



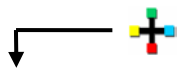
## The Summons To Christian Mission To-Day

1959

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*The International Review of Mission* 48: 177-89.

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Let me begin by reminding you briefly of certain new facts in the situation of the Christian world mission.

There is, first, what we may call the renewal of the cultural tide. The great period of missionary expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with, and was intimately connected with, the cultural and political and economic expansion of the western white races into all parts of the world. That movement of expansion has to-day been – in the main – halted or reversed. This fact creates a new situation for the Christian mission, not absolutely new from the point of view of church history as a whole, but new from the point of view of the modern missionary movement. Missions are having to learn to advance against the tide; they are no longer associated with the dominant and expanding cultural and political powers.

Second, there is the re-birth of the non-Christian religions. The modern educated Hindu no longer reacts passively or defensively to the Christian message. He is confident that he has in his own religious tradition an ocean of truth which can take whatever the other religions may pour into it and still remain essentially the same. He is confident that he has a viewpoint from which he can appreciate the truth of Christianity and yet see that it is only a partial expression of the truth, one of the many colours in the spectrum of religion which is the outward form of the refraction in human experience of the white light of reality. There is an increasingly explicit claim that the Hindu religious tradition provides the answer to the needs of man everywhere, the basis for a condition of peaceful co-existence for the whole human race. In different forms, a similar world-claim is being made by Buddhism and by Islam. Christianity is certainly not to-day, if it ever was, the only missionary religion.

There is, thirdly, the birth of what we must call a single world civilization. Every part of the world, even to the most remote villages,

is being drawn irresistibly into the current of a single global civilization dominated by the science and technology of the West. It is unnecessary for me to document this statement, for it is obvious to any observer. What is remarkable is that this universal spread of western science and technology is happening at the same time as a widespread repudiation of western cultural and political leadership. In demanding a more and more rapid process of technical development, the younger nations of Asia and Africa do not feel that they are thereby surrendering themselves to the cultural leadership of the western white races. On the contrary, they are most anxious to strengthen their independence of that leadership. But they regard modern science and technology as simply the civilization of modern man, as something which – though developed in the West – is the property of the whole modern world. The Hindu workman in a modern factory will smear the sign of his god upon the latest giant machine imported from America or Russia and not feel any sense of incongruity in doing so. The machine simply represents modern world civilization.

Fourthly, there is the fact that, while this modern scientific world civilization has been brought to the birth within western Christendom, Christianity has, to a large extent, failed to come to terms with its own offspring in its own house. It is worth reflecting on the fact that there has been no great conflict between science and religion in India such as there has been in the West. Hindu pantheism can apparently accommodate modern science and technology much more easily than can the Biblical faith which brought it to the birth. The typical and dominant scientific man of the West is, to a large extent, alienated from the Christian tradition. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the fact that, at the moment when the scientific culture which was formed within the western Christian tradition has achieved worldwide expansion and dominance, its unity with the supernatural faith in which it was begotten has disintegrated.

Finally, there is what Archbishop Temple called ‘the great new fact of our era’, the existence – as the fruit of the missionary labours of the past two centuries – of a great family of churches having at least some foothold in almost every country of the world and having an increasing sense of solidarity in the total task of world-mission. It is one of the strange facts about our situation that this very fruitfulness of missions in the past creates for missions in the present one of their great perplexities; for we are having to learn to shift our whole thinking about missions to a new basis. We can no longer think of missions as an

operation conducted from a home base in Europe or North America. We have to think of them as having their home base everywhere in the world, wherever the Church exists. This is easily said, and even easily sung about, but the profound changes in attitude and in practice which it requires are not so easily achieved.

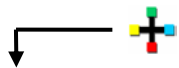
I draw your attention to these five facts as salient facts in the unfolding drama of which the Christian world mission is the central thread. Surely if we have the point of view of the New Testament, we shall not regard these new facts as mere scenery. They have an integral relation to the Christian world mission, and are only rightly understood in the light of that mission. Let us begin by looking at what I have called the birth of a single world civilization.

