

# Conversion and Worldview Transformation

*The process of doing theology in a particular setting must be that of critical contextualization in which the culture is studied, then Scripture, and finally Biblical truth and morality are used to judge and correct the culture and its worldview. This is the key to worldview transformation.*

by Paul G. Hiebert

Can a non-literate peasant become a Christian after hearing the Gospel only once? Imagine, for a moment, Papayya, an Indian peasant, returning to his village after a hard day's work in the fields. His wife is preparing the evening meal, so to pass the time he wanders over to the village square. There he notices a stranger surrounded by a few curiosity-seekers. Tired and hungry, he sits down to hear what the man is saying. For an hour he listens to a message of a new God, and something he hears moves him deeply. Later he asks the stranger about the new way, and then, almost as if by impulse, he bows his head and prays to this God who is said to have appeared to humans in the form of Jesus. He doesn't quite understand all of it. As a Hindu he worships Vishnu, who incarnated himself many times as a human, animal, and fish to save humankind.

Papayya also knows many of the 330 million Hindu gods. But the stranger says there is only one God, and this God has appeared as a human only once. Moreover, the stranger says that this Jesus is the Son of God, but he says nothing about God's wife. It is all confusing to Papayya. He returns home and a new set of questions flood his mind. Can he still go to the Hindu temple to pray? Should he tell his family about his new faith? And how can he learn more about this Jesus? He cannot read the few papers the stranger gave him, and there are no other Christians in his village. Who knows when the stranger will come again?

Can Papayya become a Christian after hearing the Gospel only once?

This depends, in part, on what we mean by the term "Christian." If by this we mean that he can be born again and enter the family of God, the answer must be yes. If by this we mean that he understands the Gospel adequately enough to communicate it without essential distortion to others, and knows what it means to live a Christian life, the answer must be no. If we form a church of one hundred Papayyas and no further biblical teaching, the heart of the Gospel will soon be lost. Their traditional worldviews will turn it into another Hindu sect. We see examples of this in the case of Simon the converted sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24), the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11-16), the people of Lystra (Acts 14:8-13) and Malta (Acts 28:3-6)<sup>1</sup>

In planting churches we must differentiate between what is essential in the conversion of new believers, and what is a true understanding of the Gospel and Church in their cultural and historical settings—in other words, what constitutes salvation, and what is the goal of Christian discipleship and maturity. We need to keep both in mind. We need evangelists to lead people to Christ, but if we expect them to grow on their own in Christian knowledge and life without discipling them, they and the church will be weak. We need biblical scholars, theologians and elders to help us understand Scripture accurately and to grow in Christian faithfulness, but without evangelism the church soon dies.

## Cultural Transformation Levels

What must change in Christian conversion and discipleship? Throughout

history missionaries have given different answers to this question. Early missionaries often viewed conversion in terms of orthopraxy—in terms of behavioral changes. For example, from 1542 to 1544 Francis Xavier evangelized the Paravas on the East coast of South India. For baptism he required new converts to recite after him the twelve items of the catechism, the ten commandments, a memorized prayer and a confession. He baptized those who did so, sometimes a thousand at one time. He held Saturday night services to disciple women, and Sunday morning services for men. Many Protestant missionaries assessed Christian faith in terms of public confessions of faith, regular church attendance, abstinence from strong drink and immoral behavior, and wearing clothes.

Certainly we should expect behavioral changes to occur on conversion, and more to follow in Christian growth, but are these sufficient to determine who are Christians and who are not? On the one hand, there may be little change at first in the lives of young converts, and it is not at all clear what changes are definitive characteristics of conversion. On the other hand, many people learn to act like Christians, but lack the personal inner faith necessary for salvation.

Many missionaries began to measure conversion in terms of orthodoxy—in holding correct beliefs. True converts had to affirm the virgin birth, the death and the resurrection of Christ, as well as their lost condition and their dependence on Christ for salvation. Orthodox beliefs are essential in maintaining

the Christian faith over time, but new converts such as Papayya would fail even the most elementary biblical and theological examination. Are they then not saved? On the other hand, if they do know all that is essential to salvation, why stress theological training?

Protestant missionaries sought to lay solid biblical knowledge through translating the Bible into local languages, starting schools to teach people to read, and establishing Bible schools and seminaries to train church leaders. By these they sought to go deeper—to the conversion of the underlying beliefs and attitudes that give rise to behavior. Today missions are emphasizing the need for each new church to do theology and answer the unique questions it faces. Christians in each culture must hear God’s Word for them in their particular cultural and historical contexts.

Learning the truth of divine revelation given us in Scripture—what we call orthodox theology—is an important part of Christian transformation, but is that enough to preserve the faithfulness of the Church over the generations?

