Worldview is one of the most fascinating and frustrating terms used by evangelicals. The first ten Google results for “biblical Christian worldview” are websites that delineate, dissect, and disseminate what it is. A closer look, however, reveals a wide variety of understandings on just what is being presented. We hear about it from our pulpits, read about it in theology and missions books, and find it discussed on blogs. It is just as at home in the evangelical academy (psychology, communication, philosophy, and theology all use it) as it is in mission training programs.

Unfortunately, the closer one looks at what people mean by the term the more confusing the picture of it becomes. Nailing ice cream to a wall is an apt metaphor for pinning down the definition. We all seem to use it, but just what does it really mean? Among missiologists, Paul Hiebert has long been recognized as a model thinker on worldview. With published reflections on worldview spanning decades and numerous worldview topics, including (in alphabetical order) conversion, epistemology, folk religions, logics, myth, the powers, spiritual warfare, symbolism, and syncretism (1989a; 1989b; 1992; 1997; 2006; 2008), Hiebert has left us a fascinating legacy to explore.

At the same time, one of the difficulties of discussing the legacy of Hiebert’s understanding of worldview, in contrast with his other legacies, is that he did not originate or introduce missiologists to the concept. Missiological publications on worldview, drawing from the originating philosophical and anthropological discourses, appeared at least a decade before Hiebert joined in (Luzbetak 1963; Loewen 1965) and they continue today, independent of his contributions (Kraft 2008). He is thus one voice among others, rather than the pioneering voice.

In light of this, it is not appropriate to evaluate Hiebert’s legacy in relation to worldview in the same way as the legacies for which he was the pioneer. In this brief article, then, we will explore selected contours of Hiebert’s perspective on worldview as seen in Transforming worldviews (2008), his last and most significant work on
the topic, before offering comments on the legacy of his perceptions for evangelical missiologists.

I. HIEBERT'S UNDERSTANDING OF WORLDVIEW

Hiebert's perspective was that worldview is essentially a mental schema through which people look at the world and by means of which they make sense of it. He posited that worldview is "the most fundamental and encompassing view of reality shared by a people in a common culture. It is their mental picture of reality that 'makes sense' of the world around them" (2008, 84). He defined it as comprising the "fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make [sic] about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives" (2008, 15). This composite picture is thus framed philosophically as being amenable to a certain type of rational discourse (e.g., critical realism). Given this orientation, it is not surprising that (as Hiebert notes) most of his research has focused on the cognitive dimension of cultures and worldviews, and far less on the affective ones (2008, 85).

Hiebert's approach to analyzing and understanding worldview is mapped out in Appendix A of *Transforming worldviews* (2008, 335). Synchronically, people (and societies) develop commonly shared mental maps that help them understand the structure of reality. These maps meld together worldview, ethos, cosmology, and root metaphors. Diachronically, people share stories of the cosmos, seen in their understanding of larger metanarrative(s) through their cosmogonies and root myths. Worldview is thus a significant component embedded within the mental maps of cultures, but not the only one, and can only be understood as one part of larger cultural systems. In turn the cultural system is only one of the interrelated systems that influence people. In ch. 3, Hiebert indicates that we should not isolate the study of worldview from the rest of the (cultural) system, let alone the multiple systems through which people can be understood (biological, physical, personal, and so on). However, in one of the ambiguities of his legacy in relation to worldview, Hiebert does not use a systems approach in the following analytic chapters (2008, 105-306).

A. Worldviews are Embedded in Cultures

As mental constructs, worldviews are invisible to external observers. At the surface level of a culture (or society) we experience only visible evidences of the underlying worldview through that culture's products, including patterns of behavior and enacted cultural dramas found in symbols, myths, and rituals. Underneath the sensory layer are the explicit belief systems that undergird the thing we experience.
Moreau: Hiebert's Legacy of Worldview

However, even deeper, and below those belief systems, lie a worldview and a means of maintaining the themes found in it (see Figure 1). By depth, Hiebert indicates that worldviews are immersed or embedded within the cultures, rather than the foundations on which cultures are built. There they "act more as keepers of tradition than as initiators of new worlds" (2008, 33).

