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DAVID KETTLE

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# Lesslie Newbigin, Christendom and the Public Truth of the Gospel

**In this article, David Kettle revisits Newbigin's call to the Church for open dialogue with Western culture. He considers the case that Newbigin made that Christianity can give careful and open attention to the real world while being committed to witnessing to the 'public truth' of the gospel. He examines the post-modern critique of critical modern enquiry, suggesting a way for Christian dogma to be engaged in dialogue which is genuinely open to the world.**

What might it mean for the church faithfully to bear witness to Jesus Christ within contemporary Western culture? This question greatly occupied Lesslie Newbigin during the last fifteen years of his life until his death in 1998. Emphatically, he believed, such witness must involve renewed testimony to the 'public truth' of the Gospel. There were some who heard him as calling for the restoration of Christendom, and this charge is still heard today. Yet he himself always denied this. Where does the truth lie?

We have good reason to ask the question. According to Newbigin, the Western churches are largely failing to bear faithful witness to Christ in the arena of public life. Instead they have become domesticated to western culture, adopting basic presuppositions about human life, about the world and about God which have their origins in the European Enlightenment. If Newbigin was right, then his critique offers the churches important clues as they seek to pursue faithfully their calling in a new millennium. If on the other hand his critics are right, he sought an impossible and undesirable return to the past, and the churches must look elsewhere for clues to a faithful future.

The purpose of this paper is to prompt further reflection on Newbigin's claims. In the first part I shall recall his pursuit of the 'public truth' of the Gospel and trace his claim that rather than seeking to restore Christendom, he sought more open dialogue within Western culture. In the second part I shall argue for the possibility that Newbigin's claim is truthful and that when his critics dismiss this possibility they reveal false presuppositions of their own.

## **Newbigin and the public truth of the gospel**

Decades of cross-cultural experience as a missionary and bishop in India gave Newbigin an enduring sense of the role played in human life by hidden, culturally shared presuppositions about the world. Behind any publicly shared life, such presuppositions were formative.

Newbigin became aware of such world-view presuppositions at work also in his own Western culture. From India he wrote in 1953 'It is, I think, difficult for those who have lived only in Western Europe to feel the enormous importance of the fact that the Church is surrounded by a culture which is the product of Christianity... the fact that this whole body of secular culture has grown up within Christendom still profoundly affects its character... it is still so much shaped by its origin in a single Christian conception and practice of life.'<sup>1</sup> Also within this Western culture, however, he noted the historical rise of non-Christian forces 'eventually launching a full-scale attack upon the whole ethical tradition of Western Europe and seeking to replace it with something totally different'.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960's Newbigin saw Christian belief at work in the very process of secularisation itself, as an outworking of biblical eschatology. Secularisation, he said, is dissolving ancient 'ontocratic' patterns of society in which established social order was simply equated with the 'order of the cosmos'. It frees people for participation in a single common and purposeful human history continuous with biblical prophetic and liberation history. The Gospel is 'public history', not merely in the sense that it has a place in the landscape of public history, but in the stronger, radical sense of giving rise in the first place to a purposeful history into which all humankind was being drawn.<sup>3</sup> This positive evaluation of secularisation was however accompanied by warnings. If secular society is not informed by biblical faith it will lead to ideological totalitarianism or to nihilism.

When Newbigin retired to England in 1974, however, he was impressed by the loss of hope. 'What has happened to our civilisation which, so recently, was confident that it was the 'Coming World Civilisation?''<sup>4</sup> he asked. His assessment of secular society now changed: 'I was the easy victim of an illusion... No room remains empty for long. If God is driven out, the gods come trooping in. England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the church'.<sup>5</sup>

Behind this development lay the driving out of Christian faith from the domain of publically acknowledged truth. Newbigin related this exclusion to the habitual separation of 'facts' and 'values': 'the public world of our culture is the world of what we call "facts", which do not depend upon the beliefs of the individual; "values", on the other hand are personal belief, and in the world of values pluralism reigns... each one must be free to cherish the values that he or she chooses... It is

