

“The Church in the Post-Christian Society Between Modernity and Late Modernity: L. Newbigin’s Post-Critical Missional Ecclesiology”

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Introduction: Setting Newbigin in the Context of Postmodernism

Similarly to the Bishop of Hippo whom he greatly admired, the Bishop of South India felt like he was living in between the times, in a transitional era. Whereas for St. Augustine the transition had to do with the falling apart of the worldwide political empire of Rome, for Newbigin the transformation had to do with the dismantling of the foundations of the worldwide intellectual empire, the Enlightenment. Newbigin often expressed this dynamic and anguish in the words of the Chinese Christian thinker Carver Yu, who claimed that the contemporary culture of the West lives in the dynamic of “technological optimism and literary pessimism.”¹ Again similarly to the early-fifth-century critic of Ancient Rome, the late-twentieth-century critic of the Modern West, did not live long enough to see what the new empire was that replaced the old one and what the implications of that shift were for the life and mission of *City of God* on earth.

It has been noted recently that it was only during the last decade of his productive life that Newbigin intentionally and explicitly started addressing the challenge of postmodernism. Paul Weston, in his important essay on Newbigin’s relation to postmodernism, mentions that all references to that concept occur after 1991 when he was already 82 years old.² Had he lived longer, Newbigin’s engagement with postmodernism would have loomed large in the horizon of his cultural critique. At the same time – and this is the key to my own investigation – as Weston rightly notes, “Newbigin can be shown to have developed a missiological approach that effectively anticipates many of the questions raised by contemporary postmodern perspectives.”³ I attempt to show in this essay that the English bishop’s engagement of postmodernism goes way beyond the year 1991. Indeed, I set forth an argument according to which Newbigin’s cultural critique of Modernity offers a fruitful and a fresh way of considering the church’s relation to the postmodern condition. However, what is ironic about this contribution is that the bishop himself neither attempted a response to postmodernism nor was by and large conscious of it.

I hesitate regarding the judgment of those who consider the bishop “A ‘Postmodern’ before Postmodernity Arrived.”⁴ Rather than considering him a “crypto-Postmodernist,” I argue that a careful analysis of his writings over a longer period of time reveals that while he saw in some features of postmodernism orientations that helped clarify the critique of Modernity, by and large he was extremely critical of key features of what he thought makes postmodernism. At no point did Newbigin consider the program of postmodernism as a whole an ally to his own pursuit of “the gospel as public truth.” I fear that one of the titles the bishop would absolutely eschew having attached to his legacy is “postmodern.” The reason for this assessment is simply the fact that, in the bishop’s understanding, postmodernism represented to him everything destructive, almost as much as his archenemy, Modernity.

My approach in this investigation is based on the methodological conviction – or at least, a hypothesis – according to which Newbigin’s thinking reveals a remarkable integrity and consistency throughout the period of his mature life, beginning from the late seventies or early eighties, when he began focusing on the critique of the church’s mistaken “contextualization” strategy into the Western (European-American) culture. This is not to say that his thinking was systematic or always even tightly ordered. It was not, he was no scholar but rather a preacher and independent thinker – and he himself was often the first one to acknowledge it.⁵ It is simply to say that upon his return from India, in a relatively short period of time the key theses of a missionally driven post-critical thinking emerged. Therefore, methodologically, the best way to determine his relation and contribution to postmodernism is to look broadly at the writings of the whole of his mature career. Indeed, my reading of his writings has assured me, against my own initial suspicions, that his critique – as well as the occasional affirmation – of postmodernism is to a large extent unspoken and tacit in the texture of the cultural critique whose main target was Modernity.⁶ Consequently, I fear, those who critique Newbigin for the lack of a nuanced understanding of postmodernism⁷ not only miss the point but expect of him something he never set out to do.

One of the reasons why I think along those lines is that, as I will have an opportunity to explain in the following, for Newbigin postmodernism was parasitic on Modernity. Postmodernism in his judgment had no independent existence, it was rather an offshoot from Modernity. He didn’t see postmodernism as a “savior” to the church, but rather another challenger along with Modernity – even when occasionally he affirmed some elements of this new epistemological approach.

My discussion is composed of two main parts. In part one, I will attempt a diagnostic assessment of Newbigin’s view of postmodernism. Rather than trying to judge whether Newbigin’s vision of postmodernism was correct or even balanced, my task is simply to analyze the bishop’s view. Part two then attempts to determine what would be the key aspects of Newbigin’s constructive proposal with regard to the church’s mission under the postmodern condition. Not surprisingly, in light of my methodological remarks above, I contend that Newbigin’s response to postmodernism is not radically different from his response to Modernism. To both Modernists and postmodernists, he offered as an alternative the view of the gospel as public truth.

I repeat myself: My aim is neither to try to make the bishop postmodern nor even try to align his thinking with postmodern orientations. Rather, my ultimate goal is to use his cultural critique of Modernity as a way to help the church in the beginning of the third millennium to reappraise her mission and existence in the world.