### *A World Civilization*

One can speak of the appearance of a single world civilization in terms of its most obvious outward signs. In every part of the world to-day one finds the modern techniques of production, transport and communication. Behind these, less obvious to the eye, lie modern methods of business organization. But at a deeper level there are questions concerning the whole nature and destiny of man, questions which have been raised by the impact upon ancient non-Christian cultures of the western Christian tradition. One can illustrate this by taking three issues with which younger nations everywhere are having to wrestle. Consider first the problem of creating a

Welfare State. Why is it impossible for the nations of Asia which have recently recovered their freedom to revert to forms of government modelled on those of Tippu Sultan and Hyder Ali? Because it has become part of the basic thinking of even the most illiterate peasant that it is the duty of Government to provide the maximum possible level of security, health and happiness for all citizens, and that for this purpose Government is bound not merely to keep law and order, but also to initiate programmes for the raising of the whole level of national wealth. This conviction has not emerged out of the traditional consciousness of the ancient eastern faiths. It is a product of the impact upon them of the western Christian tradition.

Or consider the whole question of fundamental human rights. When the modern constitutional documents of Japan came to be written, the drafters had great difficulty with the phrase 'human rights', for there was no Japanese word which conveyed the proper meaning of the word

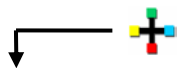


'rights'. The idea of certain things due to man simply as man, apart from any question of his status in society, has not emerged out of the ancient eastern traditions. It has come through the impact upon them of the Christian western tradition. But it has now become one of the basic political realities which no Government can ignore.

Or consider, thirdly, that problem which presses most heavily on most of the younger nations – the population problem. Whence has this problem arisen? In the last analysis, from the impact upon ancient and fairly static cultures of a valuation of the individual human being, even the apparently useless and unwanted human being, combined with techniques for preserving human life, both of which ultimately stem from the western Christian tradition. Note that it is not simply a question of techniques; modern techniques can equally be used for the systematic destruction of human life and the liquidation of unwanted individuals – as recent history has reminded us in so terrible a way. The violent upsetting of the balance between birth-rate and death-rate has been the result of the impact of both technical and ethical factors stemming from the western Christian tradition.

When we speak of the development of a single world civilization we are not thinking simply of the spread of science as an academic study, or of technics as a means of doing things more efficiently; we are concerned with a whole body of thought and practice which is dominated and controlled by the belief that man can master nature and history and can use his powers to create for himself and his children a better world. The immense importance of this fact is obscured because the belief is shared on both sides of what is called the iron curtain – by east and west in the modern usage of those terms. It is forgotten that this belief sets the modern world sharply in contrast to the ancient eastern faiths which have held the majority of mankind so far. According to those faiths human history is interpreted in cyclical rather than linear terms – as a process which constantly returns upon itself, like the natural cycles of birth, growth and death, and not as a continuous forward movement towards a goal in the future. From the point of view of world history as a whole it is surely of the utmost significance that this linear conception of human history is becoming part of ordinary human thinking even in lands dominated by the ancient eastern faiths.

One can illustrate the significance of this development by reference to a very obvious fact. In the Tamil country where I live, time is traditionally computed by means of a cyclical calendar of days, months and years, each of which has a name. There are seven days in a week,

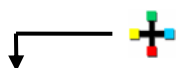


twelve months in a year and sixty years in a cycle. Dates are indicated by giving the names of the day, the month and the year. Thus the years 1820, 1880 and 1940 are indicated by the same name. Sixty years being a normal span of human life, this accords well with the cyclical view of life. But

it becomes impossible to use the traditional calendar in a country which is engaged in a series of five-year plans, each of which has its goals which are the starting point for the next. No one believes that at the end of the twelfth five-year plan India will return to the position she occupied at the beginning of the first! It becomes essential to use a linear calendar, and a linear calendar requires a starting date. It is natural – therefore – that dates are now almost universally reckoned on the time scale which is numbered from the birth of Christ. And this – as will be plain – is not a mere triviality. No other time scale could have been chosen in the circumstances for, in fact, the belief on which the whole idea of planned development is based is a secularized form of the Christian belief in the Kingdom of God. It is a distorted Christian eschatology. We shall consider further the implications of this fact in a moment, but first there is a point which must claim our attention.

