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together for youth conventions, consultations and joint evangelistic and spiritual life programmes are good signs on the horizon. Interdenominational prayer fellowships are starting in cities, building a climate for love and cooperation. Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Pune, Delhi, Madras and Bangalore are some of the places where these exist.

Networking and coalition building up between similar ministries will multiply God's work. We need expansion rather than duplication.

Prayer for the city

The need to pray specifically for the city is not only a biblical precept but an existential necessity if we are to see the kingdom expanding there. The spiritual powers over the city, be p. 364 they the strong man or the principalities and powers, need to be bound. Prayer is vital—along with the rest of our spiritual armour—to see Satan release his hold on the millions in the city. United prayer by urban coalitions specifically for the city and for one another is taking place. We need to see this increased. Prayer concerts for revival and evangelism are being held by pastors and for the whole urban church in Delhi, Bombay, and Ahmedabad where increased cooperation and a revival atmosphere are marked.

Prayer and fasting for our individual ministries is essential before launching out into new territory. Breaking into new people groups will meet stiff resistance.

Research

Gathering information about the people group you have targeted is essential. When this is not done, the result is a lot of hit-and-miss efforts. Where care is taken to do this, the blessing is very evident, as well as the saving of precious time and energy. Groups who specialize in research are the India Missions Association and the Church Growth Institute, Madras.

Training the team

This is essential if costly mistakes are to be avoided. All successful urban ministries are characterized by goal-oriented team meetings and careful planning and training.

God is calling for urban ministers today to discern the times and to be his messengers in the desperate population centres of India. May he find faithful laborers among us for the cities of this great country!

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The Gospel as Public Truth: A Critical Appreciation of the Theological Programme of Lesslie Newbigin

John Williams

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Any treatment of the theme of the Church's response to the challenge of secularization would be incomplete without acknowledging the important contribution that Lesslie Newbigin has made to the debate. We are grateful to John Williams for his indepth critical appreciation of Lesslie Newbigin's thoughts and ecumenical leadership. In this article the author puts a number of questions to Newbigin concerning his attempt to argue for the truth claims of the gospel whose source is independent of human experience, and yet open to the tests of rational verification and the credibility of the Church's witness as the community of faith. Newbigin's understanding of the relationship between the authority and trustworthiness of the biblical record as the word of God and the uniqueness and finality of the historic and risen Christ awaits further clarification. This is critical to the central issue of gospel and culture.
Editor

INTRODUCTION[1]

In 1981 the British Council of Churches initiated a study process designed to promote a 'missionary encounter with contemporary culture'. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was asked to write an introductory essay, which appeared in 1983 as *The Other Side of 1984*, published by the World Council of Churches. A second book, *Foolishness to the* P. 366 Greeks, came out in 1986, and developed more fully the questions explored in the first. Meanwhile the BCC study process was continuing and led to the launch in 1988 of a programme entitled *The Gospel and Our Culture*, the aim of which was 'to help Christians and others to apply their critical faculties to the accepted assumptions of our society and to investigate what will be involved (both for thought and practice) in a forthright witness of the churches to the truth as it is in Jesus' (GCN1).

The Management Group of the Programme began to publish a quarterly newsletter in Spring 1989 and plans were put in hand for a major National Consultation in July 1992 at Swanwick, in connection with which a volume of essays, *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hugh Montefiore, was published earlier in the year. Meanwhile Newbigin, who is a member of the Management Group, has published two books based on lectures pertinent to the themes of the programme: probably the most comprehensive exposition of his total position in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* in 1989, and a much smaller work last year, *Truth to Tell*, the subtitle of which, *The Gospel as Public Truth*, indicates the key idea with which the later part of this essay will be chiefly concerned.

I shall begin by supplying an overview of Newbigin's work and drawing attention to some significant features of his thinking over the years. Questions will then be raised in three areas where I think Newbigin's position remains ambiguous. This procedure will clear the ground for a more direct engagement with the question of 'public truth', which has come more and more to occupy centre stage in Newbigin's work in recent times. In order to get a critical grip on this notion I shall draw upon certain ideas of the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

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[1] The published works of Leslie Newbigin quoted from in this essay are abbreviated in the references as follows: HR: *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, SCM, London 1966; OS: *The Other Side of 1984*, WCC, Geneva 1983; FG: *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London 1986; GPS: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SCM, London 1989; TT: *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, SPCK, London 1991. Issues of the Newsletter, *The Gospel and our Culture*, are abbreviated as GCN1, GCN2, GCN3 etc.

I. SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF THE THOUGHT OF LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Missionary background

Newbigin's first book was *A South India Diary*, published in 1951, in which he reflected on his missionary experience. Elsewhere in his writings he occasionally alludes directly to a long career in India as a Presbyterian missionary dating from as early as 1936 and lasting until the end of the 1950s during which time he was made a bishop in the newly formed ecumenical Church of South India. He was then Director of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism before returning to India as Bishop of Madras until retirement in the mid-1970s. Since then he has been minister of Winson Green United Reformed Church in Birmingham as well as a lecturer at the Selly Oak Colleges, active in the British Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement generally, and much in demand as a lecturer, speaker and writer.

As a missionary in the early days Newbigin was very much part of the 'British India' culture to which oriental ways were alien. Yet, by the time he left India, it had become common for young people from the west to travel to India specifically in search p. 367 of an alternative culture and spirituality. Juxtaposing these contrasting perceptions raised two issues for Newbigin which have never ceased to dominate his work. First, he seeks a communication of the gospel which can genuinely take root in the culture to which it is addressed (unlike some of that early Indian missionary work); secondly, he sees the need for a recovery of confidence in the gospel as a message which can supply a rational framework of meaning and purpose for life in a culture which has largely relegated such questions to the status of private opinion (thus challenging the malaise which makes many young people feel it necessary to look quite outside Christian culture for signs of hope).

Analysis and critique of modern culture

Newbigin's earliest detailed study of contemporary culture and the role of religion within it was made in *Honest Religion for Secular Man* in 1966. As the title suggests, the book was published as a contribution to the then burgeoning debate about 'secular theology' sparked off by such popular works as John Robinson's *Honest to God* in Britain and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* in America. In it Newbigin described secularization vividly as a powerful global phenomenon. 'Negatively, it is the withdrawal of areas of life and activity from the control of organized religious bodies, and the withdrawal of areas of thought from the control of what are believed to be revealed religious truths. Positively it may be seen as the increasing assertion of the competence of human science and technics (sic) to handle human problems of every kind' (HR p. 8).

Although he went on to acknowledge that secularization could be interpreted in a Christian way, Newbigin expressed doubt as to whether either secular science or the secular state (the two formative pressures on all societies progressing towards modernity) could retain their proper character without the continuing foundation of Christian faith to keep the structure sound. In this early book he already went on to recognize that to justify this assertion would require at least two moves. First, there was need for a biblical theology which would set the interpretation of history in the context of God's 'mighty acts' for salvation, so that the movement towards freedom and autonomy could not be seen in isolation from that biblical foundation. Secondly, an understanding of what it means to 'know God' must be sought, in the context of which purely positivistic accounts of scientific knowledge as the only form of rational knowledge might be found wanting.

Detailed accounts of modern culture are given in chapter 2 of both *The Other Side of 1984* and *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Because culture is 'the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another' (OS p. 5), it will often be experienced quite uncritically, more or less sub-consciously as simply 'how things are'. We must therefore become critically aware of the cultural framework bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment, viz.:'the "real" world is a world of moving bodies which have a totally "objective" p. 368 existence apart from any human observer. All reality is ultimately intelligble in these terms … by analyzing the data of experience into the smallest possible components one can discover the laws which govern their movements and mutual relations' (OS p. 10).

This Newtonian model of objective knowledge encourages the divorce between fact and value, a key element in Newbigin's critique of contemporary culture. 'There is a world of what are called "facts", as distinct from what are called "values". In the latter world we are all free to choose what we will cherish and what we will neglect. (But) in the world of what our culture calls "facts" … it is assumed that statements are either true or false' (FG p. 16). Religious beliefs are the case *par excellence* of non-factual matters of private opinion, because they do not rest on objectively or empirically demonstrable foundations. It is simply open to individuals to choose them as they will. But Newbigin argues that if God, who is by definition the ultimate source of value, has in fact chosen to reveal himself through specifiable historical interactions with the human situation, then we do have a basis for values which is in principle objectively testable, and it is the duty of Christians to proclaim it.

Just as Newbigin criticizes the notion that 'values' have no basis in fact, so also he attacks the idea that so-called 'facts' are established without subjective input. He alludes to Francis Bacon, who in an early attempt at scientific methodology recommended the collection of 'facts' as a surer guide to the truth than philosophical or religious speculation. Newbigin points out that the popular mentality of our culture still indulges in this primitive scientism despite the fact that things have long since moved on within the scientific community, where it is now generally allowed that 'the facts' mean what has to be taken as objectively given for the paradigm within which one is working, and without which no further research could be undertaken. But since there is no process of assembling evidence, measuring, testing, controlling and so on which is not being undertaken by someone, it follows that all the 'factual knowledge' acquired contains a subjective dimension.

A final recurring criticism of contemporary culture which Newbigin also sees as springing from this basic error about 'facts' is the exclusion of the category of purpose from rational, public discourse. The concept of factual knowledge discussed above implies that things are best understood in terms of causes rather than purposes. It is appropriate to ask, as a matter of fact, 'what brought this about? where did it come from? how did it get to be how it now is?' But to ask, 'what is it for? where is it going? why is it here?' is an inappropriate question in the realm of fact (except in the rudimentary case of material objects designed by human beings with a specific end in view). Newbigin points out that since in the human realm it is undoubtedly the case that purpose is a genuine explanatory category-much human activity is deliberately undertaken with a certain end in view and cannot be adequately explained without taking that into account—we p. 369 place ourselves in a very curious position indeed if we allow that this is so in the case of human action but deny that it is a permissible category for anything else. This oddity leads Newbigin to argue strongly for the teleological nature of the Christian revelation.

Epistemology

It will be clear from the previous section that the basis of Newbigin's cultural criticism is epistemological. He sets out to correct the prevailing error through an approach to the relationship of 'belief' and 'knowledge', drawing upon the epistemology of Michael Polanyi (whose *Personal Knowledge* he has been citing as inspiration ever since *Honest Religion for Secular Man*).

In chapter 3 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Newbigin begins with a critique of Descartes' quest for 'clear and distinct ideas' which no rational person could doubt. Firstly, it is only an assumption, which could itself never be proved, that such ideas exist. We should heed Einstein's words: 'As far as the propositions of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality' (GPS p. 29)—i.e., any statement which is actually about reality must be capable of being doubted. Further, all statements with any claim to be true and to constitute knowledge have to be expressed in language, and language is quite simply not determinate or fixed in meaning. Newbigin quotes A. N. Whitehead: 'There is not a sentence which adequately states its own meaning. There is always a background of presupposition which defies analysis by reason of its infinitude' (GPS p. 29).

With these cautions in mind, Newbigin rejects Bertrand Russell's positivistic account of how knowledge is arrived at in favour of that of Polanyi. While advances in knowledge are made by putting possibilities to the test (i.e. forming a hypothesis which is in principle open to doubt), this can be done only while certain other beliefs are not being doubted at all but treated as certainly true. Those beliefs which we for the time being do not doubt we 'indwell', to use Polanyi's favourite expression. They are like a 'probe' with which we can examine the world and seek fresh knowledge. Or in another image, 'like the lenses of our spectacles, it is not something we look at, but something *through* which we look in order to see the world' (GPS p. 35). Newbigin argues that the Christian faith supplies just such a set of 'lenses' or a 'probe', a story which we 'indwell' as a hermeneutical tool for gaining true knowledge about ourselves and the world.

Through this procedure, therefore, belief and knowledge turn out to be intimately related. All knowledge is framed in a context of belief. This belief necessarily has a subjective pole to it, but the context of belief supplies the base from which exploration becomes possible on selected fronts, toward the acquisition of new knowledge. The possibility is therefore always left in the belief framework, or even exceptionally the abandonment of an old framework. Newbigin's epistemology wishes to rehabilitate what he calls 'dogma' in p. 370 the sense of that which is taken as given within the tradition where one is operating, over against the Enlightenment enthronement of doubt as the foremost epistemological principle. This is also important because for Christians to recognize and unmask the prevailing dogmas of contemporary culture is part of the liberating function of the gospel.

Newbigin is concemed to distinguish his position from discredited dogmatic varieties of Christianity where dogma has 'been entangled with coercion, with political power, and so with the denial of freedom' (GPS p. 10). For him 'the dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story' (GPS p. 12). Nourished and challenged by the biblical story and especially by its central event of Jesus Christ, and through liturgical and sacramental enactments of the same, Christians offer their own interpretation of the meaning of the world and its history. 'It is a story which is not yet finished, a story in which we are all awaiting the end when all becomes clear' (GPS p. 12).

Such a world-view must make its bid publicly for the right to compete rationally with any other understanding which lays claim to true knowledge about the world and the human condition. 'What is now being proposed is that not just in the private world but also in the public world another model for understanding is needed; that this in turn

requires the acknowledgement that our most fundamental beliefs cannot be demonstrated but are held by faith; that it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture … as a fresh starting point for the exploration of the mystery of human existence and for coping with its practical tasks not only in the private and domestic life of believers but also in the public life of the citizen.' (OS p. 27) While there is much in this epistemological correction of positivism with which I fully agree, I shall go on later in the article to suggest ways in which I think Newbigin's position requires nuancing if it is to provide the basis for the fruitful encounter with contemporary secular culture he hopes for.

Missiology and ecclesiology

This shorter section gives some further details of the consequences of Newbigin's epistemological proposals for his view of the Church and its mission. There is a key 'mission statement' in chapter 10 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 'The Logic of Mission': '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…. Now decisions have to be made … for Christ as the clue to history or for some other clue' (GPS pp. 125f).

This statement reflects all that has gone before. True knowledge will be acquired if the starting point for all enquiry, the 'dogma' which itself remains unquestioned, is sound. For Christians this is the biblical story, to which the internal hermeneutical p. 371 key is the event of Christ. This event and the major events of the whole story are rooted in history and open to inspection. The Church is that body of men and women who have come to believe that in these events, to which this story bears witness, God has acted to reveal the true nature and purpose of the world and the place of human beings within it. Spurred on by this conviction, these men and women will both seek to live out in the public domain the concrete social consequences of this truth, and cast it into the arena of public debate as a properly qualified candidate for acceptance as a rational account of things.

The local community of Christians is the context in which the firmly committed starting point of Newbigin's epistemology can be experienced, absorbed and made effective. The life of the gathered congregation can be 'a sign, instrument and foretaste' of God's Kingdom for that place. And 'if the Church is to be effective in advocating and achieving a new social order, it must itself be a new social order' (GPS p. 231). It is clear that in a secularized and pluralist society, the Church can no longer fulfil this calling by any kind of Christendom model. 'It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the Gospel' (GPS pp. 232f). All this will be rooted, finally, in that 'indwelling of the story' by Christian people which we have described earlier.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY: QUESTIONS TO NEWBIGIN

Newbigin and biblical theology

Newbigin's proposals rely heavily on an understanding of biblical revelation as an interpretative key to all of experience and to the meaning and purpose of history. His particular understanding of 'public truth' requires that biblical revelations be concretely historical, in the strong sense of being conveyed via things that have happened. Further,

his approach to Christian proclamation demands that the things that have happened be taken as focused and climaxed in a *unique* event, that of Christ. He writes: 'The Gospel is not the assertion that in Jesus certain qualities such as love and justice were present in an exemplary manner … it is the story of actions by which the human situation is irreversibly changed. The concreteness … the "happenedness" of this can in no way be replaced by a series of abstract nouns' (GPS p. 166).

Newbigin strenuously denies that this position is fundamentalist. He tells us: 'I would want to speak of the Bible as that body of literature which—primarily, but not only in narrative form—renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God' (FG p. 59). This 'rendering' does not take place in and of itself, however, but only through the biblical praxis of the Christian community which both indwells the text and struggles to live out its meaning in the public world. The validation of the claim that p. 372 revelation lives here is that 'the Church is that community which, in an unbroken succession from Abraham, lives by the faith to which the Bible bears witness, and continues to testify in the face of all other claims that it is in this faith that the truth is to be known in all its fulness' (OS p. 46). Historical criticism is quite compatible with this assurance because 'the Bible comes to us in its "canonical shape" ' (OS p. 49): the product of ongoing reflection upon events by earlier witnesses, so that by a sort of cumulative process a consistency of revelation has emerged (around the two 'primary centres' of Exodus and Christ-event).

If this is an accurate rendition of Newbigin's position, there are three questions I should like to put on record. First, does the completion of the canon mark the *end* of definitive revelation? Newbigin's overall position suggests that he assumes it must, but it is not clear how, given the ongoing hermeneutical process he describes as it extends to incorporate *ourselves*, the possibility can be excluded that biblical revelation could at some point be superseded. Does Newbigin insist on a faith based *on Scripture* or can he accommodate a faith *developing out of Scripture*?

Secondly, does Newbigin's account of how biblical authority functions really require so positive an insistence upon historical uniqueness? Take for example the statement on p. 89 of *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 'Jesus manifested a relationship of unbroken love and obedience to the one he called Father'. Here is a typical christological affirmation of faith which goes beyond what historical investigation could possibly establish, If what matters is that Christians 'indwell the story', might it not be sufficient to say that Christians receive from this story insights which they have reasonable grounds for believing to be true? Such insights they find enacted for them by God in particular events, but without prejudice to the possibility of their being vouchsafed to others throughout different circumstances.

Thirdly, even if we grant that 'what is unique about the Bible is the story which it tells' and that 'it is unique and also universal in its implications for human history' (GPS p. 97), are there any 'controls' upon the truths which those who indwell it will come to know? It is pretty obvious that 'the biblical story' has been used to motivate and justify radically different sorts of action over the centuries. Newbigin wants to exclude any insight from outside the community of faith and its biblical indwelling from the hermeneutical circle (FG p. 58), much in the same way that he denies that natural theology can offer us any help with ultimate questions (FG pp. 87f). But to admit that there must be a broader base for the concept of revelation than 'Scripture alone' would surely enhance rather than spoil the prospects for the kind of cross-cultural communication sought by Newbigin.[2] p. 373

[2] It is interesting to contrast the very different approach of Keith Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, SCM 1991, to some of the same issues. He says, for example (p. 23) that we have no choice but to seek to evaluate the truth of the biblical text 'on the grounds of independent likelihood', and suggests what some of the criteria

Newbigin and the communal or associational church

In his contribution to the Grubb Institute symposium, *The Parish Church*,[3] Newbigin argued strongly for what he took to be a 'communal' model of the Church—and yet, his work is peppered with references to the nature and the task of such a church which suggests a distinctly 'associational' style of congregational life. He warns against the Church 'failing to confront people with the sharp call for radical conversion' (p. 36). He refers elsewhere to the Church being 'visible and recognizable as the community that embraces the whole city in the Father's love (TT p. 90). He speaks of 'the presence of the Kingdom in *the Church*' (emphasis mine) in terms of foretaste, firstfruit and pledge in the Spirit (GPS pp. 119f). Such passages seem to presuppose an ideal congregation with a uniform level of clear commitment and a strong sense of common purpose *as a church*.

In envisioning the Church's role Newbigin makes use of Peter Berger's concept of 'plausibility structure'. On p. 9 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* he tells us that 'the Church inhabits a plausability structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures'. Newbigin clearly means by this the framework of ideas, the interpretive key, bequeathed to the Church by the biblical story, which offers an alternative world view to that prevailing in modern society. But for Berger the concept is rather the reverse: the 'plausibility structure' is not the beliefs but the edifice of social institutions that lend credibility to the beliefs.[4] Thus it is the Church that is ithe plausibility structure for Christian world view, rather than the world view that is the alternative plausibility structure borne by the Church. One effect of secularization is that the Church itself is left as the only structure functioning to support the credibility of Christian belief, whereas in earlier times a whole network of social institutions shared in the job.

This has rather important consequences for Newbigin's view of the Church. A congregation in a pluralist, secular society will almost inevitably be a small minority body. As such it will experience an internal p. 374 drive towards a more associational style, because the structure will need to be strengthened in order to support the plausibility of the beliefs of the members, who find them widely ignored or derided in the world outside. However, a congregation may choose to counter the drift into sectarianism by deliberately maximising the communal dimensions of its appeal: working with folk and civic religious expectations, cooperating with local secular caring agencies and so on. If it does this it will almost certainly experience a wide variation in levels of commitment and 'convertedness' among its members.

These sociological pressures will absorb the energies of many churches today, resulting in greater limitation and more compromise than Newbigin's bold vision allows for. A 'missionary encounter with modern culture' cannot overlook the complex symbiotic

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for such an assessment might be (p. 20). Similarly his treatment of 'story' on pp. 2f. offers an alternative to Newbigin's insistence that the story must also be *history*; and on pp. 44f. Ward offers a way of acknowledging spiritual truth in other religious traditions which are not prejudicial to Christian truth-claims. All these broader avenues for exploration are systematically closed off by Newbigin.

[3] L. Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', in G. Ecclestone, ed., *The Parish Church*, Mowbrays, Oxford 1988, pp. 25–42. The series of papers of which Newbigin's is part are responding to the 'Core Group' paper on 'What is a Parish Church?' which makes use of the typology of communal and associational churches developed by Bruce Reed in *The Dynamics of Religion*, DLT, London 1978.

[4] See P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974, pp. 54ff: 'The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of *social structures* (emphasis mine) within which this reality is taken for granted … when this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter …' (p. 55).

relationship that exists between Church and culture, and indeed one of the strengths of such an encounter may lie precisely in its humble recognition of the constraints under which the Church must labour.

Newbigin and the liberal/fundamentalist divide

In both *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (p. 38) and *Truth to Tell* (p. 54) Newbigin expresses the hope of overcoming the divide between liberal and fundamentalist. I wish now to question this hope. In GCN7, Newbigin is accused of a kind of crypto-fundamentalism on the grounds that he insists on a starting point which is placed beyond doubt and accepted uncritically. He replies that 'all systematic thinking about fundamental matters has to begin with certain things that are taken for granted' (GCN7 p. 2). My question is whether he correctly identifies what these things are.

In *The Other Side of 1984* (pp. 28ff) Newbigin draws attention to Polanyi's idea of the 'fiduciary framework'—that which is 'trusted in'—as the starting point for all exploration and questioning. According to chapter 1 of *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, the Christian's fiduciary framework is 'a story'; as Newbigin says on p. 11, 'the story of the empty tomb cannot be fitted into any world view except one of which it is the starting point'. However, on p. 90 of *Foolishness to the Greeks* we read that 'the twin dogmas of Incarnation and Trinity form the starting point for a way of understanding reality as a whole', and on p. 37 of *Truth to Tell*, 'God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the starting point'. There is some confusion here, because Newbigin equates Polanyi's 'fiduciary framework' with 'dogma' and then tries to identify precisely *which* dogma belongs to it. However, the framework is not so much some particular belief as that rather less definable grid or pattern which shapes all our thinking, which is acculturated in our minds as the thought-context in which we live and move and have our being.

Newbigin sounds more fundamentalist than he need by over-intellectualizing this framework. On p. 6 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, for example, he criticizes p. 375 modern culture for trying to 'subject every dogma to fearless criticism in the light of reason and experience'. If modern culture supposes that all truth-claims must bow to the judgement of reason narrowly conceived in terms of logical verification (as in A. J. Ayer), then Newbigin's criticism is justified. But to object to the idea that dogma should be tested by *experience* is another matter, since there is no other way that any knowledge whatsoever can come to us! In *Truth to Tell* (pp. 42ff) Newbigin rightly criticizes 'those who seek to present the Bible as a body of objective truths in which human subjectivity plays no part', but then goes on to describe liberals as those for whom 'the Bible is understood as a record of human religious experience' in which 'we are not dealing directly with the acts and words of God'. A suspicion lingers that Newbigin wants to maintain that Christians have in their possessions all along some source of truth independent of human experience.

I would therefore ask whether Newbigin is trying to carve out a middle way between fundamentalism and liberalism which does not exist. In all our quest for knowledge of the truth, we operate as Christians, as those whose root conviction is that the Christian faith is true. In this sense our fiduciary framework is beyond question. But as far as any specific item of doctrine or historical foundation goes, the 'liberal' principle must be allowed to apply, i.e. critical questioning is legitimate. The notion of 'public truth' cannot stand if there are no-go areas closed to debate.

III. THE GOSPEL AS PUBLIC TRUTH

In this final section I aim to bring together aspects of the questions raised in the previous part to bear upon this central theme of Newbigin's most recent work. In *The Other Side of 1984* (p. 26) Newbigin writes that our culture 'has drawn a sharp distinction between (this) private option and the principles which govern public life. These principles belong to the realm of 'public truth', that is to say to the area which is governed by the truths which are either held to be self-evident or can be shown to be true to any person who is willing to consider all the evidence'. For example, in the USA 'science may be taught as public truth, but religion may not' in the school curriculum (GPS pp. 23f). This is because religion is about beliefs and values, not facts; but 'when I say "I believe" … I am affirming what I believe to be true, and therefore what is true for everyone. The test of my commitment to this belief will be that I am ready to publish it, to share it with others, and to invite their judgment, and—if necessary—correction' (GPS p. 22).

He summarizes in a short paper prepared for the 1992 Swanwick Consultation, 'To affirm the Gospel as public truth is to invite acceptance of a new starting point for thought, the truth of which will only be proved in the course of a life of reflection and action which proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals.' What Newbigin wants is a fair hearing for Christian claims: the right for them to be debated in rational public p. 376 discourse as genuine candidates for true knowledge; so that some will even be persuaded to give Christian faith a try—and when they do, 'the proof of the pudding will be in the eating'. This ringing call needs to be headed in the Church.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to envisage what Newbigin's proposal for an encounter of the gospel as public truth with contemporary culture might mean. I think it is an important and urgent need. My criticisms, questions and suggestions for modifications of what Newbigin is saying are intended to carry the programme forward. They are not meant to rob it of that note of confidence in the gospel which sounds so clearly in Newbigin's work. They intend, however, to suggest that Christian confidence may be more bound up with vulnerability, ambiguity and imperfection, and with the readiness to live by faith with an incomplete and exploratory grasp of truth, than Newbigin seems to allow.

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Book Reviews

NO PLACE FOR TRUTH, OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?

by David F. Wells
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)

(Reviewed by David Parker)