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# A Christian Worldview of the Geographer's World

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Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW OF THE GEOGRAPHER'S WORLD**

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## INTRODUCTION

Geography is an ancient interest but a relatively new discipline. Its roots go back at least to Herodotus (485-425 BC) but it only became a formal academic discipline in the nineteenth century. Throughout its long history, geography has had as its focus the observable fact that people and landscapes vary from place to place across the Earth's surface. A basic definition of geography is the study of places and their people-where these places are, what they are like, how these places affect the people, how the people affect these places, and what human activities go on in and between these places.

At a more abstract level, geography is the study of societies and space- how space affects the organization of societies, and how in turn societies organize their spaces and indeed 'create' space. Geography is simultaneously socially constitutive and socially constituted.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a Christian perspective on the nature of geography and is primarily intended for fellow geographers at both the secondary and tertiary levels. However as geography is only offered in a few Seventh-day Adventist Colleges, it is hoped that this paper will be accessible to non-specialists especially in the social sciences. From this examination it will be shown that the secular paradigms offer a limited view of geographic reality and that a Christian perspective brings an added and necessary dimension.

## THE NATURE OF GEOGRAPHY

The contemporary nature of geography can be likened to a tapestry: a number of approaches or threads have been formative as the discipline has developed over the past 2000 years. Since 1950 there has been a rapid succession of approaches which some geographers have endeavoured to fit into Kuhn's model of revolutionary paradigmatic change (Johnston 1983). However, though at any one time there may be a dominant paradigm, there has not been paradigm succession. Rather elements of the older paradigms co-exist, if uncomfortably, with the newer ones. The threads are continuous. Five major approaches will be briefly reviewed, in their chronological sequence.

### 1. Regional

In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, regional geography held sway. Essentially it was a description or inventory of the varied environments on earth and the people who occupied these environments. The implicit philosophy was empiricism that is that all knowledge is based on experience: the things others or we experience are the only things that exist. The methodology employed was that of data collection, from both observation in the field and secondary sources, and the dissemination of the 'facts'. The observers were deemed to be objective and value-free though many in practiced collected data that suited their sponsors, for example commercial information from the new colonies for the imperial governments (Johnston 1989:50).

This approach, especially at school level, often degenerated into a 'capes and bays' approach – a sort of global trivial pursuit. The National Geographic's National Geography Bee in the USA and the Geographical Association's Worldwide Quiz in the UK are really throwbacks to this empiricist capes and bays approach.

Basically the regional approach answered the questions, 'Where is it?' and 'What is it like, there?' But the questions 'Why is it like that, there?' or 'Why is it there?' are more tantalizing. Some regional geographers attempted to place the observed facts into an explanatory framework to answer these higher order questions and adopted Darwin's ideas about natural selection and the adaptation by organisms to their environment. (1)

In environmental determinism, these ideas were extended into the social arena whereby it was thought that the nature of societies was determined in a unidirectional manner by the physical environment of a given locality. For example, it was suggested that the great Middle Eastern religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated in this largely desert region because there was nothing in the landscape to occupy the mind and consequently meditation was the only possible mental activity! Environmental determinism ignored the reality that human-environment relations are two ways – each affects but rarely 'determines' the other.

Boundaries were assigned to the regions, often with difficulty, so as to enclose areas that had some essential unifying characteristic in common: usually a physical feature and commonly a river drainage basin. This illustrates the tacit acceptance of environmental control over people

(Johnston 1989) even by regional geographers who did not subscribe to environmental determinism.

Unfortunately, the concept of environmental determinism persists in some primary school texts. A variant, social Darwinism, which sees western societies as the epitome of progress and hence superior to so-called 'lesser developed' societies is implicit in some Adventist mission report literature ("stone-age peoples"; "they do not even have computers") even though the discipline of geography had largely discarded this concept by the 1930s.

## 2. Spatial Analysis

Regional geography had lost its dominance by the 1950s. Geographers were keen to use more rigorous, scientific explanation after the debacle of environmental determinism to answer the question 'Why there?' This was particularly so in human geography: physical geography for some time had used a more scientific approach and numerical data. The new approach in human geography was spatial analysis, which is based on positivism (itself a development of empiricism). Because this approach relies on statistical methods it is often referred to as the quantitative approach but the use of statistics is only a means to an end in following the scientific method.

