

Review

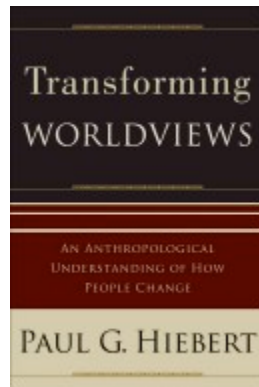
*Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological
Understanding of How People Change*

Paul G. Hiebert

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The late Paul G. Hiebert gives us an excellent, must-read introduction to “how people change” in *Transforming Worldviews*. As a comprehensive introduction to world-view theory, it possesses many flashes of brilliance and is the high point of his long, outstanding career as a missionary anthropologist. First, he defines and analyzes the concept of worldview as it has been developed by the social sciences. Next, Hiebert summarizes and critiques several worldviews that missionaries must engage today, from the worldview of small-scale societies, to peasant worldviews, to modernity, postmodernity, post-postmodernity, and the emerging glocal context of twenty-first century ministry. Hiebert addresses the impact of each on Christianity and mission and then lastly gives a brief outline for developing a biblical worldview in order to engage, critique, and help transform

non-Christian worldviews. Finally, he argues for a gospel-based mission that seeks to transform the worldviews of its recipients and offers suggestions for how to do so.

The key to understanding Prof. Hiebert's contribution is to realize that he was social scientifically trained, well read in the philosophy of science, and a theologically astute scion of the Anabaptist movement. Though he is very much more biblically balanced than many present heirs of that movement such as Ronald Sider, he does demonstrate a few of that movement's weaknesses such as some philosophical bias to the One, common with many Mennonites, as we shall see. The foundational question that drives his discussion is the fundamental nature of true conversion. The danger of an incomplete conversion is a syncretistic Christo-paganism, which he asserts in his analysis of modernity and postmodernity, affects the Western churches as much as anywhere.

At the beginning Hiebert defines worldview as the maze of underlying presuppositions of a people-group, which lie at the deepest and many time unconscious level of thought. Notably, he adds a wholistic three-fold contribution to the definition of term. In general, then, a worldview is “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” (Hiebert 2008, 15). This triadic definition of the core of worldview which he uses throughout the volume serves as an etic model by which we can “examine specific cultures” (Hiebert 2008, 25).

Next, these foundational axioms are for most people more than “useful fictions,” he writes, but “their worldviews declare the way things really are and are true in an ultimate sense”—at least in their perception (Hiebert 2008, 69). As a consequence, he argues, “underlying explicit beliefs is a deeper level of culture that shapes the categories

and logic with which people think and the way they view reality.” Worldviews, hence, are the “maps,” “frameworks,” and “assumptions” that a specific group uses to interpret and navigate through life (Hiebert 2008, 11, 15). Biblically wise worldview analysis and subsequent Spirit-wrought change that analysis brings is clearly foundational to repentance and subsequent growth. These are most often neglected by the Christian mission movement causing “reinterpretations of Christianity into an essentially pagan understanding of reality” with devastating results (Hiebert 2008, 11). He later shows the how various forms of such Christo-paganism effect and develop within “small-scale oral societies,” “peasant,” “modern,” “postmodern” and then the developing “post-postmodern or glocal worldview” (chapters 5-9) (Hiebert 2008, 5).

Furthermore, Hiebert writes, founded upon worldview are explicit “beliefs” and upon “beliefs,” deeds and “behavior.” Clearly, he writes, worldview shapes beliefs and both shape human behaviors. All three must be transformed by the culture for there to develop a genuinely indigenous or contextualized biblical Christianity in each people to which the Good News comes. Therefore, without change in the underlying worldview presuppositions, beliefs and behavior may be correct—even orthodox, yet a person may still not be regenerate and moving in the direction of the Lordship of Christ in all areas of life. Verbal expressions of belief, in other words, can be reinterpreted through the lens of underlying worldview presuppositions to mean something entirely different from what the missionary means, and for that matter even different from what Scripture means. Clearly then, what the Scripture means and what the missionary means may not be co-terminous in the minds of believers both new and old.

