

New Age Thinking and Worldview Attribution

by Theodore Plantinga

From time to time someone asks me for the lowdown on "new age" thinking. Since I teach a course in Asian philosophy, it is assumed that I should know all about it. After all, doesn't new age thinking have something to do with Hinduism? I'm afraid I often prove a disappointment to people who address such requests to me. But I hope to do better in the future.

A while back, when I heard that Redeemer College was hosting a colloquium on new age thinking and neo-paganism, I resolved to attend, in hopes of enhancing my own ability to field questions in this area. The colloquium was presented by a pair of researchers, who drew not just on philosophy and theology but also on anthropology and sociology. The colloquium included various references for further study, including good books *about* new age thinking. During the discussion I asked whether there were not also some books *by* the new-agers to be recommended. Not much was forthcoming, although it was mentioned that one could read Shirley MacLaine. This I had already done. I have read *Dancing in the Light* (1985) and *Don't Fall off the Mountain* (1970) and *It's All in the Playing* (1987) and *Out on a Limb* (1983) and *You Can get There from Here* (1975). I found these books interesting, and I make the occasional reference to them in my classes. Yet they do not count as a statement of the philosophical and theological position of the new age movement. MacLaine's talents lie more in acting and entertainment than in philosophy.

Throughout the presentation I kept expecting to hear talk about the "worldview" of the new age movement or of neo-paganism. I listened carefully, and I believe I can assert that the term never passed the lips of the two presenters. The reason I expected to hear it is that we were at Redeemer College, where it is customary to sprinkle this term into one's academic discourse. But our presenters were visitors. Perhaps they did not realize what many members of their audience would expect of them.

As I reflected on the absence of the term "worldview" from the colloquium, I was reminded of some of the reasons why I also avoid the term in presenting ideas of my own. My avoidance has grown more principled over the years, for at Redeemer we have had discussions from time to time in which pressure is exerted to bring worldview into philosophy, or perhaps even to merge the two concepts. I have resisted the pressure. The colloquium helped me to see why such pressure should continue to be resisted.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that the term "worldview" is never mentioned in my Introduction to Philosophy class. I do take it up in one of the topics. I explain why I believe it is not a suitable term for the presentation of Christian thinking or doctrine. I also indicate how the term is used nowadays in the world of secular scholarship, namely, as a concept in anthropology. One *attributes* a worldview, a set of assumptions about ontological and cosmological issues, to groups or communities one studies. To engage in such attribution is not to assert that the people in question either say or consciously think the thoughts that are articulated by the anthropological observer as constituting the worldview. The idea, rather, is that the worldview is somehow embraced unconsciously. The holders of the worldview presuppose and manifest it in their action, but they do not generally articulate it. It has to be uncovered via a process of theoretical analysis.

In the course of explaining these matters, I quote the definition of the term "worldview" that appears in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: "World view is one of a number of concepts in cultural anthropology used in the holistic characterization and comparison of cultures. It deals with the sum of ideas which an individual within a group and/or that group have of the universe in and around them. It attempts to define those ideas from the point of view of the individuals holding them, from inside the culture rather than outside." [NOTE 1]

I also appeal to the work of the anthropologist Michael Kearney. In his book dealing with the concept of worldview [NOTE 2], he tells us that a worldview "... consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world." [p. 41] If a worldview is "not necessarily accurate," it is probably not the product of a great mind. Kearney goes further: "... it is unlikely that any world view has ever been entirely consistent." [p. 53]

By way of example, Kearney presents the worldview of what he calls "California Indians" before they came into contact with Europeans (see Chapter 6). He also devotes a chapter to the worldview of the Mexican peasants (see

Chapter 7). He notes: "As in the case of the California Indians discussed in the previous chapter, there is considerable variation among Mexican peasant communities and among individuals in these communities." [p. 171] But consistency or logical coherence is not a requirement for a way of thinking to gain recognition as a worldview. Notes Kearney: "Any world view is at best a partial and necessarily inaccurate image of reality. Especially in technologically simple societies, accurate understanding of nature and humanity is lacking." [p. 117]

Thus worldviews, for Kearney, are not accurate or consistent. If he is right, have we stumbled upon a reason for barring the term from our scholarly vocabulary? I don't believe so: within the corporate framework of the anthropological analysis of societies and communities, there is room for some fuzzy edges in the way people think. I believe there is also some room for worldview attribution.

One of the reasons why such attribution is sometimes in order could easily be overlooked. When an anthropologist studies a faraway community or tribe, the primary tongue in local use is usually some language outside the group of languages (mainly European) in which science as properly understood can be written or discussed. Hence when the anthropologist reflects on the implicit ontology of such a community and then sums up the thinking of the locals and labels it "worldview," he is already some distance removed from the words used by his native informants. There is typically not much of a match or one-to-one correspondence between the vocabulary we use in English and the vocabulary used by his informants. By summing up their thinking in English, he is putting words in their mouth, so to speak, which is in turn a form of attribution. And it is hard to see what else he could do if he is intent on passing on to the folks back home (who read and speak English) what he has learned about the tribe he has been studying.

