

## Scholarship at the Crossroads: Exploring Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Model of Contextualization

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### *Summary*

Faithful Christian scholarship depends on a proper understanding of the deeper relationship between gospel and culture. Scholarship is a cultural product, and Christian scholarship seeks to bring the light of the gospel to bear in that particular area of culture. In the last three decades a rich and copious literature has emerged on the subject of gospel and culture, usually called contextualization studies, that appropriates the insights of the missionary movement. Mainstream scholarship has not widely appropriated these insights and this is a loss to Christian academic endeavours.

This paper begins to appropriate the insights of contextualization, especially as that comes to expression in Lesslie Newbigin's fruitful model, for Christian scholarship. Newbigin's missionary experience is the fertile soil out of which his model of contextualization grew. In India Newbigin encountered an unbearable tension that shaped his understanding of gospel and culture. The unbearable tension exists within the believing community that embodies two equally comprehensive yet incompatible stories: the cultural and Biblical.

Newbigin resolves this tension by unfolding three aspects of faithful contextualization of the gospel. First, the church begins by attending to the story of Scripture as its ultimate commitment, understanding culture from within that story. The problem in the West is discerning how the Biblical story has been reshaped and read in light of our idolatrous culture. Newbigin points to four dichotomies that have reshaped the Biblical story: fact-value, public-private, cause-purpose, and subject-object. Over against these distortions argues we must view the Bible as a form of universal history and interpret it as one story of God's mighty acts in history to redeem the whole creation, and see the message of the gospel as a word of both affirmation and judgement on each culture. The Christian scholar is called to acknowledge the story of Scripture as his or her ultimate context for scholarly work.

Secondly, Newbigin articulates his view of the relation of the gospel to culture in terms of the phrase challenging relevance or subversive fulfillment that avoids syncretistic compromise with culture on the one hand and irrelevance to culture on the other. In this view cultural forms are embraced and employed but challenged and subverted from within by filling the content with meaning from the gospel. Newbigin draws on the method used in the gospel of John where classical forms are used but given meaning in light of the Old Testament story. His approach is similar to Willem Visser 't Hooft's notion of subversive accommodation, Hendrik Kraemer's subversive fulfillment, and Johann Bavinck's *possessio*. This offers a way forward to Christian scholars to root out theories from their idolatrous soil asking how each theoretical formulation manifests insight into creation and also how it is misdirected by cultural idolatry.

Thirdly, Newbigin believes that faithful contextualization must move beyond cultural boundaries to save any one expression of the church from being absorbed into the culture of its place. Here the dangers to be avoided are ethnocentrism where one cultural expression is regarded as finally authoritative, and relativism where there is no criteria to judge a faithful

contextualization. These dangers are avoided by a dialogue around an authoritative gospel in which there is mutual correction and mutual enrichment. This necessary element of contextualization has not been developed in most areas of Christian scholarship. There is a need in the West for the insights of brothers and sisters in the non-West to challenge many of our cultural idols. What kind of forum will provide this kind of dialogue remains a problem.

### *Paper*

The goal of this paper is to explore the relationship between the gospel, culture, and one aspect of cultural development – scholarship. Understanding the nature of faithful Christian scholarship depends on a proper understanding of the deeper relationship between the gospel and culture. Scholarship is a cultural product, and Christian scholarship seeks to bring the light of the gospel to bear on that particular area of culture. It is the relationship of gospel and culture that has been essential to the cross-cultural missionary task for the last two centuries. In the last three decades a rich and copious literature has emerged on the subject of contextualization or the relation of gospel to culture that appropriates the insights of the missionary experience.

Lesslie Newbigin's book *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* opens with an interesting observation on this topic. *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 more with the issue of the gospel and culture. 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 issue of gospel and culture but this tradition has not been appropriated into mainstream western scholarship to shed light on the issue of gospel and culture, and more particularly on the relationship between the gospel and western culture. This is a great loss because the missionary experience of cross-cultural witness offers important insight into the gospel-culture relation.

