

## **Gospel, Culture, and Cultures: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Contribution**

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### *Introduction*

Lesslie Newbigin's book *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* opens with an interesting observation. On the one hand, the relationship between the gospel and culture is not a new subject. One thinks, for example, of the classic study of H. Richard Niebuhr who proposed five models of the relation of Christ to culture, and of work of Paul Tillich who struggled toward, what he called, a 'theology of culture' (Niebuhr 1951; Tillich 1959). However, the majority of work has been done by scholars who have not had the missionary experience of communicating the gospel to a radically foreign culture. On the other hand, the last three decades have witnessed a spate of studies on the issue of gospel and culture within the discipline of missiology under the general rubric 'contextualization studies.'<sup>1</sup> Missionaries have become more aware of the western captivity of the gospel and have struggled fruitfully with the issues of gospel and culture, and gospel and cultures. Yet while "it has sought to explore the problems of contextualization in all the cultures of humankind from China to Peru, it has largely ignored the culture that is the most widespread, powerful, and persuasive among all contemporary cultures—namely . . . modern Western culture" (Newbigin 1986:2-3). To put Newbigin's observation another way, the missionary experience and tradition has gained penetrating insight into the issues of gospel and culture, and gospel and cultures but this tradition has not been appropriated in mainstream western scholarship to shed light on the subject of gospel and culture, and more particularly on the relationship between the gospel and western culture. To my way of thinking, this is a great loss because the missionary experience of cross-cultural witness offers important insight into the gospel-culture relation.

Newbigin spent almost forty years of his life as a missionary in India.<sup>2</sup> Out of this missionary experience has come penetrating insight into the relation between gospel, culture, and cultures which this conference is attempting to address. Newbigin is one of the leading missionary thinkers and statesmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the unusual ability to clearly communicate difficult concepts. This paper briefly surveys Lesslie Newbigin's missionary contribution to the issue of gospel, culture, and cultures.

### *Model of Cross-Cultural Communication*

Street preaching was a regular evangelistic activity for Newbigin during his missionary days

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<sup>1</sup> For a good introduction to contextualization studies in missiology see Bevans 1992 and Bosch 1991:420-432; 447-457.

<sup>2</sup> See Newbigin's autobiography for more details of his life (Newbigin 1993).

in India. This attempt at cross-cultural communication enabled Newbigin to formulate two problems. The first is concerned with the gospel and culture (singular): here the question is how can one avoid the twin problems of syncretism and irrelevance? The evangelist must use the language of the hearers. Yet that language uses terms that reflect the worldview by which the hearers make sense of their world. The Tamil language, for example, is a shared way of understanding the world that reflects Hindu faith commitments. As such it expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. Therefore, there will be a clash of ultimate commitments between the gospel and Hindu culture. Thus cross-cultural communication of the gospel will call into question the underlying worldview implicit in that language. The problem is how to use the language and yet call into question the worldview that shapes that language.

Newbigin illustrates this problem by reference to his evangelistic preaching in India (Newbigin 1978a:1-3). What word can be used by the missionary to introduce Jesus to a population who has no idea of who he is? *Swamy*, meaning Lord, offers a possibility. The problem is that there are many lords—three hundred and thirty million of them according to Hindu tradition—and if Jesus is just one more lord there are more important matters to attend to than a message about another *swamy*. *Avatar* seems like an obvious choice since it refers to the descent of God in creaturely form to put down the power of evil and establish the faltering power of righteousness. The trouble here is that *avatar* is bound up in a cyclical worldview that cannot ascribe finality to any *avatar* the way the finality of Christ is portrayed in the Scriptural story. Maybe one could just begin to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. But if one proceeds in this way, Jesus will be identified with the world of *maya*, the world of passing events which is simply illusion in the Hindu tradition. Indian hearers will lose all interest. All other attempts—*kadavul*, supreme transcendent god; *satguru*, teacher who initiates his disciple into the experience of realization; *adipurushan*, the primal man who is the beginning of all creation; *chit*, the intelligence and will which constitute the second member of the triad of ultimate reality—eventually founder on the same problem. “What all these answers have in common is that they necessarily describe Jesus in terms of a model which embodies an interpretation of experience significantly different from the interpretation which arises when Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely” (Newbigin 1978a:2-3). If the evangelist is to be relevant, he or she must employ the language risking the absorption of the gospel into the reigning worldview. If the evangelist is relevant, he or she risks syncretism. The problem is how can the missionary be *both* relevant and faithful to the gospel. In relation to the problem of gospel and culture, the burning question for Newbigin is how does one avoid the twin problems of irrelevance and syncretism?

