

FITTING THIRD-WORLD BELIEVERS WITH CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW GLASSES

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Every day it becomes more apparent that millions of Christians worldwide still see the world through glasses that distort and discolor it. They profess Christianity but do not possess a Christian worldview. At the same time there is mounting evidence that some Christian leaders at least are becoming aware of the problem and trying to do something about it—trying to fit third-world Christians with Christian worldview glasses, so to speak.

That sounds a bit cryptic. What do we mean?

I. WORLDVIEW GLASSES

The metaphor is that of Christian philosopher Norman Geisler.¹ He says that in the process of learning one's culture (the technical term is "enculturation") one obtains worldview glasses. In other words, one comes to perceive the world—God, man, nature, history, values and so forth—in a way prescribed by one's own culture and/or subculture. Thus the majority of Asian Indians will grow up to think of the world as inhabited by many gods, of birth and rebirth as being the destiny of man as determined by his karma, and of history as an almost interminable cyclical series progressing toward reabsorption into the Brahman or ultimate reality. As Indians study and mature, the nuances, values and obligations of this Hindu worldview will be elaborated and clarified.

The same process of worldview acquisition occurs in all cultures. Everyone everywhere receives worldview glasses. The problem is that for the most part their worldview glasses do not reflect the world as it actually is but nevertheless determine how the wearers will actually perceive it.

Geisler says that there is something else that we must understand about culturally prescribed worldview glasses: They are exceedingly difficult to remove and replace. Once put on it is as though they were secured by superglue. An attempt to remove one's original worldview glasses and try the glasses of a different worldview will necessarily involve considerable effort and even pain. From a Christian perspective the tragic result of this fact is that without replacing old glasses it is impossible to see Christianly no matter how sincere one may be in his or her determination to be a Christian.

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¹N. L. Geisler, "Some Philosophical Perspectives on Missionary Dialogue," in *Theology and Mission: Papers Given at Trinity Consultation No. 1* (ed. D. J. Hesselgrave: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 241-258.

II. WORLDVIEW AND THE WORLD CHURCH

If we accept a wide definition of "Christian," there is a total of well over one and a half billion Christians in the world today.² Christianity is by far the most pervasive religion in the world. Though Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are growing faster and the percentage of the world's population that professes Christianity is receding somewhat, the actual number of Christians is growing significantly, having almost tripled since 1900. Moreover in certain parts of the world the growth has been nothing short of phenomenal. For example, it has been pointed out that the number of African Christians has increased from 8,756,400 believers in 1900 to 196,874,500 in 1986 and that, if the trend holds, the number will increase to 323,914,900 in the year 2000. Basing their prediction on those statistics some Christian pundits say that Africa will soon become a Christian continent.

In one way, then, Africa—and especially sub-Saharan Africa—becomes one of the world's bright spots from a Christian point of view. The temptation is great to let these unrefined statistics speak for themselves. But if we do that, we get a distorted picture. Why? Because those impressive totals for Africa included approximately 30,000,000 adherents to 6,000 or more independent church groupings as of 1985.³ Most of these independent churches are syncretistic to a significant degree. To speak in worldview terms, they retain much of the old tribal worldview.

And that is not all. Recent research indicates that syncretism may be a problem for Christians in many mainline and evangelical communions as well. One study of a large mainline but evangelical denomination in southwest Africa indicates that it is common practice for believers in difficulty to consult both their Christian pastor and a local witch doctor.⁴ Another study of a three-generation evangelical communion in southern Africa reveals that the old tribal worldview is still very much a part of the thinking of many of its members. In fact, when compared with non-Christians a slightly higher percentage of church members (84.2 percent) think it essential to continue sacrifices to ancestral spirits,⁵ and well over 70 percent of church members polled indicated that they would not use wood from a lightning-struck tree or eat the meat of an animal killed by lightning (taboos connected with the myth of the Sky Chief).⁶ Still more evidence of syncretism was recently provided by the newly-elected African bishop of a thoroughly evangelical denomination who told a

²*World Christian Encyclopedia* (ed. D. Barrett; Oxford: Oxford University, 1982).

³*Ibid.*, p. 815.

⁴M. Walford, "Developing a Ministry to the Sorcery-bound People in Shaba Province, Southern Zaire," unpublished Doctor of Missiology project, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School—School of World Mission and Evangelism, 1981.

⁵G. Congdon, "An Investigation into the Current Zulu Worldview and its Relevance to Missionary Work," unpublished Doctor of Missiology project, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School—School of World Mission and Evangelism, 1984, p. 74.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

large audience of nationals and missionaries in my hearing that after his election he had discovered that at least one of the other candidates had procured "medicine" from a witch doctor in order to enhance the possibility of being selected for the position.

