

19 Engaging Worldviews¹

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Introduction

The work of the missionary consists in facilitating the spiritual birth of new followers of Christ and making disciples out of them.² Both tasks involve an element of “science” and mystery.

Announcing the gospel and bringing a person to a point of decision involves the deployment of a sophisticated set of skills, from exegeting a culture, nurturing relationships, building bridges between individuals and the gospel,³ to leading that person into an encounter with Jesus Christ. A significant deficiency in any one of these steps has the potential to impede the missionary’s effectiveness.

The missionary enterprise also entails some elements of mystery. Chief among these is human free will, which denotes an individual’s ability to accept or reject the invitation to enter into a relationship with Christ.⁴ Another factor is the Holy Spirit, who alone can trigger a sense of need and openness to the person of Christ. Without the intervention of the Spirit and a constant reliance on him, the work of the missionary will come to naught (John 15:26-27; 16:8-11.13).

The same thing holds true for discipleship. It is science in that it entails the transmission of a certain kind of information. It is mystery in that discipleship is about spiritual transformation, which is also contingent on the intervention of the Spirit and the individual’s willingness to be transformed.

The transmission of propositional truth, which encompasses Christian doctrine and the basic elements of the biblical worldview, is critical to both outreach and discipleship.⁵ While there is no radical dichotomy between Christian doctrine and those concepts that are more germane to a discussion of worldview, for the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the latter. As a starting point for this discussion, I will explore the concept of a biblical worldview by examining the creation account attested in Genesis 1-3.⁶ I will subsequently offer some elements of reflection for

the possible relevance of this discussion, first for traditional cultures where belief in magic and spirits is intrinsic to the belief system, and, second, for cultures where modernity is prevalent.⁷

What is a Worldview?⁸

The Anabaptist missiologist Paul Hiebert defines worldview as the “fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives.”⁹ Elsewhere, he adds,

A 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. This worldview is based on foundational assumptions about the nature of reality, the “givens” of life, and clothes these belief systems with an aura of certainty that this is, in fact, the way reality is. To question worldviews is to challenge the very foundations of life, and people resist such challenges with deep emotional reactions. There are few human fears greater than a loss of a sense of order and meaning. People are willing to die for their beliefs if these beliefs make their deaths meaningful.”¹⁰

A worldview constitutes—consciously or unconsciously—a particular perception of reality, especially as it pertains to the divine, humanity, the universe, and the relationship between all three spheres. While a worldview, by definition, will be coherent, self-validating and self-consistent, whether or not it actually reflects reality is another matter altogether. Suffice it to say that any particular worldview is reality for those who embrace it. This is why, as Hiebert intimates, discussions involving worldview issues can be so emotionally intense. This also explains why the worst military conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have and will continue to be rooted in ideological imperatives.

Understanding someone else’s view of reality is much more than identifying a list of isolated beliefs. It is an attempt at apprehending how these beliefs interact with each other in order to form a system. In that respect, it would be a mistake to believe that a worldview is something that is always static. Because a worldview is the filter through which experience is interpreted, new phenomena may have a significant impact on how reality is defined. For missionaries, this observation is critical, for it implies that under certain circumstances, worldviews can be reshaped.¹¹ Conversion and genuine discipleship occur when an individual allows the biblical worldview to reengineer the structural pillars of his or her perception of reality.

A Biblical Worldview?

The Nature of Genesis 1-3

Some will no doubt balk at the notion of a coherent biblical worldview.¹² Can we not concoct any worldview we wish by carefully selecting passages that support our preconceptions and preferences? Such an objection is valid and deserves to be addressed. One could, for instance, use the prologue of the book of Job to postulate a universe in which God and Satan routinely meet to discuss the moral virtues of exceptional men and women only to devise painful ways to test their integrity. In such a universe, needless to say, it is highly advisable to maintain a low profile, if only to avoid becoming the target of a divine wager.

While all Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative (2 Tim. 3:16), individual texts address a variety of issues. Moreover, biblical texts must be interpreted in the light of their literary specificity.¹³ This implies that any investigation must first begin with texts that address the issue at hand. Identifying such primary texts provides a control factor and a common point of reference for further discussion.

