

Transforming Worldview(s) Conference

"Biblical Faithfulness in a Pluralistic Age"

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Kevin J. Vanhoozer, research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, was the symposium's keynote speaker. (Photo by Shiekainah Decano, University Communication student photographer)

By: Esther Green, Seminary student writer

You know your symposium is a grand success when people are still discussing its subject long after the event has ended. From October 18–20, 2018, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary (under the leadership of Ante Jeroncic and Jiří Moskala) held a worldview symposium that stimulated much enriching discussion. This important event was sponsored by the Adventist Theological Society and Biblical Research Institute—the theme being “Transforming Worldview(s): Biblical Faithfulness in a Pluralistic Age.” In addition to the promised academic exploration of the “significance of worldview formation for Adventist identity, theology and mission,” attendees were led to examine their own worldview and its impact on their spirituality and ministry.

The symposium’s keynote speaker, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, presented a topic titled “Being Biblical in a Pluralistic Academy.” He used this presentation to establish the primacy of the Scriptures over every other resource, be it academic or otherwise. He punctuated his assertion by reminding his hearers of what was to be Israel’s God-given response to pluralism. Moses’ counsel in Deuteronomy 4:5–6 reveals not just the primacy but the singular nature of the lens with which God provided His people: “See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show

your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (NIV).

Vanhoozer further declared that, "If faith's influence is failing today, it may be because we (as Christians) have failed at connecting the Bible to this age. Living biblically is not just following principles but living what God the Father is doing through the Son and Spirit to redeem creation." This thought-provoking statement led a number of seminarians to a self-examination of their witnessing influence toward others.

The critical question for the weekend lay in determining the length and breadth of biblical thinking and living. Is the biblical worldview to be the sole, primary one or a secondary contributing factor that guides our perspectives, practices, ministries, policies and rules of life?

One of the most impacting and often repeated statements came from Kwabena Donkor's Sabbath sermon, "Worldview, Deception and Christ." In sharing the Colossian church's struggle with divergent worldviews, Donkor, associate director, Biblical Research Institute, stressed the fact that such struggles remain in Christ's church today. As an example, he noted that in his country, Ghana, "we struggle with a certain ontology that embodies a hierarchy of beings in a certain order: God, angels, spirits, ancestors, male, female. This is the African ontology. And this has significant implications for how we live our lives...and impacts us spiritually." The collective verbal responses emitting from the congregation indicated that he made a very critical point, and it was received. His revelation brilliantly highlighted the issue of dual allegiances and the relevance of this issue to those who are in the business of soul winning.

WORLDVIEW: THE CONCEPT

Essential to the symposium was the revelation of the dynamic nature of the term "worldview." Each presenter highlighted a specific nuance of the concept, and some redefined it altogether.

Bruce Bauer, director of the Doctor of Missiology program at Andrews University, began with a more traditional view of the concept, establishing that "worldview is the totality of the culturally structured images and assumptions (including value and commitment or allegiance assumptions) by which a people both perceive and respond to reality."

For Larry Lichtenwalter, president, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, and director, Adventist Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies at Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon, "The essence of a worldview lies deep in the inner recesses of the human self. It is situated within one's self. It involves the mind but is more a matter of the heart than of the mind. It touches the soul. It is an ethical and spiritual orientation."

Encouraging attendees to see two aspects of the concept, John C. Peckham, professor of theology and Christian philosophy at Andrews University, noted, "Worldview in the minimal sense might refer to some core beliefs that shape one's perspective of reality, and worldview in the maximal sense may refer to the totality of one's experiences that shape one's overall perspective of reality."

Martin Hanna, associate professor of systematic theology at Andrews University, took hold of a surgeon's knife and dissected the term for his hearers explaining that "a worldview

facilitates science-theology dialogue by the way it answers questions of epistemology (how do we know?), ontology (what do we know?) and axiology (how should we respond to our knowledge?).”

WORLDVIEW: THE IMPLICATIONS

With the necessary definitions in place, attendees were taken on thought-provoking journeys that revealed profound implications.

Speaking in relation to the Christian university, Vanhoozer, in his keynote address, asserted that “the biblical story of the triune God’s self-communication to creation ought to be the ground and grammar of the social imaginary that serves as the unifying framework of the Christian university.” Elaborating further, he put forth the idea that “every Christian scholar ought to follow Plantinga’s advice to Christian philosophers to let faith rather than secular concerns set your discipline’s agenda or dictate its methods.”

When it comes to Bible study, exegesis and theology formation, Ed Zinke, retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, made it clear that “we cannot come to Scripture through any other philosophical system than Scripture itself if we are to understand the biblical worldview. Neither is it appropriate to synthesize Scripture with other worldviews, if we are truly to come to a biblical understanding of our world. Our concept of God, Scripture, faith, epistemology, etc., must all come from Scripture. We must accept the power of Scripture, God’s Word, above that of all other human philosophies or disciplines.”

Lichtenwaller and Boubakar Sanou, assistant professor of world mission at Andrews University, offered perspectives relating to mission. Lichtenwaller’s work with Muslims has led to the understanding that “in order to effectively engage Muslims on the level of either their internal narrative or their exterior practice, Adventists must first grasp the implications of their own distinctive biblically informed worldview and faith in relation to that of Islam. Only then can they more fully understand the implications of Islamic worldview and the nature of Islam within their Great Controversy metanarrative. Only then can they better intuit the existential impact which Islamic worldview has on the heart, soul and everyday life of a Muslim.”

Using the Bible as his primary source, Sanou reminded attendees that “Scripture narrates the various missionary endeavors undertaken by God to redeem humanity. Because humans are all influenced and limited by the assumptions of their worldview, God takes into consideration various aspects of their less-than-perfect contextual frame of reference in the process of revealing his Word so that they can understand His revelations and meaningfully relate to Him. With this precedent, biblical scholars who care about the spiritual transformation and growth of their audiences must be acquainted not only with the principles and methods for interpreting Scripture, but also with the principles and methods for interpreting the context of their audiences.”

In the final presentation of the symposium, Bauer presented the topic “The Importance of Worldview Change in the Conversion Process.” His paper revealed sobering realities regarding our conversion numbers. He pointed out that “too often Adventists only stress the importance of converting a person’s belief system and changing their behavior to reflect Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle and behavior in the conversion process and neglect dealing with the deep cultural values and assumptions. This lack often contributes to syncretism and dual allegiance.” His presentation shed light on the danger of “neglecting worldview

change in the conversion process and offer[ed] several missiological suggestions for remedying this situation.”

With such eye-opening realities, an obvious question begged to be asked—and Moskala asked it when he moderated the panel discussion: “How do you transform a person’s worldview?” In answer to that very necessary question, Sanou offered the following wisdom: “We know God is out there where we have not yet been. Since He is there...we should pray and ask God to reveal to us where He is already at work in other people’s lives. And then it is our job to only join God, on God’s terms.” This sentiment was shared by the panelists who, in their own way, surmised that worldview transformation is, ultimately, God’s very necessary work.

To find out more about the symposium and its presenters, contact Ante Jeroncic, associate professor of ethics and theology, Andrews University, at jeroncic@andrews.edu.