He correctly proclaims, “conversion to Christ must encompass all three levels of culture: behavior and rituals, beliefs, and worldview” (Hiebert 2008, 315). Conversion thus is much more “than an emotional release and far more than an intellectual adherence to correct doctrine. It is a basic change in life direction” (314). Any turning to Christ begins, he states, with “an initial conversion [decision]” after which a “period of re-evaluation” occurs during which “the new way of life is critically reexamined. If the new is no better than the old, or the cost of adopting it is too high, the person or group turns back to traditional ways. . . . Enduring transformations are the result of many decisions to adopt and develop a new worldview”(313). He proceeds to state, “Follow-up becomes critical in nurturing faith, not only to disciple individuals but to transform whole communities . . . from generation to generation” (313).

All of this is good. However, what I would have liked for him to have done is to provide a brief theological examination of the difference between conversion and regeneration. Conversion is change, indeed a series of decisions, seen from the human perspective. Regeneration, on the other hand, is the moment of change of the heart by the outpoured (baptized) Holy Spirit into the inner person. A huge source of incipient syncretism in the evangelical movement today comes because we have so often assumed and taught that the initial decision is a regenerating experience. It certainly is not. Many do not know exactly where on the conversion process the Spirit came to regenerate. To be honest, many in our churches are unregenerate and this includes the believers’ church movement as much as the covenant baptism movement (Reformed and Presbyterian).

Better by far, I believe, is what Will Metzger states in *Tell the Truth*. We ought to be sharing the maximum amount of truth to the maximum amount of people while ad-

dressing mind (cognitive), evaluative will, and emotions (affective sphere) as Hiebert so powerfully demonstrates. A careful storying of the Gospel from the creation and fall of Adam provides the foundational worldview perceptions upon which the word of redemption and consummation through Christ is built. Follow-up is certainly of key importance for people movements especially, as he demonstrates, but a careful storying of the whole word from the beginning lays that essential groundwork that eliminates a lot of disillusionment, syncretism, and even apostasy later on. After all, our Lord taught that all must count the cost and then give up every idol to him before following him. That all must be taught before the decision

In summary, then, Hiebert announces this message of the book in the beginning and then repeats it almost verbatim near the end:

Christians should live differently because they are Christians. However, if their behavior is based primarily on traditional rather than Christian beliefs, it becomes pagan ritual. Conversion must involve a transformation of beliefs, but if it is a change only of beliefs and not of behavior, it is false faith (James 2). Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behavior, but if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and the result is a syncretistic Christo-paganism, which has the form of Christian but not its essence. Christianity becomes a new magic and a new, subtler form of idolatry. If behavioral change was the focus of the mission movement in the nineteenth century, and changed beliefs its focus in the twentieth century, then transforming worldview must be its central task in the twenty-first century. (Hiebert 2008, 12; repeated almost verbatim, 315)

There are many other strengths in this volume. First I want to mention Hiebert's concise summary of his perspective on critical realism. As I have written elsewhere on Globalmissiology.org (Studying Missiology with a Presuppositional Methodology), Hiebert gives a much more biblical version of this common epistemology, which attempts to be a *via media* between idealism and instrumentalism on the one hand and positivism/empiricism on the other. For idealism and instrumentalism knowledge is a social construct and true knowledge of what a thing is in itself is impossible because the human mind cannot perceive an external reality, indeed an external world may not exist. For positivism, knowledge is a photograph of the real, external world of data. He is thus correct in stating that critical realism "does not equate revelation and theology, as positivism does, nor does it totally divorce the two, as instrumentalism does" (Hiebert 2008, 274). He provides excellent insight again by emphasizing the triadic "semiotic foundation for critical realism is Charles Peirces's theory of signs."

A sign, Peirce believes points to some external reality, and it evokes an image or thought in the mind. In other words, signs liken the objective world outside to our subjectively constructed world inside. While different cultures construct different internal maps of reality, all of them must correspond in significant ways to that external world or humans cannot exist. (Hiebert 2008, 274)

At this point, he adds: "Thus all our knowledge is partial and approximate. . . . knowledge in critical realism is not one or a series of photographs, nor is it individual Rorschachs. It is many complementary maps or blueprints" (Hiebert 2008, 274). Certainly this is true but here the "critical" in the name "critical realism" begins to play out, making

it a much better version of instrumentalism but not totally biblical. The term “critical” is normally used in a post-Kantian context in which human’s construct reality in their minds so that there is no certainty and no exact replication of the external world (if there is indeed such an entity). “Critical,” as a term it seems to me, attempts to come to a via media between idealism (external world is an individual and social construct only in the minds of humans) and positivism/empiricism (external world has independent existence). No synthesis is possible between these two mutually contradictories. Using this type of logic, however, cannot merely be written off as digital modernity, as he sometimes seems to do in the volume. It is in fact biblical and flows from the nature of God of truth.

