



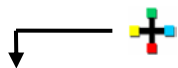
A Review of "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society"

1990

Stan Nussbaum

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For readers always on the lookout to get two books for the price of one, Newbigin's most recent work will be a real find. It really is two books in one, an apologetic book and a missiological one.

The apologetic work includes the epistemological section, chapters 1-5, which pick up familiar themes such as plausibility structures, public truth, self-evident truths and the fact-value distinction. Chapters 13, "No Other Name" and 17, "The Myth of the Secular Society" complete what appears to this reviewer to be a valuable piece of apologetics.

The missiological work, chapters 620 excluding 13 and 17, contains the constructive material: a Christian understanding of revelation, election, Christ, mission and contextualisation, the "powers", the congregation and the clergy. Most of these chapters conclude with a summary statement up to one page in length, which should be useful as starting points for the congregational discussion groups which will use the book.

In the apologetic work, Newbigin defends the citadel against the outrageous slings of what is called "reason" in our post-Enlightenment culture. In the missiological work he charges out of the fort to try to "capture the high ground". He does both duties well but this book seems to indicate that he was born to charge. If any Christian should expect to sit by safely and watch while Newbigin drops bombs on the Enlightenment and its champions, a word of caution is in order. The attack on the Enlightenment includes an attack on the ways the Enlightenment has influenced Christians of all kinds. If Newbigin is right, the entire divide between ecumenicals and evangelicals is rooted in the ways that both sides have been unconsciously influenced by Enlightenment presuppositions. If his critique (pp 148-151, 178-180, *passim*) is taken to heart, perhaps there is hope for some radical readjustments which would bring the two sides closer to each other and to the scriptures they both cite for their purposes.

The work suffers somewhat from internal repetitiveness, no doubt appropriate for the theology students at Glasgow who were hearing the material (the Robertson Lectures for 1988) rather than reading it. Tighter editorial work would have produced a shorter and clearer text.

Newbigin disavows all scholarly claims in his preface and says he is speaking only as "a pastor and preacher". If this be so, he is the pastor of a very learned congregation indeed. It is logically necessary but nevertheless unfortunate that the first five chapters are philosophically the heaviest. Many an ordinary reader may become so discouraged by this epistemological section that he or she may not reach the much more readable material beginning with chapter 6. Discussion group leaders beware!

Not writing as a scholar, Newbigin admits that his reading in the field is "very unsystematic". In most areas his reading is quite broad but there does seem to be one notable blind spot. His chapter on "The Gospel and Cultures" does not refer to a single missionary anthropologist except for a passing reference to McGavran, and his chapter on "Contextualisation: True or False?" cites only Koyama and Roland Allen, both very briefly. It would seem that the insights of persons like Eugene Nida, Charles Kraft, Paul Hiebert and Robert Schreiter would have greatly strengthened these chapters and indeed contributed significantly to the whole Gospel and Our Culture Project. Comparing the present work to *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), one notes a considerable overlap in the themes treated and occasional repetition of an argument, but there are also important places where Newbigin has clearly moved on in his thinking. Perhaps the most significant of these concerns is whether Newbigin's entire enterprise since writing *The Other Side of 1984* is really a veiled form of neo-Constantinianism. He denied this in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, but that denial was not altogether convincing.

Apparently he has been challenged on this point because he has taken it up at length in chapter 18 and become more specific about what he is proposing: the congregation rather than the denomination is the "hermeneutic of the gospel". This is a radical step forward with many implications including political ones, for it is impossible to build a Constantinian superstructure on a congregational (as opposed to denominational) base.

Another implication is that the ministry will need to be retrained in light of the new missionary role proposed for the congregation. The brief chapter (19) on this theme only begins to sketch the lines along which a massive rethinking of seminary education might take place.

There is much throughout the book to stimulate thought and not a little to stimulate action. Just what we could have expected from Newbigin's hand.

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