It is my contention that the first three chapters of Genesis offer the best starting point in terms of outlining a biblical worldview.¹⁴ Genesis 1-3, by virtue of its literary genre as a creation narrative, was designed to provide the blueprint of a new worldview. Its primary purpose was to propose an alternative to the Canaanite/Mesopotamian¹⁵ worldview the Israelites had absorbed over 400 years of captivity in Egypt.¹⁶ It should be further noted that the creation account was in fact a polemic text. It was designed to undermine the recipients' worldview and provide them with one that would reflect a more accurate portrayal of reality.¹⁷

In a manner consistent with a creation story, Genesis 1-3 is specific about issues that are central to worldview and silent on peripheral matters. For instance, it contains no explicit information about the sacrificial system as such, and no allusions to the ritual, sacrificial, or moral laws found in Leviticus and Numbers. There are no exhortations to show mercy and compassion to the poor and the vulnerable. It's not that the type of stipulations associated with the covenant are irrelevant; it's just that these issues more precisely represent derivative trajectories actualized in the specific context of Israel's history. While many of the statements found in the narrative open new horizons on a whole array of social issues, there are few explicit extrapolations as such. The creation narrative was designed to offer critical insights into the basic architecture of reality.

In addition to providing the theological DNA for the rest of Scripture, the creation account was intended to provide the ideological foundation needed to enable the Hebrews to shift successfully from Baalism to Yahwism. As such, it follows that

this foundational text may also represent the most adequate basis to ensure a robust transition from paganism, whatever form it may take, to Christianity!

Ensuring an effective transformation of worldview is one of the most critical issues missionaries face. At the risk of being misunderstood, I would venture to say, in the spirit of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), that conversion is but a first step; new believers must be equipped to resist the temptation to re-embrace their former worldview or live in a syncretistic system.¹⁸

As Paul Hiebert cautions, new converts must avoid two pitfalls. The first is secularism, which would manifest itself in a growing disregard for the spiritual dimension of the Christian life. The second would involve an inadvertent return to a Christianized form of animism “in which spirits and magic are used to explain everything.”¹⁹ A contextualized and thorough integration of the creation account may in fact represent the most effective way of ensuring that the conversion process reaches into the very DNA of a person’s identity, contributing thereby to stabilizing and reinforcing the new convert’s commitment to Christ.

An Alternative Worldview

If we can safely assume that the creation story was designed to provide an alternative worldview, it might prove helpful to identify what it was competing with. From the evidence we can gather from the book of Exodus, it appears the Hebrew slaves had, in nearly 400 years of slavery in Egypt, absorbed the major elements of the Mesopotamian cosmology.²⁰ While many aspects of the Mesopotamian worldview can be gleaned from a variety of sources representing various literary genres, they can most readily be identified from ancient mythology.

The most widely-known ancient Near Eastern myths are the Atrahasis and the Enuma Elish.²¹ These stories teach that the universe was created in the context of conflict, war, and violence. Human beings were conceived in order to be slaves in the service of the gods. They had no inherent sense of identity beyond the purpose for which they had been created. They were born slaves and would die as such. The gods were fundamentally evil and unpredictable. Human existence was characterized by uncertainty and fear; there was hope neither in this life nor in the one to come. Men and women had no intrinsic sense of dignity and worth. The life of the average Mesopotamian was devoid of ultimate significance.

Ancients lived in a world where there was little intersection between human and divine justice. Mesopotamians were cosmic orphans who had no one to appeal to. They constantly sought to appease the gods. If calamity struck a man, it was assumed that a god had been offended, or that a demon had been summoned against him.

Not only would he be ignorant of the identity of the god he had offended, he would completely be in the dark with respect to the nature of the offense itself. With a notion of justice that had little commonality with the more fluid and ever-shifting “justice” of the gods, such a man lived in a world devoid of universal moral rules. His only hope to live an uneventful life was to remain off the gods’ “radar.”

Human beings were the helpless victims of divine cosmic forces. Overwhelming powers determined their past, their present, and would inexorably shape their future. Men and women were entirely dependent on diviners and other such “spiritual” specialists to discover the ever-elusive will of the gods and to protect themselves against their wrath.²²

This, in a nutshell, describes what Israel’s neighbors believed. And this is the belief system the Hebrews themselves came to assimilate during their stay in Egypt. The Genesis creation account was designed to provide a radically different and revolutionary alternative to this particular portrayal of reality.

Blueprint of a Biblical Worldview

A Revolutionary Vision of the World

The biblical creation story represents one of the most remarkable texts ever to emerge from the ancient world, and the worldview it embodies is unlike anything else.²³ As a creation account, it is intended to broadcast a number of foundational concepts about the essence of reality, particularly as it pertains to God, humanity, and the universe. Moreover—and in this lies the true significance of this text—not only is it foundational, it is also profoundly subversive of some of the most disturbing characteristics of human culture. Its teachings are intended to act as an acid on the structures of dehumanization and exploitation that all human societies inevitably create and reproduce with every new generation. In that sense, it is indeed *good news*.

