



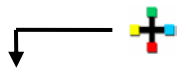
The Gospel and Our Culture

1990

J.E. Lesslie Newbiggin

(London: Catholic Missionary Education Centre)

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January 1990

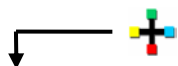
This talk was given to the World Mission Conference of the National Missionary Council and the Conference for World Mission held at High Leigh in December 1989 under the theme title of "Doing God's Will in Our Plural Society."

This talk is also available as an audio cassette, so the text adheres as closely as possible to the original. The style is therefore that of the spoken word.

Bishop Lesslie Newbiggin was ordained in the Church of Scotland and served as a missionary in South India from 1936. He was consecrated bishop in 1947 at the time of the inauguration of the union of churches (Churches of South India - CSI) and was bishop in Madurai until 1959. Seconded by CSI for ecumenical work, he served as Secretary of the International Missionary Council and, after integration, as Associate Secretary of the WCC from 1959 to 1965. He was then recalled by CSI to serve as Bishop in Madras. In 1974 he retired and served for five years as a lecturer in the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, and for nine years as minister of the URC, Winson Green, Birmingham.



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Whenever one makes a statement, there are obviously a lot of assumptions which are taken for granted. You can never argue right back to the very, very beginning; you have to start somewhere. I think perhaps before I actually give you the material that I have prepared, it would be right for me just to say what my assumptions are.

My assumptions

Very briefly they are that I assume the truth of what I say when I repeat the Creed in Church, and when I say, I believe, that means that I believe that it is true; that it corresponds to reality. Therefore that at the very heart and crux of it, I believe it to be a fact that God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things, has actually acted in Jesus Christ in such a way as to reveal Himself and to effect His purpose of delivering us from the sin and alienation which divides us from Him and from one another.

That being so, that is the starting point for any thinking about our history, whether our personal history or the whole of human history. That it is not something that can be fitted into a framework which has been developed on other principles, but has to be itself the framework into which all our other experience is fitted.

Therefore, also I believe it to be the purpose of God that there should be one world, and that it is God's gracious gift of Jesus Christ to us to be the centre around whom human beings can be reconciled to one another and that therefore there can be one world. My problem with the language about one world is precisely that we have already got it. That there is one world is the basic creed of General Motors, Coca Cola, IBM and Mitsubishi. It is the foundation of all their work, and I do not find it a matter for celebration.

Reality and fantasy

The question, if we talk about one world, is the question: On what perception or what belief about human nature and destiny is that project founded? Or to put it quite simply:

Where is the centre around which the world can be one? If one does not answer that question, then inevitably one is proposing one's own ideas as the centre, and it becomes another form of imperialism.

I believe that it is an essential part of the whole human quest that one should seek to distinguish reality from illusion, truth from falsehood, and that, therefore, there has to be an element of exclusion: that one has to exclude what is false in order to hold fast to what is true. In other words, we are dealing with reality and seeking always to distinguish reality from fantasy.

Finally there is a gospel to be communicated: the Good News that God has indeed done these things, and that the communication of that Good News to all people is the purpose for which the church exists: not merely to communicate, but to embody and therefore to invite. But, as we have been reminded so well earlier today, when we speak about all people we are speaking not about human beings in the abstract but about human beings who are shaped by a specific culture.

Objective and true

The gospel will always be heard in terms of, and must be heard of in terms of a specific culture, of the way in which people, specific people, have learned to understand and cope with their experience. That does not in anyway detract from the objectivity of that which is to be known. It does not mean that there are different gospels.

We do not know anything from the stars to the atoms except by means of conceptual frameworks within which we are able to make sense of them. As Einstein used to say, "What you call facts always depends upon the theory that you bring to them." But that does not mean that the

facts are not objective realities. And the same is true of the gospel. There is a gospel which is the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ. That has to be addressed to human beings in their specific cultures.

Now this word culture is ambiguous. Traditionally it has been used to describe what one often thinks of as rather elitist elements in our society: music, art, literature, drama, architecture and so forth. It is also used by the anthropologists and the sociologists to describe the whole way in which the corporate life of a society is ordered, the whole way in which they make sense of their experience. It is in that latter sense that we are using this word.

