

Lesslie Newbigin

His Writings in Context

Paul Weston

DURING HIS LIFETIME, NEWBIGIN was highly regarded both as an ecumenical and missionary statesman, and as a cross-cultural mis-
siologist of the first order. His obituary in *The Times* newspaper in the UK described him as “one of the foremost missionary statesmen of his generation,” and “one of the outstanding figures on the world Christian stage in the second half of the century.”¹ His reputation for many rests upon his profound missionary engagement with the post-Enlightenment culture of the West, pursued in the 1980s and 90s following his retirement from India in 1974. But his impact as a missionary statesman was already established well before this final phase of his life. In fact, he had successfully managed to integrate a number of varied but significant roles during his unusually busy life. Geoffrey Wainwright’s masterly survey amply illustrates this, with its ten chapters organized around the various dimensions of his ministry.²

Newbigin was also a prolific writer. In the annotated bibliography at the end of the collection of essays entitled *Scandalous Prophet* (compiled in 1998), there are 387 separate entries under Newbigin’s “Published Materials.”³ These span sixty-five years (from 1933 to 1998), and include

1. *The Times*, 31st January 1998, 25.

2. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*. The main chapter headings describe him as: “Confident Believer,” “Direct Evangelist,” “Ecumenical Advocate,” “Pastoral Bishop,” “Missionary Strategist,” “Religious Interlocutor,” “Social Visionary,” “Liturgical Preacher,” “Scriptural Teacher,” and “Christian Apologist” (with an introduction entitled “Man in Christ”).

3. Foust, *Scandalous Prophet*, 252–81.

thirty books, thirty-three shorter pamphlets or booklets, 267 articles or book chapters, twenty-one introductory pieces or prefaces to the work of others, two open letters, and thirty-four book reviews.

The disarming presentational “simplicity” of much of this writing—usually lacking the numerous footnotes characteristic of formal academic pieces⁴—might suggest that his writings are somehow lacking in depth and rigor. This would be a serious misjudgment. For many, they offer a depth of insight and engagement with questions of theology, culture, and ecclesiology which is all-too-rare in many an “academic” work. This engagement is the product of deep analytical reflection on the one hand, and an economy of language and penetrating application on the other. But the characteristically simple “form” of his writings also reflects two other aspects of his life and character. First, he was often compelled to write “on the hoof”—in airport lounges, railway stations and during conference breaks—as one whose hectic schedule did not allow for a more leisurely writing program, much as he might have liked one. Secondly, he was an extraordinarily retentive reader, able to recall and quote the ideas and arguments of other writers and thinkers without always needing to remember (and sometimes without knowing) exactly where they had come from. This capacity to recall, analyze, and then articulate the ideas of others—particularly in later life when his eyesight was failing and he used a team of people to read aloud to him—was quite remarkable.⁵

Newbigin’s earliest “formal” theological writings are in the form of student essays written whilst a theological student at Westminster College, Cambridge, where he had gone in 1933 to train for ordained ministry. There survive a number of pieces which presage many of his later emphases, and demonstrate his early abilities as both an analytical thinker and a cogent writer.⁶ His theological studies were a time of significant spiritual growth too, which “profoundly changed and deepened” his faith. He had arrived in 1933 as a “typical liberal,” but experienced a profound “evangelical conversion” through studying Paul’s letter to the Romans, and com-

4. John Flett aptly describes this later in this volume as a “seeming phobia of citation.” See also Eleanor Jackson’s observations.

5. He had developed a voracious appetite for reading from his schooldays where his geography teacher (“Bill” Brown), not only “created a capacity to think, to break out of stereotypes, to explore new ideas and to question old ones,” but also taught Newbigin “to get to the heart of the argument of a big book so that we could expound and defend it in debate” (Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 5).

6. E.g., the thirty-six page essay on “Revelation” (DA29/3/1/2; extracted in Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 18–21).

