



ADVENTIST UNIVERSITY OF AFRICA
SCHOOL OF POST GRADUATE STUDIES

“FACTORS THAT HINDER CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS IN ETHIOPIA”

A TERM PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF POST
GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
LEAD 777

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Aug 2019

Factors that Hinder Sharing the Christian Worldview in Ethiopia

Ethiopian evangelical churches are among the fastest growing in the world. Ethiopia has the third largest Christian population in sub-Saharan Africa. As recently as 1980, Protestant evangelicals accounted for less than 5 percent of the population, but today they make up nearly 20 percent (and 30 percent of the country's Christians). (Pew Forum 1998) Ethiopian evangelicals are thus in a position to make an enormous impact on their nation and continent in the coming decades. A factor with the potential to limit this impact, however, may be certain aspects of the Ethiopian evangelical worldview. (Ethiopia Studies 2010)

A majority of Ethiopian evangelicals have a dualistic worldview, that is, a “split vision worldview. That separates reality into two fundamentally distinct categories: holy and profane, sacred and secular.” (Brian 1984) This dualistic worldview can be traced historically to three sources. First, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is arguably the second-oldest continuously functioning church in the world, has been a 1,700-year-long influence on and within Ethiopian culture. The Orthodox often and in many ways dichotomize the spiritual and the material, for example, by elevating asceticism as the highest form of spirituality and by esteeming monks and priests as being above ordinary believers.

A second influence shaping Ethiopian evangelicals is the theology they received from Protestant missionaries, many of whom were themselves shaped by a dichotomous pietistic worldview that separated the sacred and the secular, common among U.S. fundamentalists in the 1930s and 1940s. (Tite 2013) According to their teaching, the proper work of the kingdom of God is evangelism and commitment to the work of the church. This dualism teaching laid the foundation for Ethiopia believers. (Ashagre 2012)

The third influence came from the Communist Derg regime in Ethiopia (1974–91), which severely persecuted evangelicals and promoted a materialist ideology that elevated

reason above faith. In reaction, the older generation of evangelicals grew to deeply mistrust science and reason, elevating “simple faith” above critical thinking.

Aspects of Dualism among Evangelicals

This paper will capture the present aspects of the dualistic worldview evident among evangelicals in Ethiopia under four headings, regarding attitudes toward (1) creation and material reality, (2) work, (3) society, and (4) spirituality.

Attitudes toward creation and material reality.

Rather than having a future hope for a renewed material creation, Ethiopian evangelicals more often express hope in a nonmaterial heaven, viewing the created order as destined only for destruction. Few imagine that God loves his creation or that creation has intrinsic value to God. A consequence is that the physical environment is ignored. Trash is endemic in public spaces. In the capital city of Addis Ababa, rivers are so polluted that often one can smell the stench from blocks away. Some natural resources have been severely depleted, with little awareness of consequences. For example, in the researchers personal study it was discovered that only 3 percent of the previously existing forested land in Ethiopia still exists today.

When one understands God’s love of creation, then one should pay particular attention to the natural world around them. Interestingly, even when we go to our homes and find there a lot of ants in our home, we should not do this, “O God, where did they come from? Please burn them!” Instead, I took my two-year-old baby girl and showed her the ants. . . . And I just felt something amazing and started to praise the Lord for how wonderful his creations are. Starting from that moment, I started to teach my baby to love and not to hate or be afraid of animals, and I took her to the zoo to show her some animals. (Tigist 2012)

In particular, a dualism that views creation as expendable engenders negative views of the human body. In a paper one student made an often-heard observation: “Most of our community, including a great number of evangelical believers, seem to neglect even to keep their body clean and take care of it. Some of them refuse to brush their teeth, wash their clothes, or nurture their body by eating a balanced diet. They all do this in order to please God and become more spiritual in their daily lives.” (Yiheyis 2013)

Attitudes toward work.

For a majority of evangelicals, “full-time Christian work” is often defined solely as working within church occupations. The secular and spiritual dichotomy is entertained in almost all churches. People tend to consider their work outside the church as working for Pharaoh in Egypt and their ministry in the church as heavenly activity. (Mesfin 2012)

Such dichotomizing means that church members “working for Pharaoh” outside the church often feel that they are second-class and useless to God. As one said strongly the idea of splitting the world into two realms and thinking one is better than the other affects my spiritual life and the way I think about Christian vocation. I have been working as a nurse in a hospital but have never felt that I was serving God. Rather, I felt sad when I thought of myself not being involved in ministry because I believed that I was engaged in a secular vocation. I considered that God’s true servants were people who served God full-time. . . . I considered myself as a second-rate Christian. (Bethlehem 2012)

Moreover, when evangelicals think they are working for Pharaoh, they are tempted to do their work lazily or dishonestly, since God is thought to ignore their “secular” activities. A recent report identified 80 percent of government officials imprisoned for corruption as being evangelicals. (Desta 2013) Another person tells a similar story: “Many unbelievers think that most Christians are lazy in their secular work. I say this because I have encountered a manager that does not hire Christians (born-again Christians). The reason is that he thinks

that born-again Christians have good life ethics but bad work ethics. I found this to be very true.” (Beretet 2012)

Attitudes toward society.