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1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (SCM 1953), p 14.  
 2 Newbigin, 'Household', p 12.  
 3 Newbigin was appreciative of A. T. Van Leeuwen's *Christianity in World History* (Edinburgh House Press 1964). See Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (SCM 1966), pp 27-30, 36-38. Interestingly, Van Leeuwen himself disavows an 'ambitious thesis' of Newbigin in this regard (Van Leeuwen, op cit, p 17). On the

distinctive contribution of Christianity to the idea of history see for example Georges Florovsky, *The Predicament of the Christian Historian*, in W. Leibrecht (ed.), *Religion and Culture* (Harper & Row 1959), reprinted in C. T. McIntyre (ed), *God, History and Historians*, (Oxford University Press 1977), pp 406-442, especially pp 428f.

4 Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984* (WCC 1983), p 2.

5 Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda* (SPCK 1985), p 249.

to this world of personally chosen values that religion is thought to belong. And Christianity is among the options offered for personal choice.' In the public world of 'facts', by contrast, apparent contradictions between alleged facts do not contribute to the celebration of pluralism but rather provoke argument and experiment and testing 'until we arrive at a point where we all agree.'<sup>6</sup> The latter world, he said, reflects 'our modern scientific culture (which) has pursued the ideal of a completely impersonal knowledge of a world of so-called facts that are simply there and cannot be doubted by rational minds, facts that constitute the real world....' The origins of this world are seen by Newbigin in the writings of Descartes and of Locke and in relation more widely to the European Enlightenment.

Christian accommodation to this privatisation of faith marks an 'advanced state of syncretism'<sup>7</sup> in the church, according to Newbigin. Here is the context in which we must hear his calls repeatedly for Christians to affirm the public truth of the gospel. This call was already issued in 'The Other Side of 1984'; it provided the basic 'thesis' for testing at the Swanwick Consultation of 1992, the climax of his 'Gospel and Our Culture' programme; and it was repeated in his last co-authored 'Faith and Power'. For Newbigin, to accept that our faith in Christ is merely a matter of our privately chosen values is to betray Christ.

### Newbigin and Christendom

Does it follow that Newbigin called for the restoration of 'Christendom'? He always denied this. In 'The Other Side of 1984', when Newbigin proposed that Christians should argue for a Christian framework for understanding and action within the public sphere of politics, education and social organisation, he wrote that this did not 'amount to an invitation to return to the ideology of "Christendom"' (p 29),<sup>8</sup> and he explicitly disavowed 'the "Constantinian" trap' (p 28).

At the same time, Newbigin saw an analogy for Western society today in the disintegrating Roman Empire, in which the adoption of Augustinian theology provided foundations for what later became medieval Christendom. Today, he argued, our Western societies founded on Enlightenment presuppositions are disintegrating and new foundations need to be laid in Christian revelation. Now why does not this spell an attempt to 'restore Christendom'? Because, he says, Christians are called to follow the way of Christ both in their uncompromising claim for the Lordship of Christ *and in their complete vulnerability* (p 36f). The way of

6 Newbigin, 'The Cultural Captivity of Western Christianity as a Challenge to a Missionary Church'. A lecture given in 1984. Published in Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Eerdmans 1994), pp 66-79, p 70.

7 Newbigin, 'Cultural Captivity', p 67

8 Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*. Newbigin's two-sided stance was already evident in his earlier *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, SCM, 1966, when he endorsed a vision of secular society nourished by Christian faith. Discussing D. L. Munby's *The Idea of a*

*Secular Society* (Oxford University Press 1963), which opposed the views of T. S. Eliot, Newbigin wrote: 'We may entirely agree with (Munby) in discarding any idea that the 'Christian Society' of T. S. Eliot can be established in twentieth-century Britain'. But immediately he added we may 'yet question whether he has assumed too easily the stability of a society, the rational and emotional coherence of the people about whom he is writing' (p 128). Newbigin then went on to argue that what Munby has assumed here is dependent in various hidden ways upon a Christian world-view.

coercion must be shunned; this way is an attempt effectively to secure by our own power what can only be God's gift, and also to overrate our own power in this regard. Thus Christian discipleship 'does not invest in any political programme... the hopes and expectations which belong properly only to the city which God has promised. There can be no repetitions of Constantine, either on the left or on the right' (p 37). Ours is to be the way of Christ, bearing witness patiently in the middle of conflict as we reject those premises basic to our culture which deny Christ by domesticating Christian faith within the private sphere.

Newbigin re-iterated these themes in his opening statement to the Swanwick Consultation in 1992: 'To claim that the Gospel is public truth is... not to seek for the Gospel any coercive power in the arena of public debate but it is to insist that the Gospel must be heard as an affirmation of the truth which must finally govern every facet of human life. It is not to ask that the Gospel should exclude all other voices, only that it should be heard. The universal recognition that Jesus is Lord is something promised for the end, not for the present age.'<sup>9</sup>

Thus Newbigin could contrast the claim of the Gospel with the coercive claims of medieval Christendom as a territorial religion. He wrote 'It is one of the positive fruits of the Enlightenment that we recognise that to be a Christian is to be personally committed to Jesus Christ as a matter of deliberate and sustained willing and doing. In that sense, the ending of the territorial principle has been a cleansing experience for Christendom, and we should be thankful for it.'<sup>10</sup> And he acclaimed as twin achievements of the Age of Reason 'the freedom of the individual to follow their own conscience in matters of religious belief, and the nature of religious belief as a matter of personal commitment.'<sup>11</sup> When Newbigin sought 'a Christian society' he did not see himself as attempting to subvert these achievements.

On the other hand Newbigin was emphatic that faith must not be viewed merely as a private affair. Rather he was honest about the unresolved conflict which arises in authentic dialogue between Christian faith and any other religion or ideology which, whether acknowledged or not, claims 'finally to govern every facet of life'. We cannot hope to achieve 'a stable state amid the conflicting claims of different religions and ideologies' he said. 'Until the second coming of Christ we live in a world where the truth can only be affirmed in conflict. What we must pray for is that we may learn to engage in this conflict exclusively with the weapons of the spirit.'<sup>12</sup>

In this conflict, the Spirit calls Christians to pursue dialogue. Here Newbigin turned the tables on those who believed that they stood for dialogue and that Newbigin did not. His charge was that Western critical thinkers are the ones who are not serious about dialogue. This is because they do not acknowledge their own dogmatic presuppositions, but instead require others to operate within them in what

9 Newbigin, 'The Gospel as Public Truth'. Opening address (unpublished) at the Swanwick Consultation, 1992.

10 Newbigin, 'Can a Modern Society be Christian?' Gospel & Culture Lecture (unpublished), Kings College London, 1995, p 6.

11 Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh and Jenny Taylor, *Faith and Power* (SPCK 1998), pp 138f.

12 Newbigin, 'Response to Leeds Colloquium', June 1996 (unpublished), p 2.

a Hindu observer described as a dialogue 'insured against risk'<sup>13</sup> What Newbigin called for was a more open dialogue, one of the most demanding kind, which acknowledged different starting-points for thought. He added: 'Because of what I believe about Jesus Christ I believe that this open encounter can only lead both the Church and the other partners in the dialogue into a fuller apprehension of the truth. This is not dialogue 'insured against risk'; it is part of the ultimate commitment of faith – a commitment which always means risking everything'.<sup>14</sup> While dialogue with other world religions is important, he said, the supremely critical dialogue for the Church today is that with modern Western culture.

The key question facing those who charge Newbigin with wanting to restore Christendom is therefore: is his invitation 'to more open dialogue' any such thing? Is it conceivable that Christian dogma invites a larger, richer dialogue than does modern critical Western thought with its avowed rejection of all dogma? Is it conceivable that to seek a Christian society is to seek one more open to the real world and to freedom in that world than a society which treats Christian faith merely as one expression of private values among others?

To modern Western thinking the logic of a negative reply seems inescapable. An impasse has been reached. However there are considerations which, I suggest, offer to break through this impasse and open the way for a decisively different appraisal of Newbigin's invitation. In the second part of this article shall I indicate these within the constraints of the available space.

### **Dogma and critical thinking**

Newbigin, we have seen, claimed that modern Western societies have been shaped by dogmatic presuppositions originating in the Enlightenment, and that Western theology had become widely captive to these dogmas. He invited people in the West to acknowledge this, and to consider an alternative starting point in the Gospel of Jesus Christ testified in the Scriptures.

Now the claim that modern critical enquiry has its own dogmas is of course offensive to the self-understanding of the modern enquirer. However, this claim is hardly unique to Newbigin. In recent decades many 'post-modern' writers have laid the same charge. And indeed it has been conceded not uncommonly that on occasion in the modern past a dogmatic stance has been taken. For example, it is widely accepted today that for much of the modern period there has been a failure to question traditional assumptions about the proper role of women in society.

However, Lesslie Newbigin's challenge will sound different from that of the post-modern challenger. In the latter case (the briefest evocation of the encounter between modern and post-modern will suffice here) the modern critical thinker may perhaps see in this challenge an attempt to apply further, albeit in disputable ways, the critical principle which they themselves espouse. Thus when a post-modern challenger claims that all knowledge is local and provisional, they may be seen as enlarging critical enquiry so as to take more fully into account the context of claims to knowledge. Even when a post-modern challenger seems to contradict the very

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<sup>13</sup> *The Other Side of 1984*, p 31.

<sup>14</sup> *The Other Side of 1984*, p 31.

possibility of such enquiry, they may be seen as ironically subverting and refining the practice of critical enquiry.<sup>15</sup> In this way post-modern critiques of the modern carry forward the modern rejection of dogma.

Newbiggin's challenge stands in apparent contrast to this. He is concerned precisely to restore the place of dogma.<sup>16</sup> It seems that he is concerned not to enlarge the critical principle, but rather to resist it. Apparently, despite his rhetoric of non-coercion he pursues power for Christians and their 'private' concerns.

### Critical enquiry falsely charged

However there are considerations which, as the modern critical thinker reflects on them, suggest a radical revision of this picture. These arise from the judgment that some 'post-modern' challenges to modern thinking are to be resisted simply as false. As the modern thinker attempts to resist such false challenges, he or she may be led to a new articulation of critical enquiry itself – which brings with it the possibility of understanding Newbiggin in a quite new way.

Typically such false challenges arise where there has been an effort sincerely to establish the truth of some matter and this effort is now charged with merely reflecting and serving concerns 'private' to the enquirer. Even the very act of questioning may be charged with serving such concerns insofar as its purpose is to call matters into question relative to the questioner and require an answer in terms of the presuppositions and concerns of the questioner. Here we find the thrust of the familiar charge that a given pursuit of the truth is eurocentric, or is based upon male presuppositions, or merely expresses radical lobby-group interests.

Now it is absolutely vital that the modern enquirer confronted with such a challenge should be open to the possibility that this challenge is well grounded. It is only too possible that on some occasions private concerns override concern for the truth.. On other occasions, however, the issue is different: the question is rather, whether the post-modern challenger is for their part open to the possibility that the modern critical thinker's concern for the truth *is* any such thing. *It is failure on the part of the 'post-modern' to be open to this possibility which accounts for the false challenge.* The effect of such a false challenge is not to enlarge critical enquiry but rather to subvert it.

How does such a false challenge come to be made? As the modern enquirer reflects on this, they may come to see that in the act of 'enlarging' critical inquiry,

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15 Thus Peter Donovan: 'For suppose there are lessons to learn from the social distortions and injustices unearthed by Foucault, and new insights into oppression and otherness brought to light by the deconstructions of Derrida. Those lessons will be appropriated not through abandoning notions of rationality and a common quest for truth, but through a greatly enhanced appreciation of the difficulty involved in properly applying such notions, given the inevitability of their being compromised, in subtle and unsuspected ways, by their involvement

with economic and political interests and power struggles. The intention is not to overthrow rational, critical methods, in other words, but to free them up and make them perform far better... They are seeking to bring about an enlargement of perception through using reason against itself, through testing to destruction the critical process.' Peter Donovan, 'The Intolerance of Religion Pluralism', *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993, pp 217-229, p 223.

16 See for example Newbiggin, *The Other Side of 1984*, Chapter 3.

the false challenger presupposes a certain view of critical enquiry and of how it is pursued. This view is distorted.

### **Critical enquiry: a distorted view**

In this distorted view, critical enquiry begins with an enquiring human subject who turns his or her attention upon a belief and conceives a question directed towards it. Determinative here is what the enquirer attends *to* and *from*. The enquirer attends *to* a subjective belief conceived apart from the real world; and the enquirer attends *to* this *from* a position of detachment from it, locating it within his or her own more open horizons. We may refer to this as a posture of *a priori* doubt.

Now this posture, together with the view of openness and of critical enquiry which it embodies, is already found within the cartesian tradition of modern thought itself. It originates in Descartes' 'method of doubt'; especially it is associated with more reductionist strands within modern thought. However, in the 'post-modern' false challenge a posture of *a priori* doubt is turned upon modern critical enquiry itself, as such.

Accordingly such a challenge begins with a 'post-modern' subject, who (1) attends to 'modern critical enquiry' as such and conceives this apart from the real world as a subjective activity, and (2) questions such enquiry in detachment, locating this within the challenger's own more open horizons. Such a challenger claims – at the expense of modern critical enquiry – the true mantle of criticism.

However (according to the modern enquirer), in so doing the challenger makes a false assumption. By approaching 'modern critical enquiry' as such in a posture of *a priori* doubt the challenger simply *assumes that* openness to the real world is to be pursued by *stepping back from* such enquiry and questioning it from 'outside'. But this is simply to dismiss 'modern critical enquiry' as denoting precisely that which one *enters into* when pursuing openness to the world. It is to dismiss the possibility that all openness to doubt and self-criticism are found precisely within such enquiry. The false challenger *fails responsibly to attend and see that openness to the real world is pursued by entering into, rather than stepping back from, that to which they here attend.*

Not that there is anywhere for the false challenger to step back into, from openness to the real world. Ironically on this occasion it is the false challenger who – here the modern turns the tables on the post-modern – adopts a 'view from nowhere'. Accordingly, when the false 'post-modern' challenger claims to expose critical enquiry as such as merely serving the concerns of the modern enquirer, they must be exposed as actually serving in some way their own concerns by subverting, relativising and privatising enquiry which is genuinely open to the real world.

### **Critical enquiry: towards a new self-understanding**

Now a radical revision is implied here in the self-understanding of modern critical enquiry. The posture of *a priori* doubt has been rejected as an inadequate expression of concern for and openness to the real world. Critical enquiry (as is now averred) does not begin originally *from a doubting subject* (viewing in detachment that which is doubted) nor is it directed *to a doubted belief* (detached from the world with which



it is concerned). Rather critical enquiry originates *in attentive responsiveness towards the world*. Questions arise out of this; it is the ground of authentic questioning.

Such responsiveness is at heart a matter of our giving ourselves fully – as fully as is demanded of us – in attention to the world including people with whom we are in dialogue. While such responsiveness sometimes gives rise to a posture of doubt towards a particular belief, this posture is not adopted *a priori*. Dialogue does not begin from doubt, but from a responsiveness to the world which leaves room both for doubting the other and for receiving from and being corrected by the other.

‘Critical enquiry’ (as is now averred) signifies this attentive responsiveness, and the exploration and dialogue which follow from it. This attentive responsiveness is demanded from each one of us by the real world. From this world and our attention to it come also corrections to the practice and understanding of critical enquiry; critical enquiry essentially entails openness to such criticism and reform. As such it is not a process we may take control of, to serve our own ‘private’ concerns; we ourselves never become its autonomous starting-point. Rather it is a process in which we are open to the world and allow the world to make its demands upon us. We and every other person are called responsibly to participate together in this process: it is a universal, public vocation. Sometimes criticism and reform of critical enquiry comes through other people with whom we are in dialogue; persuaded by them, their criticism becomes our self-criticism and brings an enlargement of critical enquiry. At other times we may be led to defend critical enquiry against false charges – charges which, although they are made in the name of dialogue and of greater openness to the world, actually subvert authentic enquiry and serve their own ‘private’ interests.

