The Significance of Worldview for Intercultural and Interreligious Interactions and Communications in Mission in Africa

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I would like to approach my topic of “The Significance of Worldview for Intercultural and Interreligious Interactions and Communications in Mission in Africa” by sharing with you three personal experiences in Nigeria, where I worked as a missionary for a Lutheran Church for 10 years and later did the field work of my research for my PhD in intercultural studies.

Three Personal Experiences in Africa

The Spiritual World: In 1982 I arrived in Nigeria as a young missionary sent out by the Sudan Mission to work with the Lutheran Church of Christ. The church posted me to a Government Secondary School in Numan where I immediately began to teach Christian Religious Knowledge. One day we were discussing about God and the world, and I shared my understanding of reality as divided between our physical world that can be registered with our five senses and studied by science and the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of the students protested sharply. I had completely forgotten the spiritual world of good and bad spirits, that to them were just as real as the physical objects that they could see with their eyes. I am afraid that on that day they lost some of their confidence in their new teacher, who apparently was ignorant of a critically important dimension of reality.

Still, some months later I was one evening called to come to assist the students. One of their fellow students had on his way back from town to the boarding school passed by a graveyard, where spirits were believed to roam, and he had been possessed by a spirit. Now they asked me – as a missionary and their teacher in Christian Religious Knowledge – to help them deliver the boy from the evil spirit.

The spiritual powers: In 1998 I did my field research for my PhD in intercultural studies in Nigeria. In preparation for my research on the conversion of pastoral Fulbe to Christianity I studied the culture and religion of the pastoral Fulbe who were Muslims or at least folk Muslims. On the surface level their religion was Islam, and through their adherence to this world religion they were related to the modern world. But on a day-to-day basis their pre-Islamic religion was more important to them, “pulaaku” (Fulbe-ness), which is a fertility religion focusing on the fertility of cattle and women. But when pastoral Fulbe encounter or fear crises such as certain diseases and accidents, or when they want to prevent such crises, the two religions of Islam and pulaaku are not sufficient so they have to resort to other ‘powers’.

Pastoral Fulbe distinguished between diseases brought about by natural causes for which they would consult the modern medical clinics, but for diseases (and accidents and misfortune) brought about by spiritual or magical causes they would consult traditional experts, witch doctors, sorcerers
Dreams as communication between the divine and the human world: A few years later I was back in Africa again for a consultation of Lutheran church leaders. In a coffee break I was asked about my PhD research, which I shared with them. I had studied the conversion in Northern Nigeria of Muslim pastoral Fulbe to Christianity. I chose to share one fascinating observation with my African friends. I had conducted a large number questionnaire interviews and more limited number of qualitative in-depth interviews with converts – focusing on what had happened in the various phases of the conversion process. What had surprised was that a large percentage of the interviewees shared with me that dreams had played a crucial role for them when they made their decision to convert to Christianity and be baptised. The dreams were very different, but all of them had a clear conviction that the dream was a divine communication that they had to take seriously (Mogensen 1998:291ff).

I knew that psychologist would interpret dreams according to the theories of people like Freud to be related to our subconsciousness, and I had never had any dreams that I would interpret as a message from God. But I had for weeks been listening to converts who told me how their dreams had contributed to transforming their lives, and was very impressed. I therefore shared this without in any sense being critical about the perception of the converts that this was a divine guidance or revelation. When I began to tell these stories the audience was suddenly electrified, and as soon as I stopped talking, they began talking, one after the other, sharing personal testimonies of how God in dreams had guided them in critical situations.

I had previously spent 10 years as a missionary in Nigeria, but never before had Nigerian Christians shared with me how they experienced that God communicated with them through dreams. What made the difference now, I am sure, was that they felt that I shared to stories about the dreams of the converts in a way that I did not discard it as unchristian or unenlightened.

Culture, Religion and Worldview
When reflecting on my experiences at the time and later, a lot of questions of culture and religion surfaced, but beneath the cultural and religious phenomena there was a deeper layer of worldview issues. In intercultural and interreligious situations of communication and interactions we tend naturally to focus on the cultures of various ethnic groups and on the religions of religious groups. But even more important it might be to dig deeper into the worldviews.

A typical brief definition of culture might go like this: “Culture is the integrated system of ideas, feelings and values and the learned patterns of behaviour and the products attached to them which are characteristic of a society”. This will lead us to focus on the traditions of ethnic groups and the underlying ideas, feelings and values that they express. There were of course many specifically cultural elements in the three stories.

