
The Haiti Disaster: The Need for a Cultural Transformation

On Tuesday, January 12, 2010, at 4:53pm a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck 16 miles off the coast off the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. The International Red Cross estimates that a third of Haiti's ten million people have been impacted and the European Union and Pan American Health Organization estimates that 200,000 people have lost their lives.ⁱ Thousands of homes have been destroyed and a weak infrastructure has been decimated. Hospitals, schools, major landmarks, even the Presidential Palace, have been seriously damaged or destroyed.

The world has been swept up by this disaster in a way similar to the 2004 earthquake that struck Indonesia, sending a tsunami racing through the Indian Ocean. The money that is being donated to reputable Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) is being used to bring needed emergency medical aid, food and water and temporary shelter: it will take hundreds of millions of dollars to provide life saving help in the relief effort. But, while material aid is an absolute necessity in response to this natural evil, we should not think that money alone is the sole solution to Haiti's chronic problems.

AID IS NOT ENOUGH

It is reported that in recent years there have been 10,000 PVOs working in Haiti;ⁱⁱ virtually all the world's leading non-profits, plus thousands of "mom and pop" missions and aid organizations, amounting to one organization for every 1000 Haitians. A lot of heart is being poured into helping this desperately poor nation. In addition, massive amounts of aid also come from national embassies around the world and quasi government organizations like the United Nations, the World Bank, etc. In recent years the world has continued to increase its giving to Haiti: \$580M in 2006, \$702M in 2007, and \$912M (\$259M from the USA alone) in 2009.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, the Haitian Diaspora invests \$2 billion per year in Haiti.^{iv}

All this to say that despite the work of 10,000 PVO's and billions of dollars of private and governmental aid, Haiti is still desperately and chronically poor. Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas with a per capita GDP of \$1300 (U.S.). Her level of poverty ranks number 203 out of 228 countries in the world,^v meaning the average Haitian lives

on about \$100 a month. Three out of four Haitians say that they or someone in their family has gone to bed hungry this last year. By comparison, the nation that shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, the Dominican Republic, has a per capita GDP \$8,200.^{vi} How do Dominicans, working with the same basic natural resources and climate, have six times the GDP? In this blog series I will outline my belief that it is the Haitian's worldview that has kept them in poverty.

Haiti is ranked number 168 out of 180 countries on the 2009 Corruption Perception Index.^{vii} In the 2003 edition of the Global Competitive Report of The World Economic Forum, Haiti was ranked last.^{viii} Her only engagement in the global economy is in the receiving of foreign aid.

In February of 2006, the National Academy of Public Administration published a paper entitled *Why Foreign Aid to Haiti Failed*, in which the Director of Operations Evaluation Department of the World Bank stated: "... the outcome of World Bank assistance programs [in Haiti 1986-2002] is rated unsatisfactory (if not highly so), the institutional development impact, negligible, and the sustainability of the few benefits that have accrued, unlikely."^{ix}

It is clear that the billions of dollars that have been pumped into Haiti, the thousands of agencies, and tens of thousands of volunteers who flood to Haiti every year has done very little to help this nation; and in fact, it could be argued that Haiti is moving backward socially, economically, and politically. How can this be? I believe it is because most of the aid that flows into Haiti targets the symptoms of the problem, namely hunger, poverty, housing, and inadequacy of infrastructure instead of the root of the problem.

Good intentions have lead to paralyzing dependency. And yet, one of the world's leading experts on poverty, Jeffrey Sachs, the author of *The End of Poverty* simply reverts to throwing more money at old solutions, saying, in regard to Haiti: "One can imagine annual disbursements of \$ 2 billion to \$ 3 billion annually over the next five years."^x The atheistic-materialistic assumptions that underpin these proposals are patently false: if money was the root of the issue, Haiti's problems would be solved. The reason Haiti remains poor, despite all the money spent, is that natural resources or lack of money is not the root of the problem. So what is?

EVANGELISM IS NOT ENOUGH

Some would argue that if Haiti was evangelized and there were more professing Christians, then her problems would be solved.

In 1704 Jesuits came to the island of Hispaniola and began the evangelization process. Following the successful fight for independence, in 1804, Protestant missionaries came and begin their evangelistic effort. Today the nation is nominally Christian in profession with roughly 80 % being Catholic and 20 % Protestant.

