

Towards a Biblical Worldview: Reflections of a South Asian and a North American

by Natun Bhattacharya and Tom Eckblad

In a training exercise we recently held for future missionaries, 28 people were divided into four groups of seven and assigned to a representative cultural group. Each group represented a different region of the world with a list of values that were associated with that region. One group valued change while another valued tradition. One culture valued being masters of the earth's resources while another group took on the value of being in harmony with the earth. Each of the representative groups was given seven values to assimilate in their thinking and then they were asked to view video clips from different parts of the world and project their values into interpreting the video. In other words, they were to change their worldview while seeing the video. It was a very difficult exercise.

As they strained to get outside of their own worldview and into another worldview they felt uncomfortable and frustrated. It was like borrowing someone else's glasses and not being able to bring the world into focus. They worked hard at it but a change in worldview generally does not come about in a drastic moment of change but in a gradual accustoming of the eyes to the light that strikes them. We have to say that worldview generally changes gradually but in some situations, like in a dramatic Christian conversion, a worldview can be substantially altered in a short period of time. However, in this article we would like to examine some of the basic elements of how a person's worldview changes using our personal experiences and how these changes in worldview affect a person's faith and life.

In many mission discussions, worldview is often portrayed as a static view of reality held by a particular people group in the world. There can be the Western worldview, the Hindu worldview, the Muslim worldview, the Chinese worldview, and so on. This approach is very helpful for discussion and comparative insights on different regions of the world and different people groups or cultures. However, there is a trap to be avoided and that is to think that everyone in a specific culture has the same worldview and that this worldview does not change. Worldview is both individualistic and collective, like looking out the same window together but with different glasses on. It is both changing and resistant to change. It is both able to be examined as part of our self understanding, and difficult to really be seen objectively because it is such a part of us. How then can we help ourselves and other missionaries to see our own worldview, to see the worldview of others, and to understand the dynamics and process of a changing worldview among the people with whom we are living and ministering?

The first step is to reflect on one's own personal worldviews and how they have changed over a period of time. In our preparation to write this article the three of us sat down together to discuss how our worldview had changed over the last decade or so. All of us are cross-cultural trainers with Mission Training International and are always helping others to examine their worldviews. What was noted, as seen in the following dialogue, was that our worldviews had changed from our home culture worldview and that this

change had been heavily influenced by our experiences in cross-cultural settings and working on multinational teams. Here are some excerpts from our discussion. The interviewer is Paul Nelson director of Mission Training International (MTI).

Paul: Tom, you lived for over 10 years in Latin America and have been focused toward that region for more than 20 years, how has this changed your worldview?

Tom: I would say that when I went to South America at the age of 23, my worldview was still in a formative stage. I already had a strong view of spiritual realities, such as, evil spirits, wrestling in prayer, and the conscious presence of the Lord. But these areas became a daily living reality in Bolivia, and in a much more sharper focus.

Paul: How did this sharper focus on spiritual realities come about?

Tom: There were two major factors during our initial years in Bolivia. The first was that the people with whom we were living and ministering were much more involved in this area. Whether it was the tribal group who believed in the spirit of the bird god, or the highland people who believed in mother earth or the syncretism of a mixed Catholic and folklore religion, I was always living and ministering among people with a totally different worldview than I had been accustomed to. This daily interaction with a different worldview led to the second factor that brought about change, which was being forced to look at Scripture and seeing how it spoke to these issues. There was a lot of personal struggling on my part during our first term to have a

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biblical worldview, and what I realized was that though I couldn't simply adopt the people's worldview with whom I was working, I certainly had a lot to learn from them about seeing spiritual realities from a different perspective.

Paul: Was a change about spiritual realities the only thing that changed in your worldview?

Tom: No, a second major area was in personal relationships and material wealth. Though I had not grown up in a wealthy family I didn't understand real poverty until I lived in Latin America. We had one mother offer us her baby because she couldn't afford to feed him. Physical need was a constant, daily issue; many times involving life and death issues. And yet the depth of intimate, caring relationships was so fulfilling in spite of these conditions, or maybe because of them, that my worldview about material things and relationships was deeply affected.

Paul: What was the change that you saw in your worldview in these areas?

Tom: I guess the best way to describe it was my change in my view of man. To view each individual as an opportunity to build a relationship. Below the surface of titles, education, material belongings, and cultural customs there is a person to get to know and enjoy. The Bolivians invited me into their lives and in doing so showed me a window on the world I had never looked through before. I know that I filtered what I saw through my own set of glasses, but I would have never seen the world through a new window if they had not invited me into their lives.

