How One's World View Shapes a Ministry Style

Dr. Dennis L. Sansom
Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy
Samford University
Birmingham, Alabama

My thesis is this: the campus minister's world view (or anyone's) determines her ministry style and thereby shapes her unique influence upon students.

Some definitions are needed. First, what is a *world* ? It is an ambiguous term. On one hand, it suggests the totality of possible experiences. However, this definition is problematic in that it is difficult to know a totality of which one is a part, and, also, our experiences of the world are so varied and unpredictable that it is impossible to give a complete, *total* definition. Therefore, on the other hand, it is better to define *world* as the assumed structure within our experience of life. Even though it cannot be precisely and completely known, we treat the *world* as an objective structure and presume that it is there in our experience. In a sense, it is the unity within our manifold experiences.

Second, what is a *world view* ? Simply, it is a way of looking at the world, but this says too little. More is involved. There are two necessary elements--a world and a self, both inseparable yet not identical to each other. To be a person requires being in a world, and there is no world without a self to define it. The value of one conditions the value of the other, and if this is

right, then it is correct to say that the better the self-world relationship, the better the person and the world. This leads to my definition: a *world view* is one's effort to integrate life's experiences into a meaningful concept about the world. It is a correlative notion, trying to harmonize the necessary subjective (i.e., self) and objective (i.e., world) elements of human experience.

One more question. Why do we need a world view? In a sense we all have one in that we wake up and go about our business, thinking that it all makes sense. But none of us have clear ones. If my world view is a limited and incoherent one, then much of my experience will remain indeterminate and not understandable. And even worse, if I do not have one, then the world appears as an inscrutable buzzing maze of sensory stimuli and my life in it as lost in space. The more our world view can integrate our experiences into a whole, then the better able we can find our way through life. Thus, to make our life experiences as meaningful as possible, we need a deliberate and internally consistent world view.

There are many classifications for world views-- e.g., *scientific, romantic, primitive*, etc. They are usually metaphors, acting as models in the effort to integrate experience. A particular world view succeeds over another in that it gives focus to life.   It helps us *see* a correlation to experience. Since there is obviously an unpredictable and inscrutable dimension to life, a world view will not give a perfect 20/20 vision. Because no single world view is ever absolutely and finally verified to be the picture of reality's essence, our metaphor-models need constant correction. They are honed in life's experiences and, thus, need to be pliable enough to change to accommodate experience. Yet we do settle on a world view because we think it works;

and it works because with it we are able to form ethical values, make scientific interpretations, and intentionally express ourselves about the world.

I want to propose three metaphors -- models which I think pertain to our present concern -- first, the world as a *machine* and my world view as a *machine manual*; second, the world as a *kaleidoscope* and my world view as a *visionary*; and third, the world as "home" and my world view as a *homemaker*. We will see that the first two have weaknesses and that the third is the best option.

A. The World as a Machine and My World View as a Machine Manual

For this approach the world has an immutable structure and a conceivable plan, working according to predictable laws. Isaac Newton (1642-1727) thought this way. The world is a machine. He concluded that since the laws of nature are unchanging and matter is limited, if we knew all the appropriate laws, we could predict how the world *turns*. Nature operates according to established and unalterable laws, and the scientist can accurately foretell what nature will do because his scientific theory is the manual which reveals the world's essential structure.

Many approach theology the same way. Newton himself did. For instance:

"We know (GOD) only by his most wise and excellent contrivances of things, and final causes; we admire him for his perfections; but we reverence and adore him on account of his dominion; for we adore him as his servants; and a god without dominion, providence, and final causes is nothing else but Fate and Nature....(F)or all our notions of God are taken from the

ways of mankind by a certain similitude which, though not perfect, has some likeness, however."[1]

And that similitude is the machine, because in Newton's view God is seen like an absolute mechanism, an immutable reality, operating according to a fixed plan. The minister is to ascertain the plan, the objective structure of God's will. This is done through a manual. One one level, the Bible serves this role, but more specifically it is a discipleship program which is the *machine manual* for God's preordained will. This manual is made up of selected Bible verses, arranged according to a theological motif. It becomes the key to unlock God's will for the student. The minister thus programs the student into the objective structure of God's will.

