



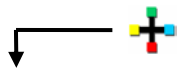
## The Spiritual Foundations of Our Work

1967

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*The Christian College and National Development* (Madras: Christian Literature Society Of India, 1967): 231-38.

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.



For three reasons I am diffident about the task assigned to me. First, I have been absent from most of your meetings. I regret this deeply. It was due to commitments made long before this Conference was planned. Second, whereas the address with which Cardinal Gracias opened this conference displayed an intimate knowledge of Protestant writings about Christian education in India, I have to admit a monumental ignorance of comparable Roman Catholic writings in the subject. Since even a Bishop is wise if he refrains from talking about things on which he is ignorant, I am obliged to confine myself to the thinking, which has been done on this subject by Protestants. Third, the subject assigned to me is potentially divisive, and one does not wish to provoke disagreements during the last address of a conference. One can hardly deal with the subject assigned to me without at least skirting those 'dangerous shoals of theological argument' against which our Secretary warned us in his initial statement. The danger is the more obvious in view of what Dr Dickinson himself has said in his report: 'We are in the midst of a crisis of goal-definition without our being clearly aware that a crisis exists' (Page 17). The truth of this statement is made vivid in the table, which is set out on the next page. From this table it is clear that there is a purpose of their work. There is no evidence of a consensus. Moreover there is – on this point – no significant difference to be observed between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant colleges. The varieties of opinion about goals is equally divided among them all. An optimist might say that this shows how ecumenical we have all become; a biblical realist might say that it shows that we are all equally exposed to the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience.

In spite of these difficulties it has seemed to me that I cannot escape the responsibility of dealing with some of the theological issues on which we are divided. I do not think that a little dose of general 'spiritual uplift' would be the right way to end this wonderful meeting. Praying for god's guidance and for your forgiveness, I can only try to say what I believe.

I start with Alexander Duff who arrived in Calcutta in 1830 to found the College, which was to be the pioneer of Protestant missionary enterprise

in the field of higher education. For Duff, truth was a single reality, and the centre and controlling point of that reality was Jesus Christ. Hinduism was an erroneous system of belief. Confront young and intelligent minds with the truth as a whole, and they will respond to it, take hold of it, love it. Truth as a whole is to be taught: history, science, geography, literature, philosophy and all the rest. Bible study will be an essential part of the curriculum – quantitatively a small part, but central to the whole. There is to be no screening of the facts, no brainwashing, no indoctrination. Pupils are to be exposed to all the facts, to discuss them, ask questions about them, sift them for themselves. There is a tremendous emphasis upon discussion and questioning. Everything is to be thoroughly thought out until the truth is grasped for its own sake.

Incidentally, this was certainly not merely a programme for training obedient clerks for the Company. Duff and his contemporaries in Madras and Bombay were no stooges of the ruling power. If you read the delightful story of John Anderson of Madras you will find that he had a compendious phrase, which covered a good, many of his compatriots in the City – ‘infidel Europeans.’

Believing thus, it followed that these men hoped that at least some of their pupils would be led to accept Christ and be baptised. For the sake of one baptism they were prepared to see their whole life work ruined if necessary. More than once in the days of John Anderson the Madras College was entirely emptied of students for this reason. More than once it looked as if the institution would be destroyed. While the college buildings were empty and angry mobs raged outside, Anderson’s biographer tells us that they used to sing the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm (45<sup>th</sup> in the Catholic enumeration) and that the words ‘echoed sweetly through the empty halls.’

This was a noble faith. It bore fruit. We are building on the foundations that were then laid.

Let us skip half a century of history and come to Madras where the dominant figure is the great William Miller of this College. The scene is in many ways different from that which faced Duff and his colleagues – different partly because of what they had accomplished. Hinduism is not the same phenomenon. It has been roused to a new self-criticism and a new self-affirmation. Government has accepted a more enlightened view of its responsibilities for the education of India. Universities have been founded and are developing. Christian Colleges must plainly be part of these universities if they are to have any future.