**B. Worldviews Have Dimensions**

Hiebert (following an anthropological paradigm) presents worldviews as having three dimensions. The *cognitive* dimension is reflected in a person's beliefs. The *affective* dimension is reflected in a person's feelings. The *evaluative* (or moral) dimension is reflected in a person's values.

Figure 2 (below) illustrates that a person's beliefs, feelings, and values (which are in turn based on her or his worldview) function as "operators" on the experiences a person has in life, through which decisions are made that yield behaviors and other cultural products.

For example, according to Figure 2, when people experience a health crisis, the decisions they make and the behaviors they engage in are built on the beliefs, feelings, and values they have— which in turn are based on the worldviews that are entrenched deep within their cultures.
The clarity of this relatively simple construct helps us understand its popularity among missionaries, who regularly observe people of other cultures act in ways that initially do not make sense to the missionaries. The missionaries want to understand what they observe to enable them to better carry out their missionary task. Figure 2 indicates that understanding the dimensions of worldview will help them be better missionaries.

Finally, Hiebert presents a selected variety of themes and counter-themes in the various dimensions that have been previously utilized by anthropologists to explain worldview orientations (2008, 50-59, 64). He notes that analysts will choose from among the themes those they find to be the more significant in explaining behaviors of the culture under consideration, and may contrast them with the ways the same or similar themes are expressed in other cultures (2008, 103-4). However, he later points out that these themes and counter-themes are not static and that different social groupings within a culture contest with each other over them (2008, 324).

1. The Cognitive Dimension

Following an earlier generation of anthropologists such as Robert Redfield, Hiebert organizes the cognitive assumptions of worldview as our ideas about the nature of our universe (time and space), the nature of the physical world (existence and being), the nature of the power(s) in our world and how they operate, how we know, and the nature of causality (types of logic). For example, all humans form categories, and we can better grasp their worldview if we understand what types of categories they form and how they form
them. It is here that Hiebert's set theory comes to play an important role. Based on how such categories are formed, people organize taxonomies at both the formal (e.g., biological species) and folk (e.g., superstitious practices) levels.

In addition, in every culture signs and symbols are used in multiple ways, and understanding this is critical for understanding the cognitive dimension of worldview, as is an understanding of the types of logic (abstract, algorithmic, analogical, topological, relational, and wisdom), epistemological assumptions (the universe is real or illusory; the material and/or spiritual nature of reality), and types of powers (personal and/or impersonal) that are in control of the world. People use these to understand causality in everyday life, and they in turn build on and reinforce their worldviews.

2. The Affective Dimension

Similarly, in every society people experience feelings from delirious joy to wrenching grief, from excited anticipation to nervous anxiety. This capacity is a reflection, however distorted, of our being made in God's image. Worldviews affect how we experience, exhibit, value, and act on our emotions. The affective dimensions of worldview support our beliefs, when they "act as a wall, protecting beliefs from within and without by providing emotional support for their truthfulness" (Hiebert 2008, 59). The affective dimension of worldview is evidenced through the aesthetic side of a society, including art, music, drama, movies, literature and poetry, and so on.

3. The Evaluative Dimension

Human beings constantly face moral choices from the mundane (obeying speed limits) to the momentous (whether to get an abortion). As we grew up we were enculturated with a conscience that guides us in making moral decisions, even though we do not always follow it. Children in the United States grow up hearing stories of George Washington, Martin Luther King, or other heroes, while children in Kenya hear stories of Jomo Kenyatta. In both places, such stories serve the same purpose—they give the hearers frames of reference for judging the actions of themselves and others in their societies. The evaluative and normative assumptions—passed on through such stories—"give rise to the social and moral order in a culture" (Hiebert 2008, 60). Understanding the assumptions and themes of this dimension of worldview enables understanding of the moral prescriptions and understanding of sin that are part of every society, a crucial element of missionary work (Dye 1976; Priest 1994; Adeney 1995; Chuang 1995). As with the cognitive dimension, Hiebert's understanding of the evaluative dimension clearly draws on a philosophical (and theological)
orientation. In that sense, it is possible to see the evaluative dimension as an extension of the cognitive one rather than a truly separate dimension.