The latter defence is necessary against the ‘postmodern’ false challenger. In this the modern enquirer bears testimony in the manner we have just seen to a normative understanding of critical enquiry. This testimony is precisely in defence of openness to the world, even though as the modern enquirer knows this defence appears to the challenger merely as a dogmatic protection of private concerns. As such the dogma of ‘critical enquiry’ calls for fundamental allegiance from all. Paradoxically it is at once a dogma, and yet invites the false challenger into a more open dialogue, despite their assumption to the contrary; and it is an invitation to yield up ‘private’ concerns, despite their insistence to the contrary.

### **Critical enquiry and Christian faith**

At this point the Christian can draw attention to the logical similarity between the testimony which the critical enquirer offers when resisting the ‘post-modern’ false challenge and Lesslie Newbigin’s testimony to Christian dogma. Newbigin similarly maintains that Christian dogma is a matter neither of ‘blind’ nor ‘private’ faith but of a faith genuinely open to the real world and to what this world demands of each one of us; that it does not seek power for ‘private’ Christian interests but is responsive to what the real world demands; and that it is genuinely open to learning and correction through dialogue (‘very humble and teachable’, as Newbigin writes), while exercising a responsibility to defend itself against false challenges. *What now precludes the possibility that Christian faith is precisely an elucidation and enlargement of modern critical enquiry, in its attentive responsiveness to the world?*

The critical enquirer may balk at this. For a start, has not Newbigin spoken of Christian dogma as *a different starting-point for thought from that of modern enquiry?*<sup>17</sup> However, what Newbigin rejects is the method of *a priori* doubt.<sup>18</sup> It is this which he identifies as a particular way of conceiving openness to the world, a stance which its protagonists should acknowledge as such in order then to enter into a 'more open dialogue'. But now the modern enquirer has identified *a priori* doubt in precisely the same terms. Surely the modern enquirer must take with new seriousness, Newbigin's call for 'more open dialogue'? The modern enquirer has no more grounds left for dismissing this call out of hand than has the 'post-modern' false challenger for dismissing their own similar call.

The modern critical enquirer thus finds themselves summoned to consider anew in the light of Christian faith, what counts as paradigmatic openness to the real. In the old cartesian picture this was represented by infinitely wide horizons of doubt and detachment. The Christian account begins by contrast with God as the reality which demands from every one of us the fullest, self-giving attentive responsiveness. Openness means responsiveness to, and responsible participation in, the mystery of God calling forth endless radical personal renewal and conversion. Christians testify to this mystery above all in the Father who engaged Jesus Christ crucified and risen and proclaimed in the Scriptures: Jesus who in his crucifixion was the extreme embodiment of searching human openness towards God and of searching divine openness towards humankind.<sup>19</sup> When we are drawn into Jesus' own radical responsiveness to and responsibility before God, we open ourselves – and the public culture in which we participate – most fully to the ground of all questioning and all truth. It is this openness which lies at the heart of Lesslie Newbigin's invitation to 'more open dialogue'.

Here are considerations which suggest a possible way through the impasse between Newbigin and those who dismiss his invitation to 'more open dialogue' as no such thing. They challenge the modern enquirer to fathom anew the normative meaning of the critical principle itself, yielding to the possibility that this is defined ultimately in Jesus Christ, and is most deeply explored and hosted in him.

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17 See for example Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, p 29-32.

18 Thus in *The Other Side of 1984* Newbigin attacks the Cartesian elevation of doubt as the first principal of knowledge' (p 19). Rather, he says, 'what is primary is the act of 'attending and receiving' (p 20) – a confession which resonates with that reached by the critical modern enquirer in our account.

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19 One fertile starting-point for such reflection would be Thomas Torrance, 'Questioning in Christ', in Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, (SCM 1965), pp 117-127.