

SPLIT-LEVEL CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction:

- we present the Gospel to Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists
- we find most Hindus are folk Hindus, most Muslims are folk Muslims
- we also find many Christians are 'split-level' Christians

A Model for Understanding Religious Beliefs:

1. Root metaphors: the horizontal dimension

1.1 Organic analogy:

- like living beings
- life processes
- relational
- ethical in nature

Mechanical analogy:

- like machines
- impersonal forces
- controlling, formulaic
- amoral in nature

1.2 Examples of beings: high god, lesser gods and goddesses, demons, rakshasas, spirits, jinn, kami, ghosts, bhutams, witches, ancestors, saints, humans, sub-humans, animals, plants, sun, moon, earth, rivers.

1.3 Examples of forces: mana, magic, evil eye, omens, taboos, astrology, medicines, chemical forces, physical forces, gravity, electro-magnetism.

2. Scale: the vertical dimension

2.1 Immanent: this world–seen [empirical]. The domain of science.

2.2 Transcendent: other worlds-unseen [transempirical]. The domain of formal religion

2.3 'Middle Zone': this world-unseen [earth spirits, magic, territorial gods, etc.]. The domain of 'folk religion'

3. The Model: combining the dimensions

4. Formal Religion:

- religious leaders: philosophers, theologians, prophets, priests
- search for absolutes and truth
- answer ultimate questions
- claim to be universal, timeless
- unified, logically consistent
- written texts
- great and little traditions
- formal organization
- goal: cosmic salvation

5. Folk Religion:

- religion of the common people
- search for power and control
- answer the immediate questions of everyday life

- existential, territorial
- pragmatic problem solving, use many solutions, not concerned with logical consistency
- oral tradition
- localized
- taught through apprenticeship
- goal: good life, health, wealth, success

6. Key Questions:

6.1 Formal religion: ultimate origin, purpose and destiny of self, society, universe.

6.2 Folk religion:

- meaning in this life – the problem of death for the living
- well being in this life – the problem of crises, sickness, droughts, disasters
- guidance in knowledge – the problem of the unknown
- the desire for justice and purity – the reality of injustice and pollution

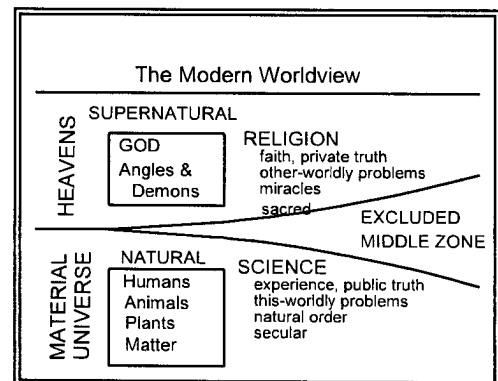
6.3 Folk science: control of nature, ordering of human relationships.

7. The Flaw of the ‘Excluded Middle’:

- the rise of modern Cartesian dualism:
Natural and Supernatural
- stress on the material world, and relegation of spiritual realities to other worlds

8. Towards a theology of the ‘middle zone’:

- a theology of the invisible
- a trinitarian view of God’s acts in everyday life
- a theology of the Kingdom of God
- a theology of power and the Cross
- a whole gospel
- a biblically balanced Christainity
- a theology of discernment
- an anticipatory eschatology
- a theology of suffering and death
- a theology of the church as a caring community



9. Dangers in dealing with the ‘middle zone’:

- syncretism: Christo-paganism – a Christian animism
- weak view of sin and seeing people as innocent victims, not active participants in sin
- human centeredness – concern with our own well being, not a lost world around us
- experience-based theology
- reinforcing secularism – see God only in ‘miracles,’ not in everyday life
- generating false guilt in those who are not healed or successful
- imbalance – focus on our existential human needs rather than on ultimate needs
- faith in leaders rather than in God

Myths of Spiritual Warfare

One area in which the analysis of myths is important in modern missions is the current debate over the nature of “spiritual warfare.”¹ At core this has to do with a missionary’s understandings of the cosmic story. Missionaries often see the story of Scripture, but also bring their own cultural myths that have shaped how they interpret biblical references to the confrontation of God and Satan. Examples of spiritual warring are found in most mythologies, and knowing what these are can help believers guard against becoming captive to them when reading Scripture—cultural inferences and God’s intentions do not always correlate. We will examine four myths that continue to influence the contemporary debate.

