

Contrast between a Greek and Hebrew (Judaean-Christian) worldview

Introduction

This article looks at the conflict between modern, secular philosophy and the Judaean-Christian worldview. For other influences on our society including the realm of education, see our article on postmodernism.

What we understand and believe about the nature of knowledge profoundly affects our view of education, whether or not we're aware of it. Is knowledge the acquisition of facts about things, or is it rooted in God? The way we answer this question is an indication of the worldview we hold – a worldview affected by either Platonic philosophy, or a Hebrew (Judaean-Christian) understanding derived from the Bible. Whilst we may aspire to holding a truly biblical worldview, Oswald Chambers (in Quotations about Education) says of us all in the West:

Our thinking is based not on Hebrew wisdom and confidence in God but on the Wisdom of the Greeks which is removed from practical life, and on that basis we persuade ourselves that if a man knows a thing is wrong he will not do it. That is not true

The development of Greek thinking

We're all far more affected by Greek philosophy than we realise. Greek thinking has dominated our Western culture since the time of Plato (427-347 BC). He was the one who developed dualism, which separated the spiritual from the natural. Very simply put, Plato distinguished between knowledge and opinion, placing faith in the category of opinion. Aristotle (384-322 BC) took these ideas further, dividing sacred from secular; knowledge and theory became divided from other aspects of life. Later, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD) built on the Aristotelian theory, separating what he called Grace from Nature. Francis Schaeffer commented:

With the coming of Aquinas we have the real birth of the humanistic elements of the Renaissance.

The effects of humanism

The Oxford Dictionary describes humanism as: 'a belief or outlook emphasising common human needs and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems and concerned with mankind as responsible and progressive intellectual beings'. From the time of Aquinas onwards it continued, and still continues, to have a profound effect on education. The secular/sacred divide affects our thinking, our presuppositions and our general perceptions.

Contrast with the Biblical worldview

The Hebrew (Judaean-Christian) biblical worldview is thoroughly different from this. It's centred in the conviction that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Psalm 24:1). Man is a created being made in God's image to love and serve him (Genesis 1:26ff). Every area and aspect of life belongs to God. This worldview has God at the centre of every conceivable subject and from this viewpoint the world is not divided up but is a divinely ordered universe united by its single creator and Lord.

*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!
(Romans 11:36)*

The effects of Greek thinking

The effect of Greek thinking pervading Western culture was to elevate knowledge as an end in itself. Knowledge stayed largely abstract – it was seen as a rational understanding of concepts. Education became a process centred on the mind and school became a place where information was transferred and facts were accumulated, whether or not they're directly relevant to life.

Knowledge for its own sake is still elevated today. Our government seeks to raise the standard of education in the UK by rating schools solely according to academic results, the National Curriculum gets reshaped and increasingly more prescriptive, and 'A' levels are evaluated and tailored to the ever-increasing demands of high academic success. We're aware that children have more and more pressure put upon them to achieve academically and they're branded successes or failures from a very young age depending on their academic prowess.

The Biblical understanding of knowledge

What a stark contrast the biblical understanding of knowledge is! Knowing is inseparable from doing and being, from a Judaeo-Christian standpoint. Therefore knowing isn't restricted to education in school; instead it carries on throughout the length and breadth of life.

These commandments I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deut 6:6-7).

So education is not just the acquisition of theory and facts, it's a process of growing in applied wisdom and understanding. This embraces the needs, gifts and abilities of every person – emotional, physical, spiritual, practical and academic.

The Enlightenment

Platonic dualism continued into the Enlightenment period, which involved a concerted quest for certainty based on rational thinking alone. For example, one early Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704) wrote:

Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.

By the time of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) the Grace of Aquinas had been replaced by Reason, which led to the phenomenal development of secular science and humanist belief in the 20th century. DA Carson in his book, 'The Gagging of God', said of Kant that:

He argued that self does not so much discover what is objectively out there in the world but 'projects order creatively on the world'.

Darwin's theory of evolution would fit into this category. The theory has received widespread acceptance although it can't be irrefutably proved. All modern science curricula in the UK state the 'big bang' theory as the beginning of the universe, which scientists have developed from evolutionary theory. It replaces belief in a God-centred universe with rational scientific thinking. The popular Ginn series of Junior Science books are just one example of this.

