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Editorial

Today there is wide recognition that the Church is in a state of spiritual crisis and in many places has her back to the wall. In the West the Church is being challenged by ever dominant secular modernity and now by the growing presence of the post-modernity of plurality of religions and pagan spirituality.

Secularization leads to the loss of power of the institutionalized forms of religion, but not of religion itself. It takes new forms. The churches of Europe, the heartland of the Enlightenment, have been the first to suffer from the process of secularization and their numerical decline is well known. There are, however, signs of new life as Christians recover their identity, clarify their understanding of the gospel and work together in new directions of mission. The process of secularization takes different forms in different parts of the Western world but the end result is the same—a loss of meaning, loneliness and despair, all of which create a fertile soil for the re-emergence of religion in new forms. The term ‘paganism’ is no longer a derogative term, but one that is growing in favour. Its earlier prophets included Nietzsche and Hermann Hesse and more recently Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence and Jean Cau. The old gods of Greece are back under new names. Today’s post-modern paganism makes no distinction between the cosmic forces and a personal God, offers communion with nature, identification with life force, and a cyclic view of history. The many forms of post-modernity paganism have one fact in common, they are anti-Christian, in so far as the Christian faith proclaims the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ.

In the developing so called ‘Third World’ the processes of secularization and materialistic values are flowing like a tidal wave. Rapid urbanization (40% of the people in India will be urbanized by AD 2000), economic explosion, massive poverty and unemployment, escalating violence, satellite communications, global travel are challenging traditional religions and their values. Even Islamic fundamentalism cannot withstand the onslaught. The materialistic world view, lifestyle and sexual behaviour of college students in Bombay differ little from those in New York or Moscow or perhaps Beijing. Yet in the midst of this secularizing process, new gurus are [p.300](#) arising and new ways to instant spirituality are being sought, many through drug abuse. Eventually there will be nowhere to hide from the new spirits of this present age.

In the words of Wilbert Shenk, ‘sociologists agree that the processes of secularization have resulted in fragmentation and segmentation of life. The public has been separated from the private; technique has triumphed over aesthetics.’ Secular society is characterized by a loss of coherence, loss of meaning and loss of community. How then should the Church live and respond? The prophets of our time, Lesslie Newbigin and Solzenitsyn and Billy Graham in a different context, are calling the churches to move from their privatized faith to the public market place and with openness and courage proclaim the truth of the gospel, the centrality of Jesus Christ and the incarnate gospel in all walks of life—political, economic, educational and the arts. The out-dated liberalism of Bultmann and Spong, who in the name of modernity reduce the Jesus of Nazareth to a mythical Christ whose resurrection was a spiritual illusion, is no answer to a world seeking ‘facts’ and rational proof. We are living once more in days similar to those of the early church. It is once again, a moment of *kairos* for the Church, a time to call for a new apology for the gospel, a new affirmation of the Faith. It is a moment for the renewal of spiritual vitality and institutional forms of the churches and for new vision for our missionary task.

Evangelism in terms of church growth along ethnic and sociological lines is important but not enough. The goal of one church for every five hundred people is an ideal, but a far

cry from many situations today. This writer pastored a church in North India in the state of Haryana, where there is only one local church for every 100,000 of the population. Evangelism and church growth need to be set in the framework of revitalized local and national churches and their mission agencies, whose worship and daily life style radiate the cohesion and sovereignty of the triune God, the holiness and compassion of our Lord and the cleansing and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Evangelism is central to the total mission of the Church, but not in isolation. In a secular and pagan culture bridges of understanding have to be built on a convincing world view and deeply felt spiritual needs in much the same way as Paul demonstrated in Athens. Evangelism is the culmination of mission, not its beginning. Os Guinness reminded Lausanne II that modernity, 'represents the single greatest opportunity and the single greatest threat the Church of Christ has faced since Apostolic times'. In this context the dictum of T. R. Glover that the early church 'out-thought, out-lived and out-died the pagan world' is poignantly relevant today. Third World churches know what it is to suffer for the gospel. Is the West ready to count the cost? The articles in this issue seek to answer some of these challenges. p. 301

The Challenge of the Modern World to the Church

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This article addresses with clarity and precision the fundamental questions of our modern society.

Will the process of secularization lead to the disappearance of religion altogether?

How has the Church responded to this challenge?

Are there points of contact between the gospel and secular cultures?

How do we incarnate the gospel without domesticating it?

Can we be optimistic about the future of Christianity in a secular world?

The author with his long and wide experience points the way forward to these questions.

Christianity has a future.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a secularized world and we all know it. Whether we come from Holland or Great Britain, from Germany or Scandinavia, from France or Spain or Italy, from Hungary or Rumania, we are all surrounded by a secularized world. In many ways it is a strange and unique phenomenon. In the 'Choruses from *The Rock*' T. S. Eliot wrote:

It seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD, not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.

Alan D. Gilbert, who quotes these words, says: ‘The possibility that an entire culture, not just elite elements within it, might dispense with religion altogether is uniquely a product of p. 302 modern Western civilization.’¹ And he rightly adds that this secularized culture is proving exportable, even in a post-colonial age. For however true it may be that the Church is growing vigorously in Africa, and also in some Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Korea and China, it is equally true that secularization is making its impact on the youth in many non-Western countries, especially on the young people that flock to the cities.

I. A SHORT HISTORY OF SECULARIZATION

Even in our Western world secularization did not emerge all of a sudden. Though our generation may have witnessed a tremendous upsurge of secularization, the process itself started many years ago. I shall not weary you with a long drawn-out historical survey, but will confine myself to a few facts and figures. These, I believe, are necessary for arriving at a proper understanding of what is going on in our own day.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, when the so-called Constantinian era started, the European world embarked upon the road towards *Christianization*. At the height of the Middle Ages this process appeared to have been very successful; at that time one could speak of a Christian culture or civilization in Western Europe. As Gilbert puts it: ‘Medieval Europe owed its coherence to the common bonds of a basic Christian consensus’ (20).

But hidden under this common Christian culture were forces that would eventually lead to the secularization of this very same culture. As a matter of fact, at the end of the 14th century these forces already presented themselves. In Italy the so-called *Renaissance* started, taking hold of the heritage of the ancient Greek civilization, which was characterized by the centrality and autonomy of man. At first the Renaissance seemed to be a mixture of both Greek and Christian thinking. The same was true of *Humanism* that developed alongside it. Many humanists of the 15th and 16th century (for instance, Desiderius Erasmus) were devout members of the Catholic Church. At the same time they shared with the Renaissance the confidence in the intellectual power of man and they also shared its critical evaluation of ancient traditions and dogmas. Even though the Christian consensus remained largely unquestioned, the acceptance of free inquiry and rational criticism meant that the way towards secularization was opened.

The *Reformation* of the 16th century made its own contribution. To be sure, the Reformers themselves continued to adhere to the idea of a Christian culture and even maintained a Constantinian view of society (‘throne’ and ‘altar’ usually retained their close relationship in countries that were deeply influenced by the Reformation). Yet there were elements in reformational thinking which in the long run could and would promote the process of secularization. I am thinking here, for instance, of Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This p. 303 doctrine not only offered to each individual believer direct access to God but also, in a fundamental way, made him independent of the ecclesiastical offices and authorities. Gilbert mentions three major contributions of the Reformation at this point. 1. It left Europeans with a profound crisis of authority. 2. It re-imposed upon Europeans a distinction between Christianity and culture. 3. It set in

¹ Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain. A History of the Secularization of Modern Society*, 1980, XII.

motion various social and political forces leading eventually to religious toleration in most European societies (27ff.).

The major source of today's secularization, however, is to be found in the 18th century movement of the *Enlightenment*. Lesslie Newbigin even calls it a 'conversion experience'.² The whole outlook on reality and on man's place within reality changed completely. Immanuel Kant, one of the 'fathers' of the Enlightenment formulated it thus: 'Enlightenment is man's exodus from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another person ... Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding; this is the motto of the Enlightenment.' By its emphasis on the human 'ratio' as the only way to understand reality and as the only means of arriving at ultimate and absolute truth, the Enlightenment broke the basic Christian consensus that had characterized the Middle Ages and to some extent also the Reformation period. At the same time it provided a new framework or paradigm for a new understanding of reality.

The Enlightenment itself, however, did not yet de-Christianize Europe. It was largely limited to the higher classes and did not yet affect the common people. Nevertheless, it made a profound impact upon Western culture. Gilbert formulates it aptly: 'While it remained *dominant*, the Christian world-view was no longer *normative*' (36).

Later movements absorbed much of Enlightenment thought and speeded up the process of secularization. I am thinking of the *French Revolution* at the end of that very same century, with its well-known slogan: 'Liberty, equality and fraternity', all ideas derived from the Enlightenment. I am also thinking of the effects of the *Industrial Revolution* in the 18th and 19th century, alienating large parts of the working classes from the Christian faith and the Christian church. The industrial revolution was not only an economic and material transformation of society; it was also a social and cultural phenomenon that completely changed the existing culture and the lives of people involved in this culture. Gilbert calls it a 'watershed in human experience with which only the Neolithic Revolution of prehistory is comparable' (43).

Still, even the industrial revolution did not yet de-Christianize Western Europe. This happened only *after World War II*, when all of a sudden the dams broke and the river of secularization swept everything along which stood in its way. Various largely independent and yet interrelated factors combined to bring p. 304 this about. I can only mention them: increasing prosperity, higher levels of education for all, the increase of free time and of mobility, the impact of the mass media, in particular of television, etc. The result of all these factors together is that the Christian face of Europe changed rapidly. Even worse, this Christian face has already disappeared and has been replaced by a secular face. Western Europe has become a *secular continent*.

II. WHAT IS SECULARIZATION?

It is not easy to define or circumscribe the phenomenon of secularization. The original meaning of the term is quite clear. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following meanings. 1. The conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to secular possession and use. 2. The giving of a secular or non-sacred character or direction to art, studies, etc.; the placing of morals on a secular basis; the restricting of education to secular subjects (1964, 1828). In a more general sense one can say that secularization today means the process in which society at large and large sections of

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel and Western Culture*, 1986, 23. Cf. also his *The Other Side of 1984. Questions for the Churches*, 1983, 6ff.

societal life are being divorced from the impact of the Christian gospel, without adopting any other form of religion. Owen Chadwick gives the following broad definition: 'The growing tendency in mankind to do without religion, or to try to do without religion'.³

The Dutch sociologist of religion Gerard Dekker (Free University, Amsterdam), looking at the phenomenon of secularization from the perspective of *society as a whole*, concludes that we should distinguish at least three aspects. (1) There is a *decrease in religiousness* among the population. An ever larger number of people no longer attends church services, or even leaves the church. (2) There is a *growing restriction of the range or significance of religion*. Religion no longer has a bearing on huge segments of societal life. It is virtually restricted to a person's private life. (3) Religion itself is *accommodating itself* to the new ways of thinking and living which are dominant in society at large. In other words, the ideas and experiences of religious people themselves are changing too. Dekker here speaks of an 'inner' secularization.

The Dutch theologian Gerben Heitink (also teaching in the Free University) has a somewhat different approach. He looks at the phenomenon of secularization from the angle of the *individual person* and notes three other aspects that are characteristic of the dominant secular world-view of our day.⁴ (1) The *loss of a religious frame of reference*. The believer is no longer supported by his environment, but is largely left to himself. This easily leads to doubt and to questions such as: Is it still worthwhile to believe and live a Christian life? (2) The *loss of relevance*. People begin to ask themselves: What is the value of belief in [p. 305](#) a world that has become autonomous, that has excluded God from its centre and that seems to be quite able to manage without him? (3) The *loss of transcendence*. One of the major aspects of secularization is the restriction of all reality to the universe as we know it and explore it with our telescopes and microscopes, and to the present life as we live it between birth and death. Even theology has at times adapted itself to this way of looking at reality. Although Paul Tillich and John Robinson still wanted to believe in God and did not want to do away with the whole idea of transcendence, in their theology God was no longer seen as the Transcendent One, who is distinct from the world and does not need it, but in a panentheistic way they described him as the Ground of Being or Being itself.

All these aspects, both the ones mentioned by Dekker and those mentioned by Heitink, show that in the Western-European world a complete *change of paradigm* has been and is taking place. When we compare the new paradigm with the old, we notice that autonomy has taken the place of heteronomy, that a democratic way of thinking has replaced the hierarchical way of transmitting truth and authority, and that the idea of transcendence has given way to that of immanence.⁵

Naturally, we should not make the mistake of thinking that this shift of paradigm is happening everywhere in the same way and to the same extent. Dekker rightly points out that the three forms of secularization which he has mentioned do not simply coincide. There is at this point quite a difference between the *United States* and *Western Europe*. In the former religion has adapted itself to a greater degree to the developments in society at large, while in the latter religion was less adaptable, the result being that the gap between modern society and the church became more pronounced and many people

³ O. Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (The Gifford Lectures for 1973/4), 1975, 17.

⁴ G. Heitink, 'Secularisatie en het individuele geloofsleven', in G. Dekker en K. U. Gabler (eds), *Secularisatie in theologisch perspectief*, n.d., 164ff.

⁵ Cf. Gerard Dekker, *op. cit.*, 48ff.

abandoned religion altogether. Gilbert, who also notes the difference between the United States and Britain, mentions another difference. According to him in Britain 'institutional secularization in the wider society has advanced more rapidly than in America, and the residuum of "religious terminology" and formal Christianity is therefore less conspicuous, less authentic, less seriously regarded' (106). Even within Western Europe there are differences. In my own country, for instance, the results of secularization are in some ways more pronounced than in other Western European countries. While in most countries secularization leads to a decreasing church attendance, without causing a complete break with the Church (the non-church-goers remain nominal members of their church), in my own country we see that many people make a clean break with the Church and officially and statistically become non-church members.

So far we have concentrated on the process of secularization on its own. In actual fact, however, secularization does not take place 'on its own'. It is an aspect of a much larger process, the *process of modernization*, which has been going on in Europe for at least some centuries. p. 306 Here, too, I shall not give a detailed survey of the entire process, but only mention some of its striking characteristics. The most striking is perhaps the *differentiation* that has taken place in society at large. In the past, even up to the second half of the 19th century, society as a whole was still characterized by unity and coherence and the lives of the individual members of society were equally characterized by unity and coherence. Family life and professional life were closely interwoven. Quite often the whole family was engaged in the same trade or profession, which was usually pursued in the building next door. As a result of the industrial revolution and the increase in technology family and trade/profession became two separate worlds, existing side by side, the trade/profession often being practised away from home. Gradually nearly all aspects of life became independent and occupied their own world: the arts, education, medicine, economics, etc. The same also happened to religion: it too became a separate world, confined to the sphere of private life. 'Christian faith became—for most people—a private and domestic matter strictly separated from the public worlds of politics and economics.'⁶

During this same process of modernization the place of man himself within the spectrum of society changed. He became more and more independent, or to put it in the well-known words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: '*Man came of age*'. In the first place man was allowed, even supposed, to speak his own mind in the various, differentiated spheres of life (the process of *democratization*). In the second place he was allowed, even supposed, to make his own choice in the world of values and truths (the process of *subjectivization*). In the third place he was expected, even supposed, to plan his own future and to bend this future to his own will (the process of *rationalization*).

All these processes together have led to a profound *pluralization* of society. Modern society shows little coherence (apart from the fact of modernity itself!), but consists of a great number of competing pluralistic systems, each constituting a small unified world and vying for the interest and support of all members of society.

From the viewpoint of the Christian gospel we must say that our modern world is a *post-Christian world*, generally characterized by such secular presuppositions as: only scientific knowledge or knowledge of facts is true knowledge; all convictions are equally valuable and legitimate; religious convictions are relegated to private life; sin is an antiquated, at the very most a personal point of view; life itself is restricted to life in this world, that is, to the comparatively short period of time between birth and death.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 22.

III. AN EVALUATION OF SECULARIZATION

In the fifties quite a few theologians were quite optimistic about the process of secularization. In his book *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit: Die Säkularisierung als theologisches Problem* (1953),⁷ the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten distinguished between secularization and secularism. The former is appreciated positively as a fruit of the Christian faith, leading to a desacralization of the world and the historization of human existence. The latter is seen as a negative development, in which the meaning of life is sought and found within the confines of life on earth (ideological secularism) or in which people simply cease to look for the meaning of life (nihilistic secularism).⁸ A similar line of thought is pursued by A. T. van Leeuwen in his *Christianity in World History* (1964), supplying many historical illustrations. Other optimistic appreciations of the phenomenon of secularization in those days were found in the books of John A. T. Robinson,⁹ Harvey Cox¹⁰ and Roger Gregor Smith.¹¹

Many advocates of such an optimistic interpretation of secularization appealed to Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In one of these letters he introduces his theory of a world come of age and of a free, autonomous man who has learned to cope with all questions of importance with recourse to God as a working hypothesis.¹² At the same time he rejects every Christian apologetic that attacks the adulthood of the world. Such an apologetic is pointless, ignoble and un-Christian. Yet Bonhoeffer by no means abandons the Christian gospel. On the contrary, fully accepting that this world has come of age he is vexed by the question of how we can reclaim this world for Christ.¹³ Two weeks later he writes to his friend Eberhard Bethge: 'The only way to be honest is to recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do see—before God ... God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him.... Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world, and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.' This is optimism indeed, but not of the kind we find in many later authors. Central in this conception is the God who is weak and powerless, as Christ was on the cross, but who as the suffering God is *with us and helps us*. And in the meantime Bonhoeffer, in his prison, read his Bible and said his prayers and sang the Christian hymns of his Lutheran tradition!¹⁴

Indeed, there is little reason to be optimistic about this all-embracing process of secularization, in the p. 308 midst of which we spend our own lives. *Hendrikus Berkhof*, who in the fifties and early sixties was still rather optimistic, afterwards changed his mind

⁷ E. T. *Despair and Hope for our Time*, 1970.

⁸ In subsequent publications (especially in his posthumous *Die Frage nach Gott* (1968) Gogarten strongly emphasized the negative tendency in secularism: without God autonomous man falls back into a new slavery. Cf. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 1979, 517.

⁹ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 1963.

¹⁰ Harvey A. Cox, *The Secular City*, 1965.

¹¹ Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, 1965.

¹² Letter of June 8th 1944.

¹³ Letter of June 30th 1944.

¹⁴ Cf. also his 'Prayers for fellow prisoners', which are added to the letters.

and began to speak of the 'eclipse of God'.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, even in his more optimistic days he clearly recognized the ambivalence of the concept and reality of secularization. As early as 1958 he wrote: 'Secularization is the child of the gospel, but a child who sooner or later rises against his mother.'¹⁶ Indeed, he goes back further and sees secularization as the child of OT religion. Especially in the creation stories we see that nature is desacralized (sun and moon, for instance, are just lamps God suspended from the ceiling of the universe) and that nature thus is made the object of man's exploitation (90). Secularization in itself, therefore, is neither good nor bad. All depends on what direction it takes. Berkhof at that time distinguished between secularization as a *Christian* or an *anti-Christian* phenomenon (91ff.). As the former it is 'conversion projected in culture—the Christianization of life' (91).

Since the seventies Berkhof has become more careful, even to some extent *pessimistic* in his use of the term secularization. He now uses a threefold distinction: *secularism* (a world and a life, entirely without God), *secularization* (also a negative term, indicating the gradual disappearance (eclipse) of God from the 'manageable' world of man) and *emancipation* (a positive term, indicating the independence of man over against a desacralized nature and his task of controlling nature).¹⁷ This emancipation, however, is wholesome and beneficial only when man accepts his freedom as a gift of God. As soon as he uses it for his own purposes, detached from the purposes of the Creator with this world, it becomes secularization. Emancipation and secularization are two movements that are often intertwined and at times even look similar, and yet they are essentially different. Emancipation is in line with [Genesis 2](#), where we hear the voice of the tempter, promising man that he will be like God, knowing good and evil.