The second problem raised by Newbigin’s experience of cross-cultural communication is concerned with the gospel and cultures (plural): here the question is how does one avoid the twin problems of ethnocentrism and relativism? The history of mission demonstrates this twin problem. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the missionary movement exhibited an ethnocentrism: the western form of the gospel was considered to be normative. All other cultural expressions of the Christian faith were judged by western patterns. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in reaction to western ethnocentrism, there was a shift toward relativism: there was no criteria to judge a faithful contextualization of the gospel in any culture (Hiebert 1994:76-86). Newbigin’s missionary experience led him to struggle with this issue. In his writings Newbigin describes a number of events that enabled him to see just how deeply his own understanding and embodiment of the gospel was shaped by his western roots (Goheen 2001:40, 41). Especially noteworthy was his weekly meetings with Hindu monks at the Ramakrishna monastery where he

studied the Svetasvara Upanishad and the gospel of John with them. Here he learned to “see the profound rationality of the world-view of the Vedanta” (1993:54). He reflects his experience prior to India when he writes: “My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply ‘how things are’. . . No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are” (Newbigin 1978a:3). An encounter with the “immense power and rationality of the Vendantin’s vision of reality” (Newbigin 1982:ix) enabled Newbigin to understand the formative power of western culture on him. If one rejects the western form of the gospel as normative, where does one find a criterion, what Newbigin called an “Archimedean point” (1993:250-251), to critique unfaithful contextualizations of the gospel. In relation to the problem of gospel and cultures, the burning question for Newbigin is how does one avoid the twin problems of ethnocentrism and relativism?

Newbigin offers a path to the faithful contextualization of the gospel (or more accurately the faithful contextualizations of the gospel) that includes three elements: faithfulness to the Scriptural story, a dialogue with the varied cultures of humankind, and openness to the ecumenical fellowship of all Christians (Newbigin 1978a:10-22).

### *Faithfulness to the Scriptural Story*

The starting point for Newbigin’s understanding of faithful contextualization is the primacy of the gospel: the affirmation that the church begins by attending to the story of Scripture as its ultimate commitment, understanding the culture in the context of the Biblical story. Perhaps surprisingly this starting point stands in contrast with the majority of current contextualization models. In Stephen Bevans’ five models, only the so-called translation model endorsed by conservative evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics, takes its starting point in Scripture (Bevans 1992; 1999:146-147). Newbigin’s understanding of Scripture and culture differs significantly from the translation model. Yet, like them, he believes that the contextualization process begins by attending to Scripture (Newbigin 1989:151). Faithfulness to Scripture as the starting point means at least three things for Newbigin.

Essential for faithful contextualization is a proper understanding of the nature of Scripture. The emphasis in Newbigin’s work in the last twenty-five years of his life on the contextualization of the gospel in the West coincided with a heightened interest in the authority of Scripture (Newbigin 1986:42-64). A discussion of Newbigin’s understanding of Scriptural authority and contextualization is beyond the scope of this paper (cf., Goheen 2001:109-110, 121-127, 389-397). It will suffice to call attention to two important aspects. On the one hand the Bible displays the form of universal history and therefore must be understood as a canonical whole (Newbigin 1989:89). When the process of contextualization proceeds by selecting particular aspects of Scripture that are most compatible with the patterns of various religions and cultures, Scripture will be interpreted in the light of culture rather than culture in the light of Scripture. On the other hand, the Bible is not a book of religious or theological ideas but rather tells the story of the mighty acts of God culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Newbigin, the central difference between the Scriptural and Greek understanding of the world is the nature of reliable truth: in the Greek worldview ultimate truth is found in ideas while

in Scripture universally valid truth is found in God's historical acts, especially in Jesus Christ, that reveal the purpose of history. In Christ, God has revealed and accomplished the end of universal history. It is precisely at this point that Newbigin differs from many models of contextualization advanced by evangelical and conservative Roman Catholics. When the Bible is turned into timeless statements the process of contextualization is subverted.

