



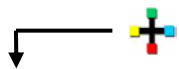
How I Arrived At The Other Side Of 1984

1985

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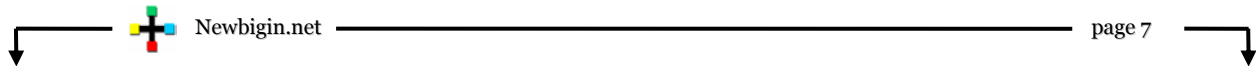
A dozen years ago I was sitting in a plenary discussion of 'Salvation Today' at Bangkok. Sitting next to me was General Simatoupong, that doughty Indonesian who, having commanded the army which drove the Dutch out of his island, and having still a taste for battle, took to theology and became one of the leader of Indonesian Christianity. He had just made an intervention in the debate and as he returned to his seat I heard him mutter (*sotto voce*): "Of course the big question is. Can the West be converted?"

Who could doubt that he was right? In large parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, Christianity is a lively and growing faith. In the old 'Christendom' it is in decline. It has been largely replaced by what is called 'the modern scientific world view'. It survives only courtesy of the latter. And wherever 'modernization' is taking place all over the world, the 'acids of modernity' gradually or swiftly dissolve the ancient religious beliefs and traditions. For those who have thus become part of the 'modern' world, this 'modern scientific world view' is not another ideology; it is simply 'how things really are' in contrast to the 'myths', the 'dogmas', the 'superstitions' which prevent the adherent of the old religions from seeing 'how things really are'.

Half a dozen years ago I was sitting here in the Selly Oak Library in a committee of the United Reformed Church On 'Mission and Other Faith.' We had spent several years working at the question of dialogue with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhist., and someone proposed that we should now turn our attention to the Marxists. At this point I registered an objection. "If we look at Marxism", I said, "we must at the same time look at the other half, the western half, of the old Christendom. The ideology which has replaced Christianity as the religion of the 'old world', has split into two parts, eastern

and western. If we study the conditions for dialogue with Marxism, we must at the same time study our own form of the 'modern' world view – the ideology of the capitalist world. Otherwise the spectacles with which we observe Marxism will not be those of the Gospel but those of our own culture". I received the due reward of my folly; they told me to go away and write something as the basis for such a dialogue.

How to begin? I am myself part of this culture. How

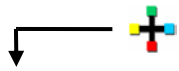


can I stand outside myself and study the way I see things?

Can there be an 'Archimedean point' from which I can look at the world view of which I am a part? Can I as a Christian really have a dialogue with me as a specimen of this 'modern' world? While I was thinking about this I happened to run my eye along a shelf of books and noticed the title of a book by Paul Hazard: *La Crise de La Conscience Europeene*. I suddenly thought: "That's it. There was a real moment of crisis in Europe's consciousness, that moment which those who lived through it called 'The Enlightenment', that moment when European people went through a sort of collective conversion, when they suddenly 'saw the light', saw 'how things really are', saw that the traditional wisdom of Christendom was just 'dogma', something that had to be thrown overboard if one was to get at the real truth. I must try to find out what happened at the Enlightenment". It was while I was trying to do this that I got mixed up in the BCC programme for 1984, and *The Other Side of 1984* emerged from the process.

Our 'modern' world came to consciousness at the moment which those who lived through it called 'Enlightenment'. Looking back on it we can see that it was a conversion experience in which one way of understanding things was replaced by another, and like all people who are converted – those who had the experience were sure that they had seen the light. 'This is how things really are'. And this is the way most Europeans and Americans still think. The 'modern scientific world view' is just how things really are, and if you want to continue to hold any of the old religious beliefs and retain any intellectual integrity, you must tailor these beliefs to the requirements of what a modern person can really hold to be true. But if you happen to live, for example, as part of the Hindu world, you have another way of seeing things which is quite as rational, as coherent and as emotionally satisfying as the European one. From within the Hindu world view there is no way of proving that the European way is true. For a long time Europeans didn't have to worry about that, because (in the period of European world dominance) they could always say: "Never mind about the arguments: our view works. Look at our technology, our industry, our scientific medicine! It works!" It is – to put it mildly – difficult to make that claim now; the 'modern scientific world' is hell-bent on self-destruction, and its typical denizens are wandering around the cities of India asking "Who am I?" But that is not the main point. The point is that the 'modern scientific world view is *not* – as the new converts of the Enlightenment thought – just 'how things really are in contrast to the dogmas and myths of religion'. It is one way of seeing things, but not the only way. It has created a powerful culture which has undermined the confidence (temporarily at least) of the great ancient culture of India, China and the Islamic world. But it is, in the end, only one among them. When – in one of

the classic statements of the 'Enlightened' world view, the American founding fathers said "We hold these truths to be self-evident and then proceeded to a number of statements which are not self-evident at all, they were only making clear that there



is no way of demonstrating their fundamental beliefs. Like the fundamental beliefs of Christians, Hindu and Muslims, they were articles of faith upon which the rest had to be founded.

As a young missionary in India I tried to understand Indian religious thought and practice and to see how the Christian message could relate to it. Obviously I often confused the gospel with my assumptions as a 'modern' European. Working with Indian colleagues helped me to disentangle things that had been mixed up. But now I had to ask: What would be involved in a really missionary encounter of the gospel with this European culture of which I am a part? Here I found great help in Michael Polanyi's *Post-Critical Philosophy*. Polanyi did not write as a Christian apologist. (I don't even know whether he was a Christian) but as a scientist seeking to show the real foundations of science and the dangers which will arise if these foundations are eroded. He exposed the fallacies underlying that dichotomy which is so pervasive in our 'modern' culture between 'scientific knowledge' which is supposed to be 'objective' and faith or belief, which is supposed to be 'subjective'. (This is brilliantly worked out in a forthcoming book by Professor Colin Gunton *Enlightenment and Alienation*). He showed how all true knowledge has both a subjective and an objective pole, that faith so far from being an inferior substitute for knowledge – is the precondition of all knowing. His analysis of what is involved in all knowing bridged the gulf between science and faith and showed as it seemed to me – the way in which the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny could be presented to our 'modern' world in a way which did not destroy the real fruits of the Enlightenment.

As is explained in the preface to *The Other Side of 1984*, the book was written at the request of the BCC. And this request came while these ideas were jostling in my mind. I wanted to challenge the arrogant assumptions of our post-Enlightenment culture and to show that the Church need not be afraid to offer an alternative understanding of the human situation which rests on a faith commitment openly acknowledged and not camouflaged as 'self-evident truth'. And, in a series of questions, I tried to suggest a programme for investigation in a variety of sectors of public life, while seeking to guard against the dangers of any attempt to return to the pre-Enlightenment world. I can do no more than glimpse some of the possible consequences of raising these questions. But I am sure they must be raised.

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