Different cultures

The middle word of our title is also ambiguous. When we talk about the gospel and our culture, whom are we talking about? Who are we? When I am asked to speak on this, I am often reminded that there are many cultures. There are the Scots and the Welsh and the Irish who are often marginalised or ignored by the English. There are also such things as youth culture, pop culture and even drug culture. There is bourgeois culture within which the gospel has already been rather successfully domesticated.

Whilst all that is true, these are sub-cultures. To direct our attention to them exclusively is to miss the wood by looking at the trees. All of these are part of, are within, a much wider thing which it is difficult for us to see because we are ourselves part of it. What we are talking about is the whole way in which human



beings have learned to understand and cope with reality.

In the experience of Europe and its cultural offshoots, roughly speaking in the last two or three hundred years, a whole way of looking at life which in the rest of the world is called modernisation. Modernisation, as it is carried out in all parts of the world, is the adoption of this culture which we have developed in this part of the world. That means it is obviously a world culture. It is typical, for example, that my colleague Dan Beeby overheard the other day in Selly Oak a student from Taiwan explaining to a British student what 'fax' is. It is obviously a world culture.

But the foreign mission enterprise – and this is why I think it is so important that we face this question in precisely this conference, as Bishop Patrick said earlier today – the foreign mission enterprise has always called for an awareness of the whole culture of a people to whom one was sent, and of the need to find ways of expressing the gospel in the terms of another world.

Here the experience of bible translation is absolutely fundamental: if one has wrestled with the task, for instance, as between English and Tamil of finding words in the Tamil language to express something which has not previously been expressed in the Tamil language, but for which you have to find the word, if you want to communicate at all. Gospel and culture has always been a key issue in the foreign missionary enterprise.

Three points

Three points have to be made at this point. The first is that the manifold discussions about gospel and culture that I read in missiological literature always seem to be about other cultures: the cultures in China and Peru, but not what we have here.

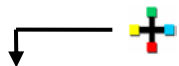
Secondly, that missionaries have themselves been the prime bearers, the prime exporters of modernisation to the rest of the world. On the rare occasions when leading politicians in India or China pay compliments to the Christian missions, it is always because they have been agents of modernisation.

Thirdly, that this was because the western churches, from which the great bulk of this missionary outreach went, were already living in a syncretistic relationship with what we call

modern culture. That becomes very clear to us when we read the literature of earlier missionary conferences. In spite of the fact that Edinburgh 1910 was aware of the evil elements in western culture it, nevertheless, did not hesitate to speak about "Christian civilisation" and to recommend what we from this angle can easily see was the communication of a mixture of the gospel and the ideas, the values, the concepts, which were simply taken for granted in Western Europe.

Too inculturated

In recent years, the foreign missionary enterprise has been concerned very much about inculturation, or indigenisation, adaption and so forth. We have to face the fact that here in Europe the problem has been that the gospel has been too thoroughly inculturated; that it has, in very large measure, lost its role as the critic of culture and become too much the legitimation of culture, or at least the ally of culture.



This is where the enduring significance of cross-cultural mission is so important, and again I am repeating what Bishop Patrick said earlier. When the gospel is carried by the people of one culture to the people of another, the authenticity of the Christianity of the missionaries is necessarily put in question by the way in which the gospel is experienced by those to whom he or she goes.

Stymied

I reflect on my experience as a young missionary in India. If I look back upon the judgments that I made then, I realise how many of them, which I thought were judgments on the basis of the gospel, were judgments on the basis of my own culture as an Englishman, a product of the English educational and cultural system.

If I may quote a little anecdote which perhaps I may have quoted before, but it was one of the events that in retrospect brought it home to me: In my very early days I was taking a bible class in St Mark with a group of village teachers. My Tamil was not yet very good, but I was extremely confident in my theology, having just done three years of it in Cambridge!

