



*Unfaith and Other Faiths*

1962

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

Unpublished. One in a series of three addresses under the theme "Christian Mission Now" – delivered to the Twelfth Annual Assembly of the Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., January 30 - February 2, 1962.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.

I confess that I have felt very reluctant to speak at a moment when I think most of us would like to be able to go away and meditate for half an hour on the rich and searching exposition of the Ephesians in which we have been sharing today and on the previous days. I confess also that I have found the title given to me, "Unfaith and Other Faiths," a very difficult title to take as the starting point for reflection. The more I have thought about it, the more difficult I have found it. And as I have asked myself why that is so, I have thought that the answer is, perhaps, that unbelief is not a possible starting point for a statement of any kind. The illusion that total skepticism is a human possibility is an illusion which is certainly quite common, but is surely baseless. It is impossible to speak one sentence, impossible even to frame one word, without a certain kind of commitment to the validity of the experiences which have shaped the language that you use. Every use of language, every selection of a word to speak presupposes certain beliefs, certain forms of thought, certain ways of grasping the total reality that surrounds us embodied in the wisdom of the people whose language we use. You cannot utter a sentence without making a certain kind of commitment – commitment to beliefs which might conceivably be untrue.

My wife is at present teaching scripture in a state school near London. When she met for the first time with one of her classes, the leading girl of the class rose at the beginning and said, "Mrs Newbigin, before we begin, we feel you ought, to understand that we do not believe in God, we do not believe in Jesus, in fact, we do not believe in anything." It was an excellent starting point because it did not take long to demonstrate that these girls flattered themselves unduly in thinking that they had no beliefs. They had, in fact, a great many beliefs. The only thing was that they had not examined them. The ambition to be without beliefs, the ideal of an impersonal knowledge which is assured and solid and reliable, apart from an act of faith, apart from a personal commitment and from a personal risk, that ideal is part of the intellectual climate of our time. It owes much to the dominant scientific ideas that surround us, and is also greatly strengthened by the fact that for the first time since the era of Constantine we have a religiously

plural world, a world in which different religious beliefs compete for the allegiance of men. It is not now a matter only of different interpretations of the Christian faith; we have been familiar with that. What we have now is a world in which wholly different faiths, faiths mutually contradictory at the deepest points of human conviction, compete freely and openly in a plural society. In a world of that kind, it sometimes seems that scientific knowledge offers a kind of rock like solidity, universal, assured and above the necessity of appealing to personal faith and personal commitment. Beside it the world of religion seems like a world of private opinion in which one is dealing with guesses, in which one man's guess is as good as another's.

Any of you who have read Michael Polanyi's massively documented analysis of this conception of science will have been convinced of its falsity. The science of our day is itself a vast structure of personal commitment, of personal commitment to views which might conceivably be false it is as true in the world of science as in the world of religion, that one's motto must be "credo ut intelligam." (I believe in order that I may understand.) Polanyi illustrates at many points the logical absurdities into which some philosophers of science are driven in trying to pretend that this is not so. All thought and all language rest upon commitment. Even at the very simplest biological levels, life is commitment. When commitment fails life ceases. Universal doubt is strictly impossible. There is, of course, a proper and necessary place for doubt in religion as elsewhere. Indeed, I like very much the phrase of Hocking when he says that faith is a kind of reversed skepticism, a refusal to take things at their face value, a refusal to be taken in by first appearances. There is a necessary place for doubt in religion, but it cannot be the first place. Neither in religion nor anywhere else can it be the starting point. The starting point must always be faith, commitment; doubt must be auxiliary. Without that there is literally nothing to talk about. Therefore, if we now talk about unfaith it can only be from the standpoint of faith otherwise we cannot even open our mouths to speak. It can only be from the point of view of that to which I am personally committed, that I can speak at all about unfaith.

