

WORLDVIEW: ENLARGING THE REFORMED TENT¹

The scene below is a true story that represents one of the lowest points ever in my entire 28-year missionary career and of which I am ashamed till this day.

"Pastor, I need your help for a serious problem I have."

"Alright, Benjamin, what is it? Feel free."

"Well, it's this way. After I go to bed at night and fall asleep, I start traveling to other places. I know this is bad, but I don't know what to do about it. I can't stop it."

"Benjamin, are you sure you are not just dreaming?"

"No, Pastor, I know this is for real. And it has not happened just once or twice, but many times."

"OK, Benjamin. Tonight I will sleep in your hut on my trekbed and I will watch to see what will happen. If you're dreaming, I'll wake you up. If you start moving, I will grab you and not let you go. Then, in the morning we will together review what actually happened."

Benjamin turned around in disgust. "Pastor, there is nothing to see or hold on to. It is my spirit that is traveling, not the body. My body will stay in bed."

With that, Benjamin left me. Clearly I had not been of any help to him. He was appalled at my attitude and my ignorance. Here was a rather common problem and this white pastor with all of his education does not understand what is going on. Hopeless!

I was left holding the bag. What was I to think of it? Was this more of this African nonsense, this Pagan fantasy that we missionaries hoped would soon disappear as the Gospel takes hold? One thing was clear: I had failed miserably as a missionary pastor. I felt empty. Helpless. Powerless. Ashamed.

This incident took place in a village in the Bakundi area of the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN) during the first two years I was there. But with all my forgetfulness, this one

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incident has stuck freshly in my mind as if it happened yesterday. It set me to thinking about worldviews.

Benjamin and I were living in different worlds. Or, better, we were looking at the world with different glasses and experiencing it in mutually exclusive ways. He was steeped in the African world that includes a myriad of spirits, good and bad, that regularly impinge upon the physical world, including that of people. His was an open universe with which both God and Satan and all sorts of other spiritual beings were in constant interaction. I was saturated in a Dutch Reformed worldview, one that is strong in its sense of the Lordship of Christ over life and that emphasizes the basic theme of creation-fall-redemption as a way of interpreting the world. But in essence it was basically a closed worldview that had unconsciously but largely allowed itself to be restricted to the empirical world. It was more open to science than to the world of spirits.[1](#)

That worldview hardly equipped me to understand Benjamin's problem. At that time, some 25 years ago now, I was convinced of my own worldview. He was wrong, primitive, pagan. He should be freed from it and imbibe mine. That would be my mission.

After many years, I am glad to report that my mission did not develop in quite such a one-way affair. At the "home" front in Canada, my church was embroiled in the charismatic struggle with some of my own sisters deeply involved. Eventually, a greater openness developed resulting in a fine synodical report[2](#) that answered responsibly the issues emerging from the charismatic challenge. That report encouraged me to open my worldview to a wider universe and to reject the narrow confines of an empirical world.

Here in Nigeria I served for some time as pastor in Nigerian churches. I noticed time and again that church members who had gone to our Takum Christian Hospital for treatment would almost without fail turn immediately to some functionaries of the local traditional religion to find out the real truth about their sickness.[3](#)

From their point of view, the missionaries and their Nigerian colleagues had done a good job treating the physical symptom, but the REAL cause had not been uncovered, let alone taken care

of. The hospital had not concerned itself with their African questions. Who had made them sick and how? Why? How could the attack be overcome? How could reconciliation take place? These questions came out of the depths of souls steeped in traditional African thinking. There is a world of spirits, powers and ancestors that play decisive roles in human society.

However, the missionary approach to the gospel and to healing totally ignored those concerns as irrelevant, ignorant, primitive and even ungodly, not to say devilish. Missionaries felt that the sooner these questions were forgotten in favor of the western medical approach, the better. They had uncritically accepted the biomedical approach and were, with few exceptions, not prepared to entertain any questions about such traditional African concerns.

