
Some Thoughts on God and Culture: Divine Worldview, Torah as a Philosophy of Life, and the Possibility of Transforming Culture

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Abstract

While many seek to make God and Church relevant to a multiplicity of current cultures, the God of Scripture presents a Divine worldview that can function as a timeless philosophy. This enables one to evaluate secular cultures as evil. In Old Testament times, God's people repeatedly opted for the cultures around them in place of the worldview God offered. In New Testament times, the same Divine worldview is available to the Church. Christian leaders and parents must actively teach the Divine worldview or else the 2nd and 3rd generations will assimilate the evil cultures of their environment.

Introduction

Could Scripture provide any insight when facing the “modern” task of reaching the 2nd and 3rd generation? Indeed! Throughout Israelite history God constantly interacted with 2nd and 3rd and 4th and 5th generations of “new believers.” As Deuteronomy 7:9 (NASB) states, “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments.” God does not only respond to new generations of believers because of the natural reason of their birth, but more importantly, because He is bound by His covenant to remain faithful to His people throughout history. We have much to learn from the God who remains faithful and relevant to all generations throughout time.

Some Definitions

Since this chapter deals with the reality of God and culture, a brief definition of worldview and culture is imperative. Worldview in this chapter will be understood

as the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual interprets God, the world, and humanity. In regard to culture, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, writing on the relationship between God and culture, provides a possible definition of culture: “Culture is the world of human meaning, the sum total of a people’s works that express in objective form their highest beliefs, values, and hopes” (Vanhoozer, 1993, p. 9). What we see in culture is the “objective” outcome of particular ideas and beliefs, namely, a particular worldview. Culture is not something in itself, it is the visible manifestation of a particular worldview.

God and Culture: Evil or Good?

Even though the culture in which each individual grows up is an inevitable part of who that person is, it does not mean that culture is inherently good. Even secular scholars evaluate that “culture is evil as well as good because we, the human beings who constitute it, are evil as well as good” (Rogers, 1989, p. 242). Cultural diversity can emphasize the beauty of human uniqueness, yet it is still foundationally sinful. Scripture is not merely

a compendium of the different spiritual experiences/stories God's people had in their different cultures that could serve as inspiration for the existential struggles of modern society. Several theologians have advocated such a perspective in the past (see Dunn, 2003, p. 19). For these scholars, there is no Divine worldview (framework of ideas) seen in distinction from the cultural framework (objective expression of worldview) of the time.

In contrast, the inspired text of Scripture, written within particular cultures, testifies to one "higher worldview" communicated by God to man through Divine revelation. From Adam and Eve in Genesis to the prophetic remnant church of Revelation, this revealed worldview provokes humanity to live with such a point of reference, which radically differs from the governing worldview and culture of one's time.

For David Naugle, "Worldview has served a hermeneutic purpose in the church by helping believers understand the cosmic dimensions and all-encompassing implications of biblical revelation" (Naugle, 2002, p. xv). Culture itself is the visible outcome of particular worldviews. To address culture is to address worldview. Roman Catholics understand this, "Given that culture is the history-shaping outcome of humanity's native philosophical and religious impulse, in order to alter human experience for the better, a radical transformation must take place at the cultural level and in the set of basic ideas that make it up" (Naugle, 2002, p. 42). Roman Catholics know that to change culture, a change needs to take place at the fundamental level of ideas that ultimately shape culture itself. Knowing that culture is inherently evil, in the pages of Scripture God primarily confronts humanity with a different worldview—with ideas that carry the potential to change culture.

God and Culture: Some Biblical Examples

Scripture provides several examples regarding how God's revelation/worldview affects particular generations. An early example is the narrative of Noah. Noah gained favor in the eyes of God because of his righteousness "in this [his] generation" (Gen 7:1 NKJV), that is, by living life within a Divine worldview amidst a generation that rejected it. In contrast, part of the greatest failures recorded in Scripture had to do with an apparent disregard toward the revealed Divine worldview, which led God's people into assimilation with the worldview/culture of the time. While God attempted to give mankind a time of probation before sending the flood

(Gen 6:3), humanity continued to act in a downward spiral of corruption and bloodshed. The Bible indicates that God's Spirit would not "strive" (Heb. *yadon*) with mankind forever, and a window of 120 years was given for repentance to acknowledge a "higher worldview" that leads to humility before God. The people of that time rejected this opportunity, which led God to "destroy" (Hebrew *shachath*) the world which humanity had "corrupted" (same Hebrew word *shachath*).

After the Flood, the Divine imperative was "to fill the earth" as indicated by Genesis 9:1 (Mathews, 1996). Yet the people "settled" in one specific place to develop one specific culture at the Tower of Babel. They had "one language and one speech" (Genesis 11:1), contrary to the worldview God had revealed. The construction of the Tower of Babel makes visible their departure from God's revelation.

Additional examples of rejecting God's revealed worldview and Israel's departure from it include the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32) and later, king Jeroboam's introduction of counterfeit worship in Israel with golden calves in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-30). Such actions led Israel into exile. By the time Christ appeared, the Jewish nation as a whole, including the religious leaders and Christ's own disciples, expected the Messiah to establish a kingdom like the prevailing culture rather than the type Jesus attempted to inaugurate. The rejection of the divine revelation of the divine worldview results in the assimilation of the sinful worldview and culture of one's time. This summarizes the basic reality that creates the tension of God and culture.

God desires his culture and worldview to be concrete—real and tangible. The Old Testament prophets addressed this. Christ's kingdom described this in preaching and teaching and demonstrated it in actions and miracles. When analyzing the Hebrew and Greek of the biblical concept of "Kingdom" Ladd wrote, "When the word refers to God's kingdom, it always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised" (Ladd, 1959, p. 20). At its most foundational level, the Kingdom now is not primarily about geography, but about living life on earth under the worldview of God's rule. Such a life places God as the ruler of this world, and still "gives to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar" (Matt 22:21). This is the biblical tension: to have a radical Divine worldview while living in a world with a different worldview demonstrated in visible culture.

