



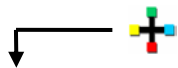
The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Mission

1988

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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It is a great honor to be invited to share in this event, an event that is significant for all of us, from whatever part of the world we come, who are committed to the Christian world mission. My first duty is to recognize the dedicated and imaginative leadership that has made the Overseas Ministries Study Center a source of strength for that mission in all its many forms of outreach, and which has now prompted this very significant move to New Haven and the launching of the Center on a new stage of its life.

Perhaps my only real qualification for being invited to address you is that I happen to come from overseas. I do not mean by that to endorse what was once described as the missionary mythology of salt water, the idea that crossing a stretch of salt water was the necessary condition for being a missionary. When I am asked to state my employment I usually answer "missionary" and can do that without endorsing the salt-water myth, but it is not unimportant that the first word in the title of this Center is the word "Overseas."

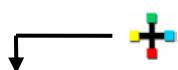
When the family of William Howard Doane founded the Center in 1922, it was for those who were then called – without embarrassment – "foreign missionaries" and who needed a period of rest from their labors in foreign parts. The Center has followed a general trend in replacing the words "foreign missions" with "overseas ministries." I do not quarrel with that, though I do sometimes reflect upon the significance of the change. It was made, I suppose, because the old term was felt to have about it a hint of arrogance. It suggested images of the old pith helmet and the white man's burden. We are very eager to be disinfected of that old but clinging aroma. A missionary in training told me the other day that what he was getting was "hairshirt missiology," so eager were his mentors to repent of the sins of our missionary predecessors.

We speak now of "overseas ministries" or – more comprehensively – of cross-cultural mission and ministry. It is to the study of the issues involved in these cross-cultural ministries that this Center is dedicated. I want to affirm my conviction of the great importance of such studies, and therefore of this Center, for the life of the church. Whatever may or may not have been the sins of our missionary predecessors (and of course it is much more relaxing to repent of one's

parents' sins that of one's own), the commission to disciple all the nations stands at the center of the church's mandate, and a church that forgets this, or marginalizes it, forfeits the right to the titles "catholic" and "apostolic." If there was a danger of arrogance in the call for the evangelization of the world in that generation, there is a greater danger of timidity and compromise when we lower our sights and allow the gospel to be domesticated within our culture, and the churches to become merely the domestic chaplains to the nation. I am not impressed by those who thank God that we are not like the missionaries of the nineteenth century—which the beloved Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette called "the Great Century" – the century that made it possible for us to talk today of the world church. Of course it is true that there were elements of arrogance in the missionaries of that century, but that was just because in the preceding centuries Christianity had become so much domesticated within Western culture that when we carried the gospel overseas it sometimes looked like part of our colonial baggage.

The truth is that the gospel escapes domestication, retains its proper strangeness, its power to question us, only when we are faithful to its universal, supranational, supracultural nature – faithful not just in words but in action, not just in theological statement but in missionary practice in taking the gospel across the cultural frontiers. The affirmation that Jesus is *Lumen Gentium*, the light of the nations, is in danger of being mere words unless its value is being tested in actual encounters of the gospel with all the nations, so that the gospel comes back to us in the idiom of other cultures with power to question our understanding of it. In this sense the foreign missionary is an enduring necessity in the life of the universal church, but, of course, the missionary journeys have to be multidirectional and not – as in the former period – only from west to east and from north to south. I speak with some feeling because it is my privilege to work in Birmingham alongside a missionary sent to us by the Church of North India and I know that England needs the witness of a Christian from India at least as much as India needs missionaries from the West.

A Center like this, where the issues of cross-cultural mission are being explored, has an importance greater than what have traditionally been called "foreign missions." Its presence here – alongside the great centers of learning and teaching that are now its neighbors – will be a reminder of the universality of the gospel, of the enduring validity of the call to make disciples of all nations. And that reminder is needed, for there are many voices in our culture that question that universality and the validity of that call. The contemporary embarrassment about the missionary movement of the previous century is not, as we like to think, evidence that we have become more humble. It is, I fear, much



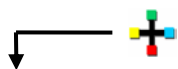
more clearly evidence of a shift in belief. It is evidence that we are less ready to affirm the uniqueness, the centrality, the decisiveness of Jesus Christ as universal Lord and Savior, the Way by following whom the world is to find its true goal, the Truth by which every other claim to truth is to be tested, the Life in whom alone life in its fullness is to be found.

