

**Worldviews
and
Nomads of the Sea**

Worldviews and Nomads of the Sea

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Sailors, like we, are shaped by their culture, and we should not be surprised when we find it hard to understand and work with them. The differences between people of the land and people of the sea run deeper than behavior and beliefs. Underlying every culture is a worldview that shapes how its people see the world.

Worldview

People perceive the world differently because they make different assumptions about reality. For example, most Westerners assume that external to themselves is a real world made of lifeless matter. People in South and Southeast Asia, however, believe that this external world does not really exist; it is an illusion of the mind. Many tribal peoples see the world as a living organism to which they must relate.

Taken together, the basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behavior of a culture are called a 'worldview.' Worldviews are the glasses with which people look at reality, not what they look at. Because these assumptions are taken for granted, they are generally unexamined and largely implicit. They are reinforced by the deepest of feelings, and anyone who challenges them becomes the object of vehement attack. People believe that the world really is the way they see it.

Worldview Differences

One way to see the power of worldviews to shape our thinking is to compare several of them. We will examine only a few broad types to illustrate their differences.

The worldviews of tribal people around the world vary greatly, but a few general themes are common to many of them. First, the world itself is seen as alive and personal, inhabited by high and lesser gods, spirits, ancestors, and other beings who share in the same life force and are interconnected to each other in complex webs of relationships that must be negotiated and maintained. Two events cannot happen simultaneously and still be independent of each other. There is no accident or luck--there has to be a cause, such as jealousy, a curse or punishment for every misfortune. Second, traditional worldviews are centered on the tribe and its members who are seen as fully humans. Outsiders are subhumans. To cheat or kill them is not a sin. Third, tribal worldviews are concerned primarily with questions having to do with this life--health, children and prosperity, and with the evils that threaten it--sickness, barrenness and disaster. The main concern is not for truth, but for power to get what one wants in life by placating the spirits and ancestors, and controlling supernatural forces by magic. Tribal worldviews are oriented to land and space rather than time, to sound more than sight, and to concrete-functional thought rather than the abstract-analytical thought.

Our modern worldview is radically different. It divides reality into two domains. Most of us assume that we live in a real world that exists outside ourselves. We see this natural realm as rational and orderly, and operating according to natural laws that can be discovered by human reason using the methods of science. Matter obeys the laws of physics and chemistry, and animals and human reflect the laws of biology, psychology and sociology. The supernatural realm, presented in religion, has to do with heaven and hell, and is inhabited by God, angels and demons.

Given our dualism between spiritual and material realities, and our growing emphasis on the material world and the sciences, it should not surprise us that we believe in progress, and

define it largely in material terms. We compete for power and possessions, judge people by what they own, and measure success primarily by the material goods they possess. We pursue happiness and define it in terms of wealth and physical well-being. This emphasis on material things is associated with a deep belief that property can be privately owned.

We believe not only that the world is real, but also that it is orderly. In science we use abstract reasoning to break down the world into neat categories, and discover causes and consequences. We use this knowledge to control the world around us. In a rational orderly world it is possible to plan for the future--to set goals and achieve them, to see problems and forestall them. It is important, therefore, to plan ahead.

The biblical worldview is different from and challenges both the traditional and modern worldviews. It begins with God--perfect, loving and righteous, and with the world he created and continues to sustain. It rejects both traditional animism and modern secularism. It sees humans as eternal beings created in the image of God and of infinite value. It recognizes that they are sinners in rebellion against God, individually and corporately, but that they can be redeemed and made perfect through Christ.

At the heart of the gospel is shalome. This beings with a right relationship with God involving worship, holiness and obedience. It also involves right relationships with humans characterized by love and care for one another as people fully created in the image of God, no matter how broken or flawed. Shalome means to be for the other, rather than for one's self. It gives priority to building communities of fellowship and support over completing tasks. It is the end of history when God and God's people share in an eternal fellowship characterized by love, joy and peace.

