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—BECKY NORTON DUNLOP, VP for External Relations,
the Heritage Foundation

TOTAL TRUTH

*Liberating Christianity
from Its Cultural Captivity*

Study Guide Edition

NANCY R. PEARCEY

FOREWORD BY
Phillip E. Johnson

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FOREWORD

When Nancy Pearcey invited me to write a foreword for her “worldview” book, I hastened to accept the honor. I was honored by the invitation because this is a book of unusual importance by an author of unusual ability.

It has been a treat for me to read and study the manuscript, and I feel that I am doing a great favor to every potential reader whom I can persuade to enjoy these pages as I have done. Nancy Pearcey is an author who is greatly respected by all who know her work. I hope that, with this book, she will receive the acclaim that her thought and writing has so long deserved, and that readers will find in its message of liberation the key to intellectual and spiritual renewal.

It would be an understatement to say that worldview is an important topic. I would rather say that understanding how worldviews are formed, and how they guide or confine thought, is the essential step toward understanding everything else. Understanding worldview is a bit like trying to see the lens of one’s own eye. We do not ordinarily see our own worldview, but we see everything else by looking through it. Put simply, our worldview is the window by which we view the world, and decide, often subconsciously, what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant.

It may be that a worldview is commonly a collection of prejudices. If so, the prejudices are necessary, because we can’t start from a blank slate and investigate everything from scratch by ourselves. When somebody tells me that he receives guidance from God in prayer, or that science is our only way of knowing anything for sure, or that there is no objective difference between good and evil, I need to have some verifiable frame of reference to tell me at once whether he is merely deluded or is saying something that is sufficiently sensible to merit serious consideration.

Similarly, when I tell my fellow Berkeley professors that I don’t believe the theory of evolution, I need to know why they find it so difficult to take me seriously or to believe that my objection to the theory is based on scientific evidence rather than on the book of Genesis. The reason is that evolution with its accompanying philosophy is identified with their worldview at such a deep level that they cannot imagine how the theory could possibly be contrary to the evidence.

Every one of us has a worldview, and our worldview governs our thinking even when—or especially when—we are unaware of it. Thus, it is not uncommon to find well-meaning evildoers, as it were, who are quite sincerely convinced that they are Christians, and attend church faithfully, and may even hold a position of leadership, but who have absorbed a worldview that makes it easy for them to ignore their Christian principles when it comes time to do the practical business of daily living. Their sincerely held Christian principles are in one mental category for them, and practical decision making is in another. Such persons can believe that Jesus is coming again to judge the world and yet live as if the standards of this world are the only thing that needs to be taken into account.

Likewise, Christian education is likely to be an exercise in futility if it does not prepare our young people to confront and survive the worldview challenges that they will surely meet as soon as they leave the security of the Christian home, and probably even while they are still living at home and being educated in a Christian environment, due to the pervasive influence of the media and the Internet. For example, a youngster may be taught very fine Christian principles, but he or she may also grow up understanding that these principles fit into a specialized category called “religious belief.”

Sooner or later, that youngster will find out that secular college professors, and sometimes even Christian professors, proceed from an implicit assumption that religious beliefs are the kind of thing one is supposed to set aside when learning how the world really works, and that it is usually praiseworthy to “grow” gradually away from those beliefs as a part of the normal process of maturing.

Why do those professors think that? Of course they are being influenced by the dominant belief system in their academic culture, which is also the culture of the newsroom at most daily newspapers or television stations. But just to say that people are influenced by their cultural environment does not explain how our culture has come to be the way it is, when it used to be very different. To survive in modern or postmodern American culture without being overwhelmed by its concealed prejudices, everyone needs to know how to recognize those prejudices, to understand what kind of thinking brought them into existence, and to be able to explain to ourselves and others what is wrong with the pervasive assumptions that often come labeled only as “the way all rational people think,” and that will swamp our faith if we are not alert to them.

A fine education in worldview analysis is as basic an element of a modern Christian’s defense system as a shield was in the days when a prudent traveler needed to be prepared to repel an attack by sword-wielding robbers. Today the

intellectual brigands rob unwary youths of their faith, and they do it with arguments based on the shifting sand of “what everybody knows” and “the way we think today.” Those youths need to find the solid rock, and they need to know both why the rock is solid, and why the world prefers the shifting sand.

Only a very gifted author is capable of writing a book about worldview analysis that will make exciting reading for the ordinary person, but which is also sufficiently informed by scholarship to convey a deep understanding of the subject rather than merely a superficial acquaintance. Everyone is aware that American culture changed enormously during the twentieth century, but very few people understand how the change was brought about by ideas and habits that seemed at first to be eccentric or of only minor importance, but that eventually crept into the popular culture and proved to be almost irresistible. The situation we find ourselves in today has deep roots in the thinking of earlier times. Conduct that not very long ago was regarded as perverse or criminal has become not only tolerated but the new norm. Those who dare to disapprove of that conduct, or just fail to applaud the new norm with sufficient enthusiasm, are themselves likely to feel the full weight of society’s disapproval. The change in conduct was brought about by changes in worldview, which caused those who followed the new fashions to think differently.

With that much of an introduction, I invite you to read Nancy Pearcey. You will find not only pleasant reading but all the elements and basic information necessary to produce a Christian mind with a map of reality that really works. When Christian parents, pastors, educators, and other leaders learn to give this subject the importance it deserves, and to practice it even as they teach it thoroughly in the home, from the pulpit, and in every classroom, then Christians will find that they are no longer fearful and timid when they have to address claims of worldly wisdom. So let’s get started.

—Phillip E. Johnson
Berkeley, California
January 2004