Book Review - Transforming Worldviews (Paul G. Hiebert)

*Transforming Worldviews, an Anthropological Understanding of How People Change,* by Paul G. Hiebert, is a compelling look at common worldviews in the modern world, and a description of how they change. Hiebert was a distinguished professor of mission and anthropology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as well as a pastor and missionary.

Professor Hiebert begins, as every debater and academic should, by defining his terms. He describes worldview (German - weltanschauung) as “a point of view of the world, a perspective on things, a way of looking at the cosmos from a particular vantage point.”¹ The concept of worldview is vital to understanding people and cultures, but it has a cognitive bias, excluding other important aspects of life and behavior including emotions, actions, and morality. To illustrate basic cultural analysis, Hiebert looks at four aspects of culture, freedom vs control and hierarchy vs equality, and demonstrates where various Western nations fall on these axes.² He also defines myth, explaining that contrary to common usage it is not a false story, but an overarching narrative that gives meaning to life.

Cultures are deep, and much is hidden (subconscious) even to those who are natives of the culture. In the West, for example, we schedule our lives by the clock and understand time as linear and having discreet, equal size and independent parts. Ancient cultures had no clocks and most understood time as moving from event to event but not necessarily in a linear pattern. i.e. “going somewhere”. Cultures comprise sets differently, use different taxonomies

² Ibid., 27.
and follow different algorithms in understanding the world. Modern people often group things by their characteristics while traditional people often group them by their relationships. Given a picture of two men, a woman and a child and asked which did not belong, many Westerners would say the child because the others are adults. Traditionalists might exclude one of the men, because a man, a woman and a child comprise a family.

Modern cultures often value the individual more than the group, while in traditional cultures it is the other way around. Hiebert contrasts a synchronic or “cross sectional” understanding of a culture with a diachronic or “over time” knowledge. Cultures can be analyzed by looking at languages, rituals, objects, and other aspects of the people involved.

Small scale oral societies such as tribes tend to see beings and spiritual forces in nature rather than just matter and energy. They are human centered but have a group orientation. People do not own but use and share the land. Often illiterate, they are oriented more towards sound than sight. Their logic is functional rather than abstract, so if given a picture of two hammers and one nail and asked to group them, they would likely group a hammer with a nail rather than grouping the hammers together as a Westerner might. Magic is real to them, and sin involves breaking relationships rather than breaking an objective moral standard.

By contrast modern peasant societies are pulled between their traditional roots and modern “developed” societies. They usually see their community as a whole and make a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders. Many are oral but a few specialists such as priests are literate. Pulled between tribalism and modernism, their traditional worldview has to coexist

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3 Ibid., 58.
4 Ibid., 117.
with them, no matter how dissonant the result. Peasant societies often believe that wealth is limited and so if one person gets more, someone else necessarily gets less. Therefore it is shameful to accumulate much wealth. Hierarchy is important, and the greatest sin is treason.\(^5\)

The modern worldview, which informs the first truly global culture, originated in Europe in the late 18\(^{th}\) century. It dichotomizes natural/supernatural, science/religion, public sphere/private sphere, and many other areas. The fundamental belief is that nothing exists outside the material world, or if something does it does not matter. Modernity emphasizes law and order based on natural principles, not spiritual truths, and focuses on systems.\(^6\) Individuals rather than groups matter. It attempts to be objective, logical and quantitative.\(^7\)

Two world wars and the threat of nuclear holocaust destroyed the optimism of modernity and ushered in postmodernity, a worldview which objects to many of the key tenets of modernity and ultimately despairs of real knowledge. Since truth is unknowable and meaning in life is only what the individual puts into it, postmodernists live in the present and seek amusement above all.\(^8\)

The last worldview is the “glocal” one, which combines global and local. It is a varying mix of modern and postmodern ideas with a focus on what works, from a personal happiness point of view. As the industrial age has morphed into the information age, rapid urbanization

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\(^5\) Ibid., 135.
\(^6\) Ibid., 165.
\(^7\) Ibid., 189.
\(^8\) Ibid., 230.
coexists with an increasing “yearning for home”. Modern nationalism is giving way to ethnicity and religion as ways of defining oneself.

Hiebert then describes a Biblical worldview; a challenging task since the Bible itself includes elements of traditional, modern, postmodern, and glocal worldviews. Nonetheless the totality of Scriptures harmonizes these elements, places them under the control of the Almighty God, and commands all Christians to see the world in this Biblical light. Finally Hiebert discusses how to change world views, including examining them, exposing them to other worldviews, and creating rituals.

Overall, Transforming Worldviews is an outstanding book. It is a must for anyone striving to understand themselves and others. I have already referred to it many times, and will do so for many years to come.

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9 Ibid., 260.