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The Question of a Christian Worldview

Books by Nancy Pearcey and David Naugle

Reviewed by James W. Skillen¹

In an article in *The New York Times* on December 5, Ian Buruma asks, "Is 'Islamic Democracy' Really Possible?" His question arises, of course, in the context of anticipated elections in Iraq at the end of January, 2005. Yet Buruma does more than repeat the hype of politicians who hope that elections in Iraq might help tame Islamic radicalism and begin to build a dike against authoritarian rule or chaos in the future. Buruma recognizes that the western idea of democracy is typically put forward as a "secular" idea, requiring the privatization or dismissal of religion. And that can hardly be what Shiite and Sunni Muslims want. Moreover, modern secularism is not really religiously neutral. The outcome of "secularizing zeal" in much of the West, he says, "was not democracy but militarism, absolute monarchy, fascism and variations of Stalinism."

"The idea that modern democracy has to be secular in its ethos is, of course, rooted in European history," Buruma explains. "The Enlightenment was partly an assault on the authority of the church, especially in France. Political arrangements were to be subject to reason, not to theology. To be modern was to reject religion, or 'superstition,' and to believe in science." One should note carefully, however, that this kind of secularism does not exist as non-belief, but as part of a new faith, a substitute faith. "The belief in science as a solution for all human problems became a kind of superstition itself," says Buruma. Thus, to believe that Islam, as a religious way of life in a country like Iraq, must give way to a "secular" idea of democracy, is really to insist on the displacement of Islam by another "religious" way of life, namely, a way of life that places autonomous humanity at the center of life. On those terms one must conclude, quite logically, that "Islamic democracy" is an impossibility.

What we see in much of modern Islam, however, writes Buruma, is a negative reaction not necessarily to democracy, but to the imposition of radical secularism by rulers such as Nassar in Egypt, the Baathists in Syria and Iraq, and the shah in Iran. Those regimes "were led by secular elites who saw religion as something that held their countries back or in a state of colonial dependence." Those "iron-fisted reformers" did not usher in scientific rationality but tried to destroy organized religion at least as a counter to their own power. And when that happens, "something worse often takes its place, usually a quasi religion or personality cult exploited by dictators. When [Islam] is marginalized, as happened in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, it provokes a religious rebellion." What is needed in Iraq,

1 Washington DC: The Center for Public Justice, Public Justice Report, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 18 2005). A Dutch translation is available in *Beweging*, Summer 2005, pp. 14-18. For an interview of Skillen see www.freewebs.com/brucewearne/skillen%20interview.PDF. The website of the Center for Public Justice is www.cpjustice.org.

Buruma argues, is the opportunity for Muslims and others to choose an open society that can make room for religious ways of life, not crush them by the imposition of doctrinaire secularism. “Until not so long ago,” he writes, “many people in countries with Catholic or Protestant parties” did begin to vote, even while following the lead of religious authorities. They learned the rules of democracy without giving up their religious faith. If Shiites and Sunnis can do this in a future Iraq, that could open the way forward. But it will be difficult if the foreign occupiers, who say they are bringing democracy, insist on imposing secularism.

What does Buruma’s article on Islam and democracy have to do with a Christian worldview? It has much to do with it, both directly and indirectly. The fact is, says Buruma, that secularism did not triumph completely in western Europe and the United States. In continental Europe, for example, Christian democratic parties are still mainstream. “The first such party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party,” he writes, “was founded in 1879 by a Calvinist ex-pastor in the Netherlands named Abraham Kuyper. His aim was to restore God (not the church) as the absolute sovereign over human affairs. Only if secular government was firmly embedded in the Christian faith could its democratic institutions survive. That is what he believed and what Christian Democrats still believe.”

Readers of the Public Justice Report will recognize the name of Abraham Kuyper. And the books we are introducing here depend, in large part, on Kuyper’s contribution to the idea of a “Christian worldview.” But before getting to the books, we must go a step farther with Buruma. The political implications of his argument, including his reference to Kuyper, must be highlighted. Many religious ways of life that insist on the imposition of one faith on all citizens, or, at best, the tolerance of contrary faiths in private as long as the control of public law and government is held by those who represent the true or dominant faith, is clearly discriminatory and problematic for democracy and an open society. This is true not only about the way the Christian church held power in western and eastern European Christendom and about the general practice of Islam through the centuries. It is also true about modern secularism—a faith, a way of life, that insists on the privatization of all other faiths but its own.