When it comes to reaching 2nd and 3rd generation young adults, the problem is not culture itself, but the worldview that develops culture. This gives primacy to understand the Divine worldview as revealed in Scripture and engage youth to creatively remain faithful to it in their particular cultural framework. This foundational approach provides a solid base compared to wrestling with any and every culture and subculture possible today. Israel was given the privilege to mature within a unique worldview informed by revelation while immersed in a variety of various cultures in their history. These various cultures that came and went were secondary to the worldview revealed by God and recorded in Scripture.

God and Culture: Torah as Philosophy of Life

The giving of Torah to Israel exemplifies the way God attempted to introduce worldview to His people throughout time. Torah encompasses much more than the term “Law,” for it is considered “the way” and “the instruction” and “the teaching” and acts in Scripture as a philosophy of life. Abraham Joshua Heschel contrasts the philosophy found in Torah from the philosophy found with the Greeks: “To the philosopher the idea of the good is the most exalted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate...things created in six days He considered *good*, the seventh day He made *holy*” (Heschel, 1955, p. 17).

From the beginning of a person’s life, leaders and parents had the great responsibility to teach their children Torah as this philosophy of life, as Divine worldview. The book of Deuteronomy, Moses’ last words to the Israelites who were to enter into the promise land, indicates the high responsibility God gave to parents and leaders at that time. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (NASB) reads: “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.” Israelite life was to be immersed in this Divine worldview. The verb “to teach” found in the verse appears in the intensive form only in this verse in the entire Bible, which demonstrates the unique action and responsibility that rested upon the leaders and parents in Israel. Psalm 1 picks up on this theme and expands it in a way that life and death are determined by one’s response to that which is found in Torah.

The tension between a revealed worldview of Scripture and the present culture of the world around

us raises the question, “Does the worldview revealed by God have the potential to change culture today?”

God and Culture: The Possibility of Transforming Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr presented the possibility of a Christ who transforms culture in his Yale lectures that were later published as *Christ and Culture*. According to Niebuhr, “The kingdom of God is transformed culture, because it is first of all the conversion of the human spirit from faithlessness and self-service to knowledge and service of God (Niebuhr, 2001, p. 228). In Old Testament times, the possibility of a “transformed culture” existed. The Divine worldview presented in Torah, for a period of time, was to transcend the walls of the Israelite homes to reach all the nations. Isaiah wrote, “And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the law [Hebrew *torah*] will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is 2:3 NASB).

Such a knowledge of God, or Divine worldview, should have transformed society and culture in the time of the Old Testament. The classical prophetic statements of Isaiah and other prophets hint at this possibility (see particularly Is 65). But Israel failed in their faithfulness to the covenant, and this transforming possibility faded away with such unfaithfulness. New Testament writers depicted the future eschatological heavenly realm by borrowing the imagery of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the transformation of society. The possibility of a “transformed culture” was gone from prophetic foresight. The role of Israel to transform culture from within is assumed by the church in the New Testament but without the prophetic anticipation that secular culture itself would be changed.

So while Niebuhr spoke of the Christ who transforms culture (present and active, not past and static), he is partially right in the sense that those who are “in Christ” today affect culture based on the revealed worldview that continues. Faithfulness to the revealed worldview had the possibility to transform culture and society in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, such faithfulness resulted in persecution for the disciples and early Christians, all the way to the eschatological remnant (see Matt 5:10; 2 Tim 3:12; Rev 12:13, 17). Paul wrote, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”

(2 Tim 3:12 NASB). The Old Testament imagery of a transformed society gets directed in the New Testament to the “New Jerusalem” as the concrete Kingdom of God.

God and Culture: Some Possible Implications

Based on this brief biblical outlook of the relation between God and culture, what are some possible implications to “reaching” 2nd and 3rd generation young adults?

First, it is imperative for leaders and pastors to understand the secondary role of culture in relation to worldview. What shapes culture is worldview, so to change culture, leaders must begin addressing a possible change in worldview. This calls for a return to a revealed biblical worldview. Instead of thinking about cultural ways to communicate the biblical worldview, think about the biblical worldview that has the capability to change cultural ways.

Secondly, The downfall of Israel was foundationally due to unfaithfulness or disregard to the Divine revelation/worldview. Such disregard resulted in counterfeit worship (1 Kings 12:25-33). The departure from the divine model of teaching Torah in everyday life led to assimilation with the surrounding cultures. In other words, superficial teaching of Torah leads to counterfeit praxis. This issue shows the responsibility leaders and parents have in being faithful to Torah and in teaching it to their sons and daughters. Christian homes and churches bear the same responsibility today. If leaders and parents would be faithful to the teaching of Torah as God imagined it, would there even be a discussion of how to reach 2nd and 3rd generation young adults?

Finally, even though the prophetic voice is silent in regard to the transformation of culture after the events narrated in the New Testament, this does not mean that changes in society cannot be made, by individuals or as the Church. Christian leaders must have a high view of those who are “in Christ” and their potential to cause

good in secular society, even while holding a negative view of secular culture. The relation of God and culture presents tensions that must be respected as they are. One example would be faithfulness to a Divine worldview while “giving to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar.” Another would be to perceive culture as inherently evil while expecting those “in Christ” to be a blessing as salt and light. These are but a few examples of biblical tensions that must be respected as they are.

As Ellen. G. White penned, “The habits and customs of fashionable society should not shape their [the youth of the church] course of action. The inspired apostle adds, ‘And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God’ [Romans 12:2]” (White, p. 20).

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