

Encountering Worldviews

ENCOUNTERING WORLDVIEWS

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The Christmas pageant was over, or so I thought. In the South Indian village church, young boys dressed as shepherds staggered onto stage, acting dead drunk, to the delight of the audience. In that region shepherds and drunkards are synonymous. When the angels appeared from behind a curtain, however, they were shocked sober, and the moment of hilarity passed. The wise men came to the court of Herod seeking directions, and the star led them to the manger where Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, and the angels gathered around the crib of baby Jesus. The message has gotten through, I thought. Then, from behind the curtain, came Sante Claus, the biggest boy in class, giving birthday gifts to all. I was stunned. What had gone wrong?

My first thought was 'syncretism.' The village Christians had mixed Christianity and Hinduism. On further reflection I realized this was not the case. The missionaries had brought both Christ and Santa. So why was I disturbed. Clearly the message of Christ's birth had gotten through. So, too, the message of Santa, the bearer of gifts. The problem was the villagers had mixed what, in my mind, were two different Christmases. One centered on Christ. In it the climate was warm, the trees palms, the animals donkeys, cows and sheep, and the participants were Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wise men. The other centered on Santa. In it the climate was cold, the trees evergreen, the animals rabbits, bears, and above all reindeer, and the participants were Mrs. Santa and elves. So what had gone wrong? Somehow the message the missionaries brought was garbled. The pieces were all there, but they were put together wrong.

To understand this we must ask what is the gospel and how does it relate to human cultures.

The problem is not only a missionary one. Today North America is navigating a cultural sea change that threatens to capsize it. On the surface, cross-waves of debate occur between technological advance and ecological preservation, between the claims of science and the affirmation of local cultures, and between the uniqueness of Christianity and the recognition of other religions. Below the surface the deep currents of traditionalism, modernity and postmodernity; of globalism and particularism; and of truth and relativism collide in different ways in different communities in our land. As Christian theologians and leaders we seek to be rooted in biblical thought, but we live in human contexts that profoundly shape our thoughts. It should not surprise us that we are influenced by these cultural currents around us.

Underlying what it means to convert to and live as a Christian in human contexts we need to examine the relationship between Gospel and human cultures. To do so, we understand the cultures and worldviews that underlie them and our own theologies.

LEVELS OF CONVERSION

Can a nonliterate peasant become a Christian after hearing the Gospel only once?

Imagine, for a moment, Papayya, an Indian peasant, returning to his village after a hard day's work in the fields. His wife is preparing the evening meal, so to pass the time he wanders over to the village square. There he notices a stranger surrounded by a few curiosity-seekers. Tired and hungry, he sits down to hear what the man is saying. For an hour he listens to a message of a new God, and something he hears moves him deeply. Later he asks the stranger about the new way, and then, almost as if by impulse, he bows his head and prays to this God who is said to

have appeared to humans in the form of Jesus. He doesn't quite understand it all. As a Hindu he worships Vishnu, who incarnated himself many times as a human, animal, or fish to save humankind. Papayya also knows many of the 330 million Hindu gods. But the stranger says there is only one God, and this God has appeared among humans only once. Moreover, the stranger says that this Jesus is the Son of God, but he says nothing about God's wife. It is all confusing to him .

Papayya turns to go home, and a new set of questions flood his mind. Can he still go to the Hindu temple to pray? Should he tell his family about his new faith? And how can he learn more about Jesus—he cannot read the few papers the stranger gave him, and there are no other Christians in a day's walk. Who knows when the stranger will come again?

Can Papayya become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once? Our answer can only be yes. If a person must be educated, have an extensive knowledge of the Bible, or live a good life, the good news is only for a few.

But what essential change takes place when Papayya responds to the gospel message in simple faith? Certainly he has acquired some new information. He has heard of Christ and his redemptive work on the cross, and a story or two about Christ's life on earth. But his knowledge is minimal. Papayya can not pass even the simplest tests of Bible knowledge or theology. If we accept him as a brother are we not opening the door for "cheap grace" and a nominal church? What must take place for a conversion to be genuine?

When we seek to win people to Christ, we look for some evidences of conversion. Our first tendency is to look for changes in behavior and rituals. This was true in missions in the

nineteenth century.¹ Many missionaries looked for evidences that people were truly converted, such as putting on clothes, giving up alcohol, tobacco and gambling, taking baptism and communion, and attending church regularly.² Such changes are important as evidence of conversion, but it became clear that these did not necessary mean that underlying beliefs had changed. People could adapt their behavior to get jobs, win status and gain power without abandoning their old beliefs. They could give Christian names to their pagan gods and spirits, and so “Christianize” their traditional religions.

¹Change in behavior was central to Catholic missions after the sixteenth century. Francis Xavier baptized converts who could recite the Lord’s Prayer, the twelve articles of the short Catholic creed, and ten commandments. Catholic theology does not make the sharp distinction between beliefs and behavior, between forms and meanings in symbols, that the Protestants do. Consequently behavioral transformation is seen as transforming beliefs.