It should not be assumed on this basis that African Christians are not sincerely committed to Christ. It would be more appropriate to ask what part our missions have played in occasioning the present state of affairs. We might also ask ourselves whether African and other third-world churches are unique in this regard. One would hope that such is the case, but that may be wishful thinking. The changes in our western churches that seem to follow directions dictated by secularized western cultures, the appeal that western preachers make to purely cultural values, the number of western Christian educators who have found it necessary to write and lecture on Christian worldview—all such aspects of western Christianity conspire to indicate that the problem is not confined to the third world even though, in the nature of the case, we might expect it to be more aggravated in those cultures where the churches are relatively young and are opposed by pagan worldviews of long standing.

To return to the African situation, then, what has happened to occasion the present state of affairs? In answering that question the conclusions of Carl F. H. Henry are most enlightening. Upon completing a five-nation lecture tour in 1982 under the sponsorship of the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa he was asked to assess the African situation as he saw it.⁷ After expressing gratitude for the immense harvest that had resulted from the evangelistic thrust of missions and churches he communicated his primary concern: "The evangelistic impetus has outrun the intellectual resources for keeping it on its highest order."⁸ He went on to say that the entire missionary enterprise in Africa is threatened unless it is undergirded theologically. And he suggested ways in which missionary and especially African leadership might prepare themselves to deal with the African mind more effectively.

As might be expected Henry dealt with the challenge to Biblical Christianity in general terms and with the emerging intelligentsia in view. For example, he was asked how missionaries could overcome the tendency to reproduce "teaching what they were taught" rather than rethinking issues on the African scene. He responded in terms of getting textbooks in the local language and scouting out the universities to discover what presuppositions are being communicated to the younger generation, noting the fact that while western humanism is invading Africa, African nations are turning back to traditional religion and culture.⁹

It may not be out of the way to add that at the grassroots level one of the chief contributing factors to the current situation in Africa (and elsewhere in the third world) is our usual approach to evangelism and the discipling of the

⁷The interview was in a mimeographed paper circulated by the International Office of the Africa Inland Mission, Nairobi, Kenya (September 1982).

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

nations—and to suggest an alternative approach.

The truth is that traditionally we missionaries have carried on our mission by introducing the gospel in a rather piecemeal fashion: translating this or that NT gospel, preaching on this or that Bible passage, teaching from one or another Bible book as we see fit. Even when we have attempted to be more systematic we have usually divided up Christian teaching in a topical fashion dealing with God, sin, salvation, the Christian life, and so forth. This approach is endemic in western instruction but it is not well suited to the rest of the world. (And perhaps it is not nearly so effective in the west as we have thought previously.)¹⁰ As a matter of fact our western approaches are so ingrained in us that the reader may wonder what alternative would be superior. It may be advantageous from this point, then, to look at a case study that exemplifies a superior alternative and then to elaborate on it.

III. AN INDONESIAN CASE STUDY

In a tremendously insightful little book H. R. Weber provides us with an illustration of how Christian communicators can go about the business of teaching the Bible in a way that better equips third-world believers to adopt a truly Christian worldview.¹¹

Weber's account takes us to Luwuk-Banggai, Indonesia. Very remote, the area was almost untouched until this century. Then in 1912 Muslim traders tried to convert to Islam some of its 100,000 scattered natives. Partly in response to the pleas of the Dutch government the Reformed State Church sent a minister to the area. Over a few years he baptized thousands without giving them proper instruction or follow-up.

Converts were of three types: (1) Some were sincere, (2) some felt under obligation to adopt the religion of the rulers, and (3) some became Christians in order to remain pagan. (Explanation: They thought that they had to accept either Christianity or Islam, and only the former would allow them to keep the pigs and dogs that were so important to their animistic sacrifices.)

After World War II there were 30,000 nominal Christians in numerous churches in Luwuk-Banggai. They were Christians and congregations without the Word of God, and most of them were nonliterate. In 1952 Weber, who was an experienced missionary with a knowledge of the local language, was asked to go and teach the basics of the Bible. He was given no money and no helpers except indigenous personnel.

The church was already divided into seven districts. It was decided to hold short Bible courses in each district. A team of district evangelists and ministers was chosen, and each congregation was invited to send some leaders to a five-day Bible course in a central village. They were to pay for this course in money

¹⁰Witness the number of Christians who have attended our Sunday schools and church services for many years who admit that they never felt they knew the Bible until taking *A Walk Through the Bible* or a similar course of study.

