

**Institute for Christian Teaching**

**WORLDVIEWS, CONTEMPORARY CULTURE,  
AND ADVENTIST THOUGHT**

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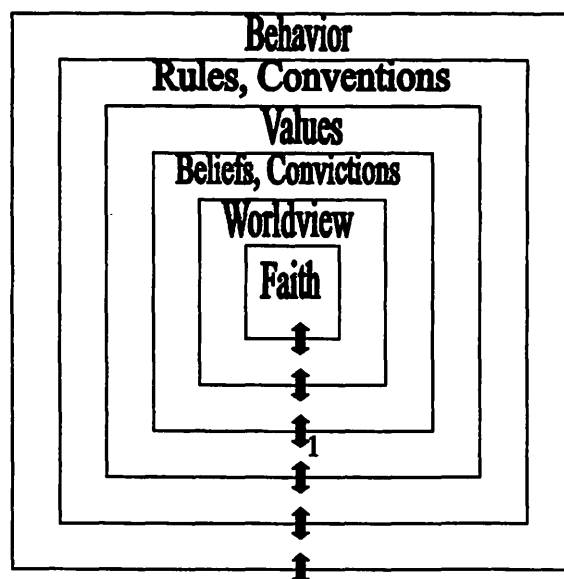
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Imagine an extraterrestrial researcher landing on one of our college or university campuses on a regular class day. He would observe a particular *behavior* that reflects accepted *conventions* and *rules*: At a given signal young men and women enter spacious rooms, sit on chairs in front of desks and await the arrival of an older individual—usually better dressed—who addresses them while they take notes or ask questions. Other members of the campus community walk into rooms with various kinds of instruments and, under the guidance of older individuals, manipulate and observe tiny fragments of matter.

If the extraterrestrial visitor were to ask these young people why they sit for hours in a room or strain their eyes in concentrated attention instead of playing, working, or doing something else, they would speak of *values*, telling him about the importance of obtaining knowledge and skills to earn a living, help other people, and achieve fulfillment in life. The extraterrestrial would also note that the campus lay-out, the administrative structure, the curriculum, the attitudes of students and teachers take for granted certain *beliefs* and *convictions* regarding human rationality, academic and professional traditions, the transmission of culture, the ability to set goals, and the freedom to move toward them.

If the extraterrestrial were to extend his stay through the week-end, he would observe younger and older members of the academic community attending meetings in a large auditorium, where they would discuss passages of a book, sing, meditate, and speak with or about a Supreme Being. These beliefs, in turn, are anchored on a *worldview* regarding reality, life, meaning and purpose. If the extraterrestrial were to probe deeper, beyond the worldview, he would discover at the core a set of undemonstrable convictions and assumptions that many would call *faith*. (Indeed, even unbelievers have faith or trust in something that is ultimately trustworthy and reliable, such as the laws of nature.)

His extraterrestrial notebook may have a diagram that might look like this:<sup>1</sup>



Every mature human being—whether they realize it or not—has a worldview, that is, a comprehensive perspective of the universe and of life, from which they understand their existence, make choices, establish priorities, and chart their destiny. As Ayn Rand stated:

Consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, man knows that he needs a comprehensive view of existence to integrate his values, to choose his goals, to plan his future, to maintain the unity and coherence of his life-- and that his metaphysical value-judgments are involved in every moment of his life, his every choice, decision and action.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper we will address the concept of worldview, contrast the Christian worldview with two major perspectives that compete for attention in contemporary culture, and then suggest some implications for thoughtful Adventists and other Bible-believing Christians.

### Understanding Worldviews

The modern concept of worldview goes back to Kant in 1790. Later the concept was elaborated by other thinkers such as Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Dilthey, in terms of *weltanschauung*—a global outlook on life and the world that characterizes a people or a culture.