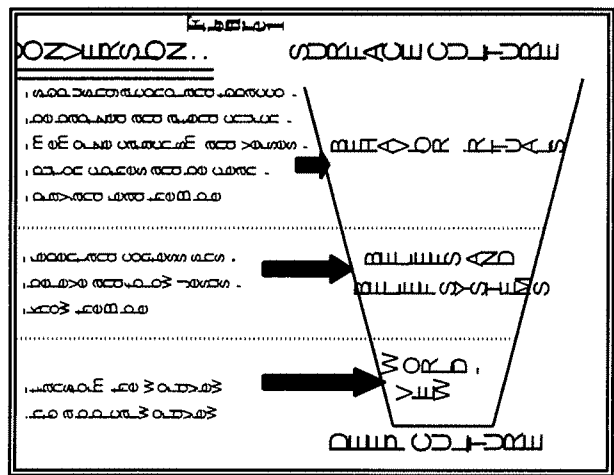
² Popular religiosity focuses primarily on right behavior as evidence in a religious community. For example, in South Asia, among the common folk a good Muslim is one who recites the name of Alla, has a Muslim name, wears Islamic clothing and a beard, does not eat pork, goes to the Mosque and prays five times a day. Most know little or nothing of the Koran or Hadith, and rely on the authority of their mullas and pirs to dictate their beliefs. Similarly, a Hindu recites the name of a Hindu god, has a Hindu name, has Hindu rites at births, marriages and funerals, and goes to the temple.

In the twentieth century, Protestant missionaries began to stress the need for transformations in the people's beliefs. People had to believe in the deity, virgin birth, and death and resurrection of Christ to be saved. They had to repent inwardly of their sins, and seek Christ's salvation offered to those who believe. Right beliefs are essential to Christian conversion, and missions set up Bible schools and seminaries to teach orthodox doctrine.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that transforming explicit beliefs is not enough to plant churches that are faithful to the Gospel. People often say the same words, but mean different things. Underlying explicit beliefs is a deeper level of culture that shapes the categories and logic with which the people think, and the way they view reality. For example, Jacob Loewen, missionary to the Waunana in Panama, asked leaders in the young church what they liked most about becoming Christians. Some said it was the peace that it brought to the people, who traditionally were at war with their neighbors. Others said that it was the worship and fellowship in church services that they enjoyed. Pushed further, they finally admitted that the what they appreciated most was the new 'power words' that Christianity had brought them. Loewen asked them to explain what they meant, and one man said, "When you want to harm and enemy, you sit right in front of them in the prayer meeting so that when you turn around to kneel and pray they are right in front of you. Then you say, 're-demp-tion', 'sal-va-tion', and 'amen' and the person will get sick." They had reinterpreted Christianity as a new and more powerful form of magic that enabled them to gain success and harm enemies through right oral formulas! Such reinterpretation of Christianity into an essentially pagan understanding of reality is not uncommon. In fact, it is one of the most common, and greatest dangers in the church.

Conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels: behavior and rituals, beliefs and worldview (figure 1). Christians should live differently because they are Christians. However, if their behavior is based primarily on tradition and not Christian beliefs, it becomes dead ritual. Conversion must involve a transformation of beliefs, but if it is only a change of beliefs, it is false faith (James 2). Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behavior, but if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run

the Gospel is subverted and the result is a syncretistic Christo-paganism which has the form of Christianity, but not the essence. Christianity becomes a new magic, and a new, more subtle form of idolatry. If behavioral change was the focus of the nineteenth century mission movement, and changed beliefs the



focus of the twentieth century, transforming worldviews must be central to the mission task in the twenty-first century.

Here it is important to differentiate between conversion as personal transformation and conversion as corporate transformation. Leading individuals to faith in Jesus Christ is the evangelistic dimension of mission. People come as they are, with their histories and cultures. We cannot expect an instant transformation of their behavior, beliefs and worldviews. It is important, therefore, to disciple them into Christian maturity. This includes not only a transformation in the way the people think and behave, but also in their worldviews. They must learn to think biblically.

Conversion must also be corporate. This is the faithfulness side of mission. The church in each locale, as a community of faith, must define what it means to be Christian in its particular sociocultural and historical setting. It must take responsibility to define and keep biblical orthodoxy, and it must do so by defining how Christianity is different from its pagan surroundings. The Apostle Paul is clear, we are to live in this world, but not to be of the world. He uses term such as *sarx*, *archeon* and *eon* to refer to the contexts in which we live. Too often we see these terms as referring to a fallen world from which we should flee. But when we withdraw in Christian colonies, we take the “world” with us. We cannot simply outlaw sin and thereby live in holy communities. The flesh and world is what we are now. They are good because humans were created in the image of God and can create cultures and societies which are good. Governments are God ordained because they help keep order in a fallen world. But the flesh and world are also fallen and sinful, and humans create structures that do evil. The fundamental characteristic of the flesh, world and age is not that they are good or evil—they are both—it is that they are temporary. They stand in contrast to the Kingdom of God which is eternal. It is totally righteous and good. The process of maintaining true faith in this world and age is an ongoing process for each generation must learn to think biblically about being Christian in its particular context.

How can worldviews be transformed? ? Before answering this question, we must explore further the nature and operations of worldviews.