IV. THE CHURCH AND SECULARIZATION

Never before has the Church had such a difficult time as in our day; not even in the first centuries of its existence, when it was attacked and persecuted on all sides. In those days there was an enemy who was easily recognized. Today the Church is facing an enemy who is disguised in numerous ways. I fully agree with Gilbert, when he writes: 'Secularization is a much deadlier foe than any previous counter-religious force in human experience' (153). And the trouble is that this enemy is present everywhere, though not in the same way and to the same extent. In *American society* we often encounter a strange mixture of secular values [p. 309](#) and religious terminology. In 1961 the American sociologist Peter Berger formulated it thus: 'The churches operate with secular values while the secular institutions are permeated with religious terminology.'¹⁸ The result is that at times one can hardly distinguish between church members and those who are 'unchurched'. Both seem to cherish the same values and use similar terminology. 'Usually the most that can be said is that the church members hold the same values as everybody else, but with more emphatic solemnity.' In *Britain* secularization has advanced more rapidly and more radically. There is less left of formal Christianity, and religious terminology has disappeared almost completely from public life. In *continental Europe* secularization has

¹⁵ This is the translation of a term borrowed from Martin Buber: *Gottesfinsternis*.

¹⁶ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 1966, 92.

¹⁷ H. Berkhof, 'Emancipatie, secularisatie en de zending van de kerk', in *Ibid.*, *Bruggen en bruggehoofden*, 1981, 176ff.

¹⁸ Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, 1961, 41.

progressed even more radically. Throughout the 19th century the impact of the French Revolution (which was never experienced in Britain!) was felt in many ways and gradually public life was completely divorced from religion and religious impulses. In our day the process has advanced to such an extent that all of Western Europe has become one large mission field! On his return to England Lesslie Newbigin took on a ministry in one of the industrial sections of Birmingham and soon discovered that communicating the gospel in secularized Birmingham is even more difficult than in multi-religious India!¹⁹ The Western culture, more than any other culture, has become resistant to the gospel.

How did the churches react? In general there are three possibilities and we see how all three of them are being tried out in our own 20th century.

1. The first one is *dominance*. Some churches have tried and still try to uphold the dominance of the Church in the midst of a secularizing culture. This attitude applies in particular to the Roman Catholic Church in predominantly Roman Catholic countries. Although the church authorities were and are well aware of the serious inroads secularization is making into every nook and cranny of society, they nevertheless continue their own work, as if all of society is still under the sway and even tutelage of the Church. Similar ideas, I am afraid, are also behind the pope's recent proposal to re-evangelize Europe. Here secularization is not really taken seriously. Ignoring the reality of secularization the Church simply aspires to dominate the national or European culture. There is, however, little reason for optimism, as far as the outcome of this programme of re-evangelization is concerned. In order to succeed it would need a reversal of the overpowering processes of secularization and modernization, a prospect that is highly unlikely.

2. The second possibility is *resistance*. In this case churches or small groups within the churches refuse the modern world, distance themselves from its secular culture, fence for the traditional faith and seek to preserve it from the corrosion of the world outside. This attitude is usually found in the smaller conservative p. 310 churches or in conservative groups within the larger denominations. Gilbert calls it a 'lonely sectarian road' (133) and mentions as an example the British Baptists (138f.), Evangelicalism (139f.) and Pentecostalism (140f.). Here secularization is taken seriously, but the price to be paid is rather high. Not only is such resistance rarely successful, but it also isolates those who opt for it from the rest of society, the result often being that they find themselves in a cultural backwater.

3. The third possibility is *accommodation*. This was the road usually taken by the larger historical denominations. The spirit of tolerance, characteristic of pluralistic society, also entered the churches and consequently most of the larger churches became pluralistic themselves. The secular way of life became so common and so natural that most church members were not even aware of the fact that their lives were becoming highly secularized. As early as 1900 the President of the Methodist Church in England said in his presidential address: 'You are in the world, brethren, steeped in its affairs, conversant with its ideas and affected by its fashions and maxims to a degree that would have shocked your fathers.'²⁰ Today there is often little difference between the church member and the non-church member, apart from the fact that the former still attends the worship services, either regularly or once in a while, and the latter has abandoned this practice. In this situation the term 'wordliness' has become obsolete. 'Churches which once fulminated against secular novels and frivolous conversation, and pronounced

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, 'Verder dan 1984' (=Beyond 1984), in Martien E. Brinkman and Herman Noordegraaf (eds), *Het evangelie in het Westen*, 23.

²⁰ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 107.

anathema on the card table, dance-hall or theatre, [have] ended up seeing nothing essentially wrong with these things' (Gilbert, 109).

A major role in this process of accommodation was usually played by the *ministry* of the Church. Of course, they did not mean to introduce secularization into the church. As a matter of fact, they started from the other end. Their question was: how can we still reach people who are living in this secular world of ours with the gospel? Thus at the beginning of this century the German theologian Friedrich Niebergall wrote his three volume work: *Wie predigen wir dem modernen Menschen?* (How do we preach the Gospel to modern man?)²¹ In England Reginald W. Thompson, chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1938, said in an official address: We 'have abandoned doctrines once thought essential: physical hell; total depravity; endless punishment for sins committed in this moment of life; Christ punished by God for others' sins; the predestination of some to eternal woe.... All these dogmas were abandoned because the working minister found they simply could not be told as Good News to the people. *A true Gospel must be preachable*' (Gilbert, 119). In our own life time we have seen similar adaptations of the gospel in many theologies, eventually leading even to the death of God theology. But p.311 whatever the shape of the theology may be, this so-called 'preachable' gospel always appears to be a *reduced gospel* and in the long run it promotes secularization rather than diminishing it. Gilbert points out that 'the appearance of *Honest to God* was a vital event in the making of post-Christian Britain. It precipitated attitudes towards religion which had long remained in suspension—vague, inchoate, undecided.... It is impossible not to conclude that the publication hastened the decline of British Christianity and actually increased the estrangement from the secular culture of that waning religious tradition which the Bishop sought to make more preachable' (121/2). Many ordinary church people, especially those who had little personal relation to the Church, concluded: 'Well, if a bishop of the Church says that it is enough to lead decent lives and be kind to others, why in the world should we still go to church?' Thus the secularization of theology passed the point beyond which there is simply no powerful ideological reason for calling people out of the 'world' into a denominational 'Church' (123).

V. IS THE SITUATION HOPELESS?

Having come so far, there seems to be only one conclusion left: the situation is hopeless. There appears to be no escape from secularization. It seems to be an irreversible fate that hangs over our heads as an immovable and threatening thunderstorm.

As a matter of fact many sociologists are very *pessimistic* about the future of religion in our secular society. Max Weber, who was one of the first to give serious attention to the process of secularization, was of the opinion that there would no longer be a place for socially operative forms of religion in a fully secularized society. Many others have followed him on this path. With regard to the German National Churches A. Kuphal once used the picture of a tree in autumn. In the years 1933–1945 National Socialism functioned as the strong wind that shook the leaves down. Today we live in a period in which the leaves simply fall down, while there is no air stirring.²² S. S. Aquaviva closes his book on *The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society* with the picture of humanity entering a long night, which will become increasingly darker as the generations move on,

²¹ The three volumes were published in 1902, 1906 and 1921 respectively.

²² A. Kuphal, *Abschied von der Kirche. Traditionsabbruch in der Volkskirche*, 19179, 472.

a night of which we cannot yet see the end. It is a night in which there seems to be no place for the idea of God or for the concept of the sacred and in which the traditional way of giving meaning to life or of facing life and death are increasingly becoming untenable.²³

Others are more *optimistic*. In the wake of Durkheim's approach they believe that even in an almost completely secularized world there will be elements of Christian values in secular institutions (Parsons) or forms of civil religion (Bellah). Peter Berger is one of those who reject the theory that 'modernity is intrinsically and irreversibly antagonistic to religion'.²⁴ Already in earlier publications he had maintained that religion will survive in the secularized world, because man cannot fail to seek answers to the fundamental questions of the whence, the whither and the why of his life. He calls the 'secular' answers to these questions 'banal'. They will lead only to the all-pervasive tedium of a world without gods.²⁵ In an article of 1982 he points out that secularity as a worldview, including the myth of progress, has been severely shaken in modern times. 'While modernization brings promises and tangible benefits, it also produces tensions and discontents both institutionally and psychologically' (15). It is therefore no wonder that in recent years several vigorous countersecular and counterpluralistic 'resistance movements' have come into existence. Besides the upsurge of religious movements in the Third World and the revival of religion in the Soviet Union he mentions the rise of the so-called counterculture and the resurgence of Evangelical Protestantism in the United States (16ff.). Berger even considers the possibility that society (in America!) will become less secular. This may happen when 'the symbolic center of the society would move to the right religiously' (21). He already sees signs pointing in this direction.

In *The Other Side of 1984* Lesslie Newbigin follows a similar line. He agrees with the philosopher Michael Polanyi that the critical movement which started in the Renaissance and which has enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivalled by any period of similar duration, is gradually coming to its end. 'Its incandescence has fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism.' But now the fuel is exhausted and the critical framework itself has burnt away (21). What we now need is a new 'post-critical philosophy'. Newbigin believes that the Christian gospel is able to provide a new paradigm. It must be 'based unashamedly on the revelation of God made in Jesus Christ and attested in scripture and the tradition of the Church' and must be offered 'as a fresh starting point for the exploration of the mystery of human existence and for coping with its practical tasks not only in the private and domestic life of the believers but also in the public life of the believers but also in the public life of the citizen' (27).

Naturally Berger and Newbigin cannot offer 'hard' evidence for their thesis that the process of secularization is coming to a dead end. But they do give us indications that something like this is actually happening. To these indications we may add the fact that the prediction of many scholars in the sixties that religion would gradually fade out of society has not come true. In 1965, for instance, Harvey Cox wrote his best-seller *The Secular City*, in which he predicted the demise of religion, at least of transcendent religion, in the secular city of our time. He then quoted with approval Amos Wilder's words: 'If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular.... If we are to find Grace it is to be found in the world and not

²³ *Op. cit.*, 1979, 201/2.

²⁴ P. Berger, 'From the Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity', in Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton (eds.) *Religion in America. Spiritual Life in a Secular Age*, 1972, 14-24.

²⁵ P. Berger, *Facing up to Modernity*, 1979, chapter 13. Cf. also P. Berger, *Rumor of Angels. Signals of Transcendence in the Modern World*, 1969 and Andrew M. Greeley, *Unsecular Man*. 1972.

overhead. The sublime firmament of overhead reality that provided a spiritual home for the souls of men until the end of the eighteenth century has collapsed' (261). But in 1984, in his new book *Religion in the Secular City*, he had to retract many of his previous notions and predictions. He had to admit that there had been new developments, indicating that religion is by no means dead. In this later book he mentioned among others the revival of fundamentalism, the resurgence of evangelicalism, the rise of liberation theology and the coming into being of the more radical Christian base communities, not only in Latin America but also in the United States and Western Europe. Admitting all this, Cox himself remained an unrepentant modernist. Throughout his book he still presented the primary goal of modern theology as the need to adapt religion to the modern world.

But whatever our evaluation of Cox's own theology may be, one thing is very clear: *religion* is by no means dead, but it is still very much *alive and kicking*. It may not always be the Christian religion, as we understand it, but it is religion nevertheless. The same is true of the New Age movement which is so popular in our day. We may wholeheartedly disagree with its religious content, for instance, its pantheism, its belief in reincarnation or its deep interest in matters occult, but it cannot be denied that the movement is religious through and through.

Apparently man is 'incurably religious'. Or as J. Blauw says it: 'A man without "religion" is a contradiction in itself. In his "religion" man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon (the real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is "incurably religious", because his relation to God belongs to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man-before-God.'²⁶ This is also the reason why modernization and secularization are unable to fulfil the deepest human needs. They leave man alone with his most essential personal questions, such as: Whence do I come? Whither am I going? What is the meaning of life? How do I cope with illness, bereavement, loneliness and death?

There is therefore no reason whatever to let the whole process of secularization happen to us, as if it were a fatal disease for which no cure exists. The gospel as it has been given to us in Jesus Christ most certainly is just as much a liberating message for our modern, secular world and for secular men and women in this modern world as it was for pagan men and women in the declining years of the Roman Empire. But it is a *liberating* message only when we preach the *full* gospel. An accommodated gospel is a cul-de-sac. Only a message that contains the full richness of the Christian gospel will do.

This may mean that as evangelicals [p. 314](#) we will have to accept a kind of 'sectarian' position or that others will regard us as a kind of antiquated religious subculture, because we refuse to accept certain cultural and moral developments in the modern world. But this sacrifice is small, compared with the result: a community of new people who are bound to Christ as their Saviour and Lord and who are guided by the Holy Spirit.

VI. HOW TO COMMUNICATE THIS LIBERATING GOSPEL TO OTHERS?

My first comment is: we should start at the point *where people really are!* As evangelicals we are often inclined to bring the message in the same way as we ourselves have heard it in our own evangelical tradition. So we start with an attempt to convince people of their sinfulness and their guilt vis-à-vis God and then go on to speak of the cross of Jesus as the means of expiation and reconciliation.

²⁶ J. Blauw, 'The Biblical View of Man in his Religion', in H. G. Anderson (ed.). *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, 1961, 32.

But is this really the correct way to communicate the gospel in a secular world? It may be the right method of communication within the church itself, because there people to a large extent share a common frame of reference, which includes the conversation that in the face of God we are all sinners. But the problem in our modern world is that secular man does not know this feeling of guilt, because he has no inner, personal relationship with God. In fact, he is generally a well-meaning person, who tries to make the best of his life and is willing to help his fellow-humans in the best way he can. I know many secular men and women who, as far as their morality is concerned, have a higher standard and better record than many church people I know!

But is it really necessary always to begin with our own traditional understanding of the gospel? In my reading of the *New Testament*, I am struck time and again by the fact that the apostles proclaimed the gospel in *many different ways*. Peter, for instance, as pictured in Acts, usually preaches the gospel to a *Jewish audience*. And he does start at the point where these people are. He addresses them as the covenant people who are acquainted with their holy Scriptures. When he speaks of Jesus, he puts him in the context of these Scriptures and tells them that in Jesus the prophecies of old have been fulfilled. He calls Jesus the Messiah, a term that is familiar to his audience. He further emphasizes again and again that they have crucified and killed this God-given Messiah ([Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10](#)), but that God has raised him from the dead, thereby confirming him as Lord and Christ ([2:36](#)). In Peter's sermons the concept of salvation plays a central role (forgiveness of sins, [2:38](#); turning everyone from his wickedness, [3:26](#); salvation, [4:12](#)) and every time he calls his hearers to repentance (a well-known concept in Old Testament religion), in order that they may share in the messianic salvation.

When Paul proclaims the gospel to a *pagan audience*, his approach is quite different. We see this clearly in [Acts 17](#), when he speaks to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus. Again Paul starts at the point where his listeners are. He [p. 315](#) speaks of the altar to the unknown God and he quotes from some of their own poets: 'In him we live and move and have our being': and 'We are indeed his offspring'. Taking his cue from these facts he speaks of the God who created the world and everything in it, who also gave all nations and individuals their particular place on earth and who hopes that they will feel after him and find him. So far it looks as if Paul has no new message for these people. But in actual fact it is brand new, for Paul preaches the one God who is the Creator of the universe and of everything in it and who is so great that he cannot be represented by anything on earth. He does not leave it at this, but goes on to call these people to repentance and to point to Jesus Christ, who will be the judge of all history, as God clearly indicated by raising Him from the dead. In his commentary on Acts F. F. Bruce calls this 'an introductory lesson in Christianity for cultured pagans'. The first lesson starts with their self-confessed ignorance of the divine nature and with a statement of the truth about God, in creation, providence and judgment, ending by introducing the Man of God's appointment. Undoubtedly the second lesson would start with this Man and his resurrection.

So we see how Paul interprets the message in the *language and thought-forms of the culture* of his listeners. Newbigin points out that this is always a 'risky business'.²⁷ Too often the figure of Jesus has been represented in other cultures as 'merely an image of [their] own ideal'. And yet this approach is unavoidable. We have to start there, where people find themselves, that is, in our case in the *secular culture* of Western Europe. This case, of course, is particularly difficult. Secular men and women of our day and age seem to be completely a-religious. They do not have any altar at all, and most certainly not one

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 53.

dedicated to 'an unknown God'. There does not seem to be any 'point of contact' (Anknüpfungspunkt) between modern secular man and the Christian message of a transcendent God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Is this not a hopeless situation? Where then to start?

Again I say: we have to start at the point *where these people are*: in a secular world. It may be a world characterized by the loss of a frame or reference, a loss of relevance and a loss of transcendence, but this does not alter the fact that they are human beings and that as human beings they cannot escape from *existential questions* that touch their own lives: Whence do I come? Whither am I going? What is the meaning of my life? How can I cope with such existential problems as illness, bereavement, loneliness and death? I would not be surprised if Paul, supposing he could address an audience in our present Western European world, would start with these questions. Modern man may have lost all sense of transcendence, yet he cannot fail to ask these questions, which, perhaps in a negative way, point in the direction of transcendence. And I would not be surprised at all if Paul in [p. 316](#) such a case would again point his secular listeners to the message of God who created this whole world and who also called his listeners personally into being and who wants to take them along into his future. And if modern man would ask Paul how he knows all this, the apostle would undoubtedly again point to Jesus Christ, who after his suffering and death on the cross was raised by God from the dead, not to return to this life and to this history, but to enter into the new, eternal Kingdom which God has promised.

No doubt in our day, too, many of the people who would hear this message of resurrection would mock, as some of the Athenians did, but others might say: 'That is interesting; we would like to hear you again about this.' I firmly believe that we should not worry too much about the fact that there is hardly any point of contact between secular man and the gospel, if any at all. Man's religiousness is no more a point of contact for the gospel than modern man's irreligion. As a matter of fact, man's religiousness may be the greatest obstacle to the gospel, because he believes that he knows God already in and through his own religion (cf. Karl Barth's statement: 'Religion is unbelief!'). Or he may incorporate Jesus Christ into his own religion as an image of the ideal of this religion. The gospel does not really need our religious points of contact. It *creates* its own point of contact or, if you wish, its own landing place. And it does this because it is an instrument in the hands of the *Holy Spirit*. Jesus did not only bequeath to us the gospel of his cross and resurrection, but he also sent the Holy Spirit to be his witness ([John 15:26](#)). 'The Spirit is the one whose witness makes possible the witness of the Church ([John 15:18-27](#)). The Spirit is [also] the prosecutor who brings the fundamental axioms of a culture under judgment ([John 16:7-11](#)).'²⁸

VII. THE BROAD SWEEP OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

The Christian gospel, however, is not just a personal message for individual human beings living within a certain culture, either a religious or secular culture. It is a message for the entire culture and it wants to enter into that culture. This it does, not by accommodating itself to that culture, so that the culture itself remains unchanged, but by *incarnating itself* in this culture and changing it from within. This is a very complicated process that can hardly be described. The gospel enters into our culture, shows the features of this culture and at the same time criticizes this culture. The Christian faith is always to a great extent qualified by the culture in which it is at work, and at the same time is a *critical* factor towards this culture. There is always a strongly *dialectical* relationship between every

²⁸ Newbigin, *loc. cit.*

culture and the gospel. Without the incarnation of the gospel in a certain culture, this culture could not be reached, nor could it be criticized in its own terms. The gospel is a voice that challenges a culture in its own cultural language and style. **P. 317**

Of course, this, too, is a risky business. The gospel might be 'domesticated' by the culture into which it enters. As a matter of fact, every culture (including our own Western European culture!) tries to do this. Looking at the history of our own Western European culture, we may sometimes become nostalgic and look back longingly on the Christian culture of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation period. But was this truly a 'Christian' culture, or was it little more than a synthesis of a Christian world-view and remnants of a pagan culture? However this may be, the experiment of the 'incarnation' of the gospel in every culture, also our own culture, must be risked, for it is the only way to 'redeem' a culture.

