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The Reality and the Apparent: Worldviews and Missiological Strategies

The Worldview Concept

Worldview is an abstract concept used for identifying a set of assumptions people use to organize their view of reality. Conceptualizing worldview is a challenging task. Nobody has seen a worldview, but everybody has one. A worldview informs a person's interpretation of reality, their cosmology, and determines their actions and reactions. Charles Kraft (1988) considers worldview as the "center control box" of a person's life and communal culture. Most assumptions reflect one's unverified beliefs and answers to fundamental questions, such as who they are and who others are, how people should relate to each other, what causes things to happen, what time is, or how a group defines and interprets space. A people's worldview provides the meanings to be attached to the forms they observe. People evaluate the world around them based on their assumptions. Their logic and feelings are informed by their worldview. People even read and interpret Scripture in the light of their own set of assumptions.

In order to move people from where they are, missionaries need to discover where people really are. This process is made difficult by the hidden nature of assumptions. What is apparent may not be real. As Paul Hiebert notes (2008), the process of discovering a different worldview requires a metacultural grid that will make comparison between the missionaries' and the peoples' worldview possible. It is what Charles Van Engen calls "a cultural and spiritual interface" (1998:63). In order to further complicate the matter, missionaries too often do not know their own worldview. They cannot evaluate their own assumptions unless they are confronted or faced with a different culture sharing a different worldview. It is like going to war with a gun, only to discover that you do not have the right bullets. Such a crisis moment reveals the underlying assumptions people

operate with. When people realize they are not able to operate in a new context, they are forced to check their assumptions.

Such moments may occur when a person's reading and understanding of Scripture has no cultural equivalent in the new culture. For example, the tribes on the island of Papua have no idea what lambs or sheep look like or what their main characteristics are. To present Jesus to them as the Lamb of God creates a void often filled in with unwanted meanings. Some missionaries in their attempt to use another popular animal, the pig, as a symbol to describe Christ completely failed. Simply replacing one symbol with another one, without checking the deep meanings assigned to it by the local people can lead to serious distortions. It is not sufficient to exegete and understand the biblical text based only on one's own assumptions; it is imperative to discover the original cultural assumptions of the writers of the text, as well as the worldview assumptions of the people we are trying to reach. Our biblical interpretations may not be the biggest hurdle, but what we assume about the Bible and our lack of understanding of the local people's worldview is often the barrier that impedes missiological strategies.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that religion is assumed by some Western missionaries to be a part of life that can easily be removed or replaced with a different one. This modular view of human beings is not shared by most of the people groups in the world. For most cultures, life is an integrated system that is completely upset if a major part is removed or replaced. Religious assumptions are not only religious in nature but impact the very identity of a people group. Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism are not simply religions but ways of life, based on sets of assumptions that make sense of natural and supernatural realities to people in a certain culture. A Buddhist is not Buddhist because the person adopted a set of beliefs, but because the person shares in the way a community of people assumes things happen. Faith and beliefs are only expressions of the deep-seated assumptions that make up worldview. Unless Christianity is assumed, understood, and presented as an integrated alternative *way of life*, strategies to reach non-Christians may have only a limited impact.

Same Realities, Different Assumptions

In the West, people embrace scientific assumptions, such as the law of cause and effect, the existence of visible and known causes for everyday realities (such as viruses and bacteria as causes for disease), and energy being the result of interaction between atoms and molecules. Easterners are more concerned about invisible and unpredictable causes that

influence their lives, such as totems, amulets, spirits, and ancestors who they believe have power over them. When Westerners assume that space is measured quantitatively, mostly private, and belonging to a known owner, Easterners consider space as common, with ancestors and spirits inhabiting it freely, approaching it qualitatively, and assigning specific roles to it (i.e., sacred space, communal space). In fact, for the rest of the world, space does not belong to anyone; people are simply using it as clients and passing it on to the next generations.

Westerners are also influenced by their scientific worldview to believe that, even if God exists somewhere in heaven, there is an impenetrable gap between the supernatural and the natural world. Atheists, deists, and agnostics as well consider that people live under the natural laws, and that divinity is irrelevant to the already-in-motion world. For much of the world, heaven is on earth, with divinities, angels, spirits, demons, ancestors, as well as the unborn roaming among the living, although invisible. That is why Gypsies or Hindus leave water by the side of the house entrance so invisible spiritual entities can have a drink and be satisfied and not threaten the lives and luck of the living. It is equally important for the Chinese to bring food to the columbarium or the cemetery and honor their ancestors with the best dishes. Showing respect is also essential to the Indonesians in Tana Toraja, where they not only feed the dead but keep them in the house, dress them, wipe their sweat, and talk to them. The corpse of the deceased lives with the family until enough money is saved to provide an honorable burial.

