Multicultural Education, Christian Worldview, and Teaching Literature

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Abstract

Indonesia cannot deny the fact that it is composed of various systems of belief, and, thus, living. Ignoring this fact can lead us to destruction as a nation, and probably will reveal utter discrepancies in the way we live. Facing this reality, Christianity, as one of many systems of belief, or worldviews, offers a comprehensive way of seeing and dealing with fundamental issues of life. Particularly through its general theme: creation, fall or sin, and restoration, Christian worldview can still retain its exclusive nature or identity and coexist with other systems of belief, hence contribute to the development of this nation along with its pluralistic nature. This paper, first, will cover the unavoidable fact of multiculturalism especially in this era of globalization in Indonesia. Secondly, it deals with how any worldview should be exclusive in its proclamation; then it will explain how, in Indonesia, Christianity can consistently live together with other contradictory belief and life systems, especially when it comes to education, where Christian schools or universities have to teach students coming from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Lastly, there will be an example of how this is implemented in teaching literature for non-literary students in Universitas Pelita Harapan, a Christian university located in Karawaci, Tangerang, Indonesia.

Keywords: multiculturalism, multicultural education, Christian worldview, grand narrative, teaching literature

Introduction

Literary texts are always fascinating to many because they are always inherently related to reality of human experience. In other words, when we are reading and trying to understand literary texts we essentially are reading experience (Lundin & Gallagher, 1989, chapter 1, Section 1, para. 8) (Gallagher, 1989). This assumption helps us to understand why definition of ‘what literature is’ is not that easy to settle. It is because experience of human being is so complex and varied to be contained in only one working definition of literature. The experience and, consequently, ways of reading and valuing it might be different from one place to another, from one moment of time to another. However, this does not mean value-judgment in literature only works based on private taste. It is, instead, rooted in “Deeper structures of belief which are as apparently unshakeable as the Empire State Building” (Eagleton, 2005. P. 14). It is changeable yet apparently unshakable.

An issue that I want to raise in this paper is how this reality of various experience and systems of valuing are related to my Christian faith? Can I claim the exclusivity of my faith when coming to discuss diverse experience and ways of living, particularly in current context, where multiculturalism and multicultural education are apparently inevitable? My contention is that a Christian can still claim the exclusivity of Christianity while at the same time go hand in hand with other people with different cultural and belief systems to find the truth for the betterment of this country in particular, and this world in general.

Multiculturalism & Multicultural Education

One experience that is becoming more apparent in Indonesia is the fact that people from different systems of living and believing do meet and interact to form certain community. The island of Java, for instance, is not only composed of Javanese people, but, is visited, lived and developed also by people from various regions and cultural backgrounds. In Yogyakarta, specifically, university students come from all over Indonesia. We can even find some campuses where number of students coming from eastern part of Indonesia is quite numerous if not dominating. Sanata Dharma University itself is a vivid example where cultures converge and create such a wonderful synergy.

This is the diversity that our founding fathers were aware of so that the idea of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in diversity) was promoted since the beginning of the existence of this country. This fact of diversity gave birth to the idea of multiculturalism which basically believes and value the existence of more than one (multi) cultures in one community or area. This concept looks valid, relevant and safe, but below I would like to discuss a possible consequence of this idea that makes situation more intricate that we think.

Philosopher Steven Yates claims that multiculturalism can be understood in two forms. The first is called weak multiculturalism which basically means “the understanding, appreciation, and recognition of those who have been ignored or oppressed” (Yates in Beckwith & Koukl, 1998. Chapter 9, Para.9). This definition promotes a study and understanding of “various cultures and subcultures of our country and the world” (Yates in Beckwith & Koukl, 1998. Chapter 9, Para.10). It accepts the fact that historically some groups in a community have been ignored because of various reasons, and thus it is the time now to take them into consideration when making decision in a community. Their voice will be heard and discussed, but not necessarily accepted and declared as true. It presupposes right and wrong exist when we discuss cultures, that there are cultures that promote false idea, concept or way of living.
Strong multiculturality, on the other hand, states that “no single culture, thinker, or group has discovered objective ‘truth’ about anything, because no universal truth exists” (Yates in Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, Chapter 9, Para.12). Such definition not only welcomes previously ignored systems of living to get recognized and learnt for the flourishing of this society, but insists that they have to unequivocally have equal position because they also are true. This is called a strong definition because it is strongly rejecting an idea that some cultures are wrong. The proponents of this multiculturalism are convinced that all cultures or systems of living are equally true, an idea not proposed by weak multiculturalism. Thus, in school, when we talk about multicultural education, each available culture needs to be represented in the curriculum. Whereas weak multiculturalism retains an idea that available and relevant cultures need to be heard and studied, but they can be declared wrong, strong multiculturalism demands that such cultures must be guaranteed the same position and portion in school, because they have their own truth which cannot be said wrong by anyone.