In fact, we find some splendid *examples* of this 'experiment' in the *New Testament* itself. Over against but also in relation to incipient Gnosticism, the apostle Paul in his *first letter to the Corinthians* does not hesitate to use the terminology of this Gnostic thinking. Again and again he uses their familiar terms, such as '*sophia*' and '*mysterion*'. But he fills them with a new content, the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and *wisdom of God*' ([1:21-24](#)). God himself made Jesus Christ the *wisdom* of the believers ([1:30](#)). For this reason Paul's message to the Corinthians was 'not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that their faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' ([2:4, 5](#)). And yet his message is also a message of wisdom, namely the '*secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification*' ([2:6, 7](#)). It is evident that this gospel is very critical of the culture of wisdom. Paul does not mind saying that 'the wisdom of the world is folly with God' (). And then he opens the panorama of the wisdom of the gospel: 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's and Christ is God's' ([3:21-23](#)).

The most beautiful and encouraging example of the communication of the gospel in and to a particular culture is undoubtedly the *Gospel of John*. Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out that here the language and the thought-forms of the Hellenistic world are employed in such a way that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them.²⁹ 'And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute **p. 318** contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity.' The Gospel starts with a prologue ([1:1-18](#)) that resembles the opening theme of a symphony. In this prologue most of the fundamental ideas are unfolded.³⁰ The Gospel itself consists largely of three parts. (a) [1:19-12:50](#) describes the public ministry of Jesus, where he shows himself to his own people as the revelation of God, but his own people reject him. (b) The second part, running from [13:1](#) to [16:33](#) contains the farewell discourses, 'in which Jesus himself

²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53. By quoting this statement of Newbigin we do not mean to say that Gnosticism itself was already a full-grown plant in the first century. But incipient Gnosticism or pre-Gnostic forms of thinking, at least in the shape of docetic thinking, were very likely present. On the other hand, there is considerable agreement today that this Gospel is essentially Semitic and has a primarily Jewish background.

³⁰ Cf. I. H. Marshall, 'Johannine Theology, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, 1982, 1082.

is the radiating centre of light and love, and all circumstances and future history are illuminated and made meaningful by that light and love' (Newbigin, 53). (3) The last part, [17:1-20:31](#) (with the later addition of chapter [21](#)) tells the story of Jesus' 'glorification' in his passion and death on the cross, in his resurrection and in his bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The whole purpose of the Gospel is summarized in [20:31](#)—'that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.

In this proclamation human culture, both contemporary Jewish and Greek-Hellenistic culture, is penetrated by the gospel of Jesus Christ in a sublime and at the same time critical, even devastatingly critical way. Terms which belonged to the common religious and cultural heritage of that time, such as *logos*, *phoos*, *kosmos*, *aleetheia*, *zoe*, *ginooskoo*, *marturia*, etc, are freely used, but at the same time they are filled to the brim with the new revelation that has taken place in Jesus of Nazareth. It is a wonderful story, but it is also a tragic story. 'The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own [home], and his own people received him not' ([1:9-11](#)). A tragic story indeed! But also a wonderful story, for 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will of flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' ([1:12, 13](#)).

For people in John's own day this gospel must have sounded attractive, because it spoke a language with which they, be they Jews or Hellenists, were familiar. And yet it must have been strange too, for it prised all familiar terms open and filled them with a new, unusual and dazzling content. I believe we, Christians of todayh, have to do the same when we encounter those who are under the spell of New Age thinking or of Eastern mysticism. Why not speak the gospel to them in their own language and thought-forms, showing that we find the true union with God only in Jesus Christ? I admit that this is a risky method indeed. If we are not very careful, the gospel may be lost in the process of translating it into the language and these thought-forms. Yet the risk has to be taken. And it can be taken, so long as we hold on to the essential features of the gospel: that Jesus is both the self-revelation of God and the prototype of the new humanity, God's new creation. [p. 319](#)

VIII. A CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW

The sweep of the gospel, however, is still wider. It is the only message that offers a *unified, coherent worldview*, in which every aspect of created reality has its own place. There are at least four passages in the New Testament, belonging to three different authors, that link Christ with the divine act of *creation*: [John 1:2](#)—all things were made through him (the Logos); [1 Cor. 8:6](#)—Jesus Christ, through whom are all things; [Col. 1:15ff.](#)—in him all things were created and in him all things hold together; [Heb. 1:2](#)—a Son, through whom he also created the world. In all four passages Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and who rose again, is connected with the very act of creation. According to many contemporary theologians we should not read these expressions as indicating the pre-existence of Jesus Christ and therefore his real 'involvement' in creation. These passages speak from the perspective of redemption and use an extrapolating mode of speaking, in which the risen Christ is related to the primeval act of creation. Hendrikus Berkhof, who does not believe in the pre-existence of Christ, explains the statement as saying: 'the world was created *in*

view of Jesus Christ; God would not have created the world if not in connection with his coming and exaltation'.³¹

It is debatable, however, whether this interpretation does justice to the meaning of these passages. Classical and evangelical theology always interpreted them as speaking of the presence and activity of Jesus Christ, as the *Logos incarnandus*, in the act of creation. F. F. Bruce speaks for this tradition, when in his commentary on *The Epistle to the Colossians* (1957) he interprets [Col. 1:15–17](#) as declaring 'our Lord's divine essence, pre-existence, and creative agency' (192). 'Here Christ is presented as the agent of God in the whole range of His gracious purpose towards men, from the primaeval work of creation through the redemption accomplished as history's mid-point on to the new creation in which God's purpose will be consummated' (193). When Paul calls Christ 'the firstborn of all creation', this expression should not be interpreted in an Arian fashion as indicating that Christ was the first and foremost of God's creatures, but as a declaration that he was present when creation began, and that it was *for* him as well as *through* him that the whole work was done (194). In him, as in a 'sphere', the work of creation took place. But he was not only the *mediator* of creation, but also its *goal* ('unto him'). Yes, in him all things *cohere or hold together*. This Stoic term (*sunesteeken*) is used by Paul to signify that the inner unity of the entire creation is found in Jesus Christ. Apart from him the various aspects of the creation disintegrate and fall back into chaos. Only in relation to him do they have a coherent and meaningful relationship with each other.

I believe that here we find one of the most significant messages of the [p. 320](#) Christian gospel for our modern world. If one thing is lacking in our modern world it is coherence. The *differentiation* that started after the industrial evolution is still continuing and both society as a whole and the life of the individual seem increasingly to become *fragmented*. Likewise *pluralism* is threatening both the unity of society at large and the life of every individual member of society. Modern society is characterized not only by political, social and religious pluralism, but increasingly also by moral pluralism, which threatens the very existence of society. For 'it is difficult to see how a society can survive without a basic moral consensus.'³² The individual member of modern society also suffers from a similar pluralism. Since his life has become more and more compartmentalized (it is subdivided in different spheres—family, work, leisure, church—, each often with its own set of morals), he is also in danger of losing the coherence of his life. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ offers a framework in which the unity of reality, both in societal and individual sphere of life, is rediscovered and regained. To me one of the great challenges of the modern world to the Church is that it should stimulate the Church to bring a gospel that does not restrict itself to personal salvation only, but that is full-orbed, offering our fragmented world a new perspective of unity and coherence: 'Jesus Christ in whom all things hold together' ([Col. 1:17](#)).

IX. WORD AND DEED

The Christian gospel, however, does not only offer a message of personal salvation and a unified world-view, but also calls for *action*. Christians are called to perform good works by which they praise their Lord and serve their fellow human beings and creation as a whole. The New Testament is full of promptings on this score.

³¹ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 167. Berkhof follows here Barth's line of thinking. In his CD III 1 Barth made two interrelated propositions: creation is the external basis of the covenant—the covenant is the internal basis of creation.

³² Peter Berger, *art. cit.*, 23.

It is interesting to note that even in our secularized world we constantly encounter people who, though fully secular in their philosophy of life, still retain many of the Christian values that for many centuries have been part and parcel of our Western European culture. In spite of their philosophy of moral autonomy, they still adhere to many of the moral values they inherited from their parents, their schools, the societies of which they are members etc. This explains to a large extent why, in spite of the ongoing process of secularization, there was so much interest in the peace movement in the sixties and seventies and why today so many people join the green movement. Likewise, when an appeal is made for those who die of hunger in Africa, many secularized and religionless people are willing to make generous donations.

Christians, who know the Pauline exhortation: 'As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith' ([Gal. 6:10](#)), should emulate their secular neighbours in all such activities. And they should join them in the struggle for justice and equality in a world, in which there is still so much injustice, inequality, intolerance, discrimination, [p. 321](#) racism, etc. They should show in their actions that they are prompted by an *unselfish love*, which has its origin in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, who told his disciples that he did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many ([Mark 10:45](#)). Following his example was the inner and outer strength of the early church. Undoubtedly these early Christians formed a kind of subculture in the society of their day. They were a repressed and persecuted majority and lived as 'strangers' in a pagan world. But they excelled in Christian love. The church historian Henry Chadwick writes of this minority church: "The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success. The Pagan comment: "See how these Christians love one another" (reported by Tertullian) was not irony. Christian charity expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to brethren in prison or condemned to the living death in the mines, and in social action in time of calamity like famine, earthquake, pestilence or war."³³

If all this is true, why should we be pessimistic? Who would have expected that, two thousand years ago, an insignificant, primarily Jewish cult might succeed in turning the great classical world upside down? And yet this happened! To be sure, our situation is different. They lived in a pre-Christian culture; we are living in a post-Christian culture that seems to be inoculated against the Christian faith. But we still have the same wonderful and potent gospel and our Lord is still the one in whom not only all aspects of creation cohere, but to whom as the exalted One has been given all authority in heaven and on earth!

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³³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin Church History), 1967, 56.

Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: *Star Trek* and the Next Generation

Stanley J. Grenz

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The author illustrates the momentous shift in our society from modernity to postmodernity by comparing the original Star Trek with Star Trek: The Next Generation. He pilots the way through to a Christian world view that critiques both the modernity of the Enlightenment and the postmodernity of the present age.

Editor

The camera focuses on a futuristic space craft against the background of distant galaxies. The narrator's voice proudly recites the guiding dictum: 'Space—the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission—to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.' With these words begins another episode of the popular television series, 'Star Trek: The Next Generation', now in its final season.

In many ways 'The Next Generation' is simply an updated version of the earlier 'Star Trek' series placed in a future era, after the resolution of some of the galactic political difficulties that plagued the universe of the previous space voyagers. Yet, sometime after Jean-Luc Picard's new breed of explorers took over the command of the redesigned Enterprise from Captain Kirk's crew, the creators of the series discovered that the world of their audience was in the midst of a subtle paradigm shift: Modernity was giving birth to postmodernity. As a result, 'The Next Generation' became a reflection—perhaps even a moulder—of the worldview of the emerging generation.

The shifts heralded by the newer Star Trek carry far-reaching implications for evangelical theology. [p. 323](#)

I. THE MOVEMENT FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

Many social observers agree that the Western world is in the midst of a change. In fact, we are apparently experiencing a cultural shift which rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity out of the decay of the Middle Ages—the transition to the postmodern era. Of course, transitional eras are exceedingly difficult to describe and assess. Nor is it fully evident what will characterize the emerging epoch.¹ Nevertheless, we see signs that monumental changes are engulfing all aspects of contemporary culture.

¹ Some thinkers have boldly sought to set forth the new postmodern mood, but these often tend to be projections of the author's own sympathies. For example, McFague includes among the postmodern assumptions 'a greater appreciation for nature, a recognition of the importance of language to human existence, a chastened admiration for technology, an acceptance of the challenge that other religions present to the Judeo-Christian tradition, an apocalyptic sensibility, a sense of the displacement of the white, Western male and the rise of those dispossessed due to gender, race, or class, perhaps most significantly, a growing awareness of the radical interdependence of life at all levels and in every imaginable way' Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), x-xi.

The term 'postmodern' first came into use in the 1930s as the designation for certain developments in the arts.² Later it denoted a new style of architecture. But not until the 1970s did postmodernism gain widespread attention, first as the label for theories expounded in university English and philosophy departments and eventually as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon.

Whatever else it might be, as the name suggests, postmodernism is the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it is a rejection of the modern mindset but under the conditions of modernity. Therefore, to understand postmodern thinking we must view it in the context of the modern world which gave it birth and against which it is reacting.

1. The modern mind

Many historians place the birth of the modern era with the dawn of the Enlightenment which followed the Thirty Years War. The stage, however, was set earlier—in the Renaissance, which elevated humankind to the centre of reality. Characteristic of the new outlook was Francis Bacon's vision of humans exercising power over nature by means of the discovery of nature's secrets.

Building on the Renaissance, the Enlightenment elevated the individual self to the centre of the world.³ The French philosopher Descartes laid the philosophical foundation for the modern edifice with his focus on doubt. This led him to conclude that the thinking self is the first truth which doubt could not deny. (Hence, his reappropriation of Augustine's dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*.) In so doing, Descartes defined human nature as a thinking substance and the human person as an autonomous p. 324 rational subject. The British physicist Isaac Newton later provided the scientific framework for modernity. He pictured the physical world as a machine whose laws and regularity could be discerned by the human mind. The modern human, therefore, is Descartes' autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world.

The postulates of the thinking self and the mechanistic universe opened the way for the explosion of knowledge under the banner of what Juergen Habermas called the 'Enlightenment project'. The goal of the human intellectual quest became that of unlocking the secrets of the universe, in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modernity characteristic of the twentieth century—bringing rational management to life and seeking to improve the quality of life through technology.⁴

At the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment project are certain epistemological assumptions. Specifically, the modern mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective,⁵ and good, and that such knowledge is obtainable, at least theoretically.

The demand for certain knowledge sets the modern inquirer in search of a method of demonstrating the essential correctness of philosophic, scientific, religious, moral, and

² Craig Van Gelder, 'Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview', *Calvin Theological Journal* 26/2 (1991): 412.

³ For a short discussion of the Enlightenment period and its impact on Christian theology, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

⁴ Van Gelder, 'Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview', 413.

⁵ James M. Kee, 'Postmodern' Thinking and the Status of the Religions', *Religion and Literature* 22/2-3 (Summer-Autumn 1990), 49.

political doctrines.⁶ The Enlightenment method places the many aspects of reality under the scrutiny and criterion of reason,⁷ resulting in an unchallenged faith in our rational capabilities.

Enlightenment knowledge is not only certain (and hence rational), it is also objective. The assumption of objectivity leads to a claim to dispassionate knowledge. The modern knower professes to stand apart from being a conditioned participant and to be able to view the world as an unconditioned observer,⁸ that is, to peer at the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history. The pursuit of dispassionate knowledge divides the scientific project into separate disciplines⁹ and elevates the specialist, the neutral observer who has gained expertise in a limited field of endeavour.

In addition to being certain and objective, Enlightenment knowledge is inherently good. For this reason, the modern scientist assumes that the discovery of knowledge is a self-evident, unchallengeable axiom. The assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge also means that the Enlightenment outlook is optimistic. Progress is inevitable, for science coupled with the power of education will eventually free us p. 325 from our vulnerability to nature, as well as from all social bondage.

Enlightenment optimism, coupled with the focus on reason, elevates human freedom. Suspect are all beliefs that seem to curtail autonomy or to be based on some external authority, rather than reason (and experience). The Enlightenment project understands freedom largely in individual terms. In fact, the modern ideal elevates the autonomous self, the self-determining subject who exists outside of tradition or community.¹⁰

Like modern science fiction in general, the original 'Star Trek' series encapsulates many aspects of the Enlightenment project and of late modernity. The crew of the Enterprise included persons of various nationalities working together for the common benefit of humankind. They were the epitome of the modern universalist anthropology. The message was obvious: We are all human. As humans we must overcome our differences and join forces in order to complete our mandate, the quest for certain, objective knowledge of the entire universe of which space looms as 'the final frontier'.

The hero of the old 'Star Trek' was Spock. Although he was the only crew member who came from another planet (Vulcan) his partially alien status actually served as a transcendent human ideal. Spock was the ideal Enlightenment man, completely rational and without emotion (or with his emotions in check). Repeatedly his dispassionate rationality provided the calculative key necessary to solve the problems encountered by

⁶ Richard Luecke, 'The Oral, the Local and the Timely', *Christian Century* (October 3, 1990): 875.

⁷ Klaus Hedwig, 'The Philosophical Presuppositions of Postmodernity', *Communio* 17 (Summer 1990): 168.

⁸ Merold Westphal, 'The Ostrich and the Boogeyman: Placing Postmodernism', *Christian Scholars Review* 20/2 (December 1990): 115.

⁹ Ted Peters, 'Toward Postmodern Theology', *Dialog* 24 (Summer 1985): 221.

¹⁰ At first, the Enlightenment project appeared as the friend of religion, offering to place belief on the more sure footing of human reason. Later thinkers, however, no longer accepted the understanding of God and the world salvaged earlier. This new scepticism led to the atheistic-materialistic world view of late modernity. Specifically, the ideas of Descartes and Newton undergirded a dichotomy between body and soul and posited an absolute gulf between the human soul and the rest of creation. Late moderns found it difficult to conceive of God's action in this dualistic world (*deus ex machina*). As the problem of interaction between body and soul led to the conclusion that the mind is an epiphenomenon, a by-product of the brain, thinkers also eliminated the human soul, viewing it as the unsubstantiated 'ghost in the machine'. See, David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 21–23, 54–56.

the Enterprise. According to the creators of 'Star Trek', in the end our problems are rational, and therefore they require rational expertise.

Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built.

2. The postmodern mind

Modernity has been under attack since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) lobbed the first volley in the late nineteenth century. But the fullscale frontal assault did not begin until the 1970s. The immediate impulse for the dismantling of the Enlightenment project came from the rise of deconstruction as a literary theory, which influenced a new movement in philosophy.

Deconstruction arose in response to a theory in literature called 'structuralism'. Structuralists theorized [p. 326](#) that cultures develop literary documents—texts—in an attempt to provide structures of meaning by means of which people can make sense out of the meaninglessness of their experience. Literature, therefore, provides categories whereby we can organize and understand our experience of reality. Further, all societies and cultures possess a common, invariant structure.¹¹

The deconstructionists (or post-structuralists) rejected the tenets of structuralism. Meaning is not inherent in a text itself, they argued, but emerges only as the interpreter enters into dialogue with the text.¹² Consequently, the meaning of a text is dependent on the perspective of the one who enters into dialogue with it, so that there are as many interpretations of a text as readers (or readings).

Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as the meaning of a text is dependent on the reader, so also reality can be 'read' differently depending on the perspectives of the knowing selves that encounter it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent centre to reality as a whole.

On the basis of ideas such as these, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called for the destruction of 'onto-theology' (the attempt to set forth ontological descriptions of reality) as well as the 'metaphysics of presence' (the idea that a transcendent something is present in reality).¹³ Because nothing transcendent inheres in reality, all that emerges in the knowing process is the perspective of the self who interprets reality.

Michael Foucault added a moral twist to Derrida's call. Every interpretation is put forward by those in power, he theorized. Because 'knowledge' is always the result of the use of power,¹⁴ to name something is to exercise power and hence to do violence to what is named. And social institutions do violence by imposing their own understanding on the centreless flux of experience. Thus, in contrast to Bacon who sought knowledge in order to gain power over nature, Foucault claimed that every assertion of knowledge is an act of power.

¹¹ 'Structuralism', W. L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 553.

¹² . This proposal is often credited to Gadamer. See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, English translation (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 261.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 50.

¹⁴ Michael Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

Richard Rorty, in turn, jettisoned the classic conception of truth as either the mind of language mirroring nature. Truth is established neither by the correspondence of an assertion with objective reality or by the internal coherence of the assertions themselves. Rorty argued that we should simply disband the search for truth and be content with interpretation. Hence, he proposed to replace classic 'systematic philosophy' with 'edifying philosophy' which 'aims at continuing a conversation p. 327 rather than at discovering truth'.¹⁵

The works of Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty reflect what seems to have become the central dictum of postmodern philosophy: 'All is difference.' This view sweeps away the 'uni' of the 'universe' sought by the Enlightenment project, the quest for a unified grasp of objective reality. The world has no centre, only differing viewpoints and perspectives. In fact, even the concept of 'world' presupposes an objective unity or a coherent whole that does not exist 'out there'. In the end, the postmodern world is merely an arena of duelling texts.