Langdon Gilkey, a U.S. theologian, connects the concept of worldview with “a shared system of meanings.”<sup>3</sup> James Olthuis, in a perceptive article, describes worldview as “a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it.” He adds: “It is the integrative and interpretative framework by which order and disorder are judged, the standard by which reality is managed and pursued.”<sup>4</sup>

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)—a noted Dutch Reformed theologian, statesman and journalist—was one of the first to apply the concept of worldview to a Christian analysis of culture. Carl Henry and Frances Schaeffer, American evangelical writers of our time, followed Kuyper’s lead in critiquing cultural trends from a worldview perspective.

As Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton suggest in their book *The Transforming Vision*,<sup>5</sup> a worldview answers four fundamental questions:

- *Who am I?* The nature, meaning and purpose of human beings. What am I here for? How do I compare with and relate to other human beings, objects, God?
- *Where am I?* The nature of the universe in which we live. What is this reality that I perceive? How much does it encompass?
- *What is wrong?* The obstacles that prevent me from attaining fulfillment. How do I understand the disorder, pain, and evil that I observe and experience? How can I explain it?
- *What is the solution?* Ways of overcoming the obstacles to fulfillment. How do I solve the enigma of evil and find personal satisfaction? The question suggests that, ultimately, a worldview implies a soteriology and an eschatology.

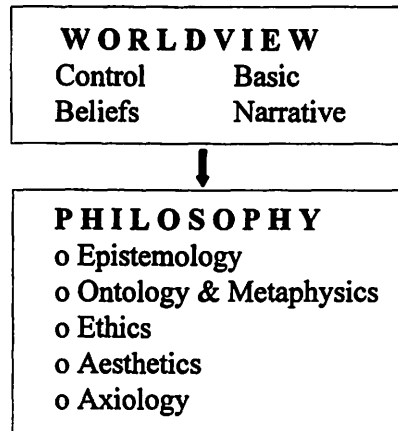
A worldview has certain characteristics:

1. *It is pre-philosophical.* Men and women, regardless of their educational attainments or their ability for abstract thought, have basic assumptions, convictions, and commitments with respect to the nature of human beings, reality, evil, and the good life. Nicholas Wolterstorff calls these convictions "control beliefs."<sup>6</sup> A worldview, then, is a pre-philosophical and pre-scientific perspective that comes suggestively close to the concept of faith.

2. *It may be expressed through a story.* A worldview is usually presented as a narrative that ties together concepts of origin, meaning, purpose and destiny for individuals, social groups, and entire cultures. On the basis of this metanarrative we understand the role we play in human history and in the conflict between the forces of good and evil. As examples of this, we can cite the Great Controversy theme elaborated by Ellen White and--from an opposite perspective--the evolutionary narrative proposed by Charles Darwin and his followers. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many observers believe that the secular worldview that has shaped Western culture since the Enlightenment is in crisis. The idea of permanent material progress and the boundless human improvement through secular scientific means now seem a chimera. Hence the increasing spiritualization of contemporary Western culture.

3. *It is normative.* As Walsh and Middleton note, a worldview is not only a perspective of life, but also a vision *for* life. While it describes reality from a specific point of view, it also proposes norms for the conduct of individuals and social groups. It distinguishes between the real and the ideal, between what is and what ought to be. It proposes ethical priorities and patterns for education. The worldview we embrace determines our attitude toward work, life in the community, politics, economy, science and technology, etc.

What we have discussed to this point may be summarized in the following chart:



### **Fighting on Two Fronts**

The decisive battles that God's followers have fought through the centuries have always been, in essence, battles for the mind and will of men and women. Jesus was aware of the dynamic power of beliefs and ideas to transform and inspire: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you

free" (John 8:32 NIV). And in two strong passages, the apostle Paul warned Christians: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Col. 2:8; Eph. 6:12 NIV).

Thus it is our duty, as thoughtful Christians and educators, to be critically aware of the underlying assumptions that inform contemporary thought and educational philosophies. These will shape the mind of the students that attend our institutions of learning, influence their choices, and determine, to a considerable degree, their eternal destiny.