When I was receiving my undergraduate training, however, putting words in someone's mouth was very much discouraged. Now, I should hasten to add that my training was in philosophy -- not anthropology. If we wrote a paper in which we criticized a thinker like Plato or Descartes, we had to make sure they actually held the views we were ascribing to them. It did not suffice to sum up their thinking in words of our own choosing: we had to find the view we wished to criticize in the text itself. Our professors did not want us setting up straw men, as they liked to say, and then knocking them down. To do so was to be guilty of third-rate scholarship.

Today I am still committed to what my undergraduate professors stressed to me and my classmates. My students may sometimes suppose that it would be quicker and easier to read a book about Plato than to wade through Plato's own writings. Thus some would like to base their papers on secondary sources. On the basis of someone else's attribution, they could then proceed to attribute views to Plato. It is my task to discourage them in this regard, and I make my displeasure felt in the mark I give them if they persist in neglecting primary sources.

The new age example can help us understand the point I am trying to make here. If a student wishes to write a paper on new age thinking, I ask for sources. What typically comes forth is what we would call secondary sources -- critical books in which it is explained that adherents of new age thinking seem to believe this, that and the other thing. Such a collection of critical secondary sources does not count -- in one of my classes -- as a good basis for a paper. It might pass muster in some other discipline, but it is not the sort of thing we like to see in philosophy.

The attitude we ought to take toward attribution can shed some light on why worldview and philosophy need to remain separate subjects -- or even separate departments -- in Christian colleges. Philosophy has a good deal in common with literature in that it has a deep appreciation for classic texts. The writings of thinkers who lived centuries ago are still found relevant and are still studied by undergraduate students. Worldview analysis, however, takes the materials it studies as clues to the presence of certain ideas. Thus in a high school setting, advertising materials may be scrutinized in an effort to discern what is called an underlying worldview. An ad in a magazine is not itself a statement of such a worldview -- only an indication that a worldview is lurking in the vicinity. That worldview must then be constructed and attributed, in order that it may subsequently be criticized and rejected.

The issue I am raising here has more to do with attribution as such than with the term "worldview." Consider, for a moment, the term "Humanism." (I usually use a capital H; some others do not.) When I bring up this term in my Introduction to Philosophy class, I point out that it is not well defined and that different and conflicting ways of thinking get grouped together under this heading. For the most part, "Humanist" is what one calls a thinker in the course of discrediting his position and rejecting it. Generally speaking, thinkers do not call themselves Humanists, or make the term "Humanism" the central element in defining or characterizing their own thought. That's why some Christian scholars like to make so much of a so-called "Humanist Manifesto" which was produced by thinkers who normally would not draw the attention of

philosophers. To quite some extent, then, talk about Humanism is an example of what I have been calling attribution: certain views are said to amount to Humanism, or perhaps to secular Humanism. Sometimes such Humanism is even dubbed a religion, and it is then argued that this religion is being taught in public schools, which are supposed to be religion-free zones.

Now, since I have already admitted that I use the term Humanism in my own lectures, I presumably do not find it wrong as such. My point is rather that what I call attribution should be kept to a minimum in philosophy courses, lest non-Christian academic folk get the impression that philosophy and ideology are pretty much the same thing in Christian institutions. We wouldn't want them to suppose that we discuss non-Christian thinkers *only* so that we can take issue with them and reject them. We should be open to learning something from them.

The upshot of this discussion is that philosophy and worldview need to be kept separate in the curriculum of a Christian college. Nothing less than the integrity of philosophy as a discipline is at stake. What tends to happen when we blend or mix the two, or when we ask philosophy professors to double as worldview professors, is that we create the impression of doing a bad job of giving instruction in philosophy. We then appear so eager to reject the views of the great thinkers that we don't even take time to read them. We attribute certain views to them, label those views their "worldview," and then reject them as obviously mistaken or in conflict with what some call the Christian or Biblical worldview. This is the way Philosophy of Religion is sometimes taught in Bible colleges and seminaries.

Non-Christian philosophers whom we still study today are -- almost without exception -- quite original in their ideas. They usually are *not* a mere reflection of what people of their time were thinking. Sometimes the great thinkers were ahead of their time, and the people (or some of them, at least) trailed along behind. Even David Hume withheld some of his more controversial work from publication during his lifetime. Sometimes they were great battlers against their age (think of Kierkegaard). Sometimes the people paid no attention at all, but later thinkers and scholars did so. Spinoza comes to mind as an example.

We need to study the great thinkers -- but not within a social-scientific or anthropological framework. There may well be place for attribution of views within the academy, but if philosophy is to remain healthy, it should continue to avoid this practice.

NOTES

[NOTE 1] *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), Vol. 16, p. 576. The definition is attributed to E.M. Mendelson.

[NOTE 2] *World View* (Novato, California: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, 1984).