



Beyond the Familiar Myths

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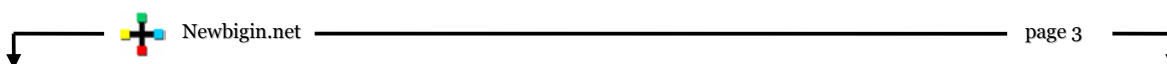
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For the small team working on "The Gospel and Our Culture" programme, 1988 has been a year of both encouragement and perplexity. Encouragement because we continue to receive a stream of letters from all parts of the world and from people in many walks of life who express their excitement and ask to be kept in touch. Perplexity, not only because it is difficult to persuade charitable trusts that we are worth supporting, but also because it is not easy to define in a few words what we are. We are certainly not an institution, hardly yet a clear-cut programme; rather a ferment, a rumbling of slowly articulated concerns. A colleague has referred to us as "Enlightenment-bashers". The reviewer of "Foolishness to the Greeks" in *Theology* says that the attempt to criticise our culture in the light of "The Bible" (his quotation marks) is like pretending to move a bus while you are sitting in it, and concludes that it is better to remain "under the critical judgement of the Enlightenment". Certainly Enlightenment-bashing is quite fashionable. In the recent US presidential elections it became clear that the Democratic candidate could be successfully rubbished simply by fixing the label "Liberal" on him, and that the test for immunity from this disease was public support for the gun lobby, the death penalty and "star wars". On the other hand, the marks of an "enlightened" position appear to be opposition to school prayers and support for abortion on demand and gay rights. In this lunatic battle, everyone is supposed to be on one side or the other.

In Britain the polarisation is perhaps not so extreme, but one is still expected to be on the left or the right of a line which is certainly the wrong line. For example, I find myself saying "Amen" to much of what the Bishop of London says about fidelity to the central Christian tradition, but "No" to his rejection of the role of women in ministry. The issues are constantly posed in terms of "progressive" and "reactionary", without asking whether the road on which we are to go forward or back is the right road. This applies both in political and in ecclesiastical issues. We cannot go back to 19th Century capitalism, but neither can we go back to the welfare state of 1950s without asking (in both cases) the question "What went wrong?" We cannot go

back behind the Enlightenment of some sort of restored "Christendom" or to a supposed natural law. We have to ask: "Why did the Enlightenment not deliver what is promised."

In the course of a recent correspondence a friend mockingly asked: "Which century would Newbigin like to live in, since he obviously does not like the 20th?" My answer is that I am happy to live in the century into which God has put me, but as a Christian and a missionary, I want to find ways of articulating the Gospel for this particular century. And I find that this requires me to question many of the things which are assumed to be "self-evident truths." Contemporary theologians who are called "radical" because they prefer the assumptions of the Enlightenment to the affirmations of the Bible have used the word "myth" to describe the central Christian beliefs. One of the definitions of "myth" in my dictionary is: "An unproved collective belief that is accepted uncritically and is used to justify a social institution". That suggests that a prime candidate for the title is the myth of the "secular society." The mythical character of the "secular society" becomes clear at the moment when anyone proposes



that Christian belief should be recognised as part of public truth, should be part of the curriculum in public schools, should be a seriously acknowledged participant in the debate about public issues. Such a proposal is regarded as the intrusion of "sectarian" opinion into public issues where it does not belong. The whole gamut of unexamined assumptions which control public debate – assumptions about the origin, nature and destiny of human life – are regarded as simply "How things actually are", "the facts," as distinct from private opinion. The myth of the secular society serves to justify the situation, and has been widely accepted in the Churches because it seems to provide a comfortable role for them, a peaceful co-existence without the cost of an open conflict. It fulfils precisely its function as a myth.

The reviewer in Theology, like many contemporary English theologians, took it for granted that "The Bible" cannot challenge this myth. He is wrong. The Bible offers an alternative vision of the human story, of the origin, nature and destiny of human life, which is radically different from the reigning myth. It is certainly not a body of timeless truths to which we are called back in reaction against modernity. It is exactly the opposite. It is a vision of the human story which opens up the future for fearless exploration in which we shall certainly be called to do things that have not been done before and to think thoughts that have not been thought before. How the angels must laugh (or weep) when they hear those who live in the world of the Bible called "conservatives"; and those who swallow uncritically all the contemporary myths called "progressive." The Gospel is not, and never can be, a call to return to the past. It is always, and is now, a call for bold exploration of the future, an exploration which is not aimless and clueless but confident in the clue which has been given by Him who is the true and living way. "The Gospel and Our Culture" is a modest attempt to explore the next steps.

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