

Understanding Culture and worldview impacts on societies

I'll use the word *values* frequently when discussing culture, so I want to take some time to clarify its meaning. Values are the things in our lives that we hold as important or that have worth to us. They can be tangible things, such as a car, a home, or other physical things. They can be preferences such as a style of clothing or decorations in a home. They can be personal desires or goals, such as having lots of money or professional success. Other values may be moral qualities, such as being a person of integrity or living a God-honoring life. Some values are more important to us than others; some values may be something we hold as individuals, while other values may be shared within our cultural group. The values that we hold, regardless of the source, are a big part of who we are as people. These values not only shape the way we understand life and relationships, but they also guide our decisions. They're also a large part of what makes up what we call a person's worldview.

I originally wrote the outline of the next section a few years ago as a devotional for one of my turns as a member of the hospital management committee. The topic of culture and worldviews is applicable to every nation and society on earth. It's one of the most essential subjects to be aware of when working or teaching cross culturally. You could miss important points or miscommunicate

altogether without understanding or, at the very least, being aware of another culture's worldview! I hope this can begin to produce an awareness of the importance of cultural differences for those who have never spent extended periods of time within another culture.

Some Definitions of Culture

- ❖ Culture refers to the collective knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.¹
- ❖ Culture is symbolic communication. Some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The symbols' meanings are learned and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions. (Institutions as referred to here would be social institutions or patterns of social order focused on meeting social needs, such as government, economy, education, family, healthcare, and religion.)
- ❖ Culture comprises explicit and implicit patterns of and for behavior that are acquired and transmitted by symbols,

¹ <http://people.tamu.edu/~i~choudhury/culture.html>

constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas, especially their attached values; on the one hand, culture systems may be considered products of action, and on the other hand, conditioning influences upon future actions.

- ❖ Culture is the sum total of the learned behavior of a group of people that's generally considered to be that people's tradition transmitted from generation to generation.
- ❖ Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.

Every group of people around the world has what is called their culture. Some countries with a lot of ethnic diversity may have a general overall culture with many subcultures within the general culture.

The country where we lived, with its 250 different ethnic groups, is an example of that. We could see into the land areas of six different language groups from our back veranda, each with its own histories and traditions. This area also has three primary religions: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam. Several of the different tribal groups have stories about how they had relocated from other areas and were given places to settle by the larger tribe

already residing in that area. The larger tribe gave them land and designated the boundaries. These groups each have their own chiefs or traditional leaders who rule their group, but they, in turn, are subchiefs to the larger tribe's leader.

These tribes collectively have many general cultural values within them that produce some commonality, but then each has its own individual traditions and values regarding important areas of life, such as marriage, death, sacrifices to the ancestors, special spiritual holidays referred to as "Country Sundays," etc. These are some of the things that give them their own individual cultural character within the general culture. There's also a people group called the Fulani, traditional Muslims who migrated from the Niger Basin across Sub-Saharan Africa in the 11th century. They share some of the same geographical area, but they have a unique set of cultural values, so they wouldn't really be considered a subculture.

The subject of culture can produce lots of questions! Where have our cultures come from? How long have they existed? Do they change? Are cultures good or bad? How does culture impact our lives? More importantly, how does God's Word affect our culture or how does our culture affect God's Word in our lives? Which one is more important? Which one is more powerful?

The attitudes, values, and beliefs that we collectively call culture unquestionably have a role in human behavior and progress, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. It's interesting to note

that those attitudes, values, and beliefs that reflect godly values promote development, while those that don't reflect godly values hold development back.

Another interesting and important thing to note is that the institutions that develop within a society will obviously reflect its cultural values. Governments, judicial systems, and economic systems will all behave just like the people who run them, the people who think and behave as their culture shapes them. What does this mean? If people generally behave corruptly and selfishly in their culture, there's no way that their institutions will function well because those individuals will take those same behavioral patterns to work. People who behave in a way that reflects godly values, with honesty and integrity, are also involved in institutions that will run well and will serve the nation well.

Matthew 7:17-18: *So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.*

Where do Cultures Come from?

