

Worldviews as moving motivations?

Kees Manintveld

ETC Foundation/Compas,
Leusden, Netherlands

Introduction

As an ETC colleague, I joined the Compas team recently mainly to provide support in matters such as planning, reporting, contracting and institutional set-up. Although I have been sympathetic to the Compas initiative since its inception I have never been involved in the implementing activities. In my regular consultancy work the cultural aspect is always there, but I have never made it to a subject of explicit study. Therefore, I do not feel I am in a strong position to write a full paper on the subject of moving worldviews. Instead I will give an account how worldviews have moved me in a personal way.

First imprints by local culture

Already early in my childhood I was confronted with changing social and cultural environments because of the movements my parents made. Although the moves all took place within the Netherlands, I experienced them as having quite some direct effect upon me. The first move was when my parents decided to live on a houseboat. The houseboat was tied up to the land of a market gardener outside a village near the town of Leiden. Fortunately, there was no kindergarten in the village, and not having reached school age, I was able to be with the gardener much if not most of my time: in the garden, in the greenhouse, on his little motorboat steering its way to the auction hall in Leiden. A fabulous year, not bothered by formal schooling, that is how I still perceive the year before I had to start at the primary school in the village. There, I literally experienced how it was to come from outside the local cultural setting. The experience was heightened as a result of having an even more special position by our living on a houseboat¹⁹. These first impressions were not always pleasant, as many a time contacts developed into direct confrontations.

The second move was to Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland in the south of the Netherlands. There, the encounter with local culture was much less negative. But the need to understand and speak the local dialect was much stronger. Moreover, I experienced, although I was again an outsider myself, how much more difficult it was for the minority group of Moluccans living in our Dutch society. In comparison my own problems seemed minor. The third confrontation was when my

¹⁹ At that time in the Netherlands (1950s) one benefited from certain tax reductions because people living on houseboats were officially considered as gypsies, not having a fixed place of abode. This applied to us, even though my father was a government officer.

parents decided to move onto the land again, and we went to a nearby village. Again a different culture, with a slightly different dialect and different behaviour, even more original (could one say pure?) than the dialect spoken in the capital town.

These childhood imprints helped me early on to understand the importance of building up a rapport and relationship with the people where I live. They also helped me to appreciate the significance of language and dialect as a vital and powerful tool for expressing oneself and being understood. On the other hand, the process of mirroring, helped me to gain a first glimpse of the serious limitations that arise when one's own culture is taken as the only point of reference in dealing with other people or influences from outside.

Enriching experiences

The first inter-cultural contacts in a professional setting taught me that one can make serious errors when the local cultural background, in terms of presence and history, are not duly acknowledged. During my practical training period I worked in the irrigation department of a Dutch company producing vegetables and fruits in Senegal, destined exclusively for export to the West European market. The focus on economic thinking from a company bias was in quite some cases so strong that the human aspect was easily lost. People making one technical mistake could be dismissed for that one error regardless of the rules spelled out in national labour laws. Also ecological effects were simply overlooked or not regarded as important by the company. Thus, the company drew heavily on groundwater for irrigation, which made the groundwater in the ponds and wells in the surrounding dune landscape drop to dangerously low levels for the gardeners producing for the local market. The reckless spraying of pesticides and almost fearless and naive handling of chemicals by the workers made me aware that technology could not just be simply transferred without taking into consideration local culture and ecology.

Searching

These experiences were amplified in my first job as a project manager in a small integrated development project in Niger. Although the social component was more sound, because it was embedded in a local structure, the cultural component remained a cause for concern. Discussions with farmers on their practices and the reasons they gave for doing things were always very rich and joyful. On many occasions we also touched upon the deeper spiritual levels of life and the influence of religion. Often I discovered a much greater enthusiasm and openness for a spiritual agri-culture among farmers than among national agronomists who were well trained in the 'modern' way of farming.

The experiences in this typical project setting definitely caused me to go in search of a new technological approach in agriculture. Moreover, I sought a sound founding philosophy that was able to connect science with philosophy and faith. In the end organic agriculture looked like a promising approach because it offered a good

mix of ecologically sound technology, social justness (fair prices of agricultural products), economic viability and recognition of farmers' knowledge. These elements were covered already by organic farming before they became the leading cornerstones of the worldwide movement for sustainable development from 1987 onwards. Among the organic farming movements, bio-dynamic agriculture appeared strongest in incorporating the cultural component as an equally important aspect for balanced farm development in a social context. Its underlying worldview, anthroposophy²⁰ or the wisdom of the human being, offers practical interpretations in terms of new and wider views on a variety of subjects such as education, agriculture, medical sciences and health care, arts, socio-economic perspectives and spirituality and religion. This worldview explicitly takes the spiritual world as an essential resource for inspiration, analysis and reflection.

Anthroposophy consciously encourages the exploration of the spiritual world as part of our personal development path. Its essence is very open and stimulating personal growth. In a developmental sense, it attributes more value to fewer steps in growth, if these are ones that are consciously taken by oneself and really implemented in life, than more steps which may have been more or less 'copied' and not really practised.

My first steps in promoting the principles of organic farming in developing cooperation brought me in contact with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo (<http://www.sriarobindoashram.org/>). His philosophy has not been translated into practical life as much as anthroposophy has, but it has some far reaching visions regarding the long-term evolution of mankind and spirituality in itself.

Worldviews: oneness in multiplicity

Somehow, the step to fully ally myself with one particular philosophy or worldview has always been and will be difficult for me. Doubts and questions have and always do rise to the surface. But two exciting certitudes become increasingly apparent to me. The first one relates to the understanding that the magnitude of life is far beyond my capability of comprehension. The second one is the deeply felt recognition that 'we need to experience the vast multiplicity of truths of spirit', a central element of the integral yoga philosophy of Aurobindo (http://www.kheper.net/topics/Aurobindo/main_points.html). It is exactly this multifaceted experience with different elements of worldviews that can move (or touch) me and help me move towards oneness between my individuality and the collective.

²⁰ Anthroposophy was founded by the Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).