While a detailed analysis of Genesis 1-3 is clearly beyond the bounds of this essay, I will nevertheless highlight some of the most important concepts these chapters offer. As a starting point, I will examine two of the story’s most seminal intuitions. I will then provide a summary of its major themes and outline some of its theological implications.

The Demythologization of the Universe: Only One God

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).²⁴ This text states that there is only one God, and that he created the entire universe.²⁵ This deceptively simple statement contains the seeds of the eventual demise of the

entire Mesopotamian mythical universe. It is the bell toll that marked the end of the age of the gods and the beginning of the age of men. Genesis 1:1 affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over creation and distinguishes the person of God from the created order.

One of the greatest theological innovations offered in Genesis 1:3-25 is the proclamation that the universe is “object” and not “subject.” Whereas Mesopotamian cosmology portrays the physical universe as the medium of divine essence, in the creation account, the physical universe is purged of any consciousness whatsoever. By repositioning humanity over nature (Gen 1:27-28), the narrative sets the stage for humanity to take its rightful place in the universe: Not as slaves of divine cosmic powers, but as Yahweh’s ruling representatives over the entire world (see also Psalm 8).

By its repeated allusions to the goodness of creation, the author declares that humanity lives in a “friendly” universe. This is not to suggest that the world is devoid of challenges (the text, after all, locates its audience in a fallen world). It is, however, a universe in which humans no longer need to fear (or covet!) supernatural powers and those who claim to wield them.

In the very process of eliminating the foundation for magic—by erasing the very existence of the gods on whom the powers of magic depended—this text had a surprising side effect. It set into motion the conditions that would eventually redefine humanity’s relationship to the physical world and establish the foundation for the development of science as we understand it.²⁶

As long as people believe that the conditions necessary to sustain human life are governed by divine interventions contingent on cultic rituals, as was the case in the ancient Near East and is still prevalent in traditional societies, they will primarily look to ritual to solve the crises that regularly threaten their existence. If, however, there is an authoritative text that eliminates the cosmic space necessary to support belief systems, human beings can acquire a new horizon to negotiate reality. They are free to navigate the challenges of human existence, not by appealing to sacred rituals and magic, but by exploiting the greatest God-given resource on earth: the three-pound brain.²⁷

The notion that magic could mysteriously influence human life was one of the commonly-held beliefs the creation account was designed to undermine. In this respect, the text could not have been more explicit. By draining the cosmos of its divine essence, the narrative reveals magic for what it is: a pure fantasy of the mind. It is the formal proclamation that in effect, “A piece of wood is only and always a piece of wood!”

The prophet Isaiah's blunt indictment of idolatry in 44:6-19 represents a powerful contextualization of Genesis 1. Creation theology is also at the core of Paul's confident response to the Corinthians' concerns about eating meats sacrificed to idols/demons in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (see especially 1 Cor. 8:4-6 and 10:25-26). While Paul acknowledges the pervasiveness of the pagan ideology that animates the Corinthians, showing particular concern for the conscience issues with which some of the weaker Christians are struggling, he leaves no room for the reality of magic or attributing to demons effective power over the physical universe. When it comes to these evil entities, the primary concern consistently orbits around the question of allegiance and loyalty (1 Cor. 10:20-22).

The Nature of Humanity: In God's Image

According to Genesis 1, the creation of the universe is the outcome of God's peaceful and benevolent intent. There is no hint whatsoever of divine conflict, war, or violence directed at humanity. The world is the expression of God's goodness towards the human race and is created for its benefit. Human beings are not created to serve as slaves, but to live as God's representatives (Gen. 1:26-31) and partners in shaping and managing the world (Gen. 2:15-17).

Because they are made in the image of God, human beings are endowed with intrinsic value and dignity (see Gen. 9:6). They are not portrayed as the helpless victims of cosmic powers that inexorably shape their destiny. In this respect, the account of the Fall (Gen. 3:1-24) confirms the intuition inherent to the concept of the image of God. Not only does this text proclaim humanity's freedom and ability to shape its future, but by holding men and women accountable for their actions, it also affirms human dignity and moral responsibility. Human destiny is not written in the stars or the entrails of animals but lies squarely in our hands.

