

World Views and Culture in Missions: Evaluating Two Prominent Existing Views

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Introduction

Does world view emanate from culture or otherwise? Which comes first, culture then world view or vice versa? Do we have evidence for whatever position we hold? What shapes our perceptions and to what extent does it affect our theology and thinking as a Christian? Is there such a thing as a “*Christian worldview*”?

These and many other questions are raised as people embark on the mission field, especially in cultures and far flung places from away from where one has been raised and brought up. Ralph Smith (2007), from whose work we have drawn much in this paper, asserts this fact, at the outset of his valuable own work. He points out pertinent issues Missionaries encounter on the field and must contend with. Smith indirectly states that whether we like it or not, we encounter what has come to be known as a “*culture shock*” as cultures and perceptions collide on the international scene. Charles Hill, in his *International Business* text alludes to similar sentiments in relation to what the global worker wrestles with as they step away from their default context and culture. That said, many people have held different views over this matter. Some hold that because of the differences in perceptions and orientations, it is not possible to have what is known as a “Christian world view” because things are relative. There is nothing as one strategy fits all because each context is unique and therefore, people are bound to give different interpretations over the same things, owing to the cultural background they have been raised in and thus, interpret the world differently. The other extreme contends that there certainly is what is known as Christian world view because when a person is regenerated, things change and radical transformations take place in one’s life.

Among those people/theologians that hold on to the first position (No Christian world view) is Charles Craft who spent many years on the mission field and thus formulated a teaching that has the following tenets:

- There cannot be anything as a “Christian world view”
- Cultures are relative and so are perceptions and practices.

- World view is derived or generated from culture.
- Our theology must mutate with the times depending on where we go on this terrestrial ball.
- The critical point is the principle and not the theology that we teach.

Craft has held sway for many generations and influenced many missionaries across the world but is his teaching correct and in sync with scripture? Do these assertions pass the test?

Before we begin to analyse these assertions, it is fitting for us to define two terms:

Culture

Culture has to do with the way things are done in a given locality, the values and practices that define that context or people. A culture could have an effect on the practices as well as give birth to a way of viewing the world. In the world are various different cultures that probably distinguish us from the rest of humanity. A nation is a group of people with similar aspiration, practices and cultures while a country may not necessarily be a nation but constitute many different cultures or even one depending on several factors such as language, climate, socio-economic issues as it were (Hill 2016).

World View

A basic definition or even description of *World view* (*derived from a German word: weltanschauung*) would be something like this: “The way we look at the world, react to reality and define or perceive issues”. This definition highlights the point that we look at the world using different lenses which ultimately determines how we interpret things. Depending on our back ground orientation or socialisation, we interpret the world around us as such. We may further say that a world view includes the elements, bias and ingredients that affect or make us lean towards a specific direction or not. In our discussion, we refer to how we perceive and interpret the world, whether through the cultural or biblical lenses.

From the definitions above, we can see that what we have on our hands are very dicey and delicate matters. People generate different positions about the same matter. In this paper, we review two prominent views declaring one closer to scripture relative to the other. Views by Charles Craft and N.T. Wright, both contemporary towering theological giants, come into sharp focus in this discourse. Both views have had their hey day but Craft’s views have recently come under serious scrutiny and, in some cases, discarded as being unbiblical

and dangerously misleading. Let us state what he teaches and then analyse it before we offer what has been termed, a more Biblical position offered by N.T Wright.