So, we can see that on one side, multiculturalism can be defined as embracing the diversity without sacrificing the possibility of attaining the ‘real’ and ‘objective’ truth, on the other side, some believe that the existence of diverse systems of living shows the impossibility to attain the real and objective truth; truth is culture-based, therefore, relative. Objective truth means truth that is not bound by someone’s feeling, personal preference, or knowledge. It is normally contrasted with subjective truth which would be absurd if we debate about it, since contradiction is welcome. We will see the problem with strong multiculturalism by, first, understanding the idea of ‘worldview’.

**Worldview**

Worldview as a term is actually a translation from the German Weltanschauung and was first used by the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, P. 11). It basically means “functioned as an idea of pure reason to bring the totality of human experience into the unity of the world-wide, or Weltganz” (Naugle in Underhill, 2009, P.54). Kant came up with a term that was widely discussed afterwards. Besides being picked in philosophical system of German philosophy, particularly nineteenth century idealism and romanticism (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, P. 12), in the course of history this notion once happened to be a slogan for Nazi Party member, as they also believed to have “their vision of the world, a radiant vision, shared by each and every party member” (Underhill, 2009. P.55).

What is currently relevant definition of worldview? James Sire (2015) offers what he calls a refined definition of worldview, after surveying several experts who have proposed their definition of the word throughout history. He states that:

> A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being (P. 141).

Above definition entails several things. First, the word ‘commitment’ indicates the totality of being or disposition, rather than simply a matter of mind or reason (Sire. 142). It is not only thought but also lived. Moreover, this definition opens to the possibility that no one is always conscious about their worldview. It is like some people who are wearing glasses and are sometimes not aware of glasses they are wearing. They are simply aware that they can see clearly, without always realizing what makes them able to do so. People are also not always consistent in applying their worldview. Next, according to Sire, worldview affects how we see this reality and it becomes the foundation for our total existence.

For further insight, we can borrow an idea from David K. Naugle when he explains that worldview or weltanschauung “establishes a powerful framework within which people think (reason), interpret (hermeneutics), and know (epistemology)” (Naugle. 2002. xix). This indicates that worldview is inescapably possessed by everyone because our thought, interpretation, and understanding, always occur from certain framework (worldview). This is consistent with what John Nash claims that we place or fit everything we believe, and interpret and judge reality based on certain worldview (Nash. 1992. P.17).

A complete worldview, moreover, commonly will include beliefs in at least the following five major areas: God, reality, knowledge, morality, and humankind (Nash, 1992. p.26). These areas are so essential that all worldviews will compete to provide the best explanation on them.

**Neutrality is a myth**

One certain consequence of the fact that everyone has a worldview is that no one can be neutral when it comes to judging reality. If neutrality means not taking position, then it is an impossibility. It is a classic example of a self-contradictory statement, because not taking position or not choosing any available options is already taking position of not-taking-position.

Let me illustrate by taking a case of abortion. The issue is whether abortion is morally acceptable or a grave evil. This is an example of telling what is right and wrong. Facing this issue, someone can have three possible positions, namely ‘yes, it is morally wrong’, ‘no it is not’, or ‘I do not know and I do not need and want to know’. These three responses emerge from three different ways of seeing this reality and existence. Even the third answer can be claimed to be taking a position of being agnostic, which in many cases is unlivable.
Law of Non-contradiction

Furthermore, the first two respond in above case cannot be declared to be both right. Abortion, in the same sense, situation, definition and context cannot be both morally true and wrong. It is ‘either or situation’, not ‘both and’ one. Such idea of ‘either or’ is the implementation of law of non-contradiction, which states that when making statement about reality of something (A), it cannot be both B and ~B at the same time in the same sense. It utterly does not make sense when someone says ‘abortion is morally right and wrong at the same time in the same sense’. It might be different, perhaps, if we use different senses of meaning of the word ‘abortion’. For instance, we use abortion because of unwanted pregnancy due to rape, and abortion needed for the life and death of the mother reason. If we have these two cases of abortion, then law of non-contradiction does not apply.

As a result, when it comes to understanding, interpreting and judging reality and our existence, some ideas from different worldviews are in direct conflict with other worldviews; therefore, they cannot be all correct. Heaven cannot ‘exist’ and ‘not exist’ at the same time. The same is true for the existence and nature of God. Statements ‘a personal God exists’ and ‘a personal God doesn’t exist’ cannot be both true at the same time in the same sense, and the idea of we are still not certain does not make both true.

The impossibility of neutrality and the existence of law of non-contradiction make strong multiculturalism is hard to embrace. As said before, strong multiculturalism insists that every culture is true, and no culture is better or superior than other cultures. This is in fact, not simply cultural pluralism, but cultural relativism. It presupposes an idea that truth is subjective and relative. Every system of belief and living can be true in its pronouncements about reality. However, if culture is understood as systems of belief and living, all cultures must assume certain worldview. If that is the case, it must be admitted that some worldviews are frequently in contradiction to other worldviews in interpreting and judging reality. This means conflicting worldviews cannot be all true, and consequently, conflicting cultures cannot be true as well. To declare all conflicting cultures are true is the same as denying reality.