The alternative to ancient and modern imperialisms is evident, if not fully realized, in Kuyper’s approach. As long as God, rather than the state or a ruler, is recognized as the ultimate sovereign, a way of opening society to everyone without discrimination becomes possible. If neither state, nor church, nor Muslim clerics, nor “the people,” is presumed to be the ultimate sovereign over human affairs, then it becomes possible to imagine a political order—a political community inclusive of all citizens—that does not have to insist on imposing a common faith, or giving public privilege to only one faith, whether that faith is a traditional religion or secularism. The key here is to be found in recognizing that the all-inclusive political community is not the all-subduing, or the highest, or the omniscient human community. It is simply a public-legal community of citizens under law and government, which is obligated to do justice to all citizens by making sure, among other things, that they are free to recognize and bow before an authority higher than the state and the government. The political freedom to live out their faiths publicly, therefore, means that people may live in common as citizens while yielding their lives to different gods and ultimate sources of authority. And, of course, an open society like this is possible only if all citizens enjoy equal freedom. However, if ancient imperialisms (Roman, Christian, Muslim) and modern ideological totalitarianisms and authoritarianisms cannot make room for a

genuinely open public square and a limited political community, what can make possible such public openness, limitation, and pluralism?

Historically speaking, the most general, if not universal, answer to this question can be found in countries and cultures that have been influenced by some version of reforming Christianity, the kind of experience where Christian imperialism and statism were rejected but radical secularism was not adopted. Said in the simplest way, where statesmen like Kuyper held tenaciously to the conviction that God is sovereign and that no human institution, including the state or church, can be the sole representative of God's sovereignty on earth, then a new, pluralistic view of the political community emerged, making possible the democratic participation of all citizens in the political community without dismissing or crushing the faiths by which they live.

For our purposes here, we need not try to evaluate the extent to which a more open public pluralism, which gives due respect to diverse religions, may be emerging today in India, Turkey, countries in Latin America, and elsewhere. Our aim, instead, is to ask more about the fact that there appears to be no possibility of holding a religiously neutral view of life, including political life. Everyone, including secularists, appear to live by faith, by deep convictions and presuppositions that undergird whatever kind of rationality they claim to use.

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This is the point at which we can turn to the books under review. Nancy Pearcey's best-selling volume, *Total Truth*, aims, as its subtitle suggests, for the liberation of Christianity from its cultural captivity (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004). Pearcey is the Francis A. Schaeffer scholar at the World Journalism Institute, a visiting scholar at the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, and a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute. She has written, edited, or contributed to countless articles, essays, and books.

At the foundation of Pearcey's argument is the presupposition that people inevitably live their lives by means of a worldview. "It is impossible to think without some set of presuppositions about the world," she writes. Consequently, Christians should live out their lives on the basis of a consistent Christian worldview that is not compromised by Enlightenment secularism or by any other worldview. Yet that is difficult, says Pearcey, because for centuries Christians have formed the habit of synthesizing the Christian view of life with Greco-Roman and modern secularist worldviews. Christians often live schizophrenic lives and don't even realize it. Under the modernist guise of neutrality, writes Pearcey, many scientific and naturalistic ideas are presented as "objective, rational, and binding on everyone, while biblical views are dismissed as biased private opinions."

The effect of such a dualism—a kind of cultural schizophrenia—is that Christians will abandon the world of ideas to the secularists. They will fail to see that secularism is itself a philosophical commitment—and that if they don't bring biblical principles to bear on various issues, then they will end up promoting non-biblical principles."

The second major section of Pearcey's book systematically pursues a critique of modern scientism and particularly Darwinism, showing how the Darwinian influence has spread into all corners of American life, including legal thought and practice. The pragmatism of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and John Dewey, for example, influenced legal, educational, economic, and political thought more than any other approach in the twentieth century. And pragmatism was radically shaped by Darwinian naturalism.

Part Three of Pearcey's volume is titled "How We Lost Our Minds." It traces the reduction of Christianity to the private realm of experience in American life. "Universities that had been founded as Christian schools, like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, began pushing theology off into a separate department instead of allowing it to permeate the curriculum as a whole. Religion was being removed from the curriculum, where we teach public knowledge, and relegated to the private sphere of subjective experience." Christians themselves were partly responsible for this, Pearcey explains, because they accepted the idea that science and law and much else was neutral, nonreligious territory.

The answer to dualism, Pearcey argues passionately, is to engage in all of life from out of a consistent Christian worldview. The only way to stand against Darwinian naturalism and secularizing pragmatism, she says, quoting Kuyper, "is by articulating a Christian worldview 'of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power.'"

Thus, in the concluding fourth part of her book Pearcey brings together the various threads of her argument to make the case for the distinctive character of a Christian worldview. By their very nature, worldviews are not merely mental constructs, she has demonstrated. They arise from the heart-deep convictions and ways of life. Biblical Christianity is a total way of life—a life of commitment to the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. The problem of dualism among Christians is ultimately the fruit of idolatry, which means living in allegiance to other gods while also trying to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ. That cannot be consistent or successful. Having a Christian worldview "is not just about answering intellectual questions," says Pearcey. "It also means following biblical principles in the personal and practical spheres of life," for in all spheres we live in God's creation, dependent on the only one who is ultimately sovereign in human affairs.