The Biblical worldview

In contrast, a biblical worldview firmly places God at the centre of everything. Knowledge is found in the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7) and in Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom (Colossians 2:3). Knowledge in isolation, we're told, puffs us up (1 Corinthians 8:1). Knowing God and ourselves in relation to him is the starting point for learning in all its diversity and for making sense of the universe. In Immanuel School we look for God's perspective on every aspect of the curriculum. Learning has a purpose and it's relational because it encourages us to know and understand more of God.

God has something to say about everything in life, not just subjects usually reserved for education establishments – take for example, debt (Deut 15), economics (Lev 25), law and justice (Deut 17), housing (Deut 22:8), business (Lev 19:35), hygiene (Deut 23:12), forestry (Deut 20:19), treatment of animals (Deut 22) – and many more.

The effects of humanism

Modern humanism has had significant consequences in the realm of education (as well as other spheres of society). It has manifested itself in the pursuit of self-realisation and self-development. This in turn has led to freedom from restraint and from any external truth or absolutes. Standards are set by man, not from anything or anyone outside of himself. The school and the world have to measure up to the pupils' needs.

Contrast with Christian education

Conversely, as Christians, we see education as a means of gaining more revelation of God in every realm of life. Professor Rousas J Rushdoony says that it's discipline under a body of truth. This body of truth grows by research and study, but the truth is objective and God-given. We begin by presupposing God and his word. Godly standards grade us. We must measure up to them. The teacher grades the pupils.

The battle for our children's minds

Some secular teachers actively perpetrate humanist ideals in the classroom. Many don't, but their teaching is shaped by the content of the resources available and by the media. There's nothing subtle about the humanist agenda, however. They're actively battling for the minds of children, as this excerpt from The Humanist magazine illustrates:

I am convinced that the battle for human kind must be waged and won in the classroom. The teacher is the proselytizer of a new faith – human religion, utilising the classroom instead of the pulpit. The classroom must become the arena of conflict against the rotting corpse of Christianity by the new faith of humanism (Jan/Feb 1983).

True education

The word 'education' comes from the Latin word 'educo' meaning 'to lead out'. The worldview our children are exposed to will determine where they're led. As Christian educators we're devoted to leading our children into the treasures of knowledge and wisdom totally found in relationship with God. This definition of education, by Arthur Jones in his paper, 'Culture, Community and School', seeks to capture the Biblical distinctives:

Education is for all the people of God and is the life-long, life-based, and life-oriented process of forming and transforming persons, communities, organisations and institutions into Christ-like maturity, for the purpose of serving God and his purposes in the world.

The ethos behind education

As we've seen, Christians are not the only ones concerned with the ethos behind our education system. The product of humanist philosophy, which in the sixties and seventies presented itself as child-centred education, the out-working of John Dewey's beliefs, had serious shortcomings. Dewey (1859-1952), the American educator, produced his 'School and Society' pamphlet and what became known as 'The Progressive Movement' began, leading to humanism expressed as 'Child-centred education'.

When the flaws in Dewey's methods became apparent, the reaction was to develop a subject-centred curriculum which met the criteria of Denis Lawton, who envisaged 'common (meaning 'state') schools transmitting common culture by means of a common curriculum.' Enter the National Curriculum! The underlying philosophy is no less humanistic so there are serious conflicts with the Hebrew Biblical worldview. In reality, finding common values is no easy task, and the genuine needs of the pupils come far down the priority list.

Different Christian responses to humanistic education

Some Christians are completely unaware of the conflict and the agenda behind education. They assume education is neutral and therefore do nothing. Some who are aware that state education is not neutral decide to keep their children in the state education system so they can be salt and light there. Some send their children to state church schools, believing that they are basically Christian in outlook. Some, as we've done here in Romford, start their own privately-funded Christian schools, where the principles and values of the Kingdom of God are paramount. With no government funding we're free of the restrictions of the National Curriculum and can develop a Judaeo-Christian worldview right across the curriculum.

This quotation by Oswald Chambers, from a paper entitled 'Quotations about Education', sums up our heart-felt conviction:

We have not to bring God into our system of philosophy, but to found our philosophy on God. The source and support of all abiding exposition is a man's personal relationship to God. If we base our philosophy on reason we shall produce a false philosophy; but if we base it on faith in God, we can begin to expound life rightly.