Paul Weston

pleted his studies with a strong evangelical conviction about the finished work of Christ on the cross which was to prove deeply significant for his future ministry and writing.⁷

Newbigin had gone up to Cambridge as an agnostic undergraduate in 1928. He came to faith through the friendship of members of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), and through a “spiritual awakening” during a Quaker summer camp for unemployed miners in South Wales. His subsequent spiritual pilgrimage led him to work for the SCM in Glasgow where he met Helen his future wife, and to theological training back in Cambridge in preparation for mission overseas.

Hereafter, and for most of his working life, Newbigin’s beloved “hub” of activities was India, where he and Helen (whom he had married earlier in the year) went to work in 1936 as Church of Scotland missionaries with the Madras Mission. As part of a developing pattern of writing “on the move,” his first book *Christian Freedom in the Modern World* (a critique of the work of John Macmurray whose ideas he had debated energetically with fellow-students at Cambridge) was written during the sea voyage and was published by SCM in 1937.

From Madras, the Newbigins were transferred to Kanchipuram (in Tamil Nadu) as district missionaries in 1939, and stayed there until their first home furlough in 1946. Amongst his wide-ranging responsibilities during this time, Newbigin became involved in the discussions about a long-running plan to unite the various denominations in Southern India in an ecumenical “United Church.” In 1942 he was appointed to the central committee, and soon became an energetic advocate of the scheme. Five years later—following protracted discussion and debate both in India and in the UK—the “Union of the Church of South India” (CSI) was finally inaugurated at a celebratory service in Madras Cathedral in September 1947.

Inevitably, much of Newbigin’s foundational doctrinal thinking about the nature of the church, and the “forms” in which it is structured and organized, was carried out during these early years of missionary service, and this is reflected in his writings of the period. Significant amongst these is his *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, published in 1948,⁸ which articulated the main contours of this ecclesiology, and formed the background to his still-influential treatise on the church

7. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 28–29.

8. It was republished in 1960 with revisions.

entitled *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, which was published in 1953.⁹

Following his year of furlough, Newbigin returned to India in 1947 in time for the formal inauguration of the CSI in September. He had received a cable five months earlier informing him that he was to be the first bishop of Madurai and Ramnad, and was duly consecrated during the inauguration service for the CSI in Madras Cathedral. He was thirty-seven years old. He held this post for the following twelve years, and alongside his many diocesan responsibilities began to be drawn into the work of the newly formed World Council of Churches (WCC). Newbigin attended its first world assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 as a “consultant,” and was invited to join the organizing committee of the second assembly which was held in Chicago in 1954. He was later appointed vice-chair of the WCC’s “Faith and Order Commission,” which set the ecumenical agenda for the third assembly to be held in New Delhi, India, in 1961. He also became involved in the work of the International Missionary Council (IMC), which had been formally constituted in 1921 to promote the understanding and practice of mission and evangelism alongside the wider ecumenical work of the “Life and Work,” and “Faith and Order” movements which had emerged from the 1910 Edinburgh conference. He was largely responsible for the agenda of the IMC’s 1952 meeting at Willingen, Germany (entitled “The Missionary Obligation of the Church”). Indeed, so significant was his involvement that he was “seconded” from his work as a bishop in the CSI to work with the WCC in Geneva, in order to spearhead the process of integrating the work of the IMC with the wider organization of the WCC. He duly became the first director of the new WCC division of World Mission and Evangelism in 1961, and at the same time became an assistant general secretary of the WCC itself.

Many of his publications during this period reflect this increasing involvement in ecumenical affairs, with important pieces on the relationship between churches and the WCC, other essays written specifically for various international WCC gatherings, and some significant early pieces on the theme of Christian unity—including his books *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958), and *A Faith for this One World?* (1961). It was during this period that Newbigin also began to give serious thought to the development of a genuinely trinitarian approach to

9. Based on the Kerr lectures given in Glasgow the previous year. The contributions of Mark Laing and Paul Weston in this collection both explore Newbigin’s ecclesiology, one from Newbigin’s early experience as a missionary, the other from a more systematic perspective.