"In the days of the early church," Pearcey writes, the thing that most impressed the neighbors of Christians "was the community of love [those neighbors] witnessed among believers. 'Behold how they love one another,' it was said. In every age, the most persuasive evidence for the gospel is not words or arguments but a living demonstration of God's character through Christians' love for one another, expressed in both their words and their actions." A Christian worldview arises from a Christian way of life lived in the love of God through Jesus Christ. This is the only strong basis on which to develop an open society with equal civil rights and citizenship for all under a limited government. For Christians know that they themselves live by the grace of God in a world where God's rain and sunshine fall on the just and unjust alike. They can leave the ultimate disposition of human beings in God's hands. They have not been called to try to impose ultimate truth and God's final order of life on fellow human beings through force.

Kuyperian pluralism in public life follows as a matter of principle from a Christian worldview. Pearcey's work is, as she acknowledges, a fruit of the labors of others, including the evangelist and apologist Francis Schaeffer, who influenced so many young people, including Pearcey, through his L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland from the late 1960s through the 1980s. Important among Schaeffer's works are *Escape from Reason* (1977) and *The God Who is There* (1998, 1968), both published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. Another important book that influenced Pearcey and many others in the development of a Christian worldview is Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, now available from Paternoster Press in Carlisle, U.K., 1996). And for an understanding the important influence that Abraham Kuyper had on all of these authors and many more throughout the world, see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Eerdmans, 1998). Kuyper's "Lectures" are the Stone Lectures that he delivered at Princeton University in 1898, still available through Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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Now, if one wants to dig really deeply into the idea of worldview, and particularly if one wants to understand why that idea has been developed so thoroughly in Christian circles, one must turn to another recent book. That book is *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Eerdmans, 2002), by David K. Naugle. Naugle, a professor at Dallas Baptist University in Texas, begins his book with an exploration of the tradition that so influences Nancy Pearcey and others, namely, the Protestant Evangelicalism of Abraham Kuyper, Carl F. H. Henry, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Francis A. Schaeffer. He then moves to the development of worldview thinking in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

And that is just the beginning. For he then goes back to the first use of the word *Weltanschauung* (world and life view) by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and its subsequent development by nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers and scientists, including Hegel, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Marx, Engels, Freud, Karl Mannheim, Donald Davidson, Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Peter Berger, Michael Kearney, and Robert Redfield. All of this is a massive and illuminating undertaking, covering 250 pages.

Naugle then concludes his book with three chapters of theological and philosophical reflection on the meaning and use of worldview. One point he makes insistently is that the word "worldview" must not be thought of by Christians as a purely subjective term, implying "a mere religious possibility or philosophical option." Instead, central to the Christian worldview is "the God who is there," the creator of all things. "Consequently," Naugle writes, "a biblically based worldview distinguished by a theological, moral, and creational objectivity has significant implications for a Christian portrayal of *Weltanschauung*. The trinitarian God exists, there is a theistically based moral order to the universe, and all created reality reflects the divine workmanship. Thus, within the framework of the Bible, 'worldview' must shed its relativist and subjectivist clothing and assume new objectivist attire."

The way people hold to and express their views of life and the world, according to Naugle, is through signs and symbols, which are typically discussed philosophically and linguistically under the category of “semiotics.” Both individuals and cultures interpret themselves and their world through words and other signs, including “narratives that provide the individual’s ‘bottom line’ as well as the primary cultural ‘given.’ These stories, consciously or unconsciously, form ‘the well-worn grooves of thought’ carved deeply into the human heart. Consequently, they have about them ‘a breathless air of unquestionable truth.’” This is the context for understanding how a worldview functions. A worldview, says Naugle, “is a semiotic system of narrative signs that creates the definitive symbolic universe which is responsible in the main for the shape of a variety of life-determining, human practices. It creates the channels in which the waters of reason flow. It establishes the horizons of an interpreter’s point of view by which texts of all types are understood. It is that mental medium by which the world is known.”

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Neither Naugle nor Pearcey concentrates on political life and thought. But in the light of Ian Buruma’s reflection on the incompatibility of Islam and secularism, as well as the incompatibility of Christianity and secularism, one can see why the idea of worldview is so important for politics and political community. One can hardly expect that people whose entire lives are called into the service of God can live comfortably within a political system that insists that they give up their religion or at least confine it to a private sphere. At the same time, if the religions by which people live, including the pseudo-religion of secularism, cannot make equal room in the public square for those who live by other faiths, then political life will never be free of serious conflict. If it is true that Christianity requires and can sustain an open, democratic, pluralistic political community (as I argue in my book, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations*), then that kind of politics must be demonstrated in practice by Christians committed to it from a Christian worldview. The question in the case of Islam is whether a Muslim worldview can open a similar approach to political life, as some current political leaders such as Turkey’s prime minister Tayyip Erdogan believe, is possible. And is it possible for secularists to come to accept a genuinely open public square that gives no privilege to secularism as an ideology. These are among the most important political questions in the world today—in America as well as Iraq, in China as well as Turkey, in France as well as India. The books by Pearcey and Naugle can help Christians develop a more consistent orientation to all of life in this world with the help of a Christian worldview