Western Dualism

Western worldviews are shaped by Cartesian dualism that divides the cosmos into two realities--the supernatural world of God, angels and demons, and the natural material world of humans, animals, plants and matter. The dominant myth of the latter is biological evolution. According to this, the evolution of life takes place through an endless battle between strong and weak in which the strong win and breed new strains of life. On this level, there is no moral distinction between good and evil, justice and injustice.²

The dominant myth of the supernatural domain is that of a battle between God and Satan, angels and demons, and good and evil. This battle takes place in the heavens, and has little to do with what happens on earth, except as heavenly beings intrude on earth. Angels and evil spirits are not seen as essential realities in ordinary, everyday life. In secular versions of modernity, the reality of the supernatural is denied.

In some Christian circles this meta-narrative has led to theological and practical demythologization of the Scriptures and life. Biblical accounts of angels and demons are explained away, and they are not seen as essential realities in ordinary, everyday life. Human systems account for poverty, oppression, suffering and other evil, and the church is called to confront them. In other circles the battle is seen as a spiritual warfare between God and Satan, the fallout of which is felt by humans on earth.

¹ The term was originally used by Allan Tippett to refer to the battle that goes in the hearts of seekers when they think of following Christ instead of their old gods. This fear arises because they do not know from experience that Christ is indeed stronger than their old gods. Consequently, after their conversion any misfortune, sickness or death is seen as the punishment of their old gods for forsaking them.

² This amoral view of nature becomes a problem when humans evolve, for here we clearly must speak of good and evil, but we have no basis on which to build a sense of morality.

Traditional Religions

As emphasized we have repeatedly emphasized throughout this book, people around the world have a strong sense of the spiritual and its impact on daily life. Many people see the earth and sky as full of beings (gods, earthly divinities, ancestors, ghosts, evil shades, humans, animals and nature spirits) relating, deceiving, bullying and battling one another for power and personal gain. For the most part these beings are neither totally good nor totally evil. They help those who serve or placate them. They harm those who oppose their wishes.

Spiritual warfare in many animistic societies is seen as an ongoing battle between different alliances of beings. For the most part these alliances are based on ethnicity and territory. The gods, spirits, ancestors and people of one village or tribe are in constant battle with those of surrounding villages and tribes. When the men of one group defeat those of another, they attribute their success to the power of their gods and spirits. When they are defeated, they blame this on the weakness of their gods. We see this in the way the Philistines and other tribes in the Old Testament viewed their battles with the Israelites. The battle between David and Goliath was seen not primarily as a battle between human armies, but as a battle between Yahweh and the gods of the Philistines.

Land plays an important role in traditional views of spiritual warfare. Gods, spirits and ancestors reside in specific territories, and protect their people who reside on their lands. Their powers do not extend to other areas. When people go on distant trips, they are no longer under the protection of their gods. Nor do traditional gods extend their domains through the conquest of neighboring gods. Gods and people defeated in battle serve the victors. They do not become followers of the more powerful god.

The Indo-European Myth

The most widespread myth in western cultures is the Indo-European myth of a cosmic spiritual battle between good and evil (Larson 1974, Puhvel 1970. See 10.2). With the spread of the Indo-Europeans from inner Asia to Europe, Mesopotamia and South Asia, this myth in its various forms became the basis for the religions of Babylon, Sumer, Canaan, Greece, India, and Germany, to name a few. During the Middle Ages the formal religious beliefs of Europe were Christianized, but popular entertainment, including sports, movies, fables, sports, politics and wars, remained based on the Indo-European myth.