Summary

The following statements provide a concise summary of some of the basic concepts and implications of the worldview outlined in the creation account.²⁸

1. The universe is created good by a benevolent God. It is ordered, predictable, and meaningful. The environment is not something to fear but the very expression of divine generosity (Gen. 1:1-31).
2. The creation of the universe has its origin in the intention of a good God and not in a primordial violent cosmic conflict (Gen. 1:1-2).
3. Human beings are assigned intrinsic value and dignity (Gen. 1:26-30).²⁹

4. Human beings are endowed with free will, an attribute that finds its ultimate expression in the context of their relationship with God (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15-14; 3:1-24).
5. Human beings are accountable for their actions (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-24).³⁰
6. Human fate is in the hands of God, but also in our capacity to choose that which leads to life or death (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-24).
7. While the creation story recognizes the reality of a multiplicity of factors involved in the process that leads to human disobedience (the serpent and Eve's own impulses, for instance—see Gen. 3:1-6), moral responsibility is ultimately attributed to humans. The emergence of sin in history is attributed to human free will.
8. While the act of disobedience described in Genesis 3:1-7 deeply affects every dimension of human existence, by assigning clear moral responsibility to Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-24) and later to Cain (4:6-12) for their actions, the narrative reminds the reader that sin does not entirely rob men and women of the dignity that derives from being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; see also Gen. 9:6 and Psalm 8), and of their ability to choose God.³¹
9. This is not to say that we stand in a neutral position with respect to choosing God and making moral choices. Scripture does indeed point to sin as something that is not simply the outcome of our environment. Genesis 2:17 and 3:7-22 describe sin as a principle that is also ontological, which, following the first act of human disobedience, has infected the very core of human nature, leaving in its wake a fundamental hostility towards God in the human heart (Matt. 15:19; Rom. 3:9-20; Col. 1:21; etc.). Sin is a structural deficiency that forever finds expression in the universal human impulse to worship death and create cultures of death. It is for this reason that the Holy Spirit is involved in convicting all men and women of sin and attracting them to the person of Christ (John 16:5-11; 1 Cor. 6:12-13; see also John 12:32).
10. Human beings are called to embrace life (Gen. 1:28; 2:15-17).
11. Human beings do not discern that which is true from false by consulting some guru, drawing a precise list of do's and don'ts, engaging in a cultic ritual, appealing to magic, or immersing themselves in esoteric experiences. Discerning the true from the false is, more often than not, the result of an intentional, conscious, and reasonable process that begins with and is constantly informed by a careful assessment of God's word (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-24).
12. Human beings have the ability to meet the challenges of human existence through the exercise of reason, human ingenuity, and hard work (Gen. 2:19; 3:19).

13. Human beings are created to be in partnership with God. Humanity is given the mandate to be God's "image," i.e., to represent the sovereign God on the earth (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:15-17). This underlines God's willingness to trust men and women. The concept of partnership also entails the expectation that humans will consult God in the course of fulfilling their tasks. The notion of partnership is fundamental to humanity's relationship with God and challenges any secular notion of autonomy.

Mission, Culture, and Worldview: A Strategic Road Map

At this point, I would like to explore how the notion of worldview can be integrated into the missional enterprise.

First, missionaries should never underestimate the importance of giving sustained attention to the question of worldview in their outreach efforts. I cannot overemphasize the importance of first engaging in this exercise independently of cultural sensibilities. While analytical work *and* cultural respect are both essential aspects of mission, it is imperative to maintain a clear distinction between critical analysis and outreach strategies. The former is a reflective exercise that offers a basic articulation of the biblical worldview, analyzes the culture the missionary seeks to reach, and compares the two in order to highlight similarities and differences. The latter focuses on ascertaining the best strategy to engage the culture with the claims of Christ. The missionary's foremost responsibility is to discern biblical truth and confront the world with its claims. When we fail to fulfill this task, there is no longer any compelling purpose for Christian mission. We become just one more voice in the cacophony of postmodernity.³²

Second, missionaries must choose to trust in the most basic concepts of the biblical worldview. The relationship between exegesis and biblical theology, on the one hand, and "practice,"³³ on the other, needs to be as linear as possible. When an engineer builds a bridge, there is no doubt as to the load the structure can carry; the process is based on scientific principles that have proven to be dependable and trusted. Missionaries would do well to position their praxis in a similar framework relative to Scripture.³⁴

Worldview as a Bridge to the Gospel

The gospel is God's answer to humanity's sinful condition and need for forgiveness.³⁵ Unfortunately, points of contacts needed to carry the most critical concepts of the Christian faith are not always readily available. Take the concept of sin for instance. C. S. Lewis once noted that ancient pagans did not need to be

convicted of sin. It was inherent to their understanding of the gods and who they were.³⁶ That is unfortunately not the case in much of the world today. In fact, one of the greatest challenges Christians face, particularly so where secular humanism is predominant, resides in the near-absence of a clear concept of moral sin on which to peg the invitation to repent.

