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Ethnocentrism Can Hinder Communication amongst Those with Differing World Views

Ethnocentrism, by definition, is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture" (*Ethnocentrism*). While it is normal for any group of people to believe that their culture and ways of viewing the world are good and valid, people who are ethnocentric are "characterized by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior" (*Ethnocentric*). Throughout the earth, various groups of people hold many different world views. Three such diverse groups include tribalists, naturalists, and typical Western missionaries. Communication between these three groups can be hindered by ethnocentrism, but wise Christian missionaries will try to understand and respect their recipient's ethnocentric attitude while minimizing their own ethnocentrism.

Within the many cultures in the world, there exists many world views shared by numerous people (Tarr 52). Tarr aptly states, "The term *world view* refers primarily not to physical realities but to mental and spiritual realities of existence as understood by the various cultures of the world" (54). Hesselgrave defines world view as "the way people see or perceive the world, the way they 'know' it to be" (197). Redfield simply states that a world view is "the way we see ourselves in relation to all else" (86). For Kearney, "The worldview of a people is their way of looking at reality. It consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world" (41). Most people develop a world view unconsciously as they grow up in a social structure that conditions them how to interpret reality and that teaches them what they should do and what they should think (Tarr 54). Although typical Western missionaries hold to a primarily Biblically based world view, other groups such as tribalists and naturalists ascribe to world views that are not essentially Biblically based.

The naturalist world view can be described as a materialistic world view encompassing atheism, secularism, scientism, humanism, "egotheism," and communism, according to Hesselgrave (214). Tarr acknowledges that many regard the naturalist as having a "world view of the materialistic mind of modern technology and industrialization," yet he sees materialists encompassing a "wider, earlier philosophy" that is expressed by pursuing materialism and enveloping an atheistic character (57). Hesselgrave presents four characteristics of the naturalist world view using the topics supernatural, nature, humanity, and time (214-16). The naturalist has no regard for the supernatural and believes it has its source in the underdeveloped "stage of humanity's evolution." Nature may be viewed as a hospitable environment or as an enemy to the Naturalist. Concerning humanity, the naturalist views man as existing by a chance arrangement of "atoms washed ashore on a little planet in a remote corner of a vast universe." Various views have been held concerning the goodness of human nature and whether it is getting better or worse. Time is viewed as the element that solves "profound complexities of nature" and stretches endlessly ahead of man and almost as endlessly behind man. Hesselgrave concludes that the naturalist world view results in a "sense of pessimism, hopelessness, and meaninglessness" (214-16). Unlike the naturalist's lack of belief in the supernatural, the tribalist maintains a strong belief in the supernatural (Tarr 52).

A tribal world view may be characterized as polytheistic or animistic (Hesselgrave 221).

The word "animism" means "soul" and is described by Tarr as "a belief in spiritual beings concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming men's interests. . . . Animism attributes life and an indwelling spirit to all material forms of reality including plants and stones and even natural happenings such as lightening and earthquakes" (58). Hesselgrave says that the tribal world view is "preoccupied with gods, spirits, and ghosts" and is focused on bringing "nature and supernature together" (222). Wallace characterizes this unity as man being "united with nature, rather than standing apart from it" (100). Hesselgrave presents four characteristics of the tribalist world view using the topics supernature, nature, humanity, and time (228-29). The supernature of tribalism includes "deities and spirit-beings of all kinds, good and evil," and they can be influenced by people who perform the right rituals. Nature contains animate spirit beings possessing intrinsic power. Humanity is "in nature, not over nature," and eventually "will be in supernature, not apart from supernature." Time for the tribalist is both cyclical, "in that it has its seasons of growth and decay," and linear, in that it has a big past and a less distant future (228-29). A tribalist is more willing than a naturalist to acknowledge a supreme God of the Western missionary.

