



Response to Hoedemaker

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I find it difficult to respond to this paper because it has little contact with anything that I have written, and because I am not an expert in the history of European thought. Hoedemaker takes as his starting point an analysis of constitutive elements in European culture and is concerned to ask what might be the shape of 'Christianity' within this culture.

As always everything depends on the starting point. I have been concerned to insist that the starting point must be God's revelation of himself and his purpose for creation as it is communicated to us in that common life which is rooted in the biblical story. If, on the other hand, one starts with an analysis of the strands which contribute to European culture one ends with a descriptive and not a normative study. Personally I find the analysis questionable. I am not clear about the 'religion' which does not come either from Jewish or from Greek sources. I notice that there is no mention of the great importance of Islam in the history of European ideas. But I am not competent to engage in this discussion and it would not serve my purpose.

Hoedemaker suggests that it would be more useful to study the conflict between capitalism and socialism than the conflict between 'a revealed Christian faith' and unbelief. But the issues raised in the debate between capitalism and socialism – issues about justice and freedom, issues about 'rights' (on the one hand the right to have basic needs met and on the other the right to do what you will with what you have earned) are rationally insoluble if there is no shared belief about human nature and destiny. Our public schools teach children to believe that life is the result of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for survival: capitalism seems the obvious conclusion. The belief that human life has a purpose beyond this is something which can only depend on

revelation. No inductive science can discover the truth about human destiny. I agree that the debate between capitalism and socialism has to go on, and that the recent events in Eastern Europe do not end the debate. But to suggest that this is the central issue to which the Church should attend would be an evasion of the real issue.

I think the crucial issue becomes clear when Hodemaker says: 'Both post-Christian culture and contemporary Christian faith – whatever form it may take – share the predicament of the problem of western culture, and they can only move forward together'. This seems to reduce everything to sociology. There is a reality which is not just 'contemporary Christian faith'. I mean the reality of the living God whose world in Jesus Christ is still living and powerful in the words and deeds of a believing Church. It is that word that I want to hear and to speak vis-à-vis 'post-Christian culture'. I know that it is always possible to reduce theology to sociology – or, for that matter, to psychology or economics. But, as in other spheres, reductionism misses the truth.

With Hodemaker's last paragraph I am in total agreement. It is a point of crucial importance. Can the delegates of the Reformed Church in Canberra persuade the WCC to write this paragraph in to the top of their agenda for the next ten years?

## Enlightenment, Eclipse And The Problem Of Western Christianity: Towards A Discussion With Lesslie Newbigin

Bert Hoedemaker  
Groningen  
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1. The new experience of secularization which occupies many Churches and Christians in the West – 'new' in the sense that it is characterized by deep uncertainty and pessimism with regard to faith and culture – is the background against which the strong appeal of Newbigin's recent work must be understood. In the Netherlands Reformed Church the most obvious example is the statement 'The Church in an age of eclipse of God' (1988). This paper seeks a solution in the direction of spiritual resistance, conversion, and healing the disastrous cleavage between facts and values, which was produced by the culture of the Enlightenment.

The strong appeal of this approach tends to obscure the possibility that the diagnosis of the Western problem which leads to a new confrontation of modern atheistic culture and a revived Christianity is too simple. The roots of the problem may be much older. The thesis of this contribution is that it is more fruitful to look for those roots in the early phases of Western culture, where Jewish-Christian sources allied themselves to a certain extent with Greek-Roman world views and social organizations. The alliance has produced an impressive 'Christianity', but also harbours basic tensions which have kept manifesting themselves throughout Western history, especially in the so-called modern age.

2. There are three fundamental elements which, in Western Christian culture, are always found together in some kind of synthesis but which can nevertheless be distinguished. The first is faith, in the form of an eschatological spirituality, a spirituality which relates human individual and social life to the judgment and promise of God in reference to the Christ-event. There are strong Jewish sources here which remain in basic tension with Greek ways of thinking. The second is rationality. This is the typically Greek heritage of raising questions about being and meaning, about God as cosmic principle, about the 'essence' of things. Within this second element there are narrative and philosophical streams in tension with each other – a tension which perhaps has facilitated the alliance with 'faith' – but it remains distinguishable as a separate element. The third fundamental element is religion, understood as the permanent human effort to deal with the immediate challenges of life in the perspective of a longing for imperishable support, coherence and continuity.

