TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ......................... 1

Chapter 1: The Concept of Worldview .......... 5

Chapter 2: Characteristics of Worldviews ......... 10

Chapter 3: Worldviews in Human Contexts .......... 50

Chapter 4: Methods for Analyzing Worldviews ........ 64

Chapter 5: Worldviews of Small Scale Societies ...... 76

Chapter 6: Peasant Worldviews .................. 91

Chapter 7: The Rise of Modernity ................ 101

Chapter 8: The Challenge of Late or Post Modernity .. 161

Chapter 9: The Post-postmodern or Glocal Worldview . 185

Chapter 10: Towards a Biblical Worldview ........... 202

Chapter 11: Transforming Worldviews ............. 238

Bibliography
Introduction

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 Santa 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. Then 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 palm, 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. Claus 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 what changes must take place when one becomes a Christian?"
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 other 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. Moreover, what he knows is shaped
by his cultural beliefs. Papayya cannot 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,”
syncretism and a nominal church? If we tell him to wait and learn more, we drive him away.
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. Many missionaries looked for evidences that people were truly converted,
such as putting on clothes, giving up alcohol, tobacco and gambling, refusing to bow to
ancestors, taking baptism and communion, and attending church regularly. Such changes are
important as evidence of conversion, but it became clear that these did not necessarily 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.

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 were seen as essential to Christian
conversion, and missions set up Bible schools and seminaries to teach orthodox doctrine.

1 Change 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.
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 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 an 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.” In a south Indian village, all the Christians painted big white crosses on their houses. I thought this was a good witness to their new faith, but they explained that the cross was a powerful sign to defend them from the evil eye. In both cases the people had re-interpreted Christianity as a new and more powerful form of magic that enabled them to gain success and harm enemies through right formulas! Such reinterpretations of Christianity into an essentially pagan understanding of reality is not uncommon. We see it in Simon’s misunderstanding of Peter and John’s prayer (Acts 8:14-24). In fact, it is one of the most common, and greatest dangers in the church.

Conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels: behavior, beliefs and the worldview that underlies these. Christians should live differently because they are Christians. However, if their behavior is based primarily on traditional and not Christian beliefs, it becomes
pagan ritual. Conversion must involve a transformation of beliefs, but if it is only a change of beliefs and not behavior, it is false faith (James 2). Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behavior. 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 its 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.

Conversion must also be corporate. 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. This is the faithfulness side of mission. 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, world and age are what we are in 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, world and age are also fallen and sinful. Fallen humans create fallen systems 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.