The result of this approach is that many Nigerian Christians live in two worlds. One is that of biomedicine, where everything is based on Western science and technology. The other is the traditional world of spirits, native medicinemen and various sorts of priests. They have learned that Jesus is capable of healing certain physical symptoms, but that He is powerless in many other cases. In other words, He is a rather weak and limited Savior. His followers are forced constantly to resort back to functionaries of a religion they have officially sworn off. I myself have on several occasions successfully brought patients to native medicinemen for treatment after the Christian hospital proved inadequate with its exclusive biomedical approach.

Some may think my approach smacks of syncretism. To be sure, the situation is not free from it. But I ask: Do you know the truth of biomedicine, its religio-philosophical foundations, on the worldview on which it is based?⁴ The biomedical missionary is as much in danger of syncretism by his combination of the secular philosophy underlying his practice with the missionary message. In the process the missionary will ignore questions of worldview, both African and Reformed. The medical missionary had uncritically adopted an almost exclusively mechanical approach to healing that seriously shortchanged the African soul and that was based on a questionable worldview, not to talk of biblical concepts and practices related to healing. Though many of these missionaries were graduates of a college that strongly emphasizes the integration of faith with life and learning, neither their academic-professional nor their mission training had successfully challenged them to engage in basic analysis of their purely Western and largely

secular approach.⁵ And all of this had the blessing of their Reformed mission board and its constituency!

The Nigerian Christian, coming as she did from a wholistic animistic background, had no choice but to resort to the services of a religion she had officially rejected. The mechanistic "Christian" healing approach bypassed her heart, her questions and her fears. Furthermore, she can hardly be blamed for the conclusion that Christian healing is only for certain types of sickness and then only for its symptoms, while the real truth behind the symptoms must be discovered by functionaries of the traditional religion. The fact that today Nigerian Christians are trooping in droves from the "mission churches" to the mushrooming charismatic churches that operate with a worldview that is both closer to that of the New Testament and to that of traditional Africa should hardly surprise us. The "mission churches" seem almost sterile in comparison.

Of course, the traditional African worldview plays a role not only in the sickroom but expresses itself in all aspects of life, including the lives of Christians. It is a world difficult to comprehend for one reared in a scientific civilization. It is a world in which some people have the strangest powers. Some can suddenly transplant themselves in mysterious fashion to other locations. Others have a strange ability to see through situations. Then there are the countervailing powers of the witch and the witchdoctor. You get to know people who have the power actually and effectively to curse their enemies or cause them to become either insane or possessed, much like the Gadarene in the gospels. Then, when they become Christian, in an equally mysterious way, they undo the spell, while they may be removed from their victim by many miles. In short, one finds himself in an incomprehensible world of mysteries and powers for which empirical science has no explanations and most expressions of the traditional Reformed worldview no room.

When a Western missionary first comes in touch with that world, he tends to dismiss most of it as superstitious hocus pocus that will disappear as the Gospel takes hold as I did in the case of Benjamin. We have tended to regard all this as a product of Satan and his deceivers. But as the years go by and one daily meets Nigerian Christians who are fully rational and respectable people, it becomes increasingly difficult to dismiss all this as nonsense. How can you regard people whose opinions in other areas of life you respect, people with whom you have fellowship

on a regular basis, people who have become your colleagues and with whom you work daily, how can you dismiss their opinions in this area suddenly as mere superstition? This whole worldview is just too consistent, too widespread, and its effects too pervasive to continue to dismiss it so casually and easily.

I decided it was time to begin a more serious study of it. I would like to do an understudy with some practitioners of these powers. In the meantime, I have searched for literature dealing with these phenomena. A lot of this, of course, is treated in the field of parapsychology, a discipline that enjoys little respectability among most serious students. I came across Douchan Gersi's *Faces in the Smoke*,⁶ a serious account of amazing powers he himself witnessed and experienced in a wide range of cultures. I was also led to Victor Ernest's account of his experiences in the mysterious world of spiritism, an account he published after he became a Christian pastor.⁷ These corroborate much of what the African worldview affirms. It is one thing to accept that many of these phenomena actually exist or are practiced. It is another thing to put them into a perspective that is consistent with the Reformed worldview that I treasure. Is that even possible?

