



## The Gathering Up Of History Into Christ

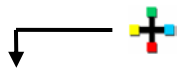
1959

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

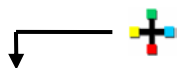
*In The Missionary Church in East and West*

(eds. Charles C. West & David M. Paton; London: SCM Press, 1959): 81-90.

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In Europe, in the United States, in Africa, in the Islamic world and in India we are meeting situations which are extraordinarily different one from the other, and we must be careful to avoid the temptation to try and bring them all under one heading and indulge in premature simplifications. Because I am living and working in India, it is inevitable that my approach should be shaped by the situation as it is in India. And there, it seems to me, in contrast with much of what seems to be happening in other parts of the world, we have a situation which is primarily characterised by a kind of serene confidence, a conviction that the future belongs to us. Certainly we can say that it is characteristic of the Indian situation at present that immense new forces have been released and are being exercised. It is a very moving thing to see village people turn out to build their own roads, schools, wells, instead of sitting back and asking the government to do it. That is something new, and a symptom of the release of new forces which is taking place in India today. But at the same time we are not having in India the disintegration of social life or of thinking which is taking place in some other parts of the world. That is partly because of the extreme toughness of the Indian caste system which has retained its essential strength and thereby preserved the individual from atomization. And on the other hand it is due to the extraordinary toughness and comprehensiveness of Hindu thinking, especially the fundamental pantheistic theology of the Vedanta. Hindu pantheism seems to be able to absorb modern science and technology without even suffering from mild indigestion. 120 years ago, when there was a great debate in India between orientalists and occidentalists, i.e. between those who advocated Sanskrit as the language of education and those who advocated

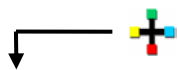


English, the latter were quite convinced that the use of English would mean a total revolution in Indian life and thought. When Duff started what is now the Scottish Church College in Calcutta

teaching little boys English literature, language and philosophy he was asked what he was doing spending his time in these things instead of preaching the Gospel. He said, 'I am laying a mine which, when it explodes, will blow up Hinduism'. The mine has exploded, but Hinduism is still there; for Hinduism is not a granite block, but a sandbank.

And yet at the same time, underneath the surface, there is no doubt that there are changes taking place which will eventually have profound effects. It seems to me that what is happening is an irreversible change in human thinking which is being brought about and which is causing men to make demands of life which they have never made before – such demands as the demand for certain fundamental human rights and the demand and the expectation that this world shall be made a place more secure and more comfortable than it has been for our ancestors. These demands are being made as a matter of course, and this leads on to the complex political and social changes which lead in the direction of the welfare state, the socialist democratic state, which India is building today. That is the sort of background out of which I am speaking and which must necessarily affect the way I look at the whole problem.

Now I ask how we are to understand this whole immense variety of changes which we see as we look at the modern world in East and West, in the old Christendom and in the areas outside that old Christendom. I don't think that merely by observing the multiplicity of phenomena we are going to find a pattern in them. Our task today is to take the biblical understanding of the world, and see how far it gives coherence to the multitude of different impressions we have as we look at this variety and changing scene. The thesis that I want to argue is this: that what we are witnessing is the process by which more and more of the human race is being gathered up into that history whose centre is the Cross and whose end is the final judgment and mercy of God.



A very long time ago, before I was a Christian, I read Myers' *The Dawn of History*. The first chapter of that book is called 'The people who have no history', and it was a reminder of the fact that vast periods and areas of human life have no history. Although human beings have lived and died and probably fought wars and done all the things that human beings do do, nevertheless they have no history. Nothing was felt to be happening significantly and therefore nothing has remained which we can call history. But it seems that what is happening now (I am not an historian, much less a philosopher of history) is that the peoples who have no history are being drawn into the history of which the centre is Jesus Christ; and that is the only history. In other words, that which has been static, or at least cyclical, in which the only movement was round and round, life and death, rise and fall – that is being drawn into a movement which is linear and dynamic, which is moving irreversibly and can never be back where it was before. The ferment of change which arises from the impact upon the ancient cultures of the Gospel, or at least of that kind of life which has its origin within Christendom, is the force which is giving an irreversible direction to that which was static or merely cyclical. When I say the impact of the Gospel or of that kind of life which has its origin in Christendom, I include technology, western political ideas, Communism – all those things which have come into the eastern world from the West and have their roots in the Christian tradition.