Reflecting on a culture's worldview may provide the clues needed to identify how *sin* (not just sins) exhibits itself. If, as Genesis 3:8-24 suggests, sin is the expression of the principle of death that is now inherent to human nature, an analysis of worldview may in fact reveal how this principle is working itself out in any given culture.

When Baptist missionary William Carey went to India, he was confronted by the rite of Sati, a custom that forced the self-immolation of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Carey knew that this barbaric ritual could not be eliminated by simply appealing to human compassion.³⁷ The missionary intuitively grasped that in order to eradicate the practice, he needed to understand and address Hindu mythology. Furthermore, he believed that making Hindu traditional texts available to a broader segment of the population would build popular support against the custom. This conviction was one of the major catalysts behind Carey's passion for literacy, the dissemination of Hindu sacred writings, and Bible translation.



William Carey

In the same vein, few comprehend the full significance of what the great 19th Century abolitionist, William Wilberforce, accomplished. Eric Metaxas, the author of *Amazing Grace*, superbly encapsulates the reformer's magnificent achievement:

To fathom the magnitude of what Wilberforce did we have to see that the "disease" he vanquished forever was actually neither the slave trade nor slavery. Slavery still exists around the world today, in such measure as we can hardly fathom. What Wilberforce vanquished was something even worse than slavery, something that was much more fundamental and can hardly be seen from where we stand today: he vanquished the very mindset that made slavery acceptable and allowed it to survive and thrive for millennia. He destroyed an entire way of seeing the world, one that had held sway from the beginning of history, and he replaced it with another way of seeing the world. Included in the old way of seeing things was the idea that the evil of slavery was good. Wilberforce murdered that old way of seeing things, and so the idea that slavery was good died along with it.

Even though slavery continues to exist here and there, the idea that it is good is dead. The idea that it is inextricably intertwined with human civilization, and part of the way things are supposed to be, and economically necessary and morally defensible, is gone. Because the entire mindset that supported it is gone.

Wilberforce overturned not just European civilization's view of slavery but its view of almost everything in the human sphere; and that is why it's nearly impossible to do justice to the enormity of his accomplishment; it was nothing less than a fundamental and important shift in human consciousness.³⁸

The significance of Wilberforce's achievement should not be lost on anyone. He managed to knock an entire wall out of a deeply ingrained worldview and replace it with a new one!

Conclusion

The study of worldview is to be an exercise where the basic features of a people's understanding of reality are contrasted to the biblical worldview and are effectively challenged in those spheres where the culture most glaringly gives expression to the principle of death that has been part of human nature since the Fall.

In regard to traditional cultures, it will come as no surprise to learn, as Hiebert once observed, that magic and the occult are a source of much vexation for missionaries, who for the most part, tend to have an equivocal stance towards those practices and their underlying assumptions.³⁹

While there is still much debate about the extent of occult and demonic influence and power, I maintain that the missionary's primary task, with respect to addressing the predominant worldview,⁴⁰ is to draw attention to the portrait of the universe offered in Genesis 1-3. Let people become familiar with the creation account for themselves and let them arrive at their own conclusions! Such an approach would truly contrast with the kind of religious colonialism in which Western missionaries have been vehemently accused to participate (I would add often unfairly so).⁴¹

With respect to Western culture, while some of the issues are similar to those found in traditional cultures,⁴² they find their focus elsewhere. The principle of death that is now an intrinsic part of human nature manifests itself in at least three ways. First, the notion of absolute truth, particularly as it pertains to morality and religious claims, is all but completely eroded. This situation is sadly sowing the seeds of ideological and political totalitarianism.⁴³ Second, the demise of the Judeo-Christian tradition is giving birth to a terrible erosion of the sanctity of life and a

rapid loss of confidence in the three-pound brain's ability to meet the challenges of human existence.⁴⁴ The global consensus with respect to abortion as the great problem-solver is evidence of the former, and radical environmentalism's perception of humans as an out-of-control evolutionary aberration that threatens to destroy the planet underlines the latter.

