

Naturalistic or biblical worldview of human development

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Abstract

A naturalistic view of human development has been prevalent for over 300 years and has gone unchallenged. Upon speaking to educators and psychologists, Piaget's name and theories are renowned and accepted while the names of John Amos Comenius, Shmuel Feuerstein, and Reuven Feuerstein are virtually unknown. However, both Shmuel Feuerstein, and John Amos Comenius challenge the naturalistic view and replace it with a biblical view of human development. Seemingly, the naturalistic view of humanity and human development has been widely accepted. Educators have come to accept the theories of human development embraced by an educational system that discount spirituality and have a naturalist worldview rather than a biblical view of human development. Developmental theories have informed our perspectives, expectations, and limitations of learners who have intellectual, behavioral, and physical challenges.

Keywords: Human development, theist worldview, cognitive development, Feuerstein, equipping minds, Comenius, mediated learning

Introduction

This article will contrast the naturalistic foundation of human development by cognitive psychologists with a biblical foundation for humanity, knowledge, human development, and mediation.

Many educators have been looking at learners with neurodevelopmental disorders through Piaget's (1896-1980) eyes rather than God's. Seemingly, the naturalistic view of humanity and human development has been widely accepted. Many religious educators have come to accept the theories of human development embraced by secular educational systems that discount spirituality and have a naturalist worldview rather than a biblical view of human development. Developmental theories have informed our perspectives, expectations, and limitations of learners who have intellectual,

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behavioral, and physical challenges. According to Brett Webb Mitchell, “Human developmental theories are not theologically neutral. For according to these theories, we are not first and foremost God’s children, created in God’s image. Instead, we become the sum of our many divided and disparate developmental categories. Depending on the developmental theory used, each theory is inextricably connected to certain assumptions both about the self, our relationship with one another and the means by which we grow, and about the particular ends to which we are growing. These assumptions may be contrary to, if not antagonistic toward, the practices of the church” (1).

Humanity

Mitchell asserts that Freud (1856-1939) reversed Genesis 1:27 from “God created man in his own image,” into “Man created God in his image” (1). God is seen as a projection of a child’s understanding of the parent. Piaget states, “The child begins by attributing the distinctive qualities of the divinity—especially omniscience and almightiness—to his parent and thence to men in general. Then as he discovers the limits of human capacity, he transfers to God, of whom he learns in his religious instruction, the qualities which he learns to deny to men” (2).

Knowledge

The ability to “know” is seen in many theories of human development. For example, Piaget’s theory of “genetic epistemology” is the study of the meaning, origins, and formation of knowledge in human organisms (3). His naturalistic views, which have significantly impacted educators’ understanding of human development, have been virtually unchallenged (4). Piaget’s theory of intellectual development has four distinct and progressive stages of development and can also be understood as peoples’ intellectual ability regardless of their age (4). Educators have come to accept the theories of human development embraced by their educational system that discount spirituality and have a naturalist worldview. These developmental theories inform our curricula, determine who may or may not attend

schools, define what is normal, and identify one’s cognitive potential based on an intelligence quotient (IQ), a static assessment (5). Educational psychology and human and child development textbooks have been the primary guide for understanding learners and have historically begun with Piaget’s theory on cognitive development (6). Piaget’s views are the most well-known, accepted, and influential. Piaget believed every learner was responsible for generating his own “logical structures.” The progression and acquisition of these abilities resulted from a learner’s successful interactions with the environment (7).

This belief system led many to view learners with neurodevelopmental learning disorders as having a fixed limit to their cognitive abilities since they were not able to acquire these abilities on their own. This belief led to the different approaches for learners with developmental disorders. Julie Lane and Quentin Kinnison in “*Welcoming children with special needs*,” follow a combined approach by informing private schools on the policies and procedures for developing a special needs program. The schools are encouraged to follow the public school model that focuses on remediation, accommodation, modification, and intervention (8).

Biblical worldview of human development

In the 1600s, the father of modern education and reformed theologian, John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) developed a system of progressive instruction according to the stage of human development a learner had reached, which was a precursor to developmental psychology. Piaget states, “Comenius was the first to conceive a full-scale science of Education” (9). While Piaget had great admiration for Comenius’ work, he dismissed and misunderstood Comenius’ theistic worldview. According to Jean Piaget, Comenius’ seventeenth century views on metaphysics and theology as presented in *The Great Didactic* were not relevant in the twentieth century (9).

