

# **Calvinist/Reformed Perspective: Selective Key Issues**

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## **Introduction and Generalities**

**Readers of this paper should remember that the nature of these papers is to present our respective worldviews (VW) for information, sharing and discussion, not for challenging or arguing about them. Their purpose is to get to know each other at a deeper level, explore some commonalities and differences. And since they are to be short, there is no attempt in the paper to defend the stated positions. Neither can we expect complete presentations from these papers. The nature of the case allows only selective approaches; complete treatment would require a book from each of us. I am selective even with respect to key issues. Only two receive attention, though they have wide ramifications. This introduction deals with two aspects of my WV. The first is somewhat philosophical in nature; the other, more Biblical.**

**Taking off with a “Damerism,<sup>1</sup>” I’ve always been a Calvinist Christian, but I didn’t always use the term. My upbringing was religious more than philosophical—the end of the “Damerism no. 1.” I do not think that we, Eric and myself, are examples of nurtural determination of our lives, but certainly our lives are heavily influenced by our nurture, even in our very natures and our way of thinking.**

**Another take off from a “Damerism,” my upbringing constituted a WV best described as an amalgam of religion cum pop philosophy shaped by the more professional philosophy of Abraham Kuyper<sup>2</sup> and the school of thought he generated, with religion being the dominant factor and understood in the widest sense of the word. As I have developed my religious worldview, I place more emphasis on the world than on the church, though I am active in the latter. I compare the church to a spiritual gas station that provides me with the fuel for making positive contributions to society. It keeps reminding**

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<sup>1</sup>Eric Damer began last month’s paper on “Secular Humanism” with a similar “confession.”

<sup>2</sup>For info re Kuyper, please check my website [www.SocialTheology.com](http://www.SocialTheology.com).

me about the basics of life. It provides me with important community and fellowship. What Christians do in the *world* is much more significant than what they do in *church*. Your actual religion comes out more in the world than in the church. When there is a conflict between your liturgical or church life and your behaviour in the world, it is the latter that expresses your *real* religion, your real devotion, your real values and faith. It is the latter that expresses what's in your heart, regardless of what you mumble or sing or preach in church.

## Secularism and Other Faiths

We are all human beings with many shared characteristics, one of them being that we all have a faith, belief or WV that guides us throughout our lives. That WV serves as the lens through which we view the world and on basis of which we act. In fact, it is our WV that defines us at our deepest level. Not our rationality, not our economic standing, not our sexuality or any other aspect of our being. We are, all of us, first of all believers. We are all guided by a WV, a belief, faith or set of values, a religion—whatever you wish to call it. It is that element within us that guides us in our economic behaviour and even in our rationality. Kant wrote *Religion within the Bounds of Reason*. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a foremost US philosopher from Yale (a former teacher of mine who lectured at UBC only two weeks ago) countered that with his own book, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. By which he indicated that our reasoning is guided primarily by our WV, by what we believe, by what he calls religion. I believe; therefore I am.

One of the implications of this view is that *no one is neutral*. Everyone is a believer in something or some idea or set of ideas. We all devote ourselves to something out there outside of ourselves or something within ourselves. That holds for secularism and humanism as well as more overtly religiously coloured value systems that feature temples, mosques and churches. Our devotion to reason, our dependence on autonomous human reason is as much a faith as my Christian faith in the sense that neither is based on proof but on belief. We meet each other not on some secular platform of neutrality, objectivity and common sense, but on the platform of our various belief systems.

Anglicanism in Ontario and Catholicism in Quebec used to be the two main platforms on which we met in this country and by which we organized our societies.

Anglicanism also played that role in a lower key in BC, especially in education. When those systems no longer enjoyed the adherence of the majority, they were challenged and largely replaced by secularism. Secularism has become the main belief system or WV, the establishment faith, by which Canada conducts its public affairs. The majority of Canadians adhere to this faith and consider it the objective neutral platform where people of all faiths meet and interact, leaving their subjectivities—often referred to as “religions”—behind. In reaction to the past, religion is banned from the market place. You may, e.g., not talk religion in the House of Commons or Legislature. Another example: The government only supports one school system,<sup>3</sup> the secular one, in its false belief that it thereby acts neutrally and objectively. Secularism provides the common ground for all, with religions being added to it for those who feel a need for it. Secularism is the objective, neutral basis for all; religion is a selected subjective addition, a luxury added on top for those who want it. If you select that added feature for education, then you have gone beyond the basics and will have to pay out of your own pocket. In fact, the shift has been from one establishment faith to another, not from faith to reason or from subjectivity to objectivity.