It is also incumbent on missionaries working in a secular environment to investigate the mythology of their culture. In that respect, evolutionism (or Darwinism as some prefer to put it),⁴⁵ which should be distinguished from the *theory* of evolution, virtually functions as a modern myth⁴⁶ and can be rightly identified as one of the most powerful factors in the rapid erosion of the notion of human dignity.⁴⁷

Regardless of the culture context, men and women all have one thing in common: they consistently display an innate hostility towards the living God (Matt. 15:19; Col. 1:21).⁴⁸ One of the direst consequences of this reality is ideological. In a dazzling display of insight into human nature and history, C. S. Lewis once observed that left to themselves, human beings will naturally gravitate towards pantheism, a belief system the great Christian apologist aptly singled out as the “permanent natural bent of the human mind.”⁴⁹

If the propensity towards pantheism is easy enough to detect in traditional cultures, it is no less real in countries where modernity has provided the dominant worldview. One need only think of the rise of belief in the supernatural and the collapse of the ontological distinction between humans and nature.

As Western society increasingly shuns the Judeo-Christian worldview to embrace ever-new versions of pantheism, missionaries have an extraordinary opportunity to challenge a resurging ancient ideology that will only leave death and chaos if unopposed. If Lewis was right and pantheism has “in the long run, only one really formidable opponent—namely Christianity,”⁵⁰ then it is incumbent on those who are on the frontlines of the Church's outreach to challenge it by confidently putting on display the portrait of reality found in the Genesis creation account. In so doing, they will not only contribute to the welfare of the culture, but will also be laying a more solid theological foundation to support genuine conversions to Christ and to resist syncretistic impulses thereafter (Col. 1:15-20).

Notes

¹ Revised from the previously published article, “The Missional Relevance of Genesis 1–3,” by Pierre Gilbert, *Direction* (Vol. 43 No. 1), Spring 2014.

² While I do not wish to create an artificial dichotomy between conversion and discipleship, in Anabaptism, there has been an unfortunate tendency for the latter to eclipse the former. As C. Arnold Snyder aptly observes, “discipleship

cannot constitute the all-encompassing characterization of the Christian life or, more precisely, its absolute point of departure. The question as to how one is born into the family of God must be asked” (“Bread, not Stone: Refocusing an Anabaptist Vision,” *Vision* 13 [Spring 2012]: 64-73).

- ³The book of Ecclesiastes provides an excellent example of such an approach. For a detailed discussion, see Pierre Gilbert, “Fighting Fire with Fire: Divine Nihilism in Ecclesiastes,” *Direction* 40 (2011), 65-79.
- ⁴The Apostle John’s characterization of God as love (1 John 4:8) implies that God will never take anyone by force, love being the ultimate and absolute antithesis to coercion.
- ⁵The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview represents one of the more recent organizations to focus significant attention to this issue and to stress the importance of articulating a Christian worldview.
- ⁶I have become convinced that an initial focus on worldview may be critical in providing meaningful insights into a culture and facilitate the creation of significant bridges between it and the gospel.
- ⁷The intent of this discussion is primarily illustrative and suggestive. In the context of such an article, it is impossible to account for the full breadth of worldviews that characterize human societies and for the models of contextualization needed to make the elements of a biblical worldview relevant to them. For a more thorough treatment of these questions, see Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) and Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).
- ⁸For a detailed definition of worldview, see James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004 [1988]). Hiebert offers a very insightful treatment of the notion of worldview in relationship to the missionary enterprise in his *Transforming Worldviews*, 13-30. See also Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984).
- ⁹Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 15.
- ¹⁰*Transforming Worldviews*, 84.
- ¹¹This is particularly true when individuals are confronted with a fact that is so inconsistent with their understanding of reality that it forces a reassessment of their belief system. In such cases, they can either deny the reality of the phenomenon, live with an even higher degree of cognitive dissonance, or allow the new data to modify their worldview.
- ¹²The notion of a biblical worldview implies the presence of a theological center in both the Old and the New Testament, but scholars are not unanimous on this issue. Elmer Martens makes a persuasive case for the notion of a theological center in regards to the Old Testament in *God’s Design*, 3rd ed. (North Richland

Hills: Bibal Press, 1998), 3-19. For an overview of the debate as it pertains to the Old Testament, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1-114. For a survey of the issues relative to New Testament theology, see I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 17-48.

¹³ See Grant Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), 149-151; 153-260.

