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Unpublished 1982 two-page essay critiquing “progressively liberal capitalism”. "Lesslie Newbigin Papers" held in care of the Orchard Learning Resources Centre, Information Services, The University of Birmingham, Hamilton Drive, Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6QW, U.K.

URC Mission & Other Faiths Committee.

When our Committee was discussing the Christian approach to ideologies and it was proposed that we should undertake a study of Marxism, I was rash enough to suggest that - if we were to do this - we must at the same time undertake a study of the ideology which informs our own society (shall we call it 'progressive liberal capitalism?'), and that if we failed to do this we would in effect be looking at Marxism through the spectacles provided by our culture rather than through those provided by the biblical tradition. The natural result of my folly was that I was asked to produce something on the subject.

For many months I have been trying to come to grips with this assignment. I have found it extremely difficult, and I am well aware that I am not trained and equipped for this kind of job. However, I could not refuse to try. I have read the two 500 - page volumes of Paul Hazard on European thought from 1680 to 1800. I have read the two volumes of Basil Willy on the 17th and 18th century. And I have ploughed through the work of Cassirer on *'The Philosophy of the Enlightenment'*. I have also reflected in the process on two books which have much shaped my thinking. The first is Cochran's *'Christianity & Classical Culture'* which documents - so to speak - the reverse movement to that of the Enlightenment - i.e. the break-up of the classical world view and its replacement by the Christian model. The second is Polanyi's *'Personal Knowledge'* which affirms that the era of the Enlightenment has come to an end, that the critical process has exhausted itself, and that no future is possible without a redressing of the balance between faith and doubt.

I am sure that if we are to understand our culture we must go back to that moment which Paul Hazard calls *'The Crisis of the European Consciousness'*, and which called itself: 'The Enlightenment'. What, exactly, happened to cause European man to believe that light had dawned uniquely on him at that point in time, that the works of Descartes and Newton and the rest of them had at last shown to human eyes how things really are - so that all previous ages (except the classical age of Greece) and all other civilizations (except perhaps that of China) were just darkness? It was, in the fullest sense, a conversion experience. It replaced one whole set of models for understanding reality by another. It meant - almost literally - that European man said: 'Once I was blind; now I see'. What, exactly, happened?

Paul Hazard says that it was the replacement of a society based on duties by a society based on rights. Basil Willy says - more profoundly, I think - that it was the replacement of one kind of

explanation by another. But how does one 'explain' that? How can one explain why an 'explanation' which was satisfying for 1,000 years has become unsatisfying and why another 'explanation' is found to be satisfying. What is an 'explanation'? Willy can only conclude that it is an inexplicable feeling of mental satisfaction. If I suffer an accident, a Hindu will explain it as the result of my previous *karma*, an African will explain it as the result of a curse, and a European will explain it as the result of a failure of the brakes. Each of these 'explanations' satisfies one - and gives no satisfaction at all to the others. How does one "explain" that? I don't know. But I follow Basil Willy in thinking that the most fundamental change at the Enlightenment was a change from a way of 'explaining' things which was basically deductive, to one which was basically inductive. The starting point, in other words, is not a revelation which is simply received as authoritative, but rather accurate observation of all the data and the organization of the results into coherent patterns by means of inductive thought. The shift is highlighted by the change in the 'tone' of the word 'dogma' and the word 'doubt'. Before the Enlightenment 'dogma' stands for that blessed gift of truth which one can trust to guide us in our perplexities, and 'doubt' is a perverse refusal to trust what has been given. After the Enlightenment 'dogma' is a bad word and 'the principle of doubt' has become the key to progress.

It follows from this that 'God' is replaced by 'Nature' in the thinking of the Enlightenment. Granted that one could fill volumes describing the various and often contrary meanings of the word 'Nature', nevertheless the main switch is clear. Nature is what is and what is accessible to investigation by reason. It is therefore the fundamental reality with which we have to deal. Anything claiming to be revealed truth is - in fact - part of nature and must submit to investigation by the same tools and on the same principles as the rest. This obviously determined how the Bible is to be studied.

The study of nature is the task of the autonomous reason which is not subject to any authority other than its own rationality. To accept any authority other than the facts of nature as the autonomous reason grasps them is a betrayal of rationality.

The facts can only be grasped by means of clear and distinct ideas. There mathematics is the clue to all other knowledge. Mathematical symbols are absolutely clear and unambiguous and the aim must be eventually to translate all alleged knowledge into the language of mathematics.

The autonomous reason, freed from the shackles of dogma, is capable of unlimited advance in knowledge, and therefore in mastery. Such knowledge and mastery are cumulative. Therefore progress is the law of history. No supernatural interventions are to be expected or desired. Man will attain increasing and finally perfect mastery over his world.

The result of this will be happiness. The pursuit of happiness is the right of every human being and happiness is to be expected as the first fruit of progress.

Among all the poisonous elements in 'dogma' the worst is the dogma of original sin. To eradicate this dogma completely from the human mind is the necessary condition for progress. It is treason against humanity. If human beings are not happy, it is because external powers (among which religion is the most dangerous) have enslaved them.

Since human possibilities are unlimited, human hopes can and should be invested without limit in the means by which the obstacles can be removed. In effect this has been seen as the nation-state. Nationalism becomes the religion of post-Enlightenment man, and the passions which previously went into religious conflict now go into the conflicts between nations. In spite of the existence of other ideologies which have been influential in the past 200 years, none of them has ever been able to

withstand or even to modify the power of nationalism. In particular Marxism in all the countries where it is the official ideology, has been in fact totally subordinated to the national idea. Nationalism is the effective religion of the post-Enlightenment nation-state - the source from which. all blessings flow - education, health, culture, prosperity.

The above is an absolutely ridiculous attempt to suggest the main elements in the Enlightenment world-view. I submit it to be shot at. Meanwhile, let me make three points.

1. The response of the Churches to the Enlightenment has been, by and large to avoid a direct challenge and to retreat into the private sector. The characteristic religious movements of the post-enlightenment years - the various kinds of revivalism - have all accepted the enlightenment concept of the autonomous individual and left the public sphere to the secular forces.

2. Probably the crucial area in which the encounter between the Christian faith and the post-Enlightenment culture must take place is in the classroom. The recent BCC document on '*Understanding Christian Nurture*' leaves 'education' to be conducted on the principles of the Enlightenment, while advocating 'nurture' for Christian children. This is simply to prepare the Church for the ghetto.

3. An alert missiology today would surely be taking it as the first priority to develop an approach to our culture which is (in A.G.Hogg's phrase) both relevant and challenging - using its terms to call in question its axiom, cherishing its achievements and exposing its errors, offering an 'explanation' which 'explains' why the Enlightenment 'explanation' does not 'explain'.

I can't yet see how this is to be done; but it may help at least to indicate the need.

Lesslie Newbigin

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