Regarding society, a sacred/secular dualism confuses notions of structure and direction. It holds that God created all things good (structure) but affirms that sin causes these structures to be misused against God’s purposes (negative direction). (Walsh 2013) Thus, rather than viewing government, politics, music, the arts, or science as God-given and therefore good structures of life that can, however, be misused, the dualistic worldview sees them as inherently evil. Practically, this means that many churches restrict their activities to preaching, healing, and evangelism; addressing human needs is considered a “secular” activity and is relegated to the government or NGOs. A tragic example is the rampant HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ethiopia, which, until relatively recently, was seen by evangelicals as not our business. The country has developed a transformation and development strategy and is mobilizing every resource toward its achievement. However, the involvement of the Christian community is insignificant. The major reason for such minimal involvement is its dualistic understanding of life. (Sofanit 2013)

In May 2005 peaceful demonstrators in Addis Ababa were killed by government soldiers. Unlike the Ethiopian Catholic Church, no evangelical church or pastor voiced disapproval against the killings based on moral grounds. The silence of the churches can be taken as evidence that churches in the Ethiopian context have largely ignored their social responsibility because of a dualistic worldview that perceives the soul as more important and of higher value than the body. (Alelign 2012)

Attitudes toward spirituality.

Perhaps most debilitating for a healthy Christian community is a dualistic view of spirituality itself. One student commented: Some Pentecostal preachers are creating many problems by abusing the word “faith,” even to the extent that sick people throw away their medicine because they think they are healed, even when they have not received real healing. And when such action results in serious problems, these preachers put the blame on the person for a lack of faith. Some people also say that it is unspiritual to try to reason out the things that are to be believed. In their view, it is spiritual to accept things “blindly,” simply by what a preacher, prophet, or pastor says. (Alelign 2012)

Ever since Augustine, “faith seeking understanding” has been a wise definition of the theological task. A dualistic worldview, however, involves faith that is opposed to understanding. Such an outlook poses many dangers. One, as indicated above, is widespread denigration among evangelicals of so-called secular science. Another casualty is honest biblical interpretation evangelicals follow the many self-proclaimed “prophets,” whose pronouncements are not evaluated critically in the light of Scripture.

One person eloquently articulated the dangers dualism poses to spiritual life through avoidance of personal responsibility: We tend to look at ourselves as inherently good. We presume that the main thing to deal with is not self but Satan. Our proposed solution, therefore, is to launch attack . . . against Satan. In the process, the need for being transformed in our inner being is greatly deemphasized. As a result, we do not see ourselves as the source of the problem; rather, the problem is from outside [us]. According to the cultural glasses that we all wore when we read the Bible, these assumptions all seemed natural and self-evident. . . . That is what it means to be a typical Ethiopian evangelical Christian. (Tekalign) 2013)

Diagnosing Dualistic Worldviews

If one is to overcome the deleterious effects of the dualistic worldview, a proper diagnosis is essential. Is dualism simply wrong thinking, or is something much deeper involved a sin-generated spiritual captivity?

One can make a case for dualism as wrong thinking. For example, Ethiopian people usually express shock at being told that the Scriptures are the result of human authorship as well as divine inspiration, or that Jesus was as completely human as he was completely divine. Their dualistic worldview assumes that the human/material contaminates the divine/spiritual—thus, even the possibility that the human and divine could coexist in Scripture or in Jesus is inconceivable to them. I would not judge these wrong understandings as sin. When we look, however, at the total result of the dualistic worldview among Ethiopian evangelicals, dualism as sin must be taken seriously.

Ethiopian evangelicals typically conceptualize sin as intentional overt actions. people often argue that unintentional or unconscious actions are not sinful. That one may commit sin without realizing it, that sin may manifest itself within society as such, or indeed that sin might be embedded in a cultural worldview—such concepts are perplexing to them. Yet many Christians throughout the world recognize racism or sexism, for example, as sin, even though individuals acting in racist or sexist ways within their own cultures often have no conscious guilt of wrongdoing.

Why are racism and sexism sinful? At the very least, they devalue human beings created in the image of God and are opposed to God's kingdom values. Similarly, dualism disparages the good creation God loves, denies the good gifts God provides to enable us to do productive work, denigrates disciples' calling to be salt and light in the world outside church compounds, and can destroy disciples' ability to live spiritually faithful lives. The student comments above testify to all these realities.

When teaching the Pharisees that sin reaches far deeper than mere outward actions, Jesus identifies the source of sin as the heart (Luke 6:43–45). David Naugle offers an extended biblical and philosophical argument that the heart is also the source of our worldview: “The heart establishes the basic presuppositions of life and, because of its life-determining influence, must always be carefully guarded.” If both worldview and sin emanate from the heart, it is easy to agree with Naugle that aspects of one’s worldview might be sinfully corrupted. (Naugle2002) Jesus seems to believe that the worldview of the Pharisees, for example, is not simply wrong thinking, but sinful.