¹¹H. R. Weber, *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates: Based on a Missionary Experience in Indonesia* (London: SCM, 1957).

or kind. Those who attended had, on the average, three years of elementary education. The format was simple but profound. By way of introduction, Weber stressed the importance of the Bible in the life of the individual Christian and the local congregation. The first evening, the travel route to be taken through the Bible was sketched: from creation in Genesis to the kingdom of God in Revelation with Christ at the center of the whole and including the fall, the covenants with Israel, the Church, and the second coming. The four succeeding days highlighted Gen 3:1-19; Exod 19:1-6; Luke 2:18-48; Acts 1:6-11.

Each day began with worship, the reading of the Scripture passage for the day, and prayer for guidance. Then the passage for the day was studied in small groups (making sure it was linked with preceding studies). Each group reported its findings and a summary was drawn up. (Later this was to be given to each student to aid him as a catechist.) Afternoons were spent in discussing community life, the meaning of baptism and communion, evangelism, and so forth. The evenings were devoted to a discussion of Christians in a tribal community, modern Islam, and the world.

On the last evening the witnessing theme was exemplified by inviting the whole village to a special gathering. The temple in Jerusalem was "created," and Psalms 24 and 100 were recited antiphonally by "priest" and "Levite" on one side and a chorus of men and women on the other. Parables such as Luke 10:30-37 were mimed, and people were asked to guess the meaning. Then the parable was read from Scripture and explained, and a challenge was given. This was followed by hymns and tea-time. Finally the Genesis 1 lesson of the first evening was balanced with Revelation 21 with its vision of a recreated world of peace and righteousness.

Weber himself made a great discovery as time progressed. He kept hearing about tremendous Christians who would like to attend the studies but could not do so because they were *buta huruf* ("blind with regard to letters"—that is, nonliterate). Realizing that the great majority came in that category, Weber started talking to some nonliterates and discovered that, though he spoke their language, communication was very difficult. When he asked the meaning of a word they would not respond with a synonym or an abstract description. Instead they would use words to paint a picture that gave the exact meaning. When describing a person they would not talk about his character but rather would tell a few experiences that pointed up the kind of person he was. Weber began to look upon the nonliterates as artists. He began to see himself as a stunted intellectual with but one method of communication—pallid, abstract ideas. He became a pupil in order to learn how to communicate picturesquely and dramatically rather than intellectually and verbally.

Weber then tried out his discovery in the nonliterate village of Taulan. There the whole village assembled. Weber asked the heathen priest to tell the story of creation as the tribe knew it. Then he used simple drawings on a blackboard to illustrate the Genesis story. He did the same with the fall and other Biblical events. Finally Weber instituted Bible study courses for nonliterates on the model above but modified by his discovery. Later in Java and Bali he added the use of symbols—contrasting the Buddhist zoetrope, the Taoist sign, and the hammer and sickle with various Christian symbols such as the cross and the crown.

IV. PRINCIPLES TO BE OBSERVED WHEN FITTING THIRD-WORLD BELIEVERS WITH CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW GLASSES

If we can bring ourselves to the difficult admission that we have contributed to the problem of tainted glasses and that Weber's approach certainly has much to commend it, we are in a position to review some essential principles. Actually in a unique way Weber takes us back to the way God himself communicated his truth to us when he gave us the holy Scriptures. The Bible, after all, is not primarily a book of systematic theology. Neither is it a series of disconnected episodes without meaningful arrangement or continuity. It is a divine record that (even allowing for human instrumentality in the arrangement of its books) progresses from essential beginnings through all-important events and divine disclosures to a prophetic ending and new beginning. In short, it is the revelation of all that is necessary—and nothing that is superfluous—for the manufacture and fitting of new, Christian worldview glasses.

With that in mind, and acknowledging a debt to Weber at certain points, it would be well to inquire into what we should avoid and what we should incorporate into our discipling approaches. Missionary experiences such as those of Weber, criticisms coming from third-world theologians,¹² the pattern of Biblical theology that follows the unfolding of God's will and way to mankind, the low level of Bible literacy in many of our third-world (and western) churches—all of these factors conspire to teach us the following principles.

1. *It is a mistake to concentrate on only one book of the Bible in translating the Bible into new languages.* It is better to select certain specially important passages—passages that can be used to tell the larger story of God's dealings with people over the course of time—and translate them. I am aware of the fact that some translators are now adopting this approach. It is to be hoped that still more of them will do so in the future, for in so doing translators lay the groundwork for the kind of instruction being advocated here.