Needless to say that all of the essay is necessarily reconstructive from the author’s point of view, particularly in view of my stated purpose above: rather than searching for the term *postmodern* in his writings or even trying to determine veiled references to postmodernism, I reconstruct the bishop’s viewpoint on the basis of his overall missional thinking and epistemology.⁸

Part I: Newbigan's View of Postmodernity

Rather than first attempting a generic description of postmodernism – if there is such a generic concept about an intellectual movement which intentionally opposes any generalizations – my approach is “from below.” What I mean is this: I will do my best to discern from Newbigan’s own writings the way he discerned the effects and implications of the transition underway in the cultures of the West as the Enlightenment was slowly giving way to a new way of thinking and being. The term “transition” in the subheading below is intentional and important: it seems to me that the best way – and to a large extent, the only way – to determine what Newbigan opined about postmodernism appears in the contexts in which he is discussing the move away, the transition, from Modernity to postmodernism. Thus, seeking for and counting terms such as “postmodernism” is to miss the point. Without often naming what this “post-” or “late-” was, he focused his reflections on the implications of the transition away from Modernism to church’s mission.

The Epistemological Challenge of the Transition from Modernity to Late Modernity.

I will divide Newbigan’s diagnosis of postmodernism into two interrelated themes: epistemology and lifestyle. The first one gets the lion’s share in this discussion, and is further divided into two segments. While epistemology and lifestyle are interrelated, they can also be distinguished for the sake of clarity of analysis.

The key to properly understanding Newbigan’s diagnosis of postmodernism is to acknowledge its parasitic nature. As mentioned above, for Newbigan postmodernism had no independent existence; rather it was an extension of and offshoot from Modernity. This may also help explain the lack of sustained analysis of postmodernity.⁹ It only came to the fore as the bishop was reflecting on the transition away from Modernity. This state of affairs is reflected in his choice of terminology. A number of terms appear in his writings such as “postmodern culture” or “postmodernity,”¹⁰ “the postmodern development of modernism,”¹¹ as well as “postmodern reaction.”¹² I believe the term “late modern” might best characterize Newbigan’s view which builds on the idea of continuity.¹³ In the following, while I continue using the term “postmodern(ism)” as the general nomenclature, I will at times use the term “late modern” to highlight Newbigan’s take on the topic. In keeping with his idea of the parasitic nature of postmodernism, one of the key observations of the bishop was that the advent of postmodernism, if such has already happened, does not mean a complete shift in terms of replacement of the old for new but rather a co-habitation of a sort. This co-habitation includes both intellectual and lifestyle issues, as the discussion will show.

There are a number of internal dynamics, even contradistinctions in postmodernism in Newbigan’s analysis. On the one hand, there are many who have grown very suspicious of the project of the Enlightenment with its search for Cartesian indubitable certainty. On the other hand, this is only one side of contemporary Western intellectual culture. Among the ordinary folks – and in many ways among the educated as well – there is still a firm trust in the facts of science and Modernity. This confidence in the project of Modernity is greatly aided by the economic and scientific-technological globalization process.¹⁴

Over against this continuing confidence in the Enlightenment, there is a definite shift that, for the bishop, signals the transition away from Modernity: for “an increasing number of people ... there is no longer any confidence in the alleged ‘eternal truths of reason’ of ... Lessing.”¹⁵ The following “working definition” of postmodernism by Newbiggin is as illustrative of his perception of that movement as any:

Its main feature is the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth-claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion. The father of this whole movement is the German philosopher F. W. Nietzsche. Nietzsche was the one who foresaw, in the closing years of the 19th century, that the methods of the Enlightenment must in the end lead to total scepticism and nihilism.¹⁶

At the heart of Newbiggin’s analysis of postmodernity is thus the loss of confidence in any kind of universal truth of reason a.k.a. the Enlightenment,¹⁷ a feature he also calls “the sickness of our culture.”¹⁸ In Newbiggin’s mind, the “foundationalism” of the Enlightenment with its belief in grandiose truths has been replaced in postmodern culture with the idea of “regimes of truth,” which stand next to each other in a pluralist society:

In the last decades of the this century, the intellectual leadership of Europe has begun to turn its back on modernity. We are in the age of postmodernity. The mark of this is a suspicion of all claims to universal truth. Such claims have to be deconstructed. The ‘metanarratives’ told by societies to validate their claim to global power are to be rejected. There are no privileged cultures and no privileged histories. All human cultures are equally entitled to respect. There are only different ‘regimes of truth’ (Michael Foucault) which succeed one another.... There are no overarching criteria by which these regimes can be judged.¹⁹

In order to properly understand the parasitic nature of postmodernity, one needs to acknowledge the bridge from Descartes via Friedrich Nietzsche – the “spiritual father” of all postmodernists – to contemporary elimination of the original Enlightenment dream of the certainty of knowledge.²⁰ Ironically the method of doubt – which was made the main way of achieving indubitable certainty – was changed in the hands of Nietzsche into the main weapon against Modernity which in turn paved the way for the total loss of confidence manifested in postmodernity. “The Cartesian invitation to make doubt the primary tool in search for knowledge was bound to lead to the triumph of skepticism and eventually of nihilism, as Nietzsche foresaw.”²¹ Nietzsche replaced rational argument as the means of arbitrating between competing truth claims with “will to power.”²² Terms such as “true” and “untrue” have simply lost their meaning,²³ what remains is simply different “narratives,” themselves historically conditioned.²⁴ Even science – believed by the Enlightenment pioneers to be the source of indisputable truths – becomes yet another expression of the will to power.²⁵

Not surprisingly, Newbiggin did not tire himself with highlighting this built-in irony of the line of development from the dream of indubitable certainty coupled with the method of doubt from Descartes to Nietzsche’s rejection and replacement of all such “uncritical” attitudes for historization of all knowledge which finally led to the total loss

of confidence of postmodernity. “It is deeply ironic that this method has led us directly into the program of skepticism of the postmodern world.”²⁶ Ultimately, the fact that postmodern culture doesn’t allow us to know which God really is the “true” God is for Newbigin a sign of a “dying culture.”²⁷