Paul: So a big factor in changing your worldview is to relate deeply with others of a different worldview?

Tom: Yes, and I found out that it doesn't come naturally but with a lot of stretching and pain.

Paul: Is it necessary for all missionaries to go through the stretching and pain in order to examine and change their worldview?

Tom: It is necessary to go through it in order to communicate the Gospel in such a way that it will touch the people with whom the missionary is working in a deep way. Dr. Wilson Awasu, from Ghana, who was on the MTI staff used to talk about deep level conversion. A conversion that reaches down into a person's personal and cultural worldview and dynamically and dramatically changes it. Without communication on that level we will have surface conversions without a deep level or true biblical conversion.

Paul: What kind of stretching and pain are you talking about.

Tom: The stretching and pain of constantly going back to Scriptures every time my worldview is challenged. And it will be challenged a lot if you interact deeply with others from other cultures. The first tendency when our worldview is challenged is to back off and defend our position or to get so busy that we don't have to interact with another worldview. It is the natural reaction we all have when challenged. What we do in our training programs when a person feels like their worldview is being challenged is to invite them to go to Scriptures and draw out the eternal principles that God has revealed in His Word and then to interact with other worldviews. It is hard work but worth it.

Paul: Natun, how has your worldview changed since 1972 when you became a Christian from an orthodox Hindu background in South Asia.

Natun: I practised pantheistic monism as a way of life. This is a radically different from Christian Theism as possible. I grew up believing that god is one, infinite, an impersonal reality. In other words, god is cosmos. All that exists are part of that ultimate reality and are one with it. If anything that is not god seems to exist, it is an illusion. My pilgrimage in worldview began when I learned from the Bible that God is infinite, yet personal, transcendent, and

yet immanent. God created the universe, 'from nothing'. It is not an extension of Himself. This transformed my outlook concerning my surroundings and how I viewed God.

Paul: You have now lived and ministered in the North American cultural context for the last 17 years. How has this further impacted your worldview?

Natun: After my conversion to Christianity, I lived and worked in India for several years. The person who brought me to Christ and influenced me most was a South Indian Christian from Karala. Initially, I attended an Indian church, I fellowshiped with other Indian believers, and became acquainted with stories of indigenous Christian believers. When I was first introduced to North Americans and other Westerners as part of an Operation Mobilization team, and later in Bible college, I thought that as Christians our worldviews would be exactly the same, but soon I discovered that our presuppositions about the basic make up of our world, about reality, were not always the same.

Paul: What were the differences you noticed?

Natun: I noticed that we had different assumptions which we grew up with. Since arriving in the States, I have wrestled further with this issue. During the last few years, I sought to explain some of the differences in our assumptions. First, various worldviews other than the Christian theism, such as naturalism, existentialism, Greek philosophy, and more recently, eastern religions, have been superimposed upon the Western world. These worldviews have influenced the way of life for both Christians and non-Christians. Secondly, both non-Western Christians, such as South Asians like myself, and my North American brothers and sisters are journeying toward a fuller understanding of God's worldview as revealed in the Bible. We both tend to visualize it through our own imperfect lenses of understanding.

We have not yet reached a perfect understanding.

Paul: What are some of the areas in the North American worldview which you have struggled with in your life and ministry?

Natun: In my interaction with the North American worldview I have thought through a number of different questions. Some of the questions I have are, 'Is the mechanistic worldview of the West, which encourages an analytical approach in which life is compartmentalized, and all things must be comprehended, consistent with the teachings about the mysteries of God which are sometimes unfathomable? Is the growing emphasis on materialism and physical well being a result of naturalism or a result of a false understanding of our capacities as humans made in the image of God? Has the extreme individualism and self reliance in Western society been born out of the human tendency for self-sufficiency? Are not human relationships more important than the overemphasis on time and task? Does the West's overemphasis on the visual world undermine unseen spiritual realities? Does it distract us from our perspectives on eternity and spirituality? Does it make us focus on only the present material world?' As I have wrestled with some of these issues, I sought a fuller understanding of a Biblical worldview standing in between my own former background of pantheistic monism and the various worldviews that have shaped the contemporary North American culture. I think my understanding of a Biblical worldview has deepened with exposure to worldviews outside of those I grew up with and encountered when I first became a Christian. I believe a cross-cultural communicator of the Gospel, whether a North American or a non-Westerner, benefits from taking this kind of personal journey and becomes effective in ministering to people of other cultures.

Paul: Tom, do you feel as the world grows smaller in communication and transportation that we will be moving toward a more homogeneous worldview?