The fundamental assumption of the spatial analytic approach is that the methods of the physical sciences can be equally applied to the social sciences (Johnston 1986). The physical sciences – at least pre-Einstein and pre-Chaos theory – are predicated on the notion of order and consequently predictions can be made. Further, the observer is deemed to be value-free and the

only valid knowledge we have is that derived from sensory experience, provided this experience can be verified by others. The aim is to generate law-like statements (or theory) by a process of model building, hypothesizing, and hypothesis testing " in a continuous looping procedure of organized speculation" (Johnston 1989: 51).

Deriving from the assumption that social phenomena can be studied in essentially the same way as physical phenomena, is the concept that the features of the human landscape – location of cities, transport networks, land-use patterns etc – are organized according to recognizable, repeated and ordered patterns. Because the humanly created world is exceedingly complex, reality is simplified in the spatial analytical approach, the key simplification being the use of the 'economic man' (sic) concept imported from neo-classical economics. Human beings are considered to have complete knowledge of a given situation, to be driven by profit maximizing motivations and make perfectly rational (i.e. economic) decisions. The various spatial analytical models rely on economic determinism: human agents have to respond to spatial structures. People are no more than machines operating in an economic environment. Even from a non-Christian viewpoint this is untenable and the spatial analytical approach was never accepted by all geographers even in its heyday of the 1960s.

Another important simplifying assumption is that of an isotropic plain – the real and variegated landscape is reduced to a featureless, uniform plain. Thus places become part of abstract space and the real world of variety disappears and may be the inherent interest of geography to school students is lost. An exemplar of this approach is Haggett's (1965) Locational Analysis in Human Geography.

### 3. Humanistic

Various humanistic approaches have been offered as a critique of positivism and its arid conception of space. Space is abstract but place is something experienced. The humanistic approach asks 'What does this place/landscape mean to those who live in it?'

Humanistic approaches attempt to promote understanding rather than explanation. In geography this means trying to understand the human world by studying people's relationships with nature and their spatial behavior, in terms of their feelings and ideas about place. The scientific method is rejected because; human geography at least, deals with the 'world of meaning' and not the 'world of things'. The role of the individual in creating their own 'geography' is central and so humanistic approaches focus on the actors. As Johnston says, "Humanistic geography does not describe a place from the outside but portrays what it is like to be part of that place" (1989: 56).

Because these approaches eschew formal research and codification, it is difficult to analyze their philosophical bases but idealism (all reality is a mental construction, an idea), phenomenology (intuition is the only valid source of knowledge), and existentialism (reality is created by free human agents) have all been used by various humanistic geographers (Holt-Jensen 1988: 78-81, 107-111). Yi-Fu Tuan's Landscapes of Fear (1980) is an exemplar of the humanistic approach. At the school level these approaches are popular as they coincide with the ideals of child-centered education.

#### 4. Radical

This approach, also known as the political economy approach, has been used widely in the 1980s in analyses of industrial location, global inequalities and urban problems. It is currently the dominant paradigm in human geography and calls for revolutionary theory in tandem with revolutionary praxis. The goal is a social revolution to replace the apparently oppressive structures of capitalist society with a socially just society. The central questions are 'who benefits/loses because of this location decision?' and 'How can this place be changed so that all benefit?' Storper and Walker's The Capitalist Imperative (1988) is an exemplar of this approach.

The dominant form of radical geography is Marxist, particularly structural Marxism. Underlying this approach is a Materialist analysis of society: for humans to live, the production of objects necessary for physical needs is essential. The material or economic dimension (the base) of society is paramount and the other dimensions such as religion, education, politics (all part of the superstructure) are merely determined by the base though they exist to support and legitimize the capitalist mode of production.

Marx proposed five modes of production of which capitalism is the fourth in his evolutionary sequence. The essence, according to Marx, of the capitalist mode of production is the antagonistic yet mutually necessary relations between two classes, the capitalists (or owners of the means of production) and the workers. This antagonism generates conflict and ultimately revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class. However capitalists also compete with each other in a 'survival of the fittest' manner.

Structural Marxism is quasi-determinist: human agents are little more than puppets manipulated by the economic base (Holt-Jensen 1988:114). This approach conflicts with the humanistic approach, which maintains that individuals are free to act and that there are no constraining external circumstance to limit their actions. According to Marx, the capitalist exploits his/her workers because of the imperatives of his/her class position and so as an individual is not to blame. Social structures are deemed to be more significant than human agency: determinism seems to haunt geographic explanation.