What then is that to which I am committed? What is the standpoint from which it is possible to speak of unfaith? Here one has to say, perhaps paradoxically, that it is the standpoint which is given at the point of ultimate despair – given by God in Jesus Christ. To use language suggested by one of the earlier Bible studies, it is the standpoint given at the place where the road of commitment ends in a precipice; the point where the man who has followed the road of commitment to revolutionary politics comes to the place where he hangs as a criminal and looks round and says, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The point where the man who has followed the road of commitment to a religious and moral crusade is halted in his tracks, and cries, "Who art thou, Lord;" the point where the man who has tried to follow Jesus says, "We had hoped that it was he which should redeem Israel." The faith of which I would speak is given to us at the point where the road of commitment ends in a precipice. For me personally, that point came when I was committed to an understanding of human life that had led me into service of any fellow-men led me also to the point of complete disillusionment and despair of my own conceivable usefulness. Every rational commitment to action implies some kind of faith that human life can be shaped to a meaningful and worthy end. And the cross of Christ is the end of that faith. It is the point at which a sentence of death is pronounced on man's quest for the good, the reasonable, the coherent. It is the point of final despair for every human idealism; the point at which one is led to believe that it adds up to nothing. It is, at the same time, the point at which a wholly new possibility is given because Jesus, the crucified, is the risen and ascended Lord. In him, there is given at that point the wholly new supernatural possibility of living a life of hope in the midst of despair, or victory in the midst of defeat.

The New Testament language abounds, does it not, in reminders that this paradox is at the very heart of the faith to which it witnesses. You are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God. I have been crucified with Christ. I am finished, done, final death sentence has been pronounced. I have nothing more that I could put into the scales on the Day of Judgment. I have nothing and yet I live, and yet not I, Christ lives in me. Then the new supernatural reality is given at the point of ultimate despair. Baptism itself, as we were just reminded, is the tomb which is also the womb,

the place of dying and of being born, the place of life out of death, the place of faith out of despair. This paradox remains the central core of the Christian faith, not at its beginning only, but through to its end. When I am weak, then I am strong. Faith, the commitment from which alone I can speak, is that paradoxical commitment which is given at the point when all other commitment ends in a precipice.

Therefore, let us face the fact that it is harder to believe in an affluent society. Am I wrong? I know at least that I find it harder to live as a believing Christian in a suburb of London than in South India, because one is always being tempted to believe that this is a fairly broad road without any precipices, at least just immediately. There is no way to believe, except by being at the point where faith is pitted against unbelief; at the point where love is being pitted against despair. There is no other place to believe except there because the love of God is love in action and it is only known in action. I think that in the years that I spent as a bishop in a big South Indian city, the points at which my faith was renewed and made possible were the points at which I was privileged to be in contact with those who were at the edge of the precipice in the quarters of the jail where the condemned prisoners were kept; in the beggar's home where the destitute, the blind, the cripples of the city were brought together; at the point where their faith was being pitted against despair. For me it was in these situations that the possibility of belief was renewed and I was again enabled to believe. We often repeat the text "inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these my brethren ye did it unto me." Do we always remember that that means that in order to meet Christ we have to go to that place where there is destitution, despair, hunger, to the edge of the precipice; that it is there that Christ waits to meet us; there that faith is possible?

What then shall we say of this faith which is born at the point of ultimate despair? We have to say, and again I am repeating things which have been said in the Bible study far better than I can say them, that it does not mean a deification of history and also that it does not mean an escape from history. It does not mean that we are committed to the belief that our enterprise of faith is going to be progressively successive. I wonder whether I am too naïve if I think that much of the perplexity and uncertainty in the missionary enterprise today arises from the very simple fact that we have been too often inclined to believe that missions are going to be progressively and increasingly successful in the world. The number of times that one is asked questions which imply that belief is significant. Is this, perhaps, one of the points at which we are too easily brought under the subtle but intensely effective control of our own public relations? The word "relevant" is a very beloved word among us, but I suppose relevance should include also a certain alertness to the contemporary strategies of the Prince of this world: that we should be rather especially on our guard against anything which suggests that the Church of Jesus Christ can be made to appear in the world as a successful affair, or that the Gospel can ever be put across as, anything other than a scandal and foolishness. Many of us, or of those who support and pray for the work of missions, have been accustomed to the idea that the work of missions should be part of a progressively successful subduing of the world to the cause in which we believe. And when we now face a situation in which manifestly the Christian Church is a shrinking minority of the world's population, this is for many something that shakes the foundations of faith. We have to be absolutely clear that the Christian faith does not mean a deification of history. It does not mean that the purpose of God in the world is identical with the success of our missionary or ecclesiastical or ecumenical operations. We know something of the demonic powers that are unleashed when a human movement comes to be regarded as the exclusive bearer of righteousness. We know something of the terrible power of the self-righteous moralism which is generated when that happens, and how we divide the men and women whom God has created in his image into angels and devils and treat them accordingly.