There is a degree of truth to this view. In that a world view is to integrate our experience into a meaningful whole, it must have some objective reference. It must refer to something, even if what it refers to is in itself inscrutable. The *machine manual* world view does take into account this necessary aspect. Theologically, it does have something to say about God.

But it says too much. It fails to take into account that the person who devises the *machine manual* is as much part of the outcome of the intellectual effort to forming a world view as is the nature of the machine. For example, the Heisenberg *uncertainty principle* has revolutionized the way we approach the knowledge of the basic building blocks of reality--i.e., subatomic particles. The principle, confirmed by experimentation, says that we cannot predict simultaneously both the position and momentum of subatomic particles. We can do one or the other but not both, and the reason for this uncertainty is the principle's most revolutionary aspect. .The experimenter conditions, not creates, the

particle's reality. The upshot is that interpretation is as much part of the outcome of the experiment as is the objective reality of the particle.

If Heisenberg is right, then we should not think our world views are exact replicas of the world's nature. They are interpretations of the world which condition the world we know. They are uncertain to the degree that they are not and cannot be immutable and identical with the world.

The same goes for ministry. We arrogate too much objectivity to our discipleship programs when we think that they are the keys to unlock the timeless and immutable will of God. Such a notion is naive in that it fails to see that the manual conditions what we know about the machine and that there is more to the reality of God than what the discipleship program claims. We need to teach the student about God, but it needs to be guided by a different world view, one different from the notion that there is an exact correspondence between God's will and the discipleship program, between the machine and the *machine manual.*

B. The World as Kaleidoscope and My World View as Visionary

This is opposite to the above approach. Whereas the *machine manual* view is too objectivistic in that it assumes that its manual replicates precisely the machine, this one is too subjectivistic in that its emphasis rests almost entirely on the person's particular perspective or vision.

The difficulties in knowing the world in the above naive, objectivistic sense have led many to approach it differently. Instead of a structure of laws and eternal meanings, it sees a multifaceted and sensational kaleidoscope. The world is to be experienced, not

delineated and understood, because it is basically unknowable and our experience of it incoherent.

In a general sense this was Friedich Nietzche's (1844-1900) view. The world is senseless, filled with recurring absurdities and pains, and all that is left is the thrust of one's own perspective on which one builds life.

Nietzsche was a trained philogoist, a student of ancient languages, and he realized we do not have the original documents of the great Greek plays and philosophers. We have copies of copies which impose their own interpretations on the original. This led him to think that we do not know reality per se either, only our interpretation of it, and the significant interpretation is one that forces its way into consciousness and promotes the struggle of the self against the world. Everything is perspective.

"Disinterested contemplation . . . is a rank absurdity . . . . Let us, from now on, be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers' myth of a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knower'; let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory notions as 'pure reason,' 'absolute knowledge,' 'absolute intelligence.' . . . All seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing."[2]

We need to make our way into the world not by reason but by the might of our perspective, our vision, because this is the most we can do. Thus the value of one's personality rests upon the strength of the vision, of the will to force oneself into the world, because, for Nietzsche, the bases of any realistic world view is the "will to power--we should be justified in defining all effective energy unequivocally as will to power."[3]

This approach has spilled over into theology. Some would agree with Nietzsche's pessimism about knowing anything objectively. Others would agree that

the emphasis needs to be on our perspective, our vision of God, rather than on dogma and doctrine. Thus theological truth is not found in God but in the intensity and certainty of one's subjective mood about God.

There is a ministry style which parallels this approach. The student minister sees herself as a guide into deeper experiences with God. She leads the student to feel more of God and to develop his own personal experiences and *visions* with the Lord. She may even present her own vision as a model to follow, inculcating a spiritual style that *really* works because it is deeply personal and essentially ineffable. Instead of objective discipleship program studies, retreats from the *real* world become the haven in which one finds God because in these the student can forget about the mundane and concentrate on the spiritual and personal.

An element of truth exists here. Since a viable world view must integrate the subjective elements into a correlative concept, and feelings and intensely personal visions are parts of this subjective element, this *visionary* approach does recognize the necessary role of one's personal touch in making a world view.