The three elements neither appear nor have appeared in their pure form; they always present themselves in some configuration or synthesis with each other. In whatever way we would define the basic identity of 'Christianity', the definition will necessarily bear the imprint of some such configuration. The definition will, in other words, necessarily contain the whole problem of Western culture, and will therefore never be able to mark a territory apart from or over against this culture. The problem of Western culture is, that there have been beautiful syntheses, but that none of them was able to 'hold' permanently because of the basic incompatibility of the fundamental elements. There is an essential restlessness here, which creates both feelings of 'eclipse' and experiences of creative challenge. The Enlightenment is fruit and symptom of this basic problem. It has created new syntheses and configurations (very generally speaking: the 'bourgeois synthesis'), and these too are breaking down.

3. The alliance of the three fundamental elements in Western culture has been and is – both constructive and destructive. It has resulted – and still results and will result – in a permanent search for configurations which do justice to the most profound experiences and traditions of Western history. Where existing configurations break down – sometimes gradually, in different way in different segments of culture and in different point of time, sometimes in revolutionary explosions – this always happens because new experiences or new 'revelations' with regard to God, world, and human beings make it necessary. Speaking from the point of view of faith: new 'eschatological' questions appear at the lines of conflict with a prevailing configuration, and these challenge new spiritual, rational and religious creativity.

It follows from all this that it is hardly possible to formulate the problem of 'Christianity and Enlightenment culture' in a clear-cut way, for instance by contrasting the basic identities of each with one another. There is, of course, a sense in which one can legitimately speak of a post-Christian culture and of a certain lostness of Christian faith in the modern European context. Nevertheless, both 'post-Christian culture' and contemporary Christian faith – what ever form it may take – share the predicament of the problem of Western culture, and they can only move forward together. The opposition between genuine Christian faith and 'atheistic' tendencies in Enlightenment-culture ought to be resisted.

4. A more promising point of departure is to look for the tensions, the conflicts and the contradictions which have appeared and still are appearing with the over-arching 'synthesis' of 'modern culture'. At this point it might be fruitful to reconsider the importance of the opposing between capitalism and socialism; rather, the importance of the appearance of the socialist 'counter-question' over against the capitalist structuring of secular culture. Capitalism and socialism are not merely two parallel fruits of the Enlightenment; the tension between them points to a very basic problem with the modern configurations, and it can serve as a model for basic lines of conflict in modern global society, even after 'institutional socialism' has ceased to play a role of world wide importance. These basic lines of conflict call for creative decision of 'eschatological' weight, rather than the much more general line of conflict between a revived Christian faith and the unfriendly disposition of modern culture towards this faith. The central 'shrine' of society does not stand aloof from the struggle and choice in the arena of today's global society. The more it is made to stand aloof, the more the privatization of faith will be strengthened and encouraged. Revival of 'genuine' Christian faith can only take place in the form of new configuration of the fundamental elements of the culture as a whole, in connection with a revival of 'judgement and promise' spirituality at today's crucial lines of conflict.

5. The final, certainly not the least important, point is that the problem of Western culture and Western Christianity has become a world-wide problem. It has been exported in the course of history, and it has been 'dropped' as a time bomb in the midst of the 'synthesis' of other religions and cultures, which at least at first sight, do not share the basic restless and revolutionary character of Western culture and seem to be much more harmonious and stable. The Western problem is a threatening presence. It is ubiquitous in the guise of a world-economic system, in networks of political influence, in the self-evidence of ways of thinking which deal with large-scale annihilation of human beings and destruction of the natural environment. It is ubiquitous in

the conflicts which it produces in human lives and societies, and in the suffering which results from those. The open question of Western culture has been placed on all the agendas of the world. The fact that World Christianity has at least to some extent become part of non-Western configurations and syntheses gives it a unique position in the search for new answers. In other words: it is 'secularization' which ought to have top priority on the lists of the ecumenical movement and of inter-religious dialogue. The problem of Western culture and Western Christianity can no longer be dealt with as a purely Western problem. It has become a problem of the physical and spiritual survival of the human race; and we need a true plurality of resources to help us in our own context to steer clear of fanaticism and nihilism.

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