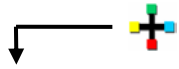
I was getting on fine until we came to the first exorcism. Westminster College, Cambridge, provided a splendid theological education, but it did not help me to deal with the question of exorcism, and what to do about devils. I was making very heavy weather. These village teachers looked at me with growing disgust, and one of them blurted out, "What are you making such a fuss about such a simple matter for?" and proceeded to rattle off half a dozen exorcisms in his own village in the last few months. It was a normal part of church life: everybody knows that Jesus cast out devils. Full stop!

So what was I to do? I could have said, "Dear brother, if you will permit me to take you over to Cambridge and allow sufficient time, I will enable you to understand what is all the real truth about this matter, and that Freud and Jung and others have explained it all." But the Gospel of St Mark was sitting on the table in front of us. I had to confess that he was much nearer to the gospel than I was, so I went on to the next passage.

I don't mean to say that I am raising a simple question. Do you try to interpret the gospel in the light of your culture, or do you try to interpret your culture in the light of the gospel? It's a reciprocal relationship. But it is a question that cannot be evaded. It's a gathering like this one, with its immense experience of cross-cultural mission (the experience which the foreign missionary movement over the last couple of centuries inherits), which ought to be the place, the source of insights and power for a missionary encounter with our own culture.

Reasonableness

What do I mean when I talk about a syncretistic relationship between the gospel and our culture? If one looks over Christian literature, especially of the 18th century (early in the development of what we may call the modern world), one notices how it is dominated by the attempt to demonstrate what was called the reasonableness of Christianity. One of the most famous books of the 18th century was entitled, "Religion Within the Limits of Reason". The gospel could be restated so as to fit the requirements of modern



thought. It has been thought that there was no other way to commend the gospel, except in that way.

I recently read an excellent little book by a philosopher, entitled, "Reason Within the Limits of Religion." Was that merely a clever reversal of the old title? I don't think so, because I think it was based upon a more critical understanding of the functioning of reason. I have been very much influenced in the last few years by the more recent writings of Alastair MacIntyre, many of which you will have read, and one of the things that comes through constantly in his writings is his insistence on the socially embodied character of all human reasoning.

Human reasoning does not operate in a kind of stratosphere above the actual events through which human beings live. All human reason takes place through the use of language, a specific language, because we have no universal language, except one that is universal in the sense that nobody speaks it.

Plausibility structure

All reasoning is conducted in a language which expresses the way in which a specific human community has learned to grasp, to cope with, and in some measure to manage the world in which we all share. That language, that way of coping with experiences, arises out of the actual history of that people. To use a phrase of Peter Berger, the sociologist, (I don't know whether it is his own phrase, but he uses it) every society has what he calls a 'plausibility structure', a structure of beliefs and practices which determines what beliefs are plausible in that society, and what are not.

In most societies throughout most of human history that structure has been shaped by religion. Therefore, the title "Reason Within the Limits of Religion," is true to the actual facts of human history, and the history of human thought. The idea of a supra-cultural, supra-historical reason which operates apart from any specific human tradition of rational discourse is an illusion.

There is an often quoted saying of the 18th century writer Lessing, who said there was a great ugly ditch which he couldn't jump across, namely that the universal truths of reason cannot be proved from the accidental happenings of history. On closer inspection the great ugly ditch disappears because there is no reasoning which is not the reasoning of a specific human community using concepts, language, images, ideas which have been developed through the accidental happenings of history. Reason is not a supra-historical entity which floats above the actual life of human beings.

This illusion is fostered very specifically by the widespread use of European languages, particularly English, all over the world. People who use English as the vehicle for their reason are operating within the plausibility structure which has been developed by the experience of Europe in the past two or three centuries.

Self-confidence

That worldwide spread is itself the result of the enormous self-confidence of that age which called itself the Age of Reason; the age which also spoke of its own time as the Enlightenment. The time when it was believed that at last the real truth about the universe had been made available and that by stripping away all the old traditions, particularly the religious traditions, it

was possible to appeal to a kind of pure human rationality which is common to all human beings and through which one can see what is actually the case and be delivered from the power of tradition, superstition and religion.

On that basis you had the great development of the concept of universal human rights, that all human beings have equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In its first explosion in the 18th century it was directed primarily against the Christian religion. In one of its more picturesque paintings of the hoped for scenario it looked forward to the day when the last king would be strangled with the guts of the last priest!