While Haiti is considered a Catholic country, it may be well to add that she is largely Voodoo in her worldview. As University of California at Irvine Professor Amy Wilentz notes in a recent Time Magazine article: “There is a saying about Haiti: 80% Catholic, 20 % Protestant and 100 % voodoo.”^{xi} The Catholic Church has largely synchronized with Voodoo, and while the Protestant church has publically condemned Voodoo, she has largely operated from a dualistic or Evangelical Gnostic paradigm that separates the spiritual from the physical. So the Protestants have focused on saving souls for heaven, instead of seeking to bring a wholistic gospel to the Haitian people that would provide both hope for eternity **and** cultural transformation today.

So while Haiti has been evangelized, a spiritual encounter alone is not enough. If the people of Haiti profess Christ but continues to think and function from an animistic or Voodoo paradigm, that is bound to have an impact on the poverty of Haiti.

ENGAGING HEART AND HEAD

When dealing with human suffering either on a personal level, or on a global level, such as the disaster that has struck Haiti, we must engage both our heart and head. While our emotions—our sympathy—motivates us to respond to human needs, it needs to be our head that drives our response. If we respond to the need with only our heart, we may treat a symptom, or use a quick fix to solve a more complex problem. Putting a band-aid on a skin lesion will be useless if a patient has a melanoma. Or we may provide a solution that exacerbates the problem by creating dependency, contributing to greater impoverishment. Helping farmers grow more food is generally a good thing in a poor nation. However, one needs to take into account what the farmer may do with the added income. Will he use the extra income to better feed his own children and pay their school fees? Or will he use the money to feed his own vices, which is a very common problem. Sometimes pouring more money into such a situation actually ends up producing more poverty.

We need to dispassionately ask questions like: What is the problem? What caused the problem? What is the root of the problem? What solutions have been tried in the past? Have they worked? If they have not worked, what else might we try? What particular tools and systems are best suited to solve this problem? Without this kind of analysis, billions of dollars are often flushed down a deep hole.

THE ROOT OF HAITI’S PROBLEM IS AN ANIMISTIC WORLDVIEW

Disasters happen! They do not discriminate as to continent, nation, race of people, or the wealth of a people or nation. The natural evil of floods, earthquakes, droughts, and tsunamis happen around the world.

On October 17, 1989, at 5:04 PM a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck the San Francisco Bay area, injuring thousands and leaving 63 people dead.^{xiii} The earthquakes in California and Haiti were of the same magnitude, striking major cities at approximately the same time of day. What produced the discrepancy in destruction and death toll? I would humbly suggest that it was a difference in worldview. The institutions, infrastructure, and habits of the heart of the people of the United States and San Francisco were influenced and ordered by the Judeo-Christian worldview, while those of Haitians, Haiti and Port-au-Prince were ordered by an animistic worldview.

Why is it that the nations of Europe and North America are relatively wealthier, healthier, more stable, less corrupt and more able to deal with natural disasters than the nation of Haiti and other chronically impoverished nations? It is the difference between a Biblical world and life view and an animistic one. One's worldview will determine the principles that order personal and institutional behaviors and the structures of society. Or to say it differently, it is mental infrastructure that will determine the quality of a society's infrastructure: the development of a nation has more to do with moral and metaphysical capital than it does with physical capital.

Disasters have a lesser impact on countries whose mentalities have been formed by the Bible than they do in cultures formed by mysticism. It is not because the people are "morally superior," more or less religious, or because of their race, or color of skin. It has nothing to do with mental or physical ability. It has everything to do with the worldview—the dominant cultural narrative of the people.

Most international agencies and PVOs function from a materialist paradigm, thus they fail to acknowledge non-material elements that contribute to a nation's wealth or poverty. That is, they see the world through a naturalistic set of lenses. From this vantage point, by definition, all problems have only material causes and thus material solutions. But what if materialism is wrong? What if, in addition to the material world, there is a spiritual reality? Could there be a spiritual or metaphysical contribution to physical poverty? I am not arguing that all problems have *only* a spiritual root. That would reflect an animistic or Gnostic worldview. What I am arguing is that if there is a spiritual reality, then it must be taken into account when looking at the problems that face a place like Haiti.

I would suggest that there are two major factors that contribute to Haiti's poverty; the first is her predominant animistic worldview, and the second is her pact with Satan. What I am about to say is certainly not politically correct. In fact, it may be downright controversial. But considering all the money, time, and heart-felt effort that has been

poured into Haiti over the years and recognizing that her people continue to be enslaved in absolute wrenching poverty, a compassionate person would want to consider that perhaps there are causes and solutions that have not yet been considered.