¹⁴ With respect to the significance of the creation narrative, Wilbert R. Shenk's assessment of the text with respect to mission is worth mentioning: "The starting point for thinking about a biblical approach to strategy must be a consideration of God's missionary initiative. Genesis 1-3 forms a prolegomenon to the rest of scripture tying together creation, mission, and redemption" (*Changing Frontiers of Mission* [Orbis Books, 1999]), 105.

¹⁵ I use "Canaanite" and "Mesopotamian" interchangeably, as the Mesopotamian culture was widely diffused in the west. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word books, 1987), xlv.

¹⁶ For more details relative to the purpose of this text, see Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 60-63; Jean Bottéro, "Le Dieu de la bible," in *La plus belle histoire de Dieu: Qui est le Dieu de la bible?* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); *Naissance de Dieu: la Bible et l'historien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). It should be noted that the majority of critical scholars assign a post-exilic date to Genesis 1-3, viewing any association with the Mosaic period as tenuous. Be that as it may, we need to remember that the dating of biblical texts is, at best, a very imprecise and subjective endeavor. On an early dating of the creation narrative, see K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 423-427.

¹⁷ See Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102 and Pierre Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2008), 45-50, 54.

¹⁸ In this respect, the book of Hebrews represents an excellent example of an argument designed to persuade Jewish Christians to resist the temptation to go back to Judaism or integrate elements of their old belief system to their newly found faith in Christ.

¹⁹ Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 200. First published in *Missiology: An International Review* 10, 1 (January 1982): 35-47.

²⁰ For more details, see Gilbert, *Demons*, 46-50.

²¹ A Translation of these myths is found in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University

Press, 1969). See also Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 2nd ed. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997 [1991], 9-18 (Enuma Elish), 31-40 (Atrahasis) and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228-277 (Enuma Elish) and 1-38 (Atrahasis).

²² For a succinct summary of the Mesopotamian worldview, see Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Gilbert, *Demons*, 50-53.

²³ See in particular Hasel, "Genesis Cosmology," 81-102. Kaufmann more broadly examines the unique character of Israelite religion in his book *The Religion of Israel*.

²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version* (1984).

²⁵ The merism, "the heavens and the earth," is intended to be all inclusive (see Wenham, *Genesis*, 15).

²⁶ Christopher Kaiser writes: "An operational faith in God as creator was a vital factor in the development of all branches of science until the late eighteenth century." *Creation and the History of Science* (London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 273. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between the development of science and belief in creation, see Stanley L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980), 112-141.

²⁷ This expression is borrowed from the French historian Pierre Chaunu.

²⁸ This summary also compares well with Walter Brueggemann's own summary of the worldview attested in Hebrew wisdom literature, which, to a great extent, appears to reflect creation theology. For more information, see *In Man We Trust* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1972), 13-28.

²⁹ Note the allusion to the image of God as a rationale against murder in Gen. 9:6.

³⁰ See also Gen. 4:6-7, where the notion of personal responsibility and accountability is applied to Cain.

³¹ The calls and exhortations to choose God in the Torah (see for example, Exod. 20:1-17, 22-23; Deut. 26:16-27:8) and the Wisdom corpus (Prov. 1:8-19; 2:1-22; 3:1-18; etc.), the use of the curse motif and the repeated calls to repent found in the prophetic books (for more details, see Pierre Gilbert, "The Function of Imprecation in Israel's Eighth-Century Prophets," *Direction* 35 [2006]: 44-58), as well as the numerous New Testament appeals and exhortations to believe in Christ and remain faithful to him provide ample illustration of this affirmation (Matt. 19:16-30; 28:16-20; Mark 5:1-20; John 3:16; Acts 2:40-41; Rom. 1:16; 3:22; 6:12-14; 12:1-2; etc.).

³² In this respect, we need to take to heart God's warning to Ezekiel: "When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to

dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself” (Ezek. 33:8-9).

³³ I never feel entirely comfortable using the term “practical” to denote praxis. Whether it is explicitly formulated or not, ministry practices and skills always assume, require, and express a theoretical framework.

³⁴ Epistemologically, I realize that some of the readers may dismiss these comments as unbearably naïve. In this postmodern era, it is no longer fashionable to speak in terms of a body of truth that functions as an absolute point of reference. But, as with many other things, postmodernism will eventually prove to be another fad that will collapse under its own epistemological inner contradictions. Those who wish to pursue this further can consult Alvin Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sander Griffioen and Bert Balk (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 29-54.

