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Item Type	Article
Authors	Jensen, E.
Publisher	Religious & Theological Students Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-19 19:48:01
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/157307

The value of women and world view

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The purpose of this article is to discuss a 'pernicious weed' which has put down roots with long tendrils reaching deep into the soil of our human history and present-day cultures. This 'pernicious weed' is patriarchalism, which is basically the rule of a tribe or family by men, with emphasis on the value and positions of men. Its corollary is often misogyny, which means the devaluation of the female and all that is associated with the feminine. Many great thinkers from the major academic disciplines have asked, 'Why is patriarchy almost a universal phenomenon?' Historians, psychologists, sociologists and theologians have presented their reasons. By applying the anthropological theory of world view I propose that the underlying problem of patriarchal behaviours is the basic cultural assumption that women are of lesser value than men.

Before presenting the theory of world view it is appropriate to name some of my own assumptions. First, the analysis of this essay is based upon a secular behavioural science perspective, not upon a theological or hermeneutical perspective. The second assumption is that I accept the Scriptures as inspired and authoritative for all of Christian faith and practice. I am seeking to understand and theologize about a human phenomenon, the devaluation of females, through a behavioural science grid. The third perspective or assumption is that I profess to be an evangelical biblical feminist. I have been a cross-cultural missionary and am very concerned about the social and spiritual realities of women around the world.

The fourth assumption has to do with the pervasive and almost universal reality of patriarchalism with the accompanying devaluation of women. There is not sufficient space to present all the data that have been gathered which demonstrate the devaluation of girls and women from before birth to the grave in almost all cultures of the world. The reader should be acquainted with the data gathered from research projects done during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985), particularly Bernard (1987), Taylor *et al.* (1985) and Sivard (1983). That is not to say that every culture exhibits devaluing behaviour patterns at every stage of every woman's life. However, the 'big picture' conclusion is that the devaluation of women is present in almost all cultures, including so-called technologically advanced Western cultures.

We started with the question 'Why does patriarchy appear to be an almost universal phenomenon?' I believe that the anthropological theories of world view can at least partially answer that question. The words 'world view' are used frequently these days in many academic disciplines. The definitions of world view presented here are from a cultural and missiological perspective, particularly utilizing the theoretical framework of world view as discussed by Hiebert (1985), Kearney (1984) and Kraft (1980). World view from this perspective refers to the deepest level of analysis of a culture. In this section I will present the concept of world view under the headings of definitions, characteristics and functions. Throughout I will interject at certain points how world view assumptions influence and/or illustrate the phenomenon of the devaluation of women.

Definitions of world view

Kearney defines world view as a people's

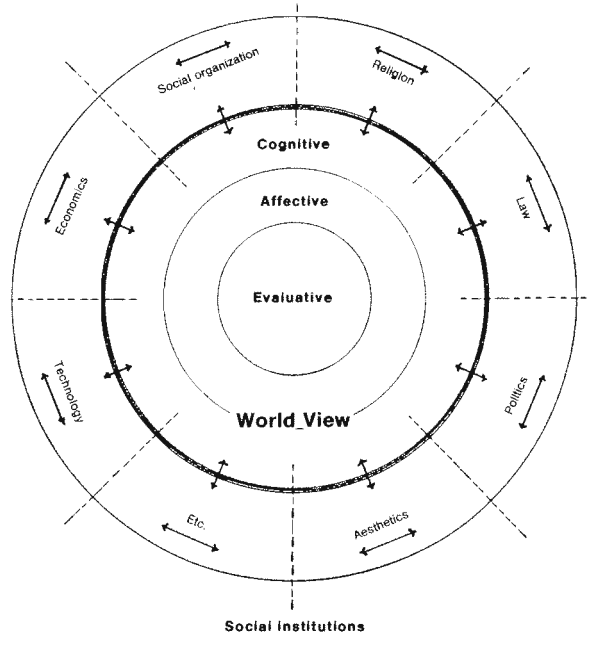
> way of looking at reality. It consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world. A world view comprises itself of Self and of all that is recognized as not Self, plus ideas about relationships between them, as well as other ideas (1984:41).

Kraft suggests that

> The world view is the central systematization of concepts of reality to which the members of a culture assent (largely unconscious) and from which stems their value system. The world view lies at the very heart of culture, touching, integrating with, and strongly influencing every other part of culture (1980:53).

I define world view simply as the basic assumptions and values by which a given individual within a group of people or society perceives and organizes the reality around them. World view is the 'heart' of any culture and is what makes a culture 'tick'. The diagram below will show how the world view (which is generally invisible) is in the centre with the various social systems (the visible social patterns, customs and traits of culture) around the perimeter.

