

# How the Bible Shapes Our World

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Over the last forty years, Christians have suffered from a significant loss of confidence in the Christian faith and in the Bible. This phenomenon can be attributed to a number of causes. Secularism has, to a great extent, relegated faith to the private sphere and to the outer fringes of social life. Unless there is a crisis of major proportions, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, we tend to frown upon overt expressions of faith in the public sphere. Christian practices and beliefs are increasingly pushed into the folkloric realm. We have, without a doubt, entered a post-Christian era in which the Church and its institutions have been stripped of much of the authority, moral and otherwise, they used to enjoy in earlier times. Moral relativism and pluralism have also contributed to shaking Christian convictions. Movies, television shows, and popular magazines produce a massive and constant flow of powerful messages that undermine the moral values traditionally associated with Christianity in our culture. The impact Hollywood is powerful, because we no longer make moral decisions on the basis of reason. Ethical conduct is now commonly determined on the basis of a social consensus where power and glitz are equated with truth. Massive immigration from Arab and Asian countries has put Christians face to face with people who hold very different religious beliefs. Whether it was the televangelists' sexual and financial failures or the recent revelation of sexual abuse amongst Roman Catholic priests in the United States, the numerous scandals that have rocked ecclesiastical institutions in the last few decades have at best increased the level of cynicism towards the church, and at worst, contributed to undermine the legitimacy of the Christian faith.

In addition to these factors, there is increasingly an anti-Christian sentiment that finds expression in our culture. Christianity is often perceived as archaic, irrelevant, narrow and bigoted. The Christian tradition has frequently been portrayed as the root cause of many of the problems that have plagued Western culture. The mismanagement of the eco-system, slavery, the exploitation of women, and the repression of human sexuality immediately come to mind. The bottom line is clear: not only has the Christian faith lost a significant degree of legitimacy generally, but I would also contend that the Church has partially lost sight of the unique and revolutionary character of the Bible and the worldview it contains.

In spite of the bad publicity Christianity and the Bible have received, I would nevertheless contend that the Bible remains the most remarkable work of literature ever to appear in human history, particularly as it relates to the way it impacts how we perceive ourselves, the world that surrounds us, and the way we live. Let's consider a few examples. Few of us would even notice, but there is something remarkable in the fact that most people do not worship the sun, the moon or the stars. In fact, most of us find the notion of worshipping the sun quite ludicrous. And yet, why don't we worship the stars, the moon, the earth, or the life force in the trees like thousands if not millions of people have done since the dawn of time all around the world? Is it because we are exceptionally smart? Enlightened? Sophisticated? I doubt it.

Pierre Chaunu, a world-renowned European historian, contends that the only reason to account for the fact that we do not worship nature or sacrifice children to Baal, Molech or any other divinity is due to fundamental reason: the subversive work of the biblical text in our culture. Genesis 1:1 says: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (NIV). Although this short sentence may appear quite trivial at first sight, this is probably the most revolutionary statement ever uttered in the history of humanity. In one swipe, this text eradicated the universe of the multitude of gods that controlled the lives of men and women and terrorized them. It emptied the physical universe of divine essence. This text literally destroyed the conceptual framework that made belief in magic possible. And here is the remarkable thing. In the very process of eliminating the foundation for magic, by erasing the very existence of the gods on whom magic is contingent, this text opens the door to science as we understand it. Without the appearance of such a text to challenge and undermine the divine character of nature, it is virtually impossible to conceive of the development of a rigorous and fully developed scientific paradigm. The reason is simple: we cannot investigate, analyse, or dissect what we worship and fear.

On a different issue, Pierre Chaunu also contends that the very recognition of women as full fledged human beings depends on moral and ethical categories that derive ultimately from the Bible. He points out, for example, in his book *Foi et histoire (Faith and History)*, 1980), that it is only in those cultures where the biblical text and Christianity have had some long term influence, that the status of women has gradually improved from that of property and progenitor to that of a full human being, equal to man. In cultures where the biblical text has not had any significant impact, women are regarded as property whose main purpose is to produce children. In such cultures, women are married as soon as they are able to procreate, they have little or no access to formal education, and they are allowed little self-determination.

The main reason behind this social transformation is fundamentally linked to a statement found in Genesis 1:27: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” This text affirms the intrinsic dignity of both men and women regardless of their gender or social status. This is in stark contrast to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia where the value of human beings was primarily determined on the basis of their social standing. This statement is also the main rationale behind the abolition of slavery and the affirmation of human rights in general. Bottom line? Whenever the biblical text finds entrance into a culture, it acts like an acid on structures of dehumanisation and exploitation. In that respect, the biblical worldview is invaluable.