³⁵ As Mark Baker demonstrates in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) and *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), the New Testament uses a multiplicity of images to parse out the meaning of the cross. While it is not my intent here to rehash the terms of the atonement debate, I do happen to side with those who believe, as the church has from the beginning, that the death of Christ was driven by an ontological necessity. At a most basic level, the biblical witness unequivocally links the death of Christ to an absolute justice imperative that is an integral part of God’s very nature (see for instance Gal. 3:13; Mark 10:45; 14:36; 2 Cor. 5:21). For a succinct treatment of the contemporary terms of the debate, see N.T. Wright, *Justification* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2009).

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 [1940]), 48-62.

³⁷ In fact, it’s surprising to see to what extent ideology will trump common notions of compassion under certain conditions. In a short article where he reflects on the one-child policy introduced by the Chinese government in 1978, Canadian journalist, Mark Steyn, offers a shocking example of the disastrous impact of totalitarian ideology on something as basic as motherly love in rural China in “‘Throw it in a Stream,’” *National Review Online*, February 25, 2010, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/195450/throw-it-stream-mark-steyn>.

³⁸ William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), xv.

³⁹ On this issue, see especially his seminal article: “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.”

- ⁴⁰ As the object of this paper is primarily focused on dealing with the question of worldview, I have purposely avoided addressing the issue of demon possession. I do, however, offer some concrete advice on how to deal with this phenomenon in *Demons*, 103-134.
- ⁴¹ In this respect, Mark Andrew Ritchie has offered a devastating critique of the position that missionary activity has been fundamentally detrimental for traditional cultures. For more information, see his *Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamö Shaman's Story*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Island Lake Press, 2000 [1996]).
- ⁴² In western culture, belief in magic and superstition has historically manifested itself in an interest in the New Age Movement, and more recently in popular culture's renewed fascination with the supernatural (movies and books on the vampire theme being but one example).
- ⁴³ To paraphrase C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton, either we are all ruled by the law of God, or we will be subjected to the tyranny of a few powerful men. Lewis develops this theme at length in *The Abolition of Man*. (Harper San Francisco, 2001 [1944]). Chesterton examines this issue in *The Appetite of Tyranny* (West Valley City: Waking Lion Press, 2008 [1915]).
- ⁴⁴ The French quantitative historian, Pierre Chaunu, wrote extensively about the intrinsic value of human life and man's ability to meet the challenges of human existence without resorting to radical "solutions" such as state-sponsored population control mechanisms or abortion. See, for instance, *La mémoire et le sacré* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1978).
- ⁴⁵ Jaki writes: "Darwin's own admission, that the failure of geological research to yield the infinitely many fine gradations between past and present species as required by the theory ... remains as relevant as ever. What most effectively gives away Darwinism is the almost mystical faith voiced by its supporters in facing up to the absence of evidence and even to the contrary evidence (Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, 120). With respect to Darwin's own assessment of the importance of the fossil record to confirm his theory, see *The Origin of Species*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1876), 265.
- ⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis discusses at length the myth of evolutionism in "The Funeral of a Great Myth," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 82-93.
- ⁴⁷ Jaki provides an insightful explanation of the cause and effect relationship between the two: "Darwinism is a creed not only with scientists committed to document the all-purpose role of natural selection. It is a creed with masses of people who have at best a vague notion of the mechanism of evolution as proposed by Darwin, let alone as further complicated by his successors. Clearly, the appeal cannot be that of a scientific truth, but of a philosophical belief which is not difficult to identify. Darwinism is a belief in the meaninglessness of existence" (Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, 115).

⁴⁸ Empirically, this is probably best evidenced by humanity's propensity and never-ending impulse to wage war.

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 101.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Miracles*, 101.

Recommended Reading

Gilbert, Pierre. *Demons, Lies & Shadow: A Plea for a Return to Text and Reason*. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2008.

Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.

_____. *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999.

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Hiebert, Paul G., and Eloise Hiebert Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.

Hiebert, Paul G., R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou. *Understanding Folk Religion: Christian Response to Popular Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999.

Naugle, David K. *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Ryken, Philip Graham. *Christian Worldview: A Student's Guide*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013.

Sire, James. *The Universe Next Door*. 4th ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Walsch, Brian J., and J. Richard Middleton. *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

Study Questions

1. Discuss Gilbert's assertion that discipling is both a "science in that it entails the transmission of a certain kind of information (and)... mystery in that discipleship is about spiritual transformation."
2. Do you agree with this statement: "the transmission of propositional truth, which encompasses Christian doctrine and the basic elements of the biblical worldview, is critical to both outreach and discipleship?" Why or why not?
3. Where does God's good news begin, in the creation account or at the cross? Explain.