Christian thinkers in that situation laboured to show that Christianity could itself be defended, could be validated, within the terms that were set for it by this new movement of thought. Christian missions, in what Latourette calls 'The Great Century', were certainly operating within that world of thought. One of the first achievements of the new rationality was the development of the idea that government should run schools, so the children could be taken away from their parents and from religious influences and shaped in the way which rationality required; and that this was necessary for the development of national strength which increasingly depended upon science and technology.

Our thought forms

The fascinating thing is that the missionaries of the 19th century wherever they went started schools, a thing which St Paul never did. I never heard that St Paul offered to start a primary school in Rome.

Here I quote the great Scottish missionary, Duff, in Calcutta, who was the model for many: they were convinced that schools would do for Hinduism and Islam and Buddhism what they were doing for Christianity, that a good sound education would prove that these old religions could never stand up.

In consequence it has followed that the intellectual leadership that has arisen out of the work of missions is a leadership which has been trained in the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, trained in European languages and in the thought forms that I am referring to. The Third World theology, which we study with such profit here, is written in English, or in one of the other European languages and it is shaped by the ideas which have been developed since the 18th century.

Their thought forms

The kind of rebuke and correction which I received from those village teachers had its power and was possible because they were quite innocent of that kind of formation. They spoke right out of their culture as it had been shaped by the gospel. Their thought-world was still that of a Tamil village. But we do not, we cannot, hear those voices in our own language; at least we have hitherto found it hard to hear them.

I am not unaware of the fact that a number of modern New Testament scholars, such as Walter Wink and George Caird and Albert van den Heuvel, have helped us to see the reality of the New Testament language about the principalities and powers in a way that has, I think, caused many of us to rethink some of the rationalist assumptions with which we dismissed all the New Testament language in an earlier day.

My point is that to a degree we have insulated ourselves from the correction which cross-cultural missions can bring because we have ensured that the voices which we hear speak our own

language. We have made our culture under the name of modernisation, of modernity, into the dominant culture of the world. Even if we do sometimes send missionaries, they do not usually stay long enough to learn the language and enter deeply into the thought-patterns of other peoples. They are more likely to be engaged on what we call development which is another name for the process of modernisation.

So we don't hear the gospel addressed to us in a way that questions our whole culture: that's the problem as it seems to me. We are challenged by voices that come to us from the churches of Asia and Africa and Latin America. They challenge us for our abysmal failure in mission, for our timidity, our numerical decline, our unwillingness to challenge the assumptions of our society. They do bring a very, very sharp challenge to us and we need it. But they are not normally in a position to compel us to re-examine the whole of that which we must prize, namely, our rationality, our technology, our science, our leadership in what we are pleased to call development. How much we need this challenge!

Our public doctrine

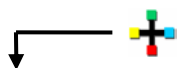
Let us imagine, if we may for a moment, someone from one of those isolated tribes in the valleys of the mountainous centre of Papua New Guinea. He has heard a rumour of a tribe of white-skinned people who believe that the whole universe came into existence by a series of accidents, that it functions like a machine, a machine that was constructed by nobody to carry out no purpose, but which is nevertheless so constructed that it can ensure that every one of the human race can achieve what is called happiness, by defining happiness as he or she wishes.

I am caricaturing, but not monstrously, what one might call the public doctrine of our society as it is taught in the schools. Surely that person from Papua New Guinea would think we must be the most credulous tribe on earth. He might not say it out loud because this tribe is still immensely powerful, but he would surely think it, and even if he did say it, we would not be able to understand.

Private opinion

If our Papuan friend had the chance to go into the history of this particular tribe, he would find that there was a time when another view of the human situation was taught as public doctrine. It was not so very long ago that one of the first facts that a child in Scotland needed to learn was that the chief end of man was to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever. That was part of public doctrine, that our life in this world is given to us as an opportunity to learn to enjoy God and his glory and all his great gifts.