Although philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty have been influential on university campuses, they are only a part of a larger shift in thinking reflected in Western culture. What unifies the otherwise diverse strands of postmodernism is questioning of the central assumptions of the Enlightenment epistemology.

In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. It is simply not the case that 'each and every clay in each and every way we are getting better and better'. For the first time in many years, members of the emerging generation do not share the conviction of their parents that we will solve the enormous problems of the planet or that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They know that life on the earth is fragile, and the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude which replaces the image of conquest with cooperation.

The new emphasis on holism is related to the postmodern rejection of the second Enlightenment assumption, namely, that truth is certain and hence purely rational. The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellectual as the arbiter of truth. Because truth is non-rational there are other ways of knowing, including through the emotions and the intuition.

Finally, the postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, because the postmodern model of the world does not see the universe as mechanistic and dualistic, but historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is 'out there', waiting to be discovered and known. Instead it is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.

In rejecting the modern assumption of the objectivity of knowledge, the postmodern mind likewise dismisses the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower. Knowledge is not eternal and culturally neutral. Nor is it waiting to be discovered by scientists who bring their rational talents to the givenness of the world. Rather, knowledge is historically and culturally implicated, and consequently, our knowledge is always incomplete. p. 328

The postmodern worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. Not only the specific truths we accept, but even our understanding of truth are a function of the community in which we participate. This, in turn, leads to a new conception of the relativity of truth. Not only is there no absolute truth, more significantly, truth is

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1979), 393.

relative to the community in which we participate. With this in view, the postmodern thinker has given up the Enlightenment quest for the one, universal, supracultural, timeless truth. In its place, truth is what fits within a specific community; truth consists in the ground-rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one participates.

The postmodern perspective is reflected in the second 'Star Trek' series, 'The Next Generation'. The humans who make up the crew of the original Enterprise are now joined by humanoid life forms from other parts of the universe. This change represents the broader universality of postmodernity. Humankind is no longer the only advanced intelligence, for evolution has been operative throughout the cosmos. More importantly, the understanding of the quest for knowledge has changed. Humankind is not capable of completing the mandate alone; nor does the burden of the quest fall to humans alone. Hence, the crew of the Enterprise symbolizes the 'new ecology' of humankind in partnership with the universe. Their mission is no longer 'to boldly go where no man has gone before', but 'where no *one* has gone before'.

In 'The Next Generation', Data replaces Spock. In a sense, Data is Spock, the fully rational thinker capable of superhuman intellectual feats. Despite his seemingly perfect intellect, rather than being the transcendent human ideal Spock embodies, he is an android—a subhuman machine. His desire is not only to understand what it means to be human, but also to become human. However, he lacks certain necessary aspects of humanness, including a sense of humour, emotion, and the ability to dream (at least until he learns that his maker programmed dreaming into his circuitry).

Although Data often provides valuable assistance in dealing with problems, he is only one of several who contribute to finding solutions. In addition to the master of rationality, the Enterprise crew includes persons skilled in the affective and intuitive dimensions of human life. Especially prominent is Counsellor Troi, a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the hidden feelings of others.¹⁶

The new voyages of the Enterprise lead its variegated crew into a postmodern universe. In this new world, time is no longer simply linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted.

In contrast to the older series which in typical modern fashion generally ignores questions of God and religious belief, the postmodern world of 'The Next Generation' also includes the supernatural, embodied in the strange character 'Q'. Yet its picture of the divine is not simply p. 329 that of traditional Christian theology. Although possessing the classical attributes of divine power (such as omniscience), the godlike being 'Q' is morally ambiguous, displaying both benevolence and a bent toward cynicism and self-gratification.

II. POSTMODERNITY AND EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

As George Marsden correctly concludes, in some sense evangelicalism—with its focus on scientific thinking, the empirical approach, and common sense—is a child of early modernity.¹⁷ The emerging generation, however, has been nurtured in a context shaped less by commitment to the Enlightenment project embodied in 'Star Trek' than by the postmodern vision of Rorty and 'Star Trek: The Next Generation'. Consequently, the transition from the modern to the postmodern era poses a grave challenge to the Church

¹⁶ Women are not stereotyped into affective roles, however, for the ship's medical doctor is also a woman.

¹⁷ George M. Marsden, 'Evangelical, History and Modernity', in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 98.

in its mission to the next generation and to evangelical theologians, whose task is to decipher the implications of postmodernism for the gospel.

1. Evangelicalism and the postmodern critique of modernity

Evangelicals facing the postmodern context will likely recoil from certain theories proposed by Derrida and Rorty. Their rejection of the Enlightenment project goes too far, for it leads to a scepticism that seems to undermine the Christian conception of truth. Having assumed that reality is not a unified whole, these philosophers have given up the quest for a universal, ultimate truth, leaving us only with our conflicting interpretations. And in the absence of any absolute criterion, all human interpretations are equally valid because all are equally invalid (in fact, as adjectives describing interpretations, 'valid' and 'invalid' become meaningless terms). At best these interpretations can be judged only according to pragmatic standards. Postmodern scepticism leaves us in a world characterized by a never-ending struggle among competing interpretations, reminiscent of Hobbes's war of all against all.

Evangelical theology cannot acquiesce in the radical scepticism of postmodernism. In contrast to the postmodern philosophers, we believe that there is a unifying centre to reality and that this centre has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth. Until the eschaton we may witness the struggle among conflicting interpretations of reality. But although all interpretations are in some sense invalid, they are not all equally invalid. On the basis of the Incarnation, evangelicals assert that conflicting interpretations can be evaluated according to a criterion which in some sense transcends them all and that the Christian worldview is superior to all other claimants.

As necessary as it is, however, we dare not allow our cautious stance toward the radical scepticism of Derrida and Rorty to blind us to the significance of the broader postmodern phenomenon. On the contrary, we ought to find ourselves in fundamental agreement with the p.330 postmodern critique of the modern mind¹⁸ and its underlying Enlightenment epistemology.

Postmodernism questions the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is certain, and that the criterion for certainty rests with our human rational capabilities. In a similar manner, many evangelicals have continually argued that the rational, scientific method is not the sole measure of truth, for aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be fathomed by reason. As Pascal declared "The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of" (*Pensées*, iv, 277).

Similarly, evangelicals can commend the postmodern questioning of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is objective and hence dispassionate. We simply cannot stand outside the historical process or gain universal, culturally neutral knowledge as unconditioned specialists, for we are conditioned participants in our historical and cultural context. Postmodern epistemologists seem to echo Augustine when they assert that our personal convictions and commitments not only colour our search for knowledge, they also facilitate the process of understanding.

Likewise, evangelicals can applaud the postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is inherently good. Events of the twentieth century bear poignant witness that the knowledge explosion cannot guarantee utopia, for technological advances bring not only the possibility of good but also the potential for evil. Evangelicals understand the theological reality that necessitates this critique: the human problem is not merely ignorance, but also a misdirected will.

¹⁸ Several evangelicals have recently expressed sympathy for postmodernism. See, for example, Jonathan Ingleby, 'Two Cheers for Postmodernism', *Third Way* 15/4 (May 1992): 25.

2. Contours of a postmodern evangelical theology

The ongoing mandate of the Church means that we are called to proclaim the gospel to the next generation and to live out the gospel in the midst of a culture that is increasingly postmodern in its thinking. This mandate challenges evangelical theologians to assist the Church by exploring how we can embody the gospel in the categories of our emerging social context. The postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment epistemology suggests several contours that ought to shape a future evangelical theology.

First, a postmodern evangelical theology must be 'post-individual'.

One of the great gains of modernity has been the elevation of the individual. Consequently, our theology dare not lose the importance of the individual human person, indicative of modernity. We must always keep in view the biblical focus on the God who is concerned about each person, the individual as personally responsible to God, and a salvation message that is directed to every human being. The lessons of totalitarianism remind us that we must continually stand against the tyranny of the collective in all its various forms.

While maintaining the individual focus of the Bible, however, we [p. 331](#) must shake ourselves loose of the radical individualism that characterizes the modern mindset. We must affirm with postmodernism that knowledge—including knowledge of God—is not merely objective, not simply discovered by the neutral knowing self.

Here we can learn from contemporary communitarian scholars who have joined the postmodern assault on the modern epistemological fortress. In place of the modern paradigm with its focus on the self-reflective, autonomous subject and the modern ideal of the self-determining self who exists outside any tradition or community, they offer a constructive alternative: the individual within community.

Community is integral to the process of knowing, communitarians argue, for crucial to the knowing process is a cognitive framework mediated to the individual by the community in which he or she participates. Similarly, the community of participation is crucial to identity formation. A sense of personal identity develops through the telling of a personal narrative¹⁹ which is always embedded in the story of the communities in which we participate.²⁰ The community mediates to its members a transcending story which includes traditions of virtue, common good, and ultimate meaning.²¹ Rather than requiring a neutral, objective stance, therefore, knowing occurs within a community and the position of personal commitment that presence in a community entails.

Evangelical theologians must take seriously the discoveries of contemporary communitarians,²² in so far as they are in a sense echoing a great biblical theme, namely, that the goal of God's programme is the establishment of community in the highest sense. Instead of elevating the individual to the centre, therefore, postmodern evangelicals must carve out a theology that integrates the human person into community, acknowledging as well the importance of the believing community and our presence within it for our

¹⁹ Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 81.

²⁰ See, for example, Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221.

²¹ E.g., George A. Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church', *Christian Century* 107/16 (May 9, 1990): 495.

²² See, for example, Daniel A. Helminiak, 'Human Solidarity and Collective Union in Christ', *Anglican Theological Review* 70/1 (January 1988): 37.

knowledge of God. In short, in our theologizing we must take seriously the reality of community as the context in which the individual is necessarily embedded.

In addition to being post-individual, a postmodern evangelical theology must be post-rational.

Another significant gain of the Enlightenment has been the elevation of reason. Consequently, a postmodern evangelical theology dare not become anti-intellectual. Yet it must embody the biblical understanding that the cognitive dimension does not exhaust either the human person, reality as a whole, or p.332 the truth of God. Nor can we continue to collapse truth into the categories of rational certainty that typify modernity. Rather, our theology must give place to the concept of 'mystery'—not as an irrational aspect alongside the rational, but as a reminder of the fundamentally non-rational or supra-rational reality of God. This means that while remaining reasonable, our theology must jettison the unwarranted rationalistic bent of all modern theologies.

Central to this task is the rethinking of the function of theological propositions. We must continue to acknowledge the fundamental importance of rational discourse, of course, and hence of propositions. Yet, our theology cannot remain fixated on the propositionalist approach of the older evangelical theologies, which viewed Christian truth simply as correct doctrine.

In their attempt to replace the individualistic foundational rationalism of modern Western thinking with an understanding of knowledge and belief that views them as socially and linguistically constituted,²³ postmodern social theorists provide helpful assistance in understanding the role of propositions. At the heart of being a Christian is a personal encounter with God in Christ which shapes and moulds us and which unites us with the community of believers. On the basis of this encounter, we seek to bring into an understandable whole the diverse strands of our personal lives and the incorporation of our lives in that of the faith community by appeal to categories such as 'sin' and 'grace', 'alienation' and 'reconciliation', 'helplessness' and 'divine power', 'having been lost' but 'now being saved'. It is in this context of making sense out of life by means of recounting the story of a transformative religious experience that theological propositions find their importance. No experience occurs in a vacuum; no transformation comes to us apart from an interpretation facilitated by the concepts—the 'web of belief'—we bring to it. On the contrary, experience and interpretive concepts are reciprocally related. Our concepts facilitate the experiences we have in life; at the same time, our experience determines the interpretive concepts we employ to speak about our lives.

So also the encounter with God in Christ is both facilitated by, and expresses itself in theological categories which are propositional in nature. These categories which form the cradle for this experience, in turn, constitute the grid by means of which we now view all of life.

A post-rational evangelical theology will be 'holistic'. The Enlightenment project was built on the division of reality into the dualism of mind and matter, which was expressed anthropologically through the distinction between soul and body. Evangelicals imbued with the Enlightenment outlook are concerned about saving souls, with at best a secondary concern for bodies which, however, has no eternal theological importance. If we would minister in the postmodern world, we must realize that the human person is a unified whole, and the gospel must exercise an impact on p.333 humans in their entirety. This does not mean merely giving greater place to human emotion or the affective aspects of life alongside the rational, but integrating the emotional-affective, as well as the bodily-

²³ This opinion was recently articulated by Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community', 495.

sensual, with the intellectual-rational within the one human person. In other words, we must be willing to acknowledge the ‘Counsellor Troi’ in each of us.

But postmodern evangelical holism must go beyond putting together the soul and body tom asunder in the Enlightenment. In a post-individualist theology, the human person will also be put back into the social and environmental context which forms and nourishes us. We must not merely speak of the human person in isolation, but also as the person-in-relationships. Our anthropology must take seriously that our identity includes being in relationship to nature, in relationship with God, and, in this manner, in relationship with ourselves.

Finally, a postmodern evangelical theology must be focused on spirituality.

A final gain of the Enlightenment was the quest for knowledge, which was viewed as good. Indeed, knowledge is a good, and hence evangelical theory is concerned to discover the truth of God. Consequently, the goal of theologizing includes right thinking, acknowledging that right beliefs or correct doctrine are important. However, our goal can never merely be the amassing of a wealth of knowledge for its own sake. Nor should we be under any illusion that the possession of knowledge—even theological knowledge—is inherently good ([1 Cor. 8:1](#)). Knowledge is good only when it facilitates a good result, specifically, when it fosters spirituality in the knower.

A theology that is ‘focused on spirituality’, therefore, views itself as immensely practical. In the postmodern world we must reappropriate the older pietist discovery that a ‘right heart’ takes primacy over a ‘right head’. Theology must take its lodging in the heart, for it is concerned with the transformation of not only the intellectual commitments, but also the character and the life of the believer (as well as of the faith community).

To this end, a theology that is ‘focused on spirituality’ fosters a proper ordering of activism and quietism. No longer can we follow the modern outlook which looks to overt activity, conduct, or specific decisions as the sole measure of spirituality. Rather, the postmodern world correctly understands that activism must be born from inner resource. Theology, in turn, contributes to this inner resource, for it seeks to clarify the foundational belief structure which shapes our responses to the situations of life and which structure is reflected in the acts we choose to do.

CONCLUSION

Our society is in the throes of a monumental transition, the movement from modernity to postmodernity. The emerging generation—those who were raised on ‘Star Trek: The Next Generation’—is already imbued with many aspects of the postmodern mind. Confronted by this new context, we dare not fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a [P. 334](#) return to the modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth—indeed, we simply cannot turn back the clock—for we are not called to minister in the past, but in the contemporary context, influenced as it is by postmodern ideas.

Postmodernism does pose dangers. Nevertheless, it would be ironic and tragic if evangelicals ended up being the last defenders of the now dying modernity. Rather, imbued with the vision of God’s programme for his world, we must claim the new postmodern context for Christ by embodying the Christian faith in ways that the new generation can understand. In short, under the banner of the cross, we must ‘boldly go where no one has gone before’.

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Evangelism Among Europe's Neo-pagans

W. A. Visser 'T. Hooft

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This refreshing and prophetic article written seventeen years ago by a highly respected theologian and ecumenical churchman exposes the falseness of the theory of 'religionlessness of the secularized man'. The author traces the history of neo-paganism in Europe, analyzes its theological and philosophical roots in terms of impersonal cosmic monism, life force and the identity of God with nature. He asks why theologians and ecumenical consultations have largely ignored the issue. His exposure of the eros versus agape love debate is even more relevant today for us living before sex saturated media. Visser 'T. Hooft concludes that the evangelization of neo-pagan Europe must be given the highest priority among the tasks of the Church.

Editor

In the discussions concerning the evangelistic task of the European churches we have given far too little attention to the considerable growth of non-Christian religious movements. We have described, analyzed, x-rayed the post-Christian secularized representative of the so-called without religion. I do not deny that type of human being exists and that we must seek to find ways to reach him with the Christian message. But I believe that there is another type of European, no less representative of the large body of people, who is no longer in regular contact with the churches and that this type is specifically religious.

EUROPEAN PAGANISM TODAY

Is it right to call them 'neo-pagans'? I do so with some hesitation because I [P. 336](#) realize that the word pagan is nowadays considered an unfriendly or anachronistic expression. But it is still the best word to characterize the non-Christian who holds a religious conviction and who must therefore not be classified with atheists. Though it is possible, although not certain, that it originally meant country-people as distinguished from city-people, it has by no means always carried a flavour of inferiority. Goethe who cannot possibly be suspected of lack of self-respect, described himself in his correspondence with Jacobi and Lavater as a pagan. C. G. Jung who had a great admiration for the non-Christian religions uses the interesting term, Europe's 'internal pagans', which he distinguishes from the external pagans to which Christian missions bring the gospel.

Where are these European neo-pagans to be found? How many are they? We will not find the answer in the official statistics. On the contrary. Those statistics generally give the impression that with the exception of the small number of Jews and a larger number of non-Christian immigrants and foreign workers, nearly all West Europeans are Christians. Thus in the last World Christian Handbook (1976) the total Christian community in Sweden is listed at 7,500,000 in a population of 7,630,000. Switzerland is supposed to have 5,190,000 Christians in a population of 5,420,000, The two Germanies together have 72 million Christians in a population of 75 million. Lucky Europe with such brilliant statistics! Compare those with the percentage of Christians in the USA which remains vastly below this marvellous record. (7 out of 10 US citizens are related to a church according to a 1977 Gallup poll.)

Now it is clear that there is something wrong with this picture. These statistics contain even greater lies than statistics generally do. The best explanation is in the story of the Edinburgh professor who, at the time of the negotiations between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, declared that he was vehemently opposed to union between the two churches. His friends said: 'But you have always told us that you were an atheist, so why do you care?' He answered: 'I am an atheist, but a Presbyterian atheist.'

That is not simply a silly story, for it reflects a very widespread phenomenon which has not yet been sufficiently analyzed. Goethe called himself, as we saw, a pagan and '*ein dezidierter nicht-Christ*' (a determined non-Christian) identified himself with Protestantism and spoke of 'we Protestants'. And we have, of course, today the shocking example of the conflict in Ulster which is generally described as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, but which continues in spite of the leaders of the historical churches and is therefore a fight between bad Catholics and bad Protestants. Similarly, there are in Europe large masses of what we may call statistical Christians who for one reason or another continue to be counted as church members though, in fact, their lives are controlled by non-Christian convictions. It is among these that we find the neo-pagans. Ernst Troeltsch in his '*Soziallehren*', written in 1911, speaks of the '*heimliche Religion der Gebildeten*' (the p. 337 secret religion of the intellectuals). According to him this is immanentist, pantheistic spiritualism which has turned its back on the ecclesiastical tradition of salvation based on the specific and unique revelation. 'Secret' this religion could be called because it did not take public institutional form and its adherents remained generally members of Christian churches.

Again worker priests in France have come to the conclusion that religion in so far as it exists among the masses is for the most part 'primitive paganism with some Christian survivals'. So, while the statistics continue to present a Christian Europe, serious diagnosis tells us that Europe is now largely a '*pays de mission*', and the thinking of the church leaders is still, consciously or unconsciously, dominated by the 'Corpus Christianum' concept.

The masses outside the churches are considered lapsed Christians who need to be 'recalled' to an active participation in church life. Wichern defined the 'Innere Mission' as the renewal or winning back of the masses in Christendom that have fallen under the power of sin. Even in the terminology used in evangelism it becomes clear that most evangelists take for granted that their audience has learned at home or in Sunday school the meaning of the main biblical concepts. I have heard a world-famous evangelist speaking for an hour on repentance without ever explaining in words which an outsider could understand, what repentance really means.

Now there is surely need for an evangelism of revival and renewal. There are millions of lapsed Christians who need to hear anew what the gospel offers them. But there are today in Europe even more millions who are not adequately described as lapsed Christians, because they have in fact turned to another religion.

But is it really possible for men and women who are the products of an old Christian civilization to return to paganism? Van Leeuwen in his well-known book *Christianity and World History* has denied this. His thesis is that secularization is irreversible: 'Once the ontocratic (pagan, primitive, naturalistic) pattern of the pagan religions has been disrupted fundamentally, there can be no returning to a pre-Christian situation.'

National socialism was an attempt to restore paganism. 'The fact that it failed shows that the way back to the pre-Christian religious pattern has become impossible' (p. 333).

This thesis seemed to confirm the theory about the religion-less period which Bonhoeffer had developed in his letters from prison and also the sociological theory concerning the fourth man who was supposed to be post-bourgeois, post-Christian and

post-religious. So, in the discussions concerning evangelism, attention was concentrated on the modern secular man who had no use for religion in any shape or form, and the emergence of neo-paganism was considered an irrelevant phenomenon which could not last long.

But in recent years this whole diagnosis of our European situation has become much less convincing. Hoekendijk with his sharp eyes noted already in 1952 that there was not only a process of secularization, p. 338 but also a process of sacralization, the growth of a mystical, diffused religiosity and that it was therefore by no means certain that the fourth man would be post-religious. M. M. Thomas, looking at Europe from the outside, wrote in his critique of van Leeuwen's book: 'It may be difficult for the West to return to the cosmic monism of paganism. But it is not impossible.' It is also interesting that Joseph Smolik, writing from the perspective of the East European situation, says that he cannot accept the theory of the religionlessness of secularized man.

In one of his most penetrating studies of the European and, more particularly, the German situation, which appeared precisely at the time of the victory of national socialism in Germany, and which remained therefore virtually unknown for a long time (*'Sozialistische Entscheidung'*), Paul Tillich described the great forces in European life. There was the pressure of ontocracy which he called the *'Ursprungsmythische Mächte'*, the primitive sub-structure of life: blood, race, nation, soil. The power of this ontocracy had been resisted by the prophetic Jewish tradition. And in the rationalistic movement culminating in the 18th century Enlightenment, the attempt had been made to suppress these primitive forces. In modern technology, technocracy and capitalism, reason had won a great victory, but we are nowadays witnessing a tremendous reaction against this bourgeois rationalism. There has arisen a political romanticism which preaches the return to the original vital realities.

Tillich made it clear that, while the absolutizing of the original elements of life could lead only to a total collapse of civilization, the underestimation of these forces was also dangerous. A true socialism would have to give a very real place to them. Tillich also made the important point that political romanticism could take either a conservative or a revolutionary form. It could try to restore the ancient structures, but it could also seek to start from scratch in the building of a society based on the expression of instinctive life rather than on the sovereignty of reason. Now it seems to me that Tillich has implicitly rejected *'avant la lettre'* van Leeuwen's thesis that after the time of secularization, paganism is no longer a possible option. The ontocratic forces may be driven back, even forced to go into hiding, but they do not disappear and make their come-back as soon as the occasion offers itself. It is therefore an illusion to think that the defeat of national socialism proves the impotence of neo-paganism. For what is striking about the Hitler period in Germany is precisely that it was possible for an essentially neo-pagan ideology to reduce to submission a nation of thinkers, scientists, poets and technicians. Its defeat had to come from the outside. All our Western nations should consider this as a tremendous warning.

It is, of course, true that post-secular paganism is not quite the same as pre-secular paganism. The post-secular form does not have the naïveté, the simplicity, the tolerance of the ancient paganism. The modern form is self-conscious, convulsive, intolerant and aggressive. This can be illustrated by the development p. 339 of paganism in Western Europe. I will not try to include Eastern Europe in this little survey, because its religious and ideological history differs in important respects from that of Western Europe.

NEO-PAGANISM IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

Paganism is far more deeply rooted in European history than is generally realized. We have innumerable church histories and histories of Christian thought in Europe. We have histories of atheism and materialism. But we have no histories of paganism in Europe.

What would be the main chapters in such a history? It would begin by raising the question of in how far, in the early Middle Ages, Europe was really christianized. Is Jung right when he says that Christianity in Europe is like a cathedral built on the foundations of a pagan temple and that the Christian message has not really reached the deeper regions of the soul of European man? Our historian would look into the theory of gnostic influence in the religion of the Cathares and of the literature of the troubadours. He would describe the ambiguous character of philosophy in the Renaissance as it drank at the same time at Christian and pagan sources. One of the first influential modern pagans is Giordano Bruno, whose traces we find in Italy, France, Switzerland, England, Germany and Bohemia. For him God is the world-soul, not the Creator. God can take on innumerable forms and names. The Hebrews in the desert were quite right in adoring the golden calf. Bruno was burnt in Rome in 1600. Julius Caesar Vannini, who had similar ideas and was also condemned to death by the Inquisition, had the nerve to publish a book with the provocative title: *'De admirandis Naturae, reginae deaque mortalium arcanis'*, and the book was published in 1616 with the permission of the Sorbonne. So it is not astonishing that Johannes Kepler, the pioneer of modern astronomy, put the new religious approach in this way to an opponent who defended orthodoxy: *'Tibi Deus in naturam venit, mihi natura ad divinitatem aspirat'*. The starting point has become nature, not the revelation in Christ.

Our historian would describe how after a period of relative calm at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century there comes what Paul Hazard has called: *'La Crise de la Conscience Européenne'*. Spinoza died in 1677. He had not dared to publish his main work, the *'Ethica'*, but it was published soon after his death. Here we have a consistent, impressive conception of life which has quite consciously broken with the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. It is not surprising that he is officially cursed by the Jewish synagogue and that his books are forbidden by the Christian magistrate. But it is not right to call him an atheist. Voltaire wrote about him that he

*Marchant à pas comptés, s'approcha du Grand Etre
Pardonne-moi, dit-il, en lui parlant tout bas,
Mais je pense, entre nous, que vous n'existez pas.*

(A little Jew, with measured steps approached the Almighty's Throne [p. 340](#)

Excuse me for a word not meant for outside ears:

I don't think you exist, he said in softest tone.)

In fact, Spinoza was a deeply religious man. But his religion has little to do with the Bible. His God is the impersonal God whose activity coincides wholly with the activity of nature. *'Deus sive Natura'*. So any specific action or revelation of God is excluded. He says the idea 'that God should have taken on human nature seems to me as absurd as to say that a circle has taken on the nature of a quadrangle'. For the time being, very few thinkers dare to go as far as Spinoza. But there is a general tendency to question the old certainties. As other religions become better known, as the deadlock between the Christian confessions becomes a problem for many, the question arises whether there is not a 'natural religion' behind and in all the historical religions, and the 'deists' in England, the rationalists in France, the *Aufklärungs*-thinkers in Germany seek to define that universal religion over against traditional Christianity with its specific revelation and its claim of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

In the eighteenth century, most of this new thinking is intellectualistic, but in the later years of the century, when the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau reaches all European countries, natural religion becomes a matter of feeling and experience. While Rousseau uses Christian terminology, his concern is not with the content of the Christian gospel, but with the insights arising from the inner light. The Savoy vicar tells 'Emile' to listen to the voice of nature and not to the voices of men. And so when Goethe describes in Faust the spiritual adventure of European man, he lets him confess his faith in words which carry an echo of both Spinoza and Rousseau:

*'Nenn's Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott!
Ich habe keinen Namen
Dafür! Gefühl ist alles;
Name ist Schall und Rauch
Umnebelnd Himmelsglut.'*

(A name is only noise and smoke, obscuring the heavenly glow)

Now it is clear that Christianity has ceased to be the one representative religion of Europe. There is another religion, in some ways more representative because its adherents are writers, philosophers and teachers, and this religion is a cosmic monism which has clear affinity to pre-Christian paganism.

The great poets mourn for the ancient gods. Since Christianity became victorious, the world has become empty, nature has lost its glamour. Schiller sings about the gods of Greece:

*'Ja, sie kehrten heim, und alles Schöne,
Alles Hohe nahmen sie mit fort,
Alle Farben, alle Lebenstöne,
Und uns blieb nur das entseelte Wort.'*

And Shelley in "Hellas" has the same complaint:

The Powers of earth and air
Fled from the folding-star of Bethlehem:
Apollo, Pan and Love,
And even Olympian Jove
grew weak, for killing truth had glared on them.
Our hills and seas and streams
Dispeopled of their dreams
Their waters turned to blood, their dew to tears
Wailed for the golden years. [p. 341](#)

But Shelley hopes that the old gods will come back:

The world's great age begins anew
The golden years return ...
Another Athens shall arise.

It is striking that so many of the leaders of thought of the time reject the Christian heritage of Europe so easily. The impressive exception is Friedrich Höderlin. For he experienced the dichotomy between Christianity and paganism as a conflict in his own soul. No one could be more enamoured by the glory that was Greece. He feels also that his generation has lost touch with the ancient gods and with nature. *'Hin nach Hellas schaue das Volk'* (Let the people look at Hellas). But he cannot forget that he has met Jesus who

remains *'der Einzige'*, the unique being. He wonders whether Dionysos may not be a brother of Christ, but interrupts himself by confessing that he feels reluctant to compare Jesus, 'the jewel of the house', with the 'wordly men', that is the gods of this world. Hölderlin's last poems do not give a definite answer to his fundamental problem, but they show how he struggled to the last to hold on to the two great components of European history. And it is probable that the acuteness of this struggle had a great deal to do with the development of his illness.

Now that the fences are down, paganism presents itself in many different forms. But the super-pagan is the inventor of the super-man. It is quite wrong to think of Nietzsche as the enemy of religion. It is true that he announces the death of God, but this means the death of the traditional Christian God. Nietzsche really wants to be the founder of the new religion. He has hoped that the new Dionysian era which he described in his *'Geburt der Tragödie'* as 'a rebirth of hellenic antiquity', would be inaugurated through the musical dramatic art of Richard Wagner, but when Wagner proved inconsistent he concocted his own religion. The *Zarathustra* is clearly a countergospel. Nietzsche does not, however, succeed in liberating himself from Christianity. Every new work is a violent altercation with the picture, or rather caricature, of Christianity that he has in mind. And the last word is: 'Have you understood me? It is Dionysos against the crucified.'

So much for the history of paganism in Europe. I think that it shows clearly that there has not only been a process of secularization, but at the same time one of paganization. Ernest Renan was right when he said: *'Les dieux ne s'en vont que pour faire place à d'autres.'* (The gods go away only to make place for other gods.)

And what about our time? We have discovered that paganism does not necessarily express itself in poetic dreams, but may become an explosive and destructive ideology appealing to the masses. If one reads Hitler's conversations, one finds that he was quite consciously religious. But what a religion! A bit of pantheism, a bit of rationalism, a great deal of primitive superstition about blood, soil and race, and a real hatred against the God of Israel and the Christian Church. He considers it as his mission to make Western Europe *'judenfrei'* (free of Jews). And as to the place of Christianity, Julian the Apostate, he says, was [p. 342](#) really Julian the Faithful, and it was Constantine the Great who was the traitor. I do not imply that paganism must necessarily lead to such barbaric consequences. But I underline that since this acute paganization did succeed for a time in the heart of Europe, it is folly to say anywhere in Western Europe 'it cannot happen here', or 'it cannot happen again'. It *can* happen, though it may take other forms. It could be a paganism of the left. Are not the anarchistic movements finally based on a fanatic vitalism? Bakounin spoke already of the 'eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the incomprehensible and eternally creative source of life'.

European culture had become a debate between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism. For a long time it had seemed that scientific rationalism would take the lead. But recently the picture has changed. The atomic threat, the terrible pollution, the lack of meaningful perspective which the technocratic civilization has brought, has led to the growth of a new irrationalism. The counter-culture is not really a counter-culture, for it is eclectic and has picked up important elements of the earlier period. Nietzsche has become again a favoured guide. And the laypreachers of paganism, in the period between the world wars, D. H. Lawrence and Herman Hesse, are more widely read than ever before. Lawrence whom F. R. Leavis calls 'still the greatest writer of our own phase of civilization', has consistently sought to replace Christianity by a life-affirming or, as he called it, 'dark religion'. It is hard to find in modern literature more explicit and, one might say, 'orthodox' pagan writings than *The Plumed Serpent* with its proclamation of the excellence of ancient Mexican religion or *The Man Who Died* with

its sacrilegious treatment of the death of Christ and the new life he finds through the love of a priestess of Isis. Hermann Hesse has become the most widely read German writer. His message is clearly neo-gnostic. Thus in *Demian* one of the teachers of Sinclair explains that Abraxas (name of gnostic deity) is to be preferred to Jehovah. Hesse has also contributed to the tremendous popularity of Eastern religions. Through Schopenhauer, theosophy and anthroposophy, Eastern spirituality had penetrated in the West, but it is only in our day that it reaches larger circles, particularly among the young. Its attraction is not only its exotic quality. It is what the neo-pagans had been looking for, 'religion without revelation' (Huxley), in which the distinctions between God, man and nature tend to disappear.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

Now what have been the various attitudes of Christians to the neo-pagans? One attitude has been to annex as many of them as possible, to say that what they meant was really Christian or almost Christian. If one may adopt a well-known saying, the idea was 'if you cannot get rid of them, accept them as church members or at least as sympathisers'. A case in point is the article on Goethe in the very authoritative German Encyclopedia RGG (first edition) which declares that **P. 343** Goethe is the first consistent representative of the Christianity of the future. This is not new since a German professor of theology published long ago an anthology of Goethe's religious poetry with the subtitle: 'short summary of theology presented on the basis of Goethe's poetical works, for theologians, students of theology and educated laymen' (see Hagenbach, *Vorlesungen*, Sechster Teil, p. 273). A more recent example is to be found in Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God*, where he quotes a typical passage from the *Plumed Serpent*, D. H. Lawrence's re-statement of the primitive Mexican paganism, and says that this comes near to what he (the bishop) has been saying. Even if the God is very different, there is a way through here to the transcendent in a world without religion. Lawrence would have been astonished to hear this and might well have asked what on earth he would have to write in order to be recognized not as a secret ally of Christianity, but as an honest-to-goodness adherent of a radically different, pagan religion.

The quotation from Robinson is specially interesting in that it illustrates the confusion created by the concept of religion. It is almost a *communis opinio* that any kind of religion is better than agnosticism or atheism and that vis-à-vis the increasingly secularized world all religions are allies. Neo-paganism must, therefore, be handled with care. But this is quite contrary to the biblical way of thinking. For in the Old and New Testament the true God and the other gods have nothing in common. At this point, van Leeuwen is right in his strong insistence that the historic mission of Israel and, following Israel, of the Christian Church is to challenge the gods, to de-sacralize life and so to make the way free for the meeting with the one God who demands exclusive faithfulness. It is time that we take neo-paganism seriously. So far that has not happened to any great extent. Some of our best books concerning the presentation of the Christian faith to the modern world—such as the symposium 'The common Christian faith' or Hans Küng's *Being a Christian* pay much attention to modern atheism but very little to modern neo-paganism. Similarly, in the ecumenical discussion concerning evangelism and dialogue, the subject is not given the place it deserves. Most recently, at Chiang Mai, the important theological consultation on 'Dialogue in Community' had sections on relations with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, traditional religions and ideologies, but no section on neo-paganism.

To take neo-paganism seriously means then neither to annex it nor to explain it away nor to ignore it. It means to confront it as a serious alternative to Christianity. We need more thorough studies of the growth, the extent, the nature of neo-paganism, such as

Miskotte¹ and Jean Brun² have given us. We should pray for more sensitive Christocentric discernment as to the true distinction between Christianity and paganism. We should ask ourselves how far the implicit and [p. 344](#) explicit neo-pagan criticism or even condemnation of the churches is justified. We should admit that we Christians have not sufficiently 'tested the spirits, to see whether they are of God' ([1 John 4:1](#)). And all this without any triumphalism, for the growth of neo-paganism in the midst of our Christian civilization is really a terrible judgement on the churches.

UNDERSTANDING OUR EVANGELISTIC TASK

What should be the main theses of an evangelistic approach to the neo-pagan? There is time to mention only some of the most important.

1. The impersonal monism

Neo-paganism appears generally in the form of a monism in which the relation between man and the divine is not that between T and 'Thou', but between T and 'It'. The question which we must raise is then: Is God the sum total or ground of all existence about which we can only meditate, or is God our Creator who calls us and to whom we may respond in the interpersonal relation of prayer? We owe a great deal to Martin Buber, the 100th anniversary of whose birth will be celebrated next February. For he has helped us to get rid of the strange inferiority complex which characterized so much Christian thought, namely that it was somehow unworthy of God to speak of him in personal terms. Buber as a faithful interpreter of the Torah shows that it is the tremendous contribution of Israel to have held on to the revelation of the God who speaks, who acts, who judges, who loves, who saves over against all the various ancient religions in which man is confronted by dark unknown powers. An impersonal monism is a radically insufficient answer to the quest for the meaningful life, for the human person, threatened by the de-personalizing forces of urbanization and technocracy, needs to be helped to become a person, not to be absorbed in an impersonal universe.

2. Religious relativism

Neo-paganism believes that God reveals himself in many ways, but does not accept that any particular event in history is a fully authoritative and decisive revelation of God. The question that we must raise is whether revelation everywhere does not mean that we are nowhere quite sure of meeting God.

At this point the conflict between Christianity and neo-paganism is most acute. For the neo-pagan is not alone in protesting against the particularism and apparent narrowness of the Christian position. The relativism which goes along with the history of religions and of cultures and the demand for tolerance seem to strengthen the neo-pagan conception and make the Christian appear as a curious survivor of less enlightened days. But it is quite essential that the Christian witness should be very clear at this point. That God has spoken in many and various ways to the fathers by the prophets, but finally through a Son ([Heb. 1:1](#)), that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself ([2 Cor. 5:19](#)), that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ([John 1:14](#)), these statements are not pious exaggerations, but essential expressions [p. 345](#) of the Christian faith. And while it may seem that here lies the weakness of Christianity, its un-modernity, its Achilles heel, it

¹ *Edda en Thora, Wenn die Götter schweigen.*

² *Le Retour de Dionysos.*

should not be forgotten that in the world of 1900 years ago for which this insistence on a once-for-all revelation in history was also foolishness, it was precisely the news that God had acted in history that was received as good news.

3. The worship of nature

Neo-paganism identifies God and nature. We are invited to return to that communion with nature which characterized the primitive religions and which was abolished by Christianity. But we must raise the question whether a surrender to nature, as in the fertility-religions, has not dehumanized man and whether the great battle of the Old Testament prophets against Baalism or the Astartes was not a true battle for his liberation and emancipation.

Now that in a world full of pollution and threatened by the irresponsible use of nuclear energy the question of man's relation to nature has become acute again, there arises a strong movement of protest against the exploitation and neglect of our natural environment. The ecological enthusiasm has strong religious overtones. It turns easily to neo-paganism because there is a rumour about that it is the fault of the biblical religion that the Western world has acted so irresponsibly in its attitude to nature. That rumour (strongly supported by the famous article of Lynne White on 'Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 1967) is based on a misunderstanding. It is certainly not true that in the Bible nature is ignored or despised. For, as the nature psalms, the book of Job and other passages show, nature is honoured as it is created by God and is the theatre of his glory. The prophets and the New Testament writers warn against the worship of nature. But it is true that Christians have often lived and acted as if nature had nothing to do with the divine economy and have therefore become exploiters rather than stewards of nature.

In order to enter into a positive relation with nature, we should rediscover the biblical doctrine of creation and develop its implications. A return to the worship of nature as divine in itself would be a tremendous retrogression. In the critical period in Germany when the national-socialist ideology was being developed, Thomas Mann made a famous speech in which he said that if one realized how hard had been the struggle to leave behind the orgiastic worship of nature and the sexual and religious ecstasy of the Moloch-Baal-Astarte cults for a more spiritual adoration, a process of thousands of years in which Israel rendered this world-historical service, then one can only be surprised about the lightheartedness with which such a process of spiritual liberation is denied today. In this respect the Christian and the humanist are allies against a return to primitivism.