The spirit in which Miller regarded his task as the principal of a Christian College is nicely illustrated in an incident recorded by O Kandasamy Chettiar in his sketch of Miller. Miller had returned from Scotland in 1888 and received a tremendous welcome from his old students and from the public of Madras. “Dr Miller’s reply emphasised the predominant aim of the College, the formation of right principles, of good habits and a noble character on the lines inculcated and exemplified by the Greatest Teacher in the world’s history. He also pointed out how in pursuing this aim the College was serving the best and highest interests of India. A few days after, I asked Dr Miller why he contented himself with a general description of the aims of the College and did not say specifically that the College

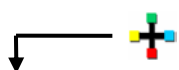
existed for preaching Jesus Christ. His answer was than an expression like that, while it sounded correct enough among Christian believers, was calculated to create an erroneous impression on non-Christian minds so long as Christ was represented to them as the destroyer of other than Christian civilisation. Christ he said was the friend of all that was good and true not only in Christianity but also in Hinduism, and the enemy of evil and error wherever found, whether in the Hindu system of civilisation or in Christendom. A paraphrastic description of Christ’s personality conveyed, he said – and I can say that this was true so far as my experience went – clearer, fuller and more inspiring ideas than even the sacred name when it conveyed no definite or correct ideas,

but only created an unthinking prejudice which hindered the entrance of Christian truth into non-Christian minds". (op.cit.page 43).

Note the two characteristic phrases: 'character formation' and 'the best and highest interests of India'. The two phrases sum up as well as can be done the vision, which Miller had for the College. The first is further elaborated in another passage in which Kandasamy reports one of Miller's addresses: "The aim of the College was in short to mould character. It aims at sending out men into the world with their whole being so developed that when truth comes before them they will love it, that when duty comes to them they will do it, that in all questions for themselves, for others, or for the community, it will be their instinctive tendency to form decisions not according to their own convenience but according to the highest principles which they see to be applicable to the case in hand. It aims at making those whom it has trained aware, not as a mere abstract doctrine but as a fact that bears on every detail of common life, that this world is in the hands of the living God and that He rules it according to a plan which however dimly apprehended in many of its parts may yet be clearly traced in others – a plan which it is only the wisdom of every rational being to conform to and which it may be our glorious privilege and sufficient joy to take part in and advance" (op.cit.page 78).

The latter part of that quotation opens up the great theme of Miller's teaching: the divine guidance of history, and India's place in it. If one reads especially Miller's long series of addresses to his old students – where perhaps his driving convictions are more clearly expressed than in his addresses to church and missionary bodies in defence of his work, one is invited constantly to share his vision of India moving forward to claim her due place in the great world history which God is unfolding, bringing the treasures of her religion and culture to place alongside those of Greece and Rome and the barbarian nations of the West. In this picture the Christian Church does not seem to play the central part. When Miller was asked the question: Is it necessary to be baptised? He refused to answer the question in that form, insisting that it was a wrong question. God, he said, will Himself show each person if and when He wants him to be baptised. The job of the Christian College is simply to 'prepare the way of the Lord'. History is in the hands of the Lord. India has her great place in God's plan for world history. As India moves forward to take that place it is (one is compelled to remark) the old students of Madras Christian College, rather than the Church of Jesus Christ, who form the vanguard.