Christians throughout history have often lost sight of the revolutionary character of the biblical text and its power to transform cultures. If preaching is declaring salvation in Jesus-Christ, it is also more than that. It entails the communication of a new worldview, i.e., a new understanding of God, human nature, and the universe. It is very tempting today, in a post-modern, secular, pluralistic, and relativistic age, where Christianity is perceived as the main cause of social evil in the Western world, to tone down the biblical worldview. We do not wish, after all, to offend others. But if we fail to expose clearly the biblical worldview, we must also understand that we contribute to sustaining the structures of dehumanisation and exploitation that human societies create generation after generation.

The Bible is foundational in one fundamental respect. We believe that it provides the basic building blocks of a true worldview, i.e., an understanding of the universe that corresponds to ultimate reality. The interesting thing about worldviews is that they are, for the most part, self-coherent and consistent. A worldview can in some ways be compared to a bubble. When one lives inside any particular worldview “bubble”, it appears completely plausible and credible. This does not mean, however, that all the worldview “bubbles” that human societies have generated necessarily reflect the true nature of reality. Logically, they cannot all be equally true, since they are often mutually contradictory. Because worldviews ultimately determine how we live, how we treat each other, and how we perceive ourselves, it is vitally important to ensure that we have and communicate a worldview that is deeply rooted into what I like to call the ground of reality. Scripture is foundational in that it provides us with the conduit to plug into that ultimate ground of reality.

There is very little doubt in my mind that without the biblical text, we would still be on all four like cattle worshipping the earth, the sun, the stars, or the moon, and we would, more likely than not, still be sacrificing infants to appease angry gods. It is important to realize that without the Bible, there would be precious little basis for affirming human rights and the intrinsic dignity and value of human life. I often read that the source of our dignity is found in our unique genetic structure. It is, in fact, the reason most often given to prohibit human cloning. But in reality, appealing to our genetic uniqueness is woefully inadequate, if simply because this characteristic is not the sole prerogative of the human race. Does a cockroach have special value simply because it has a unique genetic make up? Of course not. According to Genesis 1:27 (see also Gen. 9:6), our unique worth and dignity is linked to the affirmation that humans are made in the image of God. Without the biblical text, the door is left wide open for dehumanisation, human exploitation, and superstition. Nazi Germany was no accident. It came about, because an ideology of death slowly gained prominence. It was an ideology that redefined what it meant to be human and resulted in declaring some as human and others as non-human. The biblical text and a faithful community may well be the only thing that stands between us and Auschwitz.

I am convinced that the renewal of the Church and of the transformation of our society will be, in great part, the result of a rediscovery of the revolutionary, life-giving character of the Bible.

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The Basis of Human Dignity: Partnership with God (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:15-17)

The people who first received the creation story in Genesis 1-2 believed that human beings were created to be slaves; the ultimate purpose of human existence was to feed the gods. In our day and age, many share a similar view. The belief that the earth was the result of some cosmic accident provides no ultimate reason for human life. Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:15-17 are two texts that remind us that humanity was created to be in a special kind of relationship with God. Here we have for the first time in the history of humanity, the notion of a God who invites men and women to become partners with him in a great divine project.

In contrast to most religions of the world, the God of the Bible desires, above all, to enter into an intimate relationship, a partnership with thinking, living, breathing, loving, free human beings. There lies the essence of what it means to be in the image of God. And there lies the source of our unique worth and dignity as human beings.

Like many, I have followed with much interest many of the issues surrounding genetic research. When it comes to embryonic research on humans and cloning, more particularly, we can roughly divide people into four groups: 1) there are those, perhaps a majority, who do not have a firm opinion on the matter, for they fail to understand the ethical and social implications of the choices that are before us; 2) there are those who promote complete freedom of action in the investigation and exploitation of the human genetic material and human embryos (the Italian doctor Severino Antinori comes to mind); 3) there are those who plead for some latitude because of the extraordinary health benefits embryonic research entails; 4) finally, there are those who are absolutely opposed to any kind of research involving human embryos.

The major arguments generally put forward to curtail embryonic research or human cloning are twofold: 1) cloning should be prohibited because each human being has intrinsic worth and dignity because of his or her unique DNA structure; 2) embryonic research and cloning increase the risk of objectifying human nature, i.e., of turning human beings into objects, and human genetic material into a commodity that can be bought and sold. These arguments are fine, but in my opinion, completely inadequate in and of themselves.

Our intrinsic worth and dignity as human beings does not derive from our unique DNA structure. It is important to remember that animals are also unique genetically. Human dignity does not lie in our ability to produce great works of art or even in this fuzzy notion of an eternal soul. In a biblical perspective, the worth and dignity of each human being is linked to a divine declaration: that we are made in the image of God. And the image of God is fundamentally an expression of the special relationship we have with God. In the end, it is on the basis of such affirmation that we can affirm the infinite value of each human life.