C. A Meta-Model: Worldviews Are in Human Contexts

Hiebert is concerned to help his readers avoid the dangers of reductionism, stratification, and integration approaching worldviews (2008, 71-75). To meet this challenge, he places the study of worldview in a much larger meta-model illustrating how we are to study any component of humanity, including worldviews (2008, 75-88).

As depicted in Figure 3, Hiebert's model shows that whatever human element we choose as the focus of our study is embedded in multiple systems (indicated by the circles), including cultural, biological, physical, personal, social, and spiritual systems. What we are analyzing—in this case, worldview—is impacted by every other system and should be analyzed in each system in light of all the others (indicated by the arrows). Thus, only a systems-level approach, correlating and integrating the interactive impact of each system on the focus of our study, will serve.

Also seen in Figure 3 is that these composite human systems move through time and have historical roots that shape them. Finally, all of this takes place under God's sovereign control, and he reveals himself as he oversees the movements of all cultures towards eternity.

Figure 3
(Source: Hiebert, Transformations, 88)
Worldview analysis, then, must account for the embeddedness and the complexity of the human contexts in which worldviews operate. In his presentation on worldview in relation to systems, Hiebert pays particular attention to worldviews as part of cultural systems, less attention to worldview in social systems, and only briefly mentions their embeddedness in personal and spiritual systems (2008, 80-87).

D. Worldviews Can Be Transformed

One of the most significant components of Hiebert's legacy is his concluding discussion on transforming worldviews. He grounds his understanding of transformation in the biblical language of conversion, which, he notes, includes both an initial turning from sin (repenting) and the process of walking in a lifelong discipleship relationship with God through Christ (2008, 310). It is both point and process. Repentance (the initial turning) results from a radical paradigm shift; discipleship (the process) more often results from the normal process of growth and development as a follower of Christ. At the worldview level, this involves point and process in the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions. For Christians, transformation can come through at least three means: 1) consciously unearthing and examining our worldviews to "make explicit what is implicit" (2008, 319); 2) being exposed to other worldviews and in turn examining our own worldview through the eyes of others, a "long and difficult process" (2008, 321); and 3) creating living rituals that enable us to "express the realities of life meaningfully to ourselves and to the world around us" (2008, 323).

II. WORLDVIEW LEGACY CONSIDERED

While there is no doubt that missiology (evangelical and otherwise) is indebted to Hiebert in many ways, the final assessment of his legacy in relation to worldview is still in process. That Transforming worldviews received the Christianity Today 2008 book of the year award in the global/missions category clearly indicates that evangelicals highly regard Hiebert's thinking and analytic skills. However, we are still left with the fact that the concept and term were originally developed in other disciplines. This reminds us that the legacy of Paul Hiebert in relation to worldview will of necessity be cloudier than in those areas he pioneered.

Certainly one difficulty in assessing the legacy of Hiebert's work on worldview is that the concept itself is neither clear nor precise:

It is one of those fascinating, frustrating words that catches our attention. Its ambiguity generates a great deal of study and insight, but also much confusion and misunderstanding. There is no single definition agreed upon by all. (2008, 13)
Hiebert identifies three significant problems with contemporary discussion related to worldview: 1) It focuses on cognitive dimensions; 2) it prioritizes sight/view over hearing/sound, the more dominant sensory perception in many cultures; and 3) it is applied without distinction to individuals and to cultures (2008, 15).

Hiebert's own approach does not really escape the first problem. For example, Figure 1 (above) indicates that "belief systems" are undergirded by worldview themes. The cognitive nature of both terms predisposes anyone who follows the model to construct worldviews in philosophical (or theological) cognitive categories. The second problem is addressed as a factor in the analysis of small-scale (2008, 115-16) and peasant societies (2008, 127-28) but not as an ongoing problem of worldview analysis. The third problem, regularly seen in missiological discussions, makes it impossible to untangle, for example, the "Muslim worldview" from the particular worldview of my Muslim neighbor.