I want to suggest that we must interpret this drawing together of all peoples into an irreversible movement in terms of the apocalyptic teaching of the New Testament, in terms of the fact that world history is in the grip of Christ, is being propelled by him towards its ultimate issues, propelled through tribulation and conflict to a final consummation in which the judgment and the mercy of God which are set forth in the Cross are finally and conclusively worked out. We will not arrive at any such pattern by simply looking at the facts. We can only proceed by going to the New Testament and asking there what the pattern is, and then by taking it to the facts and asking how far it interprets them. I simply



want to share with you some of the perhaps obvious things which stand out in my mind after reading the New Testament to see what it says about the world and the nations, with this particular issue in mind.

Fundamentally the New Testament gives us all the time a profoundly paradoxical interpretation of the world. We can try to express that in six different ways, all of which bear upon the same paradox:

1. The world belongs to Christ and yet it is in the power of the devil. The wise men from the East bring their offerings, acknowledge as it were on behalf of the world the kingship of Christ, but it is the devil who offers Christ the kingship of the world and says that it is in his power to offer it. Or as the same thing is expressed in John: the world was made by him but the world knew him not. The world is his but the whole world lieth in the evil one.

2. He has come to save the world. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. He is the Saviour of the world. He has come not to judge the world but that the world through him should be saved. And yet on the other hand his coming is the judgment of this world. His flesh is bread for the life of the world and yet that very offer of his flesh as bread for the life of the world brings judgment. It is at the point where that offer is made that many disciples go back and walk no more with him and one is identified as a devil (John 6.60-71).

3. He came to gather all into one. 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' The Good Shepherd gathers all the sheep into one flock. And yet his coming provokes the hatred of the world which hates him and his disciples. Over against the Christ there emerges the figure of the Antichrist, the false counterfeit of power and grace and wisdom, gathering multitudes, deceiving even the elect. The story of the things to come is the story of an increasingly fierce struggle between Christ and Antichrist, culminating in the final struggle and victory. The figure of Antichrist does not, I think, play a very large part in modern Christian writing – at least in English; but that figure

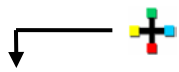


emerges in an odd way, in unexpected places. In Orwell's *1984* Big Brother is Antichrist, the one who offers salvation to the world and whose offer is accepted by the vast multitude, and that reminds one of the unforgettable fragment of Soloviev: 'A Vision of Antichrist'. And that again reminds us of the book of Revelation and its interpretation of the Roman Empire with its offer of *salus* for the whole world, of peace and security of the whole world, as the Antichrist. And the relevance of that to our own day and to the ambiguities of the welfare state is very clear. In every case the point is that the essence of the Antichrist is that he looks like Christ, so much so that even the elect are deceived. He looks like the answer to every human need, looks like the universal saviour. According to the New Testament, world history has to be understood as an increasingly acute conflict between Christ and Antichrist.

4. Christ calls all people out of the world, but he sends people into the world. There is an absolute separation between Christ's people and the world. 'They are not of the world even as I am not of the world.' But at the same time there is an absolute identification. They are being sent into the world. They are in the world. They are the salt of the earth. In the same way there is an *ecclesia*, a body called out of the world to be the bearers of God's purpose in the world, but the end is not a Church but a city, and a city in which there is no temple. The end is not a restored Church but a new heaven and a new earth, a restored world.

5. This people which is chosen out of the world by God is at the same time judged by the world for its apostasy. You will recognise that as a constantly recurring theme in the Bible. The world which knows not God knows God better than the Church which knows God. 'I have not found such faith, no, not in Israel. But many shall come from the East and the West. The men of

Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. The Queen of the South shall rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.' And listen to this from Paul, quoting Isaiah: "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me." But of

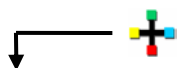


Israel he says: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people" (Rom. 10.20 – I). And moreover, according to Paul, God uses the obedience of the heathen to provoke to jealousy his own disobedient people. 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation, and with a foolish nation will I make you angry' (Rom. 10.19). Surely that has relevance for the world today: God uses the obedience of the heathen to provoke his own disobedient people.

