

Thinking Biblically about 2020

Week 2: What did 2020 teach us about the world?

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(1) We are currently living in a third world “culture” (not country), that is, one that does not base itself on something sacred or transcendent (Rieff).

- **First** (pagan-transcendent – e.g., the Greek “gods”) and **second** (religious-transcendent - monotheism) world cultures have a moral stability, but **third world cultures** do not root social and moral orders on the sacred.
- *“The culture with no sacred order therefore has the task – for Rieff, the impossible task – of justifying itself only by reference to itself” (Treuman, p. 77).*
- Charles Taylor calls that this cultural approach an “immanent frame,” where this world is all there is, and so moral discourse cannot find justification or root its authority in anything that lies beyond it.
- A clear symptom of a third world culture is abortion, where personhood is “natural” not sacred.
- *“One important point to note is that all three cultures ... can exist simultaneously in the same society. This is the reason why society now often feels like a cultural battle zone: it consists of people who simply think about the moral structure of the world in utterly incompatible ways.” (Treuman, p. 80)*
- The end result of a third world culture is actually an “anti-culture,” for it seeks to abolish the traditions, institutions, and patterns of behaviors that transmit values (and morals) from one generation to the next.
 - This is, according to Charles Taylor, “The Secular Age” (in contrast to the Sacred age).

(2) Since God made humanity to be meaning-making beings, grounded in and desiring something transcendent (“other”), all people will devote their lives to some grand story and higher purpose.

- **Values:** Key questions that drive third-world cultures: Will this make me happy (the therapeutic)? How can I find myself (the psychological)?
- **Purpose:** Teleology (design) is dead, and self-creation is the name of the game, with pleasure becoming the key to eternal life.
 - Kuyper: No human can survive long without some ultimate loyalty. If that loyalty does not derive from traditional religion, it will find expression through secular commitments.
- **Story:** In a third world culture, **religion** (transcendence) is replaced by **politics** (immanence).
 - Religion may decline but ideological intensity seeks meaning-making expressions.
 - Religious redemption morphs into secular redemption through politics.
 - The result: political debates take on metaphysical dimensions and are fraught with the existential angst one would expect at a revival meeting.

Application:

- How does the category of a “third world culture” give us insight into our world today?

- How should Christians think and act biblically in a “third world culture?”