Linear, non-repeatable time is equated with efficiency in the West and is measured quantitatively. Easterners define time qualitatively, related to events, and described as repeatable in different forms (pendulum, circle, or spiral). It is more important to establish and maintain relationships in time than to report that jobs and tasks are accomplished. What good is it to rush and finish a job and have nothing that adds to your honor? Work should continue, regardless of finishing jobs or not. Westerners interpret this attitude as laziness, not being aware of a different set of assumptions regarding time and work ethic. Unfortunately, Christian missionaries imposed on the rest of the world their Western view of time together with their model of worship and understanding of Scripture. That is why Easterners feel frustrated when worship begins and ends on time with no time to build relationships either with God or with others. For them, worship lasts as long as it is needed, including plenty of time to introduce important and honorable guests, time to warm up by singing and sometimes dancing, fellowshiping together around the meal, or enjoying time in nature. Their evaluative assumptions dictate that community and relationships entail plenty of time and are more important than to measure

it strictly according to a preset schedule. A God that is strictly requiring only one hour for worship is a foreign God to most of the rest of the world.

The same evaluative assumptions inform each culture regarding morality, regarding what is right and what is wrong, how to relate to truth, and how to interpret reality. When worldview assumptions inform a group of people that truth and justice are important values, laws and consequences predominate in the culture. When honor and face are assumed to be the most important values, everything else is subjected to that value. What the West considers a lie, is only an acceptable means to save face in the rest of the world. In fact, Easterners point to God blessing two midwives that tell the Egyptian pharaoh a lie in order to save Jewish babies. And Western Christians have a hard time explaining why Jesus, when asked if he is going to Jerusalem for Passover, answers negatively, only to show up at the Temple teaching people publicly. While for the West gossip is negative, for the rest of the world it is a necessary social control mechanism to bring back in line those who deviate from community norms.

To end up in a government court is a shame for most tribes and communities. In opposition to the Western obsession with justice, communal societies have their own mechanisms to take care of conflicts. Gypsies have their own tribunals, called *kriss*, where the issues are dealt with internally. Not to be able to solve the issues becomes a shame not only on the perpetrator, but also on the community whose leaders failed to reconcile the parties.

The way two different worldviews read the Scripture is interesting. The process Jesus described in Matthew 18 was not primarily confrontative. The three phases presented in the text offer the culprit enough time and chances to avoid the shame of publicly losing face. Bringing someone else in the second phase is not simply to have a witness or to put more pressure on the person, but to act as a mediator between the opposing parties. Only when the behind the scenes attempts fail to correct the person, is public shame used as the last resort to awaken the conscience of the accused that something is wrong in their life and the consequence may be ostracism from the community. Although to a Westerner this may seem a complicated, time consuming, and unnecessary process, to the rest of the world it is important to show mercy before judgment.

Worldviews and Missiological Strategies

Missionaries and missiologists design strategies to reach diverse groups and individuals around the world; however, the diversity of assumptions regarding the same religious or cultural forms clash and create confusion and tensions. Although well intended, missionaries often fail

to discover the assumptions and meanings people traditionally attach to religious rituals and symbols and impose their own meanings that are often even foreign to the local people. Out of respect or because they are sometimes forced, people adopt the missionaries' views, values, and allegiances on top of their old ones. Conversion, in this instance, happens at the level of forms, but not of meanings, and this usually leads to syncretism. Whenever such Christians are not closely supervised by missionaries or local church leaders, they often return to their old assumptions and practices during times of crises. Missiologists have discovered that real conversion does not take place unless the values, assumptions, and allegiances that make up a person's worldview are also aligned with biblical values. Christian growth and maturity takes place only when the values of God's Kingdom supersede the old ones. Faith in and loyalty to Jesus come only from a changed worldview.

It is also quite natural for a person's worldview to oppose any change. Since one of the roles of worldview is to make sense of the surrounding reality, it integrates factors that result in a cohesive view and rejects what does not correspond to the agreed view. Worldviews also supervise change. New elements are continuously monitored, and when an interpretation of the current challenge is found, it may be included in the worldview, or the new findings may alter old conclusions or be totally rejected.

Worldview change is an area of vital importance in the area of mission, but also an area where missionaries and evangelists usually have limited impact. What missionaries may do is to present a new interpretation of reality or a new set of assumptions. These new ideas set up tension in the psyche, and it is this tension that the Holy Spirit can use to help a person make major changes to their underlying worldview.

It is also in the area of worldview change that a careful study of the culture of the people by the missionary can make a tremendous difference. By studying and understanding the deep cultural meanings in the local culture the missionary may be able to use potential bridges to connect old worldview concepts with the new biblical assumptions and meanings.