Since the publication of the lecture by C. P. Snow with the title "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," the phrase that he coined has become very common, at least in my own country. We speak of the two cultures, and the phrase corresponds to a familiar reality. Our university campuses are divided into the faculties of science, on the one hand, and arts and humanities, on the other. Theology, of course, belongs to the latter category. Theology is not about objective facts: for that you enroll as a student of science. Theology, like the rest of the matters studied in the other half of the university, is not about facts: it is about things in which our subjectivity is involved – about values where personal choice is of the essence of the matter. The physicist-priest W. G. Pollard, in commenting on this, says that these two cultures are not really comparable entities. The scientific culture is in the prime of its power – vigorous, coherent, convinced that it is dealing with reality and gaining a more and more full understanding of it. In the world of science there are, of course, differences of opinion, disputes, controversies, and rival

schools of thought. But all these are understood to be about what is really the case, so that one expects to convince one's opponent of his error. One works on the assumption that eventually agreement will be reached. One does not accept pluralism (the coexistence of mutually contradictory accounts of what is the case) as a good thing. It is something to be overcome.

By contrast, says Pollard, the other culture is not a coherent culture at all. What goes on in the faculties of arts and humanities is the fragmented remains of what was once a coherent culture, but is so no more. Here one abandons the hope of finding truth on which all will agree. Here pluralism is accepted as normal. What remains is not a culture comparable with the scientific culture. It is, in Pollard's words, "an ever-changing variety of remnants of what was once a universal culture in the western world." And of course it is to this that theology belongs. Statements about the universal scope of Christ's saving work are not taken to be statements of objective fact, of what is actually the case. They are statements in story form of certain kinds of religious experience. They may be properly included in a syllabus for the comparative study of religions. Or they may be contributed to a dialogue in which different types of religious experience are shared. But they are not to be announced as factual truth, truth absolutely and for all.

It was not always so. Pollard speaks of the remnants of what was once a universal culture, though it was geographically limited to the Western world. Theological statements about Christ and his nature and work were part of a coherent understanding of reality, of how things really are. This was itself the result of sustained intellectual effort of a rigor comparable to what we now see in the scientific culture. Dr. Frances Young, in her recent inaugural lecture as professor of theology in the University of Birmingham, reminded her academic audience of the immense intellectual energies that went into the effort of the early church fathers to formulate the truth of the gospel in the thought world of the age in which they lived. That age was, like ours, one of relativism and syncretism in matters religious. Its intellectual atmosphere is tartly described in a famous phrase of Gibbon when he said that in that age all religions were for the people equally true, for the philosophers equally false, and for the government equally useful. Professor Young contrasts the intellectual vigor



with which the great theologians of the early centuries resisted this easygoing and seductive relativism with the contemporary drift toward utilitarianism and relativism. The latter she describes as "the modern version of the fall of Sophia, a breakdown of confidence in human powers of knowing, a failure of nerve easily compounded by disillusionment with the exploitative hybris of modern science and technology."

Alan Bloom, in his much discussed book *The Closing of the American Mind*, has traced the origins of this breakdown. At least for me it was both illuminating and alarming to see the shadowy figure of Nietzsche behind what seemed to be our innocent and even laudable preference for talking about "values," "commitments," and "lifestyles," rather than for talking about right and wrong, truth and error. Nietzsche, says Bloom, was the first to recognize that, on the basis of modern critical thought, it is strictly impossible to speak of truth and error, of right and wrong, and to draw the conclusion that the only thing left is the will to power. This nihilism has, says Bloom, been domesticated in our culture in the soft-sounding language of "values." We ask of a statement not "Is it true?" but "Are you sincere?" We speak not of right behavior but of authenticity. But nihilism will not permanently accept his comfortable domestication. Moral chaos must be the end of this road. And it will not be checked by appeals to tradition, to natural law, or to older "values." Only the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, only the living word of the Creator can bring light out of darkness, order out of chaos.

Western culture was once a coherent whole with the Christian vision at its center. It has disintegrated. If we seek now, as we must, a coherent vision for the human race as a whole, it

cannot be on the basis of a tried relativism that gives up the struggle for truth. Nor can it be by pretending that the scientific half of our Western culture can provide coherence for the life of the world. We are at present busy exporting our science and technology to every corner of the world in the name of "development" and "modernization. But we also know that if all the six billion of the world's people succeeded in achieving the kind of "development" we have achieved, the planet would become uninhabitable. There is an absurd irony in the fact that we are busy exporting our scientific culture to every corner of the world without any compunction about arrogance, but we think that humility requires us to refrain from offering to the rest of the world the vision of its true goal, which is given in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Relativism in the sphere of religion – the belief that religious experience is a matter in which objective truth is not involved but one in which (in contrast to the world of science) "everyone should have a faith of one's own" – is not a recipe for human unity but exactly the opposite. To be human is to be a part of a story, and to be fully human as God intends is to be part of the true story and to understand its beginning and its ending. The true story is one of which the central clues are given in the Bible, and the hinge of the story on which all its meaning turns is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the message with which we are entrusted, and we owe it to all people to share it. If this is denied, if it is said that every people must have its own story, then human unity is an illusion and we can forget it.

