



What is the Ecumenical Agenda

(86wica)

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

Unpublished

Two-page response to a letter from Thaddeus Horgan, Managing Editor of "Ecumenical Trends", asking Newbigin to write on this topic. Horgan had asked thirty persons each to write a four hundred word essay on this same theme for possible publication.

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.

In the brief compass allowed only telegraphic jottings are possible.

1. The modern ecumenical movement was formed in the womb of western post-Enlightenment culture and operates in its languages and categories. But the centre of gravity of Christendom is no longer in this western world. Statistically it is probably now in the 'Third World'; possibly in terms of theological 'gravitas' we may discover that it is in the 'Second World' including China.

2. This western culture is now in a phase of acute self-doubt and guilt. Disillusion with its promises of happiness is now so acute that almost anything from the 'Third World' is assumed to be preferable. This also goes for 'Third World Theologies' – even when they are only refurbishing of old western ideas (Marx and Rousseau).

3. The greatest need is a serious theological effort to re-affirm the good news of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, in terms which are dictated neither by a blind adherence to the so-called requirements of 'modern' thought, nor by a blind rejection of it.

4. For this two things will be needed. (a) The collaborative work of theologians from many cultures, but theologians whose thinking is not controlled by the axioms of the academic world, but is shaped by their struggle faithfully to communicate the Gospel in the cultural forms of their own peoples, theologians whose theology does not belong to a different world from their Sunday sermons; and (b) Much greater involvement than is now common by Christian theologians of the western world in an in-depth encounter with other cultures. Something very important has been lost in the disappearance of the old-style missionary who spent five years mastering the language of a people and thereby learning to think with their thoughts. Present patterns of inter-church exchange make this impossible and tend to accentuate the weakness identified in point 1 above.

5. In this theological task it will be essential that the conservative evangelical wing of Protestantism is fully engaged on equal terms with the traditional Protestants and Roman Catholics and Orthodox. The fact that they tried for so long to isolate the Gospel from the post-Enlightenment world tended to exclude them from the ecumenical movement in its formative period. Their contribution is necessary for them and for all.

6. Along with this theological task, which I regard as primary, there is need for fresh thinking in the field of structure. In this matter we are polarised between the advocates of full 'organic union' and the advocates of 'reconciled diversity'. The latter slogan often seems to be a polite way of agreeing to do nothing. The former arouses understandable fears of 'monolithic structures'. This fear is understandable when one contemplates the structures to which we have become accustomed. I think that there is room for more vigorous exploration of the middle ground between these extremes, looking to visible forms of ecclesial life which would combine the variety of different forms of discipleship and spirituality manifest in our divided churches with a degree of mutual commitment and shared ecclesial life much greater than is provided in our existing councils of churches.

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.