### *The Implications Of A Single World History*

To say that there is now a single world civilization means that there is also a single world history. This in itself is a new fact of decisive importance. The whole concept of history is impossible except in the light of some belief as to the meaning of the story which is told. Without this belief there is no basis for selection, no ground on which some among the infinite number of things which happen every day in the world are to be noted as having ‘significance for history’. Thus the very idea of history involves some presuppositions. There have, of course, always been peoples without history – people, that is to say, who do not believe that human affairs are leading to any significant goal, and who therefore do not trouble to note and record events beyond what is necessary for the requirements of ordinary living. One can even to-day visit hundreds of villages in India where there are no records except those concerning the purchase and sale of lands, and where one cannot find out the age of any building which is older than the oldest inhabitant. Presumably the greater part of the human race for the greater part of time has lived in this non-historical condition. Wherever there is a purely cyclical calendar, there cannot be history in the proper sense. And again there have been people who had – so to say – a tribal history, people for



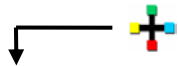
whom the significance of events was judged solely in terms of the progress of the nation in relation to other nations round about. For such a tribal history it is sufficient to have a calendar which runs from a date judged to be decisive for the tribe, like the Roman calendar which ran from the date of the founding of the city. But there can only be a world history if there is some belief as to the direction in which mankind as a whole is moving, in the light of which events can be judged significant or otherwise. There cannot be a world history without some belief as to the course of the story as a whole – that is to say, as to the origin and destiny of man.

What is happening to-day is that more and more peoples are being drawn out of the pools of non-historical existence, and out of the rivulets of tribal history, into the single current of a world history; that events are judged to be significant in the light of their relation to the direction of world history as a whole. And it is no accident that for this age it has become necessary for more and more nations to adopt a calendar in which events are reckoned on a single, linear time-scale which dates from the birth of Christ, for the driving force of this current of world history, the force which is drawing nations irresistibly out of their separate existence into a common world history, is a secularized and distorted form of the Christian eschatology – the belief about the destiny of man which has its ground in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

### *A Secular Faith And Its Breakdown*

This last statement must now be further discussed. The Christian faith involves the belief that the reign of God which broke into human history in the coming of Jesus Christ will be finally sovereign over all things, even sin and death being finally vanquished in a new order of being of which the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the earnest and first-fruit. This faith, when it is

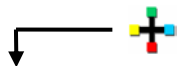
truly grasped, is capable of giving meaning both to the history of mankind as a whole and to the individual history of each human person. The secularized and distorted form of this Christian faith has transmuted the hope of God's kingdom transcending history into the hope of a new order within history to be achieved by man's progressive mastery of nature and of his own affairs. But, as we are painfully aware, this hope has been largely destroyed in the lands of its origin – not by the assault of circumstance from without, but by the very working of its own inner logic. For if the significance of human history lies in the achievement of a state of affairs which the



human beings now living can never enjoy, it follows that the human beings now living have a merely instrumental relation to the meaning of history as a whole. They are means and not ends, and if they prove inefficient means, or actual obstacles, they can and must be destroyed. The logic of this faith leads finally to the totalitarian State with its ruthless purges, and its gas chambers and crematoria for the socially useless individual. It achieves a sense of significance for history as a whole at the cost of destroying any significance for the individual human person.

The reaction against this terrible logic of totalitarianism has carried many into mere futilitarianism, into mere absorption in the most superficial of momentary satisfactions and the abandonment of any attempt to make sense of life as a whole. In many of its phases our western world to-day gives to the rest of the world the impression that this is its inner spiritual condition. For others it has led to an individualistic pietism which seeks to secure meaning for the human person in terms of a belief in personal immortality, at the cost of robbing the drama of human history as a whole of any real meaning. In so far as life has any meaning, it is found in the inner spiritual history of the individual, and in the faith that this history does not end at death. But this means that we have achieved some meaning for the history of the individual at the cost of destroying any possibility of meaning for history as a whole. It is no longer – on this view – a real drama with a coherent meaning; it is what one might call a non-stop revue, an endless series of solo items in which each of the players is destined to receive his personal bouquet off-stage afterwards, but the show as a whole has no plot and no conclusion. Plainly this also is self-defeating, for you cannot make an absolute dichotomy between man's inner spiritual history and his life in society. Man exists as a person in his relation to other men, and his inner life can have no lasting significance apart from some conception of the significance of the history of mankind as a whole.

