

Worldviews and their impact

Van der Walt, B.J. 2008. *The eye is the lamp of the body: worldviews and their impact*. Potchefstroom: Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa. 304 p. Price: R120,00. ISBN: 978-1-86822-555-2.

Reviewer: R. Coletto

School of Philosophy, Potchefstroom Campus,
North-West University

During his long career Prof. Bennie van der Walt has written extensively on worldviews and belongs to a circle of philosophers sometimes labelled as the “worldview movement” within reformational philosophy. His point of view is therefore a Christian and a reformational one, connected in particular to the tradition of D.H. Th. Vollenhoven. Given this premise, one might expect to find in this book the sort of abstruse and highly technical speculations that are sometimes delivered by philosophers. On the contrary, the author has once again managed to simplify and make accessible to the reader without solid philosophical education nine essays constituting relevant reflections on equally relevant themes. Students in various fields and amateurs of philosophical literature are thus the readers to whom the book may be especially recommended.

Of course this strategy (i.e. writing in an accessible style) may invite the criticism of those who look down at “popular” literature. My conviction is that it is easier to obscure and complicate a topic than to “open it up” for the average reader, make it interesting and instil love for a specific discussion. The simple truth is that the author has attracted to reformational thinking a crowd of students from all over the world, thus performing a task that would never have been accomplished through “heavy-weight” literature.

That the opinions of the author are well-informed can be easily derived even from a quick look at the bibliographies. The author interacts with a large variety of the best Christian contributions on the topics he discusses, including the most recent ones but stretching back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The third chapter of the book has, for example, a bibliography of 94 titles, starting from a source (J. Bavinck) dating back to 1913. The constant aim and attitude of the author is to accompany his readers to a discovery of the treasures of the reformational tradition.

The book is divided in two sections: the first one explains what worldviews are and how they function, the second one “applies” this worldview-theory to a few specific case studies. It is the second section, in my opinion, which is the most interesting and new. Of course the first section is a necessary introduction to the nature and role of worldviews, but I find particularly interesting the chapters about Desmond Tutu’s views, about the Institute for Reformational Studies, and about a “forgotten father” of reformational thinking in the Netherlands: Antheunis Janse van Biggekerke (1890-1960). These chapters are in the second section of the book.

The second section also contains a chapter asking the question whether the traditional African worldview may be counted as one of the reasons for the economic poverty of the continent. This chapter, together with the two ones on Archbishop Tutu, make the book especially relevant to the (South) African reader, but also to European or American readers who wish to get more acquainted with African Christianity. The chapters on the Institute for Reformational Studies (active from 1962 to 1999 at the Potchefstroom University for CHE), and on A. Janse van Biggekerke are recommended especially to whoever would like to learn more about the reformational tradition and its history, both in South Africa and overseas.

Even when the author is busy with such “archaeological” diggings, the main focus of the book remains, however, the present and the future. The “discovery” of Janse van Biggekerke, for example, interrogates the present of the reformational family. Why a “forgotten” pioneer? Why was his contribution not valued as it deserved? By examining the history of the IRS, the author asks questions about the spiritual and worldviewish climate of present-day Christianity in South Africa. Why was the IRS closed after more than 35 years of successful service? Are we facing a “privatisation” of our faith, leading to public irrelevance? What can be learnt from this experience? What are the possible strategies for the future organisation of Christian institutions? From what dangers should committed Christians guard themselves in the present?

During the twentieth century several philosophers of science have argued that we are the captives of our presuppositional frameworks. Not only Feyerabend but even Kuhn and Polanyi in certain occasions argued that different worldviews, paradigms or “frameworks” cannot be compared or even discussed. In fact, we can only argue “from within” a certain framework. This book is a discussion of and about worldviews, their nature, their roles, their consequences for

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practical life. In this sense, this book is also a challenge to post-modern relativism, also within Christian circles.