

TOWARD A MISSIOLOGY OF WESTERN CULTURE

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Summary

During the great century of the modern missionary movement, the theme of “blessed reflex” or “reflexive action” arose in mission studies. The mission impulse of the 19th century would rebound back and benefit the sending church. This theme was never elaborated and gradually disappears from the literature. Today we see this dynamic emerging as the growth of the church in other parts of the world is enabling the Western church to see herself anew through the eyes of the Third World church. In this new situation a missiology of western culture is developing.

The word mission and missiology is being used in a new way. Mission is no longer geographical expansion and missiology the discipline that studies this enterprise. In the International Missionary Council world conferences between Tambaram (1938) and Willingen (1952) two assumptions that undergirded a colonialist view of missions had broken down: the world is divided in two between a Christian west and a non-Christian non-West; mission and church are two different enterprises. A new understanding of mission emerged in 1952 when the concept of the *missio Dei* emerged at Willingen. Mission is the participation of the church in the mission of Triune God to redeem the whole creation. It wasn't until the 1980s that a missiology of western culture began to emerge. The catalyst for this development was Lesslie Newbigin.

David Bosch recognized that he did not engage a missiology of western culture sufficiently in his *magnum opus Transforming Mission*. However, he wrote a book that was published posthumously that outlined an agenda for a missiology of western culture. This agenda included: a recovery of the missionary nature of the church and theology; the proper way to engage the public life of western culture; attention to the third world church who can teach us much about missionary experience; a discussion about authentic ways of speaking of God; a challenge to the autonomy of human reason.

One issue on the agenda of a missiology of western culture is that of the cultural captivity of the western church. If the church is to be liberated from her cultural captivity two things are necessary: an inner reformation that recovers a missionary consciousness; the recovery of a missionary encounter with western culture.

A brief sketch of church history can show how an inner missionary consciousness and an outer missionary encounter has been lost in the western church. There are two lenses that can be used to view this history. The first is that of H. Richard Niebuhr. When the church is young and a minority it is characterized by mission and a critical engagement with culture. As it is part of culture for along time mission is replaced by pastoral care and a prophetic-critical stance is replaced by an established position. The end result is cultural captivity. A second lens is to see the church's task in culture as both positive (participation in cultural development) and negative (antithetical stance against idolatrous development). The early church manifested the second, while the church of Christendom embodied the first.

The early church understood itself in terms of resident aliens. The primary sense of this term was that of a redemptive tension between gospel and culture. The church was an alternative community living in a different story than that of the dominant culture. As it embodied a contrast lifestyle, it was attractive and publicly subversive. By way of evaluation, positively, the early church maintained an antithetical stance, while negatively, it did not always recognize her cultural responsibility.

In the fourth century, the church moved from a marginal position to a dominant institution; from a position of weakness and inferiority to a position of power and superiority; from being poor to rich; from being an oppressed minority to an oppressive majority; from an illegal religion to the religion of state; from being resident aliens to an established church. As such the church of Christendom was an established church and a non-missionary church. However, it was a church that took responsibility for cultural development.

Since the Enlightenment the church has been pushed to the margins, into the private sector of western culture. This position shows that the church is an advanced state of syncretism. Instead of resisting the idolatrous faith-commitment to reason, it has meekly conformed to the plausibility structure of the West. The Christendom mentality remains operative as it remains part of established status quo, only in a reduced role as chaplain to the nation.

Postmodernity offers an opportunity for a recovery of a missionary self-understanding. As the church finds itself in a new position in society, she will need to examine her self-identity. If the church is to survive in a postmodern culture it is necessary that she recover her missionary identity.

I. Introduction

A. 19th Century Missionary Impulse and Reflexive Action

Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great American missionary historian of the earlier part of this century, in his well-known history of the expansion of Christianity, has called the 19th century “the great century” (Latourette 1941-1944). Missionary fervour spread throughout the west resulting in remarkable growth in both human and monetary resources for the cause of cross-cultural missions. Missions became the new orthodoxy of the era. One of the themes that arose in early 19th century mission thought was that of the “blessed reflex” or “reflexive action.” Mission advocates argued that the missionary impulse of the 19th century that was sending missionaries throughout the world would result in a reflex action that would benefit the sending church. In other words, the mission impulse would rebound back on the sending church in the west, and it would reap some of the benefits of this missionary activity. These benefits were never spelled out. This theme gradually disappears from the writing of missiology at the end of the 19th century as mission became more and more woven together with colonialism. In the latter part of this century mission has gradually extricated itself from the colonial framework. In this post-colonial period the dynamic of the “reflexive action” is becoming increasingly evident. The missionary movement has come full circle and the church in the west is now beginning to experience a number of benefits.