If we move forward another half-century, we find ourselves in these buildings at Tambaram, opened a few months earlier. The scene is



the Conference of the International Missionary Council of 1938 – one of the series of ecumenical missionary meetings, which laid the foundation of what we now call the ecumenical movement. The Lindsay report had been out a few years. Its central demand – for higher academic standards, and for a greater concentration of effort – had met with less response than had been hoped. But already other factors were having a decisive impact upon the work of Christian Colleges in India. The Protestant theological pendulum had begun to swing, to the opposite pole from that represented by Miller. The fearful struggle with a virulent neo-paganism in Europe had forced Christians into a fortress mentality. Vague and diffused ideas and tendencies were not good enough for such a time as this. Something much more solid was needed. The Church, founded upon the rock, against which the gates of hell would not prevail – that was now the centre of the picture and Christian colleges – like any other forms of missionary activity – must be judged primarily by what they do to strengthen the Church, build up its leadership and equip it to stand on its own feet as a strong, confessing Indian Church. The central function of the College is to train the future leadership of the Church.

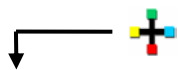
I speak here with rather vivid memories. At the time of the Tambaram Conference I was a district missionary 25 miles from here. Not a single product of those village congregations had ever been admitted to the Madras Christian College. It was not in the Miller tradition. I made it

my business to batter at these doors until a few young men from these villages were admitted. They are now playing their part in the life of the Church in Madras.

But now, 30 years later, the pendulum has again swung to the other extreme. (The Protestant pendulum seems to have a built-in tendency to accelerate, which leads me to suppose that about 15 years from now we shall be in a period of extreme ecclesiasticism). Today the key word is 'development'. We are in the middle of the 'Development Decade' proclaimed by the United Nations Organization. The criterion by which Colleges are to be judged is their contribution to national development.

In so far as this means that we have moved from a selfish communal attitude to one of unselfish service to the nation as a whole, it must be unreservedly welcomed. We shall be, and indeed we are guilty when we see the Colleges only – or even primarily – as instruments for the advancement of the Christian community. And yet the concept of national development certainly does not provide an adequate satisfaction of the demand made in our basic document for 'a goal or constellation of goals which are cogent and compelling and in the light of which the work of the colleges may be developed and evaluated'. A very small amount of reflection will make that clear. 'Development' is not a self-defining concept. We must ask: development for what? in what direction? of what capacities and resources? The concept of development does not supply the norms, which we need. On the contrary, we must evaluate and guide development in the light of more fundamental criteria derived from our belief about the nature and destiny of man.

We are in the presence of a real danger – the danger of a new sort of conformism in which whatever is happening is judged to be the work of God and the one thing that is unthinkable for a Christian is to stand alone for



his convictions. A recent review of the deservedly popular and influential book of Harvey Cox – *The Secular City* – draws attention to the Hegelian pattern of the argument of this book, in which the place occupied in Hegel's thought by the Prussian state is taken by the North American megalopolis. We cannot accept 'development' as providing the goal-definition, which we require.

Moreover we would all agree that education is concerned with the human person who certainly can only be fully developed in community, but who equally certainly cannot be used as a mere instrument for a social or national purpose. As teachers you are concerned with the individual student each of whom has his own special gifts temptations and possibilities, and each of whom as – as no nation has – an eternal destiny.

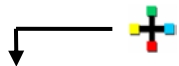
It is surely clear that for Christians – as for all others – our goals must be determined by our ultimate beliefs. No definition of the goal of a Christian College can be adequate except one, which arises from our faith in God through Jesus Christ. About this we must surely be completely frank and open. We certainly do not earn the respect of the best men and women of other faiths when we try to pretend that our faith in Jesus Christ does not govern our work as educators. If our faith does not govern the direction of our life work, what kind of faith is it? The statement of our goals must be a Christian statement.

It must be immediately added that this does not mean a statement determined by communal considerations. To keep these two things distinct is of the essence of the matter. Our goals, let me repeat, must be determined by what we believe God has shown to us in Jesus Christ; they must not be determined by what we consider to be advantageous for the Christian community.

Yet while distinguishing these two things, we cannot wholly separate them. The Christian faith in God through Jesus Christ does not exist as a disembodied entity. It exists as the faith of living men and women. To profess that one believes this faith to be true, while professing to be wholly impartial on the question whether or not others come to believe it, is to deceive oneself. There is a kind of proselytism, which we all rightly condemn because it is motivated more by the desire for corporate self-aggrandisement than by passion for the truth and love for people. But

truth does not prevail in the affairs of men unless there are people so committed to their vision of it that they needs must try to bring others to a like commitment.

