



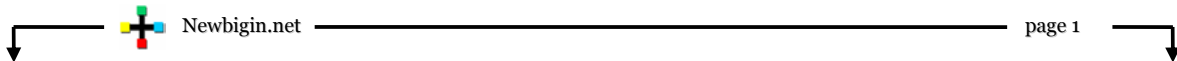
Introduction: The Gospel as Public Truth

*J.E. Lesslie Newbigin*

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*Introduction to a series of articles in "The Church of England Newspaper" on The Gospel and Our Culture Conference at Swanwick in 1992 on the theme "The Gospel as Public Truth"*

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THE CHRISTIAN Church worldwide is now growing more rapidly than it has ever done in its 2000-year history. But in Europe, which was long its heartland, it is in decline, defensive and apologetic.

The Christian belief about human nature and destiny is no longer treated as a serious factor in debate about public issues. Christianity is treated as an option for the personal life – or rather, for that small part of leisure time which some devote to sport or music and others devote to 'religion'.

The national consultation at Swanwick this summer had as its theme The Gospel as Public Truth. It focused the results of ten years of thinking and writing among a group of Christians who believe the present situation cannot be allowed to continue. If the Gospel is true, it is true for everyone and it must shape every part of human activity. If it is not true, then it is irrelevant as much to private as to public life.

In general, Christians in Europe have been unwilling to challenge the present situation. They have tried to preserve a place – even if a small place – for Christian belief as a tolerated option. They have not challenged the accepted view of public truth.

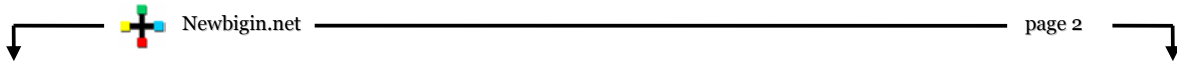
The 400 people who met at Swanwick were the beginnings of a movement of radical dissent. What is their programme?

It is not a programme for a return to the past. There was a time in Europe when the Christian faith was public truth and it was accepted as the basis for thought and action as well as governing the content of education. Acceptance of the Christian creed was the condition of entry to the University. No one had to make a personal decision to accept the Christian faith. It was taken for granted.

We can never go back to that situation. Once the critical questions have been asked, they can never be swept under the rug. They have to be answered. We cannot go back. But we also

cannot stay where we are. We cannot accept a permanent divorce between public and private truth. If we try to do so, we dissolve the world into a fog where all cats are grey and there is no such thing as truth. Truth becomes a matter of "what I personally feel" or of "what is meaningful for me".

That is happening now. We have no real world to deal with, so we



turn in upon ourselves and cultivate our own inner feelings. There is a smell of death around. Too many people see no alternatives except to stay where we are or to dream of going back. That is a failure of both courage and imagination.

We have to go forward. And to do so we have to put radical questions to the reigning assumptions of our modern Western culture. And they have to be questions about epistemology, that is to say, about our claims to know that anything is true. We have to go right down to the foundations and ask what right has anyone to say to anyone else: "This is true; that is false"?

For most of the past two centuries in Europe the model of reliable truth has been provided by science. What could be "scientifically proved" was true; the rest was a matter of personal opinion.

But science is itself under fire today. No one doubts the immense benefits we owe to science, but the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima is a symbol of the fear many people have of what science can do to us. Science enables us to do things of which previous ages could only dream.

But science cannot answer the question: "What things are worth doing?"

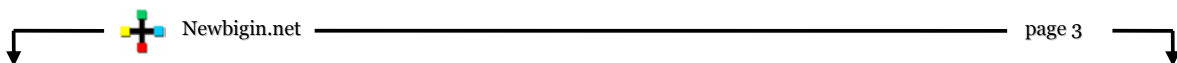
For answers to that question people have to look elsewhere, to what are now called "values". But what on earth are these "values"? They have no basis in "scientific" truth, so what basis do they have?

New Age thinking, which looks for a source of knowledge and power outside the domain of science, is increasingly attractive. So bookshops stock manuals on the occult and tabloid newspapers run sections on astrology and people turn from the rationality of science to all kinds of irrationality.

We must tackle the basic question: How do we know that anything is true? That is the question which engaged the largest section of the Swanwick consultation.

The past 300 years, heralded by the age which called itself the "Age of Reason", have witnessed the attempt to found certain truth on a basis from which faith is eliminated. Modern philosophers of science have shown that faith commitments are involved in the very heart of science. In fact, no rational thinking is possible at all except on the basis of some things which are taken for granted. Yet these things can always be doubted.

After the long dominance of the "critical principle" as the key to reliable truth, we have entered a post-critical period in which we know



that we have to find a new basis for confidence. Without this, science itself could collapse into a mere instrument of technology, a means of getting things done but not an avenue to the truth.

But the other seven sections in which the Swanwick consultation did its six days' work were about how the claim to public truth becomes meaningful in the various areas of public debate and action such as economics, education, medicine, history, the arts and the media.

Here again we must be clear that we cannot dream of going back to a situation where the Christian faith, embodied in the Church, seeks to dominate public life and debate. We know now,

or we ought to know, that a faith which has the crucified Lord cannot aspire to take the seat of Pilate. We cannot go back.

What is required is the courage, imagination and hard thinking that will enable Christian men and women working in these and other areas of public life, to bring the perspectives of the Christian faith (not just "Christian values") into the public debate which goes on in every sector of society.

In preparation for the Swanwick consultation eight groups of men and women in responsible positions in eight sectors of public life worked to produce preliminary sketches of what it would mean to bring the Christian faith into direct encounter with the assumptions that now control these several disciplines. These eight papers, published in *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture* (edited by Hugh Montefiore and published by Cassals) formed the basis for work at Swanwick.

The result, I trust, will be the development of coherent strategies for the more effective engagement of Christians with the public debate. This, as I said, calls for courage. When Christianity was the accepted public truth, it required no courage to be a Christian. When Christianity is a private opinion making no claim to be public truth, it requires little courage to be a Christian. But to affirm the Gospel as public truth requires not only imagination and hard thinking, but also the courage to engage in public debate in areas where it will be dismissed as false or irrelevant. However, as our friends in Eastern Europe know, it takes courage to be a dissident.

The ensuing articles in this series spell out some of the thinking which went into the Swanwick meeting. We are all involved in what comes out of it.

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