Missionaries should also present their own lives as examples, showing that a different interpretation of reality is possible and illustrating the fact that living biblically leads to better results. "Come and see" is more effective than any doctrinal presentation. An integrated way of life is a powerful argument that always attracts. There is no perfect or complete worldview; but when another worldview presents more credible answers to the basic questions of life—identifying the problem and offering a solution—people are more willing to embrace it. Even the young rich ruler noticed that Jesus was offering a more integrated set of assumptions, but

he was not prepared to accept the suggested changes. He would have lost his cherished sources of honor and respect, a worldview change that for him was just too costly.

Mission strategies should take into consideration peoples' culture and ways of coping with the new. Research is needed to discover the meaning people assign to religious symbols and rituals. Stories and songs have to be listened to, observation of daily life should be analyzed and compared with information provided by interviews. Integration of the different aspects of life should become mandatory before Christianity is presented as a new way of life.

An important assumption mission strategists often failed to pay attention to in the past was the communal character of non-Western cultures. Instead of contacting individuals and using an individualistic approach, communities should be invited to test the new worldview together. Either through the tribal chief or the group leaders, permission has to be secured as a sign of respect and honor. Experience shows that when a decision is made, a large majority of the group will embrace Christianity. However, the problem seems to reside in Western worldviews that believe conversion must be individual and not as a group. Perhaps in this regard, it is important to recognize that the Holy Spirit can also convert groups of people, an important concept in order to build appropriate strategies for much of the unreached world. When the thousands were baptized during and after the Pentecost, they were not separate individuals but families, clans, and groups. Paul also baptized households.

These types of group think and communal assumptions should be integrated into a missionary's worldview about mass conversions before a truly integrated strategy can be effectively implemented in the rest of the world.

There are two major factors that facilitate change: desire and crisis. Hiebert calls them "growth and radical shift" (2008:316). When people are curious or have been exposed to a new way of life, they usually want to try and taste the results for themselves. There are signs of openness and growth. Preparation strategies should be developed to raise peoples' interest. But equally important is for mission strategists to be receptive to the crisis a group may be facing. Migration due to wars or natural cataclysmic events, immigration due to economic reasons, and political or social upheavals may constitute windows of opportunity when peoples' worldviews or assumptions are shattered and they are more open to change.

Case Study: The Kanak

In 2017 Cristian Dumitrescu and I had the opportunity to do research among the Kanak tribes in the Pacific. The Kanak people is a Melanesian

indigenous group located on the main island of New Caledonia, one of the largest islands in the Pacific Ocean. The group consists of 341 tribes speaking more than 30 tribal languages. In spite of their physical, cultural, and linguistic differences, they were all shaped by the *La Coutume* and currently share values and beliefs. Their history was marked by colonization and by the Kanak revolt against the French in 1878. However, the revolt was crushed when the French colonists managed to turn some of the tribes against the others and kill Ataï, the Kanak leader of the revolt. Since then, the Kanaks have suffered not only the trauma of colonization and being dispossessed from their lands, but have also suffered because of a conflict of worldviews.

They were further shamed when more than 4,000 convicts were brought to New Caledonia, and the island became a penal colony (Bullard 2000). To further add insult to the people, Ataï's skull was kept in a museum in France for more than a century, and even when it was finally returned to Kanak territory, the French authorities refused to allow a proper funeral and burial in the ancestral land. Since reconciliation is one of the highest values in the Kanak worldview, this trauma, shame, and humiliation continues.

The colonizers brought not only a different way of life, upsetting local traditions, but they used early Christian missionaries for political purposes. The French used their imperialistic attitude to demean the Kanak animistic tribal faith and beliefs, which finally led to discouragement, despair, and resignation by the Kanak peoples. The colonizers also took advantage of the reciprocity principle of *La Coutume* and exchanged tobacco, alcohol, and food for land. Although Christianity was used as a colonization and civilization means, it brought hope to the Kanak. It taught them how to adapt to the new conditions imposed by the Christian colonizers. Missionaries considered the locals savages in need of civilization in order to be saved. Education was equated with salvation. However, conversion happened on the surface in terms of changed behavior and a better moral lifestyle. Most Kanaks today declare themselves to be Christian, but in reality they are nominal Christians holding on to much of their animistic worldview. The apparent is clearly different from the real.

The Kanak love retelling *La Parole* (the Word), the tradition and history passed on to them by their ancestors. *La Parole* tells them who they are, where they came from, why they are there, and what they can expect in the future—the basic questions that a worldview answers. Their traditional worldview is reinforced through *La Parole*. On the other hand, *La Coutume* is an ancestral code of social relations (a set of rules and rituals) which define the Kanaks' relationships with the world, the ancestors, the land, and the community. It orders their way of living, being, communicating,

and how to relate to the group, the material world, the unseen world, and others—Melanesians and newcomers (LaFargue 2012:5-6). *La Coutume* allows *La Parole* to manifest itself among people; it is a set of practices that the Kanak have developed to give the Word—*La Parole*—a form, a body through the expressions and symbols of *La Coutume* (Klein 2012:8). This set of traditions harbors the Kanaks' spiritual and religious sympathies, beliefs, emotions, and values. Without understanding the symbols, meanings, and functions attached to *La Coutume*, one cannot comprehend the Kanak worldview.