Before I continue, it is important to say that we are all deeply influenced by the prevailing worldview of our culture. Having been raised in the United States, I have been profoundly shaped by a secular, materialistic worldview and value-system. I came to Christ as a teenager, and in my mid-twenties someone confronted me with some of my ingrained secular assumptions. I had a born-again heart, but a secular mind. In fact, I needed to be born-again, again! I needed to repent of my secular mindset and ask God to help me think intentionally from Biblical presuppositions. Even now, I continue to be surprised how deeply influenced I am by the predominant values secular culture including personal peace, affluence, hedonism, and utilitarianism. In America today, perhaps the majority of people would identify themselves as “Bible-believing,” yet more than half no longer believe in “absolute truth.” They would not describe themselves as secular-materialists, and yet a naturalistic set of assumptions penetrates their thinking, values-system, and behavior. In this sense, we all need to be twice reborn for our nations to experience a cultural transformation.

Returning to the topic of Haiti, let’s do some imagining and outside-the-box thinking.

Let me be very clear that **the earthquake was not God’s retribution to Haiti!** God is not capricious. Haiti is not capriciously cursed as some people have argued. God has a love for nations. He designed the universe and human beings for their flourishing. He has built an order into creation. When that order is discovered and followed, people and nations will flourish. When that order is denied or consciously disobeyed, disorder in society follows. This disaster was a natural event. Haiti’s inability to cope with the brokenness of creation is rooted in her animistic cultural narrative, a disorder in the soul of Haiti that has made it virtually impossible to prepare for or cope with such disasters.

CULTURE IS DOWNSTREAM FROM “CULT”

The culture of a people is formed by their worship, which, in turn, determines the nature and strength of the social, economic and political institutions of the society. Or to say it differently, the spiritual realm impacts the physical realm through culture. Some cultures support the development and health of a nation and some cultures are resistant to development, leading to the disintegration of society. Haiti’s culture is a product of the worship—the cult—which came across the Atlantic Ocean on the slave ships with the people who would become known as Haitians. This worship is derived from the polytheistic tribal religions of West Africa and specifically from Voodoo.

Voodoo originated in what today is Ghana and Benin. Like most animistic religions it views the universe as capricious rather than orderly. Just these two variant concepts have a profound impact on people: when the gods are capricious they can “jerk people” around. To appease these gods, one needs to placate them with a gift, setting up a culture of bribery or corruption. It also feeds an attitude of hopelessness and despair. Fatalism reigns. People seek simply to survive the whims of the droughts, earthquakes or floods that nature (the capricious gods) brings.

In contrast, Judeo-Christian theism understands that the universe is orderly. There are natural laws governing the physical universe, which can be discovered through science and applied through technology to solve problems of hunger and poverty, to build infrastructure that will withstand earthquakes and limit the impact of flooding. In Judeo-Christian theism, work is part of man’s dignity while in animistic religions work is seen as a curse: work is for animals and slaves and people who are of “higher” social class do not need to work. This difference creates profound economic disparity. In Haiti there is a small wealthy class, a negligible middle class and a huge under class. Rooted in Judeo-Christian culture is the concept that all people are made in the image of God, they have equal dignity and worth. There is no social or spiritual hierarchy.

The root of the poverty in Haiti is not lack of material capital; it is moral and metaphysical poverty. What Haiti needs is a new cult, the worship of the Creator God revealed through Scriptures, and a transformed culture! Unfortunately, the secular development industry wants to solve the problems of Haiti without a metaphysical component. And, sadly, many Christian missionaries have brought a divided gospel to save souls out of this world for heaven, leaving the animistic culture largely intact.

Both present and historic mission movements have been shaped by a dualistic paradigm that has interest in spiritual things but not in a wholistic paradigm and mission. They have brought a spiritual gospel of salvation, but not a gospel of the kingdom that would bring hope to Haitians in the present, as well as in eternity. Christians have done little to challenge the ruling paradigm and culture. Instead, we have too often accepted the status quo of corruption, the evil of work, unjust laws, institutional evil, lack of economic freedom and human dignity, fatalism, and the capriciousness of the universe. So Haitians, who have a God-given ability to be creative, to analyze and solve their own problems, and to use the bounty of both their natural resources and internal resources (reason, invention, and innovation, spirit of discovery, will, and artistry), languish in poverty.