But it says too little about God and too much about immediate feelings. It fails to realize that our emotions are conditioned by our upbringing, health, socio-political context, and psychic history; hence it is a mistake to assume that whatever we feel deeply and interpret as spiritual is of God. It too quickly equates intense, extraordinary emotions with God, thereby limiting God to only individualistic visions.

C. The World as Home and My World View as Homemaker

Whereas the first world view fails because it is too objectivistic and the second because it is too

subjectivistic, this approach tries to balance the necessary aspects of a world view--self and world. It maintains that the world is real and potentially orderly and that we are a vital part of the ongoing making of the world. The world is home in which humanity develops its own identity.

Perhaps the best representative of this viewpoint is Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831). For Hegel, the best way to know the world is to study the way people throughout history have thought about it through their natural sciences, social ways and morality, aesthetics, religions, and philosophies. We cannot get behind these to a neutral viewpoint and say "There is the world." We are conditioned by our place within the ongoing development of human culture. Thus to define the world, we must see it as the culture which persons make in their effort to reach self-consciousness. Hegel wrote a book called Phenomenology of Spirit in which he formulated a world view through tracing the historical progress of human culture. For Hegel, this tracing does not come *from above* human experience but *from within* it. One of Hegel's famous metaphors that describes this *from within* approach to formulating a world view is seen in the following sentence--"The True (i.e., world view) is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk."[4] The reference is to the Bacchus cult in which the faithful experience the gods in the ecstasy of drunkenness. There is no sober way to do it. There is no neutral, totally objectivistic way to say what is the world. The world is not just out there, it is what we make it to be through our mores, politics, art, religion, and philosophy, in other words through our culture. We form a viable world view only from within the revel of our culture.

This view has implications for theology. God did not stop creating and retreat from the world, but is furthering God's purposes through the development of the image of God in people. Not just any human contribution is God's purpose though, but only that which contributes to the original purposes of creation and which reflects the definitive revelation of God in Christ.

For example, in Genesis 2. 18 and 20 the same word is used to describe the purpose of the animal world and Eve's creation--they are a *partner* or *helpmeet*, or *the one I find myself in*. The idea is that Adam (i.e., humanity) is not fulfilled as the image of God in isolation and exploitation of nature or others but only in partnership with them. We are created to live in community, not strife and competition, with nature and others. The better those relations, then the better our own selfhood. Therefore, the more we treat the world and other persons as the objective realities in which we find ourselves, the more fulfilled we become as persons.

I find the words *home* and *homemaker* most suitable to express this point. A home is an objective reality, but it is made, not discovered. The more of my personal care, concern, and values I put in my home, the more livable it is for me. The quality of my home is proportional to my homemaking abilities. The world is our home in which God places us to make it more after God's own image; that is, more humane.

This approach has a ministry style. The student minister helps the student form and implement the values which make their lives, friendships, professional goals, social responsibilities, ecclesiastical commitments into a better world. She definitely has to use the Bible because it is the written norm for the Church's interpretation of God and the world, and she definitely has to use her own experiences as examples

of homemaking, but her goal is not to program students or induce them with intense feelings, but to make a better world.

In conclusion, I think the last model can work best. If we think that God has created us to be partners with each other and nature in furthering God's creative purposes, then we are good homemakers when we do and lead our students to do the following: 1) promote the values and causes that eliminate divisions among people (e.g., racism and sexism), 2) reject provincial hostilities (e.g., regionalism and war), 3) defeat the threats to social and personal health (e.g., crime, drugs, and pollution), 4) expose the misuses of others and power (e.g., pornography and self-serving public leaders), and 5) proclaim that God is reconciling the world through Christ (not through *blood* revenge and retaliation).   A good minister uses the Bible and personal experiences toward these ends, ends that help define us as persons made in God's image, as persons given the responsibility to be good homemakers of God's world.

Notes

1 Isaac Newton, <u>Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica</u>, translated by Andrew Motte, in 18th Century Philosophy, edited by Lewis White Beck (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 19-20.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, <u>The Geneology of Morals</u>, translated by F. Golffing(New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 255.

3 Nietzsche, <u>Beyond Good and Evil</u>, translated by M. Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955), p. 43.

4 Georg F. Hegel, <u>Phenomenology of the Spirit</u>, translated by A.V. Miller(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), paragraph 47; italics mine.