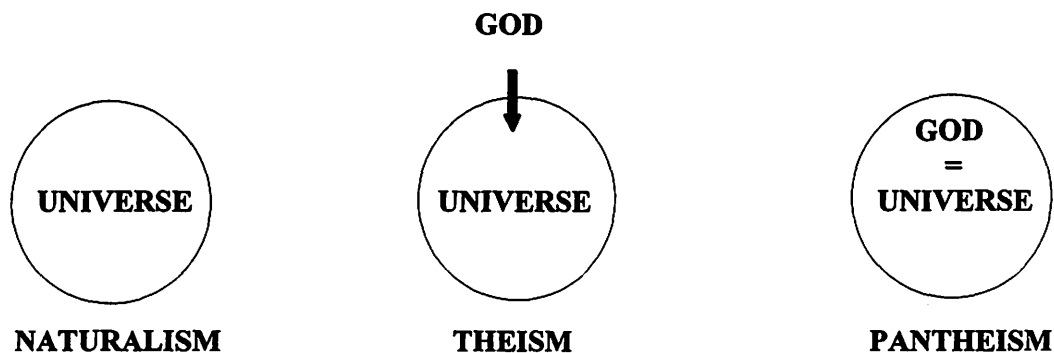
Three major worldviews compete for allegiance in our culture:

1. *Theism* posits the existence of a personal God who is Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign of the universe, and who is the source of justice and love. Theism has been nurtured by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity, in turn, has played an important role in shaping the philosophy, art, science, and social institutions of the modern world.

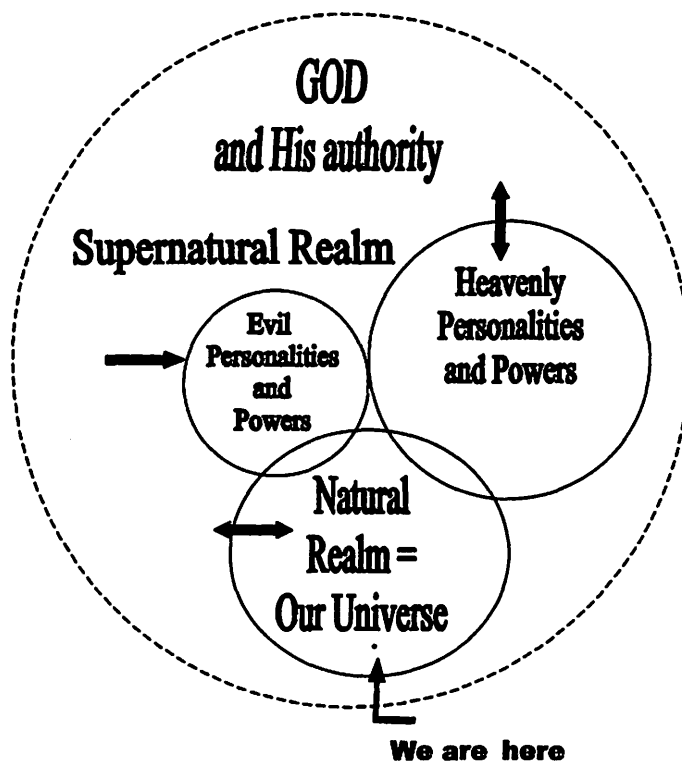
2. *Pantheism* identifies the Deity with the forces and workings of nature. From this perspective, everything that exists partakes of the divine essence. Pantheism blurs the distinction between Creator and creation, between good and evil, and between the various world religions. It emphasizes the divine in all of us and the sacredness of all things. Pantheism in the West has been nurtured by Neo-Platonic influences and lately by Eastern religions.

3. *Naturalism* explains everything that exists in terms of physical elements, forces, and processes. This worldview was already known at the time of the Greek philosophers. It re-emerged during Enlightenment and gained momentum in the context of the Scientific Revolution. Naturalism received new impetus during the last 150 years with the emergence of our scientific and technological culture. Several ideological currents derive from it: Materialism, Empiricism, Positivism, Atheism, Marxism. A secular view of life has pervaded modern Western culture through science, education, the arts, and the media.