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<sup>1</sup> For a good introduction to contextualization studies in missiology see Bevans 1992; Bosch 1991:420-432, 447-457; Goheen 2000:331-416; Hiebert 1985.

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

<sup>3</sup> Recently *Christianity Today* magazine (24 April 2000) selected the one hundred best religious books of the twentieth century. Lesslie Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* was in that list.

Newbigin spent almost forty years of his life as a missionary in India.<sup>2</sup> Out of this missionary experience has come rich insight into the gospel and culture issue – insight which has important implications for faithful Christian scholarship. Newbigin is one of the leading missionary thinkers and statesmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an incredible breadth and variety of experience, and with the unusual ability to clearly communicate difficult concepts.<sup>3</sup> This paper briefly surveys Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary contribution to the issue of gospel and culture with an eye to its relevance to faithful Christian scholarship.

### *Model of Cross-Cultural Communication*

Newbigin’s understanding of the relation of gospel to culture was shaped by his experience of cross-cultural communication of the gospel. Street preaching was a regular evangelistic activity for Newbigin during his missionary days in India. The question that pressed itself upon him was “how can one preach to a crowd of people who have never heard of Jesus?” Cross-cultural communication of the gospel means that the evangelist must relate him or herself to the culture in two ways; indeed for the missionary maintaining both relations is a matter of life and death. On the one hand, there must be solidarity; the evangelist must use the language of the hearer. If there is to be communication, the evangelist must use cultural forms that are familiar to the hearer. The gospel must be “at home” in the culture. On the other hand, there must be conflict; the language uses terms that reflect a worldview or foundational religious commitments by which the hearer must make sense of the world. These foundational assumptions are in conflict with the gospel. The gospel is “at odds” with the culture. 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 the problem with his evangelistic preaching in India (Newbigin 1978:1-3). 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.

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

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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 1978:2-3).

In the work of evangelism, two dangers present themselves – irrelevance and syncretism. If the evangelist is to be relevant, he or she must employ the language risking the absorption of the gospel into the reigning worldview. Then the gospel loses its power to challenge cultural idolatry. 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. This problem moves far beyond evangelism to the relation of the gospel to all cultural products. 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?

Yet there is more to the problem of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. The issue is distorted if it is considered simply as the missionary’s attempt to communicate a culture-free gospel into a pagan environment. The communication process enabled Newbigin to realize how deeply his own understanding of the gospel was shaped by the culture from which he had come, and that western culture was also in conflict with the gospel. 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 2000:40-41). Especially noteworthy were 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” (Newbigin 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 Vedantin’s vision of reality” (Newbigin 1982:ix) enabled Newbigin to understand the formative power of western culture on him. The problem of gospel and culture that he encountered in India is not simply a problem there; all cultures are shaped by foundational religious commitments that distort its forms and institutions. There will always be a tension between gospel and culture.

The more deeply the church senses the contradiction between the gospel and the idolatrous foundational assumptions that shape the culture, the more the unbearable tension of living between two different worldviews is felt. As Newbigin moved to Britain and engaged western culture, he stressed the public doctrine of the West *as a story*. Both the gospel and the worldview of western culture are in the form of a story – an interpretation of universal history. The people of God find themselves at the crossroads between two stories.

This unbearable tension of living at the crossroads arises from three factors. First, the church is part of a society that embodies a cultural story. That cultural story is rooted in an idolatrous