Paradoxically in view of Marx's own moral indignation at the plight of factory workers in nineteenth century England, there is no basis for morality in his schema. Religion, a part of the superstructure, is a creation of the capitalist class to divert the proletariat from the real issues of their oppressed condition.

## 5. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a currently emerging approach or collection of approaches (see Soja 1989). Essentially postmodernism is a critique of the Enlightenment. It can not accept the authority of any one paradigm or approach to be the answer: there can be no Grand Theory (Dear 1988). In geography it is a movement beyond the modern (such as spatial analysis and radical geography) and "an invitation to construct our own human geographies" (Gregory 1989:69). There is as yet no clear epistemology, in part because the approach appears to be combinational and eclectic involving geography, history, sociology and the critical school, especially

Habermas. Peet and Thrift (1989:23) suggest that this approach assumes:

"... that meaning is produced in language ... that meaning is not fixed but is constantly on the move ... and that subjectivity does not imply a conscious, unified, and rational human subject but instead a kaleidoscope of different discursive practices. In turn the kind of method needed to get at these conceptions will need to be very supple, able to capture a multiplicity of different meanings without reducing them to the simplicity of a single structure."

A fascinating exemplar of a postmodernist approach is Soja's interpretation of contemporary Los Angeles (1989: chapter 9).

## 6. Key Questions in Geography

These differing paradigms have contributed richness to the discipline of geography. The central focus is still the study of the Earth's surface as the space in which people live in specific places and environments. The key questions, which summarise geographic inquiry, are:

1. Where are people and their activities distributed on the Earth's surface?
2. What are the places and environments like where these people and their activities are located?
3. What is the nature of the relationships between people and their environments?
4. How do the people perceive their environments?
5. Why are these people and their activities located in these places?
6. Who decides and who benefits or loses from the location decisions that have been made?

## A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

According to Walsh and Middleton (1984:35) a worldview should answer four fundamental questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. What is wrong?
4. What is the remedy?

A biblical worldview is sketched here that answers these questions and will be used to test the current philosophies and paradigms in geography. (2) The organising theme for this biblical worldview is the major events in salvation history.

### 1. The Great Controversy

This acknowledges the existence of God, the central fact of the Christian worldview. Further, it identifies the source and origin of Satan and evil and hence sin in humanity. The Great Controversy is a conflict between God and Satan, between good and evil. As C. S. Lewis points out so aptly: "There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan" (quoted in Walsh and Middleton 1984:71). This conflict began before the Creation of this world and will continue until the Eschaton., A Christian worldview thus has eternal and supernatural dimensions.

### 2. Creation

The act of Creation clearly identifies God as the creator of our world and the universe. This world is part of God's kingdom and He is Lord and Sovereign. Christians should thus have

a high view of their fellow humans as all were created in the image of God and hence are equal before God. The natural world is also God's creation; we are called to be environmental stewards (see Lockton, forthcoming). As God's representatives we are mandated to reveal His love, mercy, justice and holiness, or in other words, His image.

### 3. Fall

Though created perfect, this world, including both the natural and social orders, has been contaminated and warped by evil. The locus of the Great Controversy was switched from heaven to earth at the Fall. This changed the nature of human nature and resulted in a series of broken relationships: humans with God, humans within themselves, humans with other humans, humans with their environment. Every aspect of human society and of nature has been changed and sin is not only personal and individual it is also corporate and infects social structures. The Fall also shows that human beings were created with the capacity to make moral choices.

### 4. Redemption

Christ's salvation offered at the cross can begin to restore the relationships broken at the Fall. However that restoration depends upon human acceptance of Christ's offer and it will never be full and complete this side of the Eschaton. The role of the Holy Spirit is central in this restorative process.

### 5. The Eschaton

Earth history is linear and will culminate in the second advent of Christ. Only at this event will the relationships broken at the Fall be fully restored as the Great Controversy is ended,

Satan defeated and sin eradicated. After the second advent there will be a new creation, a new perfect order.

While the Creation and Redemption give us cause for optimism about human affairs, the Great Controversy and the Fall provide a realism that is missing in many of the Christian transformist visions for the world (see Walsh and Middleton 1984). We cannot achieve complete transformation (whether Calvinist or Marxist) of this world this side of the Eschaton.

#### A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CONTEMPORARY GEOGRAPHY

As the regional approach has almost disappeared and the emergent postmodernist approach is not yet clearly delineated, the three contemporary approaches of spatial analysis (positivist), humanistic and radical (structural/Marxist) will be examined from a Christian perspective. Johnston (1989:62) has referred to these approaches as part of the empirical, hermeneutic and critical sciences respectively.