These three contrasting worldviews can be summarized as follows:



The biblical worldview, elaborated by Ellen White as the Great Controversy overarching narrative, may be diagrammed in the following manner:



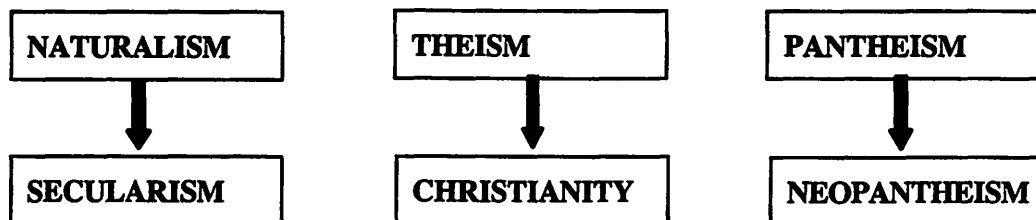
The Great Controversy account provides seven key events that impact human existence:

- *Creation in heaven:* In the remote past God creates a perfect habitat and populates it with intelligent beings.
- *Rebellion in heaven:* The most exalted heavenly creature rebels against God and is banished to Earth together with his followers.
- *Creation:* In the recent past God creates plant and animal life on this planet, including the first pair of human beings.
- *Fall:* Tempted by the Rebel to disobey God's principles, the first couple lose their innocence and, as a result, the entire web of life on earth suffers the consequences. A universal Flood destroys most living organisms and demolishes the earth's surface.
- *Redemption:* Jesus Christ, God the Creator, comes to the rescue of fallen humanity, becoming a human being, and through His death and resurrection offers salvation to those who accept Him as Lord.
- *Second Coming:* Christ returns to earth in glory, grants immortality to those who received Him as Savior, and takes them to a heavenly realm.
- *Consummation:* At the end of the millennium God returns to this planet with the redeemed, eliminates evil from the universe, and restores the entire creation to its

pristine state.

Jesus foresaw a time, prior to His second coming, in which human beings would be confronted by two opposing challenges in the spiritual arena. On the one hand, there would be a dramatic loss of belief in a transcendent God ("When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8); on the other, widespread spiritual deceit ("False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. Watch out that no one deceives you" Matthew 24:24, 4).

Both prophecies have become a reality in our time, as Bible-believing Christians fight simultaneous battles against *secularism* and *neopantheism*—two ideologies that derive, respectively, from naturalism and pantheism.



*Secularism* is a philosophical perspective that consciously rejects all forms of transcendent religion and accepts as valid only the facts of the present life. In biblical terms, secularism embodies the decision of living "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Langdon Gilkey lists four basic premises of secularism:<sup>7</sup>

1. Everything that exists is the result of *contingency*; that is, everything was caused by some natural phenomenon that preceded it in the natural universe, which has always existed.
2. Since human beings, in this view, came into existence as the result of chance, it follows that they are endowed with *autonomy*. Only they can determine the meaning of their life and chart their destiny.
3. If human beings do create their social environment without reference to a superior Being, the natural consequence is *relativity* in values. There are no moral absolutes. Time and place determine what is acceptable for an individual or for a social group.
4. Secularized people are very conscious of their own *temporality*. Since there seems to be no empirical evidence of life beyond the grave, death is the end of everything. Once conscious life ends, human thoughts and accomplishments disappear forever. Even the physical universe appears to be moving toward its own extinction.

In contrast with the fairly defined premises of secularism, *neopantheism* (or neospiritualism) refuses to be easily profiled. It represents a synthesis of religious trends derived from Buddhism, Hinduism, Theosophy, shamanism, gnosticism, and various forms of the occult. Much of it, however, appears seductively wrapped in the jargon of modern psychology and science. For that reason the term *neopantheism* seems appropriate. In some circles this homogenized religion is known as New Age, supposedly in opposition to the Old Age of creedal Christianity and scientific

rationalism.