Our WVC is a partial rejection of that orientation, for it has led to people no longer daring to talk about their faith or belief, unless it be secular. If your WV includes that selected feature, that’s OK as long as you do not talk about it in public. Everybody is kowtowed into silence. Students don’t know what makes their classmates from other orientations tick. WVC wishes to break this silence by benignly forcing the teaching of all faiths in these secular schools. I applaud this partial rejection. That’s why I joined. But it’s only a partial rejection, for we are not challenging the very basis of the secular system. It is the religious schools, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or whatever, that constitute full rejection of that secular orientation.

## **Twin Sources of Knowledge: Faith and Reason**

**The various Christian traditions view the relationship of faith and reason differently. In the West, the imagined independence of human reason actually has its**

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<sup>3</sup>True, in some provinces, including BC, the government subsidizes religious schools that meet certain standards. However, that has come about only after many years of hard struggle and challenge, including legal action and courts. These are seen as *special* schools, while the secular is considered standard and normal.

historical roots in *Thomas Aquinas*, a brilliant medieval theologian/philosopher who has placed his stamp on Western culture, including the prevailing view on reason. His system is known as *Scholasticism*. In his legitimate concern to give a place of legitimacy to the fruits of Greek philosophy in the dominant Christian WV of his day, he divided the area of faith and the area of reason. For some centuries they ran parallel to each other, but eventually secularism veered off to the reason side and began first to ignore and then reject faith altogether. In some Christian traditions, especially in Catholicism and Lutheranism, reason has traditionally been regarded as autonomous from faith, due to the continuing influence of Scholasticism.

In the Calvinist tradition, there is also great respect for reason. In its more pristine forms, it keeps faith and reason together. It insists that reason separated from faith, first of all does not really exist except in some people's imagination. And, secondly, it insists that right reason needs constantly to be corrected by divine revelation. With the fall into sin somewhere in our early human history, a radical distortion took place in the human psyche that affected his entire being, including his reason.

I am aware that here that this goes headlong against the very root of secularism and Humanism with their notion of autonomous reason. In my Calvinist way of thinking, reason without ongoing correction from divine revelation leads us in the wrong direction, where we create distorted values and begin to use each other for our own egocentric ambitions. There may be some denominations or schools of thought within secularism who are able to resist those distortions to some degree such as Humanists, but a society driven by that sense of autonomous reason eventually *brutalizes* as its effect penetrates deeper and deeper into the psyche of the nation's citizens. A general sense of meaninglessness sets in. I believe that the current breakdown of Canadian social structures, especially the family, and its consequences we see on our city's streets, is the long-term but direct result of that imagined autonomous reason. With the exception of some individuals with the right kind of support, an entire community based on it will disintegrate, brutalize. We are seeing it happen before our eyes. Autonomous reason cannot restrain the heart, the symbolic seat of our faith, values or worldview. Instead, the heart rules our reason. It is the deepest place where this degeneration begins and then penetrates the rest of life and social structures.

So, reason is a precious gift from God that we respect, cherish and use to the fullest. That is the main Christian perspective. We have deep respect for science and accept its methodology, provided it is strictly adhered to. But we need the corrections provided by revelation to keep that reason on track. We may study the origins of the universe by the scientific method, but then we inevitably end up with questions of purpose and destiny, areas where revelation provides the guidance and where science, by definition, may not tread. Even the choice of research projects needs the guidance of revelation. If the inventors of today's terrible weapons of mass destruction had been guided by Biblical revelation, I doubt that they would have developed them. If the developers of the poultry industry, as another example coming out of Damer's paper, had been guided by the Bible, they would have developed it in a different direction that would allow poultry to live according to its nature, etc.