Moreover making Scripture the starting point in contextualization is not simply a rational matter of starting with Scriptural truth but rather a matter of the believing community "indwelling" and embodying the story of Scripture. Contextualization is a communal matter; the church together attempts to view the world and live in it in the light of Scripture. But since the church also is part of the cultural community that embodies a different, and partially irreconcilable story, there is an unbearable tension within the life of the church. Contextualization is a matter of embodying a solution to this tension. This embodiment will be manifested in the life of the ecclesial community. No other contextualization model highlights the importance of community more than Newbigin.

Finally faithful contextualization requires a church that discerns the word of grace and the word of judgement that the gospel pronounces on culture. "True contextualization accords the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgement and grace" (Newbigin 1989:152). God's 'yes' to creation and God's 'no' to sinful distortion must be discerned through communal dialogue in the light of Scripture.

### *Challenging Relevance: Avoiding Syncretism and Irrelevance*

Faithful contextualization, secondly, involves a dialogue with the various cultures of the world that avoids the twin problems of syncretism and irrelevance. The issue is *how* all of culture can be both affirmed and rejected. Failure in contextualization within a particular culture takes place when either of these 'words' of the gospel are suppressed. When God's No, his word of judgement is not applied, syncretism will be the result. The culture is simply affirmed and the gospel is domesticated into the plausibility structure of the culture. Alternately, when God's Yes, his word of grace is not present, irrelevance will be the result. The culture is rejected and, since cultural embodiment is inevitable, the church will resort to a cultural form of the gospel from another time or place and will, thus, be irrelevant to its culture.

Newbigin finds a solution to the issue of affirmation and rejection in two phrases—challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment. The first term, the one used most often, he borrows from Alfred Hogg (Hogg 1945:9-26), and the second from Hendrik Kraemer (1939:4). Newbigin's employment of the notion of subversive fulfillment in the dialogue between gospel and culture is clearly indebted to Willem Visser 't Hooft (Visser 't Hooft 1967:13-14; Newbigin 1992:80; 1994:163).

For Hogg, the missionary who refuses to employ Hindu concepts and institutions will not be heard. At the same time, the danger of utilizing Hindu forms is the possibility of "a Christianizing of Hinduism instead of an Indian way of expressing Christianity" (Hogg 1945:23). The only way forward, according to Hogg, is to employ the familiar images and forms of Hinduism which express the religious longing of the Hindu and burst them open, giving them new meaning with the fact of the gospel. Choosing a familiar category is inevitable, yet challenging it is necessary because there is not straight line from Hinduism to the gospel. Hogg

illustrates this with Jesus' proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus chooses the well-known category of the kingdom of God. However, he did not simply accede to the current popular religious and cultural beliefs about the kingdom; instead he challenged them filling the notion with a new understanding that called for repentance. The terms were familiar and relevant; yet the proclamation challenged the distorted notions calling for repentance.

Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment is quite similar. The gospel comes as fulfillment to the religious longing in the heart of humankind. Yet there is not simply continuity; the gospel stands in contradiction to human wisdom twisted by sin. Visser 't Hooft utilizes Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment in the context of contextualization in culture. He writes:

Key-words from other religions when taken over by the Christian Church are like displaced persons, uprooted and unassimilated until they are naturalised. The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to re-interpret the traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. Kraemer uses the term "subversive fulfillment" and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts (Visser 't Hooft 1967:13).

Newbigin employs the notion of challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment to avoid both syncretism and irrelevance. Like Visser 't Hooft, he utilizes the model of missionary communication that John offers in his gospel (Newbigin 1986:6; 1995b:336). Of the gospel of John, Newbigin writes:

I suppose that the boldest and most brilliant essay in the communication of the gospel to a particular culture in all Christian history is the gospel according to John. Here the language and thought-forms of the Hellenistic world are so employed that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them. And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity (1986:53).

John freely uses the language and thought forms of classical religion and culture that form the world of his hearers—light and darkness, body and soul, heaven and earth, flesh and spirit, and more. Yet John uses this language and thought-forms in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. John begins with the announcement 'In the beginning was the *logos*.' As he continues it becomes apparent that *logos* is not the impersonal law of rationality that permeates the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. 'The *logos* became *sarx*.' John begins by identifying with the creational longing at the heart of classical culture for the source of order expressed in the term *logos*, but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world (1982:1-3). In this way John is both relevant and faithful: relevant because he uses familiar categories that express existential struggles, faithful because he challenges with the gospel the idolatrous

worldview that shapes those categories calling for repentance. Similarly in the Hindu context the missionary must work with models, words, forms, and institutions the Hindu is accustomed to use. But the missionary must challenge those forms with the fact of the gospel.