A Pluralist Society

A virtual synonym for Newbigin for postmodern culture is “pluralist culture.” While pluralism as such is nothing new to Christian faith, which was born in a religiously pluralistic environment, what is new is the form of contemporary pluralism: “The kind of western thought which has described itself as ‘modern’ is rapidly sinking into a kind of pluralism which is indistinguishable from nihilism – a pluralism which denies the possibility of making any universally justifiable truth-claims on any matter, whether religious or otherwise.”²⁸

An important aid to Newbigin in his analysis of the nature and effects of the late Modern pluralism is offered by Peter Berger’s *Heretical Imperative*,²⁹ with which he interacted extensively in several writings.³⁰ Berger’s well-known thesis is that whereas in pre-Modern societies heretical views were discouraged at the expense of communal and cultural uniformity, in contemporary³¹ Western culture there is no “plausibility structure,” acceptance of which is taken for granted without argument, and dissent from which is considered heresy. Plausibility structure simply means both ideas and practices in a given culture which help determine whether a belief is plausible or not. To doubt these given beliefs and believe differently makes a heresy. Understandably, the number of those in pre-Modern society who wanted to be labeled heretics was small, whereas in the contemporary culture formulating one’s own views – apart from given plausibility structures or even in defiance of them – has become an imperative. Consequently, all are heretics! The corollary thesis of Berger is that in this situation Christian affirmations can be negotiated in three different ways: either in terms of choosing one’s belief from a pool of many views, or making a distinction between beliefs that are still viable and ones that are not in light of current knowledge, or finally, building one’s beliefs on a universal religious experience (as in Schleiermacher’s vision) which precedes any rational affirmation.³² Berger himself opts for the last one.

While Newbigin appreciates Berger’s analysis and affirms its basic idea concerning the radically widening array of choices in late Modern culture,³³ he also critiques it for lack of nuance. First, Newbigin complains that the pluralism of Berger’s scheme is selective and it does not include all areas of culture:

The principle of pluralism is not universally accepted in our culture. It is one of the key features of our culture ... that we make a sharp distinction between ... ‘values’ and ... ‘facts.’ In the former world we are pluralists; values are a matter of personal choice. In the latter we are not; facts are facts, whether you like them or not.... About ‘beliefs’ we agree to differ. Pluralism reigns. About what are called ‘facts’ everyone is expected to agree.³⁴

This takes us to another main dilemma of late Modern culture of the West, which – ironically – is also the malaise of the whole culture of the Enlightenment, as repeatedly lamented by Newbigin.³⁵ This irony couldn’t be more pointed, and I think highlighting its significance takes us to the heart of the highly dynamic and tension-filled nature of

postmodernism in the bishop's thinking. Briefly put: the fatal distinction between values and facts – as Newbigin believes – is not only the undergirding weakness of the culture of Modernity; this very same obscurity characterizes also late Modern culture. Consequently, the culture of Modernity would not be cured by the transition to postmodernism (any more than postmodern culture with the shift to the Modernity). Both are plagued by the distinction which makes any talk about the gospel as public truth meaningless!

The second complaint against Berger's analysis of contemporary culture is Newbigin's incisive observation that while "the traditional plausibility structures are dissolved by contact with this modern world-view, and while ... the prevalence and power of this world-view gives no ground for believing it to be true, he [Berger] does not seem to allow for the fact that it is itself a plausibility structure and functions as such."³⁶ In other words, the pluralist postmodern culture has not done away with plausibility structures but instead has replaced the traditional for another one, namely, the presupposition that individual choices only apply to certain aspects of reality: values but not to facts. This is a selective heretical imperative. The person who sets himself or herself against this plausibility structure – in other words, attempts to be a heretic in relation to established "facts" – is called just that, the *heretic*. Here Newbigin sides with Alasdair MacIntyre, who argued that "'Facts' is in modern culture a folk-concept with an aristocratic ancestry," "aristocratic" referring to the Enlightenment philosopher Bacon's admonition to seek for "facts" instead of "speculations."³⁷ In one word, for Newbigin Modernity and postmodernism do not represent two different species but rather both represent the Enlightenment project.³⁸

The Effects on Lifestyle of the Transition to Late Modernity

So far we have been looking at Newbigin's analysis of the intellectual climate in the culture which is transitioning from Modernity to Late Modernity. With regard to lifestyle and cultural ethos, the transition to late Modernity is causing "nihilism and hopelessness."³⁹ Along with the loss of confidence in truth, postmodern society has also lost hope and optimism of progress, so typical of Modernity.⁴⁰ This loss of confidence not only in reason but also in the future can be discerned both in the lives of individuals and the society as a whole:

In the closing decades of this century it is difficult to find Europeans who have any belief in a significant future which is worth working for and investing in. A society which believes in a worthwhile future saves in the present so as to invest in the future. Contemporary Western society spends in the present and piles up debts for the future, ravages the environment, and leaves its grandchildren to cope with the results as best they can.⁴¹

Newbigin painfully found that out as he was returning to his homeland after a considerable period of missionary work in Asia. When asked what might have been the greatest difficulty in his homecoming, his response was the "disappearance of hope"⁴² and the increase of "pessimism."⁴³ All this in turn has led particularly the young generation to the culture of "instant gratification." Whereas in the past people invested in the future, contemporary people in the West just live for today and do not see it meaningful to think of the future.⁴⁴

While this kind of perception can be – and has been – critiqued⁴⁵ as a function of reverse culture shock, there is no denying the fact that these negative effects of postmodernity play a significant role in Newbigin's cultural analysis. The main point I want to make here is that in Newbigin's cultural analysis there is a direct link between the transition away from Modernity with its loss of confidence in reason and the lifestyle of people living under those transitional forces. The implications for the church's mission are of course obvious: Should the church attempt a proper response, which would entail both epistemological and lifestyle-driving reorientation of thinking and practices?