Perhaps we can describe how this reflexive action might take place with the following hypothetical scenario.¹ A missionary is sent to India. He stands in the village street to proclaim Jesus Christ to a group of people for whom the name Jesus Christ is meaningless. How does he proceed? He must use the language of his hearers. However, that language is not neutral; it embodies the worldview and commitments of the people. What word does he choose to speak of Christ. Does he choose *swamy*—Lord? The trouble is that in India there are literally millions of lords in Hindu tradition. Is Jesus just one more? This is hardly good news! How about the word *avatar*—the descent and embodiment of God? The trouble is—among others—that this idea is caught up in the cyclical worldview of the Hindu and can hardly call for a final commitment. Should the missionary just begin to tell the historical story of Jesus? This would be to identify Jesus with *maya*, the world of passing, illusive reality. It would hardly hold interest. But the evangelist must choose one of these words if he is to communicate. This is a necessary process; he must use the language of the people. In this process of communicating the gospel, the missionary becomes increasingly aware of how the worldview of that local culture can reshape the gospel. But in this process, she begins also to see that this is true not simply in India. It is also true in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe—the place from which he has come. It is very easy to believe that the worldview in which you have been nurtured is simply the way things are. One is unaware of how profoundly one is shaped by their cultural story. However, serious involvement with another culture challenges this assumption. The way that the missionary understands the gospel is shaped by the culture of which she is part and this becomes increasingly evident as a result of a missionary encounter with a foreign culture. Through dialogue and interaction with the Indian church, the missionary comes to see that the gospel is shaped by the western worldview.

If we stopped there we would be left with cultural relativism—an Indian gospel absorbed into Hinduism or a Western gospel absorbed into modernity. But we are not. The third thing that must be

¹ Perhaps this is more than a little hypothetical. I follow some of the thoughts of Lesslie Newbigin here (Newbigin 1978:1-5). In fact, in Newbigin this reflexive action is illustrated par excellence. He returned from India where he spent 38 years and his writings bringing the missionary experience to bear on western culture have made international impact.

brought into the picture is the meeting of cultures under the final authority of the Bible. The missionary brings the Bible or New Testament that has been translated into the local language. The people in India have in their hands a story which can provide a critique of both their culture and the culture from which the missionary has come. As the church in India reads the Bible they come to see the incompatibility of their worldview with the gospel. The Indian church also can provide for the missionary a fresh look at western culture through new eyes. They can enable him or her to begin to see how the Western worldview has compromised the message of the gospel.

This process is now taking place at a global level. The growth and maturing of the churches in the Majority World—the fruit of 19th and 20th century missions—now provides a challenge to the Western church to rethink their identity and stance toward their culture. Thus the missionary experience has come full circle. It now provides a critique of the sending church providing resources for a more faithful witness. This is what is meant by reflexive action.

B. Toward a Missiology of Western Culture: New Understanding of Mission in the 20th Century

As a result of this reflexive action there is now developing a missiology of western culture. To speak of a *missiology* of western culture means that the word ‘mission’ is being used in a new way. At the beginning of the 20th century, mission still denoted the idea of geographical expansion. Mission was considered to be an enterprise of Christian expansion that proceeds in one direction from the Christian West to other parts of the world. The world was divided into the Christian west and the non-Christian non-West. The West was the home base for mission and the non-West was the mission field. Church and mission were separated: *Mission* was an organization responsible for this expansionist enterprise; the Western *church* supported mission as one of its worthy causes while the the third world *church* took its place as a parallel organization along side of western based missions as a container for converts of missionary work. Missiology was the discipline that studies the issues arising from this expansion. If a missiology of western culture was to develop, these foundational assumptions about mission would need to change.

Throughout the 20th century numerous factors have challenged this view of mission. Perhaps the two most important factors are the dramatic rise, growth, and vitality of the Majority World church with its various expressions of the gospel and the parallel marginalization of the church in the West. In the International Missionary Council world conferences between Tambaram (1938) and Willingen (1952) each of the fundamental assumptions that undergirded a colonialist view of mission broke down. The separation of mission and church was challenged; it was advocated that the church is missionary by its very nature. The division of the world between the Christian west and the pagan third world dissolved; the west is as much a mission field as the third world—mission is in all six continents; Mission as geographical expansion gave way to an understanding of mission as the task of the whole church wherever it was to witness to the whole gospel in the whole world.