Use is made of a preliminary analysis produced by the newly formed Christian Geographers' Fellowship (Figure 1), which is structured around the presuppositional hierarchy of Harrison and Livingstone (1980). This moves from the highest level, Cosmology through the successively lower levels of Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology.

From a Christian critique the three approaches have much in common. At the cosmological level there is no God and the origins of the world are therefore seen as accidental and not purposeful. In empiricism and positivism there is no room for God as nothing is a priori

(Holt-Jensen 1988:92). Human nature likewise is seen as accidental in origin and so without any existential purpose. For the Christian this is a partial view that denies human beings their full God-given humanity. Human beings were created in the image of God and have both potential and choice. Again we see that the secular paradigms do not have a complete view of people.

At the ontological level the secular paradigms place humans in a primary position, people are the ultimate source of knowledge, whereas the Christian viewpoint places humans in a secondary position as God is above His created beings. "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings" (Psalm 8:5, NIV). Consequently for Christians there are sources of ultimate knowledge beyond themselves, namely God's revelation to us in Christ and the Word.

At the epistemological level "man is the measure of all things". The eternal and moral dimensions are ignored in these secular paradigms.

At the methodological level there is probably no difference between the selection of appropriate techniques by either the secular or Christian perspectives. The difference is in the conclusions drawn from the analysis, whether human explanations are seen as primary or secondary.

Further criticisms can be made of the individual non-Christian approaches. Spatial analysis elevates the economic to center position in exactly the same way as does Marxism. Human nature is diminished in the spatial analytical view as human agents can only act passively

under a deterministic structure. Humans are only machines, part of a mechanistic system where morality and ethics have no place and so the "best" or optimum location (the central concern of most of the models in this approach) is seen solely in terms of profitability and not in terms of, for example, environmental or social impacts.

The humanistic approaches criticize the positivistic approach for many of the same reasons as does the Christian perspective (see Ley 1980) but they swing the pendulum too far in the human agency direction so that individuals, and not God are central. Each person is totally free as regards his or her nature and destiny (Sire 1988:111) and so there is no absolute ethical framework within which humans should act.

The Marxist approaches must be critiqued at the fundamental level of being materialist. Human life is more than the material. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4,NIV). As with the spatial analytical approach the Marxist approach is deterministic and has a low view of human nature. (3) Consequently human agency is very limited, being constrained by the imperatives of the mode of production and the structures of society. Societal and individual change are essential components of both Marxism and Christianity but in the former the structures of society must be changed in order to produce the 'new man', whereas according to Christianity conversion change of the individual is a prerequisite for societal change and improvement. Evidence from the communist countries suggests that the Marxist 'new man' is elusive. However, this line of reasoning can be turned back on Christians and 'Christian nations.' A further Christian criticism is that Marxist

solutions accept immoral means to achieve their desired ends because there is no basis for morality.

The Marxist approach is valuable in that it has directed geographers to aspects of society and space that were previously ignored – it identifies what is wrong although it does not get to the root cause of the wrong. Ley (1974) has provided a penetrating Christian critique of the Marxist perspective in regard to the explanation of inequality in the city. (4) As he concludes "...it is privatistic iniquity, not social inequity, which is the root cause of evil in the city" (page 71). It needs a Christian perspective to extend the analysis and arrive at ultimate causes in terms of the Fall and the existence of evil. Only then can viable solutions be formulated.

Each of the approaches in the discipline of geography has its strengths and usefulness. But each approach is seen by its practitioners in exclusive terms and reality can not be encompassed by any one of these approaches, especially when that reality includes the supernatural dimension as outlined in the Christian worldview. Figure 2 attempts to summarise some of the key features of these approaches. Christians are generally comfortable with the empirical sciences but should be able to utilize both the hermeneutical sciences in order to better understand people and the critical sciences to critique the way in which society actually operates (the prophetic role?). However we should not see these approaches "as decisive, or as the only relevant analyses" (Gill 1989:66).

## THE VALUE OF GEOGRAPHY IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Geography should be an integral part of education in Christian schools for a number of compelling reasons. In terms of content, the discipline aids the student in understanding the local environment in which he/she lives. It locates that local environment in the wider global system in which all places, and people, are interdependent.