religious faith, is determinative of every part of human life, and is embodied by a community. By virtue of the creation mandate, the church is part of that community that embodies this pattern of social life. Second, the Christian community finds its identity in another story, one that is also rooted in faith, equally comprehensive, and also socially embodied. The gospel is not a disembodied message, “an ethereal something disinfected of all human cultural ingredients” (Newbigin1989:188), but is always incarnated in a community. Third, the unbearable tension emerges because of “two embodiments” in the life of God’s people. As members of the cultural community, the church is shaped by the cultural story. As members of the new humankind, if they are faithful they are shaped by the Biblical story. Therefore, the embodiment of the gospel will always be shaped by the culture: “there is not and cannot be a gospel which is in not culturally embodied” (Newbigin1989:189). The tension arises because the gospel and the cultural story are at odds and yet “meet” in the life of the people of God. Contextualization is not the meeting of a disembodied message and a rationally articulated understanding of culture; to pose the issue in that way is both abstract and dualistic (Newbigin1989:188-189). The encounter between gospel and culture happens in the life of the community called to live in the story of the Bible. The people of God incarnate the intersection of gospel and culture; the incompatibility of the two stories, even “radical contradiction” (Newbigin1987:4), produces an unbearable tension. Hendrik Kraemer, who perhaps shaped Newbigin more than any other person, writes: “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 the world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that lost its savour” (Kraemer1956:36). Authentic contextualization is the faithful resolution of this tension.

The implications for Christian scholarship are evident. The Christian scholarly community also finds itself at the crossroads of two stories. On the one hand, we are part of the broader western scholarly community and tradition shaped by our cultural story that embodies certain idolatrous faith commitments. On the other hand, we are called to carry out our scholarly endeavours in the Christian academic community shaped by the Biblical story rooted in a faith commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In reference to Christian scholarship Al Wolters nicely summarizes this: “. . . Christians of whatever tradition . . . have to recognize in principle the *de facto* influence of the Western philosophical tradition in their own thinking. This means we are all to some extent *synthesis* thinkers – meaning by that term the intermingling in a single perspective of both biblical and unbiblical patterns of thought. . . . we must begin with what is historically given. No one can start in history with a clean slate. To attempt to do so is like trying to make a sudden turn at high speed in a car. You may end up facing the opposite way, but you’ll still be travelling in the same direction” (Wolters 1975:15). The ‘unbearable tension’ (as Newbigin calls it) between scholarship shaped by the western tradition and scholarship shaped by the gospel must be felt if Christian scholarship is to be healthy and faithful.

Both Newbigin in describing his evangelistic activity, and Wolters in discussing the task of Christian scholarship, refuse the options of withdrawal and accommodation as a resolution to the tension. Newbigin states this in terms of the dangers of syncretism and irrelevance; Wolters opposes the options of evasion and domestication (Wolters 1975:14). Christian scholars can neither evade the western scholarly tradition nor can they allow themselves to be accommodated to or domesticated by it. It seems that these two dangers are realized again and again in Christian

scholarship. Yet tension is essential to faithful Christian scholarship.

How can this tension be resolved? What is the path of authentic or faithful contextualization? Newbigin offers a way 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 1978:10-22).

### *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. If there is to be a missionary encounter between the gospel and the foundational religious commitments of the culture whether in evangelism or scholarship, there must be a proper understanding of Scriptural authority. Newbigin writes: "One of the central issues involved in a missionary encounter with our culture is the question: How do we appeal to scripture as the source of authority . . ." (Newbigin 1984:13)? The problem that confronts the church in the West is that the Bible has been part of the culture for so long that it has accommodated itself to the fundamental assumptions of the culture and appears unable to challenge them. The response of the Protestant church to the Enlightenment where the religious assumptions of the West came to mature expression, was to interpret the Bible in terms of the ultimate faith commitments of the Enlightenment rather than the other way round. Newbigin asks: "Have we got into a situation where the biblical message has been so thoroughly adapted to fit into our modern western culture that we are unable to hear the radical challenge, the call for radical conversion which it presents in our culture" (1984:11)? While many Biblical scholars believe that the Enlightenment offered a neutral vantage point from which to interpret the text, Newbigin responds: "The Enlightenment did not (as is sometimes supposed) simply free the scholar from the influence of 'dogma'; it replaced one dogma by another" (1985:1). The power of the Enlightenment dogma or faith commitment is such that it is difficult to convince many modern biblical expositors "to recognize the creedal character of their approach" (*ibid*).