In the case of Papayya, it is clear that he needs not only to believe in Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who has died for his sins and saves him from eternal judgment; he must, in time, change his understandings of the nature of the categories and assumptions he uses. His concepts of *devudu*, *avatar*, *papamu*, and *moksha* have only vague resemblances for the concepts of God, incarnation, sin and salvation as presented in the Bible. Papayya uses *devudu* for ‘god,’ but in his worldview gods are finite beings who sin, are often reborn as ants or humans, and ultimately need *moksha* as much as humans. For him *papamu* is to break the moral law of

*karma* which is binding on all beings including the gods, and *moksha* means “salvation,” which consists of release from the weary cycle of rebirths dictated by this law of *karma*, and merger back into the ultimate cosmic field. There are no words to translate these concepts accurately in Telugu. The missionary must begin using words Papayya understands, even if these do not convey fully the Biblical message. The missionary and later on the church leaders must teach Papayya how the very words he uses must be radically redefined for him to understand the truth revealed in Scripture.

Graphic here  
Figure 1  
“Levels of Transformation”

Returning to our original differentiation between conversion and spiritual growth, Papayya can be converted using his old worldview. People hear the Gospel in their languages and cultural contexts, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, they can make a meaningful response to it. But that worldview must be transformed in the process of spiritual growth and maturity. No humanly constructed worldview is adequate to fully explicate the Gospel. All of them fall short of the worldview we find in Scripture. The Gospel itself challenges all worldviews, and calls for their transformation. There is not enough space here to debate whether there is or is not a “biblical worldview.” My position is that in the Old Testament

God prepared a people to be His witnesses, and a worldview through which He could adequately communicate the Gospel. If the Gospel does not have to do with worldview matters, it remains surface and transitory. Worldview deals with foundational matters. They determine our understandings of reality and truth. To the argument that there are several worldviews in the Old Testament, my response is that worldviews do change over time, but that at the deepest levels they continue over many generations. Just as we modern humans live in essentially a Greek worldview, so the worldview

of Christ and the early Church was built on the growing common understandings of God, sin, sacrifice, salvation and other key concepts in the historical progression of the Old Testament. Christ built on Abraham, Moses and the prophets. He did not introduce *de novo* a totally new worldview.

It is increasingly clear that for true Christianity to continue over the generations there must be a transformation in the world-

views people have (Figure 1). An analogy may help us here. Culture is like an iceberg. Behavior and beliefs are what we see above the surface of the ocean. The worldview is the large hidden mass beneath the surface that holds the whole iceberg up. If we convert only beliefs and behavior, in time the worldview will take the Christian beliefs captive. The result is “Christopaganism.”

### Nature of Worldview

How do we transform worldviews? Before we answer this question, we must examine more deeply the nature of worldviews. Behind the behavior and beliefs of human cultures seem to lie certain “givens” about the way

the world is put together. These include the categories and logic people use, as well as the assumptions they make, about the nature of reality. Three sets of assumptions come into play.

#### *Existential assumptions*

These assumptions provide a culture with the fundamental cognitive structures people use to explain reality. In the West they include such things as atoms, viruses and gravity. In South India they include *rakshasas*, *apsaras*, *bhutamams*, and other spirit beings. In the West we assume that time runs like a straight line from a beginning to an end, that it can be divided into uniform intervals such as years, days, minutes and seconds, and that it never repeats itself. Other cultures see time as cyclical: a never-ending repetition of summer and winter; day and night, and birth, death and rebirth.

#### *Affective assumptions*

Affective assumptions underlie notions of beauty and style, and influence the people's tastes in music, art, dress, food and architecture as well as the ways they feel about themselves and life in general. For example, in cultures influenced by Theravad Buddhism life is equated with suffering. By contrast, in the U.S. after World War II, many people were optimistic and believed that by work and planning they could achieve a happy, comfortable life.

#### *Evaluative assumptions*

These provide the standards people use to make judgments about right and wrong. For instance, North Americans assume that honesty means telling people the way things are, even if doing so hurts their feelings. In other countries, it means telling people what they want to hear, for it is more important that they be encouraged than for them to know the facts.

Taken together, the cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the

world that makes sense out of it, that gives them a feeling of being at home, and that reassures them that they are right. Martin Marty calls a worldview the "mental furnished apartment in which one lives." Thus worldview serves as the foundation on which people construct their explicit belief and value systems, and the social institutions in which they live their daily lives. Most people take their worldview for granted and those who challenge it are seen not as wrong but as crazy!

Worldviews are largely implicit. People in a society are often unaware of the way their categories, logic and assumptions shape the way they see their world. Their worldview is what they think with, not what they think about, or, to shift metaphors, worldviews are the glasses through which people look, not what the people look at. Often we become aware of our own worldview only when we live deeply in another culture, and then return to view our own culture through outside eyes, with a different belief and value system.

### **Worldview Comparisons**

One way to see worldviews is to compare one with another. An examination of Papayya's worldview, our Western worldview and the Biblical worldview helps us understand the need for the transformation of both Papayya's and our modern worldviews in planting mature, faithful churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Figure 2 at the end of the article)

This comparison makes it clear that worldviews need to be transformed if the Church as a community of believers is to understand and preserve the truth of God over time. Papayya can be converted in his old worldview, but if his worldview and that of other new converts is not transformed through the processes of discipling and teaching, the Church will soon lose the Gospel and become a form of Christo-paganism in which the Gospel message is distorted

by the categories and assumptions in which it is expressed.

