *Weltanschauung* received its own distinctive shape, being defined especially by the conception of Christianity as a culture-shaping force. Since this conception of Christianity is one of the distinguishing features of the whole movement of Dutch neo-Calvinism, it is not surprising that “worldview” continued to be widely used in this sense by Kuyper’s followers. When Kuyperians began to emigrate to America, they took the notion with them, and

coined the awkward English phrase “world and life view” to correspond to the Dutch. This expression is still used in English-speaking circles influenced by neo-Calvinism.

On the question of the relationship of worldview to philosophy, the neo-Calvinists were initially quite vague. In harmony with popular German usage at the end of the nineteenth century (before the question became a specific topic of philosophical debate), Kuyper sometimes used “worldview” as a virtual synonym of “philosophy” and sometimes as a term much more closely akin to “faith” or “religious confession.” Implicitly, however, he was moving in the direction of the worldview-yields-philosophy model, as later formulated by Dilthey. Kuyper repeatedly stressed not only that Calvinism-as-worldview must work itself out in scholarship in general, but also that this task explicitly includes developing a distinctively Calvinistic philosophy. We find this emphasis, for example, in his famous *Lectures on Calvinism*, given as the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in 1898.

We find a similarly vague usage of “worldview” and “philosophy” in the writings of Herman Bavinck. Bavinck was Kuyper’s successor in the chair of systematic theology at the Free University, and his partner in the intellectual leadership of neo-Calvinism. An example of Bavinck’s vagueness can be found in his booklet, *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing* (1904). The “Christian worldview” of which the title speaks turns out to be a highly philosophical, Christianized neo-Platonism in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas. A few years later, however, Bavinck’s concept of “worldview” had become less vague, and had taken a distinct turn toward the worldview-yields-philosophy model. When he delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton (in 1908), he explicitly referred to the recent publications by Dilthey wherein philosophy was described as emerging out of a deeper-lying *Weltanschauung*.<sup>4</sup>

From then on, the Diltheyan model provided the framework for the neo-Calvinists’ conception of the relationship of worldview to philosophy. To my knowledge, this paradigm was first stated unambiguously by Valentinus Hepp, Bavinck’s disciple and successor. Writing in 1923, Hepp said:

Of greater importance than an independent national philosophy is an independent Christian philosophy, especially one which brings the Reformed world and life view to scientific expression (*wetenschappelijke uitdrukking*).<sup>5</sup>

This conception of worldview as the pre-theoretical antecedent to the theoretical discipline of philosophy became standard among neo-Calvinists. In terms of our earlier typology, they plainly opted for model (d), Worldview yields philosophy.

### Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd

We can see this clearly in the writings of D.H.T. Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd, the two Free University professors who contributed more than any others toward the realization of Kuyper's ideal of a Calvinistic philosophy. From the beginning, both men stressed that they sought to base their scientific work in philosophy on the pre-scientific foundations of the Calvinistic "world and life view." Their writings abound in formulations of this kind. They used especially the metaphor of "foundations" (*grondslagen*) to characterize the place of worldview. Vollenhoven's writings display a consistency of usage from the 1920's until the end of his life. When asked to write an encyclopedia on "Calvinistic philosophy" in the 1950's, for example, he defined it, in so many words, as "the scientific correlate of the Calvinistic world and life view."<sup>6</sup> He was also to write in his syllabus on the History of Philosophy: "Philosophy is not the same as world and life view; it is the latter's scientific elaboration (*wetenschappelijke verwerking*)."<sup>7</sup>

For Dooyeweerd, matters are a bit more complex. During the 1920's, the role he ascribed to worldview in the development of Christian scholarship is similar to the role assigned it by Vollenhoven and other neo-Calvinists. More specifically, he identified the *wetsidee* ("law-idea") as that feature of a world and life view that allows it to become operational as a regulative factor in the formation of scientific theories. He maintained that one could elaborate a distinctively Calvinistic philosophy and political science<sup>8</sup> by isolating the distinctive *wetsidee* characteristic of Calvinism-as-worldview.

Dooyeweerd continued to speak of worldview in this way throughout the 1930's. He held that the reformation of scholarship must be accomplished *on the basis* of a Calvinistic world and life view. This is the language he used, for example, in a popular speech held on the occasion of the centennial of Kuyper's birth in 1937.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, he had begun to qualify this usage in his more academic writings. In the first volume of his major philosophical work, *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (1935), he criticized the notion that philosophy is simply the elaboration of a worldview. During the 1940's, having developed his new category of religious "ground-motive" (*grondmotief*), he explicitly corrected his conception of worldview in

its relation to philosophy. As stated in the English revision of his major work, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1953), his new position conceived of worldview and philosophy as parallel manifestations of the fundamental religious impulse which he called a “ground-motive.”<sup>10</sup> In this scheme, religion impinges upon philosophy directly, no longer through the necessary intermediary of a worldview. Calvinism-as-worldview no longer defined the character of philosophy, so that Dooyeweerd (unlike Vollenhoven) henceforth preferred to speak of his philosophy as being simply “Christian,” instead of “Calvinistic.”

