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Contrasting Worldviews and Their Implications for Missions in Spain

Leanne Dzubinski

Missionaries newly arriving on the field from their home culture face enormous changes in the first few months: language learning, culture adjustment and lifestyle changes to name a few. Popular wisdom holds that the first term is the most critical adjustment period. If the new missionary survives and thrives during this time, it is likely things will gradually get easier and the transition into full-time ministry will be accomplished. Yet many North American and Northern European missionaries coming to work in Spain continue to experience significant disorientation in their ministry long after the first few years have passed. Although they have learned the language well, are involved in a local church and in ministry and their children are integrated into local schools, the feeling of not fitting in often persists for years. Experienced missionaries frequently say that it just never gets better. And the attrition rate for missionaries to Spain remains appallingly high.

Is there something the missionaries are missing that makes their experience so bleak? How can the situation be improved? A 2001 article in EMQ summed up the recommendations of six seasoned missionaries between the ages of forty-nine and sixty-five (Swick 2001, 32-34). The missionaries offered ten principles they believed to be of help for individuals working in Spain. While there is nothing wrong with their principles per se, they fall short of helping North Americans and Northern Europeans who serve in Spain. The ten principles are largely spiritual, and a newer missionary struggling with ministry in Spain would simply conclude the problem is also spiritual: he or she is not godly enough to serve God adequately. Although in some cases this might be the case, in most, it is something entirely different.

In fact, the solution to the problem lies in the radically different worldviews underlying the two societies. On the surface, the societies of Spain and Europe appear quite similar. Additionally, worldview is so deeply ingrained that often we do not even realize it exists. North America and Northern Europe share the same fundamental cultural base; however, once one enters the Mediterranean culture, all the underlying premises change: the foundation of life is the honor-shame worldview (Kerr 2007, 358; Neyrey 1991, 29). Without a solid understanding of the enormous shift that takes place when the missionary transfers from the Northern to the Southern region, successful long-term ministry is extremely unlikely. Some missionaries appear to “go native” (Wickham 1995, 14); others resist what seem to be negative adjustments and finally end up leaving the field. We need a third option: to understand what is happening and why, and to learn to adjust and to live radically differently when required.

IDENTITY IN THE GROUP IN THE SPANISH CULTURE

The first major difference one encounters as a missionary entering Spain is the change in identity. North Americans and many Northern Europeans are accustomed to defining themselves as individuals. A mature adult, in this worldview, knows who he or she is based on his or her internal worth. He or she does not depend on others' evaluations to determine his or her worth. This value shows up in everything from the old adage "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me" to the teachings we give our children on how to resist peer pressure and stand up for what they believe (European Values Study).

In the Spaniard's worldview, however, the individual's identity lies within the group of which he or she forms a part. Thus, identity is determined by one's family, birthplace, neighborhood, group of friends, colleagues and church (Hofstede study). Moreover, each person is continually soliciting and receiving feedback on his or her identity from members of the group. This is the "honor" aspect of the Mediterranean worldview, or, the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that person in the eyes of his or her social group. In this perspective, honor is a claim to positive worth along with the social acknowledgement of that worth by others. (Neyrey 1991, 25-26)

Identity is determined by the person plus others' perceptions of him or her. For this reason, close friends or members of the church often greet each other with "Hello, beautiful" as a way of reinforcing the other person's physical attractiveness. Sports is another area in which this group mentality shows up quite strongly. Running, an individual sport in the United States, is a group activity in Spain. The North American places high value on self-discipline and self-motivation; the Spaniard gets his or her motivation from the group. On a practical level, this translates into all parts of everyday relationships. Whereas North Americans are socialized from day one to watch out for the other person in public, the Spaniard is not. He or she is socialized only to watch out for the other members of his or her group and to be suspicious of everyone else. So the tourist or foreigner is fair game for robbery or trickery. Because one's motives will appear suspect, there is also no social obligation to help a stranger, even one obviously in need of assistance. Trying to help an elderly woman with six packages off the train will more likely earn a sharp rebuke than a word of thanks; she will assume you are trying to steal her wallet.

For the Spaniard, anyone who does not belong to his or her group is suspect, if not downright an enemy. Thus, missionaries say that the foundation of relationships in Spain is distrust, or "guilty until proven innocent." This is diametrically opposed to what we learn in North America: trust someone unless they prove themselves unworthy. The missionary goes to church and expects everyone to trust and accept him or her based on his or her profession. However, the church has no knowledge of this person who has arrived from a foreign country and has no one to vouch for his or her worth. The immediate response is suspicion, although this will rarely be obvious. Greetings may be warm and the welcome may be genuine, but the foundational belief is that the newcomer must fully integrate into the group and prove him or herself trustworthy. This is far more complicated than simply "earning respect." Missionaries who come in and try to do things too quickly will find that their actions rarely succeed, and can quickly produce deep hostility because of the underlying distrust.