Indeed, Scripture does teach that only God has complete and exact knowledge of every fact, datum, and every possible explanatory theorem (both true and false). However, humans can come to a true knowledge of some exact datum points and explanatory theories else there would be no certain knowledge at all of the truth of God’s existence, Christ’s person, our collective salvation, and so forth. Next, we do indeed see an “exact photograph” of God’s created and providentially upheld external creation. It is not merely a mentally distorted picture with some points of correspondence but greatly distorted by our senses and/or minds as Hiebert implies. According to Scripture, however, it is not the mind that distorts the external reality but sin as rebellion and folly as the mirror opposite of wisdom which distorts. Our dependent nature and finitude means we cannot know, even focus upon, and correctly interpret every datum point we correctly see. Sin and folly suppresses the truth that we clearly perceive (Rom 1:18ff). I have proposed a Trinitarian Creationist epistemology, which takes into account the truth of both the idealist and positivist perspectives in the article mentioned above. It builds upon Hiebert’s

biblical insights and I hope corrects several mistakes in his much better version of critical realism than, for example, Ian Barbour's or Charles Kraft's versions.

Second, Hiebert is correct in stating that "central to critical realism is the hermeneutical community" (Hiebert 2008, 274). No one person, people, or culture asks all the questions that lead to a search of specific points in the external creation or the external special revelation that God gives. We need the whole body of Christ as Paul emphasizes. However, again at this point Hiebert errs in my opinion. He writes: "In critical realism, human knowledge is never exact and complete, but it can be true in the essentials with regard to the questions being asked" (Hiebert 2008, 274). Here he both equivocates on the meaning of the concept "true/truth" and contradicts himself. If human knowledge is never exact and complete then he just made an exact truth statement that one could never make an exact truth statement. How then can something be true in the essentials yet not exact in some regard? It cannot merely be shrugged off by stating that these objections prove that modernity and positivism bind me. Some aspects of modernity, postmodernity, and the peasant/folk epistemologies must comport with external reality or "humans cannot exist" as I just reported that he previously wrote. We must listen to the questions of all sides and all people-groups, probe and re-probe Scripture with them, and then develop an increasingly biblical synthesis of the truth that takes all the data into account, but not in a Hegelism sense of attempting to holistically merge two contradictories.

This then leads to his providing several implications of his theory. First is that "our understandings are culturally constructed by communities" (Hiebert 2008, 274-275). We can and do indeed "speak of truth but recognize that our understanding of it is partial and finite" (275). So far so good, it seems to me. Second, our grasp of worldviews "must be

extracted from many historically particular experiences” and then discerning the “big picture,” “montage” or “pattern behind many particularities.” Thus a “worldview is not the sum of the many cultural parts. It is the configuration by which we seek to interpret those parts” (Hiebert 2008, 274). Third, the international Christian community is the hermeneutical community that inter-relates with “the guidance of the Holy Spirit” and which ought to seek together to “understand” and “apply” the truth to each specific context. Fourth, human worldviews are constantly changing, only through Christ’s eyes can we “find the final revelation of God’s view of reality.” Last, in his version of critical realism truth in the mind, beauty in the affections, and holiness of evaluation must never be “divorced” (Hiebert 2008, 275).