THE IMPACT OF THE DEMONIC

In his profound book *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen missionary to Africa and Professor of Missions at Abilene Christian University, describes the systemic view of spiritual warfare. He writes:

“...the *systemic view* [of spiritual warfare] sees the powers as personal spiritual beings who are actively impacting the socio-economic and political structure of societies These powers have established their own rules and regulations that pull cultures away from God. *Stoicheia* are literally the rudimentary principles, the ABC’s of culture....These are the directives through which the powers have established legalistic control of society. *Stoicheia* within these contexts are the demonic contortions of human society.... The powers, although personal spiritual beings, have invaded the very fabric of society. Thus even Christian institutions reflect these demonic influences when the powers invade human institutions.”^{xiii}

Van Rheeën is very insightful. The spiritual realm impacts the physical realm through culture, and the demonic realm impacts social, economic and political institutions through culture. Not only is there moral evil (i.e. murder, adultery) and natural evil (earthquakes and floods), but there is institutional evil (racism, corruption). This institutional evil is the work of the demonic.

As has been previously noted, a people’s cult, or worship, produces culture, from which the institutions and structures of society are formed. All authorities rule through laws and ordinances. God governs the universe through his laws and ordinances. When nations found their societies upon God’s laws, justice, freedom, community health and prosperity follow. Satan also rules through laws and ordinances, but his laws are counterfeit. When a society bases its laws on false principles such as the inferiority of women to men; or the beliefs that work is a curse; the universe is capricious; or human beings are animals, then poverty follows.

To say it differently, “ideas have consequences!” Tyranny, corruption, lack of adequate infrastructure, and desecration of the land are all a product of a people’s worldview. A Biblical worldview, in contrast to materialism, recognizes the reality of the demonic, and in contrast to animistic cultures, it knows that God is more powerful than Satan and thus can overwhelm the demonic of Haiti’s voodoo culture.

In addition to the prison of the animistic worldview, there is another contributing factor to Haiti’s poverty: a historic event, a pact with Satan. Again, not a politically correct thought, but if we truly care about the poverty of Haitians, we must think beyond the bounds of a materialist paradigm for analysis of root causes and solutions.

In the 16th Century, Haiti was a relatively prosperous slave colony of France. The island nation was blessed with a bounty of natural resources; but the French were using African slaves to exploit those resources. On August 14, 1791, at Bois Caiman, a Vodou (Haitian for Voodoo) ceremony lead by Dutty Boukman, was used to consecrate the Haitian rebellion against France. In the ceremony a pig was slaughtered, the slaves

who were present drank the blood and pledged allegiance to Satan if he would bring them victory over the French.

According to *History of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution* on the Official Haitian Bicentennial website:

A man named Boukman, another houngan, organized on August 14, 1791, a meeting with the slaves in the mountains of the North. This meeting took the form of a Voodoo ceremony in the Bois Caiman in the northern mountains of the island. It was raining and the sky was raging with clouds; the slaves then started confessing their resentment of their condition. A woman started dancing languorously in the crowd, taken by the spirits of the loas. With a knife in her hand, she cut the throat of a pig and distributed the blood to all the participants of the meeting who swore to kill all the whites on the island. On August 22, 1791, the blacks of the North entered into a rebellion, killing all the whites they met and setting the plantations of the colony on fire. However, the French quickly captured the leader of the slaves, Boukman, and beheaded him, bringing the rebellion under control.^{xiv}

The Haitian slaves continued their revolt until they successfully overthrew the French in 1803. With their victory they established the second independent nation in the Americas (after the United States) and the first republic ruled by people from black Africa. The Haitian cultural narrative sees that it was the pact with Satan that provided their freedom from France.

Today, the people of Haiti, while nominally Roman Catholic, have a culture that is largely shaped by the animistic Voodoo cult of West Africa. What kind of impact might the spiritual and metaphysical realm have on the continuing poverty of Haiti?

We must weep at the plight of the Haitians today. We must give generously to help with the aid effort. But, the hard reality is that while the earthquake was the trigger of the destruction in Haiti, the root of the problem was a faulty worldview. If the gods can be bribed, then you create a culture of corruption and injustice in society. If you believe that history is something that happens to you, then you do not prepare your society to deal with the inevitable earthquake and hurricane. If you worship capricious gods, you will build a society with little trust and will reap disorder.

OUR HOPE IS IN CHRIST AND A TRANSFORMTION OF CULTURE

Jesus, the Messiah, states: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10) Satan wants nothing more than to destroy cultures and nations and Haiti is a perfect example. She is not

cursed, as some would argue. Her people are free and responsible agents, making decisions that shape history. Christ brings life to the full. The Biblical order creates a framework for increased life, health, bounty and ability to plan for and withstand the bitter destruction of natural disasters. Let there be no mistake. This is a clash between forces of good that would see Haiti prosper and forces of evil that would see Haiti destroyed.