Beliefs about human origins are still taught as public doctrine in our schools and universities, but beliefs about human destiny, about what the human being is for, are not taught. These are matters for private opinion, and to teach them as public truth would surely interfere with the pursuit of happiness. Churches still exist and still invite people to read the bible with its radi



cally different interpretation of the origin and destiny of human life. They do so in general with an impressive timidity and deference towards the dominant public culture.

Typically the bible is read as recommending certain styles of personal and domestic life, but not as offering the parameters within which the whole human situation, history, science and everything else, are to be understood.

We come back to the title of the book to which I referred, "Reason Within the Limits of Religion." All rationality, I said, is embodied in a society shaped by the history of that society. Rationality, as it is practised within the Christian community, is founded upon and directed by those events which are the substance of the gospel, namely that the author of this cosmos has re-

vealed and effected his purpose for it, supremely in the events which took place under Pontius Pilate: in which the one through whom all things exist and in whom all things are to be summed up and by whom all things are sustained, died a human death, and rose again from the dead to be the beginning of a new creation, to be the beginning of a wholly new reality.

The calling of the church

Those facts, if they are true, set the parameters for rational discourse. They are not, and they cannot be tailored to fit any rational framework of thought based on other experiences, or other beliefs about the universe. They authorise and require the church to call into radical question the whole plausibility structure within which the world which calls itself modern, lives and moves and has its being. That, and nothing less than that, I believe, is the calling of the church in this society.

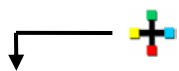
I know that to many people what I have been saying will sound scandalous. I would like to hope that it would not be felt to be wholly scandalous in this conference, for we meet in a tradition of the foreign missionary movement: and foreign missionaries have always been accustomed to being in situations where they had to question assumptions that had never been questioned.

We of all people ought to know that all reasoning is carried on within a plausibility structure which is normally not questioned, and that there is no way of communicating the gospel which does not involve raising questions which, in that plausibility structure, have never been raised.

In this matter it seems to me that the European churches have a particular responsibility. For better for worse the ideas which were developed in Europe from the 17th century onwards have been the major force shaping world history for the last two centuries and are still the major force shaping the world's agenda today. I said, for better for worse; there have been both good things and bad things: some very bad things, some very good things that have been involved in this explosion of European ideas into the rest of the world.

Controlling the agenda

Like every human venture the European vision of one world shaped by reason, by science, and by technology, which is the fruit of this science, has been profoundly ambiguous, a mixture of good and bad like every other human enterprise. But there is no other power, not even the



power of Islam, which today so controls the agenda of all the nations.

Think of a few of the key words that are operative in discussions in every part of the world. Words like modernisation, democracy, liberation, revolution, justice. These words are given their meaning in modern speech, in modern usage, by the European vision, including the Marxist version of that vision, of which I have been speaking. The greatest missionary task facing the churches in Europe is to bring to bear the insights of the foreign missionary on to this overwhelmingly powerful, spiritual and intellectual plausibility structure. That I think needs to be specially said at this time.

I think many of us have been moved, deeply moved, both by the cataract of change that is going on at this moment in Eastern Europe, and by those words of Mikhail Gorbachev about a common European home, words which surely evoke in us a deep resonance. Meanwhile there is another vision for Europe which is on offer, not a home but a market place: a market place where the only concept of the chief end of man is to become as rich as possible as quickly as possible and let the devil take the hindmost.

To disentangle the good from the bad

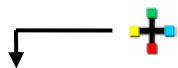
Is it not our biggest task to disentangle, and again I am repeating things that Bishop Patrick said earlier today, to disentangle the good from the bad in the European bid for the creation of one world? Therefore to distinguish, as all missionaries must try to do, the truth from the falsehood, the realities from the fantasies, in what we call modernity; to acknowledge what, in the Enlightenment, was true light – in the sense that it illuminated what is really the case, and what in the Enlightenment was simply the dazzle of fantasy and illusion.

We cannot do that by trying to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity, by remoulding it, reshaping it, fitting it into the plausibility structure of modernity. We also cannot do it, as I fear we are often tempted to do, by trying to commend ourselves to others by our good works. It is too easy to convert the missionary task into a programme for human welfare on the terms in which modernity understands welfare.