This process of defining the categories, logic and assumptions found in divine revelation is the on-going task of the church. We are part of the worldview we have, but we must continually examine that worldview in the light of Scripture, and consciously work to change its understanding of reality. In this light, the Church must act as a hermeneutical community. It needs Biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, and laity to help it understand the message of the Gospel in its historical and cultural context. The process of doing theology in a particular setting must be that of critical contextualization in which the culture is studied, then Scripture, and finally Biblical truth and morality are used to judge and correct the culture and its worldview. These truths must be taught to new believers so that they grow in a knowledge of God's truth as they begin to walk in righteousness. In the case of Papayya, discipling must begin with teaching him what the Bible teaches about the nature of God, the nature of reality, the meaning and purpose of history, the righteousness in Christ and how we can live it in Him from day to day.

### **End Note**

1. A good example of the subversion of the Gospel is found in Latin America. See Christian Parker. 1996. *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

*Dr. Paul Hiebert served for many years as a missionary to India. Currently he teaches Mission Anthropology and directs Ph.D. Intercultural Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, School of World Missions in Deerfield, Ill.*

Figure 2

<b>A Comparison of Three Worldviews</b>		
<b>Indian (Hindu) Worldview</b>	<b>American (Western) Worldview (Traditional Western)</b>	<b>Biblical Worldview</b>
<p>1. <b>Brahman:</b> The ultimate reality is the cosmic energy field. Out of this emerges the gods, humans and worlds. All are under the law of <i>karma</i> which rewards good and punishes evil. Gods and humans are finite and sinful, and are reborn as ants and other creatures. All humans are part of the divine.</p> <p>2. <b>Maya:</b> The natural world has no ultimate reality. It is a world of subjective experiences--a transitory, ever-changing creation of our minds. Truth is found inside ourselves, and is personal and subjective. We gain it by <i>yoga</i> and a flash of insight</p> <p>3. <b>Dharma:</b> Right and wrong depend on a person's place in the cosmic and social order. There is no absolute morality.</p> <p>4. <b>Jati:</b> People belong to different <i>jatis</i> by birth. These castes are hierarchically ranked from high to low. Low caste people should never try to rise in rank, for they are low as a penalty for previous sins. Public life is based on and patron-client relationships. Duty to one's caste obligations and rule by the high castes is the best.</p> <p>5. <b>Moksha:</b> Salvation is to be released from the endless cycle of rebirths and the hardships of life and to merge back into the cosmic Brahman.</p>	<p>1. <b>Natural and Supernatural:</b> The ultimate supernatural being is God. The natural world is autonomous, and is made up of quarks, atoms and other forms of matter and energy. On the supernatural level, God dictates what is good and evil. On the human level, good and evil are culturally defined.</p> <p>2. <b>Empiricism:</b> The natural world is real and orderly. It operates as an autonomous reality according to natural laws. There is a sharp distinction between natural and miracle. Truth can be found through a systematic study of nature.</p> <p>3. <b>Values:</b> People are responsible for building a society on 'self-evident principles such as freedom and respect for the rights of others.</p> <p>4. <b>Individualism:</b> People are autonomous individuals of equal worth and with equal rights, including that of freedom. Self-fulfillment is an unquestioned value. Democracy, in which people chose their own leaders is the ideal form of government. Work relationships are based on contracts between equals. People join together in clubs based on shared interests.</p> <p>5. <b>Salvation:</b> Salvation on earth is to live a comfortable, self-fulfilling life. Success and progress are unquestionably good. They are measured by the ability to produce results. In eternity salvation is to go to heaven when one dies.</p>	<p>1. <b>God:</b> The ultimate reality is God who is eternal, all powerful, and all knowing. Righteousness and love are the main characteristics of God. There is no cosmic law of good and evil which God must obey. God's moral character is reflected in and incumbent on all creation.</p> <p>2. <b>Creation:</b> The natural world is created by God, and is sustained continually by Him. The order in it is "God's habits," not autonomous natural laws. Truth can be found in studying nature, but ultimately it comes to us through divine revelation.</p> <p>3. <b>Morality:</b> God's moral character is reflected in and incumbent on all creation. Sin is disobedience and rebellion against God. The consequence is divine judgment.</p> <p>4. <b>Covenant Community:</b> The individual is fully human only in a community characterized by <i>shalom</i>. Care for the other is valued over self-fulfillment. Righteousness, love, cooperation, sharing, and justice are central moral values. The reign of God is the ideal government. The Church is a spiritual family that seeks to be and model a caring fellowship that pursues God's will for His creation.</p> <p>5. <b>Salvation:</b> Salvation involves the whole person, the human community and creation. It is to be delivered from sin and evil in and through Christ and to be restored to the perfect existence God originally intended for His creation. It involves both this world and the next.</p>