WORLDVIEWS

The concept of worldview has several roots. One is in the German word *weltanschauung*, introduced by Emmanuel Kant and used by writers such as Kierkegaard, Engels

and Dilthey. It had become a standard word in Germany by the 1840s. Albert Wolters notes,

Basic to the idea of *Weltanschauung* is that it is a point of view on the world, a perspective on things, a way of looking at the cosmos from a particular vantage point. It therefore tends to carry the connotation of being personal, dated, and private, limited in validity by its historical conditions. Even when a worldview is collective (that is shared by everyone belong to a given nation, class, or period), it nonetheless shares in the historical individuality of that particular nation or class or period (Wolter 1989, 9).

In the nineteenth century, German historians turned from the study of politics, wars and great persons to the study of ordinary people. Because they could not examine the lives of every individual or event, they focused their attention on whole societies, looking for broad cultural patterns.³ From the perspective of history, this examination of everyday human activities raised new questions. How do cultural patterns emerge, how are they spread from one region to another, and why do some die out and others persist for centuries and millennia? For example, the cultures of the West were deeply shaped by the Greco-Roman world from which they emerged. They are shaped more by Greek than Indian philosophies, and by Roman than Confucian concepts of law and social order. The German historians used the term *weltaunshaun* to refer to the deep enduring cultural patterns of a people.

³For example, Jacob Burckhardt in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* sought to explain such diverse things as festivals, etiquette, folk beliefs and science in Renaissance Italy in terms of one paramount theme, individualism. Oswald Spengler traced how cultures selectively borrowed traits from other cultures, and how they reinterpreted these traits in line with their underlying worldviews. For example, he showed how the Egyptians showed great concern for time. They kept detailed records of past events, and built great monuments for the dead to remind people of their great past. The Greeks, on the other hand, had a “shallow” concept of time and lived essentially in the present. Their historians argued that no important events had occurred before their age. They were not interested in past history, but in the structure and operation of the world around them. Wilhelm Dilthey (1957) explained different periods of history in terms of their *zeitgeist* or “spirit of the times.”

The second root of the concept is found in anthropology. Early anthropologists placed human societies on a scale from 'primitive' to 'civilized,' from prelogical to logical. They saw humans as essentially the same, but some were backward and some developed. As anthropologists studied other peoples they became aware that different societies have different sets of beliefs and practices, each of which makes sense to the people who live in it. Moreover, they began to realize that there were many standards by which to compare cultures, and that no culture is superior to the others in all or most measures. Consequently the word 'civilization' came to be seen as arrogant and ethnocentric, and a new word, 'culture,' was adopted in its place.

As anthropologists studied different cultures more deeply, they found that below the surface of speech and behavior are beliefs and values that generate what is said and done. In time they became aware of still deeper levels of culture that shaped how beliefs are formed--the assumptions the people make about the true nature of things, the categories they use to think with, and the logic that organizes these into a coherent understanding of reality.

As anthropologists studied different cultures and their worldviews, It became increasingly clear that people do not live in the same world with different labels attached to it, but in radically different perceptual worlds. This growing awareness led to investigations of deep culture, and the use of words such as 'ethos,' '*zeitgeist*,' 'cosmology,' 'world event,' 'world metaphor,' 'world order,' 'world theory,' 'world hypothesis,' 'social life-world,' 'root paradigms,' 'collective unconscious (Durkheim),' 'cultural unconscious', 'plausibility structure,' and 'worldview.' Like the others, the last of these has many problems associated with it, but we will use and modify it in this study for lack of a better, more precise term. To start with, we will

define it as “the fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives.”

Foundational Assumptions

Worldviews are the basic assumptions people make about the nature of things. Their cognitive assumptions provide them with the fundamental mental structures people use to explain reality. In the West these include such things as atoms, viruses and gravity. In South India they include *rakshasas*, *apsaras*, *bhutams*, and other spirit beings. In the West we assume that time runs like a straight line from a beginning to an end, that it can be divided into uniform intervals such as years, days, minutes and seconds, and that it never repeats itself. Other cultures see time as cyclical: a never-ending repetition of summer and winter; day and night, and birth, death and rebirth.

Affective assumptions underlie notions of beauty and style, and influence the people’s tastes in music, art, dress, food and architecture as well as they ways they feel about themselves and life in general. For example, in cultures influenced by Theravada Buddhism life is equated with suffering. By contrast, in the U.S. after World War II, many people were optimistic and believed that by hard work and planning they could achieve a happy, comfortable life.

Evaluative assumptions provide the standards people use to make judgments about right and wrong. For instance, North Americans assume that honesty means telling people the way things are, even if doing so hurts their feelings. In other countries, it means telling people what they want to hear, for it is more important that they be encouraged than for them to know the facts.

Taken together these assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the world that makes sense out of it, a *worldview* that gives them a feeling of being at home, and that reassures them that they are right--what Martin Marty calls "the mental furnished apartment in which one lives (1991)."

Worldview assumptions are largely implicit. They are what **we think with**, not **what we think about**. Like glasses, they shape how we see the world around us--they are what we look *with*, not what we look *at*. And like the glasses we wear, it is hard for us to see our own worldview--others often see it better than we do ourselves. Our worldview assures us that what we see is the way things really are. Those who disagree with us are not wrong, they are crazy and out of touch with reality. If our worldview is shaken, we are deeply disturbed because the world no longer makes sense to us. As Clifford Geertz points out (1979, 83), there is no fear greater than meaninglessness--of not understanding the world in which we live. Even death itself can be endured if it has meaning.