2. *Instead of choosing disconnected Bible stories or even logically connected Bible topics in order to teach the Christian faith, the continuity and progressive nature of Biblical revelation should be preserved in initiating Christian instruction.* I recall how impressed a number of us early-postwar missionaries to Japan were with a series of lessons prepared by one of our colleagues. At the expense of many hours of painstaking effort he had prepared a series of lessons dealing with basic topics he believed to be critically important if Japanese were to understand the Christian faith. The lessons were on the nature of God, revelation and the Bible, the deity of Christ, sin and salvation, and other topics of equal importance. To acknowledge the superiority of his materials and ap-

¹²I have in mind criticisms such as those articulated in the Seoul Declaration, which states in part: "Western Theology is by and large nationalistic, moulded by Western philosophies, preoccupied with intellectual concerns, especially those having to do with faith and reason. . . . We urgently need an Evangelical Theology which is faithful to Scripture and relevant to the varied situations in the Third World." "The Seoul Declaration: Toward An Evangelical Theology for the Third World," in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (ed. B. R. Ro and R. Eshenaur; Tarchung: Asian Theological Association, 1984) 23.

proach as compared to ours required some measure of humility but no extraordinary intelligence. Nevertheless in retrospect it seems obvious that there is a way that is still better.

In giving us the Bible that he gave us and in the way he gave it to us, God accomplished some very important objectives that we tend to forget. First, he kept doctrine in the context of life situations and in the context of history. Second, he provided us with the big picture into which the smaller scenes fit. Third, he provided us with a progression in which more complex and advanced teachings are built upon those that are more elementary.

We forget all of this at our peril—especially in the third world, and perhaps in the western world as well. People in the third world are capable of mastering large quantities of material when it is presented in narrative and pictorial forms. They identify with the OT readily because it speaks to their situation. The sacrificial system of Genesis and Leviticus has special relevance. The idolatry of heathen tribes—and even Israel's tendency to take and make false gods—do not require lengthy explanation and careful redefinition. Ancestors, ancestral spirits, witchcraft and the like are aspects of daily life. Polygamy is seen as a Biblical problem as well as a contemporary one. Abraham's resort to cohabitation with Hagar in order to secure a son and realize God's promise is seen in a new light. So are God's prohibition against intermarriage with heathen tribes and the evil consequences of, for example, Solomon's disregard of that prohibition. The refusal of Daniel and his friends to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's image speaks to a fundamental issue in the third world. And the distinction between true and false prophets is of the essence.

Of course this does not mean that the OT must be mastered before NT materials can be treated. But, as Weber reminds us, it does mean that Jesus the Messiah must not be de-Judaized to the extent that he is dehistoricized.¹³ It does mean that without the OT the materials of the NT may be put in the framework of the mythological by third-world converts. It does mean that the NT itself (not only the gospels but the letters as well) will more readily be seen as dealing with the really crucial issues occasioned by the advent of God's Son and the movement of his gospel into a pagan and hostile world. And it does mean that the eschatological events culminating in Christ's reign of righteousness and the new heavens and new earth will be viewed against the backdrop of man's inability to govern either himself or his planet rightly.

3. *As one teaches, it is important to compare and contrast Biblical history and truth with cultural myths and errors.* Of course this must be done accurately and sensitively. But the old mythological framework must be shattered (even though it likely contains some important elements of truth) if the Biblical worldview is to predominate. Once the Biblical worldview is in the ascendancy the commitment of third-world Christians will take on an entirely new configuration. A person's ability to cope with the common trials of life, to say nothing of life's unexpected catastrophes, is in large part determined by his or her ability to integrate those trials and tragedies into an all-encompassing world-

¹³Weber, *Communication* 26.

view and thereby find some sort of meaning for them.

The importance of a worldview can hardly be overstated. Hindus are able to live with monstrous inequalities and inequities because they can be meaningfully related to karma and samsara (the wheel of birth and rebirth). Tribalists counter "bad medicine" with "good medicine" and cope with tragedy and death by ascertaining and avenging their cause. Similarly Christians can confront evil and overcome temptation not only because of the indwelling Spirit but also because they understand how God deals with evil in history and how he will deal with it in the future.

At one time or another most of us have had the experience of putting a jigsaw puzzle together—not just the simple one designed for children but the complex one designed to challenge adult ingenuity for seemingly endless hours. If so, we have probably discovered that the saving factor in the situation was the small reproduction of the completed picture on the cover of the box. By observing the subject, outline and shadings of the completed picture we were aided in discovering how to fit minuscule pieces into the whole. Ultimately we were able to put them in just the right place and experience a significant degree of satisfaction in doing so.

In like manner, Christians quite naturally relate new experiences—particularly those experiences that cry out for an understandable explanation and an appropriate response—to whatever worldview they know best. In terms of the jigsaw analogy they fit their experiences into the picture that is most familiar to them. To return to our earlier metaphor, they perceive their experiences in a way dictated by the worldview glasses they happen to be wearing at the time, and they respond accordingly.

In the light of our present knowledge of third-world churches, missionary and national teachers who are serious about discipling the nations by baptizing and "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:20) will want to give careful attention to ways of fitting third-world believers with Christian worldview glasses.