On the other hand, faith does not mean an escape from history. It does not mean a kind of timeless individual mysticism for which the events of history are merely scenery, or for which they are only important in so far as they bear upon the success of the Christian enterprise. These two negative statements must be made at the beginning, but when we have made them what then can we say? Let me ask that we leave to a little later what we have to say positively about the

content of faith in relation to the events of history. Let us now ask, "What do we say of the relation of this faith, not to unfaith, but to these 'other faiths' about which I am asked to speak?" What are we to say of this array of other faiths, some of them ancient, some of them modern, but all in a sense modern because even the ancient ones concern us now in that they are also modern, revived and renewed as living faiths very largely by the impact on them of influences derived ultimately from the Bible? What we are dealing with in all these faiths, even those which are rooted in ancient, non-Christian cultures, are faiths which are now living as conscious alternatives to the Gospel. Certainly that is true of modern Hinduism. Modern Hinduism as a living faith in India today is a post-Christian phenomenon. It is a conscious attempt to wrestle with issues raised for Indian culture by the impact upon India of the West and specifically the impact of ideas derived ultimately from the Bible. It is an effort to respond to that impact without disrupting the ancient framework of Hindu thought, to find within the ancient religion resources to meet this impact within the terms and the forms of the old faith. In a real sense, all these faiths of which we speak confront us as conscious alternatives to the Gospel as post-Christian phenomena.

That is surely what we should expect. If we have understood our Bibles, we have understood that the coming of Jesus Christ into the midst of history, the coming of the Word, or Him who is Alpha and Omega, in the concrete humanity of the man Jesus, means that men are faced now for the first time with the necessity for a concrete decision about their ultimate destiny. One sees that taking place in the pages of the Gospels themselves. One sees the presence of Jesus among men, creating a situation in which twilight becomes impossible, in which shadows become sharper and sharper as the light shines more and more brightly, in which neutrality becomes more and more impossible, in which men are inescapably drawn either to total commitment to Him as Lord and God, or to total rejection of Him. One sees, as one reads through the apocalyptic parts of the New Testament, that same process of polarization extended in faith and vision across the whole span of history until its end. The coming of Christ in the flesh necessarily precipitates the appearing of the false Christs, of those many who come saying, "I am He," claiming Messianic power, claiming to be the bearers of salvation, that is to say, of total welfare for mankind within history. It is not a new thing for men to be offered salvation outside of history, in the sense of an escape from history for the individual. It is a new thing, a post-Christian thing, to be offered total salvation – total welfare for mankind – within history. The New Testament teaches us to see the coming of the Alpha and Omega in the midst of history in the concrete humanity of Jesus as the point at which the issue of man's ultimate salvation is definitely posed, so that after His coming, neutrality becomes impossible, and men must either give themselves to Him or else seek total salvation on some other terms. Those of you who have read that unforgettable fragment of Soloviev called "A Vision of Anti-Christ" will have recognised there an extraordinarily penetrating and relevant prophecy of the time in which we live. The times after Christ are the times in which men expect and get messiahs. If, therefore, politics and every other part of human life becomes more and more messianic, that is surely precisely what we would expect.

How then, do we understand these other faiths and our relation to them? Three things I think we must say. Firstly, that there is no question of fear or anxiety as though it were a matter of rivals which threaten our position, as though our success were now in a new sense in the balance. We have too much of that kind of talk, but from a New Testament point of view that is simply unbelief. Is it not necessary to say rather plainly that there are two motives which, if they are allowed to get into the heart of our missionary thinking, can be terribly corrupting? One is guilt about our past, and the other is fear about our future. Guilt about our colonial past is no true ingredient in the missionary motive, nor is guilt about our wealth and our power. If we have not been able to accept God's forgiveness for our own past, we shall not be ready to forgive the sins of others in the present and the future. If we have not been able to accept God's forgiveness for the sins of imperialism and colonialism we shall not be able to forgive the sins of nationalism and totalitarianism. That kind of guilt is spiritually sterile. We must so accept by faith God's forgiveness that we are delivered altogether from every attempt to justify ourselves by works, even by our works of technical assistance. Only so shall we be free to look without illusions and

