

Response to Paul Hiebert's "Transforming Worldviews" Presentation

James N. Pankratz

The purpose of my response is to suggest directions for discussion of Paul's paper. I will do that without recapitulating Paul's argument and without extensive analysis and critique. I will not address his specific analysis of the worldview of North American culture, but will attempt to respond to the broader questions he raises explicitly or implicitly. I believe that the paper, like so much of Paul's work, illuminates important current issues and suggests new possibilities. It is a privilege to suggest ways in which Paul's thesis can be explored.

1. First, the central idea in this paper that I believe should be explored in our discussions is Paul's underlying assumption that worldviews are in ongoing transformation. Worldviews are not static for individuals or communities. Adaptation (borrowing, change, contextualization, conversion, recapitulation, repression, translation) is ongoing. It may be stimulated by the simple passage of generations or an individual's lifecycle, or by factors such as ecological change, human conflict, or technological innovation.

One area of discussion for missiology already is, "What factors are presently shaping the worldview transformation that is underway in XX (which could be North America, India, or an age group in a specific culture), and how are they shaping it?"

Paul's analysis of worldviews in process holds great potential for this discussion.

2. Some of the ideas Paul has developed in other work he has done can be helpful for this discussion of transforming worldviews. I suggest that his work on centered and bounded sets is especially useful. Much contemporary writing about worldviews proceeds from a bounded set approach. It is more helpful to proceed from a centered set understanding of worldviews, and especially to understand that individual or communal conversion has a centered set dynamic to it.

Paul's questions about Papayya (a non-literate Indian farmer who becomes a Christian convert after hearing one half hour presentation of the Gospel) raise the

James Pankratz is Academic Dean at Menmonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno CA.

broader question, "When is a worldview transformed?" Is it when "converts" orient themselves to a new center? When they apply this new orientation to new situations with coherence and creativity? When they show fruit of the Spirit?

3. It would be helpful to explore whether there are sometimes "straws that break camels' backs" in worldview transformation. What I mean is, when there is an accumulation of changes in beliefs, actions and commitments that results in a significantly transformed worldview, it may be possible to identify the most catalytic elements in the process, or to identify when the accumulation of components gained the critical mass to sweep forward with its own momentum.

4. It is common to describe the biblical or Christian worldview as a Hebrew worldview transformed by its encounter with Greek culture. But is the Hebrew worldview normative, is it essential? Are all other adaptations of the Christian worldview always to be judged by how faithfully they embody the DNA of the Hebrew worldview? Could one look at the critique Jesus brought to bear on his religious culture and argue that the Christian worldview is actually:

- less radically monotheistic and more immanent
- less morally prescriptive and more ethically malleable
- less ethnically defined and more inter-cultural and inter-racial - less violent and more peace-making
- less ritually defined and more fluid and plural in its manifold expressions.

To put this in other language, should the OT and the Hebrew worldview be less privileged in the Christian worldview, and should more polytheistic and pluralistic worldviews be given a greater scope?

5. There are many contemporary discussions about whether North American culture is Christian and what the status of other religious cultures has been and can be within North America. These discussions provide us with an opportunity to assess to what extent a worldview may still be largely Christian (or Hindu, Islamic, or Buddhist) even when the central distinctive affirmations and actions of that faith are no longer professed and practiced by most members of a society. I do not know if

James Pankratz is Academic Dean at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno CA.

there are scholars who have explored to what extent Soviet society was ever fully "de-Christianized" at the level of those who articulated its guiding philosophy and attempted to define consistent policies, but that would seem to me to be an accessible case study of this issue.

6. Conversely, how do we assess when a worldview is not embedded within a culture even though many of the overt actions and affirmations are consistent with that worldview? To rephrase a biblical caution, is it possible that there may be a culture that says, "Lord, in your name we healed and brought peace and prosperity to the world," only to hear the Lord say, "I never knew you!"

I especially invite Paul to respond to my suggestion that the concept of centered set is helpful for this discussion of transforming worldviews. Second, I invite dialogue about the primacy of the Hebrew worldview for Christian identity. Finally, I would be interested to hear from Paul and others whether there are studies available which document the

transformation process of worldview transformation in communities or cultures, from the perspective of our present discussion.

James Pankratz is Academic Dean at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno CA.