This return to the mysterious and the transcendent may be understood as a collective reaction to the loss of the sacred resulting from the combined impact of secularization and of secularism in modern culture. We find it difficult to carry out normal lives without reference to the spiritual and transcendent dimension of our existence. Certainly God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And as old faiths collapse, we human beings continue to seek meaning, value and purpose beyond ourselves.

Our age is also experiencing a loss of faith in the ability of reason and science to solve our problems. The devastation caused by two world wars and many bloody regional conflicts, the failure of political ideologies in bringing a millennium of peace on earth, the possibility of a global holocaust triggered by nuclear weapons, the precarious ecological balance of our planet threatened by human economic greed--all these factors fuel a disenchantment with impersonal or even dangerous technology that send many in search for the transcendent. In fact, some scientists are beginning to acknowledge that the strict scientific approach may not be the only or even the best method for knowing reality.

This recent tendency toward a mystical resacralization of the universe and life in the West may be traced to the counterculture of the 1960s, with its use of drugs as a way of reaching higher levels of consciousness. Parapsychology and transcendental meditation began acquiring an air of scientific respectability through university experiments. From within Roman Catholicism, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) has argued that matter and spirit are but two distinct aspects of one single cosmic stuff. He also proposed that man is evolving, mentally and socially, toward a final spiritual unity with the cosmos.

Soon Hollywood started exploiting these trends through films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Exorcist*, *E.T.*, and the *Star Wars* saga, which supposedly depict the world beyond and recommend friendly contacts with "the Force." By the late 1970s and early 80s "The Age of Aquarius" had fully arrived accompanied by pseudo-scientific and semi-religious practices that started to alter Western consciousness and its understanding of reality: biofeedback, self-hypnosis, yoga, est, Jungian dream analysis, primal therapy, shamanistic rituals, etc. With her books *Out on a Limb* and *Dancing in the Light*, actress Shirley MacLaine emerged as the celebrity evangelist of reincarnation and the New Age. Her central message is clear: All of us are gods; we have lived before and will live again; there is no death; each of us creates our own reality.

Douglas Groothuis, in his book *Unmasking the New Age*,<sup>8</sup> outlines six premises of neopanthemism:

1. *All is One* (Monism): Everything in the universe is interrelated, interdependent and interpenetrating. There is no basic difference between God, human beings, animals, and inanimate objects.

2. *All is God* (Pantheism): Everything that exists somehow partakes of the divine essence. The Superior Being is a force, an energy, or a personality.

3. *Humanity is God*: Each one of us is a god in disguise, and our own ignorance prevents us from fully realizing our real essence.

4. *A New Consciousness*: We have forgotten our true identity and need to be enlightened. Western rationalism must be replaced by a new way of thinking and feeling.

5. *All Religions are One* (Syncretism): There may be various paths to the truth, the external



features of religion may vary, but ultimately all aim at helping human beings become one with the One.

6. *Cosmic Evolutionary Optimism*: We are at the threshold of a global transformation, when humanity will begin directing its own evolution. Doomsday scenarios must be replaced by an expanding "spiritual futurism" that will lead us forward into a glorious future.

This new spirituality manifests itself in various ways: the popularity of holistic health, the human potential movement, the convergence of physics and mysticism, a renewed political globalism, and a new religiosity. Some of these concepts are also penetrating Christianity and subtly affecting the language of preaching, the churches' rituals, and the content of their consciousness-raising seminars.

### Competing Perspectives

It will be helpful to outline now the main premises of these three competing perspectives. In the case of secularism, we will profile the most attractive strand of this ideology--secular humanism. Representing Christianity, we will list the views most closely associated with our biblical position. The scheme will allow us to see clearly the contrast between those who claim that there is no God and of those who affirm that we are gods.