Comenius presents the first principles of human development and instruction in “*The great didactic*” as he brings theology, education, and human development together. Chapter 1 titled, “Man is the highest, the most absolute, and the most excellent of

things created,” admonishes the reader to, “Know thyself, O man and know me, me the source of eternity, of wisdom and of grace; thyself, my creation, my likeness, my delight” (10). As man is the center of God’s creation, Comenius believes, “Man is naturally capable of acquiring a knowledge of all things, since, in the first place he is the image of God....So unlimited is the capacity of the mind that in the process of perception, it resembles an abyss....but for the mind, neither in heaven nor anywhere outside heaven, can a boundary be fixed. The means to wisdom are granted to all men, and he reaffirms the common character of learning potentiality in all of mankind. What one human being is or has or wishes or knows or is capable of doing, all others are or have or wish or know or are capable likewise” (10). Comenius’ insights into the potential and unlimited capacity of the human mind truly was hundreds of years before his time, as well as the scientific discovery of neuroplasticity. Comenius reminds the reader that God is not a respecter of persons, and no one should be excluded because of their intellect. He believed that those with weak intellects need assistance by a mediator: “We do not know to what uses divine providence has destined this or that man; but this is certain, that out of the poorest, the most abject, and the most obscure, He has produced instruments for His glory” (10).

Contrasting naturalistic and theistic worldviews

A human’s intellectual development, or capacity for rational thought, is present because we are created in the image of God (10). This theological foundation is crucial as we look at how these areas are related. A theistic worldview of humanity asserts that the chief aim of man and all of creation is to glorify God (11). The biblical metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration in relationship to the *imago Dei* and cognitive development as found in the Bible will be explored (11). Further areas of examination are the integration of the theistic view of knowledge, human development, and mediation.

Creation of humanity

A creational view of human development includes genetic and physiological, cognitive, emotional, volition, and relational development (12). In the creation account, God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his *own* image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26). It continues, “For in the image of God he made man” (Gen 9:6). Theologians refer to this as the *imago Dei* or “the image of God in man.” Daniel Akin said, “To be human means to be an image-bearer of God. In the Bible, the image of God extends dignity to all humans of varying ages, abilities, genders, and ethnicities” (13). Furthermore, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum stated, “The covenant relationship between God and Man is not restricted to an elite sector within human society” (14).

A correct understanding of the *imago Dei* is the basis for human relationships and our relationship with God. According to Gentry and Wellum, “God is the center of the universe and we humans find our purpose in having a right relationship to God and to one another. The first man and woman, however, rejected this way” (14). This rejection led to the fall of man.

Fall of humanity

At the fall of humanity, “The image of God was damaged but not destroyed. It was defaced, not erased Humans today still bear God’s image, even if in a distorted and fallen way” (13). Abnormal human development emerged at the fall as seen in physical, cognitive, and biosocial damage. All humans are born in sin and shaped by a sinful world (12). Man’s intellect or cognitive development was effected by the fall as well.

Redemption of humanity

Union with Christ enables the fulfillment of human development. Salvation is the appropriation of our union with Christ. Redemptive development or the process of sanctification impacts our thinking and emotional patterns (12). Consider the following, “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in his son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20; see also John 17:3). Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). God desires that we grow deeper in our relationship with him and that our thoughts, our actions, and our desires reflect Christ Jesus. We are also to put on the new self (Eph 4:24) and be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2).

Man can be renewed in knowledge and in the image of his Creator, which involves the mind and heart. The image of God includes the whole person, in structure and function (15). Believers should be growing in our knowledge of God on a continual basis as God gives believers the cognitive ability to be “increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10). Believers are part of the body of Christ, a biblical community and thus, “should have the same care for one another” (1 Cor 12:14-26). The parent-child relationship is valued in Scripture. The following passages exhort parents to mediate, teach, and train their children in the commandments of God. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train a child in the way he should go.” Deuteronomy 6:7 instructs parents, “Teach them [commandments] diligently to your children and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” In the New Testament, Paul exhorts, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). All believers are called to holistic discipleship impacting cognition, volition, emotions, and relationships.

Restoration and consummation of humanity

Restoration of the image of God is an ongoing process in the Christian life. There are five passages which refer to the restoration of the image of God in believers (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10 and Eph 4:22-24). In addition, the Bible speaks of the full consummation of believers to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49). (13) The Apostle Paul says, “Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor 13:12). In similar hope, John states, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ And He said to me, ‘Write, for these words are true and faithful’” (Rev 21:4-5). These truths give hope to learners with neurodevelopmental learning disorders (NLD) as there will be no disabilities in our glorified bodies.

Integration of Imago Dei, knowledge, human development, and mediated learning

Believers know God as creator and as redeemer. Because we are formed in the image of God, He gives us the ability to know Him and to reason about Him. Jeremiah prophesied, “And I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord: and they shall be my people and I will be their God: For they shall return unto me with their whole heart” (Jer 24:7). According to John Calvin (1509-1564), “God says that he would give them a heart to know him. The word heart is to be taken here for the mind or understanding, as it means often in Hebrew. It indeed, means frequently the seat of the affections, and also the soul of man, as including reason or understanding and will” (16). Calvin goes on to say, “We cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge of ourselves is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were first created and what our condition became after the fall of Adam” (17).