A Christian College is not primarily a place where the Gospel is preached with a view to bringing about conversion. It is a place of teaching. I am arguing, however, that its goals must be stated in Christian terms. As a starting point for the positive statement I want to make, I quote the following characteristically clear and terse statement from Dr J R Macphail of this College: A College, he says, “may properly be called Christian if those responsible for its policy, and a considerable proportion of the teachers are moved mainly by their love of Christ, and take his sacrifice as the standard of truth and goodness. The motive must be Christian. But the object is secular. The College is to be judged, as it turns out students able to think. The Christian teacher must teach, as the Christian healer must heal. No one



would approve of a Christian hospital if all its patients died, even though they had all been baptised first”.

I suppose that if this sentence had been read to John Anderson, he might have commented: ‘and who will approve of a hospital where all the patients are cured – and go to hell?’ We do not say things like that nowadays, but I do not think we have got a proper theological reason for not saying it. We believe that it is good – good in God’s sight – that sick people should be healed and dull boys taught to think clearly and judge wisely, even though they are not converted to the Christian faith. But we have not developed a coherent theology of secular action. The problem of stating our goals as Christian colleges is part of the wider problem of stating in clear terms the theological justification for the pursuit of secular goals. Granted that we believe it to be God’s purpose to sum up all things in Christ (Ephesians I: 10) that the range of his purpose is cosmic and includes the renewal of the whole of creation; and granted also that we believe the Church to be the body formed by God to have special consciousness of and therefore responsibility for this purpose; what is the ultimate value of these works of ours in subduing the earth, creating civilizations, advancing knowledge, teaching, healing building – these activities which we believe are in the line of God’s will as revealed in Christ but which fall outside the boundaries of that body explicitly committed to Christ by faith and baptism?

I believe with all my heart that these things are – so to say – validated by our assurance of the faithfulness of God; that we can trust him to ensure that nothing of this is lost; that we can be sure that in some way beyond our present understanding they will find their place at the last in that renewed and restored creation of which the resurrection of Jesus is the first-fruit. I think that to explicate this in a way that can be grasped by ordinary people is the greatest theological task of our time. The writing of Teilhard de Chardin in one way, and those of Henrikus Berkoof in another are immensely stimulating – though doubtless also vulnerable – essays in this direction. The 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Vatican Council document on the Church in the Modern World, entitled *Man’s Activity throughout the World* is a very helpful statement of the matter which also contains sober reminders of the negative, satanic elements in the story of man’s terrestrial progress. I am sure that this is an area in which a great deal of work will be done in the coming few years.

It would, however, be intolerable to suggest that Christian colleges can get along without clearly defined goals until the theologians have finished their arguments. And it would be irresponsible for me to take you through this long argument without trying – however ineffectually – to suggest the outlines of a statement of goals. With very great diffidence, therefore, I suggest to you the following statement of our purpose: to offer to students of all communities that kind of training for the whole person which is congruous with God’s revelation in Christ of the nature of manhood, and is appropriate to the needs of India at this point in world-history. And let me offer the following comments on this statement.

1. It begins by referring to the students. It is for them that the College exists.

What we are doing arises from a loving desire, which we believe is rooted on the love of

God, that every one of these young men and women should be trained to think straight, judge wisely, and act effectively.



There are indeed ends beyond this – national development, social justice, world order, the affirmations of man’s humanity everywhere. But our students are not means to these ends. Our concern is for them, that they may learn to discern for themselves and to seek for themselves the true end of man.