Newbigin points to four different dichotomies issuing from the Enlightenment that have reshaped Scripture in the Enlightenment mould: fact-value, cause-purpose, public-private, and subject-object (Goheen 2000:389-397). I will only touch on the first – the fact-value – as it has important implications for our subject of Christian scholarship. With autonomous scientific rationality as the arbiter and criterion of public truth, only truth claims that can pass through the 'screen' of autonomous scientific reason are established as facts. All other claims are relegated to the inferior epistemological realm of values, which have not more claim to truth than one's personal preferences or tastes.

In terms of Biblical authority, the church surrendered to this idol in at least two ways. On the liberal side of the Christian fellowship, the Bible was split by the fact-value dichotomy. On the one hand, the Bible was reduced to religious experience, the world of values. The Bible narrates Israel's religious experience. On the other hand, liberal Biblical scholarship sought to determine the 'historical facts' of the Bible by use of the higher-critical method. The Bible as a true story of God's mighty acts in history moving toward a goal for the whole world is lost. On the

conservative side of the Christian fellowship, the Bible is simply reasserted as propositional truth in the fashion of Enlightenment truth. Instead of breaking the Bible into historical-critical bits as the liberal scholars do, the conservative wing of the church reshaped the Biblical narrative into systematic theologies with systematic-theological bits. In both cases the Enlightenment understanding of facts is operative, and the Biblical story loses its authority, and can no longer issue a radical call to conversion. When the Bible is fragmented into bits – higher-critical or systematic-theological – the Bible is absorbed into the more ultimate story of western culture.

Over against these proposals which fragment and reshape Scripture, Newbigin contends for two aspects of Biblical authority. First, 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. Second, 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 to be found in the nature of reliable truth: in the Greek worldview truth is found in timeless ideas while in Scripture truth is found in God's historical acts, especially in Jesus Christ, that move toward the goal of universal history. In Jesus Christ, God has revealed and accomplished the end of history. It is precisely at this point that Newbigin differs from many models of contextualization advanced by evangelical and conservative Roman Catholics. Contextualization is not the relation between timeless ideas and culture, but between two different stories. When the Bible is turned into timeless statements the real process of contextualization is subverted.

The fact-value dichotomy has also crippled the authority of the Bible in the task of scholarship. In his article *The Use of the Bible in Christian Scholarship*, Sidney Greidanus rejects two uses of the Bible in Christian academic work that are the result of the fact-value dichotomy. The first is dualism: the Bible addresses itself to the spiritual realm, the realm of religious and moral values, while science deals with the facts of the material world. Here the Bible is declared irrelevant for all scientific investigation and there is no hope for Christian scholarship. The second is Biblicism: the Bible speaks in scientific terms and gives us data for our theorizing. While the first strategy assigns the Bible to the realm of values, the second strategy reduces the Bible to the notion of Enlightenment facts. Greidanus works out a way beyond these Enlightenment options that involves three connections between the Bible and scholarship: the Bible shapes a faith which bears fruit in scientific work; the Bible offers a framework of reality that serves as a light for scientific endeavour; and the Bible offers more specific norms that can guide the Christian scholar in his or her scholarly activity (Greidanus 1982:144-147).

Faithful contextualization requires a Christian (scholarly) community that lives in the story of the Bible, and thereby discerns the word of grace and the word of judgement that the Bible pronounces on culture. Faithful contextualization requires a Christian scholarly community whose mind is shaped by the story of Scripture in all its detail, enabling it to hear God's yes and God's no to the western tradition of non-Christian scholarship. "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).

### *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, how God’s yes and no, God’s word of grace and judgement can be heard. 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). Both of these men were cross-cultural missionaries – Hogg to India, Kraemer to Indonesia. Further, 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 (Kraemer 1939). 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 (Newbigin 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 classical longing 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. 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 – including theories – yes to the creational structure and no to 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*. 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. 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. 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 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*).

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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).

It is precisely a recognition of both of these factors – the idolatrous shaping of all culture and the powerful creation revelation of God<sup>5</sup> – 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.