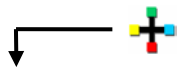
I do not believe it is an illusion. I believe the word of Jesus when he said that being lifted up on the cross he would draw all people to himself. I believe it because the cross is the place where the sin that divides us from one another is dealt with and put away. But I believe that the truth is credible only when the witness born to it is marked not by the peculiarities of one culture, but by the rich variety of all human cultures. We learn to understand what it means to say that Jesus is the King and Head of the whole human race only as we learn to hear that confession from the many races that make up the human family. In the end we shall know who Jesus is as he really is, when every tongue shall confess him in all the accents of human culture. That is why this Center for the study of the issues raised in cross-cultural ministry is important for us all.

We have already, in the ecumenical fellowship of churches, a first foretaste of that many tongued witness. We owe the existence of this worldwide family to the missionary faithfulness of our forebears. Today and henceforth all missionary witness must be, and must be seen to be, part of the witness of this worldwide, many cultured fellowship. Every culturally conditioned expression of the Christian witness must be under the critique of this ecumenical witness. The one Christ is known as he is confessed in many cultures. But we must reject the relativism that is sometimes wrongly called "the larger ecumenism." I am not referring to the fact, for which I thank God, that we are now much more open to people of other faiths, willing to learn from them, to share with them, to learn to live together in our one planet. I am referring to the fact that it is sometimes suggested that as the churches have come together to form one fellowship across their doctrinal differences, so – by a natural extension – the great world religions must move toward a fellowship of world faiths and that this latter movement would be a natural extension of the former.

In fact, such a move would not be an enlargement but a reversal of the ecumenical movement. That movement was not born out of a lazy relativism. It was born through the missionary experience of the nineteenth century, when Christians, divided by centuries of European history, found themselves a tiny minority in the midst of the great ancient religious systems of Asia. In this new situation perspectives changed. The issue "Christ or no Christ" loomed so large that the issues dividing Christians from one another seemed small. They did not disappear. The long theological wrestlings of Faith and Order are witness to the seriousness with which they were treated. But – real though they were – they were relativized by a new realization of the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ. The separated Christian confessions would never have accepted membership in the World Council of Churches without its firm Christological basis – Jesus Christ, God and Savior – a phrase later put into its proper trinitarian and biblical frame. It

was only because the absoluteness of Jesus' Lordship was acknowledged that the confessional positions could be relativized.

What is proposed in the so-called larger ecumenism is the reversal of this. It is a proposal to relativize the name of Jesus in favor of some other absolute. We have to ask: What is that absolute in relation to which the name of Jesus is relativized? Is it "religion in general"? Then where-in the medley of beliefs and practices that flourish under the name of religion – is the criterion of truth? Let it be brought out for scrutiny. Or is it, perhaps, "human unity"? But if so, unity on whose terms? Andre Dumas has correctly pointed out that all proposals for human unity that do not explicitly state the center around which unity is con-



ceived to happen have as their hidden center the interests of the proposer. We have a familiar word for this. "Imperialism" is the word we normally use to designate programs for human unity originated by others than ourselves. The center that God has provided for the unity of the human race is the place where all human imperialisms are humbled, where God is made nothing in order that we might be made one. It is an illusion to suppose that we can find something more absolute than what God has done in Jesus Christ. It is an illusion to suppose that we can find something larger, greater, more inclusive than Jesus Christ. It is a disastrous error to set universalism against the concrete particularity of what God has done for the whole creation in Jesus Christ. It is only through the specificity of a particular historic revelation that we can be bound together in common history, for particularity is the stuff of history, and we shall not find meaning for our life by trying to escape from history.

But we rightly bear witness to the universal scope of that particular history, the history that is the theme of our Scriptures, as we listen to the response of every human culture in every tongue and idiom to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The promise that the Holy Spirit will lead the church into the fullness of the truth is set in the context of the missionary commission. So the insights given in the exercise of cross-cultural mission are essential to the fulfillment of that promise. That is why the work of this Center is of importance not only to those who will be its students and its residents, but for all of us, for our growth into the fullness of the truth, for our learning with all the saints the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of God, and to the One who by the power at work in us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think, to that One be glory in the work of this Center, in the church, and in Christ Jesus forever.

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