Another important thing to understand is that different cultures have developed under different conditions. Most cultures were developed long before God's Word and the Gospel formally reached the people in the various cultures. The men often referred to as the

Founding Fathers in the United States were largely believers in a higher moral authority, either as deists or as followers of Jesus Christ, when the U.S. Government was first being formed. They knew that the government they were attempting to form as they wrote their Declaration of Independence and designed the Constitution and Bill of Rights would be very fragile and had to reflect godly values for it to function well and survive. They knew that godly values and the moral behavior of the people would be the key to that survival. That was made clear as they tried to reflect that ideology when designing those documents. People lived and worked in ways that reflected those values for many years, and God blessed the nation's development.

However, pride in man's success began to rise after 200 years of growing prosperity, and the limits on freedom that had kept it from becoming anarchist, provided by Judeo-Christian values, began to come under attack with increasing intensity. Today, after nearly six decades of growing pagan influence, the U.S. culture now condones abortion, killing over 62 million unborn children since 1973.²

Homosexuality has become a mainstream lifestyle. Prayer in schools was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962, and reading a Bible publicly has come under attack. These events have resulted in the moral decay of America's current culture.

² www.lifenews.com/2021/01/22/62502904-babies-have-been-killed-by-abortion-since-roev-wade-in-1973.

Culture is a powerful force, but culture can also be altered by changing values, for both good and bad.



A culture was already firmly entrenched in the various societies in the country where we lived in Africa, where the Gospel had only reached its shores in the mid 1800s and slowly spread throughout. The question now is, how much influence have the Gospel and God's Word had on those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior? One only needs to examine the condition of the society, the justice system, the way various government ministries function and how strong the economy is to arrive at a conclusion.

It becomes clear, then, that even if the Gospel has spread throughout the nation and even if thousands of churches have sprung up among many different denominations, the transformation of hearts and minds by the Spirit through the Word has been lagging far behind. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:2 that we are not to be conformed any longer to our previous life patterns, but by examining God's word to learn His values, we can begin to see the areas in our personal and cultural values that need adjusting and make those changes, being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing*

you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

West Africa has many wonderful Christian leaders. There are also many who believe that there's a strong connection between Western culture and Christianity and that it was something that the colonials and missionaries tried to use to make Africans become more Western or to control them. I have personally heard people refer to the Bible as the white man's book on several occasions. This idea isn't as strong as it used to be, and many churches have done well in making the church their own. However, I still see comments on social media that show this idea is still present in the minds of some church leaders. This thinking is disturbing and incorrect. It's also a compelling reason why the focus needs to be on the development of national church leaders whom God can use to build His kingdom in their own cultural contexts.

I'll look next at some cultural value comparisons, opposing worldviews and how they can potentially affect development.

MODULE | Culture and Worldview

Impacts on Society [Pages 21 – 26]

Theme: *Every society is shaped by underlying beliefs—its worldview. These beliefs influence laws, education, media, economics, and ethics. Discipleship must engage culture at the level of worldview to bring lasting transformation.*

Grounding Scripture

Romans 12:2 | *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...”*

Acts 17:22–31 | Paul engages the Athenian worldview with truth and grace.

Proverbs 4:23 | *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life Proverbs.”*

Puzzle Piece

INSIGHT: Culture is not neutral—it’s a carrier of worldview.

THE PUZZLE IS DIAGNOSTIC: What beliefs are shaping society’s systems, and how do they align or conflict with biblical truth?

CHALLENGE: When believers fail to engage worldview, they may accept cultural norms without question or retreat from public life. This leads to erosion of spiritual capital and societal crumbling.

Bridge Thought | Connection

- The bridge between faith and culture must be built with discernment.
- Believers are called to be salt and light—not by withdrawal, but by wise engagement.

Toolbox | Practical Tools

Worldview Mapping: Teach believers to identify the dominant worldview in media, education, and policy.

Cultural Discernment Framework: Equip believers to evaluate cultural trends through a biblical lens.

Redemptive Engagement Model: Discuss ways to respond with truth, grace, and strategic influence.

Reflection Prompts

1. What cultural messages are shaping your community’s values?
2. Where do you see conflict between biblical truth and societal norms?
3. How can you engage culture without compromise?

Action Steps

- Train believers to analyze worldview in their spheres of influence.
- Create forums for public theology and cultural engagement.
- Encourage creative expression—art, writing, media—that reflects truth and beauty.