The source of the typical Western missionary world view is the Bible, consisting of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In regards to supernature, the Bible assumes without formal proof the existence of a unique supreme personal God that created everything apart from Himself. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (NASB). Opposing the naturalist's atheistic view, Psalms 14:1 says, "The fool has said in his heart 'There is no God'" (NASB). While tribalists believe in supernatural beings, the Bible boldly proclaims allegiance only to Almighty God when He says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (NASB Exod. 20:3) and "I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me" (NASB Isa. 44:6). In regards to nature, the missionary world view holds that God is active in nature but separate from it. While naturalists see nature as being potentially accommodating or harmful, tribalists see nature as "populated with spirit beings" (Hesselgrave 228) and sometimes becoming one with nature. Unlike the naturalist who sees no real purpose in humanity's evolution, the missionary sees humanity as having purpose by virtue of being created by a purposeful God. For the missionary, God is a perfect moral being who interacts with His morally imperfect humans in hopes of them accepting His love and allowing Him to supernaturally improve their morals and establish an everlasting relationship with them. From the missionary's perspective, there is no potential for God to be one with humans nor for humans to be one with nature, as tribalists may claim. The typical Western missionary world view sees time as linear, flowing "from the past through the present to the future" (Tarr 84). While naturalists hold a similar view and some tribalists hold a linear view that emphasizes the past (Hesselgrave 229), the Westerner places more of an emphasis on the future (Tarr 84) and on the life after death. In order to be more accepting of the typical Western missionary world view, the naturalist needs to hear rational truth while the tribalist needs to see a demonstration of power from the Almighty God.

Ethnocentrism can hinder effective communication between people of diverse backgrounds. Hesselgrave describes ethnocentrism as an attitude, held by almost all of the world's people, that says, "The way we think, feel, and behave is 'the way to think, feel, and behave.' It is '*the way*,' not '*a way*'" (105). Tarr describes ethnocentrism as the idea, "our own cultural traits are better than the cultural traits of others" (30). A person who is reluctant to accept or participate in a different culture will not be well received by those in that culture. It is human nature for people to like other people who respect, appreciate, and like things about them, especially when those things are an integral part of their lives. People tend to communicate with those whom they like and share common aspects. A naturalist who values science and natural reasoning will not readily listen to a

tribalist who has not studied philosophy nor to a missionary who is not versed in apologetics (Hesselgrave 218). A tribalist who believes in spirit beings, will probably reject communication with a naturalist who does not appreciate their belief in the spirit world and may reject a Western missionary who is not able to demonstrate the power of God through the Scriptures or in reality (231).

A Western missionary will have difficulty communicating to a naturalist or a tribalist if either he or the later are ethnocentric, but the missionary can improve communication by learning and appreciating aspects of their world views. Hesselgrave, denying that there are no absolutes in a culture, states:

But there is also a right kind of 'cultural relativity' that says that although there are divinely dictated absolutes of right and wrong, one's own culturally prescribed assumptions of right and wrong will reflect them imperfectly at best and may not reflect them at all. Moreover, many cultural prescriptions are not matters of right and wrong at all but simply matters of utility or taste. (105)

The apostle Paul did not exhibit an ethnocentric attitude when he declared, "I have become all things to all men, that I may be all means save some" (NASB 1 Cor. 9:22). Out of love and self denial for those he wanted to meet, Paul expressed that he did not want to offend them by disregarding their consciences concerning actions that did not compromise or contradict Christian principles (Gilbrant 375). Barclay further comments, "The man who can never see anything but his own point of view and who never makes any attempt to understand the mind and heart of others, will never have a . . . friend" (83). Although missionaries will not compromise Biblical truths, they do have liberty to accept and appreciate aspects of a person's thoughts that are not in conflict with Scripture. The result is improved communication.

Jesus was probably the greatest communicator in history, and he encouraged his disciples to communicate the gospel to all nations and ethnic groups. Jesus provided a strategy for missions by giving the Great Commission and emphasizing to believers that they must make disciples as they go to all the nations (Matt. 28:19). Pomerville aptly states that a new Christian "needs to hear Christian truth in terms of his particular world view, problems, and spiritual needs because he must learn to follow Christ in the culture where he lives" (161). Furthermore, "redemptive mission always requires identification with people in their arena of need," just as Christ was incarnated to truly identify with people on earth (162). To best reach people in particular cultures around the world who hold differing world views, the Holy Spirit must supernaturally raise up and enable Christian missionaries to effectively communicate the gospel to diverse communities.

The task of the church is "for God's people worldwide to cross the cultural frontiers of numerous peoples and tribes" (Pomerville 145). McGavran perceptively observes and defends the homogenous unit principle that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (163). Wagner comments well in the preface of McGavran's book that the "principle is an attempt to respect the dignity of individuals and allow their decisions for Christ to be religious rather than social decisions" (x). Pomerville states, "Missionaries' neglect of ethnic image in patterns of worship, roles of leadership, methods of evangelism, and even in architecture can create cultural barriers for people whom the Holy Spirit would attract to the church. A church with a foreign appearance has difficulty in penetrating society" (147). Missionaries should strive to allow unbelievers, including naturalists and tribalists, to come to Christ without having to cross many cultural barriers. As a result, missionaries will be "much more effective than those who place [barriers] in their way" (McGavran 168).

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