with compassion, both upon the self-righteousness of colonialism and upon the self-righteousness of nationalism. Equally sterile as a motive for missions is fear about the future, fear about what is going to happen to the world, fear about how successful, or otherwise, missions are going to be, fear about the power of rival faiths. If that is our motive, we have no Gospel. Our message is the Kingdom of God. God reigns, be the people ever so unquiet. That is the basis of our mission.

Secondly, unfaith and other faiths are among the things of which it is written that "these things must come to pass." In different ways, in the synoptics, in St. John, in the Revelation, we are warned to expect that the revealing of the Christ means the sharpening of the conflict between the powers of the Kingdom of God and the powers of evil means the revealing of the anti-Christ, or the false proponents of total welfare for mankind on other terms than God's.

And thirdly, in the perspective of the Gospel there is no such thing as a hierarchy of other faiths. There is no such thing as higher and lower in relation to the Gospel. Rather, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The Gospel is a revolutionary power which upsets all our stratifications and the caste systems based upon our own moral assessments. The publicans and the harlots may go in the Kingdom of God before the churchmen. The irreligious communist may be nearer the Kingdom of Heaven than the pious believer. The son who kept all his father's commandments may at the end be outside, while the ne're-do-well is in the father's house with feasting and dancing. We are simply forbidden to act as if this were a movement in our hands in which we were free to make alliances, to make judgments of high and low, near or far. All men without exception are within reach of the cross. And the condemned murderer may be nearer than the pious believer. Jesus is the one who goes down to the very depths of hell to save men, and whose sovereign power reaches to the very ends of creation.

Having then said those three things about the relation between this faith and other faiths, let me now come back to what seems to me the most difficult and perhaps pressing issue, and to try to say what faith means for the understanding not merely of unfaith and other faiths as intellectual systems, but for the understanding of what is happening in the world, what God is doing in the world – this world of unbelief and other beliefs. For these other faiths are part of the struggle of men to make sense of their history, to bring meaning at least into some little area of the meaninglessness of human existence. They are the part of the struggle to see life as a significant thing leading to some significant end. I don't mean to say that the old pre-Christian pagan, non-historical forms of religion are not still strong. They are extremely strong. But in their modern forms these ancient faiths derive such strength as they have out of this wrestling with modern history, out of the attempt to meet the dynamism of this world in which we live. Even if they deliberately go back to the pagan past, the result is something different because it is a deliberate and conscious return. Again, let me say, with a little more elaboration, the two negative things with which I began.

Firstly, our faith does not mean a deification of history. It does not mean the success of our movement, it does not mean that the mission of the Church is the clue to history in the sense that it is going to be more and more clearly the dominant fact of human history. That says something, does it not, to a good deal of our missionary practice and thinking? I have put down here two headings – perhaps I should not expand them. "Missionary Statistics." "Missionary Anxiety." I don't know what you think about missionary statistics. But I wonder whether we have quite sufficiently reflected upon that story from the Old Testament about what happened when David tried to number God's people. And about missionary anxiety: I would remind you of that challenging passage in John Taylor's great book, "The Growth of the Church in Buganda," where he speaks of anxiety as the characteristic mark of a certain kind of missionary, anxiety about the cause of God and about the life of the younger church. All of these spring from a false understanding of the relationship between our faith and what happens in history. It was to me an extraordinarily illuminating and liberating moment when as a fairly young missionary wrestling with the problems of a church in India it was suddenly borne in upon me, that when God launched the original mission into the world, there was no home board to fall back upon,

But, secondly, our faith is no escape from history. We know how we have often attempted in effect to make it an escape; how we have often made it appear that we were not really concerned with what was happening to the world as a whole, except when it impinged in some sense on our work, either for helping or for hindering, so that we have made it appear that we were concerned with something less than the whole fulfilling of God's sovereign will over history.