Fundamental to the Indo-European myth is the belief that good and evil are two independent eternal entities in eternal conflict (figure 10.2. In this dualism, good and evil are represented by two opposing superhuman beings: a Good God (Ninurta, Indra, Marduk, Mazda, Rama and others) and a Bad God (Asag, Vritra, Tiamat, Marmaduke, Ravanna and others). All reality is divided into two camps: Good God and Bad God, angels and demons, good nations and evil ones, good humans and wicked ones. The line between the two camps is sharp. The good has no evil in it. Good beings may be deceived or forced into doing bad things to gain righteous

ends, but, at heart, they are good. Similarly, evil beings, though at times they do good, are fundamentally wicked. Evil beings have no redeeming qualities, and must be destroyed so that good may reign.

10.2

The Indo-European Myth

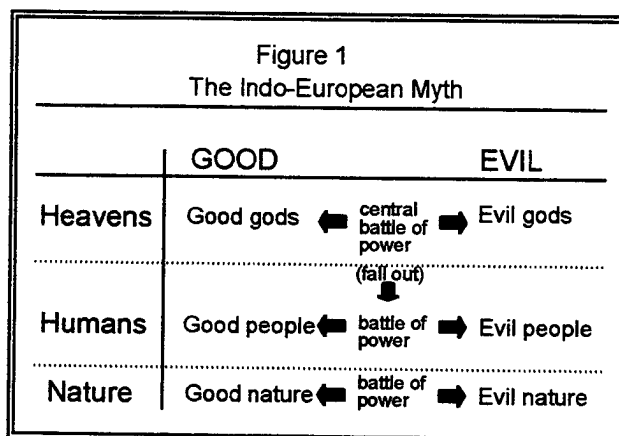
From the beginning Ahura Mazda, god of light, life, order and truth, has been battling Ahriman, god of darkness, death, chaos and falsehood. The real world and all of life springs from their struggle. Ahura Mazda creates the world of life and warmth; but Ahriman, to thwart good, creates the world of death. Ahura Mazda creates an earthly paradise where roses flourish, humming birds fly, and cattle graze, but Ahriman creates insects and wild beasts to destroy and harass all living creatures. Ahura Mazda creates a great peaceful, prosperous city, Ahriman introduces lies and deception; Ahura Mazda teaches work and faithfulness, Ahriman sloth, deception and misery; Ahura Mazda introduces just and moral government, Ahriman tyranny and anarchy. Ahriman and his forces seek to darken the light and spoil the beauty of creation by tempting humans into self-indulgence and greed, and fills them with rage and anger.

The life of the universe is the constant struggle of these two forces. Humans are called by Ahura Mazda to kindness, goodness, justice and truth, but Ahriman tempts they to lie, oppress, and murder. People are free to choose whom they will support, and every act and thought is an expression of their allegiance. Their choice has no effect on the ultimate outcome. After 12,000 years of battle, Ahura Mazda will triumph, but until then there is no final victory. (Biallas 1989, 210-210).

The battle is for control of the universe. If the wicked king wins, he creates an evil empire in which evil reigns. If the good king conquers evil, he establishes a kingdom of righteousness, justice, peace, love and harmony. To win, therefore, is everything, but ultimate victory, particularly in the face of apparent defeat, is evidence of who is good and who is evil. The defeated must admit the superiority, and therefore worthiness of their conqueror. In folk religions, conversions to new gods often follow dramatic 'power encounters.'

Morality in the battle is determined by a morality of "fairness," "equal opportunity" and success. To be fair, the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. The outcome must be uncertain. It is "unfair" to pit a professional ball team against a team of amateurs. Equal opportunity means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. If the evil side uses illegal and wicked means, the good side is justified in using them too. In cowboy films, the sheriff cannot draw first, but when the outlaw does, the sheriff can gun him down without a trial. In a moment the sheriff becomes judge, jury and executioner. In the end, both sides use violence, deceit, and intimidation to win the battle. Whatever evil means the good hero uses to gain the victory are now justified as necessary and expedient. Success is the proof of right, and enables the victor to establish order--the greatest good. The greatest evil is chaos.