<b>Secular Humanism</b>	<b>Biblical Christianity</b>	<b>Neopanteism (Neo-spiritualism)</b>
<b>1. Prime reality:</b> Inanimate matter and energy.	An infinite, transcendent God, who acts in the universe and is knowable by human beings.	The spiritual universe, which is God/Mind/One/All.
<b>2. Nature of God:</b> God is a human myth.	A personal (triune), creatively active, omniscient, and sovereign Being, who is the source of morality.	An impersonal and amoral God/Mind/One/All.
<b>3. Origin of the universe and life:</b> The universe is eternal and operates as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. Or, according to the Big Bang Theory, the universe appeared suddenly and inexplicably.	Created by God by the power of His word, to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system.	Manifestations of the eternal God/Mind/One/All.

**4. Means of knowing truth:**

Human reason and intuition working through and confirmed by the scientific method.

God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and through the Bible, human conscience and reason illuminated by God the Holy Spirit, and confirmed by experience.

Trained introspection plus channeled revelations of God/Mind/One/All.

**5. Nature of human beings:**

Complex "machines;" highly evolved animals.

Physical-spiritual beings with personality, created in God's image, capable of free moral decisions, now in fallen condition.

Spiritual beings, a part of God/Mind/One/All, temporarily residing in material bodies.

**6. Purpose of human life:**

Uncertain and arguable: self-fulfillment, pleasure, service, betterment of the next generations.

Establishing a loving relationship with God, realizing our potential, serving our fellow humans, enjoying this life, and preparing for eternal life.

Transition toward progression (or regression) until union with God/Mind/One/All is achieved.

**7. Basis of morality:**

Majority opinion, contemporary mores, tradition, particular circumstances, or a combination thereof.

Unchanging character of God (just and merciful), revealed in Christ and in the Bible.

Inner impulses and inclinations; there is no "right" or "wrong" behavior.

**8. Human predicament:**

Ignorance of reality and true human potential; bad laws; incompetent government; lack of human understanding and cooperation; polluted environment.

Sin: conscious rebellion against God and his principles; attempt to enthrone humans as autonomous and self-sufficient creatures; as a result, the image of God became defaced and the entire world suffered.

Ignorance of reality and of true human potential; lack of comprehension of of supernatural communications; inattention to environmental balance.

**9. Solution to the human predicament:**

Better education, more support to science, technological progress, just laws, competent government, improved human understanding and cooperation, and care of the biosphere.

Spiritual rebirth: faith in divine redemption through Jesus Christ, that leads to a new life of loving obedience to God, adequate self-understanding, proper human relationships and care of our earthly home.

Change in consciousness, which leads to better self-understanding, human relations, and care of the biosphere--self-redemption.

**10. Death:**

Final end of existence in all its dimensions.

An unconscious parenthesis (other Christians: entrance into another conscious state).

An illusion; entrance into the next stage in cosmic life.

**11. Human history:**

Unpredictable and without overarching purpose, guided both by human decisions and by forces beyond human control

A meaningful sequence of events, guided by free human decisions, but also supervised by God; moving toward the fulfillment of God's overall plan

An illusion and/or a cyclical process

**12. Ultimate human destiny:**

Nothingness.

Transformed beings in a New Earth, or eternal annihilation (other Christians: eternal punishment for the wicked).

Permanent union with God/Mind/One/All; loss of individuality in eternal bliss

Why are these distinctions important? Not only because they will serve as basis for interpreting the experiences of life, making moral choices, and charting our destiny. But also because naturalism will lead us to atheism while neopanthemism will take us toward the occult.

### **Postmodernism: The Subtle Connections**

During the last 20 years postmodernism has emerged as the latest expression of the naturalistic or secular worldview. Initially, postmodernism was a reaction against modernism--the movement that stressed human reason as the best way to understand reality. This emphasis on rationality and the empirical method, in turn, led to the extraordinary development of modern science

and technology in the last two centuries. Postmodernists, in their critique, point out that “the Enlightenment Project” has not led to utopia, but to human alienation, environmental degradation, and destructive wars conducted with increasingly sophisticated weapons.