All these seminal insights remained unfruitful, however, because there was no theological framework in which to relate them systematically. The world missionary conference in Willingen, Germany in 1952 provided a beginning answer to this problem. The notion of the *missio Dei* brought together Christological, eschatological, and pneumatological insights from the theological guild in a way that opened the way for mission as a task of the church in all continents to emerge. The church’s mission was a participation in the mission of God to redeem the creation. The Father sent the Son; the Father and Son sent the Spirit; the church is sent by the Son and taken up in the redeeming work of the Spirit. Mission is first of all a work of God and the church is the locus of

mission before it becomes the agent. The church is sent to be a bearer of the Spirit and the mission of God. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” The sending is of the whole church by God into the world not merely the sending of some individuals by mission boards to the third world.

The implications of these insights for western culture were not immediately recognized on a wide scale. It would not be until the 1980s that serious attention would be devoted to the development of a missiology of western culture. The catalyst for this development was British missionary, ecumenical leader, and author Lesslie Newbigin. He commented upon his return to Britain from India that he found western culture to be “the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world” and “the one of which the Churches have been—on the whole—so little conscious” (Newbigin 1993:235). He tackled the issue with the insight of an outsider who could see the church in western culture with new eyes. His books have spawned a world wide interest in the subject and a number of organizational, scholarly, and publication initiatives to address the issue. We can see today the contours of a missiology of western culture beginning to emerge.

For the development of a missiology of western culture, the legacy of the 19th and 20th century missionary movement is invaluable. Its vast experience and tradition in dealing with missional issues provides a tremendous resource for the church in former sending lands.

C. Contours of a Missiology of Western Culture

In 1991 David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* appeared—perhaps the most significant missiological book to be published in this century. Before his tragic death in April of 1992 he already had indicated that he recognized that he had not engaged the topic of mission in modern western culture sufficiently and that this must be a priority concern for our day. His little book *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* was an attempt to begin to deal with this need. It was published posthumously in 1995.

In this book Bosch sets out the contours of a missiology of postmodern western culture. It included the following features: 1) In a missiology of western culture we must understand that the church is missionary by its very nature. Mission is not just one (maybe very important) task of the church; this redemptive era is characterized by mission and that this gives the church its very identity. Thus all theology is missionary as it brings the gospel to bear on various contemporary situations in an attempt to equip the church for its missionary task (Bosch 1995:27-32). 2) A missiology of western culture must address the issue of engaging the public life of culture avoiding the temptations of either trying to create a Christian society (mistake in Christendom) or withdrawing from society into a spiritual realm (mistake in modernity) (:33-35). 3) A missiology of western culture must take greater account of the churches in the third world and this for several reasons. First, we have much to learn from the missionary experience of these churches. Second, the west (including the church) shares the blame in the plight of the third world (:35-40). 4) A missiology of western culture must struggle with the issue of how to speak of God in an authentic way in a culture where there is the dual threat of modern secularism that has eclipsed God and postmodern spirituality with much god-talk and its religious smorgasbord that trivializes and consumerizes religious experience (:40-45). 5) A missiology of western culture must seek ways to challenge the autonomy of reason—our greatest idol—by communicating in our lives that all reasoning takes place in the context of committed belief (:47-53).

It is these five ingredients that Bosch believes to be of primary importance in a missiology of western culture. He adds six more elements briefly at the end of the book that he believes also need to be addressed. They are: need to address ecological issues because of the west's complicity in

creating this crisis (:55f.), the need for a new counter-cultural stance of the church because of the domestication of the church in western culture (:56f.), the need to address the ecumenical concern for the unity of the church because of the burgeoning denominationalism in the west (:57f.), the need for contextualization of the gospel that avoids syncretism and irrelevance because of the illusion that the gospel is at home in western culture (:58f.), the need to equip the lay members of the church for involvement in their public callings because the clergy/laity distinction has sidelined their ministry (:59), the need for a vital, worshipping congregation as the source of mission (:55f.).

D. Cultural Captivity of the Western Church

In a developing missiology of western culture, one of the problems that has become clear and received growing attention in the last several decades, is the cultural captivity of the western church. In a recent article Konrad Raiser (1994:628f.), the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, distinguishes between two different forms of missionary witness. There is a difference between the missionary situation in Europe and North America, on the one hand, and Africa and Asia, for example, on the other. While the central missionary problem of the “younger churches” is the experience of cultural estrangement—gospel is felt to be a foreign element that disturbs cultural traditions—the central missionary problem of the “older churches” is the cultural captivity of the gospel. In other words, in Africa and Asia, the problem is for the gospel to be at home in culture. In the West the gospel has become absorbed and co-opted into culture.

If the church in the west is to be liberated from her cultural captivity its life and attitude must be transformed in two ways. First, there must be an inner reformation. That is, the church’s self-understanding must be transformed from a non-missionary to a missionary self-image. In her own self-perception and self-identity she must see and understand herself as existing to communicate the good news of the kingdom of God. She must recover the missionary nature of the church. Second—and very closely related—this missionary self-understanding will lead to a new understanding of her relationship to culture. Along with and closely aligned with an inner missionary consciousness there must be a recovery of an outer missionary encounter with her culture (Shenk 1995: 87, 94). This involves a missiological analysis of culture that enables the church as a contrast society, called to witness to the gospel, to confront the idols of the reigning worldview. It is an analysis of the foundational assumptions of culture that will equip the church to resist the temptation to live in comfortable co-habitation with powers that contradict the reign of God.

II. Cultural Captivity of the Western Church: A Brief History

How is it that this inner missionary consciousness and outer missionary encounter has been diminished in the western church? I will now sketch a brief history of what I am calling the cultural captivity of the western church.

The lens I want to use to view this history is the thesis of H. Richard Niebuhr (1935) in *Gospel Against the World*. In this little book with two other authors, he describes what takes place when the gospel is part of a culture for a long period of time. When a church is young and a minority its identity is defined by mission and a critical engagement with culture. This missional understanding issues in a community with a distinctive identity and a rigorous evangelization of the culture. As more and more embrace the faith, the church moves from being missionary to being pastoral. The church must now care for new converts. Gradually, a working arrangement with the powers and institutions of society develops. The gospel permeates more and more of culture. There is a

lessening tension between church and culture since the culture is not as pagan as it once was. The final state is one of corruption—where the church is domesticated and absorbed into the culture. This end result is one of cultural captivity.

There is another lens that we can use to look at this history. The church has two responsibilities toward its host culture. First, it is part of the culture. Since the cultural development is a good part of creation that God has called humanity to participate in, the church must take its share of responsibility for that cultural development. Second, since the whole of culture is distorted by idolatrous faith commitments, the church is also called to take an antithetical stance.² Paraphrasing the words of Jesus in John 17: the believing community is in the world but not of it. In the first 300 years of church history, it takes an antithetical stance. But during this time the early church could not take her responsibility to participate in the development of Roman culture with sufficient seriousness. With the conversion of Constantine, the church is established as part of the culture. As such the church takes its responsibility for cultural development seriously. However, the antithetical stance is lost. This led to the absorption of the church into its culture resulting in cultural captivity.

A. Early Church : Resident Aliens

The way the early church understood her identity and relation to culture can be seen in the way they referred to themselves.³ One of the most common self-designations of the early church was resident aliens (*paroikoi*).

The primary sense of *paroikoi* is that of a redemptive tension between church/gospel and culture. In an article reviewing the use of this term *paroikoi* in the literature of the early church, Pierre de Labriolle concludes: “The idea of heterogeneity of the Christians from their pagan neighbours and the society where they live is one of those which one finds most frequently in the texts” (1927: 198). They understood themselves to be different from others in their culture. In fact, they also called themselves a third race along with the Jews and Gentiles.

This distinctive sense of an alternative community was nourished by an alternative story—the story of the Bible. Everett Ferguson (:1989) argues that this distinctive sense of identity developed as an alternative story was pressed on the catechumen in the process of catechism. The story of the Bible must supplant the story that gripped the public life of Roman culture. The whole catechetical process had a pastoral purpose to empower a distinctive people.

This community with a distinctive identity shaped by Scripture was attractive. Alan Kreider argues that the church’s “...rites and practices were designed to re-form those pagans who joined the church into Christians, into a distinctive people that individually and corporately looked like Jesus Christ. As such, these people, reformed, would be attractive” [1994:5]. And so they were. A second or third century Christian remarks: “Beauty of life causes strangers to join the ranks...We do not talk about great things; we live them” [quoted in Kreider 1994:12]. But we do not only have the testimony of the early church; we also hear from the enemies of the church as to the attractive power of their distinctive communal life. Celcus and Julian the Apostate both testify to the impact of the church as a result of its distinctive and attractive life.

What was the content of this exemplary life? In part it was that the early church broke down barriers erected in the Roman empire—rich/poor, male/female, slave/free, Greek/Barbarian. It was

² It is this side of cultural responsibility that is being increasingly stressed in American initiatives in the area of missiology of western culture. Grippled by the insight that the church is culturally captive, the answer proffered is an antithetical, prophetic-critical stance that renounces all power.

³ I owe many of the insights of the following section on the early church to the booklet by Alan Kreider (1994).

the love they exercised toward the poor, orphans, widows, sick, mine-workers, prisoners, slaves, travellers (hospitality). It was the exemplary moral lives of ordinary Christians over against the rampant immorality of the average Roman citizen. It was the hope and joy and confidence experience by Christians in a world of despair, anxiety, and uncertainty. It was their unity in a fragmented and pluralistic world. It was their chastity in a world dominated by sex. It was their generosity with money and simple lifestyles in a world dominated by accumulation and consumption (in A.D. 251 in Rome there was 154 ministers of one sort or another on the list for financial care and **1,500** widows and poor people !). It was their forgiving love of their enemies. Justin comments: "We who once took pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with people of different tribes..now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies" (quoted in Kreider 1994:9).

In sum the lives of the believing community, nursed and shaped by a different story, living as resident aliens were lights in a dark world. The Canons of Hippolytus expressed the desire that the lives of Christians "may shine with virtue, not before each other [only] but also before the Gentiles so they may imitate them and become Christians..." (quoted in Kreider 1994:12).

And this witness of the early church was publicly subversive. The early church did not allow themselves to be pushed into a private realm in the Roman empire. It quietly set aside and rejected the public doctrine of the Roman empire and lived out of the story of the Bible. Its confession that Jesus is Lord stood in stark opposition to the confession Caesar is Lord that bound the empire together.

In summary, in the early church, we see a community that understands her identity in terms of a witness to the kingdom of God. She lives in the story of the Bible and thus stands in redemptive tension with her culture. Her contrast or alternative life is from the margins yet is attractive to many and publicly subversive of the reigning idolatry.

By way of evaluation, we can say, positively, that the early church maintained an antithetical stance toward culture. Hendrik Kraemer has rightly maintained:

The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the Church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in this world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that has lost its savour (1956:36).

But negatively, her responsibility for and participation in the cultural development of the Roman empire suffered. This two sided stance can be seen in the struggle the early church had with various occupations. Hendrik Kraemer comments a few pages later:

It is worthwhile to have a look at the struggle with adaptation by paying attention for a moment to the conflicts of Christians in their professions. The great question was, How far is a Christian allowed to enter into the professional jobs of those days with their mores and customs, *without denying Christ and without becoming polluted by participation in idolatry?*(:40; cf. Harnack 1961:303-311).

According to some in the early church, many occupations and professions were considered to be polluted by the idolatry of pagan culture and were therefore prohibited to Christians as a legitimate calling (cf. Harnack, *ibid*).

B. Christendom: Domestication

All of this changed in the fourth century. Constantine became a Christian and legalized the Christian religion. In 380 Theodosius made Christianity the religion of the empire. The Christian church grew sixfold. However, in this new era we call Christendom we move very far from the understanding and practice of mission of the early church.

The early church moves from a marginal position to a dominant institution in society; from being socially, politically, and intellectually inferior to a position of power and superiority; from being economically weak and poor to a position of immense wealth; from being an oppressed minority to being the oppressive majority; from being an illegal religion to becoming the only religion of the state; from being resident aliens to a territorial understanding of the faith whereby the Roman empire is considered Christian.

In this new position the church's self-understanding changed rather dramatically. We can say four things about the church in Christendom. First, it became an established church. The redemptive tension, the prophetic-critical, antithetical stance of the church in relation to culture diminishes. The church became part of the constellation of power within the state. It took its place alongside of the political, economic, military, social, and intellectual powers within the empire. Now the church's identity is shaped by society rather than the *missio Dei*. The church became an arm and instrument of state policy rather than an instrument for God's redemptive purposes. Its task was to contribute to the maintenance of the existing political and social order. It was to uphold and support the status quo rather than prophetically critique it. An established church is domesticated by the culture. The stories or worldviews of the church and the broader society become one. Critical engagement is lost. There is the assumption that the gospel and church are at home in a Christian culture. The Roman Catholic theologian Roger Haight describes the established church:

The word established indicates a theological category which characterizes a church whose mission has ceased; an established church is at peace with society and content with and in its own forms and inner life. The term is negative for it implies the presumption that the missionary task has been completed so that the church is no longer a mission but simply a community. In terms of missionary and pastoral activity...an established church assumes only pastoral responsibilities (1980:10).

Second, the Christendom church becomes a non-missionary church. As Haight says, the mission of the established church has ceased. The assumption is that the whole society is now Christian and outside the empire is pagan. With this assumption work *within* the empire would change from missionary to pastoral maintenance. The church becomes preoccupied with its own welfare and maintenance. *Outside* the empire the initiative for Christianization of peoples is taken by the state as it extends its empire. The church participates as the religious arm of the empire. Mission often became coercive by means of religious wars.

Third, the church in the Christendom era becomes a powerful and privileged church. The church was now made up of the educated, powerful and rich. Christians were given privileged positions within the culture. The "Christian empire" is powerful. Mission now is taken from a position of strength—from the superior to the inferior.

Finally, in contrast with the early church, during Christendom, the church takes on cultural responsibility. While the antithetical stance of the church toward her culture diminishes, it takes

responsibility for many dimensions of cultural development. Newbigin has correctly observed:

Much has been written about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism, and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme. But could any other choice have been made? When the ancient classical world . . . ran out of spiritual fuel and turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together, should the church have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? It could not do so if it was to be faithful to its origins in Israel and the ministry of Jesus. It is easy to see with hindsight how quickly the church fell into the temptations of worldly power. It is easy to point . . . to the glaring contradictions between the Jesus of the Gospels and his followers occupying the seats of power and wealth. And yet we have to ask, would God's purpose as it is revealed in Scripture have been better served, if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a "Christian" Europe, if all the churches for the past two thousand years had lived as persecuted minorities . . .? I find it hard to think so (Newbigin 1986:100f.).

As Newbigin goes on to point out, however we evaluate this time, we are heirs of that Christendom experiment. We belong to a culture that has been shaped for a thousand years in a *corpus Christianum* in which the whole of public and cultural life was permeated by Christian revelation.

My own evaluation is to again look at the two sides of Christian cultural responsibility. In terms of taking responsibility for cultural development, the church of Christendom was faithful. In terms of an antithetical stance to the pagan classical and Germanic elements of that culture, its established position weakened her witness.

2. Historical Trajectory of Christendom

A number of historical factors converged to break down historical Christendom. However, many assumptions about the church and mission that were shaped during this era continue to shape the church's life to the present—a situation called by some missiologists of western culture a 'functional Christendom' (Van Gelder in Guder et. al. 1998:46-62).

C. Church in Modernity: Privatization

With the breakdown of Christendom, the Enlightenment offered another vision of public life based on an autonomous, scientific rationalism. In this new situation, the Christian faith moves from the centre to the margins of the culture. Newbigin has made an important contribution to missiology here by offering us an analysis of the epistemological foundations of western culture that has moved the church to the private religious realm.

The vision of the Enlightenment appeared promising to that generation for two reasons. First, the religious wars were fragmenting all the countries of Europe. It seemed that the gospel or the Christian faith could not provide a centre for European society. Alongside, the success of the natural sciences in explaining the natural world gave hope that scientific reason could provide an alternate centre. At the heart of the Enlightenment worldview was a commitment to autonomous human reason as the sole arbiter of truth and primary instrument of social progress. Reason disciplined by the scientific method, applied to society and translated into technological power had the ability to

transform our world into a materially and socially prosperous utopia. Methodological and neutral reason was to be the sole arbiter of truth. Tradition and authority were not to be trusted as guides to truth. Only human reason disciplined by the scientific method held such esteemed power.

Descartes has been called by many “the father of modernity.” Descartes distinguished between the knowing subject and the object to be known. If the knowing subject was to have reliable knowledge s/he must disinfect him/herself of all subjective contaminations. The knower must reject all authority and tradition. It was only through a rigorous application of method that truth could be found and validated. One built the temple of rational truth piece by piece by subjecting all truth claims to the dictates of a neutral and methodological rationality.