One of the difficulties in assessing the legacy of Hiebert's understanding of the term is a lack of precision even in Transforming worldviews. This can be seen, for example, in Appendix A (2008, 335). There, Hiebert presents a summary table of his model for analyzing worldviews. However, he lists "worldview" itself as one of the synchronic sub-components of our world maps that are themselves part of our worldview. I am sure that his intention is demonstrating that worldview fits into a larger context, but the casual reader will not readily discern this distinction. This lack of precision about worldview can be seen throughout contemporary missiology, with missiologists such as Hiebert and Kraft developing models that do not cohere (Nishioka 1998)—demonstrating that much more work needs to be done.

However, this reality is evidence of a more fundamental problem with the concept of worldview and possibly the biggest challenge to understanding the Paul Hiebert's worldview legacy. Christians across a variety of academic disciplines such as education (Thiessen 2007), psychology (Blanton 2008), philosophy (Naugle 2002), and theology (Wright 2007) regularly use worldview as a key for understanding culture. However, many Christian anthropologists have distanced themselves from using worldview in this way, and anthropological discourse largely jettisoned the conceptual framework of worldview as a central base for cultural investigation decades ago (Howell 2006; Priest 2009a; 2009b). This alone puts into perspective the absence of recent dates for citations in Hiebert's historical review of anthropological discussion of worldview (2008, 15-25). Only two come from after 1984, and one of them is an adaptation of a social psychologist's perspective on individualism/collectivism (Hofstede 1994), the other an historical review of anthropological concepts (Bernard 2000). One is left with the conclusion that no recent developments in anthropology related
to worldview are significant enough to discuss, which supports the critique.

Given these challenges, we need to consider whether Hiebert's understanding of worldview is the most important legacy we have from Transforming worldviews. I prefer to see Transforming worldviews as Hiebert's attempt to bring to bear every significant conceptual tool he had available under the larger frame of the meta-model diagrammed in Figure 3 above. I distinctly remember a conversation with him several years ago over a potential book in which he excitedly explained how he would utilize a systems-approach to analyzing human experience. While the particular focus of Transforming worldviews is worldview, in light of Hiebert's comments to me it is possible that he saw the means of analysis as of greater significance than the topic. In his work on meta-theologizing (1994), in which the means of theological development was the focus rather than the (contextualized) theological product, the means used to understand worldview is a paradigm for future studies of human experience. In light of this, I propose that Hiebert's approach is a more important legacy than his understanding of worldview.

If this is true, we are left with the question of the viability of this meta-model. For example, the way Hiebert applied his method in the second half of the book (analyzing worldviews in small-scale, peasant, modern, postmodern, and glocal societies) is unfortunately an example of the type of reductionism he hoped to avoid. Even when he overtly returns to his meta-model in Transforming worldviews while discussing people movements in light of the systems in which they take place, the analysis would hardly fit a full-blown systems-level approach (2008, 324-32).

It is fair to say that though he proposed the method, it has yet to be fully modeled. If someone were to embark on such an ambitious project, we suspect that Hiebert would remind them that only a critical realist approach would provide a necessary restraint on overstating the anticipated outcome of such a large-scale enterprise.

To date I have not encountered a discussion in which the meta-model as a means of analyzing human experiences is the focus. Nor is it yet clear how successful Hiebert was in using his method to analyze worldview. The other legacies left by Hiebert, including the flaw of the excluded middle, set theory in relation to category formation in mission, and critical contextualization, were more focused analytic tools to be used wisely. The analytic possibilities of Hiebert's meta-model, however, shows how such tools can be used in ways that open up new horizons for understanding humans made in God's image and thereby more effectively participating in the missional task of the church.
Contemporary academics stipulate that no such modernist "Unified Field Theory" of understanding human behavior is possible. That should not stop Christians from asking whether Hiebert's meta-model accords with a biblical perspective and not only allows its pursuit but perhaps even demands it. Only time will tell.

References Cited