**Part II:
Missional Response to the Culture in Transition
between Modernity and Late Modernity**

Having looked at Newbigin's diagnosis of postmodernism, through the lens of the effects of the transition away from Modernity, the second part of this essay attempts to discern the main responses of the bishop. To repeat myself: rather than focusing on themes related to postmodernism, I will continue gleaning widely from Newbigin's writings in order to show that his response to late Modernity can only be reconstructed from his response to Modernity.

In order to bring to light the dynamic nature of Newbigin's thinking, I wish to reconstruct his response to late Modernity along the lines of several polarities. Clearly, the bishop envisioned the mission of the church in this transitional period being faced with a number of dynamic tensions. While the notion of a safe middle ground hardly does justice to his radical program, in many ways I hear him calling the church to locate herself at the midpoint of various polarities, such as the following ones:

- Calling the church to be "relevant" while declining from explaining the gospel in terms of late Modernism
- Adopting fallibilistic epistemology while resisting the nihilism of postmodernism
- Standing on a particular tradition while rejecting subjectivism
- Holding on to the gospel as public truth while critiquing the "timeless statements" of Modernity
- Affirming "Committed Pluralism" while Condemning "Agnostic Pluralism"
- Trusting the power of persuasion while abandoning any notion of the will to power

Calling the Church to be "Relevant" while Declining from Explaining the Gospel in Terms of Late Modernism

For the church to fulfill her mission in any culture, Newbigin argues, she has to be relevant on the one hand, and to confront the culture, on the other hand.⁴⁶ One of the recurring complaints of the bishop against the church of Modern Western culture is her unapologetic and uncritical desire to be only relevant. This is the crux of the mistaken contextualization strategy of the church vis-à-vis Modernity: the church has completely accommodated herself to the culture of Modernity. At the heart of this mistaken strategy is the apologetic defense of the rationality of Christianity to the Enlightenment mind. The only way this strategy of "tactical retreat" may wish to defend the "reasonable" nature of Christian faith is to stick with the standards of rationality of Modernity.⁴⁷ But those standards are of course not in keeping with the "Christian worldview." Among other deviations from the Christian view, those standards operate with the fatal split between values and facts, as explained above.

The reason the church of Modernity attempts to accommodate herself to the strictures of the Enlightenment is the need to be "relevant." The church that is being pushed into the margins of the society, to cater "values" while science, politics, and the rest of the public arena takes care of facts, feels she needs to be acknowledged. Consequently, the church purports to influence choices in the private area alone and shies away from any attempt to present the gospel as any kind of "universal truth."⁴⁸ In Modern

theology this move away from the idea of the gospel as public truth to catering of personal values was aided and guided by Liberal Theology, under the tutelage of Friedrich Schleiermacher and others which finally led to the “anthropologization” of theology.⁴⁹ When the statements of theology are noncognitive descriptions of religious “feelings” rather than “personal knowledge” with “universal intention” – to use Newbigin’s key phrases borrowed from Polanyi – an attitude of “timidity” follows.⁵⁰

Now, someone may ask why am I rehearsing this familiar Newbigin critique, the target of which is Modernity rather than postmodernism, the topic under discussion. The reason is what I argued above, namely, that because in Newbigin’s diagnosis postmodernism is but an offshoot from Modernity, the church’s response to postmodernism can only be reconstructed from the initial reaction to Modernity.

Similarly to the culture of Modernity, I argue on behalf of Newbigin, the culture of postmodernity is willing to tolerate the church as long as she “behaves” according to the rules. As shown above, with all their differences, both cultures operate with the same distinction between values and facts. The difference is this: while the culture of Modernity really believed that there are facts – and thus indubitable certainty – to be distinguished from personal, noncognitive values, postmodernism regards both “facts” and “values” as personal opinions.

The end result with regard to the church’s mission, however, is the same: In this transitional period of time the church is tolerated only if she suffices to be “relevant” under the rules now of late Modernity with its idea of “regimes of truths,” none of which is better or worse off and none of which has any right whatsoever to consider other “truths” as less valuable or less “true.” For the church now to succumb to the temptation of being silent about the gospel as public truth would in Newbigin’s opinion just repeat the same old mistake of the church of Modernity.

As an alternative – again following Newbigin’s program for the church that wants to recover from the Babylonian Captivity of Modernity – there has to be a new initiative to question the basic beliefs of postmodern culture.⁵¹ This means a shift from explaining the gospel in terms of the postmodern worldview with its denial of any kind of “universal truth” to explaining the postmodern worldview in terms of the gospel.⁵² This bold initiative means nothing less than confronting the “revolution of expectations” in the postmodern world.⁵³ Similarly to the call to the church facing the forces of Modernity, the bishop would call the church of this transitional period to the “conversion of the mind,” not only of the “soul.” The reason is simply that there is a radical discontinuity between the gospel and the beliefs of both Modernity and late Modernity.⁵⁴

Interestingly enough, Newbigin compares his own view of the Bible and revelation to that of the Liberation theologies. The basic purpose of Liberationists is not to explain the text but rather to understand the world in light of the Bible. Liberationists resist the idea of the Bible student being a neutral, noncommitted outsider.⁵⁵ Newbigin’s theological hero St. Augustine is also commended in this regard. Augustine was the first “post-critical” theologian and philosopher who subjected the prevailing culture, Greek rationalism which was falling apart, to biblical critique. Rather than living in nostalgia, the Christian church should learn from Augustine a bold and unabashed approach to culture by taking the biblical message as an alternative worldview.⁵⁶

Only this kind of bold initiative would help the church balance the dual need to be relevant and to be faithful. How that may happen is the focus of the continuing discussion here.

Adopting Fallibilistic Epistemology while Resisting the Nihilism of Postmodernism

A tempting way for the church to question late Modernity's lack of confidence in knowledge would be simply to adopt an opposite standpoint of affirming the Modernist program of indubitable certainty. This is not the way the bishop wants the church to perceive her role in this transitional period. Rather, in a surprising move he seems to be echoing some of the key concerns of postmodern epistemology by affirming a fallibilistic epistemology. Indeed, says the bishop: "We have to abandon the idea that there is available to us or any other human beings the sort of certitude that Descartes wanted to provide and that the scientific part of our culture has sometimes claimed to offer."⁵⁷ Here there is a link with postmodern orientations, and the bishop is happy to acknowledge it:

We accept the post-modernist position that all human reasoning is socially, culturally, historically embodied. We have left behind the illusion that there is available some kind of neutral stand-point from which one can judge the different stories and decide which is true. The "Age of Reason" supposed that there is available to human beings a kind of indubitable knowledge, capable of being grasped by all human beings which was more reliable than any alleged revelation, and which could therefore provide the criteria by which any alleged divine revelation could be assessed. This immensely powerful hang-over from the "modernist" position still haunts many discussions of religious pluralism.... But in a post-modernist context all this is swept away.⁵⁸

Part of the situatedness of knowledge is to acknowledge – in the British bishop's case – its Euro-centric nature: "My proposal will, I know, be criticised as Euro-centric, but this must be rejected. We cannot disown our responsibility as Europeans within the whole evangelical fellowship. It is simply a fact that it is ideas and practices developed in Europe over the past three centuries which now dominate the world, for good and for ill."⁵⁹ That said, the bishop of course also calls himself and other Europeans to take another look at how that legacy has been passed on with regard to other cultures; the acknowledgment of the situatedness of knowledge and preaching the gospel does not save Europeans from helping their "brothers and sisters in the 'Third World' [in] the task of recovering the gospel in its integrity from its false entanglement with European culture, and so seek together to find the true path of inculturation."⁶⁰

Because of the socially and locationally conditioned nature of human knowledge, Newbiggin condemns any form of Fundamentalism, a mistaken approach to revelation and the Bible in its search for an indubitable certainty by appealing to "evidence" to prove the Bible.⁶¹

If the Scylla of Modernity is the illusion of indubitable certainty, the Charybdis of postmodernism is the lack of confidence in anything certain. As implied above, the way from the search of indubitable certainty to virtual epistemological nihilism goes via the way of doubt. The built-in self-contradiction of the Cartesian program is the necessity of doubt as the way to certainty. This "hermeneutics of suspicion," when taken to its logical end, of course leads to the doubting of everything, in other words, the dismantling of all

certainty. At the end of this road, as explained above, there is the Nietzschean nihilism. This would close all doors to affirming the gospel as public truth.

Differently from both Modernity and postmodernism, the bishop – in keeping with Augustine’s dictum *credo ut intelligem* – considers belief as the beginning of knowledge. Both Descartes and Nietzsche would disagree. Belief as the beginning of knowledge does not mean leaving behind critique and doubt. Rather, it means that doubt and critique are put in a perspective.⁶² Even doubt entails some assumptions, the doubter begins with something else, a “tradition,” an idea Newbiggin borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre.⁶³ “But the questioning, if it is to be rational, has to rely on other fundamental assumptions which can in turn be questioned”⁶⁴ Briefly put: certainty unrelated to faith is simply an impossible and unwarranted goal.⁶⁵ Newbiggin makes the delightful remark that both faith and doubt can be either honest or blind; it is not always the case that faith is blind while doubt is honest. One can also envision honest faith and blind doubt.⁶⁶

While the Christian tradition represents confidence and “fullness of truth” promised by Jesus, the Christian concept of truth is not an “illusion” that “imagine[s] that there can be available to us a kind of certainty that does not involve . . . personal commitment,” for the simple reason that the “supreme reality is a personal God.” Thus, those who “claim infallible certainty about God in their own right on the strength of their rational powers” are mistaken.” Bishop Newbiggin reminds us that in interpersonal relationships we would never claim that!⁶⁷

As an alternative and cure for both the Modernist illusion of indubitable certainty and the postmodern lapse into nihilism, the bishop presents his own view of human knowledge as “personal knowledge.” It is borrowed from Polanyi, who negotiated between Cartesian certainty and pure subjectivism. “Personal knowledge”

is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passion, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.⁶⁸

Polanyi’s concept of personal knowledge serves the bishop well in that it fits in with his view of reality as personal, as mentioned above. The “object” of Christian knowledge is not a “thing” but rather “who,” a person, the incarnated Lord.⁶⁹ Being “personal” means that this kind of knowledge entails a risk, it is “risky business.”⁷⁰ It is “subjective in that it is I who know, or seek to know, and that the enterprise of knowing is one which requires my personal commitment. . . . And it is subjective in that, in the end, I have to take personal responsibility for my beliefs.”⁷¹ Yet, this kind of knowledge is not subjectivistic because, again borrowing from Polanyi, it has a “universal intention.” It is meant to be shared, critiqued, tested, and perhaps even corrected. It engages and does not remain only my own insight. It is not only “true for me.”⁷² Thus, to repeat what was mentioned above: doubt and critique should not be abandoned, rather they should be put in a perspective by seeing them as secondary to faith.⁷³ Only this kind of epistemology might offer for church that lives under the forces of Modernity and postmodernism an opportunity to attain *Proper Confidence*.

Standing on a Particular Tradition while Rejecting Subjectivism

While half of contemporary Western culture still lives under the illusion of the possibility of indubitable certainty, the other half, the late Modern one, “has lapsed into

subjectivism” which is the “tragic legacy of Descartes’ proposal” and even more ironically, the half into which theology usually falls.⁷⁴ Modernity, on the one hand, denies the whole concept of tradition in its alleged “neutral” standpoint. The Cartesian method mistakenly believes itself to be tradition-free. Postmodernism enthusiastically affirms traditions, “regimes of truth,” happily existing side-by-side. No one tradition is better or worse, and no one tradition has the right to impose its own rationality upon the others.⁷⁵ The implications for the church’s mission are obvious. For the Modern hearer of the gospel, any appeal to a particular tradition is an anathema and a step away from the alleged neutral, tradition-free search for certainty. For the postmodern hearer, the gospel is *a* good-news but not *the* good news.

The way out of this dilemma for the bishop is to take a lesson from both Polanyi and the ethicist-philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre⁷⁶ and speak robustly of the need to stand on a particular tradition. The necessity of acknowledging the tradition-laden nature of all human knowledge is based on the shared postmodern conviction, nurtured by contemporary sociology of knowledge, according to which all knowledge is socially and thus “contextually” shaped. “There is no rationality except a socially embodied rationality.”⁷⁷ Any knowledge is rooted in and emerges out of a particular context, location, situation. The bishop boldly accepts that all truth is socially and historically embodied and thus aligns himself with a leading postmodern idea. Another ally here is, as mentioned, Alasdair MacIntyre:

As Alasdair MacIntyre so brilliantly documents in his book *Whose Justice, What Rationality?* the idea that there can be a kind of reason that is supra-cultural and that would enable us to view all the culturally conditioned traditions of rationality from a standpoint above them all is one of the illusions of our contemporary culture. All rationality is socially embodied, developed in human tradition and using some human language. The fact that biblical thought shares this with all other forms of human thought in no way disqualifies it from providing the needed center.⁷⁸

The “situational” nature of human knowledge means that knowing can only happen from within tradition: This state of affairs, however, does not mean that therefore no one can claim to speak truth. Indeed, to “pretend to *possess* the truth in its fullness is arrogance,” whereas, the “claim to have been given the decisive clue for the human search after truth is not arrogant; it is the exercise of our responsibility as part of the human family.”⁷⁹ This seeking after the truth happens first and foremost in the Christian community. Whereas Modernity focuses on the individual person’s knowledge, Christian rationality – in this regard, aligning with the ethos of postmodernism – believes in a communally received knowledge, even when the act of knowing is personal, as explained above. “It would contradict the whole message of the Bible itself if one were to speak of the book apart from the church, the community shaped by the story that the book tells.”⁸⁰

For Newbigin, the church is a truth-seeking community that seeks to understand reality from its own vantage point. Again learning from Polanyi, Newbigin claims that there is a certain kind of correspondence between the Christian and scientific community as both build on “tradition” and “authority.” Even new investigations happen on the basis of and in critical dialogue with accumulated tradition, represented by scholars who are

regarded as authoritative. For the Christian church this tradition is the narrative, story of the gospel confessed by all Christians:

The Christian community, the universal Church, embracing more and more fully all the cultural traditions of humankind, is called to be that community in which tradition of rational discourse is developed which leads to a true understanding of reality; because it takes as its starting point and as its permanent criterion of truth the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is necessarily a particular community, among all the human communities.... But it has a universal mission, for it is the community chosen and sent by God for this purpose. This particularity, however scandalous it may seem to a certain kind of cosmopolitan mind, is inescapable.⁸¹

There is always the danger of domestication of the tradition or, as in postmodernism, its reduction into *a* story among other equal stories – that, in Newbigin’s mind, would lead to pluralism and denial of the particularity of the gospel. The gospel can be protected from this kind of domestication, he believes. “The truth is that the gospel escapes domestication, retains its proper strangeness, its power to question us, only when we are faithful to its universal, supranational, supracultural nature.”⁸² By making universal truth claims, Christian faith coexists with other traditions and their claims to truth.⁸³ Out of the framework of the gospel narrative, Christian tradition, the church seeks to understand reality – rather than vice versa.⁸⁴

As mentioned before, rather than explaining the gospel through the lens of postmodern culture – or Modern culture for that matter – this missional ecclesiology seeks to explain the world through the lens of the gospel. Here there is of course a link with the thinking of George Lindbeck and Postliberal thought. Dissatisfied with both the Fundamentalistic “Propositional Model” of revelation and the Liberal “Experiential Model,” Lindbeck suggests an alternative that he calls the “Cultural Linguistic Model.” That model sees Christian claims and doctrines as “rules” that govern our way of speaking of not only of faith but also of the world. While sympathetic to Postliberalism’s insight,⁸⁵ Newbigin’s thinking also differs from Lindbeck’s in that Newbigin still considers Christian doctrines, based as they are on the dynamic narrative of the Bible, as historically factual and thus in some sense “propositional.” For Newbigin, the crux of the matter is to raise the question “Which is the *real* story?”⁸⁶