What are we called upon to do in gratitude to God for what he has done? We are under obligation, we are indebted to all human beings to show, in so far as we are able, the love of God that has been shed into our hearts. But our good works do not constitute the substance of the gospel. That substance is, as I have said earlier, what God has done in Jesus Christ and the primary task given to us in the church is to make that known. The first business of the church is to speak the truth in a world of lies. Nothing can take the place of that.

The project: The Gospel and Our Culture

The programme on Gospel and Our Culture is a very, very modest onehorsepower, one-cylinder affair, an attempt to raise the questions that I have indicated even if we are a very long way from finding the right answers. We have found it very hard to get any money for this programme, because I suspect that the



trustees of charitable foundations rightly recognise that what we are doing is profoundly subversive, but we have been, by the grace of God, enabled at least to make a small start.

There are essentially three elements in what we are trying to do, and let me say that the programme as it now stands is a very limited one, looking forward to a national conference at Swanwick in July 1992.

The first element in it is a series of seminars on eight key issues in which Christians who are occupying influential positions in various sectors of our intellectual and academic and business life try to say what are the questions which the gospel has to put to the accepted patterns of thought and action in these different sectors. Under the leadership of Bishop Hugh Montefiore there have been collected a very distinguished group: eight groups, roughly of eight people each.

Fundamental issues

We have taken what we think to be four fundamental areas, and then four areas out of the many, many secondaries that we could have chosen. The first four fundamental issues are: Authority, because the question always put is, What authority does the Church have to speak? Is the Church not itself simply part of our culture? Is the bible not itself part of our literature? By what authority can we speak of addressing a Word to our culture?

Secondly, Epistemology: How can we claim to know anything? How can we escape from the trap of subjectivity where nothing is true because everything is culturally conditioned? Thirdly, History: How do we understand the whole human story and our place in it? Fourthly, Science: How do we understand the relationship between Christian faith and this immensely powerful, creative, dynamic element in our culture, namely, the great natural sciences?

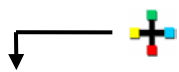
The four secondary issues are those of economics, education, the media, health and healing. As I say, in each of these areas we have been privileged to get the help of very able and distinguished men and women. The hope is that out of their work there will come a volume to be

published at the beginning of 1992 which will provide the data, the fodder for the national conference in July of that year.

Secondly, at the congregational level, a priest in Birmingham off his own initiative produced a study guide called, "Another way of looking at things," which is an invitation to ordinary congregation members to begin to question some of their normal assumptions in the light of the gospel. That has been used in a number of parishes and amended in the light of experience. In a revised form it is to be published by the Bible Society.

Thirdly, and through the generous help of the Bible Society, it is proposed to have a series of conferences of perhaps two or three hundred people for anyone who likes to come during 1990 and 1991. One of them will be held, we hope, in the South of England, one in the North of England and one in Scotland, where the issues raised by this whole study can be further investigated and clarified.

Fourthly, a quarterly newsletter. We have not done anything about advertising it, but the subscription list seems to go on steadily rising



and there are now about 630 paid-up subscribers, considerably less than Elijah's seven thousand, but not bad!

Finally a very rapidly growing international network of groups in different parts of the world who have taken up the challenge and are pursuing it in their own context.

The No. 1 Question

I would like to finish with a story, which some of you may have heard, but it seems to me to be spot on. If you ask a man in his anecdote, you expect anecdotes! I was at one of the conferences in this series at Bangkok in 1971. We were in an early session of the conference discussing the total global situation of the Christian world mission. Sitting beside me was General Simatoupong of Indonesia. If you are not familiar with Indonesian church affairs, Simatoupong was the general who commanded the forces that drove the Dutch out of Indonesia. When there were no more Dutchmen left to fight, by a very natural transition he took to theology and is now one of the leading theologians of the Indonesian church.

Simatoupong had got up and made an intervention in the debate, which I don't remember, but what I *do* remember is that, when he came back and sat down beside me, I heard him say, under his breath, "Of course, the Number One question is, Can the West be converted?" And I think he was right.

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