But it is in terms of values that geography has a crucial role in Christian education. Geography in Christian schools has a trinity of interests: God, the planet and people. Two core value areas derive from these interests (Lockton 1990). First, concern for the state of the environment, whether local, national or global. It is paradoxical that Seventh-day Adventists with their concern for the veracity of the creation account have not been as concerned with the stewardship of that creation (Lockton, forthcoming). Geography has a long tradition of such concern. A Christian understanding of environmental issues is particularly needed at the present time as the 'green' movement has a distinctly pantheistic tone. Perhaps this is the time to call humanity to "Fear God and give Him glory . . . worship Him who made the . . . the earth" (Revelation 14:7, NIV).

Second, concern for the plight and condition of people in other places. Christ gave us the Great Commandment – to love others – and geography can help in creating empathy and compassion for the human condition, especially in distant places. Christ also gave us the Great Commission – to go into the entire world. Again it is paradoxical that Seventh-day Adventists with the most global of Protestant mission programs have largely ignored geography (5). Yet

Ellen White (1903:269) called for an education that studied "all lands in the light of missionary effort" that students might "become acquainted with the peoples and their needs".

Contemporary geography and Christianity are showing a convergence of interest and concern – for the state of the environment and the persistent and mammoth problem of global inequality. Geography should be prominent in all Christian schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined the philosophical presuppositions of various approaches in the discipline of geography. Several of these presuppositions conflict with those of a Christian worldview. However this is not unique to geography and in fact offers the Christian teacher an excellent opportunity to help his/her students better understand conflicting worldviews and to see how their Christian faith relates to their academic pursuits.

I also contend that the Christian critique enhances and enlarges the otherwise restricted, partial viewpoints of the secular approaches. Reality is larger and more complex than they admit.

## END NOTES

1. Darwin's influence upon the discipline of geography has been traced by Stoddart (1966) and Livingston (1985).
2. The difference between Christian and Adventist viewpoints has not been defined in this paper, though the Great Controversy motif is chiefly an Adventist concept. The Eschaton, especially its imminence, while not unique to Adventists is not held by all Christians.

3. Marxism and positivism developed from empiricism and all three are part of the broad category of naturalism (see Sire 1988).
4. Other Christian critiques in geography have been offered by Houston (1978) on relationships between people and land/territory and by Wallace (1978) on the presuppositions of economic geography.
5. History has always been stronger than geography in the SDA educational system, presumably because of the latter's relationship to prophecy.

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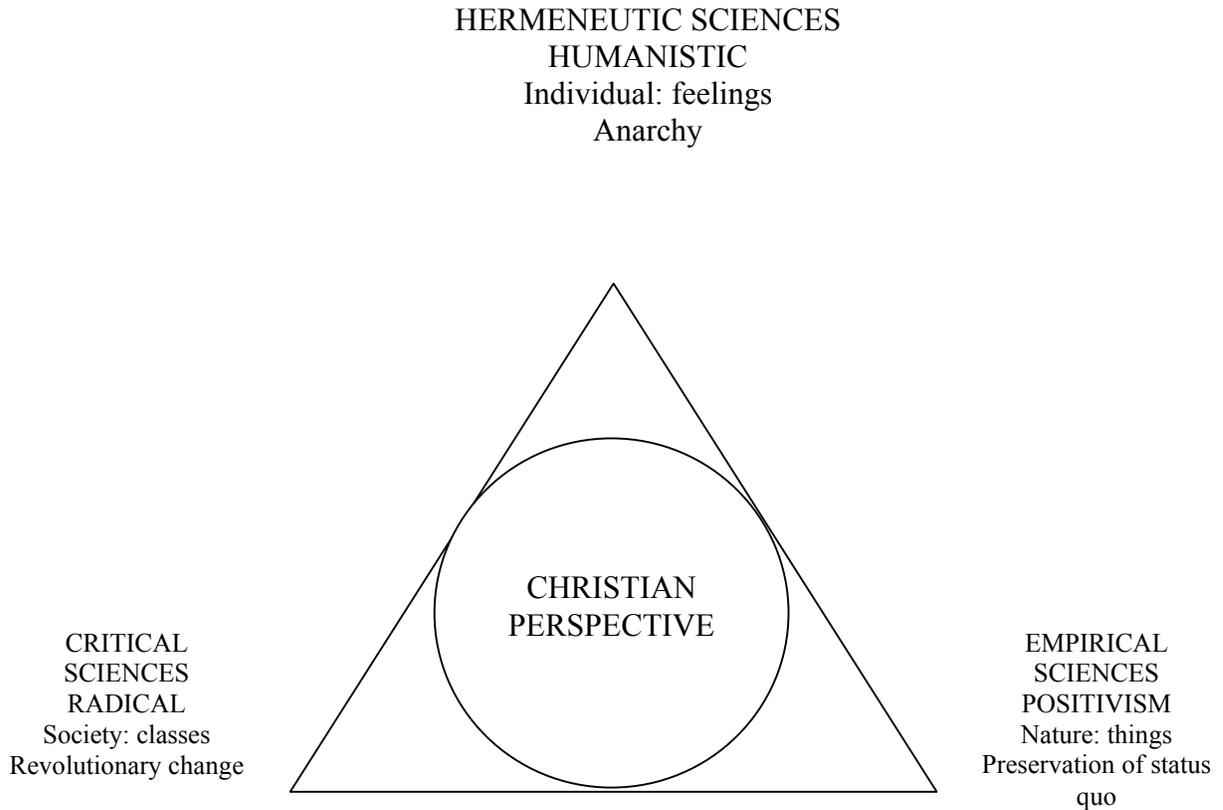
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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY  
BELIEF-SYSTEMS

