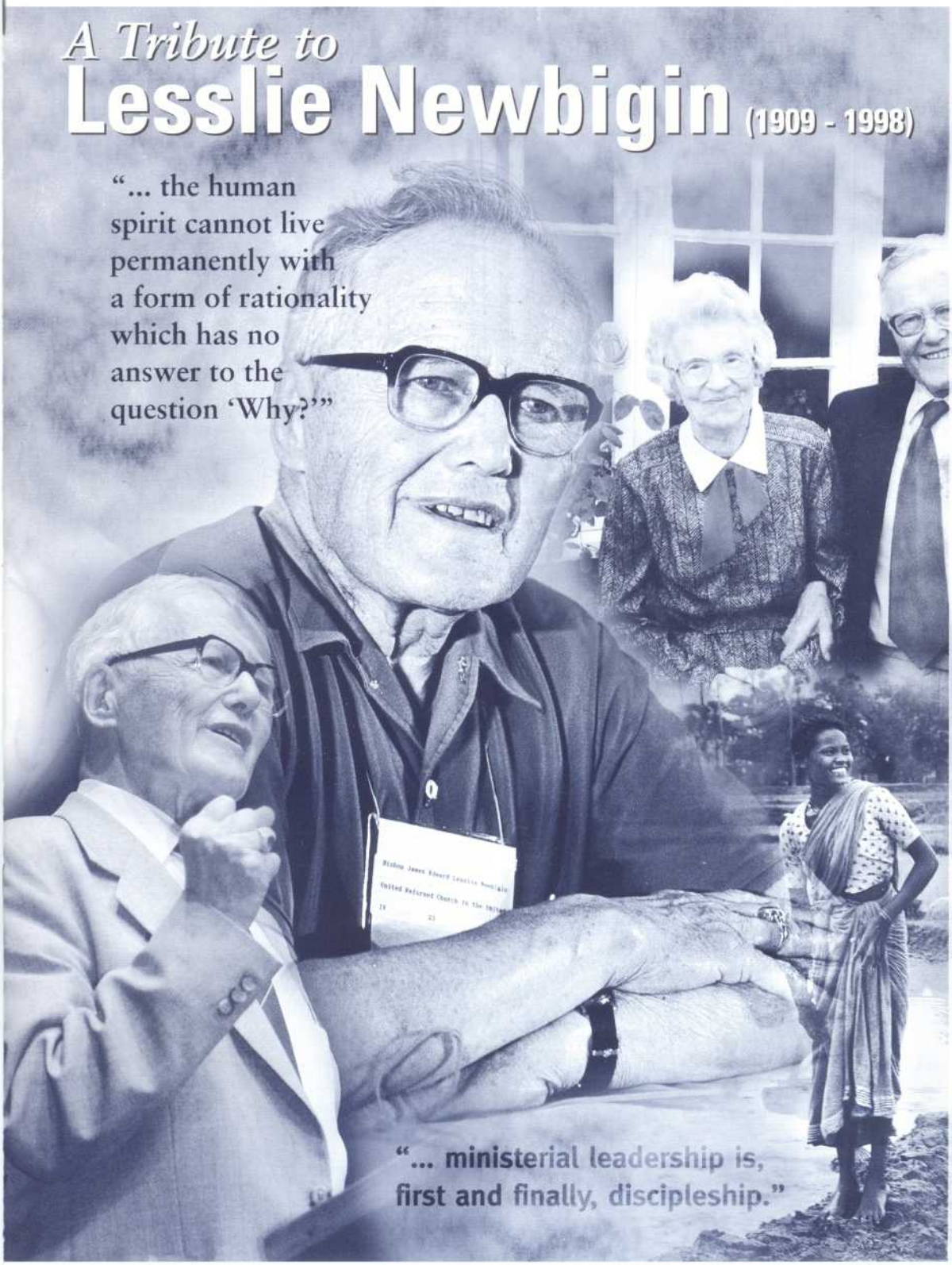
BIBLE SOCIETY

the Bible in TransMission

a forum for change in church and culture



A Tribute to Lesslie Newbigin (1909 - 1998)

"... the human spirit cannot live permanently with a form of rationality which has no answer to the question 'Why?'"

"... ministerial leadership is, first and finally, discipleship."

in this issue...

A Passion for Mission

by Martin Robinson

The Revd Dr Martin Robinson is a minister in the Churches of Christ. He is Director of Mission and Theology at Bible Society, and is a well-known lecturer and writer.

Regular readers of *Transmission* may well wonder why we have included a special edition dedicated to the life and work of Lesslie Newbigin. Two reasons predominate. First, it is virtually certain that Lesslie will be counted as one of a handful of significant shapers and shakers amongst church leaders in the twentieth century. Few can match his astonishing contribution to the world of ecumenism and mission. His offerings include his writings but beyond the written page his unceasing energies as teacher, pastor and ecumenical statesman mark him out as one that matched a keen mind with personal kindness and zealous conviction.

Second, Lesslie's work in recent years in connection with the Gospel and our Culture movement has acted as an important catalyst for the Bible Society in re-imagining the role of the Bible in the emerging mission field of the West. In this he has acted both as a friend and a mentor. The sub title of *Transmission* "a forum for change in church and culture" reflects Lesslie's significant influence.

Many of the contributors have commented on the breadth of Lesslie's activities in a long life of Christian service. Tom Faust, a Ph.D student at Birmingham University, has helpfully compiled the following outline of Lesslie's life and ministry which readers may find a helpful reference point in appreciating his immense contribution to the Church's mission.

Lesslie Newbigin

1909	Born 8 December
1909-28	Early life
1928-31	Cambridge University
1931-33	On staff with Student Christian Movement (Glasgow)
1933-36	Theological training at Westminster College, Cambridge University
1936-47	Missionary in India with Church of Scotland
1947-59	Bishop in the Church of South India at Madurai and Ramnad
1959-61	London: seconded to International Missionary Council
1962-65	Geneva: seconded to The World Council of Churches: Division of World Mission and Evangelism
1965-74	Bishop in Madras, India
1974	CBE
1974-79	UK: Lecturer in Theology at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham
1977-78	Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church
1980-88	Minister with United Reformed Church, Winson Green, Birmingham
1983-98	Retired: active with The Gospel and Our Culture Movement, writing, advising, and teaching
1998	Died 30 January

"And finally, it follows that the missionary encounter of the gospel with the modern world will, like every true missionary encounter, call for radical conversion. This will be not only a conversion of the will and of the feelings but a conversion of the mind – a 'paradigm shift' that leads to a new vision of how things are and, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is 'rendered' for us in the pages of Scripture."

(Foolishness to the Greeks, SPCK, p. 64.)

Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to the Theology of Mission

by Wilbert R Shenk

Lesslie Newbigin has been one of the decisive influences on the theology of mission in the twentieth century. Not only did he live a long and full life but he continued to speak and write right up to the end. His writings touching on mission theology and practice span six decades. In this appreciation of Newbigin's contribution, I want to note the characteristics that distinguish his work and assess the impact of his thought.

A fitting starting point is the formative experience he records in his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda* (1993 2nd edn). In 1928 he entered Cambridge an agnostic with regard to religion; but during his first year at university the example of an older student challenged him to consider the Christian faith. The following summer, at the age of nineteen, he joined a Quaker service centre in South Wales that provided recreational services to unemployed miners. The coal-mining industry was depressed and the situation bleak and hopeless. One night, as he lay in bed overwhelmed with concern for these men, he saw a vision of the cross (p.11) touching, as it were, heaven and earth. The cross embraced the whole world and the whole of life. This conversion experience left an indelible imprint on him, furnishing the point from which Newbigin would thereafter take his bearings. The cross as "clue" became a central motif for his life. Furthermore, his relationship with God was intimate and vivid, nurtured by continual communion. He was God's partisan.

Newbigin was highly disciplined. He mastered the basics of whatever he was studying and prepared thoroughly for each assignment. When he arrived in India in 1936 he immediately set out to attain proficiency in Tamil, a language non-native speakers find difficult to master. Next he deepened his understanding of the culture and religion of India by spending many hours with the Ramakrishna Mission reading alternately the Svetasvara Upanishad and John's Gospel in the original languages. This attitude of intellectual fearlessness enabled him to engage in dialogue with a range of viewpoints regardless of whether or not he found them congenial.

By force of personality and giftedness, Newbigin early emerged as a missionary statesman and ecumenical leader. His views were never parochial and yet he remained rooted in the local – be that the rural villages of Tamilnadu, urban Madras or inner-city Winson Green in Birmingham. He modelled what it means to contextualise Christian witness by immersing oneself in the language and culture of a particular people. Rather than narrowing or limiting one's view, true contextualisation will extend one's horizon.

Lesslie Newbigin was a frontline thinker because of an uncommon ability to sense the emerging issue that must be addressed at that moment. This is not to be confused with the pursuit of fads. He had an aversion to fads. What drew his attention was those issues that impinged on the future of the church and its obedience in mission: the nature of the church in relation to unity and mission, the relevance of the Trinity, the gospel and the religions, the proper meaning of contextualisation, conversion, pluralism, Christian witness in a culture that has rejected Christendom. Time and again Newbigin led the way in introducing an issue that would become a dominant theme in the ensuing years.

Newbigin's mode of discourse was theological even though he consistently disclaimed any pretension to being a professional theologian. In the preface to one of his most widely read books, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), he wrote: "I can make no claim either to originality or to scholarship. I am a pastor and preacher." Virtually everything Newbigin wrote was 'on assignment', that is, in response to a request to speak or write for a particular occasion. He found no time for leisurely and detached reflection. He spoke and wrote 'on the run.' This gave his thought an immediacy not characteristic of the academy so that some academics felt compelled to point out that he was not one of them; yet his thought commanded attention because of its profundity, vigour and challenge.

Because he remained intensely engaged in both church

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and world Lesslie Newbigin devoted himself to reflecting on the life of faith as it intersected with that of the world; he was impatient with 'airy-fairy' or detached scholarship that flaunted its objectivity. (He could be devastating in exposing the pretensions of the latter.) His vocation was to be one of the seminal frontline thinkers of the twentieth century. He was read with appreciation by a vast number of lay people while his books have regularly appeared on the reading lists of numerous divinity schools. Rather than a systematic scholar attempting to provide a comprehensive account, he is best characterised as a strategic thinker.

Contribution to theology and practice of mission

Lesslie Newbigin was wholly committed to God's mission of the redemption of the world. He was equally committed to the unity of the church. At the centre of both stood Jesus Christ. His forceful commitment to Christ-centred mission and Christ-centred ecumenism gave his witness a coherence that leapt over the usual ecclesiastical and theological lines. Conventional theological labels were never adequate to describe him.

The following passage from *The Household of God* (1953), and frequently repeated, serves as something of a programmatic statement of Newbigin's theological vision:

"It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought – and is seeking – to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second." (p.20)

Here Newbigin emphasises that the starting point is God's initiative in Jesus Christ, the calling on the church to be the visible and witnessing community of the gospel, and the essential structure that of an unfolding narrative rather than an institutional system.

The categories of theology and missiology are almost wholly irrelevant. Newbigin's theology is thoroughly missiological and his missiology is theological. The wellspring of his thought was his vision of the cross that perforce thrusts the church into missionary witness; and for him action must continually be tested against the norm of the gospel, the centre of which was the cross.

I want to examine Lesslie Newbigin's contribution in terms of three dimensions: missionary theologian, contextual theologian, and strategic theologian.

Missionary theologian

On almost every page of the Newbigin writings, one encounters the mind and heart of the missionary theologian at work. In the William Belden Noble Lectures for 1958 at Harvard University, Newbigin offered a rejoinder to one of Harvard's most eminent philosophers in the twentieth century, William Ernest Hocking, who two years earlier had published a book, *The Coming World Civilisation*. In the 1930s Hocking had presided over the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry that produced the multi-volume report *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932) and stirred debate about the future of Christian missions. Hocking's proposed reformulation of missionary principles in the summary volume, which entailed a considerable redefinition of the meaning of mission, contributed to polarisation within the missionary movement.

Newbigin titled his reply to Hocking *A Faith for this One World?* Already at this point Newbigin was wrestling with the issue that would preoccupy him continually in the last two decades of his life: 'No faith can command a man's final and absolute allegiance, that is to say no faith can be a man's real religion, if he knows that it is only true for certain places and certain people. In a world which knows that there is only one physics and one mathematics, religion cannot do less than claim for its affirmations a like universal validity' (p.30). The modern secular solution in which two mutually unintelligible categories were established – 'fact' and 'values' – had to be rejected. The secularist claimed universal validity for scientific fact but allowed only for personal preference where values were concerned. In making his critique, Newbigin considered the proposals for a universal religious framework for humankind put forward by Indian philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, British historian Arnold Toynbee, and Hocking. It is the latter that concerns us here.

In his quest for a basis for a universal civilisation, Hocking argued that Christianity alone offered such a foundation provided its offensive parochialisms and doctrinal particularisms were stripped away. Newbigin queried Hocking's proposals at three crucial points: Hocking's view of faith, the meaning of Jesus Christ, and the relationship between faith and history.

(1) The biblical view of faith is radically different from that of Hocking. For the latter, faith is 'an individual experience of timeless reality,' a view that echoes Radhakrishnan's. In the Bible the living God takes the initiative in creating a new social reality. According to the biblical account, the eternal emphatically has a history, however shocking it may be to the philosopher. Hocking speaks abstractly of One who is Love but this One never engages history.

(2) Hocking is diffident about Jesus Christ, preferring to interpret the Christ in relation to some universal religious spirit. He suggests that Christian faith is of a piece with the faith by which all people live. Hocking cited the words from John's Gospel: 'The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world' (1:9a NEB). Newbigin pointed to the logical fallacy on which Hocking's argument turns. Hocking bases his reasoning on personal religious experience whereas the Johannine passage insists that this light is 'present where man is present, not wherever *religion* is present.' In this and numerous other passages, Newbigin warns of the danger of putting confidence in religion. Biblical faith arises from God's initiative in history, encountering us in our world, dying at the hands of sinful humans and in the resurrection gaining victory over the power of death. Biblical faith depends on what Newbigin repeatedly refers to as 'the total fact of Christ.'

(3) The third criticism of Hocking has to do with the way the philosopher argues for a necessary link between history and religion but fails to base this on the Incarnation. Christians believe, insists Newbigin, 'that at one point in human history the universal and the concrete historical completely coincided, that the Man Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate Word of God, that in his works and words the perfect will of God was done without defect or remainder.' The Christian gospel depends on this 'total fact of Christ.' Hocking fails to take this seriously, opting instead for a universal mystical experience available to humankind but without any specific point of reference. The gospel insists that God acted decisively in Jesus Christ to reveal the meaning of divine love and salvation.

In the end, Newbigin's reply to Hocking is that the only viable basis for the 'civilisation in the singular' he advocates is to be found in the missionary proclamation of God's revelation in Jesus Christ by which a new humanity is being called into being. In coming years Newbigin would develop his theology of mission further by placing it in a trinitarian framework and thinking through issues of conversion and contextualisation. But its foundation remained 'the total fact of Christ'.

Contextual theologian

A cursory reading of the Newbigin writings might suggest a fair amount of repetition. He early developed a characteristic style of discourse that persists throughout. Certain themes recur over the decades. The theological framework remains securely in place. All this must be granted. I want to suggest, however, that what makes Newbigin consistently compelling is his keen sense of context and his ability to identify with his audience. He had the ability to articulate what for others remained only subliminal until he expressed it for them.

Lesslie Newbigin began his missionary service in India in 1936. The West was in turmoil, with intimations of another world war. Movements for political independence in the Asian and African colonies constantly reminded the European colonial powers that the present order could not last indefinitely. Missionary leaders were aware that the so-called younger churches were restive under continued mission control.

Newbigin begins the 1952 Kerr Lectures – later published as *The Household of God* – with a discussion of the breakdown of Christendom and its significance for ecclesiology. Christendom means 'the synthesis between the Gospel and the culture of the western part of the European peninsula of Asia' which had developed over a long period. Christianity was so at home in European culture that it had become the folk religion and Western ecclesiology had developed in this insular context: it was non-missionary and focused on conflicts between various Christian groups rather than any vision of the church in relation to the pagan world. The break-up of this historical reality, starting in the seventeenth century, coincided with the movement to send Christian missions from the West to other continents. Naturally, these missions took with them the only understanding of the church they knew, the Christendom model. Thus, both in the historical heartland of Christendom as well as in other parts of the world where Western missions had established churches based on this Christendom ecclesiology, ecclesiology was an urgent concern.

Comparing *The Household of God* with *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, written thirty-six years apart, one notes an underlying coherence in theme and structure. Both books model sensitivity to the socio-historical context in which it is set that characterises a vital theology. In 1952 Newbigin is a Western missionary living in the non-Western

world trying to address both worlds; by 1988 his outlook has undergone a radical change. Now he is looking at his homeland with critical concern, even alarm. Retiring from service in India in 1974, he attempted to 'go home' but discovered that the Great Britain he once knew was no more. Instead it had become a disconcerting, even disturbing environment. What some artists and philosophers were describing as the 'decline of the West' and 'the end of Christendom' in the pre-World War II era, had now become reality. A palpable existential hopelessness had settled over Western society. The bankruptcy of the Christendom ecclesiology weighed heavily on him. It is no surprise that the chapter in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* that attracts the greatest reader response is 'The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel', chapter 18. The malaise widely felt among Western Christians is generally attributed to forms of church life that do not support Christian discipleship and witness in modern culture. The diagnosis Newbigin offered in 1952 has, if anything, become even more compelling.

Strategic theologian

In 1981 Newbigin was asked by the British Council of Churches to write an aide-memoire that would guide the council in responding to the concern for Christian witness in modern British society. The result was a small book, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (1983). This, of course, set the course for the rest of his life as it became his consuming passion: so to renew the church in the West that it would again bring the witness of Christian revelation to bear on the whole of life, but do so without reverting to 'Constantinian' forms and assumptions. Newbigin deployed insights from philosophy, history, sociology, and science to create a compelling analysis of the present situation, but his framework was theological and missiological. From this point on Newbigin was not only engaging a particular context but was continually asking the question of strategy: how can the church respond faithfully in this situation?

Future agenda: the challenges ahead

It is entirely characteristic that Lesslie Newbigin titled his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda*. He lived in the present for the future. He had a strong sense of an eschatology that gave one nerve to face the present knowing that the victory was assuredly in God's hands. What guidance with regard to the future has Newbigin left us?

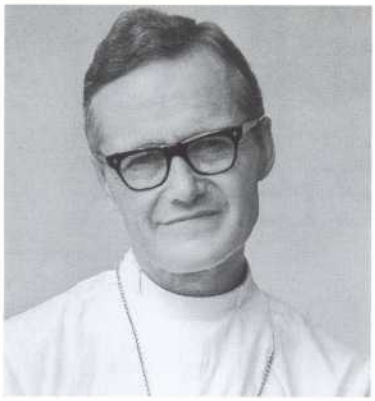
Firstly, we are being called to affirm that the cross provides the clue to the human predicament. The gospel tells us the story of what God has done to redeem the whole creation from bondage to sin, decay and death. At the centre of that story stands the cross representing that moment when God in Jesus Christ intervened decisively 'for us and our salvation'. No part of human existence is beyond the scope of God's salvation. God's compassion extends to the whole of creation. Yet Christian history is filled with examples of ways the gospel of the cross has been denied or reduced to fit the prevailing plausibility structure. Whenever this happens, the power and impact of the gospel is diminished. In modern culture a fundamental division was introduced in the seventeenth century between 'fact' – empirically verifiable according to scientific laws – and 'value' – subjective, personal, private. Only objective 'facts' could be regarded as universally valid and authoritative. Religion was classed as a 'value'. The gospel of the cross not only was scandalous but entirely out of place in the public sphere. But if the church is to have a witness, it will have to reclaim 'the total fact of Christ', as Newbigin frequently put it, and not a truncated version tailored to modern sensibilities. This means that the church needs to learn once more to indwell the biblical narrative so that its own life, witness, and worship are shaped by that narrative rather than secular myth.

Secondly, we are being called to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose. In *The Household of God* Newbigin pointed to the fatal dichotomy that marks Christendom ecclesiology: church and mission. Mission is often treated as a stepchild or, even worse, in some cases an orphan. That is to say, traditional ecclesiology has had no place for mission. Yet the church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be a sign of God's reign and the means of witnessing to that reign throughout the world. The church that refuses to accept its missionary purpose is a deformed church.

Thirdly, we are being called to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose in relation to modern Western culture. While it is essential that we press to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose, the next step is to work out that fundamental missional ecclesiology in relation to modern Western culture. And this is admittedly a challenging undertaking. Modern Western culture with its roots in Christendom manifests deep antagonism towards religious faith. It views itself as being post-Christendom, even post-religious. Such attitudes and habits of thought are deeply held. The task facing the church in the West is retrieving the integrity of its identity as a missionary presence in society. This will entail learning to understand this culture from a missionary perspective – its controlling myths and plausibility structure – and discerning the relevance of the fullness of the gospel in this culture.

"So the logic of mission is this: The true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be private opinion. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part."

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, SPCK, p. 125.)



Lesslie Newbigin – A New Zealand Perspective

by Harold Turner

The Revd. Dr Harold Turner has had a long career teaching Religious Studies and is a renowned scholar of primal religions. In 1989 he founded the Gospel and Cultures Trust in New Zealand, where he lives in retirement.

From my many memories of Lesslie Newbigin I can indicate something of his influence on the other side of the world, in New Zealand. When I went to Birmingham in 1981 Alan Brash, my fellow New Zealand Presbyterian minister who had been associated with Newbigin through the WCC, told me that Lesslie and I, having so much in common, would 'fall on each other's necks', or some such. Newbigin was then ensconced in a carrel in the Selly Oak Colleges library writing his commentary on St. John's Gospel, and I was establishing the Centre for New Religious Movements in the same building, but somehow we did not 'connect'.

It was only when *The Other Side of 1984* appeared and the Gospel & Culture movement took shape that a warm friendship quickly developed. I just 'happened' (as we say before we recognise Providence at work) to be there, and found it congenial to everything that had gone before in my own life. Newbigin and I lived close to the Colleges and latterly worshipped at the same URC church, and it was a high privilege to be involved with him from the mid-eighties until his death.

As one specific example of our relationship, I was moved by his humility in asking me (an unknown newcomer to his world) to read each chapter as it came off his typewriter for the Robertson lectures he gave in Glasgow University in 1988 - the text for his subsequent major book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

In 1989 I returned to New Zealand and he managed to find time to correspond, and warmly support the establishment here of an equivalent Gospel & Culture initiative; in fact I think 'distance lent enchantment' and he had a rather exaggerated view of what we were managing. This probably reflected what was happening in Britain at the same time - the failure of the movement there to take off independently of its ageing chief articulator. I am glad that he did live to see the Bible Society in Britain officially take up responsibility for developing the Gospel & Culture issue.

In New Zealand there was no question of my abandoning the new vistas and activities, and I was resolved to be a link with what was happening in Britain and elsewhere. Here there was a good deal of respect for Newbigin's earlier theological writings among the more serious-minded ministers, but missiology has not been developed in ministerial training nor in the mission societies. There was, therefore, less understanding of the mission thrust that had marked his later writings, even before the Gospel & Culture development. The man himself was not known, except for a few New Zealand missionaries who had met him in India; he had paid only one short visit to New Zealand many years before.

His influence here in the nineties is, therefore, all the more remarkable, both through his writings since the *1984* book, and through the inspiration he provided for the Gospel and Cultures Trust that was established in 1990. I should, therefore, give some outline of its activities, all of which Lesslie followed with intelligent interest and warm support.

You will note the plural 'Cultures', because we could no longer refer simply to 'our' culture, i.e. Western culture, in a society where we are very aware of the Maori heritage and there are growing numbers of Pacific Islanders and now of Asian immigrants. Multiculturalism is the public context and the social reality and so the original British agenda had to widen, even while the chief focus remains on the dominant and modern Western culture. Lesslie, of course, after half a lifetime in India, fully understood this as well as appreciated the great advantages of operating in a small society.

Thus we were able to form a group of Trustees including the Anglican Archbishop, the Catholic Cardinal, a retired general secretary of the then National Council of Churches in New Zealand (a Baptist), a Presbyterian theological lecturer, a retired professor of education, and the national Principal of the Bible College of New Zealand (a Christian Brethren member). This would not have been possible in any other country. Nor would it have been so easy to secure as Patron the present Governor-General of New Zealand – Sir Michael Hardie-Boys, a committed Christian. When the movement seemed to be in the doldrums in Britain, Lesslie found this all very exciting and he was liable to read too much into it.

In addition to the Trustees, a management team has been drawn together consisting of local people in Auckland. These include an industrial chemist who directs the University of Auckland marketing body, Uniservices, a medical doctor, a university chaplain, a lecturer in history, an accountant, a school teacher and several ministers.

Experience in England, along with Lesslie and Dan Beeby, meeting with Christian foundations for funding Gospel

"The minister's leadership of the congregation in its mission to the world will be first and foremost in the area of his or her own discipleship, in that life of prayer and daily consecration which remains hidden from the world but which is the place where the essential battles are either won or lost."

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 240-241.)

"...the human spirit cannot live permanently with a form of rationality which has no answer to the question 'Why?'"

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 213.)

& Culture suggested that it would be a waste of time appealing here for funds for such an unknown enterprise. So we have been privately financed thus far, largely by one family, and economically set up with two office rooms downstairs in my house. I was the one full-time and honourary staff member until 1997 when health problems forced retirement and John Flett with some assistance took over as part-time Secretary and office manager.

Our activities have included a residential conference of church leaders in 1991, similar to the Gospel & Culture Swanwick conference, and a three-yearly Newsletter, *New Slant*, akin to the former British one, is now in its sixth year. In 1995 I conducted a thirty-hour course over ten Saturday mornings, for over thirty laity. This provided a solid introduction to the relation between the Gospel and the basic assumptions of our Western worldview – epistemological, ontological and cosmological. It will, hopefully, lead to a book before the end of this year, *Frames of Mind: A Public Philosophy for Religion and Culture From a Christian Stance*. At the same time, Lesslie was quite excited about teaching lay groups at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton. This drew upon his biblical–theological position as compared with our own more philosophical–theological approach; but when we discussed them he recognised how the two were complementary.

He was also fascinated by the M.Th. research of John Flett into the earlier major initiative on Gospel & Culture in Britain in the 1930s-50s. Led by J.H. Oldham, this was undertaken through his Christian Newsletter and elite think-tank, The Moot, which later became the Christian Frontier Council and its journal became *Frontier*. Newbigin himself was invited to read a paper (that Oldham disliked!) to The Moot and followed with keen interest what Flett is opening up as to where that high-powered initiative differed from the new Gospel and Culture movement and why it had failed. To relate these two sections of Christian history is of the greatest importance to us all, and this research is guiding our further and major development in the form of a 'DeepSight Institute' permanently funded and adequately staffed for this new 'deep mission to deep culture'.

Our connection with the British Gospel and Our Culture movement will now be developed further by Bible Society. Another joint development has been the establishment of a single shared internet site on behalf of the Gospel & Culture movement in Britain, the USA and New Zealand, at http://www.voyager.co.nz/-dozer. Although Lesslie was not up in these latest technologies he thoroughly approved and was intrigued at the page devoted to himself as inspirer of the whole enterprise.

As his blindness advanced, voluntary readers visited and read to him. New Zealanders Murray Rae and Graham Redding (both on our management committee here) were members of this team while they were studying at King's College, London. So the New Zealand connection has been manifold. Over the last four years of his life Lesslie and I corresponded by cassette tape. Receiving these tapes was for me a great privilege and tremendous support. Since he covers on them so many issues and events in a free and informal way, they are an invaluable archive of his thinking.

So now I share with hosts of others my thanksgiving to God for the gift of Lesslie Newbigin as a prophet of our age, as the formative influence in his further Gospel & Culture development in my own country, and for me personally as a major presence in my life.

Walking with Lesslie – A Personal Perspective

by H Dan Beeby

We invited Dan Beeby, friend and colleague of Lesslie, to write in the form of a 'walk' with Lesslie drawing on memories of their shared experiences.

The Revd Dr H Dan Beeby is a minister of the United Reformed Church. He lectured at Selly Oak Colleges, where he was Principal of St Andrew's Hall, and is a consultant to Bible Society for the Recovery of Scripture programme.

Brought up as a Northern English Presbyterian, it seems I can hardly remember a time when I didn't known of Lesslie as a legend. We nearly met on a cold Whit-Monday in London in 1946 when the Newbigin family returned on furlough from India. I, ordained and married, was studying Chinese while waiting for a ship to China. Illness and the cold changed their plans. They went direct from Southampton to Newcastle and we didn't meet. First contact was in 1965 when our two sons conjointly had a difference of opinion with their headmaster in Kent and were not welcome in their school for a spell. Lesslie and Helen were in Geneva, my wife was in Taiwan, I was in New York and tomorrow was my doctoral oral. With visions of our erring sons loose on London streets, Lesslie and I corresponded. When I was farewelled on retirement in 1986, Lesslie read my letter. He had kept the letter.

We finally met at a large conference in Montreat, North Carolina. Lesslie was there as Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches to help ease relationships between a conservative mission and its 'younger missionary churches'. From a distance, on the back rows, I saw the quintessential Newbigin: the brilliant speaker, the clear thinker and also the severe critic when he rounded on one prominent minister and thundered, 'Today thou hast borne false witness against thy neighbour'. As village preacher and Indian bishop, as missionary statesman and ecclesiastical civil servant he could see every point of view, he could prosecute and defend and finally could heal.

In 1974, Lesslie in retirement came to teach in Selly Oak Colleges and he was given an office next to mine. The legend finally took flesh and became even more legendary while at the same time more human as I had the joy and the privilege of working alongside him in various capacities. He had returned from India full of honours and an Indian halo to episcopal offers, moderatorships and preaching at Balmoral; but he saw himself as someone learning to teach and the minister of Winson Green URC, opposite the prison. We were in and out of each other's offices, we borrowed each other's books, we sat on the same committees and when he could no longer drive, the four of us went shopping together.

One committee we shared was on Christianity and other faiths and there I saw some of the beginnings of what led to Lesslie's booklet *The Other Side of 1984*. Its impact on publication surprised everyone, not least Lesslie himself who claimed he had said nothing new. Others disagreed strongly and the British Council of Churches formed a committee to continue what he had started and to work towards a conference on the Gospel as Public Truth in 1992. When I retired, I was asked to co-ordinate this work. Nothing could have given me greater joy because I regarded retirement as a heresy and I delighted in working with Lesslie. He gave one the self-honesty to know that one was the monkey on the barrel organ but yet that monkey felt a little leonine; knowing you were four foot high you felt basketball tall and inspired with a 'proper confidence'. Treating you as equal he would even say he was indebted and really believed it.

And there were things that I could do. I could blow his trumpet when he couldn't or wouldn't and I could counter his humility when necessary. In the States there was enthusiasm for 'The Gospel and Our Culture' but Lesslie was hesitant to suggest that they should inaugurate a movement and begin to organise. They did and it flourished splendidly. One morning, he said he had just turned down an invitation to lecture in Glasgow which wasn't fair to Helen. Hesitatingly, I suggested he might offer to give the lectures at a later date. He said nothing but the following day he told me that he had taken my suggestion and with a grin he said 'May God forgive you'. I am sure he has because I think *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* will be seen as Lesslie's most influential book.

Like many great men there was mystery about him that sometimes puzzled because it seemed to imply contradiction. This brilliant

and profound writer left a manuscript of limericks, recently published and he was wonderful with children, sometimes standing on his head to illustrate a children's address.

He lived to unify and to reconcile but he was always in conflict. To unify Indian churches he fought with Anglicans; since the sixties he had struggled with his beloved World Council of Churches, specialist in Hinduism and other religions he was a warrior for Christ, and to his deep, deep distress he died in conflict with his own church.

He was a scholar who said that he wasn't and didn't use footnotes although he read other people's. Perhaps he was pointing us to new ways in scholarship because like Paul, he was an intellectual who knew only one thing: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

He was known to others in the old people's home where he and Helen lived as 'that kind old man who does our shopping for us'. To thousands, in many lands, he was their pastor. He was an incomparable friend because he could be stern as well as tolerant and his generosity was such that his right hand hardly knew what the same hand was doing!

In speaking of his labours since 1983 he always said 'we' and 'our' without the hint of a smile. When asked by the family to preach at his funeral, I felt that nothing could be more sad yet that there could be no greater honour than to have been his friend.

"Is it the primary business of the ordained minister to look after the spiritual needs of the church members? Is it to represent God's kingdom to the whole community? Or – and this is surely the true answer – is it to lead the whole congregation as God's embassage to the whole community?"

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, SPCK, p. 237.)

Renewing Faith during the Postmodern Transition

by George R. Hunsberger

George Hunsberger identifies the resources Lesslie Newbigin bequeathed to the churches in the USA.

George R Hunsberger is Professor of Missiology at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, USA and Co-ordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America.

The publication in 1986 of Lesslie Newbigin's book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, loosed a new wave of his influence among pastoral leaders in the USA. For decades, his influence had already moulded the way people approached an important range of issues. His missionary ecclesiology (*The Household of God*) and his insistence on the pursuit of its visible unity (*Is Christ Divided?*) had taught us how to think about the Church. He had led us to take proper note of the theological underpinnings for the mission of the Church (*The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission, The Open Secret, Mission in Christ's Way*). He had engaged the relationship of Christian faith with the variety of other religious faiths in the world (*A Faith for This One World?, The Finality of Christ*). He had displayed in it all a deeply pastoral style, whether in the villages of India or the bureaucratic halls of Europe (*A South India Diary, The Good Shepherd*). We looked over his shoulder as he did the work of an evangelist among children of the traditions of the West as well as the East (*Honest Religion for Secular Man*, and the lesser known but very significant *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary*).

But now he had turned his gaze in a new direction. It was not divorced from the issues he had dealt with for years, so productively for so many people. In fact, it was a specific application of that missionary angle of vision he had so clearly developed, and now turned upon the Western culture which was his own culture of origin and his home in retirement.

What he asked seemed impertinent to some, incomprehensible to many, but liberating to others. He wondered what a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture would be like if the encounter were to take its clue from centuries of missionary experience, from the recently recovered sense of the Church's essential missionary identity, and from the insights of companion churches around the globe which were the fruit of the missionary approach of Western churches. Whatever comfortable situations the churches in the West had once enjoyed in their Christianised societies had now passed, and the time was more than ripe for the question. With *Foolishness to the Greeks* and numerous other books, articles and addresses he has made this the orienting issue for a generation of emerging leadership in churches in the USA and other Western societies.

This alone has made hi an indispensable resource for pa toral leadership in general and th

practice of preaching in particular. Under this vision, you can no longer preach in the same way. Preaching sermons for a church membership and general public that comes to church to be nourished in the moral and spiritual character assumed to be the norms of a Christian society is no longer adequate. In a mission context, and in a missional Church, the requirements for the biblical nourishment of the community and the clear articulation of liberating news in multiple spheres of human living are not just raised to a new level, they require preaching to be something more. In an atmosphere where it is no longer true that all good people are supposed to believe (that is, they ought to, and it may be presumed that deep down they already do), preaching can bolster little of what is socially expected. Instead it invites, welcomes and enables people to believe things that are at odds with the going versions of reality. It participates in the inner dialogue between the gospel and the assumptions of one's own culture and cultivates a community for whom continuing conversion is the habitual approach. It is for the art of that sort of preaching that Newbigin provides essential resources for the preacher.

In reflections on the significance of Newbigin's work just after his death in January 1998, I found myself referring to him as an "apostle of faith and witness." I never spent time with Bishop Newbigin when he was not working hard to cultivate for the Church a sense of its authority to preach the gospel and its authority to believe that it is true. In deep response to the crisis of missional nerve in the churches of the West, which had become ultimately a crisis of faith, he seemed to have been called to be pastor to us all. That pastoral quality was much in evidence from the beginning of his ministry as a bishop in the Church of South India and throughout his years in India. But he pastored us in the churches of the West no less. He gave us ways to believe, whether under the privatising effects of modernity or the pluralist social arrangements of postmodernity. In our progress-and-success culture, he helped us see that death finally mocks all our greatest achievements and our only hope lies not in the permanence of our accomplishments but in the risen Christ.

In the latter years of his life, it was Newbigin's purpose to open Western culture to a missionary dialogue with the gospel. In the course of that effort, he was essentially cultivating 'ways of Christ' for people living in the midst of the cultural transition from modern worldviews to postmodern and in what had already become a post-Christian social era. His cultivation of ways of believing, of witnessing, of being community and of living in hope anticipates the daily and weekly preoccupations of any preacher or minister sensitive to the demands of the present day. For these crucial elements of a preacher's vocation today, important resources are to be found in Newbigin's approach.

Ways of Belief

When Christians feel intimidated about telling other people the Christian message, it is not just a matter of believing that people will not like being told that Christianity is true and that it calls other claims to truth into question. It goes much deeper, to the ability to believe the message themselves in a world that tells them in one way or another that a religious conviction cannot lay claim to be the truth in any factual sense and must be held only as a private opinion. The strict dichotomy that grew up under Enlightenment rationality between knowable public fact and chosen private opinion already pushed in this direction. The emerging postmodern sense that all knowing is from some particular perspective further relativised all claims to truth and questioned such claims as exertions of the will to power. Christians imagining any form of direct public assertion of the Christian message do not have to be told that it will meet with a cloud of questions about its legitimacy. Besides pushing them toward silence, the atmosphere erodes the strength of their own inner conviction that the Bible's account of things can be taken to be a valid option for construing the world.

Newbigin always wrestled with such matters himself, and the way he found pathways through the intimidating terrain maps out a route for others. His early theological training under John Oman of Cambridge had taught him the importance of recognising the personhood of God, and that God's personal character is displayed by the freedom to act, and to choose the time and place of such action. God can be known in the ways that any person can be known, by what that person reveals through the choices they make and actions they take. This sense of the necessity of revelation as the way to know God had come to be viewed by many, under the imprint of the Enlightenment's confidence in autonomous human reason, as a less sure form of knowledge than that gained through the scientific method and the certainty of tracing cause and effect. What Newbigin ultimately discerned, helped immeasurably by the work of Michael Polanyi, was that science was as much a tradition, borne by a community and rooted in certain beliefs, as is any religious tradition, including that of the Church. Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* gave clarity to Newbigin's sense that knowing what the gospel announces and knowing what science detects are not the fundamentally different sorts of knowing that the culture tends to assume. In fact, Newbigin shows that Christian faith is not irrational but represents a wider rationality than that posited by the norms of scientific discovery, because the gospel opens the question of purpose which scientific knowing set aside in favour of cause and effect.

Newbigin's use of Polanyi's approach, most developed in the first five chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, provides an apologetic approach to undergird the faith of believing

people, something that is essential for the presence of confident witness. I have watched as students have read the sixty-five pages of those chapters and found themselves liberated to believe – to really believe – that this good news is true and can be told with assurance. The preacher today is in the business of securing ways for people to see how they can believe. What I have called elsewhere Newbigin's 'postmodern apologetic' is a helpful frame of reference for the preacher's work. It is essential for a context where Christian faith is no longer merely what polite citizens are expected to believe.

Ways of Witness

Postmodern people have a way of using qualifying phrases that show a sensitivity to the opinions of others. Affirmations are prefaced by phrases like 'It seems to me,' or 'I believe that...,' or 'I have found this to be true for me'. The language is generous and tolerant. But somewhere in it lurks the potential that all notions are held as true only 'for me,' with little or nothing presumed to be true also for others. Newbigin helps us see that even within the generous tolerance of humility about the provisional character of our knowing there is nonetheless the possibility – for all postmodern people on all sorts of issues – to hold some things with universal intent, that is, as being true for everyone, however partial may be our grasp of it. As Christian believers read the gospel they find that it is surely in this sense that the New Testament expects to be believed. It announces with firm conviction that this good news is for and about the whole world, not just a particular few. Jesus' prophetic utterance, 'You shall be my witnesses' both energises them with a sense of their calling and haunts them with the dilemmas it causes in the midst of the postmodern mood. It is not hard to see how deliberate, direct Christian witness rubs against the sensibilities of a world living on the rump of several centuries of Western colonialism. What right do Christians have to pretend to be the bearers of a message everyone should believe?

It is to this matter of 'the duty and authority of the Church to preach the gospel' that Newbigin has constantly addressed himself in an attempt to build confident Christian witness. What is most distinctive about his rationale for witness in the contemporary world is that it is grounded in particularity, not undone by it. Most take the particularity of the Christian Church and its historic cultural location primarily in the West to be the problem that thwarts any possibility of universal witness (whether that means among all peoples of the world or all people in our own locale). If only some point of reference in a universally validated gospel could be found, it is supposed, then witness might rest on that ground. Some seek this under the rubric of objective truth, others in universally found religious principles. In either case, the particularity of the Church is suspect and believed to be an obstacle to witness.

But not so for Newbigin. The rationale for witness, for the mission of the Church and thus its very existence, does not lie in some universal principle distilled out from the particularity of Christian communities; it is rooted precisely in their particularity! He finds it an unworkable myth that we can only witness forthrightly if we somehow rise above and beyond particularised belief to a shared, universal knowledge. That at any rate is impossible. But what is more important still for Newbigin is that he finds in the biblical rationale for witness the notion that a true particular faith is exactly where the universal scope of witness finds its grounding.

Newbigin shows this in what he calls the 'logic of election'. In his understanding of the 'missionary significance of the biblical doctrine of election' we find a thread that runs through his major work on mission theology, *The Open Secret*, and in fact throughout the range of his writings. By the term *election* Newbigin refers to God's choice of Israel to be God's particular people, to be blessed by God and to be a blessing to the nations, and to God's choice of the incipient Church – the earliest circle of disciples – to be witnesses to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. In both cases, the choice of the nation and the Church is the choice of a particular community to be the means by which people of other particularities will hear and see the witness. In the very act of witness from one particularity to another, and in the birth of faith in persons and communities to whom the witness is born, the healing reconciliation about which the gospel speaks occurs. In the end, so declares Paul in Romans 9–11, both the Jew and the Greek depend on the witness of the 'other' from whom the gospel is received. God's method of choosing particular witnesses is congruent with the social nature of the gospel which envisions the healing of the nations.

The consequence of such a rationale for the Church's mission of witness is an attitude of humility. Any missionary who recognises this as the source of authority for commending the gospel with universal intent will do so knowing that the particularity of the missionary Church's faith must be worn with confidence but not assumed to be absolute or final. The conviction with which the gospel is told leads to a humble form of missionary dialogue with the ways that a new person or community or culture grasps and exhibits the gospel in response to the Spirit.

Preaching that approaches its task in this way will model the sense that in any preaching – in sermon, conversation, demonstration or deed–the calling of the Church is to give the gospel away and to expect wonderful new flowerings of its expression in the message's recipients. Confident witness by the whole community is best nourished when that is the case.

Ways of Community

If Newbigin has been an apostle of faith and witness, he has always been an apostle on behalf of the Church. It is the Church's faith and the Church's witness that he is concerned to nourish. Christian existence is fundamentally corporate and Christian calling is a corporately shared calling. While not denying the individuality of each person's experience of Christ, he warns against the individualism of belief and identity that so strongly shapes Western forms of Christian life and undermines the corporate nature of God's salvation. For Newbigin, the Church is the chosen witness

that bears in word and deed the witness of the Spirit.

This theme has always been a strong one in Newbigin's thought. He presents it with special relevance in his most recent writings and thus helps to form a postmodern, post-Christendom way of understanding the very existence of the Church as a community of Christ and the character of its life together as critical features of its whole witness to Christ and the reign of God he announced. He so often said that the Church is the 'sign, foretaste and instrument' of the reign of God. It is the firstfruits of the new creation in the Spirit.

His stress in later years on understanding the congregation to be a 'hermeneutic of the gospel' forms an important answer to another of the authority questions postmodern people ask: 'Why the Church?' By what authority, and on what ground, is there a rationale for the Church to exist at all? The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message. The presence of the Christian community functions as a hermeneutical key, an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colours of common life. The Christian congregation offers itself to be a community within which one can grow into faith in the gospel, put on the garb of its followers and join oneself to the distinctive practices that mark the community as God's own people.

This is refreshing good news in light of the identity crisis which has seized so many churches living within a secular culture. In an earlier day, it could be assumed what a church is for. It served the chaplaincy needs of a Christianised civic order. But that day has faded. Churches can still seem to thrive by providing the public with the religious goods and services it seeks. But even in that role the Church is uneasy. What are we for, when stripped of those things that used to give us meaning?

Both the content of what is preached and the manner in which preaching addresses the Christian community week after week are crucial for the recovery of the Church's identity. Preaching first has to know that it shapes communal identity, for good or for ill. Then it has to wrestle to find the sense of identity that has faithful roots in the gospel and recreates the Church's reason to exist in its present circumstances. Finally, it has to discover what style of preaching cultivates such identity. For all these, the vision Newbigin has for the Church's vocation is an invaluable resource.

Ways of Hope

Another aspect of the humility which Newbigin both espouses and models lies in his sense that in the final analysis death mocks all our achievements. Hope for the future must rather be found in the distinctive way the Christian faith is rooted in history. The gospel comes in the form of a narrative that renders accessible to us the character, actions and purposes of God. The particular actions of God told in the narrative are world news, not just news for the religion page. The narrative claims that no less than the meaning of the world's life is revealed in the story whose centre is Jesus Christ. His heralding of the coming reign of God shows the meaning of the story by showing its end!

Hope is not convincingly cultivated in a congregation by preaching that hope resides in the success of our efforts and the height of our achievements. Biblical visions of hope are not lodged in the actions of clever entrepreneurs but in the actions of God against all odds. The coming reign of God that is hoped for is not portrayed in the Bible as the cumulative effect of human efforts but as God's gracious gift. Faithful preaching invites us to receive it and enter it, not try to build it.

There are deep pastoral implications if we see things this way. I remember the first time I personally encountered the impact of Newbigin's vision and the way it nourished me at a time of exhaustion and grief in the work of pastoral ministry. It was in 1980. I had just returned from an intense year of work in Kenya, working among Ugandan refugees from Idi Amin's regime. Back in the USA, a friend commended *The Open Secret* to me and I began to read it.

At about the same time, contact with people in the congregation I had pastored until a year and a half before made me aware that serious fracture lines were emerging in the congregation, and its unity and continued existence were threatened. I did not know that before long my worst fears would be realised. A division would leave a fragile remnant behind that would try for several more years to rebuild the community. But eventually it was to end in the dissolution of the congregation.

I came to the place in the book where Newbigin observed that all our greatest achievements are destined to go down into the chasm of death and become part of the rubble of history. Or if they should remain at the time of Christ's return, they will be subject to God's discriminating judgment. Ultimately, he said, our hope lies not in the quality or permanence of our achievements but in Christ who has passed through the chasm of death and come up on the other side in his resurrection. The significance of our work is not in its success or achievement but in its relationship to the risen Lord.

This redirection of hope nourished me in the midst of my fears for the congregation I had been a part of for over five years. A few years later it would console me again when the news of its death overwhelmed me with grief.

The cultivation of hope lodged in Christ – its proper place – is desperately needed in churches and preachers living in today's success-and-achievement world. Newbigin's help nourishes the kind of hope that overcomes the world's despair and cancels the demands for performance as the basis for self-worth. It fashions preachers and pastoral leaders whose confidence is as deep as the resurrection of Christ is sure.

"And what would it mean if, instead of trying to explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific culture, we tried to explain our culture in terms of the gospel?"

(Foolishness to the Greeks, SPCK, p. 41.)

"For the Christian tradition the supremely authoritative memory is that embodied in the Bible, and the supremely authoritative practices are the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist."

(Truth to Tell, SPCK, p.87.)

Lesslie Newbigin – A Bible Society Perspective

by Colin J D Greene

The Revd Dr Colin Greene is Head of Theology and Public Policy at Bible Society. He is a former lecturer in Systematic Theology at Trinity College, Bristol, and has served urban churches in the Diocese of Leicester.

My first meeting with Lesslie Newbigin took place in Dan Beeby's office in Selly Oak college library, Birmingham in the spring of 1989. I went to see both Dan and Lesslie ostensibly to talk about a possible partnership between Bible Society and the flourishing Gospel and our Culture movement spawned by Lesslie's writings. Lesslie had just produced the first draft of arguably his best book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. I was immediately impressed by Lesslie's deep and passionate concern to draw individuals and other missionary minded organisations into the common task to redefine the relationship between the gospel and the mores and values of contemporary Western culture.

From that first meeting there developed not just a warm personal friendship, but a shared missiological agenda between Bible Society and the Gospel and our Culture movement which was to have major repercussions for both parties. Two memorable regional conferences aimed at clergy and lay leaders were organised. The first took place from 15–17 October 1990 in London entitled *Mission to our Culture in the Light of Scripture and the Christian Tradition*. The second from 10–12 April 1991 in Swanwick, Derbyshire was called *Freedom and Truth in a Pluralist Society*. Both were oversubscribed and their success paved the way for the jointly organised and sponsored international conference with took place again at Swanwick, 11–17 July 1992, called *The Gospel As Public Truth*. This was an important and significant conference which celebrated ten years of corporate work and endeavour for the Gospel and our Culture movement which over 400 people attended.

During this period Bible Society moved into a major period of re-evaluation and reappraisal in regard to its own role and future as an organisation serving the churches in England and Wales. The influence of Lesslie's writings as well as his personal advice and counsel was a seminal factor as the Society sought to redefine its strategic aims and objectives. During this at times painful and arduous period of assessment and re-evaluation a firm conviction arose, wholly supported by Lesslie, that the future role and mission of the Bible Society should be concerned with the critical repositioning of the Bible in the public life of Western culture. Such a conviction cohered with Lesslie's own avowal that the gospel is not a mere private conviction or belief but public truth, if indeed it is the universal truth about human life and destiny. To facilitate this end, a strategic decision had already been taken to concentrate on researching and examining how the biblical narrative could or should impact contemporary concerns in the areas of politics, education and the media. The importance of these areas of public life as major instruments of change and innovation in contemporary culture cannot be underestimated.