And there were of course also many specifically religious issues at play. It is, however much more difficult to come to a consensus concerning a definition of religion than a definition of culture. The sociologist Emile Durkheim offers this short definition: Religion is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things". Even this definition points to the close relationship between religion (beliefs and practices) and culture (ideas/feelings/values and behaviour). And the often used definition by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz expresses an even closer affinity
between the two – to the extent that he makes religion a part of the cultural system – by staying that religion is a

system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

In analysing interreligious and intercultural encounters it is, however very helpful to go beyond the focus on culture and religion to the deeper level of the worldview.

The concept of worldview has become an important concept in philosophy, theology, missiology, history, and anthropology and other academic disciplines, but there is no consensus on a definition of the concept. The term “Weltanschauung” was introduced by Immanuel Kant as early as 1790 (Naugle 2003:58), and by the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century German historians used the term when referring to the deep cultural patterns of a people (Hiebert 2011:loc 257). But it was in anthropology that the concept was developed and applied the most, by anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, Mary Douglas, Robert Redfield, Michael Kerney and Morris Opler, Clifford Geertz and many others.

The American anthropologist Paul Hiebert defines worldview in a short and simple way as the “fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives”. And he adds that “Worldviews are what people in a community takes as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living” (Hiebert 2008:loc 286).

According to Hiebert, the “worldview of people is the deep cognitive, affective and evaluative categories, logic and assumptions people make about reality. What people think with, not what they think about. It is their basic maps of reality”

Just as culture and religion are closely interrelated, worldview is also closely related to both culture and religion. To the extent that some tend to reduce worldview to either culture or religion. Anthropologist tend to subsume worldview as well as religion under the all-encompassing concept of culture, and it is of course true that worldviews function as an integrating factor in cultures.

On the other hand there may in the science of religion be a tendency to focus on the idea that the basic assumptions of any religion may be seen as a worldview. Sometimes Christian theologians talk about a specific Christian worldview that all Christians share. In discussing the Jesus perspectives on life, the evangelical American missionary anthropologist Charles Kraft asks

Why not Call this the Christian Worldview?: "Many try to label these perspectives \textit{a or the} "Biblical worldview". Such a term is, however, imprecise enough to be misleading, since it \textit{confuses a set of perspectives revealed by God and integrated into one particular cultural worldview with the worldview as a whole}. Such a term could easily be misconstrued to imply either that there is only one cultural worldview in the Bible (which there isn’t) or that God endorses one or another of those worldviews as normative for everyone (which he doesn’t) (Kraft 1989:103).
For analytical reasons, however, I think that it is helpful to distinguish between culture, religion and worldview although all three concepts of course are highly overlapping.

**Reflections on the Three Personal Experiences in Africa**

Let us look again at the three cases presented earlier, and reflect on them in view of culture, religion and worldview.

“**The spiritual world**”: My students were Christians and I was a Christian. We shared the same Christian religion – and most of them were members of the Lutheran church just like me - but our view of reality differed radically. I later realised that they shared their view of life – concerning the reality of a very developed and powerful spiritual world – with their Muslim fellow students and with adherents of various African traditional religions. The fact that my students had become Christians – and many of them Lutheran Christians as me - had not altered their worldview in this area.

The students represented different ethnic groups, such as Bachama, Longuda, Mumuye, etc, each with their specific language and cultural traditions, but in spite of cultural differences they all shared this worldview element.

”**The spiritual powers**”: The pastoral Fulbe officially adhered to the religion of Islam and in reality also practiced the pre-Islamic fertility religion, Pulaaku. But their life and actions cannot be understood only with reference to Islam and Pulaaku. According to their worldview there were spiritual powers – and people who were able to manipulate these spiritual powers – that were part neither of Islam nor of Pulaaku. Here it is interesting to observe, that a very high percentage of other Muslims, of Christians and adherent of African Traditional Religions viewed reality in the same way as the pastoral Pulaaku, and often would consult the same “experts” as the pastoral Fulbe.

As a Western Christian I would follow the pastoral Fulbe to the modern medical clinic to seek help against ordinary diseases, but we would part ways when the pastoral Fulbe (and many other Nigerians irrespective of their culture and religion) – in cases of certain diseases, accidents, problems and fears - would consult traditional experts on spirits and magic. The dividing line between us was not a line following religious lines. Not all Nigerians would follow in the footsteps of the pastoral Fulbe to consult the traditional experts on spirits and magic, and here the dividing line would not be ethnic or cultural. The dividing line, however, seems to be that of worldview. Some Nigerians would have adopted a Western worldview in this area.