LEVEL OF PRE-SUPPOSITIONAL HIERARCHY	SECULAR BELIEF-SYSTEMS			CHRISTIAN BELIEF-SYSTEM
	POSITIVIST	HUMANIST	STRUCTURALIST/ MARXIST	
1 COSMOLOGY <i>Fundamental beliefs about the origin of reality.</i>	The universe is <u>accidental</u> ; there is <u>no God</u> ; humans are the measure of all things (under various degrees of constraint by environmental and social structures).			Universe is the <u>creation of one God</u> ; humans are made in <u>God's image</u> and while free to choose and act, are subject to constraints imposed by the entry of sin into the world. Each person has the <u>potential</u> to live as God intended by accepting Jesus Christ as saviour.
2 ONTOLOGY <i>Presuppositions about the nature of reality and the sources of knowledge.</i>	The world of our <u>immediate senses</u> , however fully we may expand the means and extent of our <u>observations</u> , is all that there is and all that we can know.  <u>Agreed evidence.</u>	That which exists is that which people <u>perceive</u> to exist.	That which <u>really exists</u> (i.e. forces, structures) cannot be observed directly, but only through thought.	Ultimate reality is <u>God</u> , unknowable through pure intellectual investigation, but only through a <u>relationship</u> with Him, based on His <u>revelation</u> of Himself.
3 EPISTEMOLOGY <i>Constraints on the understanding of reality, delimiting the domain of enquiry and specifying legitimate questions</i>	The <u>intellect</u> and its use is the source of ultimate truth.  Knowledge through <u>experience</u> , but must be <u>verifiable</u> .	Knowledge gained <u>subjectively</u> in a world of <u>meanings</u> created by <u>individuals</u> .	The world of appearances does not <u>necessarily</u> reveal the world of <u>causal mechanisms</u> .	<u>God's revelation</u> of Himself into <u>human experience</u> within time and space is the <u>only</u> source of ultimate Truth.
4 METHODOLOGY <i>Organization of analysis of reality, identifying the type of analytical techniques and appropriate instruments to be used.</i>	Natural scientific or humanistic (phenomenological/reflexive) enquiry generating <u>objective</u> or <u>intersubjective</u> 'truth'. Human explanations necessarily <u>primary</u> .  <u>Verifying factual statements</u> : 'scientific method'.	<u>Investigation of individual worlds</u> , emphasising individuality and subjectivity rather than (positivistic) replicability and 'truth'.	<u>Construction of theories</u> to account for observations (we cannot test for their veracity as direct evidence for their existence is not available).	Similar, but in a framework of prayerful application of Bib. <u>local principles</u> to analysis of problems and prescription for change. Human explanations are necessarily <u>secondary</u> to God's explanatory revelation (which we must still strive to understand). Essential <u>attitudes</u> include love, humility and service, following the <u>example of Jesus Christ</u> .

Source: Christian Geographers' Fellowship (1989)



KEY TO DIAGRAM  
 GENERAL CATEGORY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE  
 SPECIFIC APPROACH IN GEOGRAPHY  
 Focus of study  
 Political Orientation

FIGURE 2 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CRHISTIAN AND SECULAR  
 PHILOSOPHIES IN GEOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES