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The task that we have before us is not one that we can carry out in isolation from our local churches. It has to do with God's purpose to unify the human race and to restore his domination in all dimensions p.354 of life and over the totality of creation. In other words, it has to do with his Kingdom. The new ecclesiology, rooted in the experience of the grassroots ecclesial communities, reminds us that the place to begin is the local church, a community of priests called to a prophetic mission.

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Can the West be Converted?

Lesslie Newbigin

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It is now a truism to assert the neo-paganism of the West. Newbigin analyzes the fundamental characteristics of Western culture; in conclusion he gives a very practical six-step suggestion as to how the West be re-Christianized.

Editor

Let me begin by confessing that my title is a borrowed one. A dozen years ago, at the Bangkok Conference on 'Salvation Today', I happened to be sitting next to General Simatupang, that doughty Indonesian Christian who, having driven the Dutch out of his islands, turned to theology as the most agreeable field for the exercise of the arts of war. We were in plenary debate, and Simatupang had just made an intervention. As he returned to his seat beside me, I heard him say under his breath: 'Of course, the Number One question is, Can the West be converted?'

In the following years I have become more and more sure that he was right. If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline; and, moreover, wherever the culture of the West, under the name of 'modernization', penetrates, it carries with it what Lippmann called 'the acids of modernity', dissolving the most enduring of religious beliefs including the beliefs of Christians. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the church than the one I have posed. Can there be an effective missionary encounter with *this* culture—this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as 'the coming world civilization'. Can the West be converted?

I am posing this question at a time when, especially in evangelical circles, great attention is being paid to the question of gospel and culture, to the question of the contextualization of the gospel in different cultures. Recent missionary literature is full of the subject. 'Contextualization' is an ugly word but a useful one. It is better than the word long used by Protestants—'indigenization'—which always tended to direct attention to

the past of a culture rather than to its present and future. And it is better than the traditional Catholic term 'adaptation', which suggested that the missionary was the bearer of a [p. 356](#) pure, culture-free gospel which had then to be adapted to the receptor culture, and thus concealed the fact that every statement of the gospel from the New Testament onwards is already culturally conditioned. 'Contextualization' directs attention to the actual context, shaped by the past and open to the future, in which the gospel has to be embodied now. But why is it that we have a plethora of missionary studies on the contextualization of the gospel in all the cultures of the world from China to Peru, but nothing comparable directed to the culture which we call 'the modern world'?

I say 'nothing comparable'. There have of course been great theologians who have dealt with the question of gospel and culture from within the parameters of this modern world—men like Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr. But these have not had the perspective which the experience of cross-cultural missions provides. Where can we find a cross-cultural perspective for the communication of the gospel to modern societies? Can the experience of cross-cultural missions to the many pre-modern cultures of our world in the last two centuries illuminate the task of mission to this modern world? I am not forgetting the important experience of dialogue between Christians of the first and third worlds, and between Christians and people of other world faiths. But this experience has a limited relevance because all of it is conducted in the European languages and therefore within the terms which our modern Western culture provides. No one takes part in them who has not been qualified to do so by a modern-style education in a European language. This kind of dialogue, with perhaps some exceptions, is too dependent on the language and thought-forms of the West to provide a radical challenge in the power of the gospel to the West.

One of the most persuasive writers seeking to articulate a Christian affirmation in the terms of our culture is Peter Berger. As a sociologist, he has developed a way of using the sociology of knowledge not (as so often) to undermine but to undergird the Christian claim. In his book *The Heretical Imperative* he has argued that the distinctive fact about modern Western culture, as distinct from all pre-modern cultures, is that there is no generally acknowledged 'plausibility structure', acceptance of which is taken for granted without argument, and dissent from which is heresy. A 'plausibility structure', as Berger uses the term, is a social structure of ideas and practices which creates the conditions which determine whether or not a belief is plausible. To hold beliefs which fall outside this plausibility structure is to be a heretic in the original sense of the word *haeresis*, that is to say, one who makes his own decisions. In pre-modern cultures there is a stable [p. 357](#) plausibility structure and only the rare individual questions it. It is just 'how things are and have always been'. In modern societies, by contrast, we are required to make our own decisions, for there is no accepted plausibility structure. Each one—as we often say—has to have a faith of his own. We all have to make our own decisions. We all have to be, in the original sense, heretics.

In this situation Berger describes three possibilities for Christian affirmation, which he calls (not very happily) deductive, reductive, and inductive. The first simply selects one of the religious traditions and affirms it—preferably in such a loud voice that other voices are reduced to silence. Of this strategy he takes Karl Barth to be the most notable exponent. But, after a few respectful genuflections towards the great Swiss theologian, he rules him out of the debate. Even thirteen thick volumes of dogmatics are not enough if you cannot show rational grounds for choosing this starting point rather than another. It will not do simply to say, 'The Bible tells me so' if you cannot show reasons for choosing the Bible rather than the Qur'an, the Gita, or *Das Kapital*.

The second, or reductive, strategy is typified in the Bultmann programme of demythologization. Here the fact that the 'plausibility structures' of traditional religion simply collapse in the atmosphere of modern secular society is fully recognized. In effect, says Berger, Bultmann takes the beliefs of the modern secular town-dweller as the criterion of what can be believed. When, in a famous phrase, Bultmann says, 'one cannot use electric light and radio and call upon modern medicine in case of illness, and at the same time believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament', he is in effect taking the modern worldview as ultimate, and this must in the end mean the abandonment of even those parts of the Christian tradition which Bultmann seeks to safeguard. One does not need Jesus in order to endorse an existentialist view of life.

Berger therefore opts for the third alternative, which he calls the inductive. This is to take the universal human experience of what, in another book, Berger calls 'signals of transcendence', the religious experience which is the presupposition of all theologies whether of Barth or of Bultmann, of the Hindu, the Muslim, or the Buddhist, as the basis for religious affirmation. The paradigmatic figure here, of course, is Schleiermacher. The way he pointed is, according to Berger, the only way forward in the conditions of our modern secular world. The movement associated with the name of Barth is, in Berger's view, a temporary excursion into a blind alley, and we are now returning to the main road. To the obvious question, 'How, amid the many different signals of transcendence, does one distinguish the true from [p. 358](#) the false?' Berger answers with the words of the Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali that they must all be weighed in 'the scale of reason'. He insists that in giving this answer he is not surrendering to a rationalism of the style of Enlightenment. He defends what he calls 'sober rational assessment' as the only way of distinguishing between true and false religious experience, but he does not attempt to describe the criteria for assessment or the grounds upon which these criteria rest. Perhaps the adjective 'sober' has more than ordinary importance here, for the original context of Al-Ghazali's image of the 'scale of reason' is a passage in which he likens the actual religious experience to a kind of inebriation and goes on, 'The words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast', but later, 'their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored: and reason is God's scale on earth'. This accords with Berger's own statement that religious certainty is 'located only within the enclave of religious experience itself', and cannot be had except 'precariously in recollection' in the ordinary life of the world.

It seems clear that the 'sober rationality' with which we are to assess the value of different religious experiences does not belong to the enclave but to the public world outside. It is not a rationality which rests upon the religious experience but one which judges it. And it is not difficult to see that it is the rationality which rests upon the assumptions of our culture.

I believe that Berger is correct in his diagnosis of our culture in terms of the 'heretical imperative'. In contrast to all preceding cultures, ours has enormously extended the range of matters on which each individual has to make his own choices. A vast amount of what previous ages and cultures have regarded as given facts which must be accepted are now matters for personal decision. With the aid of modern technology, if he is wealthy enough, modern man chooses where he will live, whom he will meet, how he will behave and what style of life he will adopt. He can, if he has mastered the arts of 'modern living', change at will his job, his home, his company, his entertainment, and his spouse. The patterns of belief and behaviour which ruled because they were not questioned have largely dissolved. Each person makes his own decisions about what to believe and how to behave. It is therefore entirely natural that religion too is drawn into this way of understanding

the human situation. It is natural that religion too becomes a matter of personal choice. We are all now required to be—in the original sense—heretics.

But what are the implications of this? What are the implications of a division of human experience into two parts—the enclave where alone p. 359 religious certainty can be had, and the public world where religious experience is to be ‘weighed in the scale of reason’? We come here to what is perhaps the most distinctive and crucial feature of the modern worldview, namely the division of human affairs into two realms—the private and the public, a private realm of values where pluralism reigns and a public world of what our culture calls ‘facts’. This dichotomy of the public and the private is something which is absent from traditional cultures. We shall have to look at it more closely. But let us accept it for the moment. Let us accept Berger’s statement that in respect of what goes on in the enclave of religious experience we are all subject to the heretical imperative. But what about the public world where we all meet and where all things are weighed in the scale of reason? It is this world that we must examine if we are to understand modern culture. In this world pluralism does *not* operate. It is the world of what are called ‘facts’ (we shall have to examine that word in a moment; meanwhile let it stand in its ordinary meaning). In respect of what we call ‘facts’ pluralism does not operate. Here statements are either true or false. If statements of alleged facts are in mutual contradiction, we do not take it as an occasion for celebrating our faithfulness to the principles of pluralism and freedom of thought. We argue, we experiment, we carry out tests until we reach agreement about what are the facts, and then we expect all reasonable people to accept them. The one who does not accept them is the real heretic. Of course, he will not be burned at the stake, but his views will not be published in the scientific journals or in the university lecture rooms. In respect of what are called ‘facts’, a statement is either true or false, right or wrong. But in respect of what are called ‘values’, and supremely in respect of religious beliefs on which these values are believed to rest, one does not use this kind of language. Value systems are not right or wrong, true or false. They are matters for personal choice. Here the operative principle is pluralism, respect for the freedom of each person to choose the values that he or she will live by.

Here, plainly, is the real plausibility structure which controls our culture and within which Berger himself operates, and which he takes for granted. His choice of the inductive method for dealing with religious truth-claims belongs to this plausibility structure. His ‘sober rationality’, in contrast to the inebriation of religious experience, is the rationality of this worldview. The inductive method which he espouses has been basic to the whole development of the modern scientific worldview from the time of Bacon and Galileo. Looked at from the point of view of the gospel its value is both real and limited. It is a valid way of coming to the truth because the created world is both rational p. 360 and contingent—rational as the creation of God who is light and not darkness, contingent because it is not an emanation of God but the creation of God who has endowed it with a measure of autonomy. Because this is so, a Christian would argue, the study of things and happenings in the created world can give us true understanding of them. That is the foundation upon which science rests. But the inductive method has a validity which is limited in that it cannot decide the question by whom and for what purpose the world was created. The answer to that question cannot be reached by any method of induction until the history of the universe has reached its terminus; short of that point, the data for a valid induction are not available.

Within the worldview of modern science it is perfectly possible and proper to insist, as Berger does, that the phenomena of religious experience should be studied along with all the other facts that are available for our inspection, and that conclusions should be drawn by induction from these studies. In this way it is proper to challenge the kind of

narrow positivism which has sought to deny cultural acceptance to the phenomena of religion. Berger is a true follower of Schleiermacher in commending religion to its cultured despisers, in seeking to show that there is a place for religious affirmation *within* the 'plausibility structure' of the modern scientific worldview. But this whole procedure leaves that worldview unchallenged. The whole method simply excludes the possibility that it might actually be the case that the one who is creator and sustainer and sovereign of the universe has personally made himself known at a certain point in the human story. Any such claim is simply bracketed with other claims to be included in a syllabus for the comparative study of religion. It has been silenced by co-option into the modern scientific worldview. The gospel is treated as an account of something which happened in one of those many enclaves in which religious experience takes place. It has to be brought out of the enclave into the public world to be weighed in the scale of reason along with all the other varieties of religious experience, and on the basis of all the facts.

At this point we come to the crux of the matter. What, in our culture, is the meaning of the word 'fact'? In its earliest use in the English language it is simply the Latin *factum*, the past participle of the verb 'to do', something which has been done. But plainly it has acquired a much richer meaning. In ordinary use 'fact' is contrasted with belief, opinion, value. Value-free facts are the most highly prized commodities in our culture. It is upon them that we think we can build with confidence. 'Fact,' says Alasdair MacIntyre, 'is in modern western p.361 culture a folk-concept with an aristocratic ancestry.' The aristocrat in question is Lord Bacon who advised his contemporaries to abjure speculation and collect facts. By 'speculation' he referred primarily to the Aristotelian belief that things were to be understood in terms of their purpose. But in advising his contemporaries to collect facts, he was not launching a programme for magpies collecting any odds and ends that might be lying about. That is not how modern science was born. The new activity was shaped, as every rational activity must be shaped, by another speculative framework—namely the belief that things should be understood in terms not of their purpose but of their cause, of how they work. Facts thus became value-free, because value is a concept related to the purpose for which a thing either is or is not well fitted. Here is the origin of what MacIntyre called the 'folk-concept' of 'facts' which dominates the consciousness of modern man. There is, in this view, a world of facts which is the real world, an austere world in which human hopes, desires, and purposes have no place. The facts are facts and they are neither good nor bad; they are just facts.

It follows that the scientist uses a different kind of language from the religious person. Religious statements are normally prefaced by the words 'I believe', or 'we believe'. In textbooks of science no such preface is used. The writer simply states the facts. And it is this world of facts which is our shared public world. Our values, our views of what is good and bad, are a matter of personal opinion, and everyone is free to have his own opinions. But on the facts we must all agree. Here is the core of our culture, the plausibility structure in relation to which we cannot be heretics and remain part of society, the area where pluralism does not reign. Facts are facts.

But are they? If we go back to Bacon and the beginning of modern science we can see that what happened was that different questions were being asked about the things with which people had always been familiar. The Greeks had asked the question 'Why?' and had tried to explain (for example) motion in terms of purpose. Modern science asks 'How?' and tries to explain things in terms of cause and effect. Both questions are—of course—proper, but neither by itself is enough to bring full understanding. You can set out to understand the working of a machine in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry, and you can give a complete account of its working in these terms. But it would be foolish to say that you 'understand' the machine if you have no idea of the purpose for which this

assembly of bits of metal was put together in this way. And it is certain that, if you have no idea of its purpose, there is no meaning in calling it good or bad. It just is. If, on the other hand, [p.362](#) you know what it is for, you can and must judge it either good or bad according to whether or not it achieves its purpose.

Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue* has chronicled the attempts which have been made in the past 200 years to find a rational basis for ethics within the modern scientific worldview. He demonstrates two things; first, that the morality for which a basis was sought was one carried over from the pre-scientific age; and second, that all attempts to ground ethical precepts in the 'facts' as science understands them have failed. As Kant and others have insisted, from statements of fact, 'This is so', you cannot move logically to statements of value or obligation: 'This is good', or 'This ought to be done'. But this is only so if 'facts' have already been defined in such a way as to exclude purpose. To take one of MacIntyre's examples: from the factual statement, 'This watch has not lost five seconds in two years', you may immediately conclude, 'This is a good watch'—provided that 'watch' is already understood as an instrument for keeping time. If 'watch' means only a collection of bits of metal which can be used according to the personal preference of its owner for decorating the sitting room or for throwing at the cat, then no such conclusion follows. If 'watch' is understood only in terms of the physics and chemistry of its parts, no such conclusion follows and everyone is free to have his or her own opinion as to whether it is a good watch or not.

This simple illustration takes us, I think, to the heart of the matter. 'Facts', as our culture understands them, are interpretations of our experience in terms of the questions 'What?' and 'How?' without asking the question 'Why?' And facts are the material of our public, shared culture, the culture into which we expect every child to be inducted through the system of public education. That human nature is governed by the programme encoded in the DNA molecule is a fact which every child is expected to understand and accept. It will be part of the school curriculum. That human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever is not a fact. It is an opinion held by some people. It belongs to the private sector, not the public. Those who hold it are free to communicate it to their children in home and church; it has no place in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. And since the publicly accepted definition of a human being excludes any statement of the purpose for which human beings exist, it follows necessarily that (in the ordinary meaning of the word 'fact'), no factual statement can be made about what kinds of behaviour are good or bad. These can only be private opinions. Pluralism reigns.

Here, I submit, is the intellectual core of that culture which, at least from the mid-eighteenth century has been the public culture of [p.363](#) Europe, and has—under the name of 'modernization'—extended its power into every part of the world. Two hundred years ago it was hailed in Europe as, quite simply, the dawning of light in the darkness: The Enlightenment. And it still bears that glow about it. For millions of people all over the world what we call the modern scientific worldview is accepted quite simply as the true account of how things in fact are, in contrast to the dogmas, myths, and superstitions of traditional religion.

And we must gratefully acknowledge the immense achievements of these past two centuries. Who can deny to the men of the Enlightenment and their successors the credit for liberating the human spirit from many ancient fetters, for penetrating the secrets of nature and harnessing nature's power for human purposes? Surely this has been the most brilliant period in human history thus far, and we are—with all our weaknesses and perplexities—its heirs. It would be easy at this point to throw in some remarks about the signs of disintegration which our culture is showing—the loss of faith in science, the scepticism about our ability to solve our problems, the disappearance of belief in

progress, and the widespread phenomena of anomie, boredom, and the sense of meaninglessness. But let us, for our present purposes, ignore all this. Let us rather ask what is involved in a real encounter between the gospel and this culture of ours at its best and strongest. Let us attempt something quite different from what Berger proposes. Instead of weighing the Christian religious experience (along with others) in the scale of reason as our culture understands reason, let us suppose that the gospel is true, that in the story of the Bible and in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the creator and lord of the universe has actually manifested himself to declare and effect his purpose, and that therefore everything else, including all the axioms and assumptions of our culture, have to be assessed and can only be validly assessed in the scales which this revelation provides. What would it mean if, instead of trying to understand the gospel from the point of view of our culture, we tried to understand our culture from the point of view of the gospel?

Obviously to ask that question is to suggest a programme for many decades. Let me simply suggest four points as prolegomena to the answering of the question.

1. The first point to be made is that modern science rests upon a faith which is the fruit of the long schooling of Europe in the worldview of the Bible. Historians of science have devoted much thought to the question why the marvellous intellectual powers of the Greeks, the Chinese, the Indians, and the Egyptians, in spite of their achievements p. 364 in science and mathematics, did not give rise to the self-sustaining science which has dominated our culture for the past 200 years. Briefly the answer seems to be that modern science rests upon the faith (which of course can never be proved) that the universe is both rational and contingent. If the universe were not rational, if different instrument readings at different times and places had no necessary relation with each other but were simply random facts, then science would be impossible. Scientists are sustained in their long and arduous labours by the faith that apparent contradictions will eventually be resolved because the universe is rational. But if that were all, science would not be necessary. If there were no element of contingency, if all that exists necessarily existed as the outward expression of pure rationality, then all the experimenting, exploring, and testing work of science would be unnecessary. If—as India has tended to think—all that exists is emanation from primal being, then pure contemplative reason alone is enough for making contact with reality. If the world were not rational, science would be impossible; if the world were not contingent, science would be unnecessary. Because it is a rational world, but not the only possible world, we both can and must bestir ourselves to find out what kind of world it is. Science rests upon a faith which cannot be demonstrated but is simply presupposed, and the roots of this faith are in the biblical story which shaped the life of Europe for the 1,000 years before modern science was born.

2. The second point is this. Modern science achieved its great breakthrough in the seventeenth century by setting aside the question ‘Why?’ and concentrating on the question ‘How?’ It left the question of purpose to what Bacon called the speculation of philosophers and theologians and concentrated on the question of cause. It asked of everything not ‘What is its purpose?’ but ‘How does it work?’ That question gave unlimited scope for probing, dissecting, exploring, and experimenting. Purpose is a personal word. It implies a mind which has a purpose real in the mind though not yet realized in the world of objects; it can be known only by listening to the person whose purpose it is. But for understanding cause we have to examine what is already there in the world of objects. This is a different kind of enterprise, as different as dissecting a brain to find out how it works is from listening to a person to find out what he means. Both are proper activities in their proper place. But clearly the elimination of the question of purpose can only be a methodological strategy; if there were no such thing as purpose

then the scientist could have no purpose in adopting this strategy. The scientist acts purposefully when, as a decision on method, he investigates cause and ignores purpose. Plainly it is an [p. 365](#) error to move from this section on method to the conclusion that there are no purposes at work in nature other than the investigative purpose of the scientist.

3. The third point is as follows. Human beings are also part of nature and can be investigated by the methods of modern science. For this purpose they are treated as objects whose behaviour can be understood in terms of cause and effect and without reference to their alleged purposes. The practitioners of what are called the behavioural sciences seek to formulate laws of human behaviour analagous to the laws of physics and chemistry. On the basis of these laws the administrator, the civil servant, and the advertising consultant seek to direct or influence human behaviour. In doing so, they are crediting themselves with a capacity for purposeful activity directed to rationally chosen ends, a capacity which the method denies to those who are investigated. We are familiar with the spectre of the ultimate achievement of this kind of scientific management of human affairs in the various scenarios for genetic engineering. At this point we are bound to ask the question: What will direct the behaviour of those who use the methods of science to direct human behaviour? Science itself cannot provide the answer to this question because its method eliminates purpose as a category of explanation. If there is a purpose to which in fact all human life ought to be directed, this purpose cannot be discovered by the methods of science. The scientist has his own purposes, but they have no basis in the world of 'facts'. They are his personal choice. Science acknowledges no objective world of values in the light of which his purposes could be judged right or wrong. And since the scientist, like every human being, has different purposes at different times, and since his method excludes the possibility of an objective criterion for judging between these purposes, he is left under the control of whichever is the strongest impulse of his nature. He becomes, in fact, an agent of nature. Man's mastery of nature turns out in the end to be nature's mastery of man. We have been conned by the oldest trick in the book. Marching triumphantly forward we failed to notice the jaws of the trap closing behind.

4. Fourth, this way of understanding things which we call the modern scientific worldview has now achieved global dominance. There is, of course, no way in which it can be proved to be the truth about things from outside of its own presuppositions. When, as those who have served as missionaries know, it meets older traditional views, such as those of India and Africa, which are equally coherent and equally compelling to those who dwell in them, the decisive argument has usually been: Look! Our view works. It delivers the [p. 366](#) goods. Look at our machines, our medicines, our technology. It works! Today we are not able to give that answer with the same confidence. We acknowledge the enormous achievements of the modern scientific worldview, but its failures are becoming apparent. It is not opening for us a rational view of the future. We can no longer say, as we did a generation ago, 'This is just how things are'. And more to our present purpose, it will no longer do for Christianity to accept, as Berger invites us to do, a position in one of the enclaves of this culture, even as one of its privileged old-age pensioners. It will no longer do to say that the Christian faith is one among the possible private options available within the parameters of this culture. It will no longer do to confuse the fact of plurality with the ideology of pluralism—the view that since no one can really know the truth we must be content with a multiplicity of opinions. It will no longer do to accept the dichotomy between a public world of so-called 'facts' and a private world of so-called 'values'. We shall have to be bold enough to confront our public world with the reality of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, the one in whom the eternal purpose of almighty God has been publicly set forth in the midst of our human history, and therefore to affirm that

no facts are truly understood except in the light of him through whom and for whom they exist. We shall have to face, as the early church faced, an encounter with the public world, the worlds of politics and economics, and the world of science which is its heart. It will not do to accept a peaceful coexistence between science and theology on the basis that they are simply two ways of looking at the same thing—one appropriate for the private sector and one for the public. We have to insist that the question, ‘What is really true?’ is asked and answered.

I confess that when I say these things I feel alarmed, for I can hardly imagine all that they will entail. And yet I cannot avoid believing that they are true. Nearly 150 years ago W. E. Gladstone wrote these solemn and prophetic words:

Rome, the mistress of state-craft, and beyond all other nations in the politic employment of religion, added without stint or scruple to her list of gods and goddesses, and consolidated her military empire by a skilful medley of all the religions of the world. Thus it continued while the worship of the Deity was but a conjecture or a contrivance; but when the rising of the Sun of Righteousness had given reality to the subjective forms of faith, and had made actual and solid truth the common inheritance of all men, then the religion of Christ became, unlike other new creeds, an object of jealousy and of cruel persecution, because it would not consent to become a partner in this heterogeneous device, and planted itself upon truth and not in the [p. 367](#) quicksand of opinion ... Should the Christian faith ever become but one among many co-equal pensioners of a government, it will be a proof that subjective religion has again lost its God-given hold upon objective reality; or when, under the thin shelter of its name a multitude of discordant schemes shall have been put upon a footing of essential parity, and shall together receive the bounty of the legislature, this will prove that we are once more in a transition state—that we are travelling back again from the region to which the Gospel brought us to that in which it found us.

What Gladstone foresaw is essentially what has been happening in the years since he wrote. The end result is not—as we imagined twenty-five years ago—a secular society, a society which has no public beliefs but is a kind of neutral world in which we can all freely pursue our self-chosen purposes. We see that now for the mirage that it was. What we have is, as Gladstone foretold, a pagan society whose public life is ruled by beliefs which are false. And because it is not a pre-Christian paganism, but a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity, it is far tougher and more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganisms with which foreign missionaries have been in contact during the past 200 years. Here, without possibility of question, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.

Can the West be converted? God alone knows the answer to that question. I do not see except in the dimmest way what would be involved in a serious response to this challenge. I can only see that it must mean great changes in the way we see the task of the church. There is no space at the end of this essay to do more than suggest the headings of an agenda that will take decades rather than years to undertake.

1. I would put first the declericalizing of theology so that it may become an enterprise done not within the enclave, in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels ‘religion’, but rather in the public sector where God’s will as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools.

2. Second, I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world. The silencing of the apocalyptic notes of the

gospel is simply part of the privatization of religion by which modern culture has emasculated the biblical message.

3. Third, I would put the need for a doctrine of freedom which rests not on the ideology of the Enlightenment but on the gospel itself. The p. 368 world will rightly distrust any claim by the church to a voice in public affairs, remembering that the freedom of thought and of conscience which the Enlightenment won was won against the resistance of the church. But the freedom which the Enlightenment won rests upon an illusion—the illusion of autonomy—and it therefore ends in new forms of bondage. Yet we have no right to say this until we can show that we have learned our lesson: that we understand the difference between bearing witness to the truth and pretending to possess the truth; that we understand that witness (*marturia*) means not dominance and control but suffering.

4. Fourth, I would affirm the need for a radical break with that form of Christianity which is called the denomination. Sociologists have rightly pointed out that the denomination (essentially a product of North American religious experience in the past 200 years) is simply the institutional form of a privatized religion. The denomination is the outward and visible form of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of our culture. Neither separately nor together can the denominations become the base for a genuinely missionary encounter with our culture.

5. Fifth, there will be the need to listen to the witness of Christians from other cultures. The great new asset which we have for our missionary task is the presence among us of communities of Christians nourished in the cultures of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. We need their eyes to see our culture afresh.

6. But finally, and this is fundamental, there will be the need for courage. Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers—realities to the existence of which our privatized culture has been blind. To ask, ‘Can the West be converted?’ is to align ourselves with the apostle when he speaks of ‘taking every thought captive to Christ’, and for that—as he tells us—we need more than the weapons of the world.

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Mission in an Urban World

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The following article is an attempt at the theology of the city. It not only gives a brief summary of the growth of the megapolis of our time but also shows how the city was the centre of attention in Old Testament as well as New Testament times. In conclusion it scrutinizes certain peculiar characteristics of modern urban life and lists basic steps for any urban Christian mission.