“**Dreams as communication between divine and human world**”: In the world view of the African Lutheran Church leaders, God would communicate with people also through dreams (and as you may all know this also applies to the life world of the Old as well as the New Testament). This worldview element Christians shared with folk Muslims and with adherents of African Traditional Religions. But in my worldview – as a Christian Westerner – dreams had no place as divine communication. God would communicate with me through Word and sacraments.

These church leaders belonged to different ethnic groups, and in other areas their worldviews would differ, but in this respect they shared the same worldview, and also shared in with adherents of Islam and African Traditional Religion.
But concerning communication between the divine and the human world my worldview differed radically from that of my Christian brethren in Africa.

The Flaw of the Excluded Middle
A way to make sense of what perspired in my encounter with my African friends in the three stories above would be to draw on the insights and analyses of Paul Hiebert. In the article “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” from 1982 he shows how the Western worldview – which I shared – “has a blind spot that makes it difficult for many Western missionaries to understand, let alone answer, problems related to spirits, ancestors and astrology” (Hiebert 1982:35).

Hiebert develops an analytical framework with two dimensions of analysis. The first dimension is that of immanence-transcendence, which include two distinctions. A distinction between the seen or empirical and the unseen or supernatural. And a distinction between this worldly phenomena, which that occur in this world and universe, and other worldly phenomena, which occur in some other worlds and in other times.

The second dimension is that of organic-mechanical. When describing phenomena we use analogies from everyday experience. We may either see things as living beings in relationship to each other or see things as inanimate objects that act upon each other like parts in a machine.

This leads to six categories
- High religion based on cosmic beings
- High religion based on cosmic forces
- Folk or low religion
- Magic and astrology
- Folk social science
- Folk natural science
I would agree with my African friends about the existence of an empirical world that could be seen or directly observed through the use of our five senses, and we would also agree on an unseen or supernatural world beyond immediate sense experience, such as Gods. But our disagreement would turn up about which phenomena occur in this world or universe and time, and which phenomena occur in some other world or some times.

My African friends – Christians as well as Muslims and traditional worshippers – recognized a middle area, which most Western Christians have a hard time recognizing as real, but would refer to phantasy or superstition. This is the area, which is not empirically observable but still belongs to this world/universe and time. Here we find personal entities such as ancestors, spirits, demons, and impersonal – that is belonging to the organic domain. And here we also find impersonal entities such as magic and astrology – that is belonging to the mechanical domain.

To put it more bluntly, according to a typical Western Christian world view, we operate on the basis of our belief in what natural and social science can offer, and a belief in a transcendent God, an eternal world of heaven, which is beyond our direct sense experience. As Western Christians we live in a two storey building of science and religion with little integration between the two storeys, but my African friends live in a three story building.

In the West we have excluded the middle level of supernatural but this worldly beings
and forces from our view. As a scientist I had been trained to deal with the empirical world in naturalistic terms. As a theologian I was taught to answer ultimate questions in theistic terms. For me the middle zone did not really exist. ... Therefore, it should be apparent why many missionaries trained in the West had no answers to the problems of the middle level – they often did not even see it (Hiebert 1982:43f).

Science as a system, whether modern Western science or folk science, offers explanation about the nature of the world as we may directly observe it with our five senses and how we may therefore control the physical world and handle social relations. Religion as a system offers answers to the ultimate questions of life and death, where we come from, the purpose of life, and the eternal world.

In the middle level, however, we find questions about the unknown influences of the past, the crises of present life and the uncertainty of the future. How do we foresee, prevent or handle crises, accidents and misfortunes of this life? Why does this accident hit me? How can we find divine guidance to avoid accidents or overcome accidents?

When Western Christians look at the world through their Western worldview they may not even register these issues of this middle level and when presented with questions belonging to the middle level, they may not have any answers.

**A World View Encounter between Western Christian Missionaries and Bena People in Tanzania**

How the encounter between people with very different worldviews may develop will be exemplified by reference to the PhD dissertation by the Danish theologian and missionary, “Mission, Church and Tradition in Context. Emic Perspectives on the Encounter and Tension
between Traditional Bena Religion and Lutheran Christianity in Ulanga, Tanzania” from 2005, Flemming Hansen analyses the encounter between Danish missionaries and their Danish Lutheran Christianity AND the Bena people (i.e. the Wabena). Hansen’s thesis is that

Due to the historical course and problems in communicating the Gospel contextually, a parallel structure has gradually developed among the Lutheran Christians between Bena religion and Christianity in belief, thinking and cultic mode of expression. For many Lutheran Wabena the present outcome is that both religions still, largely without interfering with one another or being mixed, contribute in forming their identity and world view” (Hansen 2005:14).