In the Indo-European myth, the battle between good and evil is fought on different levels (figure 1). In the heavens, it is the battle between the gods and demons, in society between righteous and evil kings and people, and in nature between good and bad animals.³ The real battle is at the highest level, but skirmishes are fought on the lower ones. Humans are but pawns in the battles of the gods.



Underlying the Indo-European myth is the deep belief that relationships in the cosmos are based on competition, that competition is good, and that the good (strong, successful, intelligent) will ultimately win. The results of this unceasing competition are progress (civilization), development (economic), evolution (biology), and prowess (sports) as the stronger, better and brighter defeat the weaker, badder and duller.

In this myth, the battle is the center of the story. It is what people want to see. Many fables end with the words, “and they lived happily ever after.” There is, however, no story worth telling during the “happily ever after.” People pay to see the football game, and go home at the end of the game claiming victory or making excuses for a loss. The story ends when the detective unmasks the villain, the cowboys defeat the Indians, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leah thwart the Evil Empire, and Superman destroys the enemies of humankind. Victory in the Indo-European myth is never final, however, nor evil fully defeated. Evil rises again to challenge the good, so good must constantly be on guard against future attacks. Today's Super Bowl does not make a team the unchallenged victors forever. They must defend themselves next season.

This fascination with battle is evident in modern sports: football, basketball, tennis, hockey, chess and monopoly. People pay to see a baseball game. When the battle is over, everyone waits for the next one. The Indo-European religions may have died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1989), the Indo-European myth dominates modern thought. It is the basis for the theories of evolution and capitalism, and is the dominant theme in western entertainment. It is told and retold in westerns, detective stories, murder mysteries and science fiction. It is Superman, Spiderman, Super Chicken, Underdog, Sherlock Holmes, Colombo, Lone Ranger and Star Wars. It is the basis of most of the video games in arcades.

³ All three tiers are seen in the Panchatantra, the tales told in Indian villages to instruct children regarding the virtues and vices of daily living. Lessons are taught through the use of stories that tell of the intrigues and battles of the gods, of humans and of animals. Aesop borrowed many of his tales from this book. Today the same worldview is reflected in comics such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Road Runner in which animals live in a world that mirrors that of humans. They, in turn, live in a world that mirrors that of the gods.

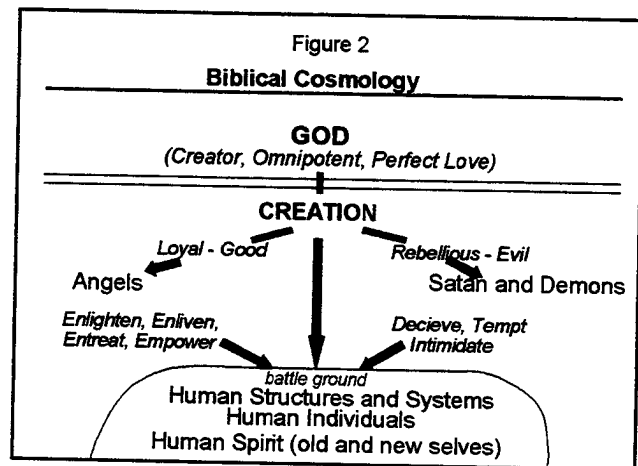
In Christian circles the Indo-European myth leads to a view of spiritual warfare as a cosmic battle between God and Satan in which the battle is fought in the heavens, but it ranges over sky and earth. The central issue is power: can God defeat Satan, can Christians overcome demons? Humans are seen as passive victims who will turn to Christ if they are delivered from the control of Satan.