More or less integrated

Cultures are more or less integrated. By this we mean that they provide us with a more or less coherent way of looking at things. If our belief systems contradict one another too much, we are torn by cognitive dissonance and the fear of meaninglessness.

Cultural integration is never complete. In part, this is true because cultures constantly change. New ideas are introduced that run counter to some old ideas and tensions emerge. For instance, the development of new methods of birth control led to an increase in premarital sex in North America and to rising immorality. Another reason cultures are not fully integrated is that

different groups in a culture often hold different beliefs. The rich, for example, see things differently than the poor, and one ethnic group than another. There are differences between the folk beliefs of the common people and the theories of the specialists in such fields as medicine and religion.

Functions

Worldviews serve several important functions. On the cognitive level our worldview gives us a rational justification for our beliefs and integrates them into a more or less unified view of reality. On the level of feelings, it provides us with emotional security. On the level of values, it validates our deepest cultural norms. In short, our worldview is our basic map *of* reality, and the map we use *for* living our lives.

Our worldview monitors our responses to culture change. We are constantly confronted with new ideas, behavior and products that come from within our society or from without. These challenge our fundamental assumptions, and create tensions in our understanding of reality. To reduce the stress of these we modify or drop some of our assumptions. Our worldview helps us select those ideas and products that fit our culture and reject those that do not. It also helps us reinterpret those we adopt so that they fit into our overall cultural pattern. In the process, the worldview itself changes over time.

Sometimes our worldview no longer helps us make sense of our world. If another and more adequate one is presented to us, we may reject the old and adopt the new. For example, Muslims and Hindus may decide that Christianity offers better answers to their questions than do their old religions. Such worldview shifts are at the heart of what we call conversion and worldview transformation.

WORLDVIEW DIFFERENCES

The fact that people in different cultures see the world differently, not only on the surface but also on the deepest levels, has profound implications for missions and the contextualization of the Gospel in terms of communicating the message, adapting strategies of evangelism, inculturating ecclesiology and leadership and incarnating theology. To understand the issues involved, it is helpful to examine the nature of worldview differences.

When asked to group a set of words into larger domains (figure 2), most in the West do so by distinguishing between Supernatural and Natural domains; making a sharp distinction between different kinds of life: humans, animals, and plants; and dividing living beings from inanimate matter (figure 3). This classification is based on the Greek dualism which came to the west after the 10th century, and gave rise to modern science.

A young Masaii grouped them as presented in figure 4. For the Masaii, the most important thing is life, and women and cows are the givers of life. Consequently, when a young man marries, he is taking the most valued reality—a life giver—from another clan. To reciprocate, he gives them cattle—givers of life. This is not the purchase of a bride, as early anthropologists thought [‘bride price’], nor even the purchase of the children [‘progeny price’—the man can marry without paying all the cows, but the woman’s children belong to her parents until the full price is paid], but an exchange of gifts. And the greater the sacrifice the young man makes in giving

Figure 2	
Group the following words into larger categories and domains	
=====	
TREE	ANGEL
WOMAN	ROCK
COW	GIRL
BIRD	GOD
WHALE	LION
GRASS	FISH
DOG	MAN
BUSH	VIRUS
SAND	DEMON
ANCESTOR	MARTIAN

example, in Telugu, a South Indian language, there are two basic words that might be used to translate the word “God. One of these is *devudu* (figure 6), the word normally used for the many gods who are ultimate seen as manifestations of one God. The gods are the greatest of beings and very powerful. But they are part of creation, and therefore finite. Moreover they sin, and must be reborn as ants or humans as punishment. The second word is *brahman* (figure 7). This is the ultimate, eternal, infinite reality, but it is the cosmic force field from which all emerges. It is not a being who relates, loves and forgives. There are other words, but they all fit into these two categories. The Bible translator and theologian must decide whether it is easier to add ultimacy, infiniteness and perfection to the concept of *deva*, or to add beingness, relationship and love to *brahman*.⁴

What must be transformed when people become Christians? Too often we equate conversion with changes on the surface level of behavior and practices. As signs of orthodoxy we check whether members drink alcohol, smoke and commit adultery, and whether they attend church services regularly. We should expect behavioral changes to occur on conversion, and more to follow in Christian growth, but are these sufficient to produce a faithful Christian community in our world? New converts often show little change in their lives at first, and many people learn to act like Christians, but lack the personal inner faith necessary for salvation. How do we measure faithfulness?

In recent years we have gone deeper to examine orthodoxy in terms of right beliefs. True

⁴ This was the debate between two Indian theologians at the end of the 19th century, Brahmabandab and Uppadhya (Robin 19##).

Christians must affirm the virgin birth, the death and the resurrection of Christ, as well as their lost condition and their dependence on Christ for salvation. Orthodox beliefs are essential in maintaining the Christian faith over time, but often these are hijacked by the worldview around them. We may speak a Christian language, but the meanings of the words, and the values in which they are embedded are secular and modern.