I cannot argue with any of these except to emphasize that the biblical worldview takes into account both the digital, linear logic, which he complains is the foundation of modernity and the fuzzy logic and comprehensiveness of other types of logic. Again, it is not a matter of either-or but of both-and in different contexts, situations, and times. I believe, Prof. Hiebert would have agreed (see Hiebert 2008, 39-45, 117-119, 180-196). I agree also with his emphasis upon “Scripture [as] the foundation of knowledge . . . [and] God’s revelation to us.” It gives a “record of human history” but also “God’s understanding of that history.” At the same time, he continues, our theology, or understanding of Scripture, our version of biblical truth is never “revelation itself” (Hiebert 2008, 275). This keeps us humble and dependent upon the Holy Spirit to “grasp the shape of reality, albeit looking at the world through a glass darkly” (Hiebert 2008, 276).¹

¹I am not convinced that this passage cited from 1 Corinthians 13 is actually dealing with epistemology but probably about the maturity of the final revelation given in the Person of Christ—see Heb 1:1-2).

In summary, although he depends much too much upon non-Christian philosophers or strongly syncretistic Christian philosophers (e.g., Ian Barbour) with respect to critical realism, his discussion is excellent with some reservations noted above. I only wish that Dr. Hiebert had broken out of his theological worldview and read C.A. Van Til, John Frame, Herman Dooyeweerd, and H. G. Stoker among several reformational philosophers. I believe these could have helped him tremendously to develop even further his perspective.

Next, I wish to commend his analysis of various worldviews, again while greatly desiring that he had read some of the Dutch, Afrikaner, and English speaking Christian philosophers as I mentioned above. He begins with what worldviews are and how they function within “human contexts” (chapter 3, Hiebert 2008, 71). He shows how to integrate various perspectives in a biblical manner. He does seek to do this by reductionistic strategies, stratifying or compartmentalizing efforts, but by using a grand unifying theory found in the biblical worldview. “This master blueprint is a biblical worldview that helps us see the big picture of reality presented in Scripture and in nature.” He then writes the following, which would thrill the hearts of the late C. A. Van Til and his chief systematizers, the late Greg Bahnsen and John Frame:

This blue print begins with the God of the Bible and includes the reality of an orderly creation, humans shaped in the image of God, the fall, redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ, and eternal life in him. The fullest expression of this worldview is found in the New Testament and in the teachings of Jesus. Theology, science, and the humanities chart the details and applications of this worldview. When they conflict, we

must reexamine both our different understandings as well as our worldview to seek a resolution.

His analysis of each of the worldviews (small scale oral societies, peasant, modernity, postmodernity, and post-post-modernity or glocal worldviews are worth the price of the book. They are simply outstanding though with a few weaknesses. First, he neglects to analyze pre-modern Christianized European worldviews—both scholastic and folk. He seems to indicate that modern dualism springs from modernity but Herman Dooyeweerd in his several excellent works demonstrates that Christian thought syncretized with pagan-Greek dualism almost from the beginning—whether in the Platonic form (Origen), neo-Platonic (Augustine of Hippo), or Aristotelian (Aquinas). I believe he engages a bit in the contemporary habit of postmodernity in bashing the West by not emphasizing the many truly Christian insights that were intertwined among the dualist insights in Western and especially Reformational based cultures. The budding Reformational worldview of the UK, French and German Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Anglo-North America did bring a great measure of justice, freedom, prosperity and flourishing of biblical religion unmatched in history.

Having said this, I believe that his analysis of modernity was especially good. His exceptional critique of the pervasive and pernicious influence of Greek dualism is brilliant. Again, I wish he had read and applied Herman Dooyeweerd's *grondmotiewe* (foundational culture themes) to his analysis of modernity (and postmodernity). However, what he has done is excellent with many dazzling and some weak insights. For example, he writes strangely: “with human centeredness [of modernity] came the doctrines of liberty and equality, an emphasis on freedom and human rights, and a high value on private

ownership of property and on capitalism” (Hiebert 2008, 150). I say “strangely” because though modernity secularized and perverted these qualities of Protestant-Western civilization, a strong argument can be made that each of these qualities springs both from pre-modern Euro-Christianized civilization and non-modern Reformational thinkers. These thinkers are exceptional, such as John Calvin, John Knox, Philippe Du Plessis-Mornay (alias Junius Brutus), Samuel Rutherford, and a myriad of other Christian thinkers including Groen van Prinstener, Abraham Kuyper, and D. H. T. Vollenhoven.