The tragic element in our human situation to-day is that the secularized and distorted Christian eschatology, the faith, that is to say, which finds the significance of human life in the achievement of a new order of human society on earth – is achieving global extension and penetration just at the time when – by the outworking of its own inner falsity – it stands self-condemned in the lands of its origin. It is recorded that the historian R. H. Tawney was once listening to a group of national leaders from Asia discussing their hopes for their peoples, and after listening for some time interjected the remark : 'If you people



want to go to hell, I don't see why you should want to go to hell the European way.' A young Swiss who came to visit me in India some years ago came back from spending a day with a group of ardent social workers and said : 'It is terrible to see this great people putting its feet on the top of the slippery slope that has led Europe down into the abyss.'

In saying this I must immediately guard against a possible misunderstanding. I am as far as possible from denying the duty and necessity to place modern technics at the service of human need in order to raise the standard of living in the under-developed parts of the world. This duty is urgent. The enormous and growing disparity between the standard of living in the rich and the poor parts of the world is the most important single fact which should be on the consciences of



the wealthier peoples. At a time when it has been suggested that Britain should double her standard of living in the next few years, Christians ought to be pointing out that that standard is already fifteen times that of India. If we are concerned about the doing of God's will and the hallowing of His name in this world – this world where we are now all on each other's doorsteps but have not yet learned to live as neighbours – nothing is more pressing than the duty to try to secure a more equitable distribution of the world's goods. That is not primarily a matter of aid, though aid is involved. It is a matter of our total national economic politics, our policies in regard to finance and tariffs. It is a question whether these policies are dictated only by considerations of national well-being, or also by a concern for the equitable distribution of well-being throughout the world. It was encouraging to read the other day that the British Prime Minister had bluntly told a group of leaders in the cotton industry that they must recognize that there were more important ethical and political issues in the world than the protection of the British cotton industry. More of that sort of courage will surely be needed if we are to act as Christians in this one world. Perhaps our greatest need is, as someone has said, a sort of worldly holiness which can freely use all the resources of modern technics to secure a better standard of living for our brethren, without being bemused into sharing the idolatrous faith in material progress which often provides the driving force for technical advance. It is this faith which provides the main central current of that single stream of world history into which all nations are being drawn.

If we have the Bible as our clue to the understanding of history, it is surely not difficult to understand the development that I am referring



to. The coming of Christ into the world is the revelation of the true destiny of man and of human history. But that coming therefore necessarily precipitates a crisis – *the* crisis, properly so called, of human history. Once the fact of Christ has become known, life can no longer go on as before. It cannot continue in the merely cyclical pre-historic pattern. Equally it cannot continue to flow in the channels of merely tribal history. An irreversible change in the human situation has taken place. The question, 'What is the destiny of man?' has been posed and can no longer be evaded. One either accepts Jesus as the true revelation of human destiny – which means a radical break with the powers and structures of this world, or one tries to find another absolute authority. An absolute claim can only be met by an absolute counterclaim. Thus – and here the teaching of the New Testament begins to be luminous to our generation again – history converges towards a single final issue : Christ or Antichrist, the true Saviour of the world, or the bogus saviours who purport to offer mankind final security and well-being in terms which belong to this world, that is to say, which belong this side of death. An earlier generation was inclined to dismiss the New Testament figure of Antichrist with a disdainful smile. To our generation he is an uncomfortably familiar figure, delineated – for instance – in Big Brother of George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*. For Antichrist is not simply evil in general; the name stands for exactly what it says – the concretion of the powers of evil precisely in the form of an alternative to the true universal salvation offered to the world in Jesus Christ. This convergence of history towards a single issue is clearly not to be thought of as merely part of the background for the Christian world mission. Rather is it one aspect of the fact, which the Bible teaches us to acknowledge, that the world mission is the central clue for the understanding of world history as a whole.