The notion of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance is applicable not only to language and verbal missionary communication. Unfortunately, theories of contextualization are often dismissed as being relevant only for evangelism. Rather the significance of these observations moves well beyond the bounds of missionary communication to insight into the general relation of gospel to culture. It is the process by which the Christian community interacts with all the various institutions and customs of its culture. The gospel speaks a ‘Yes’ and a ‘No’ to each cultural form—yes to the creational structure and no the idolatrous distortion. The church must discern what subversive solidarity means in each situation.

Newbigin’s understanding of challenging relevance or subversive fulfillment is similar to Johann H. Bavinck’s understanding of *possessio*.<sup>3</sup> Bavinck writes:

We would . . . prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take possession [as opposed to the common terms ‘adaptation’ and ‘accommodation’] . . . Within the framework of the of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come. . . . [Christ] fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it new direction. Such is neither ‘adaption’ nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth (Bavinck 1960:178-179).

On the one hand, Newbigin has elaborated the concept further than Bavinck and brought it to bear on western culture. Bavinck limited his discussion to missions in non-western cultures. On the other hand, Bavinck has offered a more solid theological and philosophical foundation for this concept than Newbigin. This foundation is provided by Bavinck in his philosophical understanding of culture and his theological understanding of creational revelation and common grace.

There are two important aspects of Bavinck’s analysis of culture that are important here. On the one hand, culture is a unified whole: “We regard them [pagan religions and cultures] as powerful, life-controlling entities, as complete indivisible structures, because each element coheres with all others and receives its meaning from the total structures” (Bavinck 1960:173). On the other hand, each aspect of culture is shaped by an idolatrous religious core: “The entire culture, in all its manifestations, is a structural totality, in which everything hangs together, and in which religion occupies a central position” (Bavinck *ibid*). While both of these elements of culture are implicit in Newbigin’s thought, they are insufficiently developed.

Affirming only these two dimensions of culture by itself would lead to a pessimistic analysis of culture which could only provide a basis for rejection but not subversive fulfillment. Therefore, the second theological observation is equally significant: God’s creational revelation

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<sup>3</sup> Newbigin’s notion of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance is also similar to the reformational notion of ‘inner reformation’ (cf. Hart 1988:14; Wolters 1975:15).

or common grace continues to uphold his creation and does not permit human idolatry to run its gamut.<sup>4</sup> Bavinck comments: “We must remember that although man has fallen from God, and that the results of this fall are in evidence in his every thought and deed, nevertheless, thanks to God’s common grace, man is safeguarded against complete deterioration” (Bavinck *ibid*).

It is precisely a recognition of both of these factors—the idolatrous shaping of all culture and the powerful creation revelation of God—that provides a foundation for subversive fulfillment. Every custom, institution, and practice of culture is corrupted by sin; yet the creational structure remains because of God’s faithfulness to His creation.

### *Ecumenical Dialogue: Avoiding Ethnocentrism and Relativism*

Faithful contextualization requires a dialogue that moves beyond cultural boundaries. This dialogue must be “open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of that place and enabled to represent to that place the universality, the catholicity of God’s purpose of grace and judgement for all humanity” (Newbigin 1989:152). There is a danger that any one local contextualization of the gospel will be absorbed into the culture of that place; if it is to be challengingly relevant then a dialogue must take place among believers from every culture. This dialogue will involve both mutual correction and mutual enrichment (Newbigin 1978a:13; 1989:196): mutual learning since each cultural contextualization opens up new insights into the gospel, and mutual criticism because each cultural contextualization has blind spots. Newbigin writes:

The reference to mutual correction is the crucial one. All our reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us. . . . the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretation of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. We have to listen to others. This mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but is necessary and it is fruitful (1989:196).<sup>5</sup>

For Newbigin, the importance of ecumenical dialogue for faithfulness to the gospel within a certain culture is evident when noting his use of the image of Archimedean point. When Newbigin returned to Britain from India he was consumed with question: “How can one find a perspective on one’s own culture. . . . Could there be an Archimedean point, so to speak, from which one could look critically at one’s own intellectual and spiritual formation?” (1993:250-251). Newbigin found the Archimedean point in the mutual enrichment and correction of ecumenical dialogue.