Biblical Views of Spiritual Warfare

The biblical cosmology differs radically from the modern, animistic and Indo-European myths (figure 2). In the fallen world the lion eats the lamb (Isa. 11:6), and competition, not cooperation, works best. This, however, is not God's way. He cares for the weak and marginal. He calls Christians to love their enemies, and to seek reconciliation and peace. The biblical view represents God's reality which should, ideally, be reflected in the natural realm.

A biblical view of spiritual warfare must begin with God as eternal, righteous, loving and good. Evil is not eternal or ultimate. God and Satan, good and evil, are not eternal and coexistent. In the beginning was God alone, and God was good. Satan, sinners and sin appear in creation. Second, creation depends on God for its present existence. God did not create a universe that exists independent of him. Satan and sinners, like all creation, are contingent, and continue to exist through God's sustaining power. Their very existence in their rebellion is testimony to God's mercy and love.

The battle in Scripture between God and Satan is not one of power, to see who wins. God's omnipotence is never questioned. Even the power Satan and his followers use in fighting against God is God given. The Old Testament writers attribute Israel's victories and its defeats to God. Unlike animistic and Indo-European myths where success in battle is attributed to the power of the victors' god, Israel's losses are not blamed on Yahweh's defeat at the hands of other gods, but on Yahweh's judgment of his own people because they turned to other gods.



The encounter between God and Satan is a moral encounter. It is the battle between holiness and evil, justice and injustice, love and hate. As Eugene Peterson writes, There is a spiritual war in progress, an all-out moral battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in continuous and energetic battle against all of it. God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is contested (1997, 122-123)

God is righteous, light, life and truth. Evil is the perversion of good--deceitfulness, darkness and death. It is rebellion, broken relationships, idolatry, alienation and worship of the self. In this battle the cross is the ultimate and final victory (I Cor. 1:18-25). This was not an apparent loss saved at the last moment by the resurrection. The cross makes no sense in Indo-European terms. In it Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors, called in his angelic hosts waiting poised in heaven, and come down from the cross.

Satan rebelled against God, and all humans, following Adam and Eve, joined the insurrection. But God did not march in to destroy them all when they fully deserved punishment. He reached out to win people back to himself. His desire is not to stand triumphant on the battle field, but to gather all his creation around his throne in a kingdom of *shalom*. At the heart of Scripture is God's love. In the Indo-European myth, rulers oppress the weak, and leaders command their followers. Scripture speaks of love and commitment to the other regardless of the counter response. It gives priority to building community over fulfilling oneself; to servanthood, not lording it over others (Luke 22:25-27); to loving one's enemies, not destroying them (Luke 6:27, 35).

The biblical worldview focuses on relationships, not tasks and achievements. Consequently, it has room for chaos. Unlike the Indo-European view that all chaos is evil, Scripture has room for creative chaos as the unformed potential from which spring life and creativity--the unshaped material out of which God created the universe (Gen. 1:2), and the infant not yet grown to adulthood. It also has room for the chaos that is inherent in all truly mutual relationships. Marriage requires both husband and wife to give up their own self interests for the sake of the other. The birth of a child introduces turmoil into the routine of the home. Friendships mean letting go of power and sharing decisions.

What then is the battle? On the highest level it is between God and Satan and their angelic hosts, but it is not one of power. The Scriptures use the metaphor of a king and a rebellious vassal or steward (Matt. 21:33-43. See Gulick 1990). A faithful steward is appointed to rule over part of the kingdom, but later he rebels and persecutes the righteous in his district. The king does not arbitrarily cast out the rebel. He first demonstrates that the vassal is not worthy to rule by sending messengers calling the rebels to repentance and renewed allegiance. Satan and his followers, through humans and religious and political systems, find these messengers guilty on false charges and condemn them to death. The case is appealed to the supreme court in heaven. There the judgment is found to be unjust, and the case is overturned. The lower court itself is found to be evil, and, therefore, no longer legitimate, so it is removed from power and punished. The central issue is not one of power, but of justice and legitimacy.