4. Vitalism

Neo-paganism is a thorough-going vitalism which seeks the intensification of life rather than its transformation. But we must raise the [p. 346](#) question whether life which has become an end in itself so that 'the purpose of living is to live' (Aldous Huxley) has any meaning and is truly human. Over against the worship of the life-force as such, we point to the gospel which speaks of the 'Prince of Life' ([Acts 3:15](#), 'Author of Life' in RSV) who has come to bring the abundant life ([John 10:11](#)) but it is a new life, the entrance to which is a fundamental change of direction, a 'repentance unto life' ([Acts 11:18](#)).

It is strange that in a generation in which the sense of social justice and of the solidarity of mankind is strongly developed, we find so much naive faith in the goodness and reliability of uncontrolled and unbridled life force. For such a faith can produce only a society in which the most vital will dominate and which will oscillate between explosions of vitalism from the right such as fascism, and those from the left such as anarchism.

When the neo-pagans attack Christianity as a life-denying faith and preach their gospel of the affirmation of life, we must admit that in many expressions of Christianity the negation has been more audible than the affirmation. But we must go on to make it very clear that the new life in Christ is truly abundant and does not destroy, but transforms and orients the original life force in us.

5. Rehabilitation of Eros

Neo-paganism demands the rehabilitation and emancipation of Eros which has been suppressed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. But we must ask whether Eros itself is a reliable guide for the creation of deep and permanent human relations.

The modern protest against the disqualification of Eros in the tradition of the church and in various forms of moralism is not without justification. In Christian theology and teaching, Eros has seldom been treated as a normal and basic constituent element of human existence, but as a dangerous and evil force. This was, of course, due to the fact that in the ancient pagan world Eros had been the object of worship, and the nature of eros-love was essentially different from the nature of agape-love, the love characteristic of the Christian life. Now in our day, Eros takes its revenge. Eros refuses to be ignored any longer. Some declare that the time has come to combine religion and eroticism, since 'both have the same aim: They want to change man and seek his rebirth' (Walter Schubart). Others are convinced that in order to serve Eros we must reject the God of the Bible. In this situation the message of the Christian Church is lacking in clarity. We know that Eros must not be allowed to be in sole charge of human relations. For Eros is finally self-seeking and so its victories are often Pyrrhic; the victor does not reap any fruit of his victory. Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence's friend and himself an apostle of Eros, spoke a true word when he said of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that it was 'a beautiful, but inexpressibly sad book'. The qualification applies even more to the literature by lesser writers of the pan-erotic school.

It is, then, clear that Eros needs Agape. The very best we have in our tradition concerning the relations between men and women is inspired by Agape, very especially the definite [p. 347](#) commitment of two human beings to each other as faithful partners for life. But we have not yet done our homework on the question of what can and must be the place of Eros in the lives of men and women who want to be instruments of the God-given Agape. The debate between Anders Nygren, Karl Barth, Denis de Rougemont and others on Eros and Agape has not led to any conclusion that we can use in our evangelistic approach. Until we have a clear word on this deeper issue, we cannot deal helpfully with the acute moral issues of our time. One wonders why this crucial issue has not been taken more seriously at the ecumenical level.

6. Life without hope

Neo-paganism is a religion without a definite, well-grounded hope. Where there is only the concept of infinity, but no meeting with God, only an abstract omnipotence, but not the omnipotence of the qualities of this one God, there is no centre of time, there is no beginning and no end and we live in an unlimited freedom without orientation and in unmeasurable loneliness (Miskotte). And this absence of a clear ground for hope is all the more tragic since the present generation has had to take leave of so many illusions concerning the future of mankind.

CONCLUSION

So the evangelistic message to the neo-pagans must show that, according to the Old and New Testament, the people of God are the people on the way to the great fulfilment, the people who have a wonderful future to look forward to, a messianic people which does not despair about the state of the world because it knows that this world is in the hands of the God who says: 'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save' ([Isaiah 46:4](#)).

In closing I would make two remarks. The first is that evangelization of Europe's neo-pagans is so urgent, so difficult that it ought to have the highest priority among the tasks of the church. How many of our theologians are working in this field? How many pastors? Far too few. What courses concerning neopaganism are given in our theological faculties and in our lay training institutes?

My second remark is that we are now in a situation in which for many Europeans, especially the younger ones, a meeting with the gospel comes as a new discovery. They thought they knew it, but they find that it is vastly more relevant than they thought. Let us hope that in a Europe which has become mission territory, the churches may become in the best sense 'younger' churches.

The late Dr. Visser 'T. Hooft, formerly General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, delivered this address to the West European Consultation on Evangelism sponsored by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Frankfurt-Main, Germany, September 1977. p. 348

The Gospel as Truth in a Secular Society

The Three Levels of Mission in New Zealand

Harold Turner

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The author explores the importance of the surface cultures of individual behaviour and social customs and the deep culture of foundation truths and the interaction between them for evangelism in New Zealand society. He illustrates his thesis from the rise and fall of Marxism.

Editor

Christian missions have been part of New Zealand's history in the modern period, initially as missions to the Maori people. After these missions became Maori churches, crosscultural concern was redirected into foreign missions. New Zealand personnel eventually served in every continent of the world. For a small country we have a notable record. Besides denominational mission agencies, the list of independent missionary societies or local representatives of overseas societies runs into many scores.

HOLISTIC OVERSEAS MISSIONS

In most of this overseas work there has been a holistic approach in the sense that the gospel was addressed to all three levels of human existence: the individual personal, the public social, and the deeper cultural. Such a comprehensive approach was demanded by the nature of the local situation. Missionaries had to start at the first level, with sole converts or small groups. They also had to address the second level: social systems and the structures of marriage, the place of women, the treatment of disease, pay-back revenge, and many other areas demanding reform in the direction of God's kingdom.

Beyond these two levels missionaries p. 349 had to address the basic culture itself. Language is the first expression of the basic culture. The local language was learned, given written form, and used for translating the Scriptures. This study was extended by the use of anthropology to help reach the very roots of a people's life. Missionaries were pioneers in the development of the modern sciences of linguistics and anthropology. They then brought the gospel to bear on the roots of the culture. They were engaged in what I am calling 'deep mission'.

LEARNING FROM OUR MISSIONARIES

The holistic approach we have learned abroad in other societies and cultures offers a radical critique of what we have been doing in New Zealand. Here the evangelism of the 'evangelical' and the more recent 'charismatic' constituencies has been focused on level 1, the individual, as its chief emphasis. Christian bookstores concentrate on this and on the nurture of the personal religious life. The more 'liberal' constituency, especially in the mainline churches, is much more involved in the reform of social systems and structures, level 2 of our existence, especially through its focus on issues such as rights, ecology, peace, feminism, etc. For some two decades evangelicals have shown increasing concern for social transformation. Brian Hathaway's *Beyond Renewal, The Kingdom of God* provides striking evidence of this.¹ Nevertheless there continues to be a degree of polarization between the individual and the social emphases within our Christian community, polarization that has been less evident on overseas mission fields.

While our missionaries overseas study world-views and the basic assumptions of tribal and other cultures, level 3, in order to bring a biblical critique to bear at this level, concern in New Zealand to bring the gospel to bear on the very roots of our culture has been almost totally absent. There are various reasons for this.

SURFACE CULTURE AS SOCIAL CUSTOMS

First, we operate with a surface view of culture, the popular view that limits culture to our various traditions: foods, clothing, housing, entertainment and parties, music, art styles, greetings, births, marriages and funerals, anniversaries, etc. I call this surface or expressive culture. It is equivalent to social customs rather than to any deeper basic worldview. 'Cultural presentations' consist of music, drama, dance, costumes, foods, ways of greeting, all of which are interesting to others and contribute to the self-identity of groups. These presentations may reflect the original root culture only little or not at all. To that extent they restrict the basic meaning of culture to social customs. So we come to believe, to quote from an Auckland mayor's publicity, that 'all challenges of a cultural nature can be resolved by fostering understanding, communication and working together

¹ Brian Hathaway, *Beyond Renewal, The Kingdom of God*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Word, 1990).

with a love for all in our community'. This [p. 350](#) is superficial, but Christians fall for it like everyone else.

To illustrate further, consider the very distinctive 'cultures' of the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish within the one society and nation of the United Kingdom. Here in New Zealand these surface culture variations of Britain survive and are consciously nurtured. To these have been added surface cultures of Dalmatia, the Netherlands, Greece and many others. These people are however all Europeans. Beneath level 2 variations of social custom they are Europeans who share a common deeper-level, level 3, European tradition and worldview. The two levels are quite different.

From the Maori viewpoint they are all 'Pakeha' (foreigner). Pakeha is primarily a cultural term rather than a racial one. New Zealanders will become even more conscious of our common surface culture when we see the impact of the current immigration of quite different Asian cultures, and understand what lies below the surface cultural variations of Taiwanese, Japanese, Indians and others. An Asian worldview has fundamental oppositions to the European worldview. This is a new and urgent question to which governments seem to be irresponsibly indifferent. How can these worldviews combine if there is a basic incompatibility between them? We just do not know what we are doing at these foundational levels of human life.

DEEP CULTURE AS FOUNDATION TRUTH

The same word 'culture' can refer to social customs, i.e. 'surface culture' (level 2, the social level of our lives), or to the basic axioms and convictions by which people live, i.e. our 'deep' or 'foundational culture' (level 3, the deeper level). Like the foundations of a building the third level is often hidden. At some points there may be the closest interconnection between these two levels. It is remarkable how at other points they may be separated.

A classic example of this is found in the Scriptures. Israel emerged from a background of tribal cultures and religions where rituals and festivals were linked with the fertility of crops and herds, with lambing and harvest festivals, and with pagan fertility rites. Remarkably, outward forms, the visible social customs, were retained and given new meaning that derived from the new biblical worldview. The feasts of Weeks, of Tabernacles and of Passover commemorated the specific acts of God within their history rather than the timeless fertility powers of nature. Israel's surface culture now carried a new meaning.

A similar process occurred in the early Jewish church. In Acts chapter 15 we read of the history-making decision not to impose on Gentile converts in other cultures even such a basic Jewish cultural requirement as circumcision. The requirement was removed, as it were, from level 3 to a position within the more surface culture of level 2, a fairly radical change for Jewish Christians. The same process occurred again when rabbits and eggs of pagan Europe's ancient fertility rites were given new historical meanings within the Christian context of Easter.

There is no necessary connection [p. 351](#) between the surface culture of social customs and the deep cultural forces that ultimately control our lives. For instance, we will not necessarily deal with the basics of Maori culture at the level of marae protocol, nor with the roots of Japanese culture by learning how to visit a Japanese home for a meal, important though these and all similar customs are. In identifying the ambiguities of this word 'culture', we relocate these more surface aspects of cultures to the area of the social. This places them among the concerns of the Christian social reformer who seeks a Christian life-style in these matters. There is much to be done here. What is a Christian

wedding or funeral, a Christian style in furnishings or dress? Some styles are plainly un-Christian, and evangelism must certainly take account of this level of our existence. So I am not depreciating the importance of change or reform at this level. But we do not reach understanding of the culture of any people when we seek it only at the surface level of social custom, by learning only to be polite to one another, or attending one another's festivals.

The Analogy of Marxism

In illustration consider the history of Marxism. If Marx had been content to operate at our level 1, he might have left no more than a coterie of like-minded radical thinkers or at best a kind of Marxist Church. Such groups were founded in the 19th century in the name of humanism or secularism.

Or Marx might have been merely a radical social reformer, operating at our level 2, a social activist concerned with child labour, boy chimney sweeps, sweated seamstresses, or conditions in prisons or factories. He would have joined the band of similar and honoured social reformers who effected some improvement in these areas. But he would not have changed the face of the world in the next eighty years.

The immense global and practical influence of this one man, Karl Marx, depended on his theories which offered a worldview, an interpretation of history and the meaning of human life. They offered the basic assumptions or axioms of a comprehensive philosophy of existence. They claimed to be true. They invoked the adjective 'scientific' to support their claim. Marxism would win in the end because it was true! Correct theory, i.e. Marxist orthodoxy, was paramount, and the worst enemy would come from within as deviationism or heresy. What Marxism offered was foundational truth which lay at our level 3. On these axioms all else was to be built. Therein lay its strength.

This provides vivid examples of several important principles. First, note the difference between focusing primarily on level 3, rather than on levels 1 or 2. If we focus on levels 1 or 2, the results will be only on those levels. We must also work at level 3. We sorely need to absorb this fact when we talk about evangelism.

Second, note the supreme importance at level 3 not of pragmatic results or of power but of truth. Marxism had practical results and power in plenty, but it was wrong. Its basic view of reality was simply untrue. No achievements in China or elsewhere can mask the final [p. 352](#) consequences of a worldview that does not correspond with the way things are created. What is remarkable is how quickly reality rebelled and exposed the falsity.

And third, the gospel could reach Marxism and critique it only at the fundamental level, level 3. It was not much use picking a moral quarrel with the life-style of individual Marxists, who often put half-hearted Christians to shame. Nor was it very effective to critique Marxist economic and political systems which had usually replaced something worse, often with remarkable achievements. Only the truth of the biblical worldview, and its version of the real structure and goal of human nature and the real forces in history, could be placed over against Marxist axioms. In the end history and reality could wait no longer. With the collapse of Marxism, it is at this third level that the real reconstruction of Eastern Europe must now be sought.

DEEP CULTURE AS THE NEW MISSION FRONTIER

Now at last we come to consider the proper content of level 3 itself. Here we meet a major difficulty, that of bringing to consciousness for critical examination the underlying, axiomatic, unconsciously-assumed convictions that I have called deep or foundational culture. We may get the feel of this unfamiliar realm if we look at the wide variety of terms

used to describe its contents: words like axioms, assumptions, paradigms, viewpoint, mind-set, fiduciary stance, belief-system, worldview, cultural roots. I shall use the general term worldview for the contents of this level. This is the level in need of deep mission which will critique its truth or error, its relation to the biblical worldview, and so its relation to reality itself.

Who among us could describe clearly the underlying assumptions of our lives? Brian Carrell sets out some of the characteristics of modern Western culture that Christians share with those outside the Christian faith, characteristics that make us all so alike as New Zealanders.² And who can tell us how far this secular humanist worldview has become the effective working basis in much of our church and personal life? As Brian Carrell puts it, 'a priority must be de-secularizing the Church itself'. Or, in other terms, de-indigenizing the Christian faith within New Zealand before we can think of genuine indigenization. The basic reason why the gospel has so little impact in this country is that it has lost its distinctives by assimilation to the prevailing culture within which we all live. There is no 'us' and 'them'. We are all 'them'.

Let me offer the simplest of examples. The regular Salvation Army advertisement for its holiday facilities at Russell includes the offer of a 'luxury motel'. When the Salvation Army goes up-market and gets into the business of selling luxury, we have to ask whether the gospel or our current consumer-oriented Western culture is in control. For a Christian in a poor world the criterion of luxury is a good guide as to what [p. 353](#) not to buy or do. If the Army should plead that its motel is really quite modest (as well it may be), then it has been caught up in current advertizing exaggeration to the point of untruth! I apologize to the Army for taking this example when more serious and complex illustrations can be found in any of our churches. But the very simplicity and unwitting nature of this example shows how easily we operate with the unconscious assumptions and attitudes of our culture.

Changing hearts and minds at the level of belief systems, to remove distortions and sheer errors: that is the new mission frontier for the gospel of Christ. This gospel brings its own special understanding of the way things really are. At this third level that is the question at every point.

Deep mission at this level is essential if we are to undergird the direct changes in the social order at level 2, and provide the cultural context for more holistic persons at level 1. Indeed, if Christianity is to do more than counsel individuals at the private level, or avoid becoming an increasingly weak and parasitic ally of liberal humanist forces operating mainly at level 2, it must cross this new mission frontier to level 3 and engage with all serious-minded people in a profound re-examination of the very bases of Western culture. This will demand hard thinking, the most relevant form of practical action for Christians in New Zealand today.

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² Brian Carrell. *New Vision New Zealand* (Auckland, Vision NZ, 1993) pp. 49–58.

The Christian Faith in a Post-Christian Society

Brian Carrell

*Reprinted with permission from The Reaper December-January, 1992.
Abridged.*

*In this address to the graduating class of 1991 of the Bible College of New Zealand, Bishop Carrell redraws the battle lines for the gospel of the 21st century. In the first part of the address (not reprinted) he compares the year of 1991 with the critical year of 1963 when C. S. Lewis and Aldous Huxley died, John F. Kennedy was assassinated and John Robinson launched his best seller *Honest to God*. He asked, 'Would the graduating students of that year (1963) feel adequately equipped and confident enough in the Spirit to minister in the secular Aotearoa New Zealand of 1991? Personally I doubt it. What has happened to our world over these intervening years? In what ways have the gospel battle lines been redrawn? How do we commend the Christian faith in a post-Christian society such as ours today?' He then outlines four paradigm shifts in the Western world, three signs of hope, three prospects for the 21st century and three priorities for the Church.*

Editor

I. PARADIGM SHIFTS

The technological and social changes which have taken place are awesome enough, but it is the changes in Western world-view which are even more significant when considering the mission of the Church and the task of evangelism. These changes have been both radical and unpredictable. It was the Dean of the Harvard Medical School who, in addressing freshman students, stated that by the time they graduated half the knowledge they **P. 355** were being taught would be useless. He went on to state that the tragedy was that he did not know which half!

So far as our Western world-view is concerned, especially when it impinges on our task and calling as Christians, there are four significant, major paradigm shifts which have occurred over these past thirty years.

1. Privatized Faith

The holding of religious belief has come to be seen as the mark of an individual rather than a feature of a community. With this has come a steady removal of religious concerns of perspectives from educational philosophy and practice, from political argument and accountability. A secular society is not anti-religious; it just insists that matters of faith be a private concern, restricted to certain occasions and places, optional at all times, and never intruding into the larger life of society.

The Church has unwittingly aided and abetted this attitude with its insistence on individual faith, personal response, and often a divorce of religion from large areas of life such as sport, politics and economics. And even among many Christians, religious faith is deemed to be a leisure time activity and more appropriate in the privacy of the domestic home than in the politicking of the public meeting.

2. Pluralized Belief

This new secular climate within which we now all live has as one of its unwritten tenets that all belief systems are valid, all have credentials of some sort, no one set of beliefs is true, tolerance is king.

But the consequence of this is that we have to deny society any preference for one faith over another. The ‘scandal of particularity’ is an offence in such a society. Our Christian heritage becomes a can of worms which no right-minded secularist would want to open. And the future in no way is given direction or shape by the commitment of a community to one such faith as Christianity. So we are no longer, even in a very generous sense, a ‘Christian country’.

3. Marginalized Religion

The exclusion of religious faith from the public realm eventually leads to a diminution of respect for its presence and substance on the local scene. There comes a loss of a sense of the sacred. Holy days lose their significance. The meaning of Good Friday or Easter Day or Christmas cannot be naturally explained or promoted in the classroom (though paradoxically there can be an epidemic of witches and weirdos at Halloween!). And churches become targets for vandalism. In such a society, where respect for the transcendent has disappeared, it is little wonder that God becomes irrelevant.

4. Relativized Values

Remove God and there is little need for religion; remove religion and there is little ground for absolute values. Where once our society had a pretty good idea of what was right and what was wrong, of the reality of good and the fearsomeness of evil, in a secular society all these are comparatively relative. It is a morally grey world in which we live. Society sets its own standards, and those with enough media muscle shape such moral and ethical reference **p. 356** points to suit themselves. There is no authority outside our own consensus to which we are accountable. Objective truth (except, again paradoxically, in the steadily shifting sands of science) does not exist. Doubt in such a world is more acceptable than dogma; searching than discovery; feelings than thoughts; departing than arriving. The heretic is the hero, the saint the sinner. In such a topsy-turvey world, it is no longer palatable to point to Jesus Christ as ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life’.