Furthermore, Proverbs 1:7 states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Calvin states,

“If you ask in what this whole edification consists which we are to receive thereby, in a word, it is a question of learning to place our trust in God and to walk in the fear of Him, and – since Jesus Christ is the end of the law and the prophets and the essence of the Gospel of aspiring to know no other aim but to know him” (18). It is through our personal relationship with God that believers truly know God, not just acquire knowledge about God. This knowledge is transforming.

Knowing God results in mediating or instructing children differently and teaching them both diligently and intentionally. The concept of having a mediator to assist and teach those who are weaker is rooted in Scripture, as well as both the Christian and Jewish communities. God says of Abraham, “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him” (Gen 18:19). This active and deliberate approach is in direct contrast to Piaget’s passive approach, as unmediated exposure to stimulus is meaningless for those with neurodevelopmental disorders. However, according to Shmuel Feuerstein, “Intensive exposure to mediational experience makes meaningful and pervasive changes in the individual’s cognitive structures” (19).

Reuven Feuerstein (1921-2014), simultaneously a cognitive psychologist, a theist and devout orthodox Jew, believed that we are created in the image of God. While he did not always insert his strong religious beliefs in his general writings, they were the foundation for his theories of cognitive development as he would refer to these beliefs in his formal lectures and professional training (19). According to Louis Falik and Refael Feuerstein, regarding the last work by Reuven Feuerstein, *“Changing minds and brains,”* one objective of this book was, “To give voice to the influence of Judaic culture in the formation and development of Professor Feuerstein’s lifework. He was deeply religious, has throughout his life brought his knowledge and familiarity with the philosophy and practice of his Judaism into his educational and psychological theories and his practices, and devoted his life to the transmission of his culture, again to benefit humankind” (20).

He studied the Bible throughout his life and credited the daily discussions of Scripture with his father with developing his cognitive abilities (21). To reiterate his theistic worldview, he stated, “The individual is asked to act in the image of [God] as is stated: [God] made man in his image” (19).

The theistic foundations to MLE are found in *“Biblical and Talmudic antecedents of mediated learning experience and theory”* written by Shmuel Feuerstein, brother and colleague of Reuven Feuerstein. Shmuel Feuerstein expounds on the biblical foundations of the theory of Mediated Learning. He shows the relationships between events, religious precepts, and conduct with a modern psycho-educational theory. Shmuel Feuerstein reminds the reader that there is a strong emphasis on the process of identification in Judaism, and mediation is the means through which a sense of identity is instilled (19). Shmuel Feuerstein stated, “There are a whole series of qualities and attributes related to God which the human being learns to aspire to. The individual is asked to act in the image of God as is stated: God made man in his image. This image becomes the rationale for identification with characteristics that are attributed to the image of God. Identification is not only an emotional, volitional or motivational act but is probably one of the first and strongest requirements placed on the Jewish person” (19).

Comenius and Feuerstein also agreed on two matters. First, that as God’s creation, all individuals, regardless of abilities should be treated with human dignity. As the prophet Malachi states, “Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us” (Mal 2:10)? Secondly, he believes that mediation stretches the mind and the cognitive capacities of an individual to optimal limits and reasoning capacity. Shmuel Feuerstein states, “Developing each individual’s mental capacities is an end in itself but it is also an important religious value. Each individual is endowed by God with capacities which must be developed to the fullest in order to fulfil God’s will and place one’s abilities in the service of God” (19).

Discussion

The current research study (24) with *EMCDC* brings the theist views and theories of Comenius and Feuerstein to the discussion on human development and the importance of one's worldview when viewing individuals. An integration of the biblical view of humanity as created as the *imago Dei* imparts immeasurable worth to all human life regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, or cognitive abilities. Theologians, educators and psychologists can embrace the theist views of human development of Comenius, the father of modern education, and Feuerstein, a clinical and cognitive psychologist who spent his life working with individuals with NLD to reach their full potential (19).

The *EMCDC* (22) is based on a biblical worldview of human development furthering the theistic perspectives of Comenius and Feuerstein, which see all individuals as created as the *imago Dei*; these theories allow us to see everyone through the lens of a biblical worldview rather than a naturalistic worldview. Educators, theologians, and psychologists can use *EMCDC* in their schools, churches, and private practice which will impact curricula, admission policies, and ministries in religious schools and churches. The findings from the current research support viewing individuals with a NLD from a biblical worldview whose cognitive abilities can be increased.

Conclusion

Most importantly, the biblical worldview of Comenius and theistic beliefs of Reuven and Shmuel Feuerstein affirm that all individuals, regardless of abilities should be treated with dignity because they are created in the image of God. Furthermore, through a human mediator, each individual's cognitive capacities must and can be developed. For as Comenius stated, "We do not know to what uses divine providence has destined this or that man; but this is certain, that out of the poorest, the most abject, and the most obscure, He has produced instruments for His glory" (10).

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