



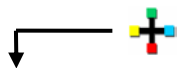
## Face To Face With Ultimate Reality

1998

J.E. Lesslie Newbiggin

*Third Way*, (March): 17.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbiggin family, the Newbiggin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbiggin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



The older you get, the more you are teased by questions: the questions behind the questions and the questions behind the answers that you gave in the past. There is a sense that everything can be questioned, because everyone has some basic starting point which is not negotiable, which is absolute.

I don't want to talk about absolutes, I want to talk about Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ is that ultimate reality to whom I am finally committed with a commitment which is not negotiable. At the end of the day, you cannot translate that into any set of moral or philosophical principles. There is no doubt that these have their place, and you have to work at them, but it is this personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is essential.

That prayer of St Richard of Chichester – "Oh Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour, Friend and Brother, let me know you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly day by day" – in a sense has to be the absolute prayer. More and more, I find myself limited to that – if that is a limited thing.

Scepticism has told us that we cannot really know reality, we can only know the appearances of things. Now, this has no philosophical basis: it's a mood, it's part of the climate of opinion. There is no reason to accept it. Of course, we know that our apprehensions of reality are partial and need to be corrected by others, but we have no reason to lose confidence that when we put our minds and souls to the task we can come to some real contact with things as they are.

I think we need a careful re-examination of the whole critical movement of the last 150 years. There is no doubt that it has brought many good fruits, but we must ask the question that you must always ask of any critical movement: "What are the assumptions which are not criticised by the critics?"

I am horrified by the extent to which so much of the preaching that goes on in the church is about the context, not about the text. It's so often all about the world and our human experience. Of course we have to show that the Bible relates to the contemporary world, but we don't start with the world: we start with what is given to us in scripture.

For me, what you become depends on what you attend to. I treasure the time spent first thing each morning really listening to the Bible and reflecting on it. We must allow the Bible to shape our minds.

What I have tried to do in these last few years is to persuade people to distance themselves from where they now stand. The secret of the great scientists was the gift of making themselves strange to the familiar. We must learn to take the present world, its assumptions and clichés, and stand back and say, "is that truly so?" I think this is a necessary preface to the business of presenting the gospel in its sharp distinctiveness, because an awful lot of people in this country think they've heard it already, they think it is just "Be kind to each other."

I see the challenge of Islam as something to be welcomed, as it will wake us up to the pagan nature of so much of our society. When you look at the parallels between what is happening in our culture and the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, one is constantly reminded that this thing that we call modern Western culture could disintegrate into chaos. I see Islam and Christianity as being in a sense partners in the coming century as from our different standpoints we wrestle with the future of Western culture.

Muslims have perhaps not yet really begun to face the kind of questions Christians faced in the 19th century in relating their faith to a modern secular culture. In their struggle to do so, I would hope that there could be fruitful dialogue between Christians and Muslims. We must certainly steer clear of any kind of crusading mentality in relation to Islam, though we must still affirm the truth about Jesus and confront our Muslim friends with it.

I think in some sense dialogue is easier with Muslims than with Hindus. For Hindus, God is ultimately unknown and as a result all religions can happily merge with each other. Christians who enter this religious synthesis very quickly become Hindus who happen to have Jesus as their favourite deity. With Islam that won't happen, because Muslims are as sharp as Christians in insisting on the uniqueness of the revelation which they treasure.

The other day, a television producer asked me, "Why do you think the teachings of Jesus have been so much more influential than many of the great teachers of antiquity?" I said: "Because he died and rose again and they didn't." After all, his sayings are not unique: many of them can be paralleled in other parts of the world. We remember him because he fought the ultimate battle which changes the course of history, and so we *have* to remember his sayings.

You can't understand Jesus if you don't understand him as he understood himself. He is the one in whom the whole story is fulfilled of the long, patient wrestling of God with his chosen people to make them the place where the holiness of God and the sinfulness of men would meet and the final victory would be won. What Jesus did was the decisive turning-point of the whole story of creation and of humanity, the point from which every human being must in the end take their hearings. We may have questions about how we interpret that, but if it is fact we have to tell people about it. This is public truth.

The more one reads about his life, his words, his deeds, the more one sees him as a real human being amongst other human beings who actually met him face to face. Yet often he gave these people such terrifyingly challenging answers to their questions. You cannot help asking yourself, "How will I meet that face at the end?"

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.