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<sup>4</sup> The term common grace is often misunderstood. Bavinck does not stop to explain this term but his understanding is similar to G. C. Berkouwer who writes: “Life of this earth does not yet disclose the full consequences of sin. Calvin speaks of ‘common grace’ and, in this connection, he discusses virtues to be seen also in the lives of unbelievers. He did not wish to ascribe these phenomena to a left-over goodness in nature—as if apostasy from God were not so serious—but rather he discerned here the power of God in revelation and in grace preserving life from total destruction” (Berkouwer 1959:20-21; cf. Berkouwer 1955:137-230).

<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of ecumenism is a far cry from many who see the ecumenical process as reduction to the lowest common denominator. On this subject, one of Newbigin’s favourite jokes is about the South Pacific cannibal who is asked what he thought of the ecumenical movement. He replied that he didn’t think much of it, because now all the missionaries tasted the same!

Newbigin notes a number of problems that face the world church if it is to pursue this kind of ecumenical dialogue. I mention two. First, at present dialogue takes place in the context of only “one of the tribal cultures of humankind” (1978b:152). The dialogue proceeds in the context of only one cultural tradition of the church—the West: “All of its [i.e. the ecumenical church’s] work is conducted in the languages of western Europe. Only those who have had long training in the methods of thinking, of study and research, and of argument that have been developed in western Europe can share in its work” (1978b:151). Because of the dominance of western cultural patterns in the ecumenical movement, western Christians do not receive from non-western Christians the correction they need.

Because of the total dominance of European culture in the ecumenical movement, there has seldom been any awareness among Western theologians of the extent to which their own theologies have been the result of a failure to challenge the assumptions of their own culture; and because theologians of the younger churches have been compelled to adopt this culture as the precondition of participation in the ecumenical movement, they have not been in a position to present the really sharp challenge that should be addressed to the theologies of the Western churches (1978b:152-153).

A second hurdle facing the church if ecumenical dialogue is to be mutually challenging is the forum in which the conversation takes place. On the one hand, Newbigin notes that the World Council of Churches has been the primary forum in which the dialogue has occurred. Indeed, the rise of the WCC must be placed in the context of a need for mutual correction and enrichment. On the other hand, Newbigin raises a twofold problem about the future of the WCC as the primary place of ecumenical dialogue: the dominant pluralist presence and “wider ecumenism” threatens an authentic and faithful dialogue that centres in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (1994:119, 125); and many of the thriving evangelical and pentecostal churches of the world church remain outside this fellowship (1995a:9).

Newbigin points to another possibility for mutual correction and enrichment—the cross-cultural missionary. Newbigin describes his own missionary experience:

My Christianity was syncretistic, but so was theirs. Yet neither of us could discover that without the challenge of the other. Such is the situation in cross-cultural mission. The gospel comes to the Hindu embodied in the form given to it by the culture of the missionary. . . . As second and third and later generations of Christians make their own explorations in Scripture, they will begin to test the Christianity of the missionaries in the light of their own reading of the Scripture. So the missionary, if he is at all awake, finds himself, as I did, in a new situation. He becomes, as a bearer of the gospel, a critic of his own culture. He finds there the Archimedean point. He sees his own culture with the Christian eyes of a foreigner, and the foreigner can see what the native cannot see (1994:68).

The missionary has the gift of new eyes; but he or she also has the knowledge of the sending culture that enables him or her to be able to translate that insight for the church (cf. Sanneh 1993:162-163). It is for this reason that the “the foreign missionary is an enduring necessity in

the life of the universal Church.” The reflexive action of the missionary is crucial “so that the gospel comes back to us in the idiom of other cultures with the power to question our understanding of it” (1994:115). Newbigin himself is an outstanding example of this reflexive action.

### *Conclusion*

For various reasons missiology has been marginalized in the academic curriculum. It is treated as a specialized discipline for those called to the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. Thus studies in contextualization have not received the kind of wide circulation in the broader academic community that they deserve and the western church is poorer for it. Newbigin has offered helpful insight toward the gospel-culture and gospel-cultures issues that has relevance beyond the cross-cultural mission of the church. Indeed it offers valuable insight into how the people of God in the West might be faithful to the gospel in relation to the culture in which they live. Faithfulness to the gospel in all of life, in any calling, not least the academic profession, demands commitment to the Biblical story centred in Christ as the real story of the world, an interaction with culture that embraces its forms but challenges and fills them with new content through the gospel, and an ecumenical dialogue that offers mutual correction and enrichment.

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