The insistence on the factual, not only “linguistic” basis of Christian narrative is essential to Newbigin as he willingly admits the “confessional” nature of his starting point. This confessional standpoint, however, in his opinion is no affirmation of fideism or subjectivism a.k.a. postmodernism:

I am, of course, aware that this position will be challenged. It will be seen as arbitrary and irrational. It may be dismissed as “fideism”, or as a blind “leap of faith”. But these charges have to be thrown back at those who make them. Every claim to show grounds for believing the gospel which lie outside the gospel itself can be shown to rest ultimately on faith-commitments which can be questioned. There is, indeed, a very proper exercise of reason in showing the coherence which is found in the whole of human experience when it is illuminated by the gospel, but this is to be distinguished from the supposition that there are grounds for ultimate confidence more reliable than those furnished in God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, grounds on which, therefore, one may affirm the

reliability of Christian belief. The final authority for the Christian faith is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁸⁷

This clinging to the historical event of Jesus Christ takes us to the heart of his desire to defend the gospel as public truth.

Holding On to the Gospel as Public Truth while Critiquing the “Timeless Statements” of Modernity

The church and her mission in this transitional period finds herself faced with a twofold challenge: on the one hand, there is the Modernist search for indubitable certainty, and on the other hand, the nihilism of postmodernism. At least this is the way the bishop paints the picture.

In order to continue reconstructing the proper response to such a transitional era, a brief summary of our findings so far is in order. First, while the church seeks to be relevant, it has to resist the temptation to accommodate herself to the strictures of the existing culture. Second, this can be done best on the basis of committed, personal knowledge which avoids the trap of the nihilism of postmodernism and the illusion of Modernity. It is a knowledge with the aim to be shared with the rest of creation. Third, this kind of committed, “proper confidence” can only be had from within a particular tradition. This tradition-driven knowledge is an alternative to the alleged neutral standpoint of Modernity and the subjectivistic, noncommitted “regimes of truth”-driven view of postmodernism. Christian tradition avoids the dangers of domestication because it is a tradition shared and tested by an international community and it is based on a universally oriented “true” story of the gospel. Now, this all leads to the affirmation of the gospel as public truth while resisting any notion of the timeless truths of Modernity.

Where Modernity fails is that it does not acknowledge the social nature of its knowledge. Where postmodernism fails is in its one-sided focus on the socially embodied nature of human knowledge to the point where there is no overarching Story, framework, criterion. All stories just exist side by side and everyone is free to choose.

The affirmation of the gospel as public truth is based on the “foundation” of the unique authority of Christian tradition based on God’s self-revelation. That self-revelation happens in secular history⁸⁸ to which Christ is the clue.⁸⁹ The peculiar nature of the Christian story with regard to its truth claims is the “Total Fact of Christ.”⁹⁰ The *factum*-nature (from Latin [*factum est*]: “it’s done”) of Christian claims to truth in Christ has to do with history.⁹¹ While the Christ-event is part of salvific history, it is also an event in universal history. Therefore, the subjectivistic interpretation of Existentialism according to which the events of salvation history such as the resurrection only “happened to me” is a totally mistaken view. The Christian gospel is story, narrative, but is more than that: “Christian doctrine is a form of rational discourse.”⁹² Happening in secular history, its claims are subject to historical scrutiny. The historicity of the Christian story, then, is the reason why “its starting point [is] is not any alleged self-evident truth. Its starting point is events in which God made himself known to men and women in particular circumstances...”. In a sense, the argument is of course thus circular: the church interprets God’s actions in history as God’s actions, yet regards them as happening in history. But, says the bishop, the same principle applies to science, too, which is in this sense circular in its reasoning.⁹³

If the historical nature of the Christian tradition is the safeguard against the charge of the Modernist self-evidence of truth, the historical and thus factual nature also marks it off from the postmodern view with no interest in the historical basis. Christian rationality necessarily has to raise the question of its “objective” basis:

The central question is not “How shall I be saved?” but “How shall I glorify God by understanding, loving, and doing God’s will – here and now in this earthly life?” To answer that question I must insistently ask: “How and where is God’s purpose for the whole of creation and the human family made visible and credible?” That is the question about the truth – objective truth – which is true whether or not it coincides with my “values.” And I know of no place in the public history of the world where the dark mystery of human life is illuminated, and the dark power of all that denies human well-being is met and measured and mastered, except in those events that have their focus in what happened “under Pontius Pilate.”⁹⁴

In other words, with all his insistence on the socially embodied nature of human knowledge and its tradition-driven nature, the bishop is not willing to succumb to the postmodern temptation of leaving behind the “facts.” True, against the Modernists, Newbigin claims the risky, “personal” nature of human knowledge; but at the same time, against postmodernists, he sets forth the argument for the historical and factual nature of key Christian claims. This is no easy middle way but rather a radical middle!