Hansen shows how in the process of becoming Christians experienced changes informed by Christianity took place in the life of the Wabena, but mostly on the surface cultural level, whereas very little changes had taken place on the deep worldview level, since the traditional worldview still would exert a decisive influence on their life. Hansen argues that the Wabena use Christianity for gaining eternal life while at the same time using traditional means and religion to mange the present world – more or less without mixing the two (Hansen 2005:14)

In the traditional Bena worldview there was what we would call a science level and a religion level. A folk science level dealing with the entities in their world that could be seen, and there was a religion level, to which belonged entities in the other transcendent world-- the creator God Nguruvi and the oldest ancestors. More important to the Wabena in their day to day life than the religion-level, however, was the middle level.

The Western missionaries could very well relate to both of these levels, by offering the modern effective medicine and other gifts of modern Western science that could make a great difference in the life of the Wabena. The Western missionaries could also offer an attractive message about the God, salvation and eternal life and heaven. But the missionaries could not relate to the middle level, which was invisible but still a part of their world. Here we find the ancestral spirits, the ancestors, evil spirits, sorcery and sorcerers.

Hansen quotes a South African proverb to describe the outcome of the encounter between the Western worldview and the Wabena worldviews: “A Christian is a Christian by day and an African by night” (Hansen 2005:224). Hansen concludes (with Hiebert) that

Foreign mission and later the local church have not taken into consideration the invisible, but immanent middle part of the traditional worldview and this has resulted in a striking reductionism in present and contemporary Christianity. Christianity therefore, although it may not have been the intention, has been limited or reduced to the question of how to get eternal salvation and thus by this to avoid eternal damnation. The basic and almost only concern has been the heavenly life to come, which has left problems, and virtually the whole content of the present life in the family and cultural context unsolved, and thus has made Christians very vulnerable. Christianity solves the problems at the time of death and the afterwards, but not life and problems of the present life in a highly sorcery infected context (Hansen 2005:238)
The Western missionaries were not aware of the most significant part of the traditional worldview of the Wabena, and they therefore did not respond theologically to the issues of this excluded middle, and the Wabena pastors trained by the missionaries carried on this neglect of the middle level issues. Therefore the middle level problems had to be handled in the traditional way outside the church.

Christianity therefore still for many Christians basically has nothing to do with the excluded middle area and thus many can, as referred earlier, take it off like a coat when they enter the middle in order to solve their present problems (Hansen 2005:239).

His conclusion is that the missionaries through their preaching and teaching of Christianity had brought many new elements into the Bena culture and had lead to the establishment of Bena Lutheran congregations, but it had not had a decisive impact neither on the day-to-day life of the Christians in their social and cultural context nor on their basic world view.

The Western Christian missionaries who went to the Wabena people in Tanzania to communicate the gospel were captive to their own worldview, with its two tiers of religion and science, and therefore did not realize that the local Wabena people perceived the world vastly differently from them. They overlooked the invisible part of the immanent world – as perceived by the Wabena, a middle section between the invisible transcendent world of high religion and the visible world of folk science, a section of the world, which was of utmost importance the traditional Wabena. The Western Christian missionaries failed to understand the Wabena worldview and therefore their communication of the gospel suffered critically from this “flaw of the excluded middle”.

Metaphors of Mission

Let us finally look at the significance of worldview in the missionary encounter between Christian Missionaries and people of other faiths from a different angle. The American Philosopher Stephen Pepper and others have pointed to the critical role of root metaphors that form the basis on which worldviews are based. Pepper distinguishes between the organic root metaphor and the mechanistic root metaphor. All worldview have elements of both, but for each worldview either the organic metaphor or the mechanistic metaphor will be dominant. In our Western worldview the mechanistic metaphor is clearly dominant, whereas in African worldviews the organic metaphor is prevalent.

Here I want to reflect on the metaphors that form the thinking of mission. In 2000 a group of evangelical missiologists and missionaries convened in California for a “Consultation on Mission Language and Metaphors”. Their purpose was to reflect together “about the words, metaphors and images evangelicals use to communicate about the missionary mandate and endeavor to the world at large”. They expressed regret that there had been a tendency to use metaphors – to inspire involvement and action – that were military in nature, such as “target”, “conquer”, “army”, “crusade”, “mobilize”, “beachhead”, “advance”, “enemy” and “battle”.