Even the island's political authorities seemed to have understood the value of *La Coutume*. Subsequent social movements and revolts during the 19th and 20th centuries restored part of the Kanaks' traditions and tribal organization. The French government recently allowed the establishment of Customary Civil Courts, where contextual judicial practices of *La Coutume* could be implemented (Demmer 2017:15). In this court the Kanaks not only deal with the shame a crime places on the perpetrator, but with the shame placed upon the entire community. Shame affects relationships as well as the harmony between clans. The Customary Courts provide the venue for the restoration of honor. Restitution is encouraged and consensus is attained. Communal values take precedence over individual ones, and traditional restoration processes are enacted before or instead of the usual legal civil or penal ones.

A Customary Court brings the perpetrator in front of the community. Although consequences cannot be avoided, the punishment is dealt with in a communal way. Other tribe members may voluntarily choose to share in the punishment, restoring the honor of the ones dishonored, while at the same time enhancing their own honor. They act as a substitute, a redeemer for the perpetrator. The ritual is not focused on punishing the offender, but punishment is delivered so the culprit will be able to reintegrate into the community and have his honor restored. Reconciliation and the restoration of relationships are the final goals.

The Grand Hut is another central symbol for understanding the Kanak worldview. The hut is the place where heaven and earth meet. The customary space, a sacred space in front of the hut, is surrounded by tall trees that are more than 130 years old. Here *La Coutume* is practiced in the presence of the leaders of the host tribes, as well as leaders from other guest tribes. The Grand Chief is the custodian of the Grand Hut, the place where the divine spirits and the ancestors come to meet human beings. The symbolism of the hut unites the three levels of Kanak cosmology: the lower invisible level of the unborn, the visible level of the living, and the upper invisible level of the world of spirits and deified ancestors. In the Melanesian worldview the deified ancestors continue to remain active

and integrated in the life of their families by blessing, cursing, protecting, and reprimanding (Doumenge, Métais, and Saussol 1986:257).

Relationships and belongingness are high values for the Kanaks, and they are expressed both toward the spirits and fellow human beings. An individual is tied to the clan and the community, one's identity is provided by the lineage, not by personal achievements. Collectivity needs consensus, and all meetings last until consensus is achieved. All voices are heard, and the art of listening is mastered. The atmosphere is one of humility, with many symbols in the customary space reminding participants that respect and humility are core values. In the end, the decision of the Grand Chief will be supported by everyone, for reconciliation is the final goal.

Reconciliation is also the message of the Bible. Since humans have turned their back on the Creator God, his special mission is to reconcile the entire creation. God's character is at stake. Although God loves the sinner, the consequences of sin cannot be removed. Punishment is required by the law. However, God himself steps down and receives the punishment in a redemptive way, opening the way for reconciliation. Acting as a substitute, he earns the right to offer the sinner pardon and a chance to have his honor restored. By bearing the shame, he removes shame. The Kanak worldview expressed through *La Coutume* offers bridges to present the gospel to them.

Sin has to be presented as shame, both for the individual as well as for the community. Adam and Eve felt ashamed because of the broken relationships with God and with each other. They felt naked, alone, and exposed. They lost face, innocence, and purity. In spite of their shameful-ness, God, whom they shamed, came to restore their honor by restoring his relationship with them. Jesus as the Word (*La Parole*) comes to teach humans how to live (*La Coutume*) as the Great Ancestor (The Ancient of Days, the God of all ancestors) in the Grand Hut (The Sanctuary). He dwells with his people (Immanuel). This is a possible bridge missionaries could use to reach the Kanaks, a people concerned about their identity and ultimate spiritual realities.

Conclusion

Worldview change implies enabling the Holy Spirit to work in peoples' lives in order to raise awareness of their condition and the need for repentance. The meaning of "being born from above" (μετάνοια) is a change of mind, a turning point, a change in view or of one's way (Arndt, Danker, and Bauer 2000:640; Louw and Nida 1996:509). Unless the Holy Spirit touches the deepest values and assumptions, real conversion is not complete. Adventist missionaries and missiologists, evangelists, pastors,

and administrators need to re-evaluate their mission strategies. Change needs to involve more than behavior and belief; it must include change at the worldview level. Change at the worldview level usually takes place when cultural bridges have been identified in order for the message to be relevant.

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