6. Christ is the final judgment of the world; all men and all nations are ultimately judged by their relationship to him. And yet Christ is hidden in the world, hidden so that even his own people do not recognise him. 'When saw we thee hungry...?' Christ is hidden in the world, Christ is the judge of the world. To meet Christ we have to go into the place where apparently he is not, i.e. into the world which lies in the hands of the evil one.

I have done no more than to give an untidy summary of the things that struck me as I read the New Testament with these issues in mind and asked the question, what is the world, what are the nations? Let me not attempt to sum it up. I have no tidy conclusions to offer, but offer these four thoughts:

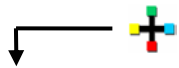
1. The world is in Christ's hands and it is his purpose to bring the world to the final issue of mercy and judgment. As we see in the Gospel story our Lord bringing his disciples gently, patiently but inexorably to the point where they have to face the final issue of faith or unbelief in him, so we see him leading the nations of the world. We see nations being drawn out of isolation and stagnation, into one unitary historical process of which the central issues are being determined by the whole complex of ideas which derive ultimately from the revelation in Christ. They may derive at many removes, but the point is that we are now witnessing the reality of world – history, of a unitary history. And that means that the question of the relation of every man to Christ is becoming more and more inescapable, more and more inevitable, more and more central. One could illustrate that interestingly from India. In the midst of what I described at the beginning, i.e. the fact that Hinduism appears to be able to digest the whole of western



technology, science and religion without indigestion, we come across this document, the Niyogi report produced by Madhya Pradesh. It is now evident that the beginnings of indigestion are to be observed. Some intelligent people are beginning to realise with a shock of horror that Christ presents them with an absolute decision. Over and over again the report prints in horrified italics the statement that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. These are distinct signs of indigestion. The terrible fact is beginning to be clear that in Christ you are presented with a claim to absolute kingship. This report is one of the most encouraging things that has taken place in India for a long time from the missionary point of view. It shows that the real claim of Christ is beginning to be heard. There is a beginning of a meeting between the Gospel and the Hindu mind.' One could look at the leaders of the Gandhian movement in India and one finds in them men very, very near to Christ and very, very far away at the same time, men who are profoundly attracted and fascinated by the New Testament, who read it and re-read it, and who are trying with an obedience far greater than that of the vast majority of Christians to follow Christ and yet rejecting the claim that Christ himself makes. Here again is God using the obedience of the non-Christian to provoke the Christians. Such men are trying to follow Christ with devotion and self-sacrifice, and yet rejecting the claim of Christ to exclusive Lordship. In some of the most sensitive spirits in

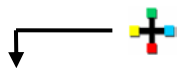
India today, men who are playing a crucial part in the development of the nation, you have this evidence of our Lord leading people right to the ultimate issue of absolute surrender or final rejection. They are far away from the cyclical, self-contained life of that which is not yet history; they are caught up in an irreversible movement. What you see in these men is a sign of what is really happening to the world; that what we are witnessing is the process by which more and more of the human race is being gathered up into that history whose centre is the Cross.

2. We have to be awake to what the New Testament says about the Antichrist. That which looks most like the offer of salvation may



in fact be the farthest away from it. Again I think of the issues being raised for India by the development of a socialist democratic republic essentially along the lines of a welfare state. The demand for such a kind of state arises ultimately from Christian sources, from that valuation of the human being which the Gospel has introduced into the world as distinct from the conception of the human being of pre-Christian Hinduism. But it makes demands that ultimately only the Gospel can meet and it therefore seems to me that it leads us closer to the issues of Christ and Antichrist. Every time there is a step in the direction of totalitarianism, there is the fundamental question of the value of the human being as such. The issue Christ – or – Antichrist is going to be pressed harder and harder upon the conscience of every man.