A missionary couple we know learned this the hard way when they were accepted as

interns at a church in a small city. They were to work there for one year, learning the ropes and assisting the pastor in his labors. Our friends desired to use their home as a center for hospitality for church members, as well as a site for evangelism. They instituted “dinner and a movie” evenings, they invited church families to come and bring non-Christian friends for cookouts and they offered English classes to church members and non-Christian friends. These events were quite successful. Gradually, however, they began to sense hostility on the part of the pastor and his wife. Eventually, they were ordered to leave the church and never come back. They had become a very real threat to the powerbase of the pastor. Although they fully intended their activities to contribute to the good of the church, from the Spanish worldview it looked like they were setting themselves up to “steal the sheep” and take over the church. They had failed to integrate with the group and truly earn trust before beginning ministry.

BEING VS. DOING IN THE SPANISH CULTURE

A second aspect of the identity question is the concept of being versus doing. We North Americans get our value, identity and worth to a very large degree from what we do, whether work, educational accomplishments or ministry successes. Our achievements give us personal worth. The Spaniard defines him or herself in terms of being, and his or her being is closely related to his or her group identity. In fact, for the Spaniard, the two are virtually inseparable. According to Jerome Neyrey, “In this world, meaningful human existence depends on individuals’ full awareness of what others think and feel about them, along with their living up to that awareness” (1991, 76). North Americans routinely ask someone what he or she does as a means of identifying the person. But the question the Spaniard asks is not, “What do you do?” but rather “Who are you?” The answer is defined by the group to which you belong, because, Neyrey says, “Strong group persons define themselves rather exclusively in terms of the groups in which they are embedded” (1991, 74).

The sharp distinction between our individualistic “doing” and the Spaniard’s “being” showed up clearly in a recent event at our church. The youth planned to participate in a large multi-church field day. A few days before the event one of my daughters became ill and could not go. The following Sunday afternoon our family attended a special recognition service at church for the participants. We thought only one daughter would receive an award; however, both girls received diplomas for their part in the field day. Afterward, my daughter who had been sick said to me, “Mom, it was so embarrassing. I didn’t do anything.” In her worldview, because she did not individually participate, she should not have received recognition. But in the Spanish worldview, because she is part of the group, her actual inability to participate that day was irrelevant. She belongs to the group and desired to participate; therefore, she deserved recognition. Not to recognize her publicly would have been to negate her membership in the group and dishonor her.

PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD IN THE SPANISH CULTURE

A third important area in which the Spanish worldview differs has to do with the perception of the world in which we live. North Americans are taught from birth that we can control our world and affect our circumstances. We believe we can achieve anything if we just put our mind to it and are willing to work hard. We look to the future and imagine how we can make things happen. For Spaniards, the individual has very little ability to control his or her environment and all resources are limited. This belief breeds a kind of fatalism. One cannot change anything, so why even try? In addition, the belief in limited resources produces the problem of envy. Spaniards are famous for it, and will

even tell you about it themselves. So whatever a missionary has, someone at church will be envious. The thinking goes something like this: "There are only so many apartments out there, so if you have one, then I cannot." It does not really matter if the missionary lives in one town and the envious person in another.

This brings all kinds of problems for the missionary. Hospitality becomes a huge risk. The missionary who has church members into his or her home will find his or her possessions envied, however shabby they may be. Trips to the home country for support raising are immediately suspect. "Why do you need such a long vacation?" is a common question. Attendance at missionary conferences can be downright dangerous. Recently, I went to France for a leadership meeting. One of the women at church heard I was going to France and immediately started to complain: "Oh, the lives these missionaries lead! I want to be a missionary, too. I want to go to Paris, and see the city, and enjoy the food and the nightlife." It took ten minutes to explain that I was not going to Paris, but to a youth hostel in a village with no sights and no restaurants to work sixteen hours a day. She finally said that perhaps it was not quite what she had thought. One experience like this can make you laugh; twenty of them become wearying. The real damage comes from gossip and false stories about the missionary. When every work trip to a youth hostel becomes a sightseeing trip to Paris, envy has plenty of food to keep it flourishing.

To some degree, the Spanish worldview of limited resources is correct. Particularly in regard to material things, there are limits. But when we get into the area of spiritual things and God's resources, big problems emerge. Here, the "limited resources" worldview has an even more damaging aspect for the cross-cultural worker, because it affects spiritual authority, respect, power and leadership within the church. Because power is seen as a limited resource, the only way for one person to gain power is for someone else to lose it. This is what is called a zero-sum equation. The gains must equal the losses, so that the net result is always zero. In this worldview, when someone wants to gain power, the way he or she sets about it is by challenging the existing leader rather than proving one's own capabilities. This way, power is "transferred" from one person's account to another's.