God's final victory is the cross on which his son died, not a battlefield strewn with slain foes. It is the victory of righteousness over evil, of love over hate, of God's way over Satan's way. If Christians do not see the cross as God's triumph, they need to examine their understanding of spiritual warfare. On the cross Jesus became Lord and victor over all the

powers of evil. His obedience unto death "rendered powerless him who had the power of death that is the devil" (Heb. 2:14). The cross was Satan's undoing (Col. 2:15), but Satan's defeat is not an end in itself. Rather it removes the obstacles to God's purpose of creating people fit for His Kingdom (Gen. 12:1; Ex 19:3ff; I Peter 2:9).

On the personal level the battle between good and evil in Scripture rages in the hearts of individuals whom God is seeking to win, and Satan is trying to keep. It is for the allegiances of human beings who are not passive victims caught in cosmic battles. They are central actors, and the locus of the action. They all were co-conspirators with Satan, and self-worship was the basis of their idolatry. But God in his mercy and love calls them to repentance and to restored fellowship with him in his kingdom. The biblical parable here is the wayward son. The father lavishes his love on his son, but the son rebels and turns on his father. The father is not interested in defeating his son, but in winning him back, so he reaches out in unconditional love. The son wants to provoke the father into hating him, and twists logic to justify his rebellion, but the father takes all the evil his rebellious son heaps on him and continues to love the son. When the son repents, he is restored back fully into the family (Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:35-36). Satan, on the other hand, is seeking to keep the loyalty of each individual, but his methods are deceit, half truth, temptation, accusation and fear.

In salvation, people turn from evil and are delivered from the power that Satan formerly had over them. Every person who is "in Christ" shares in Christ's uniqueness, and need not be apprehensive or feel paralyzed with fear concerning Satan and evil spirits (I John 4:4). Christians are encouraged to pray for deliverance from this deceiver who seeks to woo them back (Mt. 6:23; Col 2:13). To hold that Satan still has control over Christians is to deny the greatness of their salvation. Satan and his hosts are dreadfully real and represent the powers of darkness arrayed in battle against God's Kingdom of Light. They seek to keep sinners from converting, and to win back those who have been saved. On the other hand, the hosts of God's angels minister to protect and guide the saints (2 K 6:17, Gen 24:7; 31:3,11,12; Dan 8:15-16, 9:3,20-23; Matt 1:20).

On the corporate level the battle is for human systems. Human beings create societies and cultures. There is much good in these, but there is also much evil in them. Cultural systems can blind people from the truth, and social systems can keep individuals from coming to Christ. Family ties, religious structures and social systems prevent them from converting on pain of persecution and death.

Missionaries must take spiritual warfare very seriously, but they must be careful not to focus on the battle as a cosmic battle between God and Satan to see who is the victor. To do so is to reduce God to the level of his creation, and to introduce doubt and fear as to the outcome of the battle. Most misfortunes and illnesses are not directly caused by demonic sources. They are part of the fallen estate of humans and the judgment of sin. The greatest hindrance to people coming to Christ is not demon possession, real as it is, but fallen cultural and social systems which lead people to the worship of self--the created rather than the creator (Rom 1:21-25).

Missionaries should also avoid the equation of Satan and his followers with territories that can be exorcized. To do so is to introduce animistic beliefs into the Christian worldview. It also implies that the people living in these lands are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods, and that once they are delivered they will be ready to believe in mass. This sells human sinfulness short. Even if demons are driven out, humans call them back and renew their individual and corporate rebellion against God.

The focus must be on God and his power, and the fact that being 'in Christ' protects people from the onslaughts of the enemy. When the focus is on demons and the battle, people are in danger of despair and lose sight of the fact that God is and always has been creator and ruler of all. C. S. Lewis notes,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight (1961, 3).

A secular approach to spiritual warfare denies its existence. A traditional or an Indo-European approach turns it into animism and magic. Missionaries must reject all three in a biblical understanding of warfare.