Metaphors and the mindsets and attitudes behind them are potent in shaping thought and compelling action. Positive metaphors are essential tools of missions and evangelism. When twisted or taken too far, however, the distort God’s purposes. —Warfare metaphors and terminology, while biblical in the cosmic/spiritual sense, have been misused in Christian mission communications. They have become
increasingly counterproductive to mission work, sometimes endangering the lives of local believers, and are being used by opponents of the church to indict and impede its work. We therefore advocate an immediate end to the inappropriate use of such words.

The use of military metaphors is seen to have become increasingly counterproductive to mission since it does not reflect the Christian message of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and blessing. The use of military metaphors may even endanger the lives of local believers. And the consultation therefore advocated for an immediate end to the inappropriate use of military metaphors. Instead of these military metaphors they “call for the use of alternative metaphors such as ‘blessing, healing, inviting, sowing and reaping, fishing, restoring family relationships, becoming reconcilers, peacemakers and ambassadors’”.

The statement by this consultation might be interpreted as a call for a more up-to-date and less military terminology in mission, but I see the concern of the participants of the consultation to be going much deeper. What is at stake here is not just a matter of effective communication, but of the metaphors through which the missionaries view the world, their missionary task and their relationship to people of other faiths.

In his groundbreaking book from 1980, Metaphors We Live by, George Lakoff introduced his now famous metaphor thesis that the lives of individuals are in a very significant way influenced by the central metaphors they use the explain complex phenomena. Metaphors are not only a matter of words, linguistic constructs, rather

metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature … Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003:3)

In his analysis of dominant metaphors in American and Chinese language, Diin Liu, has in his book Metaphor, Culture, and Worldview has explored the close connection between metaphor, culture and worldview. He sees central metaphors used in languages as key windows into the worldview of people, and shows how metaphors at one and the same time are shaped by the culture and world view of the people who use these metaphors and is shaping their culture and worldview. Liu argues that in American language sport and business metaphors are the dominant metaphors, whereas in Chinese language family and eating are the dominant metaphors (Liu 2002).

The metaphors, missionaries use about their mission work among people of other faiths, on the one hand reflect their view of their relationship with other people and on the other hand informs, forms or formats their relationship. It is of course a matter of the worldview of the missionaries. Is the relationship between Christianity and other religions and the relationship between Christians and adherents of other faiths conceived as a military battle where the other is seen as the enemy to be conquered and his territory to be occupied? Or is it the relationship seen in terms of blessing, reconciliation, sowing seed? The dominant metaphors used in talking about the relationship of missionaries to people of other faiths may reflect the worldview of missionaries and contribute to form their worldview and thereby also influence their actions. Metaphors are not innocent linguistic constructs.
Conclusion
In order to make sense of my experiences with my friends in Africa, it was very helpful to introduce distinguish between culture, religion and worldview. Worldviews of different cultural and religious groups may contain common themes – as we saw with various groups in Africa, just as the world views of different Western groups may contain common themes, and the worldviews of Africans and the worldviews of Westerners may differ radically in important areas. The middle area – of the invisible part of the human world – of the worldview of Africans was apparent absent in the worldview of Westerners. In the dissertation about the missionary encounter between Western missionaries and Tanzanian Wabena, we saw the effects of a lack of appreciation by the missionaries of the Bena worldview on their interactions and communications. Finally, we saw that the metaphors – which form part of the worldview – that missionaries operate on reflect and form their relationship with people of other faiths.

I therefore agree with John Walk who in his article “Religion or Worldview: Enhancing Dialogue in the Public Square” in is recognition of the importance of the concept of worldview. Among other things he states that

Use of the term *worldview* may … be more helpful in a post-Christian, post-modern era filled with religious and non-religious beliefs of various kinds. By implementing the term *worldview* we move beyond a sole focus on religion or traditional religion to include other perspectives, such as secularism, capitalism, exclusive humanism and atheism, to gain a greater understanding of ourselves and the world.

The term *worldview* has steadily gained greater recognition and acceptance in the public in general and the public academy in particular perhaps because it is more inclusive of those who do not readily identify with traditional religions. There is also larger recognition of the fact that all humans have a worldview – “everyone has a mental map through which we perceive our world” – even if many do not embrace a particular religion (Lappé 2003:230).

And he goes on to say that the “use of the term worldview forces us to confront our own beliefs and the assumptions we critically or uncritically assume in light of them.” This is of critical importance for the outcome of any intercultural or interreligious encounter and communication.

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