II. VANISHED PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE

What has happened in the last thirty years is that we have lost the plausibility structure for the gospel. What was once a user-friendly world for Christians is now a world at best alien to the message of Jesus Christ, at worst hostile. Where once those who were not committed to Jesus Christ were largely like the God-fearers in New Testament times, sympathetic and at least grudgingly aware of God, today the bulk of people outside the faith community are literally lost to God—ignorant of Christ, uncaring about eternity, without any bad conscience over their chosen way of life or lack of faith.

Facing such a world provides both handicaps and hopes when we come to consider our gospel mandate. The handicaps are not only a resistant society which sees no need for our message but also an illequipped church when it comes to understanding and responding to such a society. For in the process of society contracting this secular sickness, imperceptibly the Church herself has also been infected with the very disease she has sought to resist. The issue has been powerfully and imaginatively addressed in Os Guinness’ book, *The Gravedigger File*. It is an absorbing and at times chilling exercise to reflect on what are the classic secular values of our age and in what ways these have unconsciously seeped into the life of our churches, often to a point where they are

promoted as gospel assets! (For example, a preoccupation with various human rights, the elevation of the individual over the community, wealth as a sign of blessing, the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfilment as a supreme goal of life, the separation of faith concerns from social concerns.)

III. SIGNS OF HOPE

But alongside the handicap of a resistant society and an often illequipped Church, there are also encouraging signs of hope for us in the task of making Christ known and bringing the world under his Lordship. We now have, as never before, an holistic grasp of the gospel which will make much more sense in the kind of society we face, a gospel which declares itself in both word and action, in concern for the whole person in all their needs.

Secondly we are discovering, sometimes in a painfully slow way but with the leadership of bodies such as the Bible College, that only a total ministry by the whole of the body of Christ will make inroads on a religiously callous and uncaring society. Both the steady training and equipping of lay people, many of whom will then return to their dairy [p. 357](#) farm or classroom or job-search, and the witness of Christians of various denominational backgrounds studying and working together, have assisted remarkably in this preparation of a church for evangelism in the 21st century.

Finally as a sign of hope there is also, perhaps surprisingly, the growing disillusionment within self-assured secularism. The world which secular society has had a chance to build without God is beginning to let them down. Market forces have not been the liberating angel they had hoped for. Educational changes have not produced a better society. Politics have not become more sensible, long-sighted and honest. The demise of communism has not removed terror and fear from the international scene. Property and persons are less secure in our kind of society today than they were in 1963, and there are no indications that the next political, economic, social or educational recipe is going to make everything right, hey presto! The secular optimists are becoming disenchanted.

IV. PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What then are the prospects before the Christian concerned to step out into such a world in order to make Christ known? Let me conclude by making three statements about the Church as it faces the 21st century:

1. Christendom Has Irretrievably Gone

There is no way we can return, or probably would wish to return, to the world as our forefathers knew it. The way ahead is not to be found by looking over our shoulders or by making a U-turn.

Yet also, we will in no way want to concede the ground to the secularist privatizing pressures. Somehow, and it will be your generation rather than mine that discovers how, we must reclaim the high ground of public life, morality and order for Christ and the gospel.

2. Our Call To Be A Holy People

That means a people who are prepared to live differently, and who know the telling points where these differences matter.

These will be in the areas of world-view, values, priorities, even possessions. We are still called to be a people set apart for God, living as strangers in an alien world.

Yet we are not asked to withdraw from the world; we are not to lose touch with our culture. Somehow we now need to learn how to embody our gospel in the way that we live and worship as church communities, recognizably part of the culture of this lovely green land of ours, yet distinctive. Encountering Christians in community anywhere should always be for the unbeliever an encounter with Christ.

3. We Are To Be The Salt Of Society

Our evangelism is not to be addressed only to individual people; it is also to be addressed to our culture and its many environments: the arts, literature, environmental concerns, the landscape, industry, commerce, education, the courts, medicine etc. How is Christ to be seen as Saviour and honoured as Lord in each of **p. 358** these settings and in the concerns they express?

V. THREE PRIORITIES

This will require of us three priorities of ministry.

1. Revitalizing Local Churches

It is here that the Christian faith puts down its roots. Institutional Christianity on the national scale will never impress as much as the local church which belongs to a community, cares for the community and makes Christ visible in that community.

A priority must be not simply multiplying churches so that there is one in every 500 people, but revitalizing churches so that they make good gospel sense in every rural and urban community. Ways must be found to make all of our churches more authentic, vibrant, winsome and earthed locally.

2. Training In Discipleship

If this is an increasingly unsympathetic and unwelcoming society in which we live, how can we help Christians to live with integrity as disciples of Jesus in such a society? Most of the practical portions of the new Testament epistles were written with the intention in mind to help new believers in the first century to know how to live for Christ in their kind of world. We must do the same for our changed circumstances of today, as a priority of lay or ordained ministry.

3. Challenging Secular Assumptions

What we are up against is a society which bases its assumptions and therefore makes its decisions and establishes its values on secular premises. We have to challenge these premises, to show with intellectual integrity their shortcomings, to offer an alternative world-view which makes sense for a world such as ours. In short, we have to provide a plausibility structure for faith. After all, it was the world God loved so much that he gave his only Son; it was the world Jesus sent his disciples out into; it is the world that Christ died on the cross to redeem. And a priority for evangelism is to restore this wider world dimension to our gospel-vision.

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The Challenge of Urbanization in the Developing World A Case Study from Bombay

Viju Abraham

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Urbanization is a major contributing factor to the process of secularization and also to the post-secular forms of spirituality. This is as true of the cities of the emerging Third World as it is of the West. The article points to the complexity of the urban dwellers' self identity, the crisis of urban churches and para-church agencies. It challenges the whole church to the priority of urban mission.

Editor

God's rederuptive concern for the concentrations of people in cities is clear throughout the Bible. We see the heart of God in Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah ([Gen. 18](#)). We see it in the mission of Jonah to Nineveh and God's chiding of the prejudiced prophet, who would probably have seen a Sodom-type of holocaust. Jonah is told of the number of innocents as well as cattle in the city!

God's heart is seen in his call for his people to be a blessing (literally peace-*shalom*) to the city of Babylon and to be intercessors even while being a slave class people ([Jer. 29:7](#), compare [Psalm 137](#)). The purposes of God in the Messiah's ministry include the restoration of ruined cities ([Isa. 61:4](#)). In the New Testament, we see that the apostle Paul focused on the cities of the empire while fulfilling his mission to the Gentiles. It was a very effective strategy. Ephesus, for instance, became the centre for outreach to Asia through the natural webs of relationships that cities produce through commerce and interchange ([Acts 19:8-10](#)).

Though the Bible started with a garden, it ends in a city ([Rev. 21:1-4](#)). The city of God seems to be synonymous with the people of God. The mission of the Church today calls for the expansion of the city of peace (Jerusalem—God's people—God's kingdom) in the city of Baal or Babylon (Satan's kingdom). [p. 360](#) What does that look like in India today?

I. DEMOGRAPHICS

India, like the rest of the developing world, is seeing a population explosion in the cities. The move from farm to factory has been repeated in industrializing societies in the twentieth century as it occurred in the Western world a century ago. The conditions of Charles Dicken's London can be compared with the overcrowding, the slums, the destitution, and the crisis with facilities, shelter, employment and health in Calcutta and Bombay, except that we enjoy better medicine and technology today, and live in a world made smaller (by the airplane and modern communications) than it was in the last century.

Whereas at Indian independence the urban population in India (that is, town and city) stood at 18 percent, in 1981 it had climbed up to 29 percent. It is predicted that in 2000 it will be between 40-45 percent. Our cities grow at a pace of up to 1500 new migrants (Bombay) every day; that amounts to 500,000 annually.

Migration accounts for more than 50 percent of the population growth in our major cities.

Needs are Opportunities

The city certainly demonstrates overcrowding, pollution, crime, and all the other problems that result from large conglomerations of people. But these also need to be seen as the great opportunity before the church in India. Here we may be involved in loving service and mission among the masses of the city.

The urban person in India today suffers from some of the same emotional maladies that urbanites face elsewhere in the world: loneliness, insignificance, and irrelevance in the complexity and enormity of the city. Along with this is the grim reality of overcrowded metropolises that rural migrants face, unless they are among the fortunate 50 percent who have a proper shelter over their heads.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CITY'S PEOPLE

Who are the people that make up the Indian city? It is imperative that we see the sociology of the city before trying to make our plans for mission. 'The poor and the lost' provides an overall description, but we need to see how this mass of people can be understood by looking at them through different lenses.

Professions

The urban person can be distinguished from the rural person by being primarily a non-agricultural worker, but also in getting his identity from his occupation. He is not Mr. K. R. Reddy's son, but an engineer with Tata Electric, or a lathe operator in Hindustan Autos. There are, moreover, hundreds of professions and trades. Life revolves around one's profession. The time spent at work and in commuting adds up to fifteen hours daily.

The city can be seen as consisting of professional zones, e.g. the commercial district, the government offices, the industrial area, the transport zones of the railways, the airports, the bus stations. The people [p. 361](#) that the urban Christian comes across each day at his job site are a major mission field. The average pastor can multiply himself at the parishioners' work site if he sees himself as their trainer more than a Sunday preacher.

Ethno-linguistic Groupings

Every city is cosmopolitan to a far greater degree than a village. People not only come from all over the state and country, but also the world. Bombay has its Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Telegu, Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Punjabi worlds, as well as its Iranian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and German ones. This makes the planting of language churches essential. The common language may be Hindi or English but works are needed in the native languages of the target groups. In Bombay we have churches in more than ten Indian languages, including Mizo and Nepali, as well as Korean and German.

The diplomatic community as well as international tourism and business involve the church in serious overseas mission. The growing world of refugees in our cities from Iran, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh call us to compassionate service. The world has come to us. This is God's mission today in our cities, where the peoples of the country and world have come to us. Many stories are told of how overseas students, international travellers and homeless refugees have found Christ in our cities.

Religion

Religion along with language strikes at a person's basic identity. In addition, caste in religion, as in the cases of Hinduism and Sikhism, creates a feeling of kinship. A way of seeing the city's peoples is by analyzing the ethno-linguistic religious caste groupings, e.g. Gujarati Patels or Gujarati Jains, or Tamil Agyangars, Malayali Nairs, Bhojpuri Yadavs, or Punjabi Kshetris. The Muslims have their subcultures too, such as the Gujarati Menons, Malayali Moplahs or Gujarati Bohras. The major religions of the world can all be found in the city. This calls us to look beyond our church walls to proclaim the gospel to the city's peoples.

Class

The city's industrial society and commerce produces class stratification. The rich and the poor are at opposite ends of the spectrum, with a squeezed-in middle class between them. Shacks are a reality in the city. Bombay has approximately four to five million living in them, as well as more than 100,000 in sidewalk/pavement shacks. The poor of the city as well as the rich need the good news. However, in a special way God calls the church in the city to care for the urban poor, for in them the nature of the kingdom of God is revealed. There needs to be churches for the slums that are holistic in their programme, involving themselves in the desperate plight of urban slum dwellers.

The Marginalized

We can also see a socially marginalized group at the very bottom. There are the prostitutes (150,000 in Bombay), [p. 362](#) the beggars, the lepers (700,000 begging in Bombay), the blind (estimate 150,000), destitute children, dying destitute (for which Mother Teresa has become famous), the mentally and physically handicapped, and the terminally ill of the city.

Age groups

Another way to look at our cities is by age. The average age is dropping as the number of births increase. The increased demand for educational programmes in Indian cities is only one indication that the percentage of children in the urban population is rising. It is therefore a time to expand children and youth ministries. Youth for Christ, Scripture Union and Union of Evangelical Students of India need to multiply their ministries many times over, and city churches need to make their children's and youth ministries more outreach-oriented. The children of the slums and the destitute children of our city streets beckon to us in a special way. What will their school-less and hungry lives produce without literacy, job skills and nutrition in the urban jungle?

III. UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH IN URBAN INDIA

Churches should be the main resource pools for labourers in the urban harvest. We need to be quite broad-minded if we are not to close our minds to those who are in fact fellow labourers in the kingdom. We will find a lot of kindred spirits in the broad spectrum of the Catholic, Orthodox, historical Reformed churches of Episcopal traditions, and the older and newer churches in the free church tradition.

Unfortunately, a lot of church growth in cities is basically transfer growth. We need renewal in the older churches where a lot of nominal faith exists, but also in the newer ones, where even after the first generation the faith of the parents is not necessarily passed on. The wheat and tares are soon to be seen growing side by side.

What we need to see in the city is both the renewal and expansion of the whole body of Christ outwards to the unchurched. I recommend growing a whole network of churches in the city rather than just our own individual denomination. Few churches, I sense, want to grow by genuine evangelism to the unreached. How wonderful it would be to see churches growing by genuine conversions in the love and unity of Christ, as seen in [John 13:34-35](#) and [John 17:11, 21](#)!

Church plantings among the different people groups and languages can become a reality if churches will evangelize to the outer borders of their own language group in the city, while also sending cross-cultural workers to unreached groups. Urban church planters can come from within the city, so that the normal problems with new workers finding accommodation will not be a hindrance.

Parachurches in the city

The church versus the parachurch debate will continue for some time. It would be more profitable to see how we could join hands together for the city. Parachurch bodies have a mission function that the local **p. 363** church cannot always fulfil. They are specialized ministries, often service-centered in things like literature and media. Others focus on one people group, be they businessmen, the intelligentsia, students, youth, children, slum dwellers or hospitalized people. Those who are working for outreach to specific unreached ethno-linguistic religious groups in the city, however, are rare, as are those who have focused on professional groups such as rickshaw drivers, cabbies, airline personnel, factory workers, or hawkers.

Missions to tribals and villages often base their headquarters in the city but don't do any direct ministry there, apart from fundraising and administration. Considering that the village is moving to the city at such a rapid rate, we need to consider seriously assigning workers to the city, or having workers who reach out to the groups from the hinterland concentrate instead on reaching their own people in the city.

IV. EQUIPPING WORKERS

The problem of 'spectatoritis' in the city's churches is not a new phenomenon. God's chosen people are often God's frozen people! The pastor and a handful do most of the work of the congregation and very little participation is seen from the majority. Changing this in the city could dramatically see God's people (the laity) being unleashed. This will take training of pastors and laity alike. Groups like the Church Growth Institute in Madras, Christian education programmes, Bible colleges and seminaries, as well as city networks, need to underline the training of this silent majority in our churches.

V. STARTING A MINISTRY IN THE CITY

What are some of the essentials in beginning urban ministry? What are the first strategy steps?

Unity and networking

If there is one message I would like to preach over and over again, it is this: 'We are not alone in the city.' God has more people than we imagine. We need to avoid the Elijah syndrome of feeling we are the only ones left.

The more we can fellowship with the rest of the body of Christ in the city, the greater the reality of the message of Christ ([John 17:21](#)). Moreover, we can avoid duplication and see a genuine expansion of ministry. Examples of churches separated by language joining

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

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

Prayer for the city

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

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

Research

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

Training the team

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

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

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

John Williams

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(abridged).*

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

Editor

INTRODUCTION¹

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

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

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

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

I. SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF THE THOUGHT OF LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Missionary background

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

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

Analysis and critique of modern culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

Epistemology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Missiology and ecclesiology

This shorter section gives some further details of the consequences of Newbigin's epistemological proposals for his view of the Church and its mission. There is a key 'mission statement' in chapter 10 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 'The Logic of Mission': 'The true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be private opinion. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part.... Now decisions have to be made ... for Christ as the clue to history or for some other clue' (GPS pp. 125f).

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

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

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY: QUESTIONS TO NEWBIGIN

Newbigin and biblical theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Newbiggin and the communal or associational church

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Newbigin and the liberal/fundamentalist divide

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

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

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

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

III. THE GOSPEL AS PUBLIC TRUTH

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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Book Reviews

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

by David F. Wells

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

The 'recovery of dissent' (288, 295–6) by an evangelical movement too much affected by the world (293) is Wells' main objective in this erudite and complex analysis of contemporary American culture.

As such, it tackles a puzzling question about American evangelical Christianity: it is numerically strong, vociferous and enjoys the support of some highly prominent adherents, yet it seems to make little moral impact on a humanistic, secularized society which continually reports increasing crime, corruption and violence (293, 171, 135f).

This book provides an answer to this question by pointing to the inner weakness of evangelicalism. Wells charges that, despite its apparent vitality, it is characterized by 'vacuous worship', 'psychologized preaching', 'trident logical vision and leadership, leading to institutional disintegration and therefore claims that the movement is in danger of running out of spiritual capital (133). Accordingly, he speaks of 'the declining years of evangelicalism' (127) and avers that 'the word *evangelical* has, by default, been allowed to degenerate into little more than a slogan' (294).

The title indicates Wells' explanation for this state of affairs. Evangelicalism, along with other Christian traditions and the community of which they were dominant parts, once accepted theology as important because it dealt with 'the cognitive substance of faith' (132). The ground rules and data were accepted by all, even if there was not always agreement as to conclusions.

But now, as a result of fundamental changes in Western culture, there is literally no place in the public's consciousness for the kind of truth that once was considered the essential material of theology (280, 125ff, 183ff). There is therefore no definitive role for theology in the Church, which, as a result is hollow and inward looking (295, 292), and having lost the source of its vision and goal, finds its future in grave doubt.

These cultural changes, which Wells dates to the latter part of the [p. 378](#) 19th century (61), have a special importance for the evangelical church (288, 289), because it is based on a particular interpretation of revealed truth, and it once prided itself on its strict adherence to the cognitive nature of divine truth (128).

Wells does not argue that theology as such has completely disappeared from evangelicalism, but under the impact of a coalition of forces represented by technology, urbanization, democracy and capitalism which constitute the new consciousness of modernity, it has changed both its nature and its function.

Wells traces this development by studying two prominent features of American culture, individualism ('self-piety') and conformity ('Every-person'). He concludes that instead of functioning within the believing community as a dynamic force for unity, worship and service, theology has been fragmented into its separate intellectual, confessional and practical components. In the modern world, these elements have become in practice the preserve of different groups, critical biblical and theological scholars, applied thinkers in the areas of philosophy, ethics and the social sciences, and practitioners such as pastors and evangelists in the Church. But these groups are largely isolated from each other, which means that theology can no longer function as a unifying power for faith, spirituality and service.

So theology as the source of truth about God has become peripheral to the life of the Church; being cut off from the believing, serving and worshipping community, it loses its 'sense of wonder' and 'productive connections' (292) and shrivels into a cold, speculative discipline.

Meanwhile, faced by the forces of consumerism, the church focuses on its own survival and the therapeutic and relational concerns of its constituency. The role of the clergy changes so that they become not brokers of redemptive truth (221, 233, 237), but psychological counsellors and professional managers of the religious enterprise, who may

call upon theology if it seems to be useful in developing their own skills, building self esteem or developing the church's institutional image.

Wells, like M. J. Erickson (*Evangelical Mind and Heart* Baker, 1993), charges that this kind of acceptance of modern values by evangelicalism is akin to the earlier Liberal doctrinal compromise, although that was a deliberate, principled development, which can hardly be said about the trends in evangelicalism.

In this study of the impact of modernity upon evangelicalism, Wells does not propose a final solution—we have to wait for his second volume for that! However, in the final section (285ff) he gives an outline of the direction he proposes to take. He bases his approach on an acceptance of the objective truth about salvation history unfolded by the biblical narrative when interpreted according to its natural sense.

He argues that what is needed is not a Finneyite type of revival (296) in which human effort and determination are coupled with modern aids such as management theory and psychology. Instead, he calls for a reformation (257) at the spiritual and p.379 theological level, focusing especially on the knowledge and vision of the holy God (291) and the consequent conviction that people, though created in the divine image, need redemption because of sin. (299–300)

This might seem to be a surprising and simplistic conclusion after so many pages of detailed sociological, historical and philosophical analysis. However, it is an essential part of Wells' burden, viz., confidence in the revealed truth of God is not obsolete or contrary to the biblical position as so many would claim today, but the difficulty in accepting the Bible's account of salvation history is a problem created by modernity itself.