Archibald Hart, former dean of the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, presents a compelling synthesis of biblical and psychological views of sin in the following way. The person is indeed transformed (has a new heart) in a once-for-all cleansing (justification). However, the further scrubbing clean of sin’s corruption in the psyche and personality is an ongoing, lifelong process of transformation (sanctification). (Hart 1993)

As one reflects on this biblical/psychological understanding of sin, it is realistic to assume that some aspects of sin’s inner corruption might include elements of a perverted worldview. Missiologist Paul Hiebert comments on the importance of seeing conversion as both a point-decision (justification) and a lifelong process (sanctification).

Conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels of culture: behavior and rituals, beliefs, and worldview. Although conversion must include a change in behavior and beliefs, if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and becomes captive to the local culture. . . . If behavioral change was the focus of early Protestantism, and changed beliefs the focus of the twentieth century, transforming worldviews must be central to the church and mission in the twenty-first century. (Naugle 2002)

Moving beyond a Dualistic Worldview

That Ethiopian evangelical take Satan, evil, and sin very seriously gives reason for great hope. For them to recognize the dualistic mind-set as a possible strategy of Satan that undermines their impact for the kingdom of God might serve as a needed wake-up call. Accepting that a sacred/secular dualism might be both a sin and a Satan-generated sickness will, in turn, hopefully prod evangelicals into deeper reflection and action.

What directions might such deeper reflection and action take? Hiebert suggests that worldviews change in two basic ways: through slow growth and through paradigm shifts. (Hiebert 2008) The former involves a constant adaptation of the underlying worldview, like remodeling an existing house. Paradigm shifts involve demolition of the old house and reusing its materials to rebuild with a better design. Both strategies are needed, but the paradigm shift is essential for evangelical leaders.

Transforming such a worldview requires more than new information, even new biblical information. Jesus gave the Pharisees plenty of new information, yet only a few (e.g., Nicodemus) changed their worldview regarding him. Many observe that new information by itself rarely heals racism or sexism, either. The kind of worldview change needed requires a spiritual healing that only happens under the power of the Holy Spirit, who “leads us into all truth” (John 16:13) and makes each of us a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, fervent prayer for the Spirit’s power must underlie any effort to transform a dualistic worldview.

Practically, what pathways might the Spirit take in which human beings may cooperate? Hiebert suggests three steps that result in worldview change. First is “surfacing” the worldview to conscious awareness so it can be understood for what it is—not reality, but only a model of reality. (Hiebert 2002) One then carefully examines how well dualism fits the biblical worldview under the categories of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This is what I try to do with my graduate students. After carefully reviewing the weight of biblical

data, I have observed that many students begin to shift away from defining reality in sacred/secular ways.

A second means of worldview transformation is to step outside one's own culture and see it from a new vantage point. "As we learn to see the world through the eyes of others and then return to our own culture, we come back as 'outsiders' and begin to see it through new eyes." (Hiebert 2002) One of the values of a global theological village is the opportunity to see through others' eyes as they have wrestled with the same issue. A crucial task for Ethiopian Bible schools and seminaries is to offer the next generation of evangelical leaders these "new eyes" with which to see the negative impact dualism is having on their spiritual lives and witness to society.

These first two strategies stimulate the paradigm shift that I believe is especially needed among church leaders. Once this paradigm shift is under way among leaders and future leaders, then we can begin to adopt Hiebert's most provocative suggestion for transforming worldviews—the "slow growth" of living rituals. (Hiebert 2002) Rituals reinforce worldview change. Since ritual is deeply embedded in Ethiopian society, it offers great potential. Growing a new ritual might be as simple as for evangelical leaders to decide never again to use the phrase "full-time Christian work" to refer to church workers, or to stop using "secular" altogether to modify "work," "music," and so forth. Changing how we speak slowly changes how we think.

One of my students organized a cleanup day for her church members to pick up trash around the community. Another student got her Sunday school class to plant trees in the church compound. Simple efforts to be sure, but such repeated small actions can slowly change how we see the world.

Evangelical worship is an especially fertile soil for new living rituals. Adding social concerns in congregational prayers, offering testimonies of members having an impact for

Christ within their “secular” occupations, or writing new songs about God loving creation are options. Such new rituals require a new kind of church leadership, which again raises the necessity of a paradigm shift into a more biblical worldview for the new generation of leaders. While paradigm shifts tear down and rebuild the house (especially for leaders), living rituals slowly remodel it for all evangelicals. They are complementary efforts; both are needed.

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Through teaching at the only Protestant graduate theological college in Ethiopia, I have been able to interact with outstanding Ethiopian students representing all evangelical denominations. Much of what I present here I learned from them. I am especially grateful to Tekalign Nega for helpful comments on a draft of this article 2010.

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