BOOK OF THE YEAR 2011

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Category: Reviews

I'm not one of those people who keeps a note of the books I read. This year, I've read a fair bit of fiction; my standard reading on when I'm travelling or relaxing, but less theology and serious reading than usual. My 'books to read' pile keeps getting bigger; one day, I'll get it down to zero (probably, just after I get my email inbox cleared). This year, one book stands out clearly as being the best book I've read: a book that not many people seem to have picked up on. I posted the following review in July, and it's as valid as ever:

As many people have noted, this year marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. A great deal has been written and said about the impact of the KJV on the language and culture of the English speaking world, but no one has come close to describing the impact of the Bible on Western Culture in the way that Visahal Mangalwadi has done in his wonderful volume The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization.

Inexplicably, this book has not had much impact and I have come across very few mentions of it in the press or on blogs. This is a shame, because this is truly an excellent book and one which deserves to be widely read both by people who treasure the Bible and by those who would denigrate it.

In terms of hard facts, it is a longish book (just over 400 pages not including the notes and index) without any pictures! However, it is extremely easy to read with short, well crafted chapters. This is not an academic book that should frighten the everyday reader, it is a book written for normal people.

Probably the easiest way to describe the contents is to say that it is rather like a Bible centred version of Jared Dimondâ€™s Guns Germs & Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, though this wonâ€™t help you if youâ€™ve not read it! Essentially, Mangalwadi sets out to demonstrate the way in which the Bible has shaped Western culture from the ground up; as the subtitle says â€˜the Bible created the soul of Western Civilisationâ€™.

Covering topics as widely spread as humanity, rationality, technology and heroism, the book demonstrates the way in which a Biblical view of humanity has influenced all aspects of life in the west and contributed greatly to the development of democracy and technology. Dimondâ€™s excellent work says that the development of the west can be attributed to physical factors (the guns, germs and steel of his title). However, Mangalwadi demonstrates that human society is far more complex than this and that moral and spiritual factors have also played their part in the growth of the West and the impact of its civilisation on the world.

The book has added interest because, as his name suggests, Visahal Mangalwadi is not an English clergyman or a scholar at an American Christian university. His Indian background allows him to look at the West as an outsider, albeit a sympathetic though not uncritical outsider. This gives the book a depth and breadth of analysis that would probably not be possible if it had been written by someone who grew up within and was shaped by the culture he is addressing.

The book is woven through with episodes from Mangalwadiâ€™s own life, which are both thrilling and

humbling. In the absence of a biography or autobiography, it is worth getting hold of this book for those insights alone; he, his wife and his children are true heroes.

I donâ€™t have time or space to do this truly wonderful book justice. However, can I suggest that if you read just one book about the Bible in 2011, it really should be this one.