It is increasingly clear that we must deal with Christian faith on the worldview level. If we do not do so, the church will be come captive to the surrounding culture, just as early Christianity was received into Rome, and not Rome into Christianity. The danger for the church over time is not under-contextualization, but of over-contextualization. No humanly constructed worldview is adequate to fully explicate the Gospel. All of them fall short of the worldview we find in Scripture.⁵

It is increasingly clear that for true Christianity to continue over the generations there must be a transformation in the worldviews people have in the light of biblical revelation. An analogy may help us here. Culture is like an iceberg. Behavior and beliefs are what we see above the surface of the ocean. The worldview is the large hidden mass beneath the surface that

⁵ There is not enough space here to debate whether there is or is not a 'biblical worldview'. My position is that in the Old Testament God prepared a people to be his witnesses, and a worldview through which he could adequately communicate the Gospel. If the Gospel does not have to do with matters of worldview, it remains surface and transitory. Worldview are foundational. They determine our understandings or reality and truth. To the argument that there are several worldviews in the Old Testament, my response is that worldviews do change over time, but that at the deepest levels they continue over many generations. Just as we as modern humans live in essentially a Greek worldview, so the worldview of Christ and the early church was built on the growing understandings of God, sin, sacrifice, salvation and other key concepts in the historical progression of the Old Testament. Christ built on Abraham, Moses and the prophets. He did not introduce *de novo* a totally new worldview.

holds the whole iceberg up. If we convert only beliefs and behavior, in time the worldview will take the Christian beliefs captive. The result is “Christo-paganism.”

OUR WORLDVIEW

We focus on the transformations churches in new cultures must undergo. Too often we overlook the fact that we bring worldviews with us, and that these, too, need to be transformed. Many of us gathered here have been shaped by the worldview of modernity. What are some of the modern worldview themes that have shaped the modern mission movement?⁶

Dualism: The Split between Natural and Supernatural

One modern worldview theme is the split between spirit and matter; between subject and object; and therefore between subjective faith and objective truth. This came from the Platonic dualism of supernatural and natural, spirit and matter, mind and body, and replaced the biblical contingent dualism of Creator and Creation after the twelfth century. In theology this found expression in Thomas Aquinas. In science it appeared in the Cartesian split of the world into **rex cogitans** (mind) and **rex extensa** (matter).

This division between natural and supernatural realities led to the separation between science, which deals with the material world in mechanistic terms, and religion, which has to do with spiritual realities. Nature came to be seen as an autonomous domain, made up matter and energy which operate according to impersonal ‘natural’ laws. The supernatural is the domain of religion, and deals with God, spirits, miracles, feelings and morality.

⁶ I am following the model of worldview developed by Morris Opler (1945).

A second consequence of the dualism is the shift to the mechanistic view of the natural world which we saw in our analysis of American social systems. Regarding the Cartesian dualism, Alwyn Jones (1987:236-40) writes,

[It] allows scientists to treat matter as dead and completely separate from themselves. and to see the material world as a multitude of different objects assembled into a huge machine. . . . Priority is . . . given to the parts over the whole, the presumption being that a knowledge of the whole can gradually be built up from a detailed understanding of the relationship between the parts. The model of reality which emerges from this is a vast machine whose fundamental characteristics can be understood by an analysis of its parts and the laws which govern their working. . . . This has led to the "searchlight" effect - of high specialization but not seeing the whole.

A third consequence of this dualism is the emergence of the modern welfare state, and with it civil religion. In the middle ages, the state dealt primarily with matters of defense and trade. The church and other institutions took responsibility for the well-being of humans. They established hospitals, schools, orphanages and poor homes. In the nineteenth century, the welfare state came to be the central institution ultimately responsible for the well-being of its citizens. It took control of education, medicine and welfare, and set the limits of religion. It also demanded total allegiance, particularly in times of war. Unfortunately, the church was an all too willing partner in this reorganization of loyalties and responsibilities. Increasingly it saw its primary responsibilities to be in the private sphere having to do with feelings, values, family life, entertainment and the women's world.

The effect of this dualism on Christianity in the West has been devastating. Christianity has been privatized and relegated to personal piety, while science controls public truth and life. In Christianity, it has led to a division between evangelism and social concern. It has also led to a growing secularism in the church. God is largely confined to the Supernatural domain--to

salvation and the Kingdom of God defined in spiritual terms. He is not immediately involved in the natural order of things, which is better understood in scientific terms. Consequently, in the church we look for miracles for these are signs of God's presence among us.

Individualism, Freedom and Rights

As Robert Bellah and his associates have shown (1985), another North American theme is individualism. The idea of the individual as an autonomous, self-made person is a product of modernity. Allen Bloom (1987) traces the shift from the word 'soul'--which connotes dependence on God, to 'self'--which carries the idea of an autonomous being. This shift gave rise to the notions of self-fulfillment, self-achievement, and self-realization. With it comes an emphasis on personal freedom and rights, and a strong emphasis on private ownership of property and a capitalistic worldview.

The impact of this individualism on Christians and the church is far reaching. Lamin Sanneh notes, "Our modern tendency to see the Church in terms of individual healthy-mindedness, as a selfhood that is vulnerable to bouts of low self-esteem, is light-years removed from the Church as a fellowship of faithfulness to God's promises (1993, 221)." The erosion of the church from being a covenant community, along with its transformation into a crowd, club or corporation, has made Christianity largely a spectator sport or a business activity. Here the Brethren in Christ have much to offer the larger evangelical church. It has a strong ecclesiology, and a heritage of the priority of the church as a corporate body over the Christian as an individual believer. It will be very hard to maintain this emphasis in the corrosive individualism of our modern world.

Myth of Redemptive Violence

Underlying much of the American worldview is the Indo-European myth of redemptive violence. According to it, the world is a cosmic battleground between the forces of Good and Evil. Before Good can establish the rule of righteousness, it must defeat Evil by might or evil will reign (Wink 1992). 4

The Indo-European religions largely died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1992), the Indo-European cosmic myth dominates modern American thought. It is the basis for our westerns, detective stories, murder mysteries, and science fiction. Our children see it each week on TV. Bluto tries to grab Daisy, and Popey comes to the rescue. Bluto beats Popey into a pulp, but Popey manages to get some spinach and knocks Bluto out of the picture. The same story is repeated week after week, but we never get tired of it. Bluto never learns to leave Popey alone, and Popey never learns to take his spinach before he attacks Bluto. The same plot underlies Superman, Spider man, Super Chicken, Underdog, and most of our cartoons. It is reenacted in “Star Wars” movies, dramatized in video games, and taught in the New Age movement. It is played out in football, basketball, and tennis. The fundamental message of this myth is that life is based on competition and battle, that the victors gain control and establish order, and that the result is progress. This message lies at the heart of our theory of evolution, our faith in democracy, and our worship of capitalism.

In the Indo-European worldview, the battle is the center of the story. People pay to see a football game. When the battle is over, everyone goes home and waits for the next battle.

Francis Fukuyama, a policy planner in the U.S. State Department, sees the end of the Cold War

as “the end of history,” leaving the world with no master plot, and only “centuries of boredom” stretching ahead like a superhighway to nowhere. When the battle is over, the real story is finished. The final words are “and they won (or were married) and lived happily ever after.” But there is no story worth telling concerning the “happily ever after.” The adventure and thrill is in the battle, and it is to this we return again and agin.

Morality in these power encounters is based not on a cosmic moral order of righteousness and sin, but on the notion of fairness and equal opportunity. To be “fair” the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. In other words, the outcome of the battle must be uncertain. It is “unfair” to pit a seasoned gunman against a youngster, or the Los Angeles Rams against a high school football team. “Equal opportunity” means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. The defendants of good cannot use evil means first, but if the evil side does, they can too. In westerns, the sheriff cannot draw first, but when outlaws do, he can gun them down without trial--acting as judge, jury and executioner at the same time. He is justified in using evil means because his enemies do, because he is acting in ‘self defense,’ and because these are necessary to win the battle. The primary good is victory, the greatest evil is defeat. Righteousness and love reign only after victory is won by means of violence.

In contrast to the Indo-European myth with its stress on violence and battle to gain control, the Biblical story is clear. There is no question that God indeed rules and that his methods are love, reconciliation, cooperation and peace, not competition and warfare. His aim is to win his opponents, not defeat them.

The myth of redemptive violence is the foundation for the theories of evolution, capitalism and democracy. Competition leads to the survival of the fittest, and this leads to advance. The theory of cultural evolution has influenced the West in several ways. The first is a deep belief in progress.⁷ Most Westerners assume the superiority of western peoples and western civilization. Members of other races might share in their goodness and wisdom, but westerners are the leaders, and will remain so for a very long time. This led to the Enlightenment agenda that it is the 'White Man's burden' to educate and civilize the 'natives'.

Closely related to the notion of progress is that of development. Peter Berger points out that, "Underlying the major ideological models for social change are two powerful myths--the myth of growth and development, and the myth of revolution (1974, xi)." North America is committed to the first of these. It assumes change through incremental improvement through competition and the success of the strongest, brightest and best adapted. This competition gives rise to the enlightenment assumptions of progress, autonomous individualism, faith in reason and innate goodness of humans. Jon Bonk writes,

The West continues to be the standard against which "development" is measured; and western aid and efforts have, until quite recently, been fueled by the certainty that given enough money, time and Western expertise, the rest of the world can become what the West now is--"developed" (1991, 20).

The Enlightenment concept of progress had a deep effect American Christianity. Many

⁷ Rollo May (1991) traces the myth of progress in the popular myths of North America such as Horatio Alger and the American Dream, the therapist and deliverance from hell, romance and the chase of love, and the myth of patriarchal power. We need more analysis of how these give meaning to the life stories of many Americans.

Christians rejected the theory of evolution, but the general ideas which were part of the evolutionary Zeitgeist were absorbed with the air they breathed. Charles Tabor notes,

The superiority of Western civilization as the culmination of human development, the attribution of that superiority to the prolonged dominance of Christianity, the duty of Christians to share civilization and the gospel with the "benighted heathen"--these were the chief intellectual currency of their lives (1991, 71).

Wilbert Shenk writes,

The seventeenth-century New England Puritan missionaries largely set the course for modern missions. They defined their task as preaching the gospel so that Native Americans would be converted and receive personal salvation. The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization. . . They gathered these new Christians into churches for nurture and discipline and set up programs to transform Christian Indians into English Puritans (1980, 35).

In the past missionaries, as people of their times, sought to both Civilize and Christianize people around the world. They build schools and hospitals alongside churches, and see science as essential a part of the curriculum as the Gospel. This equation of the gospel with western culture has made the Gospel unnecessarily foreign in other cultures.

On the other hand, Western missionaries often saw traditional religions--with their fear of spirits, witchcraft and magical powers--as animistic superstitions, and assumed that these would die out as people accept Christianity and science. They saw little need to study these religions, or provide Christian answers to the questions they addressed. Consequently, many of the old beliefs went underground, but today they are resurfacing around the world and creating havoc in young churches.

Western Christians also saw Christianity as the fulfillment of other religions (cf. Dennis 1897, 1899, 1906). David Bosch notes,

It was, however, not until the arrival on the scene of the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, the rise of liberal theology, and the birth of the new discipline of comparative religion, that the stage was set for an approach according to which religions could be compared and graded in an ascending scale. In the Western world there was no doubt, however, about which religion stood at the pinnacle. In almost every respect every other religion--even if it might be termed a *praeparatio evangelica*--was deficient when compared with Christianity . . . (1991, 479).⁸

Although colonialism has collapsed around the world, the Western church must deal with the feelings of arrogance, superiority and triumphalism that still runs deep within it and underlie our racism, and classism. Too often these attitudes give rise to a ‘rescue’ mentality in our ministries to those in need., and to our effort to export our church polity, religious practices and organizational skills as the right way to do things. Regarding the Baptists’ work in Africa, Lloyd Kwast writes,

Baptist missionaries introduced the form of church government they knew best--the kind they used back in London, Berlin or Chicago. The fact that Baptists have historically fought, suffered and even died for their Baptist “distinctive” almost gives them a sacredness for most Baptists, concepts such as soul liberty, the separation of Church and State, a congregational form of church government have little, if any, meaning for Africans, who are largely ignorant of European context in which these concepts first found meaning. Nevertheless, African Baptists were taught that the “Christian” way to govern the Church was by congregational and democratic processes conducted according to Robert’s Rules of Order. In theory Baptist polity calls for the complete autonomy of the local congregation, but in practice considerable control is exercised by the mission or the convention over congregations (this inconsistency between theory and practices still has many untutored Cameroonians confused) (1971, 159).”

The same can be said of most Western missions around the world.

⁸ All this must be said, but as Lamin Sanneh (1993) points out, the missionaries were concerned with communicating the Gospel to the people. They lived with the people and often defended them against oppression by business and government. Moreover, by translating the Bible into native languages, communicating to them a universal gospel, and baptizing the converts into the global church, the missionaries dignified the people and helped them more than other westerners to preserve their cultural identities.

THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNITY

It is increasingly that a worldview shift is taking place in the West. Some argue that modernity is dying and a postmodern era is being born, others that we are entering the late stage of high modernity. In either case, the church is facing new challenges which it must address.

Pluralism

The social cause of postmodernity is the growing pluralism of western societies, and encounter with different peoples and cultures. No longer does one community dominate North American culture. Increasingly a myriad of other voices are clamoring for rights and power. This is particularly true in our cities. For example, in Los Angeles, public school classes are now being taught in more than eighty different languages!

But postmodernity is more than the fact of cultural and ethnic pluralism. It is the acceptance of pluralism as the ideal way to organize society. No longer do we speak of the assimilation of immigrant communities into our dominant society. Rather we encourage them to maintain their distinct identities.

The implications of pluralism for the church are far reaching. Should the church bless difference by baptizing 'homogeneous unit' churches, or should it advocate unity based on uniformity? Should it speak of Theology or theologies? What is the motive for missions if we are to affirm other communities and their religious beliefs? And are there more ways than one to the Kingdom of God and eternal salvation?

Deconstructionism, relativism and pragmatism

One fundamental consequence of pluralism is deconstructionism. Not only does this argue against coherent plots and perspectives in art (Gunn 1987), and distinct styles in architecture, it also argues against any single system of objective truth. All truth, it holds, is perspectival, including science. In this sense it breaks down the public-private dualism of modernity, and reduces everything to the private sphere. Anthony Giddens points out (1990)

... post-modernity refers to a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology and from faith in humanly engineered progress. The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the 'grand narrative' -- the overarching 'story line' by means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future. The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place.

David Harvey adds (1984),

I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic . . . but postmodernism . . . does not try to transcend it, contradict it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.

Postmodernists such as Linda Hutcheon see pluralism and contradiction as inherently good. She writes (1980:xiii),

Willfully contradictory, then, post modern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape the implications of the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) domains of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within.

Postmodernists are open in their attack on science and its search for a unified theory, and on Habermas and his idea of "unity of experience." Lyotard writes (1984:80-81),

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. . . The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us

be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

The result of pluralism and deconstructionism is relativism. We can no longer speak of objective truth. All beliefs, including science, are subjective and private. The effects of this are now being seen in our western response to other religions. A long list of authors now affirm that our task is not to convert others to Christianity, but to affirm the good in all religions.