A Model of world view



Characteristics of world view

First of all, Hiebert (1985) has theorized that there are three segments or parts in a world view: cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions. Cognitive assumptions provide people with basic concepts of time and space and help shape categories of thinking and types of logic used. The affective assumptions give people their basic ideas of what is beautiful, what is good taste in styles, colour, smells, music, *etc.* Finally, 'evaluative assumptions provide the standards people use to make judgments, including their criteria for determining truth and error, likes and dislikes, and right and wrong' (Hiebert 1985:46, 47). It is particularly this third segment of world view, the evaluative, that is being dealt with in this essay. The world view will contain evaluative assumptions about all segments of society. In this study I am dealing only with the evaluative assumptions regarding gender issues. It is proposed that the underlying problem of visible patriarchal behaviours is the basic invisible assumption that women are of lesser value than men. The diagram indicates that the evaluative part of world view is at the inner core of world view (from Hiebert 1985:46).

The second characteristic is that human beings are not born with a world view. Rather it is developed and becomes part of the individual's thinking as he or she interacts with other people and objects, first within the family system and later within the other social systems of the culture. Often these assumptions are unconscious, unexamined, and usually taken for granted since the learning process begins at the moment of birth. The world view assumptions are taught to succeeding generations so convincingly that they seem absolute and therefore are seldom questioned, with the result that people interpret their life experiences in terms of these assumptions and feel that they are absolute truth.

Third, Kearney suggests that 'the backbone of a world view is the opposition and integration of the Self and the Other' (1984:108). From birth and throughout life, the dynamic relationship between Self and Other (be it humans or objects in the environment) is the basis for the formation of various categories and value systems of the world view. From the second and third characteristics of world view can be drawn enormous implications for infant girls as they seek to find their place within the family system. The numerous evaluative messages communicated to the girl, most often at the intuitive level, are being imprinted upon her developing psyche. Very early on she learns that others perceive her to be of lesser value. From these devaluing life experiences she develops the assumption that in truth she must be of lesser value. Now this dynamic learning process is basically unconsciously taught and learned by the adults and the daughter in the family.

Of all the many possible relationships between Self and Other, the relationship between male and female as it is experienced by women, first in the family and later in the broader society, is a very significant part of any culture. From global demographic data it is apparent that the male/female relationship can be most frequently described as patriarchal, that is, men ruling over women. We begin to see how patriarchy and the devaluation of women are two sides of the same coin.

The fourth characteristic of world view is that it is the 'source' from which explicit culture is derived. In other words, the world view of culture provides the underlying, but invisible building blocks for the visible social systems of the culture. Notice in the diagram that there are 'gates' from the world view to the various social systems. It is also observed from the diagram above that the various social systems are in a reciprocal relationship with each other and the world view. This means then that the world view is the 'source' for the visible or explicit culture, but in turn the explicit culture, the social systems, reinforce and sanction the assumptions of the world view. They are in reciprocal relationship.

Gender roles are part of the visible culture. Therefore, as we examine not only the various roles women play, we must also ask about the values and assumptions behind the roles. When women are consistently paid less for the same job as men, does it not imply that women and the work they do are of less value than men and the work they do? Why is a woman's testimony in the court room often taken to be less credible than a man's testimony? Why are the doors to education more easily opened for boys than for girls? In like manner, we must also ask about the invisible values and assumptions behind the very visible exclusion of women from certain ministries and positions within the religious system.

Fifth, it is important to understand that world view assumptions are not necessarily the same as religious beliefs and opinions, although in some cultures there may be a strong relationship between the two. The religious system is only one of the various social systems of the culture (see the diagram). The various social systems do not impact the world view with equal importance and strength. In some cultures one or two particular social systems will have a stronger relationship with and therefore a greater impact upon the world view. For instance, in Western cultures it is the economic system with its emphasis on materialism and consumerism that has strongly reinforced world view assumptions regarding the use of time and material elements. That is in spite of the fact that they are so-called 'Christian' nations. However, in many other cultures around the world it is the religious system that strongly influences, reinforces and sanctions the basic assumptions and belief systems of their world view. It is to be noticed then that the religious system is separate from the world view assumptions even though it may have tremendous influence on the world view.

Basically, the religious system will *describe* and *prescribe* the general and specific beliefs and values of the world view. That is to say, the religious system will not only describe and affirm a certain type of relationship between men and women, it will also say that that is how 'things ought to be'. In prescribing the gender relationship it is in turn informing the contents of the assumptions of the world view. This sanctioning influence of the religious system on the basic world view values and assumptions is of great significance in regard to the devaluing process of women.

Functions of world view

When all basic assumptions and values are brought together to form a world view, they function in at least five ways to help the people of a given culture to conceptualize their whole reality. First, the world view of a people provides a rational explanation or justification for the belief system that they adhere to. The world view gives the cognitive and rational apologetic for how and why things are the way they are. This 'map of reality' is logical to the people who own a particular world view.

The second important function of world view is to provide emotional security and stability. When individuals or a whole society must face highly emotional situations, for instance crises or celebrations, it is the basic assumptions of the world view that will indicate to the individual how to find help in the midst of the crisis or how a given celebration will reinforce emotionally the belief system. When we are going through a difficult crisis, it is the basic belief in an eternal God who cares for us that prompts us to turn to God in prayer. Rituals and ceremonies are times in which the world view assumptions are reinforced through the emotional response.

