

The Flaw of the Excluded Middle (Excerpt)

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How did this two-tier worldview emerge in the West? Belief in the middle level began to die in the 17th and 18th centuries with the growing acceptance of a Platonic dualism (Bufford 1981:30), and with it, of a science based on materialistic naturalism. The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion. Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on the certitudes of sense experience, experimentation and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws. Religion was brought in to deal with miracles and exceptions to the natural order, but these decreased as scientific knowledge expanded.

It should be apparent why many missionaries trained in the West had no answers to the problems of the middle level—they often did not even see it. When tribal people spoke of fear of evil spirits, they denied the existence of the spirits rather than claim the power of Christ over them. The result, as Newbigin has pointed out (1966) is that Western Christian missions have been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history.

What are the questions of the middle level that Westerners find so hard to answer, and how do they differ from questions raised by science and religion? Science as a system of explanation, whether folk or modern, answers questions about the nature of the world that is directly experienced. All people have social theories about how to raise children and organize social activities. All have ideas about the natural world and how to control it for their own benefits.

Religion as a system of explanation deals with the ultimate questions of the origin, purpose and destiny of the individual, a society and the universe. In the West the focus is on the individual; in the Old Testament it was on Israel as a society.

What are the questions of the middle level? Here one finds the questions of the uncertainty of the future, the crises of present life and the unknowns of the past. Despite knowledge that seeds once planted will grow and bear fruit, that travel down this river on a boat will bring one to the neighboring village, the future is not totally predictable. Accidents, misfortunes, the intervention of other persons and other unknown events can frustrate human planning.

How can one prevent accidents or guarantee success in the future? How can one make sure that a marriage will be fruitful and happy, and endure? How can one avoid getting on a plane that will crash? In the West these questions are left unanswered. They are "accidents", "luck" or "unforeseeable events", hence unexplainable. But many people are not content to leave so important a set of questions unanswered, and the answers they give are often in terms of ancestors, demons, witches and local gods, or in terms of magic and astrology.

Similarly, the crises and misfortunes of present life must be handled: sudden disease and plagues, extended droughts, earthquakes, failures in business, and the empirically unexplainable loss of health. What does one do when the doctors have done all they can and a child grows sicker, or when one is gambling and the stakes are high? Again, many seek answers in the middle level.

And there are questions one must answer about the past: why did my child die in the prime of life, or who stole the gold hidden in the house? Here again transempirical explanations often provide an answer when empirical ones fail.

Because the Western world no longer provides explanations for questions on the middle level, it is not surprising that many Western missionaries have no answers within their Christian world view. What is a Christian theology of ancestors, of animals and plants, of local spirits and spirit possession, and of "principalities, powers and rulers of the darkness of this world" (Ep 6:12)? What does one say when new tribal converts want to know how the Christian God tells them where and when to hunt, whether they should marry this daughter to that young man, or where they can find the lost money? Given no answer, they return to the diviner who gave them definite answers, for these are the problems that loom large in their everyday life.