Subjectivism, idealism and existentialism

A second consequence of pluralism is that the realities we know are created by our minds, not by external verities. The new epistemological foundations are either instrumentalism or idealism.⁹ The world we live in is a construction of our minds. Walter Anderson writes (1990),

In recent decades we have passed, like Alice slipping through the looking glass, into a new world. This postmodern world looks and feels in many ways like the modern world that preceded it; we still have the belief systems that gave form to the modern world, and indeed we also have remnants of many of the belief systems of premodern societies. If there is anything we have plenty of, it is belief systems. But we also have something else: a growing suspicion that all belief systems -- all ideas about human reality -- are social constructions.

The logical consequence of this idealism is self-centeredness. We create the world in which we

⁹ While instrumentalism is a form of realism, and therefore stands in contrast to idealism, the two act in much the same way. Instrumentalism says that there is a real world outside us, but that we cannot know anything about it for certain. Consequently, we must reject notions of truth and accept science and other forms of knowledge as useful constructs that help us live. Pragmatism and utilitarianism are the results. Idealism denies that there is a real world outside and says that we mentally construct the worlds in which we live. In both we are left ultimately with images in the mind.

live. Therefore, we must be gods. Another consequence is existentialism. We are the center of existence, so we should live for ourselves today. We are no longer interested in history, only in News.

The impact of postmodern subjectivism is widely felt in the mission and church where, increasingly, 'experience' is the arbiter of truth, individual beliefs take priority over church confessions, and religious pluralism is affirmed. In part, this is a corrective to the modern emphasis on truth as cognitive affirmation, but it leaves us with theological and religious relativism. We need to affirm again the Truth of the Gospel, not as part of western culture, but as divine revelation given to all human and that stands in judgment on all human systems. Here again our Anabaptist vision of the church as a counter cultural community that stands as a prophetic voice of God's Kingdom helps us, for this keeps us from equating the Gospel with any human culture. All humans must hear and interpret the Scripture, and all stand under its call to personal and corporate transformation.

Therapeutic society

A second central theme of postmodernity is a stress on therapy and health. R. Fox and T. J. Lears note (1983, 4),

[There is] the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world - an ethos characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms. . . . In earlier times and other places, the quest for health had occurred within larger communal, ethical or religious frameworks of meaning. By the late nineteenth century those frameworks were eroding. The quest for health has become an entirely secular and self-referential project, rooted in peculiar modern emotional needs - above all the need to renew a sense of selfhood that had grown fragmented, diffuse, and somehow "unreal."

This search for the 'self' is a reaction to modernity with its depersonalization of human beings.

Lamin Sanneh notes,

Our new orthodoxies are now constructed and validated as psychological uplift, self-esteem and other versions of emotional quick-fix, in the name of all of which we would make sacrifices that we would begrudge Church and fellowship (1993, 221).

The shift to therapy and healing as the root metaphors, has led to a decline in concepts such as sin and salvation. People are not rebels against God but victims of society, or of evil spirits. They need health, defined primarily in terms of feelings, not an objective reconciliation with God. What we need is deliverance and self-realization, not justice and peace. Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out (Fox and Lears 1983, 14) that "multitudes of people are living not bad but frittered lives - split, scattered, uncoordinated." The problem, in other words, is not morality but morale. Robert Bellah (1985) traces some of the consequences of this theme on contemporary American life.

The therapeutic view of reality has had a deep impact on the church. Today psychology and counseling are often seen as more 'scientific' ways of dealing with the human dilemma, and referring to sin and judgment is often political incorrect. As committed Christians, we must reaffirm our belief that we are individually and corporately sinners, for only then is there hope of a true salvation through Christ. Here our pietistic roots provide us theological foundations both for repentance and for holy living.

TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

What is the Gospel in human cultures? I have not given any answers. I have only tried

to lay out an agenda for future study. I am convinced that the solutions lie not in a prophet who will lead us through the land, but in a community of committed Christians who are willing not only to hear the Gospel together in our countries, but also to pay the price that obedience to that Gospel will demand. Our radical stress, as Anabaptists, on authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, and church as a hermeneutical community that stands in check of individual misinterpretations provides us a meta-theology (Hiebert 1988)--a theology of how we should do theology. This enables us to constantly reflect on and respond to the changing world in which we live.

Our task is a two-fold one. We must address both social orders, and cultural orders, particularly our own worldview. To challenge one or the other is not enough, for the two systems are interlocked. We need, therefore, teaching and action. We need to remember that human systems are not all evil (Wink 1992). Individualism, mechanism, and technique are beneficial if they are kept in check by higher values and social systems. Groupism, organicism and relationalism carried to the extreme are equally destructive. The greatest danger is that we accept our social organization and our culture without being aware of it, and become its captive. All human systems need to be brought under the lordship of Christ and his Kingdom.

As a minority in the country, we as Anabaptists must first experience transformation in ourselves and in our churches. Then we must act as salt in the land, subverting systems when they opposed the Kingdom of God. Newbigin puts it well (1991,82),

If I understand the teaching of the New Testament on this matter, I understand the role of the Christian as that of being neither a conservative nor an anarchist, but a subversive agent. When Paul says that Christ has disarmed the powers (not destroyed them), and when he speaks of the powers as being created in Christ and for Christ, and when he says

that the Church is to make known the wisdom of God to the powers, I take it that this means that a Christian neither accepts them as some sort of eternal order which cannot be changed, nor seeks to destroy them because of the evil they do, but seeks to subvert them from within and thereby to bring them back under the allegiance of their true Lord.

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