But then there are also the Christian biblicists. Like secularists, they have also separated faith and reason. *Unlike* secularists, they have turned away from human reason and want to derive all their wisdom and knowledge from the Bible, from revelation. For example, they tend to reject all scientific study of the origin of the universe and insist on a literal interpretation of the creation story in the Bible—literal in a Western sense. From my Calvinist perspective, an *irrational approach to the Bible* is as wrong as an *unbiblical approach to reason*. Revelation and reason need each other, because man is fallen from his original grandeur and goodness.

## Summary Review of Genesis 1: Seeds of a Christian Worldview

My interpretation of Genesis (Gen.) 1 is based on at least four factors.

1. Interpreting Gen. 1 in the context of the entire Bible.
2. The body of historical Christian teachings over the centuries.
3. Scientific discoveries and their interpretations.
4. Archeological studies of other ancient documents of similar literary genre. This is really an application of 3.

Gen. 1 begins in a very vague way about the earliest beginnings of the universe.

**READ :1-2.** Now, having heard of various scientific descriptions of that early process, I take this passage to be interpreting the origins of the universe not from a scientific point of

view. While all this development or evolution was taking place, the Spirit of God was hovering over it, guiding it towards its purpose and destiny. These are not necessarily totally contradictory explanations so much as complementary. The one is scientific; the other, religious. Describing the two aspects of the one process. But there is a significant difference: the Biblical version has a teleological dimension that is generally lacking in the secular view of evolution. This development had a purpose.

To me, most events have a rational scientific explanation as well as a spiritual. But they are not necessarily dished up for you; you have to dig for them. In the Bible, e.g., ordinary natural events are often described as miracles. A miracle is not necessarily something science cannot investigate and once it does, it no longer is a miracle. A miracle is usually an event that draws special attention to the power or concern of God for His people, but that is often amenable to scientific explanation, often, not always. There are some events around the life of Jesus that probably will never be amenable to science. But who says that every event *should* be amenable to science? What is the basis of that belief? Why do people insist on that? Who has proved it? To me, this is one of the myths of secular scientism; not of science, but of scientism, of scientists going beyond the agreed-upon restrictions of the scientific method.

Genesis continues and moves into specifics. It tells us that God made various things, animals and human beings one after another. Let there be light. Let there be a separation between the waters. Let there be...--7 times. 7 is one of the Biblical symbols for completion. The chapter intends to *interpret* the complete beginning for us—interpret, not describe. And the things and processes it interpreted were things, beings and processes that bewildered some of the ancient pagan cultures around Israel. They would deify certain created things or processes. Or they would fear some others and thus seek to placate them by religious ceremonies like dances and sacrifices.

The writer of Genesis is here telling the people of his own time, look, these things that you deify, that you worship or fear and for which you dance and sacrifice are all made by this one God of the entire universe. They are not worthy of worship and they do not need to be feared. They were all made by this one God and He is the one you ought to worship and serve and fear. In the language of those days and that general worldview, it is

to Him and Him only that you dance and sacrifice. All these other things are creatures. When you worship them, you become an idolater and they become your idols.

In terms of our modern day, this chapter constitutes strong encouragement to still worship God, not things in this world such as money or career or earth or power. These things are good in themselves, but when you deify them, turn them into your god, they become tyrannical over you, they become demonic with power over you. They lead you astray into meaninglessness.

Note that I said that these things are good in themselves. Genesis 1 declares them to be good. God is described as having made something and then we read, “And God saw that it was good.” 6 X—It was good. Then the 7<sup>th</sup> time—again, that notion of completeness—in :31—READ IT. Now it is all finished. He looks over His handiwork and declares His delight in this creation.

A *good* creation! The original addressees were afraid of much of creation and considered much of it evil. Genesis says: It was good, very good. Today, for us with all our questions about evil in the world: God made it good. Do not blame Him! The Bible throughout emphasizes this: God meant and means this world to be good. That’s how He created it.