Crafts' views analysed

Craft holds several views as highlighted above which basically argue that a Christian world view does not exist because each context is different and as such, has to be approached completely different. He further argues that no two Christians from different locations of the world can be the same by that token. His argument basically hinges on the fact that the Bible itself has several cultures and thus no distinct culture can be said to be "Christian". He argues for instance that Abraham and Paul lived in different dispensations and thus could not have shared the same world view. He says a world view is acquired and learnt from culture rather than the opposite. By implication, a Christian, even after regeneration essentially remains different from another saint who is equally regenerated in another place even if they read the same Bible. What this Missiologist advocates for is that when missionaries go on the mission field, their aim should not be to change people or bring them to the same understanding of the Bible doctrines as refined as we have them but ours should be to bring about a principle from the scriptures applied in their context. In addition, Craft teaches that a culture in and of itself is not holy but only used as a vehicle to communicate God's word. Thus, the different cultures in the Bible are no more holy than those in the western world. To be effective therefore, Missionaries should not labour to change people but leave them in their cultures as well as practices only pointing out some cautions here and there. At face value, Crafts' ideas seem to make sense and appear plausible but when weighed against the touch stone of scripture, things are not so plausible.

NT Wright's view

Wright critically read through Crafts' writings and concluded that the ideas thus far advanced were at variance with scripture and actually dangerously led to the wrong direction. Wright contended that there is such a thing as a 'Christian world view' because any Christian must read the same Bible and thus come to similar conclusions over matters regardless of their background or hind socialisation. Wright contended that after one becomes regenerated, their hearts and minds are changed and thus have new spiritual appetites which are fulfilled in the scriptures. As one reads the Bible, they cannot help but know something as well as connect with Adam, Noah, Abraham and the other patriarchs. He further contends that worldview is from God rather than derived from culture. The question perhaps worth asking is: Which came first, culture or world view? The answer is obviously world view and put in Adam, Noah and others. These people came into the world before any culture ever was in the sense we know it.

Consider Abraham, he was called from the east and went on to follow the Lord, abandoning all he had learnt in the Ancient Near East before becoming the father of faith in the Levant. Thus, Wright contends that Missionaries must insist on a radical change leading to a Christian world view. Granted, they may not interpret everything the same but certainly there is some commonality between a Christian in Japan and one in Africa, centred around the cross of Christ. The relativity talk has been brought about by men's ideas which eventually make our faith appear fluid and unpredictable. The Bible is very clear in its assertions and must be obeyed as such. Although we do not for a moment agree with Wright's work on a number of areas especially his views on the revisions of the doctrine of Justification, we heartily embrace his conclusions on this matter on world views in relation to culture. The gospel demands and brings about radical changes away from the default world view, no wonder Paul would write to the Romans in Chapter 12. Paul further argues in similar terms both in Ephesians 4:17-30 and Colossians 3 stating that saints, at regeneration, are wholly transformed resulting in a radically inwardly renovated mind, heart and perceptions. They can rightly be said to "once lived" in a particular way prior to conversion but now must put on the new man, renewed in Christ. Craft's view falls short on that score, although he probably has a point or two worth learning from but the rest is to be ignored, if not discarded. His view probably lead to pragmatism too rather than fidelity to scripture. We need transformed lives, yielding to King Jesus and at the same time connected to saintly kindred minds, irrespective of their background orientation or socialization.

Conclusion

We have seen that both gentlemen (Craft & Wright) aim to be as evangelical and possibly authentic but they differ in their presuppositions and therefore conclusions. Clearly from what has been found out, Wright is far closer to the scriptures because no Christian can be one without knowing or referring to the Old Testament as well as knowing something about the patriarchs. We may live in different dispensations/times but certainly, we have one thing in common-our faith and to some extent, character coupled with similar perceptions of things. Andy Johnson (2017), although focusing on the Biblical mechanics of how to do Missions, shares similar Biblically sound notions to Missions. This is God's work resulting in transformed lives. Practice and may, we say, culture not the reverse. We conclude with Ralph Smith's apt observation which every Missionary or Christian for that matter, ought to espouse:

There is a Christian worldview that all Christians can and should hold in common. There are also cultural particulars that will be different because we all have different histories. We will apply the Christian worldview in different ways and expound it with different emphases. But if we follow the Bible, Christians in modern Africa or Asia will recognize their affinity with the ancient Hebrews, with the North African Augustine and the

French John Calvin. Christians of all ages and places form one Community because they share one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit.

It could not be said any better!

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