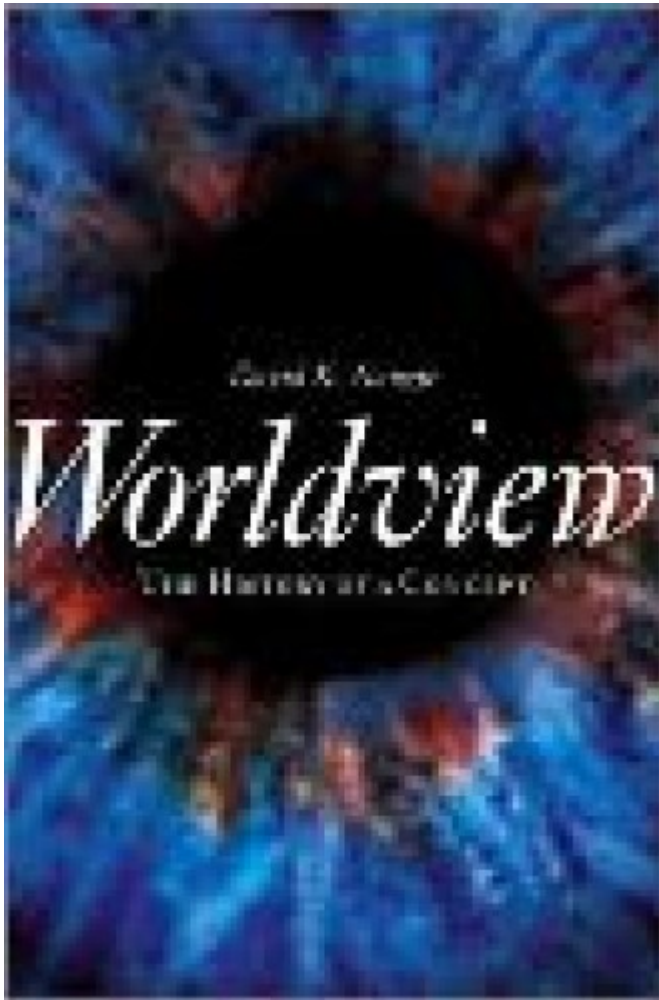


Worldview: The History of a Concept

reviewed by [Dennis P. Hollinger](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Worldview: The History of a Concept

David K. Naugle
Eerdmans

Worldviews make a difference. How we think about ultimate reality, human nature, the natural world and the course of history significantly determines how we live. This

is David Naugle's underlying assumption. Naugle, a professor of philosophy at Dallas Baptist University, is an evangelical whose work reflects Reformed thinking. He sets out both to provide an historical overview of the concept of worldview and to delineate a Christian worldview.

Naugle explores how worldview was defined by and the role it played in the work of a broad array of thinkers, including Kant, Nietzsche, Polanyi and Freud. A century ago the concept, often referred to by the German word *Weltanschauung*, was quite popular, though definitions abounded. Worldview was never quite as significant for philosophy as it was for theology and the social sciences, but in many disciplines it was deemed to play a pivotal role in people's basic orientation to the world and their commitments and values.

Naugle points out that though Protestantism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy have differed theologically, "there is a remarkable common denominator among these three traditions in affirming the overall biblical schema of creation, fall and redemption." Protestants (especially in the Reformed tradition) used worldview language most frequently and usually from a more rational perspective. Catholic and Orthodox thinkers spelled it out in sacrament and liturgy.

Naugle states that any theory or definition of worldview "is itself a function of the actual worldview of the theorist or the definer." Accordingly, he moves beyond the history of the concept to a theological examination of the implications of a Christian worldview for a theory of worldview. The Christian story brings four issues to a definition of worldview: objectivity, subjectivity, sin and redemption/grace.

Objectivity "implies the objective existence of the Trinitarian God whose essential character establishes the moral order of the universe and whose word, wisdom and law define and govern all aspects of created existence." Humans are not justified in assigning their own meaning to the universe, for God has spoken, ordered and guides.

But worldview is not just a "heady" idea, Naugle insists. There is a subjective side to the Christian perception of it, which is rooted in the human heart. "The heart is the religious, intellectual, affective, and volitional center of a person. Believing, thinking, feeling, and doing all transpire within it," and have a powerful impact upon a person's perception of reality. Because the heart and mind are infected with sin, humans have a tendency to fabricate idolatrous belief systems. Hence, the final

aspect of a Christian worldview is redemption through God's grace, which forgives and enables a new understanding of the world as God's creation.

A Christian worldview provides a narrative that makes sense of things (a basic need of humans) and at the same time offers a subjectively satisfying portrayal of reality. "A philosophically sophisticated, God-centered conception of a Christian worldview spares believers from a naïve fideism, a scandalous anti-intellectualism, and a cultural obscurantism," Naugle states. He helps to free the idea of worldview from its dusty, rationalistic, thoroughly modernist legacy. And he manages to retrieve the role of the heart in forming worldviews without falling into the abyss of subjectivism.

Naugle's extraordinary treatment would have been enhanced by a consideration of the role of community in shaping a worldview, and of the actions or ethics flowing from a worldview. Christians should never overlook the community of faith, the church, which is both the agency through which a Christian worldview is formed and the place of its most visible expression. The word *church* never even made it into Naugle's index.

As for ethical action, Naugle never completely frees himself from the "headish" legacy of the concept of worldview. For example, in portraying redemption in the Christian worldview he writes of the "gracious inbreaking of the kingdom of God into human history" to "atone for sin," and to enable "those who believe in him to obtain a knowledge of the true God and a proper understanding of the world as his creation." I wish he had added, "and to enable believers to live other-oriented lives of mercy, love and justice," and that he had provided some ethical content along with his fine theological content.