The Worldview of Seafarers

If worldviews are so powerful in shaping the mental worlds in which we live, it is important that we understand the worldviews of sailors if we want to minister to them. A few themes can help us enter their world.

Nomadic

Seamen are nomad and, over time, they develop a transient mentality. Many have no permanent residence that is really 'home.' They return periodically to a family and community, but they are soon ready to move on. They live in temporary quarters, and leave with little regret. Their companions and surroundings are constantly changing, their friendships passing. Land people look for permanence and stability. We like to put down roots--to build solid houses and churches, and to develop stable communities of people we know intimately. We like regular routines, and familiarity of surroundings.

This contrast between transitory and permanent residence and relationships, between moving on and staying put, makes it difficult for land people to minister to sea people. Most churches have grown among people who are more or less settled. Church worship styles and organization are based on the assumption that members will live in one place for relatively long periods of time. Land people have little idea of how to plant churches among nomads. Our impulse is to try to get sailors to 'settle down,' and to build 'permanent Christian relationships' in resident congregations.

Living in the Present

Land people work hard to control their lives. We heat and cool our houses, plan our futures, and live by calendars, day timers, schedules. Sea people must learn to live in a world often beyond their control. They continually encounter new places and people, and cannot choose their fellow sailors with whom they must live in close quarters. They sail to unknown destinations, encounter strange cultures, face storms at sea and are caught up in global politics. At sea they suffer long times of loneliness and hardships. In port, they gather with other sailors to celebrate the day and break the tedium of life at sea.

In such a world, people live in the present, from day to day. On board ship there is little separation between work and play, day and night, ordinary time and crisis time. Sailors do not think of having a long history that stretches out behind them. Their past is the stories they tell and retell in gatherings with other sailors. Their future is an extension of the present, and they must make decisions on the basis of present circumstances, not a predictable future. There is little point for long-term planning.

Self-reliance:

To survive, sailors must be self-reliant. They have a strong emphasis on the freedom of the individual and on fair play. Each man must stand up for himself. They live in small groups and depend on personal interactions rather than on large institutions to organize their lives. Because they share few cultural beliefs and values, and disagreements and violence are always a threat. This is compounded by the fact that this is a male-centered world in which men from different cultures often work together in difficult and dangerous situations.

Culture Brokers

Seamen live between resident cultures, in places where different worlds meet. Each brings his own cultural heritage, but lives with people from other cultures. Such people are “culture brokers.” They are simultaneously members of two or more different cultures, and do not identify fully with any of them. They live on the boundary between cultures, and marginal to both. This does not mean they are unimportant, without influence or inferior. Brokers are essential to global communication and trade. Like money changers who trade dollars to yen or rupees, they are essential to the communication between different cultural worlds.

Culture brokers are often lonely because they are caught between different worlds. The people in each world have only vague and often strange notions about the other worlds, and expect the culture broker to be loyal to their interests. They become suspicious and distrust the broker when he defends the others.

Ministry with Seafarers

How can we, people of the land, minister among seafarers? We must begin by rethinking our traditional assumptions about ministry which are deeply rooted in our worldview, and learning to understand the world in which sailors live. First, we must question our assumption that Christians must be members of stable congregations, and learn to minister to them on the move. Jesus was a marginal person, on the move and out of tune with what the Jewish leaders wanted and expected of him. He related to people on the fringes of society--lepers, tax gatherers, Samaritans and sinners. Christians, too, are to be marginal people, for they live in the world, yet they are citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are no longer fully at home on earth.

Marginal people, such as Christian sailors, have a significant contribution to make to the global church. Throughout history, seafaring Christians have reached places and people no others could reach, and have played a key role in the global outreach of the church. They can teach us much about ministering to migrants, refugees and other marginal people in an increasingly nomadic world. They can also help build the worldwide fellowship of the church. In a sense, they are prophets who speak from outside, and provide us the broad perspective and critique that can help us in our culturally parochial churches struggle with our identity in non-Christian settings.