The church has been instituted by God to be the primary agency for the transformation of society. She is to be the instrument of kingdom culture bringing truth, beauty and goodness to societies. We have seen the church function in this capacity at times in history. Social historian Rodney Starks argues that the early church led the most profound sociological revelation of all time. In his book [The Rise of Christianity](#) he stated that the: “*Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberation, and effective social relations and organizations.*” Starks continues:

“I believe that it was the religion’s particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most seeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines *took on actual flesh* [emphasis mine], the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity.^{xv}”

We have seen this kind of transformation throughout history on both a macro and micro level. On a regional and national level there are a number of models that come out of the ministry of the Disciple Nations Alliance. It was the Reformation (1517-1648) in Europe that brought about the rise of concept of universal education, the dignity of work, and the beginnings of what the world now calls “the middle class” which resulted in immense economic, social and political transformation of society.

The Methodist Revivals in England (1738-1784), under John Wesley transformed British society in a single generation and laid the moral and metaphysical foundation for the end of slavery in the British Empire and the restoration of civility in national life. The English Lecturer Donald Drew’s summary of the book [England Before and After Wesley](#) shows the transformative effect that the Wesley Revivals had on England *and* America:

“The Great Awakening in colonial America (1730-1770) provided the moral and metaphysical foundation for the Declaration of Independence. It reinforced the fundamental principle that “all men are created equal,” and established the frame work for a nation born in political and economic freedom.^{xvi}”

This cultural transformation is needed not only in Haiti, but also in the minds of Western donors. Instead of viewing Haitians as poor and incapable of their own development, Western donors must see them as image bearers of God who have every God given ability and potential to develop their own society. Instead of thinking that

Western aid is going to solve the problem, they need to see, support and encourage grassroots community transformation. Instead of seeing and treating Haitians as objects, they need to be seen for what they are: free and responsible moral agents. Instead of supporting the old corrupt leadership of the nation, donors need to recognize a new generation of grassroots leaders, come along side them, walk with them and encourage them. We must be careful not do things for them. We must honor their humanity, creativity, and vision for their nation.

Examples of how this kind of transformation is taking place globally on a micro level, may be found on the [Disciple Nations Alliance website](#) and the [Harvest Foundation Website](#). Papers and articles that relate to the transformation of communities and national development may be found on both websites.

All this to affirm that in the short term, Haiti is currently in need of material aid to respond to the devastation of the earthquake. In the long run she needs to make the Creator God the focus of her worship, embrace a Judeo-Christian worldview leading to a transformation of culture. When this happens, Haiti will begin to reach her incredible God given potential. The church in Haiti will play a central role in this, with appropriate support from churches around the world.

NOTES

ⁱ *Numbers Tell Story of Horror, Heroism in Haiti*, CNN World, January 26, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/26/haiti.by.the.numbers/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Tracy Kidder, "Country Without A Net," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/14/opinion/14kidder.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Statistical Annex of the 2010 Development Co-operation Report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Table 25, http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en_2649_34447_1893129_1_1_1_1,00.html

^{iv} <http://www.sfbayview.com/2009/haiti-policy-statement-for-president-obama-and-congress/>

^v Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book: Haiti*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html>

^{vi} Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book: Dominican Republic*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/dr.html>

^{vii} Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2009*, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table

^{viii} World Economic Forum, *The Global Competitiveness Report, 2002-2003*, http://www.weforum.org/pdf/Gcr/GCR_02_03_Executive_Summary.pdf

^{ix} National Academy of Public Administration, *Why Foreign Aid to Haiti Failed*, 9, http://www.napawash.org/haiti_final.pdf

^x Jeffery D. Sachs, "After the earthquake, how to rebuild Haiti from scratch," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/15/AR2010011502457.html>

^{xi} Amy Wilentz, "The Distant Memories of Haiti Before the Quake," *Time Magazine*, January 23, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1953379_1953494_1956237,00.html

^{xii} Bryan Walsh, "Earthquake Preparedness: Lessons from San Francisco" *Time Magazine*, October 16, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1930668,00.html?iid=sphere-inline-sidebar>

^{xiii} Dr. Gailyn Van Rhee *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers, 1996), 101

^{xiv} "The History of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution," *Haitian Bicentennial Site*,

<http://www.ci.miami.fl.us/haiti2004/history.htm#top>

^{xv} Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211

^{xvi} Donald Drew, *England Before and After Wesley*,

<http://www.disciplenations.org/uploads/b9/3c/b93cXPZnLVxO9loQ7dbj3g/England-Before-and-After-Wesley.pdf>.

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