But in honor-oriented societies, people experience an ongoing competition for honor and reputation, a continual rivalry, an endless win-tie-or-lose game in which name and honor are always on the line. Attempts to damage reputations are constantly made, although great stress is laid on face-to-face courtesy in terms of formalities. The prestige level of the members of the community is a matter of continual comment. Every quarrel normally leads to imputations of acts and intentions that are dishonorable, which may have nothing to do with the quarrel. (Neyrey 1991, 33)

Remember our friends with the house and evangelistic ministries? Their actions were seen as power challenges to the pastor. When matters exploded, the rumor mill began to churn out accusations of other unrelated wrongdoing. In order to prevent the perceived coup d'état from succeeding, it was necessary to destroy their reputation and transfer all their "honor points" back to the pastor.

If we apply the envy-plus-power challenges-plus-fatalism triad to the missionary, the results can be disastrous. Simply by being there, being supported by people from far away and not having to "work," the missionary is immediately the target of Spanish envy. Because the missionary values him or herself as a person based on his or her

personal accomplishments rather than depending on group feedback, he or she is perceived as “proud” and the power challenges begin. Finally, although the challenges usually result in points lost to the missionary and gained for the Spaniard, the fundamental fatalism of their worldview means that no matter how successful they are, nothing ever really changes (Leon 1990, 47).

FUNCTIONING EFFECTIVELY IN THE SPANISH CULTURE

All of these differences create great stress in the missionary. Simply walking down the street becomes enormously difficult, and this even before he or she begins learning the language, shopping for groceries or having any kind of ministry. The missionary's options often seem intolerable. He or she can continue to do things according to his or her worldview and be eaten alive, or he or she can try to adopt the Spanish worldview and feel like he or she is in the wrong about half the time. What a choice!

So how does the missionary come to grips with these problems and find a way to function effectively? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Pay careful attention to the being-versus-doing and the individual-versus-group aspects of society. The missionary must be willing to arrive, pick a place to live and a church to work with and settle down for a long stretch of what will appear to be “nothing.” During this time, which will last for several years, the emphasis must be on learning the language, gaining trust, listening to the people, being who we are and proving ourselves to be part of the group. Many missionaries find it helpful to be involved in some other ministry during this time to satisfy the need to “do something.” However, one should not be in charge of any church ministry at this point, nor should the missionary offer much in the way of ideas or suggestions. This will be very, very hard. We see ourselves as competent, capable and here to do a job. We are! But the job is not what we expect it to be. The first task is to integrate. Without solidifying this stage of adjustment, nothing else will likely succeed.

2. Learn how to deal with criticisms, attacks and confrontations. What is the correct response when you are walking down the sidewalk and the guy with the hose deliberately soaks your foot? Or the woman behind you in line slams into you with the grocery cart? More troubling still, what is the correct response to the church member who says you will never amount to anything because you still make mistakes in Spanish even after having lived in Spain for several years? Or the man who tells chauvinistic jokes to your teenage daughter? In these cases, it is best to take our position from the Apostle Paul, who, after all, was also from a Mediterranean culture (Van Leeuwen 2002, 59). In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 he deals with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Those who have been raised in a culture of idolatry will perceive eating meat sacrificed to idols as sinful behavior. Paul does not tell them to not be so sensitive.

Quite the contrary, he tells them not to eat the meat, and warns other believers not to try to force them. What this means for us is that some cultural things the Spaniards do will seem to us to be sin, whether they mean it so or not. When we perceive ourselves to have been sinned against, we must deal with the occurrence the same way we would any other offense. Making excuses or saying we must just “get over it” does not really help. We (in our worldview) have been sinned against and must choose to forgive that person, whether or not he or she repents. This is much easier said than done! Recognizing we have been offended and choosing to forgive goes a long way toward preventing anger, bitterness and burn-out.

On the other hand, many of these events are in fact meant as power challenges and jockeying for position, and as such require some kind of response from us. Doing nothing is not helpful. Thus, a “Hey, watch what you’re doing!” to the man with the hose or the woman with the cart is perfectly acceptable. So is a kindly spoken but correct explanation of our efforts to learn the language or the real conditions of our trip to France. In the case of the man telling inappropriate jokes to my child, I rebuked him. I told him it was hard enough to deal with all the ugly stuff in the public schools, without having to come to church and hear it there as well. He admitted my point and apologized to her. This was not a time for “turn the other cheek.” It was a time for “when your brother sins against you, rebuke him.”

3. Do not copy everything you see the Spaniards do in an effort to acculturate. For us, that would be like eating the meat sacrificed to idols: we would be sinning against our own conscience. James 4:17 says that if we know the good thing to do and do not do it, then to us it is sin. For most missionaries, learning when to speak up and when to be silent will be a long, slow process. Fortunately, the years of being before doing will give us plenty of time to learn the ropes. We must remember that we are here to see change for the progress of God’s kingdom. As one friend told me, “If you do everything just like us, what good is it for you to be here?” Nevertheless, I must be here a long time and earn the right to model something different, and that on a totally different time schedule than my own.

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Leanne Dzubinski has twenty years of cross-cultural experience in Europe, including

Germany, Austria and Spain. She holds a doctorate in ministry from Gordon-Conwell and a masters of theology from Dallas Theological Seminary.

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