Christian Worldview

Christianity is one available worldview among many worldviews that exist in this world. I am aware that the word ‘Christianity’ is problematic as people can ask “which Christianity are you talking about?”. Here I want to use what C. S Lewis say as “Mere Christianity” which refers to a wide range of Christ followers who hold the same view on the key areas of worldview, which comprise essential doctrines of Christianity (Lewis, 1952, p. x). With this, normally Protestantism and Catholicism would be together, while Jehovah Witness is not at the same boat. In short, Christian worldview sees God as triune, and he chose to create this reality. He is God who revealed himself throughout history, and wants human beings that are created in his image to follow his commands. Finally, that God is a just and good being from which morality is derived (Nash, 1992).

With such beliefs, Christian worldview always welcomes the presence of other cultures and beliefs. Diversity is seen as a part of God’s grandeur wisdom that might beautify this existence. Yet, Christianity also holds a belief that sin has caused human being diverted from truth, which means some people and cultures are wrong in their view of reality. Accordingly, an educational institution that is based on Christian worldview should always welcome and love to those who are in conflict with Christianity, without necessarily declaring them to be true. Furthermore, criticism and evaluation are always possible in order to bring people to the right track since the existence of sin may cause Christians to be away from truth, and God always wants his followers to struggle to follow him.

Moreover, when it comes to teaching, Christian worldview can offer a biblical narration as a framework for curriculum. This narration is composed of three words: creation, sin and restoration. Creation places the importance of God as the creator who is sovereign over all in this existence. All God’s creation is good, especially human being whom he trusts to cultivate this world to certain goal. Sin reveals the condition where human being is no longer in a perfect communion with God, after the first human disobeyed God. Consequently, evil, suffering, and pain are part of human existence, as punishment for their disobedience. Yet, God is a loving God who desires his creation to be restored into ‘good’ again. That is why Jesus came and died on the cross. His sacrifice functions as redemption and salvation for human being. As the connection is restored, human being still have to struggle in the reality of ‘already but not yet’ which means restoration has already happened, yet, not in a full sense. Christians still have to struggle in this world, to create a better world by maximizing all potentiality that God has given, as well as, evangelizing those who still disbelieve, to come to join the beauty of God’s salvation (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008).

Teaching literature from Christian worldview

In practice, a literature class in a university based on Christian worldview can start by stating that taking position is inevitable, including in terms of educating people. Students will be invited to think about Christian faith as an subject of an academic training, where it can freely be tested and questioned. This opening statement shows the rational aspect of Christian faith. Therefore, students will be introduced to the value of literature as one of God’s creation where he would reveal his truth. In this phase of learning, students will be challenged to see how God is sovereign, that all things are under his control, that all can be used to glorify him, including literature. Beauty as an aspect of creation can also be discussed here. God is an artist who creates beautifully.

In my classroom, the biggest part would be for discussing how sin has permeated human life that false beliefs, evil, pain, and suffering can easily occur in human experience. The discussion of Oscar Wilde’s The Selfish Giant, for instance, can be lead to see how inevitable it is for human to think about themselves, and see others as a threat. Students can generally reflect on this, and usually they can see how this also can happen in their lives, for example, when they feel threatened by the presence of others who simply perform well academically.
The story of *Clara* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma can shed a light on how evil human being towards other human beings who suffer. The internal conversation of the policeman rightly reveals how human being can be in conflict not only with other human beings, but also with themselves. Politically, the life and work of Wiji Thukul can show how human being desire to control others, and feel so uncomfortable and threatened when someone try to bring mirror and reveal their true self. Morality, ethics, evil, and suffering in this reality become the central of discussion under the idea of sin.

The story of *Robohnya Surau Kami* by A.A. Navis can be the example how human being actually cannot be always consistent in obeying God’s command, thus they need an intervention from the savior. Human being needs grace to be good. Although this concept of grace is not what A.A. Navis believes, but it is always interesting to see how students react towards our longing to be with their creator, and how difficult it is to attain that connection and restoration with our own effort. This idea of restoration shows the deepest condition of human being, and at the same time the inability to attain connection with God with our own effort.

**Conclusion**

Christian worldview is a view that is open to people with different systems of beliefs, or cultures. It commands its believers to treat others as respectfully as possible because all human beings are created in the image of God. However, it does not mean Christian-worldview-based educational institutions have to restrain themselves from proclaiming the exclusivity of Christian faith. Exclusivity is unavoidable, and it is our duty as beings with logical capacity to test every exclusive claim, including Christian faith. Thus, in this era of pluralism, Christianity with its worldview can still declare as the best worldview to understand reality and therefore to create a better nation and world.

**References**