Based on the ideas advanced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, French thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have been the most significant expositors of postmodernism. They and their followers have developed the basic premises of postmodern thought:

First, human beings have no access to reality and, therefore, no means of perceiving truth. Second, reality is inaccessible because we are caught up in a prison-house of language that shapes our thought before we think and because we cannot express what we think. Third, through language we create reality, and thus the nature of reality is determined by whoever has the power to shape language.<sup>9</sup>

Although it is difficult to assess the lasting effect of postmodernism on our culture, given the resistance of scientific thought, it is clear that postmodern ideas facilitate subtle connections with neopantheistic views by relativizing truth and blurring the distinction between reality and imagination.

### **Implications for Adventist Education**

The picture can now be completed. Each worldview shapes a particular philosophy, which in turn determines an approach to education—its mission and objectives, the administrative style and the use of financial resources, teacher selection, the curricula, the campus location and lay-out, the internal policies, the application of discipline, as well as the topics selected for investigation and research.

For the past decade, the Education Department of the General Conference has been fostering, through seminars and publications of the Institute for Christian Teaching the integration of faith and learning at the secondary and tertiary levels. We define this integration as a deliberate and systematic process of approaching the entire educational enterprise—both curricular and co-curricular—from a biblical-Christian perspective. In a Seventh-day Adventist setting, its aim is to ensure that students, by the time they leave school, will have freely internalized a view of knowledge, life, values, and destiny that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed.

Due to the secularization of modern culture and the naturalistic assumptions of most graduate programs, some Adventist teachers have unconsciously adopted a dualistic perspective on education. We tend to keep in separate mental compartments our faith commitment, on the one hand, and, on the other, our approach to the academic discipline(s) we teach.

The process of integrating faith and learning in an Adventist school involves all aspects of the educational enterprise. However, the transmission of an integrated view will depend on the extent to which the teachers themselves have brought together faith and learning in their own experience, on the basis of Bible teachings and a daily communion with God. They will then be able to mediate this integrated view to their students.

In his book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, Steven Garber persuasively argues that the strongest factors that will keep Christian college or university students anchored in their faith and active in their church as professionals, after they leave the campus, are: (1) embracing the biblical worldview,

which provides a reliable basis for their moral choices; (2) establishing a lasting relationship with a Christian mentor; and (3) participating in the life of a supporting community of believers.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Bible provides a comprehensive, coherent, and reliable revelation of God on which we can anchor our trust and convictions, our values and behavior. In addition, the Bible leads us to know Jesus Christ—our Creator, Redeemer, Friend, and Coming King.

At the core of our individual thought processes there is a worldview—a set of assumptions regarding life and the universe on which we base our decisions, establish priorities, and chart our destiny. The home, the church, and the school—with their multiple personal interactions—provide the most powerful influences in developing and nurturing a Christian worldview in children and youth. When God and the Bible are at the very center of home life and school teachings, and these are effectively reinforced in the congregation’s activities and relationships, the members of the next generation are provided, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, with a reliable perspective from which they can pursue their vocation, make choices, critique culture, and prepare for the School of Eternity. There,

the acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body. All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God’s redeemed.<sup>11</sup>

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### NOTES

1. Based on an illustration used by Lloyd E. Kwast, “Understanding Culture,” in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: California: William Carey Library, 1981), pp. 361-364.

2. *Romantic Manifesto* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 19. Ayn Rand was a Russian-born American writer, whose novels and essays present a philosophy of life, which stands in contrast with the Judeo-Christian ethic. However, her statement of the human need for a worldview is valid.

3. *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), p. 43.

4. "On Worldviews," *Christian Scholars Review*, XIV, 2 (1985), p. 155.

5. Full title of this useful book, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984).
6. *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd. edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).
7. See Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).
8. ( Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986).
9. Gary Land, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," *College and University Dialogue* 8 (1996):1, p. 6. See also Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).
10. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behaviour During the University Years* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
11. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 677.

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