Tom: I think that we have to be careful to be maintain a view of how deep a person's and a society's worldview really goes. With short-term missions, doing missions in English rather than the mother tongue and the great interchange of leadership from all parts of the world we can begin to think that we all have the same worldview. A lot of the cultures of the world are buying into the material comforts of the Western world without necessarily buying into a materialistic view of the world. It reminds me of seeing a little boy in the middle of a South American jungle wearing a Denver Broncos teeshirt. And then a few hours later being in a major Latin American city surrounded by computers and cell phones. Our North American tendency will be to interpret another person's worldview based on their material possession. Worldviews around the world are changing but we must be careful not to equate material change with a change in a person's worldview.

Paul: Natun, you have talked about your personal pilgrimage in influencing your worldview, do you think the worldviews in both the West and the East are radically changing too?

Natun: I think changing worldviews is a two way street. The East has been influenced immensely by the West because of technological advancement and international communications. There is an increasing tendency to adopt Western materialism, individualism, and other characteristics of the predominant worldviews of the West, especially among the younger generation in the East. Therefore, at least in some way, the worldview is changing in the East. At times, the change is on a deep level. During my last trip to India, I recently witnessed many manifes-

tations of Western influence on the indigenous culture. Likewise, Eastern mysticism, new age philosophy, and pluralism have contributed to the development of a highly syncretic and eclectic worldview among many in the West. Thus what seemed to be such an abnormal worldview in the past, is no longer viewed that way because these thoughts have become part of the West's contemporary culture. Over the last few years I have increasingly seen this to be more so. This two way change creates many implications for the communication of the Gospel in both the East and the West.

Paul: Having discussed your perspectives on worldviews, and being a bi-cultural person, how has worldview changed your ministry?

Natun: I have, above all, learned to be sensitive to who I am ministering to. Sometimes missionaries have a comfortable tendency of "one approach fits all". My systematic theological training did not really equip me to be sensitive. However, as I have listened to people and dialogued with other Asians, North Americans, and people from other minority cultures in the U.S., I have come to appreciate how each people group holds a unique set of beliefs and assumptions consciously and subconsciously about the world around them. The result of this persistent encounter has made a profound impact on me. I am convinced today more than before that relevant contextualization of the Gospel produces eternal results for the Kingdom of God.

In our discussion together we realize that worldview is so deeply ingrained in us it is as natural as breathing. We do not stop and examine our actions, beliefs, and social systems in the light of our worldviews but it is always there with us. Nevertheless, our worldview provides a solid framework for explaining the life surrounding us. A person really cannot totally reflect on nor fully comprehend any worldview other

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than his or her own. However, their understanding is greatly increased as they step out for a while from their own worldview into any person's worldview. In our own experience we can affirm this: As we undertake this journey into understanding, questions about reality, truth, knowledge, human beings, and life's beginning arise within us. Though some worldviews have a complete or consistent answer to some of these questions nevertheless, all reveal logical and truth intrinsic flaws. What makes the Biblical worldview genuine is not only the historical reality of God's revelation to us, but our personal discovery of the grandeur of God in our own pilgrimage. Here our working framework in worldview is not based on religion nor on a conscious or vague philosophizing, but rather on the personal God who is infinite, omniscient, sovereign, transcendent, immanent, full of goodness and love, true and consistent toward all peoples and cultures everywhere in all His dealing with mankind!

Conclusion

Communicating what worldview is and how it affects missionaries as they seek to share the Gospel with their people is an integral part of the continuing dialogue the MTI staff carry on. In addition to the theoretical discussion on worldview there is also the realization that each needs to be constantly reflecting on their own worldview and nurturing a strong desire that our own personal perception of reality would be shaped by a strong Biblical worldview.

Natun Bhattacharya was born and raised in an orthodox Hindu family in India. After his conversion to Christ, he spent several years of missionary work among the Indo-Chinese tribe of Northeast India. In 1980 he came to the States and became involved in cross-cultural ministry to international students, ethnic immigrant communities, and North

American churches. He earned a Master of Divinity from Northwest Baptist Seminary in Tacoma, WA and a Master of Arts in Communication Education from the University of Northern Colorado. Currently he is on staff with Mission Training International in Colorado Springs.

Tom Eckblad spent 20 years with the South America Mission (SAM) working in Bolivia in the areas of church-planting and leadership training and for nine years he served as Personnel Director. He earned a M.A. in Bible from Columbia International University and a M.A. in Sociocultural Anthropology from the University of Kentucky. Since moving to Colorado he has worked with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and is presently on staff with Mission Training International.

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