### *A Worldwide Christian Fellowship*

Here the other 'great new fact of our era' becomes relevant to the argument, the fact that we can begin to speak with some realism of a worldwide Christian fellowship, having at least some foothold, however small, in every part of the earth, and increasingly realizing and expressing its unity as a body not merely western, but universal in character. One must beware of claiming more than this, for there is very much to be said on the other side. In great areas of the world the Church is a numerically insignificant minority. And in spite of all the modern



developments of oecumenical fellowship we are very far from acting as one body even in matters where interest obviously requires us to do so. Yet it is not merely wishful thinking when we speak of a worldwide Christian fellowship, increasingly aware of its unity in diversity, and increasingly seeking together to bear witness for Christ against all the idolatries of East and West. Plainly nothing short of this can be adequate to the demands of our time. A universal Gospel demands as its sign and instrument a universal fellowship. As history converges towards its final issue, it will surely become more and more clear that it is in the Name of Christ alone that we can face the world, and that all those other names which we have added to the one Name by which we must be saved, all those titles by which we have sought to define our special and local interpretations of the fact of Christ, will drop into a secondary place.

I think it is part of the inner logic of this whole development that we are now looking forward to the integration of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches, so that there may be one common organ for our growing fellowship as a worldwide Christian fellowship committed to the task of mission to the whole world. It is true that this integration will not immediately make any striking difference; the IMC will go into the integrated Council substantially as it is, and will be able to continue the work that it is doing in very much the same way. But in the long run, this integration can hardly fail to lead to profound changes – rooting the missionary task far more deeply in the whole life of the churches, and making it impossible for Christians anywhere to think of churchmanship in other than missionary terms.

It is of special significance that we are witnessing just at this time the beginnings of the development of new organs of regional Christian co-operation and fellowship corresponding with the emergence of a new regional self-consciousness in various parts of the world. The most advanced of these is the East Asia Christian Conference, which hopes to achieve full formal incorporation at an assembly to be held in Malaya in May, 1959. There are similar promising beginnings in Africa with the Ibadan Conference and its follow-up. Many of us hope that the great conference of Latin American churches to be held in 1960 may open the way for similar developments in that great area of the world. Such organs of regional fellowship are likely to be of great importance in ensuring that measure of decentralization in an integrated world council which is necessary to ensure that no one

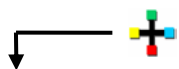


part of the worldwide fellowship has too great a dominance in its thinking.

These developments in co-operation and fellowship are of great significance for such a time as this. But plainly matters of organization are not the most important. As we face our new tasks in this one world, the question is, 'Do we have a message to match this hour?' All our resources in men and money and machinery of co-operation will be of no significance unless we are out-thinking the powers ranged against us. It is here that one of the great tasks of the IMC has always been, and I am happy that there is so much encouraging news to give in this regard. Let me briefly refer to some of the recent developments. Firstly let me mention the quite remarkable development during the last two or three years of a chain of Study Centres in which an attempt is being made to penetrate afresh the great non-Christian cultures with the light of the Gospel. I can speak with first-hand knowledge of the work being done in India under the leadership of Dr Devanandan and Mr M. M. Thomas. It is of the highest quality and is opening up exciting new avenues for constructive Christian approach to the religious and cultural life of India to-day. My brief stay in the Near East this summer, which included the sessions of the Near East Christian Council, enabled me to feel the tremendous encouragement which had been given to Christians throughout the area by the work of Dr Cragg in regard to the approach to Islam. On the other centres in Pakistan and Hongkong I cannot speak with the same personal knowledge, but I believe

that they are making significant contributions in their own areas. Linked with these study centres is the new study project on the Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men, which is bringing scholars from East and West together in a fresh effort to articulate the word of the Gospel to the men and women who live to-day within the spiritual orbit of the non-Christian faiths.

