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Epilogue: Faith and Social Science

Paul Marshall

In order to put these papers in perspective, I would like to step back a little and consider our overall purpose: why are we, as Christians, interested in the relation of philosophy, social theory, and worldview?

As Christians in the social sciences, our primary goal is to equip ourselves, our fellow Christians, and others to act in just and healing ways in our societies. Although Christians need to be equipped in various ways, the particular service of those who have contributed to this volume is analytical: our particular task is to help clarify the basic issues, problems, structures, and directions Christians face in society, insofar as these can be clarified through scientific work.

In addition, we who are in the sciences intend our service to be Christian. By this we do not mean primarily that our scientific work is done on behalf of Christians, or that it is done in Christian institutions, or that it is done to defend the superiority of the Christian faith as a basis for science, or even that our personal conduct as we do it manifests Christian virtues. Rather, we are seeking what it is that makes scientific investigation itself Christian—what is the inner connection of religion and science. It may be better to speak, as Wolterstorff does, not so much of “Christian” as of “faithful” social science, a word that captures what we mean without raising some of the misunderstandings we often encounter as we seek to obey God in the sciences.

As we address ourselves to these concerns, we take it that faith is present at the heart of all science. A central focus in this volume has been on the “inner reformation of science”—that is, on how Christian faith works itself out in the reshaping of all aspects of the scientific

enterprise, especially in the conceptual structures developed in the sciences. In seeking a reformation of science, we find we must first describe more precisely what we mean by an inner connection between religion and science. In what way does faith guide and shape all science? In the case of Christian faith, one factor we must consider is the Bible. But the Bible is couched in a form that is very different from scientific work, so we must look for some mediation between the two. Some suggest that we speak not so much of the Bible and science as of faith and science. Yet faith is so broad a concept that it becomes troublesome in analytical work. As an alternative, others recommend we consider Christian philosophy as the mediator between religious commitment and science; hence, some essays in this volume investigate things like presuppositions, ontologies, and epistemologies. But here we run into the problem that philosophy is itself a science, and so cannot properly be considered a link *between* religion and science. Is there something that lies “behind” philosophy but “ahead” of faith, so to speak? Yes, we say; and that something is worldview. Hence the theme of this volume: worldviews and the social sciences.

In short, what we are engaged in is a search for some sort of mediation between religion and science—particularly social science. In other words, our primary concern is not in worldview *per se* but in clarifying how faith shapes the way we do science. “Worldview” is merely one of the most recent candidates for the job.

What is a worldview? The contributors to this volume generally agree that a worldview is a “framework,” a “package,” a “system,” a “structure,” or a “set” of beliefs. Alternative terms for beliefs might be “commitments” or “representations.” The core concept is that a worldview is not a random collection of ideas; it is a set of beliefs that hang together and depend on each other in some ordered way.

One point on which contributors disagree is whether a worldview is a self-conscious commitment. Some contributors hold that it is. Others argue that worldviews lie at a deeper level; to the degree that a commitment is conscious it cannot be a worldview but only the *expression* of a worldview.

Another point of disagreement is how to characterize a belief. Is a belief like a theory? Or does the commitment aspect of belief make it something different, something dominated by a confessional rather than an analytical element? This question is aptly discussed in the essay by James Olthuis.

In my mind, there is one aspect of worldviews that is overlooked in this volume. We discuss in great detail here what a worldview is,

how people change worldviews, whether various scholars have or have not recognized the working of worldviews, the history of worldviews, the history of the concept of worldviews, alternative terms used for the concept, and so on. But what is conspicuously missing is any discussion of the actual *content* of worldviews, particularly of a Christian worldview. We have not discussed possible components of such a worldview, such as concepts of justice, law, history, freedom. We have not discussed the distinction between structure and direction. In short, we are continually preparing the ground but failing to go on to build anything.

Because of this lacuna, the papers here are less serviceable for the actual practice of social science than they might otherwise have been. Supporting the idea that worldviews do exist, and that they do in fact guide people in their theoretical work, is not in itself much help to those seeking to be truly Christian in their practice of science. What people working in the field need is even a germinal or perspectival working out of key concepts (such as human responsibility), which would give them some sort of touchstone for the development of Christian social theory.

That we have largely overlooked the content of worldviews reflects a general tendency among Reformed theorists to answer a question with a meta-question. One manifestation of this is our esteem for philosophy and philosophers, going almost to the point of making philosophy the new "Queen of the Sciences." Another manifestation is the way we seem to appoint philosophy the gatekeeper, or watchdog, or guardian of religious purity. The Christian sociologist comes home bedraggled but joyful from a day of work and research, proudly clutching his or her new results and theories. Waiting at the gate is the Christian philosopher, who scans the work with a critical eye. Aha! Here is a borrowed concept, a stolen term, something perhaps unknowingly assimilated from Idealism, or Rationalism, or Functionalism, or Materialism, or Relativism, or some other "ism." The philosopher pounces on the poor sociologist, raining questions on him: "Where did you get that? Don't you know where that came from? Don't you see the intellectual baggage trailing along behind it? Don't you know it's loaded with theoretical contraband? Don't you dare bring that tainted thing into the room of Christian theory."

The image may be exaggerated, but it is not far off the mark. The sociologist comes to feel that before he or she can do science as a Christian he must undergo philosophical purification, working out a systematic philosophical elaboration of the Christian faith and worldview.

Against this, I would insist that philosophy is no purer or more single-minded religiously than any other mode of human activity or scholarship. We are not obliged to grant philosophy primacy, or to make it the starting point of all Christian scholarship. The inner reformation of science (which includes our own inner reformation as scientists) can begin anywhere as we earnestly seek to follow God. In other words, we can begin with what we already know of our Christian faith and proceed by directly pursuing social research, and then submitting it to criticism by Christian colleagues and scholars in many fields. To use Luther's phrase, we ought to go ahead and "sin bravely" in our work within the social sciences, always sensitive to critique and correction from fellow believers. Criticism goes both ways, of course—scholars in philosophy and other fields can also learn from those in social science. Instead of continually examining the philosophical categories used in social research, we ought to *do* social research, and then analyze what it is we are doing. As Clifton Orlebeke puts it, we should "show" rather than "tell."

In short, the way we conceive of the inner reformation of science is often too rationalistic. We would benefit from a greater emphasis on the actual pursuit of science. Progress can be made in constructing a genuinely Christian social science by carrying out projects in social analysis and then reflecting communally upon the work we are doing.