Wells, who has also written on these topics elsewhere, is only one of many who are currently tackling the problem of modernity. In fact, there is a case for arguing that the emphasis of the book could therefore have been less on the general nature of modernity and more on its implications for evangelicalism. However, Well's approach, as contrasted for example with Stanley Grenz' *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (IVP, 1993), raises some basic questions.

It might be questioned whether *No Place for Truth* with its analysis of contemporary culture and its call for reformation, constitutes a profound and prophetic breakthrough for evangelicalism, or whether the opposite assessment is closer to the reality, viz, his call for a new kind of evangelicalism which is 'more like the old kind used to be' (p. 13) is far too reactionary. In other words, does this sharp critique of evangelicalism for following in an unprincipled way the mistakes of classical liberalism in accommodating to contemporary culture reflect the spirit of fundamentalism more than the gospel?

Although the essay is learned and penetrating, there is a somewhat idealistic tone in its implicit suggestion that the evils of modernity should be reversed and a golden age of the past resurrected where absolute truth is once again recognized and embraced. (This approach compares closely with other recent proposals, such as the 1993 papal encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendour of Truth) with its call for the recognition of the absolute universality and immutability of moral truth, and the British 'Gospel and our Culture' movement, led by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin which proposes to reestablish the gospel as 'public truth' once again in secular society.)

This reactionary character is also reinforced by the fact that Wells seems to be thinking of one particular form of (Evangelical) Christianity as the standard viz., Calvinism.

Another question is whether his sharp critique of evangelicalism and its adoption of the ways of modernity is not too extreme, or whether it is even necessary at all. The alternative is to consider the responses to modernity which he describes as simply examples of the legitimate process of contextualizing theology to the western context.

Admittedly, this process may have been carried a little too far or is somewhat out of control, but this is a different proposition from suggesting that the values of a pre-modern p. 380 era should be reinstated.

Yet despite these reservations, there are many strong points in Wells' work. Apart from the main themes, for example, it offers helpful insights on professionalism and the ministry, the impact of television on popular culture, and the background and significance of the Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) degree for the church and clergy; it also presents insightful reports on trends in the contents and editorial policies of influential journals like *Christianity Today* and *Leadership*.

His comprehensive approach to the nature of theological work and the importance attached to its church-relatedness are other significant features for an evangelicalism which has been so influenced by pietistic 'heart religion' that it has become unnecessarily suspicious of scholarship.

Wells also raises many questions about theological education, including the place of theology in the curriculum and especially the consequences of the current trend for more lay people to undertake theological studies; this is a move which tends to cancel the isolation of theology from the general education which took place when seminaries were established as separate institutions from the universities.

Much of the material in this book is specific to the United States, but the general principles are relevant to other countries affected by the 'world culture' which he describes. The impact of this culture is likely to be particularly severe in countries where the growth of Christianity is strong because, as Wells points out, it is Christianity itself which has given rise in large part to the forces which, in re-shaping world culture, have had such a serious impact on the place of theology in evangelicalism. (284)

There may be room for discussion of the details of Wells' assessment, for he deliberately paints with a broad brush and sometimes his analysis is abstruse. But if there is any validity in his presentation, the task of correcting the problems which he has isolated is made more difficult because, according to Wells, two of the normal avenues of help, the ordained leadership of the church and the discipline of theology, are themselves part of the problem.

DINING WITH THE DEVIL THE MEGACHURCH MOVEMENT FLIRTS WITH MODERNITY

by Os Guinness

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Hourglass Books/Baker Book House, 1993, pb. 113 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Os Guinness has borrowed the title of this stimulating little book from the well known words of Peter Berger, 'He who sups with the devil had better have a long spoon.' However, the sub-title indicates more clearly the central theme, 'The megachurch movement flirts with modernity.' The book is an expanded version of an article published in *No God but God* (Moody, 1992) edited by Guinness and John Seel. The 70 pages of text in the present edition is supplemented by p. 381 discussion questions on each chapter, notes and references; to add more content, there is also an 'opening meditation' titled 'Fishers of Men' from Søren Kierkegaard, a none too successful 'Pilgrim's Progress' style meditation, 'The Celestial Railroad', by Nathaniel Hawthorne closes the book.

The author who is a well known exponent of the problems modernization presents to the Church, does not advance his previously published thinking much in this volume, which suffers from its complex publishing pedigree. It also suffers from its artificial

structure which, after a lengthy introduction, commences in chapter one with ‘One main question’ and progresses systematically to chapter seven which is titled, ‘Seven main tips for discernment.’ There is also a problem with the uneven development of topics, some being treated in detail while others are listed only briefly.

Nevertheless, many helpful insights and telling examples are presented. (One example that stands out is the reported comment of a Japanese businessman who stated that when he meets a Buddhist monk he sees a holy man, but when he meets a Christian leader he finds a manager!) (49) More importantly, the book validly focuses attention on ‘one main question’ thrown up by the successes of the megachurch/ church growth movement—‘In implementing its vision of church growth, is the church of Christ primarily guided and shaped by its own character and calling—or by considerations and circumstances alien to itself?’ Guinness believes modernity provides a great opportunity for effective outreach, but at the same time it presents one of the greatest challenges to the Church, especially in its threat to turn evangelicals (of all people!) into the most worldly Christians of all through wholesale adoption of principles which are contrary to the gospel. The challenge is to be able to sift the good from the bad, if that is possible!

While this book is directed specifically against the megachurch movement, its warnings and insights are valid in a generalized form for all evangelicals. In calling for greater wisdom in discerning trends affecting the nature and direction of the church, it raises profound questions about virtually every area of Christian life, especially leadership training, spirituality, outreach and theological methodology. While Guinness’s sociological approach may not answer these questions, it certainly presents them in a penetrating form.

THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD

Ed. Martyn Eden and David F. Wells

(IVP, 279 pp.)

(Reviewed by Graham Keith in Banner of Truth.)

This is a collection of essays to mark John Stott’s seventieth birthday. Amid the variety one might expect in an essay collection there is the recurring theme of contemporary challenges to Christian life and witness.

The book is prefaced with a biographical sketch of John Stott by p. 382 Timothy Dudley-Smith. To illustrate Stott’s importance, a tribute is cited from the liberal Anglican, David Edwards, who contends that Stott has been the most influential clergyman this century in the Church of England apart from Archbishop William Temple. None, however, of the essays which follow is distinctively Anglican in content or tone. The contributors are from varied backgrounds, and the whole book is refreshingly free of denominational politics.

The essays are grouped into three sections, the first of which is entitled ‘The Essential Gospel’. Here two essays address theories of religious relativism, with Chris Wright highlighting some Old Testament perspectives on biblical authority and David Wells demonstrating how liberal theology has rendered the idea of atonement obsolete. The other piece in this section has a different target in view. The historian David Bebbington shows that, contrary to popular opinion, the burgeoning Evangelicalism of the 18th century owed a lot to the Enlightenment, particularly in its ideals of scientific investigation, hope for the future and humane reform. A healthy Evangelicalism, it is suggested is in need of these values today.

The second section is entitled ‘Understanding the Modern World’, and is concerned with issues which evangelicals have yet to grasp. Ernest Lucas challenges Christians with

scientific expertise to take up the implications of the new physics and the new biology, which have sometimes been claimed in support of New Age theories. Martyn Eden chides Christians for naivety in the political arena, as exemplified in a failure to see beyond the right/left divide: while Elaine Storkey on the basis of a sociological analysis pleads that Christians look beyond specific issues like Sunday-trading to more underlying values in modern Britain like economism and individualism. In another sociological article Os Guinness explores the relation of the missionary enterprise to modernity, while Saphir Athyal sets out the place for, as well as the limitations of Christian-Hindu dialogue.

The final section is on 'Living the Gospel', and tries to integrate the more intellectual concerns of the earlier sections with issues of spirituality and social action. James Houston directly addresses the current weakness in evangelical spirituality, while Dr. J. I. Packer gives a biblical analysis of preaching. Effective local church evangelism and Christian ministry are appraised by Michael Green and Michael Cassidy, both of whom are anxious that the church should not overlook its social responsibilities. The only piece I cannot commend in the whole collection is that of Michael Nazir-Ali on the content of the faith and the context in which it is worked out. Most of this essay is an extended meditation on the love of God. The author's enthusiasm for his subject sadly runs away with his judgement. The essay ranges far and wide, venturing into highly speculative territory without adequate scriptural corroboration. As a result, a promising theme is ruined.

Otherwise, this collection is both a worthy tribute to John Stott and a timely exhortation to the whole [p. 383](#) church. There is much here to ponder, to drive to prayer and to stimulate to action.

ENGAGING WITH GOD: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

by David Peterson

(Leicester, Apollos (Inter-Varsity Press), 1992 Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993, pb. 317 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

The sub-title of this book is important, especially for readers familiar with standard works in the theology and principles of Christian Worship such as those by Robert E. Webber, James F. White, William H. Willimon. The author has written specifically from the perspective of a conservative version of the Biblical Theology movement to give the 'substructure of worship theology' (p. 166) within a 'redemptive-historical framework' (p. 206). So he has covered the full range of the themes of biblical theology pointing out their relevance to worship, rather than focusing specifically on topics usually associated with the nature and principles of worship. In particular, he bases a great deal of his argument upon his many enriching word studies; he also treats covenant and cult in the Old Testament and in the teaching of Jesus before moving on to the early church and the theology of Paul, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Revelation to John.

A strength of the book is the extended expositions of the biblical text, amounting to virtually paraphrases of whole books in some cases (such as the chapters on Hebrews and Romans); however, so broad is the theological treatment that much of this material may seem superfluous to readers who are well acquainted with the passages themselves and with the general flow of systematic and biblical theology. His approach to the Pentateuch is a conservative type of canon criticism in that his 'concern is with the [OT] text in its final form, as it influenced Jewish and Christian thinking in the New Testament era' (p. 50); similarly, he treats the gospels 'in their final, canonical form, without engaging in tradition-historical study of the text' (p. 103). However, he wisely warns against the all too common practice of simplistically assuming that early Christian practice as recorded

in the New Testament is 'automatically prescriptive for later generations of believers' (p. 211).

Although there are copious references to a wide range of literature in the notes which follow each of the ten chapters, the text is not written in technical style. Unfortunately, this rich source of data has not been compiled into a comprehensive bibliography, but there are subject, author and textual indices; each chapter usually contains a succinct summary of the major points.

As the main part of the title of this book indicates, Peterson, who is on the faculty of the Anglican institution, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia, holds a particular view of worship which differs markedly from many authorities in the area of worship and from the p. 384 positions reflected by movements in the contemporary church.

He defines 'the worship of the true and living God' in functional terminology as 'essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.' (p. 20, 55) Hence, Peterson makes the nature of God and the terms of his relationship with humankind a prominent part of his explanation on worship. These topics would normally be treated in general theology, leaving the theology of worship to deal with specific matters related to the principles and practice of worship itself; these are topics which Peterson tends to omit and for which the reader will need to turn to other works to study in any detail.

A key issue for Peterson is that the transition from Old to New Testament eras shows how Jesus Christ himself becomes the replacement for the Hebrew sacrificial cult as the divinely-ordained means of access to God in worship and life. Hence, Peterson concludes, the presentation of Christ to the congregation through preaching and sound biblical teaching is essential for Christian worship and for the nurture of disciples.

But even more important for Peterson is the notion of 'transformed worship' which he finds throughout the New Testament. According to this concept, the centrality of the person Jesus Christ means that Christian worship is non-cultic, being expressed holistically in the totality of everyday life, not merely on liturgical occasions. This means also that there are no longer any 'holy places' in which God may be said to reside, but instead the focus is upon 'holy people' amongst whom his presence dwells.

This phenomenon is noticeable particularly by the way in which liturgical terms such as *sacrifice* and *priesthood* are used in the New Testament to refer to non-liturgical matters such as the dedicated life and the ministry of the Church in intercession and service. It was only later in the Christian era that this metaphorical language of the New Testament was taken literally and Christian ministers were referred to as priests, thereby losing a distinctive feature of Christian life and worship. It is also to be noted that the New Testament does not prescribe a definitive, detailed procedure for worship and indeed, according to Peterson, it hardly even refers to Christians as 'worshipping' when they meet together.

This concept of 'transformed worship' is particularly clear in [Romans 12:1](#) where Peterson translates *logike latreia* (spiritual worship—RSV) as 'understanding worship'; since it refers to 'the service rendered by those who truly understand the gospel and its implications'. He argues that the service called for in this text is 'the obedience of faith expressed by those whose minds are being transformed and renewed by God' (p. 176) which of course goes far beyond what happens in a congregational gathering for prayer or praise.

It is only from this perspective that Peterson discusses what Christians do when they meet together in 'worship'. He regards this activity as a special form of 'transformed worship' (p. 220), and finds that the biblical evidence points to the teaching p. 385 of the

Word of God and mutual edification especially through exhortation, prayer and other 'verbal ministries' (p. 196f) as the major functions of the Christian assembly.

In the course of surveying the life of the Pauline and other early churches, Peterson puts forward some stimulating views on such matters as the nature of fellowship (*koinonia*), the role of the local church, and the need for 'prophecy' and 'confession' in the Christian meeting. It is in the discussion of these issues that the author's ability to present the results of his extensive exegetical and background studies in a simple but comprehensive and compelling way stands out.

In striking contrast with many other contemporary books on worship which tend to be mere inspirational and anecdotal or devoted exclusively to procedures, most of Peterson's material consists of substantial biblical and theological exposition. Practical application to the conditions of modern worship is almost entirely restricted to short comments at the end of major sections; however, they are usually so brief and arbitrarily related to his own church context that most readers will find themselves wanting to make their own applications instead.

If the Epilogue in which Peterson presents his description of an ideal Christian gathering is any guide, it is clear that he is dissatisfied with both the formal liturgical tradition and the contemporary renewal stream, preferring instead an informal service consisting of corporate prayer, readings, preaching, mutual ministry and a simple administration of the Lord's Table in the setting of an authentic fellowshiping community. However, while this book provides lively expositions of key themes in biblical theology relevant to Christian life and worship in their broadest sense, readers, whether they be church leaders or students of worship, will still need to spend considerable effort in working through the implications of 'transformed worship' for the day to day life of the Church.

GOD, THE BIG BANG AND STEPHEN HAWKING: AN EXPLORATION INTO ORIGINS

by David Wilkinson

(Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1993, pb. 156 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

True to its title, this book by David Wilkinson provides helpful insights into the complex world of cosmology for the lay person, linking it with topical concerns and basic theological issues. In only 152 pages, the author, who holds a PhD in theoretical astrophysics, not only explains some of the more arcane but tantalising areas of science in highly readable terms, but has also shown with commendable clarity how they may be understood in relation to key Christian concepts. As one who is also trained in theology and is an ordained Methodist minister working as a chaplain to Liverpool University, he not only understands the theological issues involved, but has the ability to express his concerns in a pastorally sensitive and informative manner.

Areas of cosmology covered by Wilkinson in the first half of the book include the nature of the universe (galaxies, space etc), the 'big bang' theory, relativity, quantum theory, the anthropic principle, cosmic inflation, and the nature of scientific procedures and proofs. He does all this in a way that shows the inner logic of cosmological investigations, and provides an explanation of the mechanics of the operation and development of the universe as understood by modern science. This offers a powerful rationale for the proposals of contemporary cosmology and takes the debate well outside the area of opinion and dogma. The second part of the book focuses on the implications of

the modern approach to cosmology for our understanding of God's nature and activity, especially in relation to divine creation and providence, and the cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God.

These are highly topical subjects, given the popular interest in such matters generated by well known scientific spokespersons like Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies and others. A great deal has, of course, been written and spoken on the big bang theory of the origin of the universe, quantum theory, relativity, chaos theory and the like, much of which is over-complex for the lay person, simplistic or biased. The virtue of this book, however, is that it arises from a position which is knowledgeable and sympathetic to both scientific and theological concerns, although one that is not blind to the limitations and difficulties of both science and theology. Consequently, it avoids glib solutions and succeeds admirably in providing insights which open up the reader's interest and ability to pursue the topic further, especially in constructing a Christian world view which takes the results of modern science seriously. Needless to say, those who support a rigid view of 'scientific creationism' will find little comfort in this volume, although should they study it with the care it deserves, they will be challenged to provide as satisfying and positive a 'theory of everything' from their own basis.

In a short work on such a vast topic, it is inevitable that the discussion is kept mostly on the big picture. Thus there is little on specific details of the biblical text, although there is an appendix devoted to various options for understanding the creation passages in Genesis. However, these accounts are so brief as to be of help probably only to those who approach the passages for the first time, although Wilkinson's preference for a literary, rather than literalistic or harmonizing approach is clear.

While those with relevant scientific expertise will no doubt find plenty in Wilkinson's approach to interest them, theologians will be more likely to set out exploring the implications of his proposals about the complementarity between contemporary cosmology and Christian belief, especially in the areas of divine providence, natural theology, revelation and eschatology. In so doing, the problems they face will be mostly concerned with how the general principles of belief in a sovereign, creator God (widely accepted by Christians of all traditions' p. 387 can be related to the detailed material of science, the Biblical text and Christian practice. But then, that is always the prime task of theology, and its greatest challenge!

MEDIA IN CHURCH AND MISSION: COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

by Viggo Sjøgaard

(Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1993, pb. 287 pp.)

Reviewed by David Parker

The value of a book like this one to those involved in any kind of Christian ministry, whether as fulltime professionals or as laypeople in a Church setting, is that it underlines just how important the principles and methods of communication are for their activities. As Dr. Sjøgaard, who is Associate Professor of Communication at Fuller Theological Seminary, points out, God has communicated with humanity and he has commissioned his Church with the task of communicating the good news of the gospel to all people. It goes almost without saying that a proper understanding of the nature of communication is essential for all who are involved in the task.

But it does not take much investigation to find examples of poor communication—the author refers to several to make his point. The export of un-adapted North American television and radio programmes to countries with vastly different cultural and religious contexts seems to be his pet hate; he gives one example where a special Christmas

television programme was broadcast months later with U.S. phone numbers still appearing on the screen! So books like this are still urgently needed, especially where the memory of the televangelists' scandals linger on, and promoters of Christian media ministries are less than accurate in their claims about the scope and effectiveness of their programmes and where others lack imagination and relevance.

The first part of this book gives the basics of communication theory adapted to relate to the context of Christian outreach and ministry. The author refers to acknowledged authorities, both Christian and secular, and makes use of many brief outlines, summaries and helpful diagrams; however, so concise is the treatment that relatively few examples are given, apart from ones deriving from the author's own work in an Asian-based audio cassette ministry.

This section covers theological considerations which characterize Christian communication in particular and then moves on to discuss the nature and principles of communication, followed by material on strategies and research required for effective communication. Dr. Søggaard concludes this section by noting that communication in a Christian context must reflect dependence on the Holy Spirit, be person-centred, receptor-oriented and church-related; it must also be based upon quality research and be seen as a process rather than as a simple event and have an intercultural perspective.

The second section of the book offers some guidelines on the nature and uses of the major media types; it p. 388 covers television, radio, video, audio cassettes, print, film, music painting and drama, and finally computers. In just over 100 pages it is not possible to do more than describe the most basic features of these types of media, list their strengths and weaknesses and hint at the most effective ways of using them in evangelism and Christian ministry. But together with the extensive references given, there is enough in this section to indicate the extremely wide range of possibilities available and to provide a starting point for readers searching for fresh communication ideas.

The final section is devoted to practical guidelines on the use of media and church and mission contexts, covering strategy, production, pre-testing and evaluation. The book tends to lose its way in this section and there is a good deal of repetition of material given in Part I. Nevertheless, some useful guidance is given, with the emphasis on rational planning of projects, cultural sensitivity in programming, careful research into receptors' needs and honest appraisal of results. If these guidelines alone were to be taken fully into account by readers engaged in communicating the gospel, then the book would make a worthwhile contribution to the Church's mission today. The lengthy bibliography gives plenty of sources of further information. p. 389

Journal and Book Information

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