Secondly, there is the exciting new move made at the meetings in Denmark last summer in regard to the study of the Theology of Mission. All of us who are practically involved in the work of foreign missions know that there is often much confusion in the minds even of faithful supporters of missionary work about the real basis of missions. A study of the promotional literature of Foreign Mission boards might reveal some strange answers to the question: 'Why do people support foreign missions?' It has become urgently necessary that we should study together and state afresh in the clearest possible terms the real basis upon which we rest our claim that the Church has the right and duty



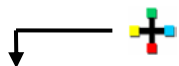
to preach the Gospel to all nations. To help us in this matter a group of extremely able scholars is being called together to work over a period of two or three years, and I cannot doubt that this will help to bring a greater clarity of aim, and therefore a greater concentration of purpose into the missionary movement.

There is, thirdly, the remarkable series of studies in the Life and Growth of the Younger Churches. The first of these has been completed in Uganda, another is very well advanced in Rhodesia, and others are planned in Iran, India and other areas. It has been exciting to watch the kindling enthusiasm with which the first reports of the Uganda study have been read by missionaries and national leaders in other areas, and how suggestive they have already proved of new lines of thinking for the Church. The full report is about to be published and will surely be one of the most stimulating volumes on missionary problems that has appeared for very many years.

And, fourthly, I would mention the creation (through the magnificent generosity of the Sealantic Fund and the major Boards in the United States) of the IMC's Theological Education Fund. From the beginnings which have already been made I am sure that this new venture is going to have profoundly important results in enabling the younger churches to have a ministry better equipped to meet the needs of this new day, better able to help the Church to out-think its adversaries. We are just at the beginning of this tremendous programme, but even at this stage I venture to express the hope that the creation of the Theological Education Fund may only be the first of similar ventures in combined action directed to the urgent requirements of our common task.

### *Our Ultimate Faith*

But it is more, even, than a matter of out-thinking our adversaries. It is a matter of our relation to the ultimate spiritual realities, to the power of God Himself. Our faith is that the word of the Cross is in very truth the power of God unto salvation-and that does not mean just the rescue of each one of us separately, but the healing, making whole, of the whole creation and the fulfilling of God's whole will. Our faith is that the Cross is in truth the only event in human history which can properly be called the crisis of human history, and that the issue which is raised there for the human race as a whole is one beside which even the survival of human civilization on earth is a secondary matter. Our faith is that Christ has broken and destroyed the powers



of sin and death, and that the keys of death and hell are in His hands. The word of that Gospel is, in sober truth, the power of God.



I have been led recently to think much of our Lord's parable of the seed – the seed which in itself is so insignificant a thing, which can fall by the wayside and be lost in the dust, or choked by weeds; but which – given the right circumstances – can have such enormous multiplying power. In our part of India it is quite common to see by the roadside an old building into which by chance a seed has been dropped. At the time it fell it could have been blown away by a puff of wind. But it has fallen into the right place, germinated, put down roots and grown; and now the roots have forced the great granite blocks apart, penetrated and split open cracks in the stones themselves and finally reduced the building to ruin. The Word of the Gospel has that double quality. It can seem to be just a puff of wind, just talk; but in certain circumstances it can germinate and put down roots that go right into the interior life of whole communities, breaking open old structures of thought and practice and bringing forth living fruit. That is what I have seen happening in dozens of villages in South India, where the Gospel spreads from village to village because men cannot keep it to themselves. I have come to feel more and more the simple truth that it is the Gospel itself which is the power of God and that we – with all our apparatus – are, strictly speaking, only servants of the Gospel.

I have spoken of the convergence of world history towards a single issue. That surely means a certain simplification. We face an increasingly unified world whose central driving conception is a secularized and distorted form of the Christian eschatology – a faith in the ultimate power of man to establish on earth the order that he wants. To that we have to oppose simply the word of the Gospel – not an ideology, not a programme, not a religion, but simply Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, the lowly Servant of all men and the exalted King and Head of the whole human race. We have only one message, and only one authority for delivering it; our message and our authority is Jesus Christ. That is the one Name given under heaven for the salvation of mankind. It is enough that we stand under that Name.

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