3. We need to be aware of that paradox which I tried to express by saying that Christ is hidden in the world, the world which lieth in the hands of the evil one. We shall not meet with Christ except by going right into the world, into the very situations where it appears that Christ is being denied. I have in mind again such issues as we are facing in India in the sphere of education. A very great effort is being made to convert the whole elementary educational apparatus of India into that form of basic education worked out by Gandhiji. That involves many of the insights of the Gospel with regard to the education of the human being. But it is also intimately tied up with the Hindu conception of religion which ultimately excludes the possibility of Christianity. The most honest of the leaders of Indian education will confess that their ultimate object is a society in which a religious minority is unthinkable. To that end the basic education schools make it a fundamental part of their programme that there should be common worship in which the resources of all religions are pooled and students are trained so that they cannot make an exclusive claim for any one religion. The Church is faced with the alternative of staying out of that situation because of the fear of compromise, and thereby losing any opportunity to make a concrete witness not only in the training school of today but in the India of tomorrow and thereby becoming irrelevant to the national life;



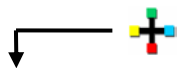
or on the other hand of trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide one and going into that situation at the risk of making grave mistakes in order to be sure that we are there to bear our witness where men and women actually are. We have to take seriously the fact that we meet Christ in the world, even hidden in the world, at the point where his own people do not recognise him.

4. In the first Epistle of John where these themes of the world and of Antichrist are most explicitly dealt with he comes down very heavily on this emphasis: 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh', the concrete humanity of Jesus. This emphasis is absolutely crucial for our obedience in the world if my understanding of what is happening is at all true. 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh'; that means an absolute refusal to dissolve away the concrete actuality of Jesus Christ whether in terms of the idealism of the last century or of the existentialism of this century. The thing we have to convey is not ideas but a concrete relationship to Jesus, attachment to him through his people, through the actual historical community which stems from him. St John speaks of the water and



the blood, a visible sacramentally-centred fellowship drawing all men together in the name of Jesus. The name of Jesus is a stumbling-block in a situation such as in India, because it is concrete and refers to a human being who cannot be dissolved away. People find it easier to use the word Christ, because that can be detached from particularity and made into a general idea. But our message is: 'Jesus come in the flesh'. Our relationship with him is through that sacramentally-centred fellowship which stems from him.

If we make this emphasis we must at once be on our guard against petrifying the Church in the social and organisational structures which it develops necessarily from time to time, but which do not have any necessary connection with its essential nature. Frl Cremer has written of this in relation to the situation in Europe, and it is no less relevant to the situation in Asia. How very much of our failure in missionary work is due to the failure to distinguish between that which is essential in the visible form of the Church and that which is merely a thing that our fathers and grandfathers were brought up in! The Willingen conference in



1952 sounded a note in favour of flexibility. I am sorry that the debate following Willingen has centred on the question of the place of institutions such as schools and hospitals, but did not go further and deal with the questions of the forms of Church life itself. There is still a need for debate on fundamental questions regarding the visible forms of Church life and ministry with which the people of God go out to embrace new peoples. There is need to find, e.g., in the situation of an Indian village, that visible form of ministry and congregational life which at the same time shall be authentically one with the whole family of God and yet on the other hand genuinely relevant to the situation there. Too often we have imposed on a new situation the visible forms which we have been brought up with and which were totally unsuited to it.

If my central thesis is true – that what we are witnessing is the drawing together of the human race into that history whose centre is the Cross – then the issue of Christian unity is the most central and critical one for the mission of the Church. Every day that the present fragmentation of Christendom endures makes the Church as it is more and more irrelevant to the task of mission. If our message is Jesus Christ come in the flesh, not just a set of ideas, and if the meaning of what is happening in our time is the gathering up of the human race into history of which the centre is Jesus Christ, then the division of the Church is a flat contradiction of its message at the central point. World community is no longer a matter of the dreams of a few visionaries. It is pressing upon us in its secular form every day. That means that the unity of the Church is a burning issue at the very heart of its world mission, a unity not just in ideas, not just in programme, let me say not just in the kind of togetherness that we are able to enjoy in the Ecumenical Movement and its activities; but a unity in the inner life of liturgy, sacrament and congregational fellowship. If we fail to take that as literally the most crucial issue facing us in relation to the world mission of the Church, how is it possible for us to come to the central point of our witness, i.e. Jesus come in the flesh?

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