I "accidentally" stumbled across a helpful discussion in a classic expression of a Reformed worldview: Abraham Kuyper, no less, in his *Pro Rege*.⁸ Kuyper argues that these strange powers are remnants of the original power given to the human race with which mankind was to pursue the Cultural Mandate. The fall led to a loss of most of these powers, but various cultures have retained remnants. Often these remnant powers have over time been distorted and are thus used for negative purposes. We see their restoration in Christ, who performed His miracles not as the Son of God, but as the first fruit of restored mankind. His powers, strange as they may seem to us, were expressions of restored *human* powers, powers that were also available to His disciples and even to us today.

It would take us too far afield to summarize how Kuyper relates this thesis to science, which, according to him, is the main expression of human creative power today. However, here is a wholistic, Reformed perspective that already early in this century made room for these phenomena so common in the worldviews of the cultures that confront us missionaries.

Although Kuyper's works are seldom regarded as relevant and therefore hardly studied in the missionary community, his perspective has not gone unnoticed. J. H. Diemer has further developed it. "Signs and wonders are happenings in which the original power of men over creation shows up again," he asserts. In restored fellowship with God through Christ, even today's believer can perform signs and wonders. It is a native human ability.⁹

What is strange is that Western Christians have lost that ability and usually even deny its possibility, while these powers continue to be practiced by people in many other cultures, though often in distorted fashion. Being products of that Western society, missionaries have been quick to denounce these powers as demonic without realizing that they are not only natural to the human race, but that they can be and are to be redeemed in Christ. The heritage of the Enlightenment, Rationalism and scientism has filled our hearts and minds more than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I find this perspective helpful, but it needs further development, especially with a view to the "mission churches" in the south, many of which have atrophied as a result of the Western missionary heritage. They have no defense against the onslaughts of charismatic groups who operate with stark varieties of supernaturalism and dualism and who generally share a concept of the Holy Spirit, of redemption and of the Lordship of Christ that has led most of them to a heretical contempt for God's creation.

This perspective enables us to account for phenomena that too many have disparaged as mere superstition and to regard them in a more positive light. But it does require that we move the goalposts of our Reformed worldview and enlarge our tent.

End Notes:

1 I find the following more recent publications helpful as more open expressions of a Reformational worldview in relation to this essay. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: A Transforming View of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). An interesting somewhat older treatment of these questions from a Dooyeweerdian perspective is that of D. G. Molenaar, *De Doop met de Heilige Geest* (Kampen: Kok, 1963).

2 John H. Stek, reporter, "Neo-Pentecostalism," in *Acts of Synod, 1973* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1973), pp. 398-493.

3 For more details concerning these developments, see my *Wholistic Health Care of, for and by the People* (Jos and Lagos: Christian Health Association of Nigeria, 1989).

4 For an excellent summary of the worldview underlying biomedicine, I refer you to J. R. Kriel, *Removing Medicine's Cartesian Mask: The Problem of Humanizing the Face of Medicine* (University of Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1988).

5 For a more exhaustive treatment of the philosophy of the Western concept of the closed universe as it relates to these concerns, see Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

6 Douchan Gersi, *Faces in the Smoke: An Eyewitness Experience of Voodoo, Shamanism, Psychic Healing, and Other Amazing Human Powers* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1991).

7 Victor H. Ernest, *I Talked with Spirits* (Wheaton: Tyndale; London: Coverdale, 1970).

8 Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege of het Koningschap van Christus*, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1911), pp. 143-246. I have published an English translation of this section under the rather unKuyperian title *You Can Do Greater Things than Christ*, trans. Jan H. Boer (Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, P.O. Box 6485, 1991). You can find it on this Boeriana page.

9 J. H. Diemer, "Natuur en Wonder," *Philosophia Reformata*, 1943. These articles have been translated and published as *Nature and Miracle* (Toronto: Wedge, 1977). Cf. also his "Miracles Happen: Toward a Biblical View of Nature," trans. W. Bouma (Toronto: The Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, n.d.). For a further discussion on Diemer's view cf. Molenaar, pp. 78-79.