But now, let me try positively to say something more. I believe we shall find the way to state truly the relationship between what God is doing in His Church in the preaching of the Gospel, in the administering of the sacraments, in the bringing in and the baptizing of the nations on the one hand, and what God is doing through the great movements of secular history on the other, only if we are willing to take seriously the trinitarian character of our faith; if we are able again, as the earliest Church was compelled to do when it sought to articulate the Gospel in the pluralistic, polytheistic world of the Greco-Roman empire, to express it in terms of faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To be specific, we have to remember constantly that the revelation of God, which is the basis, of our faith, is the revelation of a Son, and that that governs its entire character. "We beheld His glory, the glory of an only begotten, from the Father." In other words, the revelation which is the basis of our faith is not the revelation of one who controls history, but the revelation of one who loves and obeys the controller and, who, therefore, suffers history; one who does not fulfill his mission by seeking to alter the course of history, but fulfills His mission by accepting the Father's disposition of the course of history, including all the petty details of the life and politics of a little province of the Roman empire, as the form in which His mission is to be fulfilled. At this point there is something, it seems to me, basic for our understanding of the relation between God's work in the Church and God's work in the world. And it means surely, that we have to accept the fact that in a certain sense, the primary form of the Church's witness is suffering, *marturia*. It is in loving obedience to Him who does control history that the Church bears its witness to Him. It is at the point where the Church is brought to persecution that the promise is given, "In that hour it shall be given you what to say." Thus, the Church becomes the place at which God's mercy and judgement are present. Christ sent forth the Church, as the Father sent Him. The Church is the continuing of His mission, and its mission is subject to the same basic form as His. It is sent out not to rule but to suffer, and to be given in the hour of suffering the word of witness, to be the place where concrete decisions are made, to obey or disobey the Lord of all, to be the first fruits, therefore, of the Kingdom.

We understand rightly the mission of the Church if we understand the work of God, the Father, Son and Spirit. The Father, the ruler of all, bears all things in His hands. He causes even the sin of men to serve His purposes. He raises up the nations and casts them down. He permits idols to exist and also destroys them. But the witness of all that He is doing, the sign of the end to which He is leading all things, and the place, therefore, where that end is understood and where therefore it can, be deliberately accepted, where the possibility is offered of becoming by sonship, the obedient and living and understanding co-workers with the Father, is the Church, the Body of Christ in history. And the Church does not simply suffer in human strength. It does not merely bear with human fortitude the unbearable tension of hope, the "not yet" which is written over all things. The Holy Spirit of God is given to the Church as a living power in the heart of the believers, as the arrabon, the instalment of the inheritance which is in store for us. He is, therefore, also the witness who Himself makes men aware of the presence of the Kingdom even in the poverty and weakness and foolishness of the Church, and who therefore convicts the world of sin of righteousness and of judgement. The Church does not go through history, building up, stone upon stone, the Kingdom of God. The Church does not in that sense go through history establishing God's lordship in the world. On the contrary, it is the Spirit, the sovereign free Spirit, who goes ahead of the Church, preparing men's hearts in ways that no man could have planned, so that the Church has all that it can do to follow after to make open and visible what the Spirit has already begun in secret before any churchmen knew of it. Surely every missionary knows this!

And these three are one God: the Father ruling all; the Son as head of the Church who is seated at the right hand until all things are put under his feet; and the Spirit poured into the hearts of Christ's people so that they are enabled to witness to Him in speaking, in doing, in suffering. These are not three Gods, but one. He whose Spirit has been given to us is also He who rules all things in nature and in history. We know Him as the Spirit who makes us members in the Son, so that we know the Father and love and obey Him in and through the Son, accepting as he did the Father's disposition of events as the form in which the witness to His reign is to be given.

Unfaith and other faiths will be with us to the end. The conflict between true faith and false will grow sharper and more fierce. There can in the end be no neutrality. Every soul must be finally given to Christ or wholly surrendered to the devil. We are not required to be anxious about the success of God's cause, or about the powers of unbelief. He reigns above the flood. What is required of us is that we should be faithful witnesses of His Kingdom and servants of His will in whatever historical circumstances He is pleased to place us. The rest is in His hands.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.