Furthermore, Hiebert’s use of the terminology such as “late Capitalism” and “neo-Liberalism” seems to bely an uncritical acceptance of at least neo-Marxian terminology if not something of the worldview of collectivism that leans toward philosophical idealism (i.e., toward “the one”)—even though they often claim to be materialists. A notable supplement to his perspective would have been the Christian scholarship of Francis Schaeffer, Herbert Schlossberg, John Whitehead, Rushdoony, and so forth. I believe it would also have been beneficial had he interacted with free market scholars instead of only modernity and postmodernity bound non-Christians. Many evangelicals such as Franky Schaeffer (when he was an evangelical), Tom Rose, E.L. Hebdon-Taylor, Ron Paul, R. J. Rushdoony and his son-in-law, Gary North, and Roman Catholics such as Michael Novak have made extremely important contributions to the study of a more biblical approach to economics. I will grant, however, that while Hiebert tends to accept the social analysis of the more collectivist version of economists, a case can be made that the scholars I named above lean toward the individual and individualism. We need instead to consistently and self-consciously think “equal ultimacy of the one and the many” in a Trinitarian manner, as some I just mentioned are attempting to do.

His great strength is to lay out a framework for a biblical worldview in Chapter 10: “Toward a Biblical Worldview” (Hiebert 2008, 265-305). He defines a biblical worldview—to which I can only say “Amen!”—as the human understandings of the underlying givens in Scripture, rather than as the creation as God sees it. All our attempts to understand what God has revealed in Scripture are partial and biased by our historical and cultural perspectives. Just as we do not understand the material world fully, even at the level of the particle physics, so we do not understand the full scope of the gospel. This does not mean that we should give up seeking to understand the substructure of truth revealed in Scripture. It does mean that we need to be more humble in our claims and more open to listening to our sisters and brothers in faith. (Hiebert 2008, 265).

Hiebert begins correctly with the Creator-creature distinction: “All creation—angels, humans, animals, plants, matter, and energy—is dependent at every moment on God’s ongoing creation for its very existence. This section is outstanding. His only weakness is to try to solve the “old debates between Calvinists and Arminians [that] are misplaced”—showing a deep lack of real understanding of the issues (269). He opts for a classic Arminian position. “God is not only powerful, but *is* love. . . . As sovereign, God reigns over all things. As lover, he seeks to restore a relationship with humans whom he created in his own image, but he cannot predetermine their response. . . . In his unconditional love, God foreknows those who will love him, but he does not predetermine that response” (Hiebert 269-270).

Curiously, on the other hand, he states that “three events in history mark its states: creation, incarnation, and the return of Christ. In each of these God acts in direct and ex-

traordinary ways, ways that have no parallel in history” (Hiebert 2008, 270). Evil thus is “contingent, the distortion of good, not ontologically eternal” because God created the “material world as a bearer of meaning” that is meaning that proclaims the praise of God. The “fall as rebellion against God” by man and some of his angels” damages this world. But “sin,” therefore, “is not ontologically eternal. It is not equal and coexistent with righteousness” (270). Christ comes to make us holy: “Holiness reflects who we really are in Christ” (271). This is excellent and makes short shrift of dualism. I wrote “curiously” at the beginning of this paragraph because he shows no acquaintance with James Sire, Albert Wolters, and several other key Reformational thinkers who make this exact point.

Last, I greatly appreciate the fact that he mightily attempts to break out of the Pietistic, Anabaptist worldview in his last chapter “Transforming Worldviews” (Hiebert 2008, 307-333):

The apostle Paul is clear in his assertion that we as individuals and the church are to live in this world, but not to of the world. He uses the terms *sarx*, *archeon*, and *eon* to refer to the contexts in which we live. Too often we see these terms as referring to a fallen world from which we must flee. But when we withdraw into Christian colonies, we take the “world” with us. We cannot simply outlaw sin and thereby live in holy communities.

The flesh and the world are what we are now. They are good because humans are created in the image of God and can create cultures and societies that have much good in them.

But the flesh and the world are also fallen and sinful, and humans create structures that do evil. The fundamental characteristic of the flesh, the world, and the age is not that they are good or evil—they are both—it is that they are temporary. They stand in contrast to the kingdom of God, which is eternal, totally righteous, and good. The process of main-

taining true faith in this world and age is ongoing, for each generation must lean anew to think biblically about being Christian in its particular context. (Hiebert 2008, 326)

All in all, this is an excellent read, which I highly recommend.