Towards the end of this crucial period Bible Society was approached by Churches Together in England to partner an important public campaign called the Open Book. The common task of those involved was to 'open the Book to the culture and the culture to the Book'. Such a campaign could only succeed if both in the short and long term those involved endeavoured to facilitate a much more intelligent, credible and creative encounter between ordinary people and the central drama or narrative of the Bible. So to the areas of politics, education and the media was added the creative arts because the Bible is not just a text but a multimedia event, which should be performed as such both in our churches and also in the public life of a society which may at the present time only look back nostalgically at its origins in the Judeo-Christian faith. Once again Lesslie was wholly supportive because as he himself had continually argued:

'The Bible is... a narrative that structures human experience and understanding. However varied be its texture, it is essentially a story that claims to be the story, the true story both of the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos'. (*Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Pennsylvania, Trinity Press 1996, p38)

Lesslie understood very clearly that such a conviction had major implications for the public life of our culture. Take for instance the present debates in the area of education. So often the apparently laudable concern for higher standards of literacy and numeracy reflects a market-driven consumerist mentality which is itself based on a vision of education which is largely secular,

humanist in content and emphasis. And yet the fact remains that mass education developed in Western culture from the 16th century onwards after the Reformation had replaced the authority of the Church with that of the Bible. Previously other cultures regarded knowledge as a source of power to be guarded by and for the elite. The work of Bible translation and the advent of the printing press allowed everyone, rich and poor, men and women, high society and the outcasts, access to the divine revelation without the necessity of intermediaries. This in itself provided a powerful impulse for mass education and the missionary movement globalised education as the right of every citizen regardless of race or status.

Education is presently embroiled in a debate about the importance of viewing children not just as consumers of knowledge and information, but as future responsible citizens who need to be equipped for citizenship through understanding the importance of spiritual, moral, social and cultural values. But where does one find access to such values? Primarily in the great communitarian traditions which are part of our cultural heritage. In terms of Western culture there are only two such traditions, the Judeo-Christian faith and the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of virtues based on the ideal of citizenship.

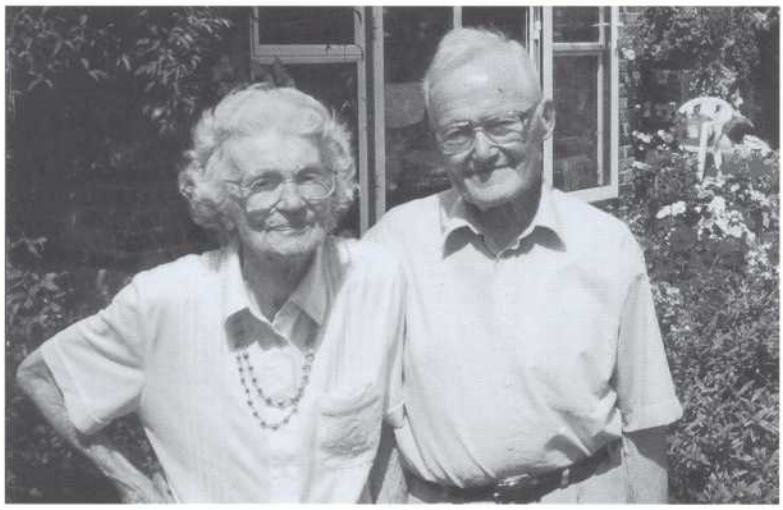
Secular humanism tried to reconstruct moral discourse on the notion of a universal humanity. This was proved to be a rationalist abstraction which ignores both the importance of religious traditions and the cultural pluralism of the real world we inhabit. Postmodernity is rightly jaundiced towards the inflated rationalism of modernity, viewing it as just another example of cultural imperialism, and yet it is unable to halt the slide toward a debilitating consumerist relativism in regard to moral and spiritual values. In the end we are told 'You pays your money and you takes your choice'.

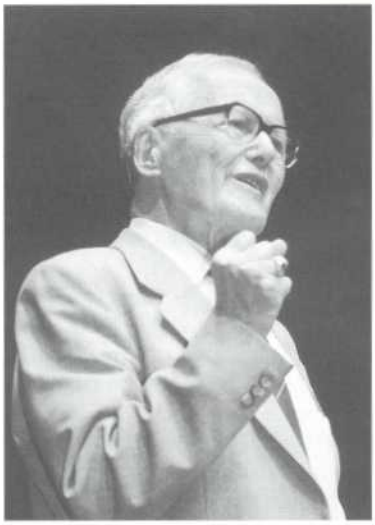
If education is indeed a discipline in search of a new story then, as Lesslie continually reminded us, this is precisely where the gospel and our culture intersect. Perhaps then it is both appropriate and providential that the movement he both created and nurtured should find its institutional home once again with the Bible Society as part of those wider concerns to create a forum for change in Church and culture.

In his later years Lesslie's considerable intellectual and pastoral gifts were primarily orientated toward a critical engagement with the philosophical and scientific presuppositions which undergird Western culture. His was a radical disputation with modernity. As a man of his times and a gifted missiologist this was where both his instincts and his vocation led him. He viewed the advent of postmodernity as another immense challenge; one, however, which would need to be the responsibility of another generation of thinkers and leaders who had the prophetic insight to read the signs of the times and the courage to declare the good news that in Jesus Christ:

'...God has crowned all his mighty acts by a supreme act in which sin and death were disarmed and all the nations were invited to become part of the people of the God of Abraham ... All the nations, in other words, were invited to find the clue to the puzzle of human life not in the eternal truths of the philosophers but in the story told in the Bible.' (ibid., p67)

When the gospel is regarded as the clue provided by the Creator to the meaning of the whole created process, it generates a proper universalism. It is not good news for the privileged few, the elite or the recipients of some special *gnosis* (knowledge). And yet postmodernity is in danger of saying precisely that, namely that goods news is simply a function of the individual's social construction of reality. The deconstruction of modernity by the exponents of postmodernity presently leads us towards greater fragmentation and uncertainty. We are in need of a vision of reality which can celebrate a proper diversity and pluralism without discarding the search for the truth which alone can set us free. Such a vision is offered to us both at the beginning and at the end of the story the Bible recounts. ■





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A Brief Bibliography

Most recently Newbigin's writings have been the impetus to The Gospel and Our Culture Movement beginning with the booklet *The Other Side of 1984* (published 1983). Other recent major publications of Newbigin's that stress the theme of a missionary encounter with modern Western culture include:

Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture (1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991); *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (1995); and *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (1996).

Some of Newbigin's other significant writings include: *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme* (1948; revised 1960); *A South India Diary* (1951; revised 1960); *Household of God* (1953; revised 1964); *Sin and Salvation* (1956; revised 1968); *Is Christ Divided? A Plea for Christian Unity in a Revolutionary Age* (1961); *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966); *The Finality of Christ* (1969); *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World* (1974; revised/reprinted 1977 and 1985); *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (1978; revised 1995); and *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (1982; reprinted 1987).

Lesslie Newbigin's autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda* was published in 1993 by St Andrews Press.

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