In his mature thought, then, Dooyeweerd adopted something resembling our model (c), Worldview flanks philosophy (although this characterization is misleading if it is not understood in the context of his overriding emphasis on ground-motive). Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of Dooyeweerd’s later position as a kind of hybrid between models (c) and (d). It certainly seems to be unique in the tradition of philosophical reflection on this matter.

### Can Christians Use the Concept of Worldview?

We return now to the question we left unanswered above: is there incompatibility between the very idea of *Weltanschauung* and a fundamental religious critique of modernity such as that undertaken by neo-Calvinism? In response to this question, I venture to make the following general observations:

- (1) To the degree that “worldview” incorporates or suggests the concept of a comprehensive religious confession about the total scheme of things which is not theoretical or elitist in character, it is eminently suitable for Christian appropriation. These features of *Weltanschauung* represent a justified critique of the long intellectualist tradition of Greek *philosophia*.
- (2) To the degree that “worldview” carries overtones of a *Geschichtlichkeit* which does not allow for perduring constants, it needs to be redefined or reformed in the light of the biblical ideas of creation and revelation. This is essentially what Kuyper did by relating worldview to the themes of creational ordinances and transcendent Word-revelation. However, as is shown by Dooyeweerd’s later redefinition of the place of worldview, the connotations of historical relativity continued to be strong. He avoided the problems of linking worldview to a supra-historical point of orientation, yet the same problems resur-

faced in his new conception, ground-motive.

(3) It is remarkable that the various classical Christian paradigms for relating “grace” and “nature” show striking parallels to the five models for relating “worldview” and “philosophy”. On the face of it, we might expect the following correspondences:

- a) worldview repels philosophy—A) *gratia contra naturam*  
(cf. Anabaptism)
- b) worldview crowns philosophy—B) *gratia supra naturam*  
(cf. Roman Catholicism)
- c) worldview flanks philosophy—C) *gratia iuxta naturam*  
(cf. Lutheranism)
- d) worldview yields philosophy—D) *gratia intra naturam*  
(cf. Calvinism)
- e) worldview equals philosophy—E) *gratia instar naturae*  
(cf. liberalism)

I am not in a position to document any real parallels corresponding to this abstract scheme,<sup>11</sup> but there are some scraps of evidence. For our present purposes, it must suffice to point out that the correspondence of model (d) to model (D) is significant in the case of Dutch neo-Calvinism. Dilthey’s model lends itself, *mutatis mutandis*, to a Calvinist appropriation. Philosophy is not a matter of “natural reason” in the Thomist sense (model (B) ), but must itself be relativized with respect to, and internally shaped by, a pre-theoretical commitment which is religious, not vital (as in Dilthey).

(4) The process by which Christians must critically confront and appropriate the concepts and categories which the intellectual tradition bequeaths us must (from a Calvinist point of view) itself exemplify the renewing impact of “grace” upon “nature.” This is true for *Weltanschauung* as well as for *philosophia*, *ousia*, *Geschichtlichkeit*, *transzendental*, and a host of other key terms in the history of ideas. It is always a matter of spiritual judgement whether, in a given historical situation, the secular connotations of a term require that it be rejected altogether or whether the term can be explicitly redefined in the context of a Christian categorial framework. In my judgment, the latter course is preferable at this time in the case of *Weltanschauung* and its cognates.

## Footnotes

1. I was enabled to do research on the subject of this essay during my sabbatical in the Netherlands during the 1981-1982 academic year by a *bezoekersbeurs* (Visitor's Grant) awarded by the Dutch Organization for Purely Scientific Research (ZWO).
2. Albert Wolters, "Weltanschauung in the History of Ideas: Preliminary Notes." Unpublished paper.
3. Anfinn Stigen, "Philosophy as World View and Philosophy as Discipline" in *Contemporary Philosophy in Scandinavia*, ed. Raymond E. Olson and Anthony M. Paul (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), 307-330.
4. H. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).
5. Quoted in C. Veenhof, *In Kuyper's Lijn* (Goes: Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, 1939), 15. (Translation mine.)
6. D.H.T. Vollenhoven, "Calvinistische wijsbegeerte" in *Oosthoek's Encyclopaedie*, 5th ed. (1959).
7. D.H.T. Vollenhoven, *Kort overzicht van de Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte*, syllabus (Amsterdam Uitgeverij THEJA, [1956]), 1. (Translation mine.)
8. H. Dooyeweerd, "In den strijd om een Christelijke Staatkunde. Proeve van een fundeering der Calvinistische levens-en wereldbeschouwing in hare wetsidee" *Antirevolutionaire Staatkunde* I (1924-1925):7-25. See also subsequent issues (concluded in 1927).
9. H. Dooyeweerd, "De plicht der jongere generatie tegenover Kuyper's geestelijke nalatenschap" in *Volhardt*, proceedings of the 19th annual convention of the Bond van Meisjesverenigingen op Gereformeerden Grondslag in Nederland held in Zwolle, 1937 (Kampen: 1937), 12-21. See especially the statement: "Also in the area of science the battle with Humanism had to be joined on the Scriptural foundation (*grondslag*) of the Calvinistic world and life view." (p. 20)
10. H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1953-1958), 1: chap. 2, "Philosophy and Life- and World-view." See especially 128, 156, 158, 165.
11. For a more detailed discussion of these paradigms, see my "Nature and Grace in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31," *Calvin Theological Journal* no. 19 (1984): 153-166.