It was this Cartesian legacy that seized the imagination of the Enlightenment generation. *All* truth claims must be brought before the bar of scientific reason for ultimate judgement. Truth claims that could be validated by human rationality were accorded the high place of facts. Truth claims that could not be validated in this way were ushered into the lower epistemological realm of values. Thus the idolatrous commitment to human, methodological rationality created a fundamental dichotomy that lies at the heart of Western culture. A fundamental dichotomy between facts/values, knowing/believing, public/private, truth/opinion, science/religion was created in which the former is accorded a higher place and is trusted to shape public life. This dichotomy has become an unquestioned article of faith in western culture—a hidden assumption that gives shape to our culture. This foundational assumption, based on the faith of Western people, functions like a tectonic plate that is just below the earth's surface, unseen yet it gives shape to the social topography and geography above.

The claims of the gospel must also be submitted to the dictates of methodological reason. Since such claims cannot be proven by scientific method (although there has been no shortage of attempts in rationalistic apologetics) the claims of the gospel have been shunted to the netherworld of private values that are a matter of subjective opinion and personal preference. The gospel is not to be considered as public truth but mere private taste. One may find the gospel privately engaging but its truth claim is dismissed. It can have no place in shaping the public life of a nation.

Newbigin's indictment of the church is that instead of resisting this idolatrous faith-commitment to scientific reason, the church has been absorbed and domesticated into the culture (Newbigin 1983, 1986, 1989). It has quietly and meekly conformed itself to this alien faith-commitment. It has accepted its role in the private realm. The church may offer an otherworldly and entirely future salvation to interested individuals. The church may influence the morals of its members. It may meet the religious needs of its adherents. But woe to the church that dares to believe that the gospel is the true starting point for understanding all of human life. Newbigin is joined by many other voices who see both the ecumenical and evangelical tradition as two sides of the same modernist coin—churches that have been co-opted into the reigning plausibility structure of modernity.

Shenk argues that, paradoxically, the Christendom mentality remains very operative here (Shenk 1995:41). It is our Christendom heritage that has led us down this path of privatization. The church has been established as part of the status quo, as part of the constellation of powers for so long it knows of no other relationship to culture. As an arm of the state, the church still has its role to play. However, it has been greatly reduced since the Enlightenment to an institution that cares for the religious needs of its members and perhaps influences the individual morality of the nation.

In other words, the church has become in modernity a chaplain to society. A chaplain is a hired employee of a bigger organization. S/he is employed to meet the religious needs of those in a community with a higher and more comprehensive purpose. A chaplain contributes to the maintenance of the status quo; s/he does not challenge it.

D. Postmodernity: Recovery of Missionary Self-Understanding?

We live in a time when the modern worldview is breaking down. We live in a post society—post-modern, post-industrial, post-critical, post-liberal, post-Enlightenment, post-Christian, etc. For those churches who have hitched their wagon to some aspect of modernity the postmodern shift represents an enormous threat. And no doubt, the postmodern worldview does represent a threat to the Christian faith as all worldviews do. But it seems that it also represents an opportunity. Kosuke Koyama tells us that the Japanese character for crisis is danger and opportunity. And perhaps that is just what postmodernity offers us—danger and opportunity.

In terms of the opportunity the church in postmodern society has been pushed to the margins. This provides an opportunity. This can be illustrated by employing the language of anthropologist Victor Turner. The church in western culture is at a point of liminality. Liminality is a condition of transition from one position or role in culture to another. For example, the movement from adolescence to adulthood is a point of liminality. At such times one struggles with identity. The church has lost its dominant position and is now at the margins. As it struggles with its identity, the opportunity is there to recover a missionary self-consciousness. And perhaps it is just there—at the margins—that the western church can learn again to become missionary. Maybe the postmodern condition offers the church the opportunity to recover the counter-cultural stance for which Bosch calls, the redemptive tension of the early church—hopefully a stance that will take seriously both cultural responsibility and antithetical critique.

Lesslie Newbigin said that the trip from India to Europe through the continent of Asia made a profound impact on him because he saw that the vital churches of the Middle East had disappeared without a trace (1993:226-228). The same threat looms in the West. A recovery of a missionary understanding of the church is a vital matter if the church in the West is to remain as a significant presence.

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