Also notice the emphasis on the creation of living creatures *according to their kind*. Repeated several times. You need to treat them according to their kind. Today this is disregarded. We treat our animals inhumanely and totally ignore their nature and character. We just pack them in wire cages, cut off their beaks, crowded so they cannot move, fill them full of poison to make them grow faster and fatter. That is not the perspective of Genesis. Everything according to its kind. That’s how they were created; that’s how they are to be treated.

And now the creation of our progenitors. READ :26-27. First: in God’s image. This is later explained in the Bible, though never in great detail, that we should reflect God in all we do. His love, His justice, His compassion—everything He stands for should be reflected in the way we live. So, this is a call to be all these good things as we move through this world. But at the same time, never erase the line that’s between us. He is God; we are His creatures. We are not God and nothing in this world is, not even the earth, as some try to identify the two in a kind of pagan religion. Reflection, not identification.

And note that there is no distinction between Adam and Eve in this matter of image. They both reflect Him equally. At the same level. That's how He intended it to be. The degeneration that later developed between the genders is the result of our fall.

Made in His image. All of us, men and women, low and high, poor and rich. Black and white. All in His image. All are His crowning glory. That spells the end of all racism and discrimination, contempt, class. To honour and respect every one, regardless of race or status. The basis of human rights and democracy.

And then the function or role that the human race is to fulfill the creation by unraveling and searching for its potentials To rule over all the earth and all creatures. In theological parlance: *Cultural Mandate*. Even David Suzuki the other day talked about our position over all other creatures. Well, that's what Genesis teaches us. We are the crown of His creation. We are His reps, His landlords, His managers, His keepers, His stewards. We are responsible for all of it to take care of it. Exploit it, but only positively so, not so that we destroy it. To exploit it responsibly so that all creatures retain their space and live according to their kind. This is His garden and we are to use it while we also protect it. Well, that's a very update assignment in our current global warming situation.

Finally, underlying all of this, note the total emphasis on the physical. There have been times and even today some Christian traditions that uphold the spiritual aspect of creation and downgrade the material or the physical. This comes not from the Bible but from the long-term ancient influence of some Greek philosophers, but it has been tenacious tradition that pops up here and there. Today in general I would say most Christians have more appreciation for the physical creation. Gen. 1 is one grand affirmation of the physical, the wordly, the material. *That* is declared good and even very good. Any Christian who berates the world and working in the world in favour of some spiritual task or good, is off the mark. This entire chapter elevates the physical. This is our home. This is where we are to work and protect and enjoy—eat from all the plants and trees. It's all yours. Enjoy.

Well, I have given you the beginning. It's not the entire story. Things went wrong. True, but *this* was the intention. A world of joy. If it is that no longer, remember how He made it. Life is meant to be enjoyed. And working in this world is to serve Him. *That* is the basic reason for our existence. That's why we're here.



**This is my Christian worldview—an important part of it, at least. It provides me with guidance in different areas of life and in various ethical issues. It tells me how to relate to the world and to my neighbour. It also gives me a compass in the Western confusion between faith and reason. It answers the question why I am here. There is more, of course, in the Bible, but for our short time, this suffices as a beginning.**

### ***Multi-culturalism (MC)***

**I support MC, but not the Canadian version of it. As long as one worldview enjoys establishment privileges, there is no true MC. The day every worldview with significant adherents is fully recognized not only at ceremonial occasions or within their own institutions, but in the marketplaces of the nation, that day will be the birthday of Canadian MC. The programme of WVC is a gentle push in that direction.**

### ***Pluralism***

**The same issue as the above paragraph.**

**I support pluralism for an additional reason. Beliefs, worldviews or religions cannot be forced on anyone. Convictions are not born that way and do not bloom in an environment of force. EG, much of Europe was Christianized under force. Hence, it never went deep and it is toppling under the twin weight of stronger secularism and, more recently, Islam. A forced religious tradition becomes distorted. Europe's internal wars and its external imperialism go deeply against the grain of its (previous) official religion, but its distorted form could not resist the temptation. Hence I support pluralism, for it allows everyone's worldview to bloom where it is nurtured in freedom. On basis of the principle to do unto others as you want to have done to yourself, I support the same degree of freedom for others as I do for myself. Pluralism is a natural derivative of that principle.**