Paul Weston

mission.¹⁰ His small but influential booklet, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, was published in 1963, and its central ideas provided the basis for his later and larger 1978 work on the theology of mission, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, which was based on a course of lectures he gave on the theology of mission at the Selly Oak Colleges, in Birmingham following his return to England in the mid-1970s.¹¹

When the five-year appointment in Switzerland came to an end in 1965, Newbigin returned to India on his election as bishop of Madras. He quickly found himself immersed in the wide-ranging challenges facing a city which then numbered around three million people (and was growing at a rate of 100,000 every year). Under his leadership, a number of evangelistic initiatives and community projects were developed in the extensive slum areas that were mushrooming around the city area. He also continued to travel extensively round the world, responding to invitations to lecture and preach, and maintaining an active involvement in the developing work of the WCC. He was a prominent delegate at the fourth assembly of the WCC at Uppsala, Sweden in 1968, took part in the Louvain meeting of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order in 1971, and attended the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism conference at Bangkok, Thailand in 1973 (with its theme of "Salvation Today").

As before, Newbigin's published output during this period continued to reflect his varied ecumenical and mission involvements. But alongside these he was developing other projects too. His 1966 book *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, for example, was the substance of the Firth Lectures given at Nottingham University in 1964, and was a theological response to the secularization debate that was provoking discussion across many disciplines in the early 1960s.¹² It also includes a significant and prescient central chapter in which Newbigin sets out an approach to the theory of knowledge (much influenced by his first reading of Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* [1958]) which would inform and undergird many of his later discussions on the epistemological crisis facing the West.¹³ There were other books too. *Christ our Eternal Contemporary* (1968) was a write-up of a series of lectures given at the Christian Medical College

10. See Flett's chapter "Who is Jesus Christ?" in this volume.

11. It was republished with minor revisions in 1995.

12. The title is itself a partial rebuttal of John Robinson's book *Honest to God* published in 1963 (see the discussion of Robinson's approach in Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, 88–93).

13. Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, 77–99.

at Vellore, whilst the 1969 book *The Finality of Christ* (based on his 1966 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale three years earlier) addressed the question of what it meant to claim the uniqueness of Christ in an increasingly pluralized world. And alongside these he also found time to publish a little evangelistic book entitled *Journey into Joy* (1973).

When Newbigin duly “retired” in 1974 at the age of sixty-five, he and Helen fulfilled a long-cherished ambition to travel back overland from Madras to the UK using only local transport. It took them two months, in the company of two suitcases and a rucksack. On arrival back in the UK, he was invited to join the staff of Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham where for the next five years he taught courses on “The Theology of Mission” and “Ecumenical Studies” to students training for missionary work. He also became a minister in the United Reformed Church (becoming its national Moderator in 1978–79), and in 1981—at the age of seventy-two—took up the pastoral leadership of a small inner-city congregation in Winson Green, Birmingham, which he was to lead for the following seven years.

Newbigin’s return to the UK was also the prelude to a period of intense activity, reflection and writing for which he was to become perhaps best known. He had been shocked by the way in which an increasingly secularized culture in the West had made its impact, not just on the church, but more generally on the wider culture. When asked about the contrast between his experience in India and his return to Britain, he often commented on the “disappearance of hope” that he was encountering in the UK.¹⁴ In response to this he began to engage more seriously with the issues facing the church in this increasingly secularized context. In the early 1980s, this led him to put down on paper some of his thoughts arising from the discussions of a working party convened by the British Council of Churches. The resulting pamphlet was published in 1983 under the title *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*. Somewhat to his surprise, it seemed to strike a chord, and quickly became a bestseller, becoming the first in a series of publications by Newbigin focusing on the missionary challenges facing the church in the West. What later became known as “The Gospel and Our Culture” program soon gathered momentum and led to two UK regional conferences in 1990 and 1991, and to an international conference of 400 delegates held at Swanwick in Derbyshire, UK in July 1992.

As the debate around these questions developed, so did the output from Newbigin’s pen. A further fourteen books and around 160 articles

14. Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984*, 1.

Paul Weston

and smaller pieces followed the publication of *The Other Side of 1984* in 1983. Perhaps most significant amongst these “retirement” books are *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), *Proper Confidence* (1995), and *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (1996).

Lesslie Newbigin died in 1998 at the age of eighty-eight.

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