This approach to all cultural forms offers a way to deal with non-Christian scholarship as a Christian academic community at the crossroads. The neo-Calvinist or reformational tradition issuing from the Netherlands has used the term “the inner reformation of the sciences.” Al Wolters describes this in the following way: “. . . we must begin with what is historically given. No one can start in history with a clean slate. . . . Reformation is working along the grain of history, respecting what is good in the tradition and bending it around to move in another direction” (1975:15). Henk Hart describes it in the following way: “Christian scholars should work in science for continuing reformation, changing science radically from within, pulling its roots out of its traditionally idolatrous soil and transplanting them in the soil of the gospel” (1988:14). Wolters suggests that the way theories and concepts can be reformed or subverted from within is by asking, what is the insight into the structure of creation and how has this insight become misdirected by religious idolatry (1978:12, 13). As a matter of fact, it can be precisely at the point of idolatry that the insight into the creation comes. Wolters writes:

Plato’s distinction between perception and analysis (not made by his predecessors) . . . is a real and valuable one . . . The neo-Platonic hierarchy of being, though identified with the good-evil distinction, nevertheless points out many real creational distinctions between e.g. space, physicality, vitality, perception, and analysis. Kant can teach us much about the distinction between morality and legality, and between the language of faith and the language of science and ordinary experience. There is a great deal we can learn from Hegel about the nature of history and the cohesiveness of cultures, and from Jaspers about the committed nature of philosophy. In a paradoxical way, a great philosopher’s contribution tends to lie precisely in the area of his idolatry. . . . Marx’s discovery of the correlation between class and culture, although he inflated it to become the basis of a new gospel for mankind, nevertheless unearths a distinction and a relationship which cannot be ignored (1978:12f.).

Theories uprooted from idolatrous soil and replanted in the soil of the gospel, respecting the good in theories and bending it around from an idolatrous direction to move toward Christ, filling the insight or longing with new content from the gospel – all of these images offer a way to move beyond irrelevance and syncretism, withdrawal and accommodation, evasion and domestication.

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<sup>5</sup> Bavinck does not bring this notion to bear on western culture. To do so requires the affirmation of another factor, that is, the formative effect of the gospel on western culture. Bavinck is dealing with cultures where the gospel has had not shaping influence. However, in the West the gospel has shaped the world of culture. This factor is important also for the notion of subversive fulfillment.

*Ecumenical Dialogue: Avoiding Ethnocentrism and Relativism*

Finally, 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 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 (Newbigin 1989:196).<sup>6</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.

Newbigin notes a number of problems that face the world church if it is to pursue this kind of ecumenical dialogue. I mention only two that have implications for Christian scholarship. First, at present dialogue takes place in the context of only “one of the tribal cultures of humankind” (1978:152). 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” (1978:151). 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,

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<sup>6</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!

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 (Newbigin1978:152-153).

Newbigin is thinking here primarily of the theological disciplines. The problem is perhaps even more acute in other academic disciplines.

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).

Again the problem of a forum is perhaps more pronounced in the area of Christian scholarship. Where is there such a forum? The only such forum that I know is the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE). IAPCHE is a world-wide community of scholars and institutions that provides a network for Christian academic activity. IAPCHE exists to promote dialogue among Christian scholars from various continents and cultural traditions. Fostering a dialogue among Christian scholars of various cultures needs to be a much higher priority for Christian scholarship; this is not a frill but is essential to faithfulness. The work IAPCHE needs higher profile among Christian scholars.

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 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. Again this insight has relevance for Christian scholarship. There are many Christian scholars serving in parts of the world outside the West that can offer fresh insight for Christian academics who work exclusively within the western context.

### *Conclusion*

For various reasons missiology has been marginalized in the academic curriculum. It is treated as a specialized discipline for those called to that part of the church’s ministry. Thus studies in contextualization have not received the kind of wide circulation that they deserve and the western church is poorer for it. This paper has only begun to appropriate the insights of contextualization by reference to Newbigin’s work. Newbigin has offered helpful insight toward the gospel and culture and gospel and cultures issue that has relevance beyond the cross-cultural mission of the church. Faithfulness to the gospel 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. Christian scholars would do well to wrestle with this insight from missiology in their academic callings.

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