2. You will note that I have not referred to moral and spiritual values. In one sense we cannot be too much concerned about these. Yet I fear that when moral and spiritual values are spoken of apart from a foundation in some belief about what is, and simply in the context of their obvious desirability as a means of preserving order in society, then the smell of ideology is in the air. Too often, in this context, what are called moral and spiritual values become the ideological screen behind which the possessing and ruling groups protect their interests. True education must train people to see what is, and to discriminate between what is good and what is bad, between what is genuine and what is bogus, between sense and nonsense.

3. The definition refers to the training of the whole person. It implies the development of the capacity to see, to judge and to act. It therefore says something not only about the academic life of the College but also about training in the community, in public service, in self-government.

4. It is training appropriate to the needs of India today. If national development is not and cannot be our ultimate norm, nevertheless the needs of India at this moment in history must be recognised as the primary conditioning factors. I do not need, at this stage of the conference, to repeat that there is need for drastic self-criticism among us at this point when we look at our colleges today.

5. India is neither an isolated nor a static entity. Our nation is part of a world community in which the dominant fact at the present time in the drive towards a sense of global unity within a single secular civilization. Surely Miller was right, and the Lindsay Commission were right in insisting that it should be one of the marks of a Christian College that it gives its students a sense of history of which they are a part, of its direction, of the fundamental choices which have to be made in our time, and of the light which is cast upon these issues by an understanding of history which finds its centre and turning point in Jesus Christ.

6. The crucial clause in the whole definition is ‘the revelation in Christ of the nature of manhood’. The centre is our Lord himself. It is from him that we must derive both our motive and our norm. It is contact with him that will pose the most searching questions and set the highest standards. His place at the centre of all we do will – if I may put it so – be the guarantee of permanent and radical self-criticism. It is in him that both staff and students will find a light that illuminates every true course of action and exposes every false one. It is his presence that will put to shame everything shoddy, everything that is mere show without depth.

I therefore find myself going back to the position of Duff in its basic essentials, namely an education in which Christ is present as the centre – simply because he is who he is, the Lord or all, the Word made flesh, the king and head of the human race, the cause and cornerstone of the



universe. We cannot now share Duff’s estimate of Hinduism, or his understanding of God’s way of leading India to himself. But I think fundamentally our intention must be as his was, to offer to

all who would come to an education of which Christ is the centre in the faith that this will be a mighty instrument for the fulfilment of God's will for the nation.

Seventy years ago, when William Miller was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1,500 old students of this College addressed a letter to that Assembly to express their gratitude for what the College had meant in their lives. They included men who were playing leading roles in the life of India at the time. The Assembly was moved to send a reply, part of which I would like to quote. Much in our situation is different from that in which this message was written. Nevertheless I think that it says something, which is equally valid today. "You remind us", says the Assembly message, "that many of you are not sharers with us in the religious belief which has inspired our work in India and elsewhere. We respect the exercise of your own judgment, and through all the differences that may divide us we would maintain the same cordial goodwill. It is most true that we desire, as you express it, to see East and West linked in a common brotherhood. We rejoice in all good gifts which are peculiarly your own; and we would be serviceable to you in communicating, so far as you will receive them, whatever good gifts have been bestowed upon us by Him who has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth. But, in that spirit, we desire, affectionately and above all things, once more to commend to you, as our missionaries have often done, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Who for us men and for our sake, took flesh and died. We men in the West have no better claim to Him than you have. We possess nothing so precious – we value nothing so much – we have no source of good so full, fruitful and enduring – we have nothing to compare with the Lord Jesus Christ. To Him we must bear witness. And we should gladly consent that you should cease to listen to us, if you would be led to give your ear and your heart to him".

A Christian College is not primarily a place where the Gospel is preached and people are converted. It does not exist primarily to strengthen the Christian community. It is not simply a contribution to national development. It is – or ought to be – a place where, under the impulse of the love of God, there is offered to all who desire it that kind of training of the whole person which is congruous with God's revelation in Christ of the true nature of manhood, and is appropriate to the needs of India at this stage of world history.

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.