The third function of world view is to judge and validate the norms of the society. The world view evaluates what is right and wrong about behaviours and choices. In other words, our world view not only gives us a map *of* reality, it also gives us a map *for* reality. A world view not only describes how things are but prescribes how things should be within a given culture.

World view serves not only to say what is valuable but also how to sort out and prioritize our values by putting them in hierarchical order. It teaches us the degrees of allegiance we will extend to the Other of our environment. It would be difficult for most people to put the same value on the soap they use to clean themselves as compared to the value ascribed to their parents or siblings. In other words, our world view indicates to us which values, beliefs and allegiances we would be willing to die for and which ones we can let go without losing our sense of integrity.

It seems to me that the evaluative function of world view is at the crux of the matter when discussing gender issues, especially the function of ascribing allegiances. Not every culture in the world devalues women to the level of animals. Nevertheless, even if women are accorded a relatively high value in a given culture, men are usually given a higher priority or allegiance in the society. This is demonstrated in subtle ways. Boys and men generally speaking have better nutrition than girls and women. In certain cultures female foetuses are aborted more frequently than male foetuses. In most instances, men have more legal rights than women. In these and many more instances, men are given the preferential position and treatment.

The fourth function of world view is to integrate and give an overarching pattern or organization to all of our perceptions and

assumptions. The devaluation of women is usually not seen in just one of the social systems, *i.e.* the family or church. If the devaluation of women is truly a world view issue, it will be demonstrated in one way or another in all the social systems.

Fifthly, not only does a world view integrate the basic assumptions of a people, it also monitors how and when change will be brought to the world view and culture. In spite of the fact that the world view provides stability, it also permits change. This function presents hope that the massive devaluation of women in human history can be turned around. The danger is, though, that changes will only be brought to the visible part of culture, the social systems. Society may pass laws which mandate that women and men receive equal pay for the same job in the workplace. But because there is a change in the visible culture does not necessarily mean there will be a corresponding change in the invisible world view of the culture. The perceived value of women and their work must change also.

Concluding implications

Thus far the theories, characteristics and functions of world view have been presented. To close I shall briefly discuss a few implications for Christian ministry and the process of theologizing in our contemporary world.

First, an obvious fact should be noted. World views are held by both men and women in a given culture. The belief that women are of less value is not held by men only. Women also perceive themselves to be of lesser value. The devaluation of women affects both men and women, albeit in very different ways. Both men and women must work towards finding a true gender identity which liberates both to be all that God would want them to be.

Second, world view assumptions are passed from generation to generation. The present-day devaluation of women was learned from the previous generation, who in turn learned these values from their ancestors. The human race has been 'congenitally flawed' with aggressiveness on the part of men and passivity on the part of women for a very long, long time (Van Loeuwen 1987). If we believe that the human race finds its common origin in the Genesis creation narratives, then we might also find the beginnings of the phenomenon of the devaluation of women in those same passages. It seems to me that Genesis 3:16 describes this phenomenon when it says 'the desire of the woman shall be for her husband and he shall rule over her'. Patriarchy and the devaluation of women are a result of sin entering the world. Because human beings, when left to themselves, seem to have a very strong propensity to get caught in the 'cultural drag' of patriarchalism and misogyny, each new generation of children needs to be carefully and clearly taught the equal value of male and female.

We have suggested that patriarchy and the devaluation of women have been around since sin entered the human race. A cursory overview of the two-thousand-year history of the church indicates that only sporadically has it spoken out against the sin of sexism. Christian missionary enterprise has sought to deal with various kinds of cultural issues like polygamy, ancestor worship or ethnic music, but very little has been done to deal with the issues surrounding the devaluation of women around the world. This indeed is a challenge for contemporary theologians.

Third, it was stated that there is a sanctioning and reinforcing reciprocal relationship between the visible and the invisible culture. This fact presents a warning to both the traditionalists and the feminists. All human beings are profoundly and powerfully influenced by the invisible and often unconscious world view assumptions of the culture in which they were socialized. We are all strongly conditioned by the culture around us. And this is true even for Christians. Both the traditionalists and the feminists theologize out of their own cultural and world view perspectives. Each must be willing honestly to acknowledge their own 'cultural baggage' being brought to the task of scriptural exegesis.

Fourth, as might have been guessed, it is much easier to change the visible cultural behaviours, customs and systems than it is to change the invisible world view assumptions, beliefs and allegiances. For all the good changes that have been made in favour of women, they will be short-lived unless the underlying value systems are changed.

In this essay I have sought to define the theory of world view and describe how this explains at least in part the universality of patriarchy and the devaluation of women. Now the discussion must move on to ask the question 'How do we bring change at the world view level?' That is a question which there is neither time nor space to discuss at this moment. In the meantime, those of us who profess to be 'in Christ' are called to embrace a value system which demonstrates that kind of gender equality in our everyday behaviours (Gal. 3:26-28).

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