Affirming “Committed Pluralism” while Condemning “Agnostic Pluralism”

In light of the fact that for Newbigin “pluralism” is a virtual synonym for late Modernity – as observed above – it is surprising that he is not willing to abandon the concept altogether. Rather, to paraphrase MacIntyre, he is raising the all-important question: Whose pluralism? Which pluralism? The bishop is against that kind of pluralistic ethos of contemporary Western society in which no truth can be considered truth, an ideology of parallel and equal “regimes of truth” without any criteria or parameters. In his opinion, this kind of pluralism is based on the fatal distinction between facts and values. Whereas in the area of values no criteria exist, in the domain of facts, mutually assumed criteria can still be applied quite similarly to the ethos of Modernity. In other words: while, say, a scientist as a private person may have no right to argue for the supremacy of his personal values, as a *scientist*, however, she is supposed to stick with the rules of the game. In medicine, physics, and chemistry there is no “Wild West” of pluralism, some claims and results are considered to be true, while others false. “No society is totally pluralist.”⁹⁵ As mentioned above, this “heretical imperative” is highly selective.

A significant contribution to the discussion comes from the bishop’s distinction between two kinds of pluralism, one desired, the other one to be rejected, namely, “agnostic pluralism” and “committed pluralism.” He defines agnostic – sometimes also called anarchic – pluralism in this way:

... [I]t is assumed that ultimate truth is unknowable and that there are therefore no criteria by which different beliefs and different patterns of behavior may be judged. In this situation one belief is as good as another and one lifestyle is as good as another. No judgments are to be made, for there are no given criteria, no

truth by which error could be recognized. There is to be no discrimination between better and worse.⁹⁶

In other words, this is the pluralism stemming from the failure of the Modernist program in delivering its main product, indubitable certainty. The latter type of pluralism, committed pluralism, is an alternative to the former. The best way to illustrate its nature is again to refer to the way the scientific community functions. That community is “pluralist in the sense that it is not controlled or directed from one center. Scientists are free to pursue their own investigations and to develop their own lines of research.” This type of pluralism is committed to the search of the truth following mutually established guidelines and operating “from within the tradition.” It takes into consideration the authority of tradition while maintaining the freedom to pursue new ways of understanding the reality and truth.⁹⁷ In order for the church to come to such a place, she has to appreciate her tradition in a way similar to the scientific community.⁹⁸

In a pluralist society of late Modernity, says the bishop, “There are only stories, and the Christian story is one among them.”⁹⁹ The attitude of committed pluralism drives the church to dialogue with other traditions and modes of rationalities. If the church believes it is a witness to – if not the possessor of – the gospel as public truth, the “Logic of Mission”¹⁰⁰ pushes the church out of her comfort zone to share the gospel. While the gospel truth does not arise out of the dialogue, it calls for a dialogue with a specific goal in mind, namely to present the gospel faithfully and authentically:

... [T]he message of Christianity is essentially a story, report of things which have happened. At its heart is the statement that “the word was made flesh.” This is a statement of a fact of history which the original evangelists are careful to locate exactly within the continuum of recorded human history. A fact of history does not arise out of dialogue; it has to be unilaterally reported by those who, as witnesses, can truly report of things which have happened. Of course there will then be dialogue about the way in which what has happened is to be understood, how it is to be related to other things which we know, or think that we know. The story itself does not arise out of dialogue; it simply has to be told.¹⁰¹

This Christian view of dialogue thus differs radically from the understanding of dialogue under the influence of agnostic pluralism. For that mindset, “Dialogue is seen not as a means of coming nearer to the truth but as a way of life in which different truth-claims no longer conflict with one another but seek friendly co-existence.” That kind of model of dialogue bluntly rejects any kind of “instrumental” view of dialogue as a means to try to persuade. It only speaks of “the dialogue of cultures and of dialogue as a celebration of the rich variety of human life. Religious communities are not regarded as bearers of truth-claims. There is no talk about evangelization and conversion.”¹⁰²

Since for the Christian church dialogue is not an alternative to evangelization, one has to think carefully of how the attempt to persuade with the power of the gospel may best happen in late Modernity.

Trusting the Power of Persuasion while Abandoning Any Notion of the Will to Power

In late Modernity, any hint of the old Christendom way of resorting to political power as a means of furthering a religious cause is a red flag. Bishop Newbigin was the first one to condemn any such attempt on the church’s part: “I have argued that a claim that the

Christian faith must be affirmed as a public truth does not mean a demand for a return to 'Christendom' or to some kind of theocracy. It does not mean that the coercive power of the state and its institutions should be at the service of the Church."¹⁰³

The suspicion of the "will to power" in late Modernity, however, is deeper and more subtle than the fear of the church's political power. The postmodern suspicion has to do with the church's desire to confront epistemology that has lost all criteria in negotiating between true and false. Therefore, postmodernists argue, "There is to be no discrimination between better and worse. All beliefs and lifestyles are to be equally respected. To make judgments is, on this view, *an exercise of power* and is therefore oppressive and demeaning to human dignity. The 'normal' replaces the 'normative.'"¹⁰⁴ It is here where the church, rather than succumbing to the mindset of agnostic pluralism, should confront the people of late Modernity with the offer of the gospel as public truth. While there is no way for the church faithful to her mission to avoid this confrontation, the church should also do everything in her power to cast off any sign of the will to power.

In Newbigin's vision, the church is a Pilgrim People, on the way, and thus does not claim the fullness of truth on this side of the eschaton, it only testifies to it and seeks to understand it more appropriately.¹⁰⁵ Even the Christian witness waits for the final eschatological verification of the truth of the gospel.¹⁰⁶ Such a witness does not resort to any earthly power, rather he or she only trusts the power of the persuasion of the truth. Consequently, time after time, the bishop recommends to the church an attitude of humility and respect for others. While witnesses, Christians are also "learners."¹⁰⁷ The church does not possess the truth but rather testifies to it, carries it on as a truth-seeking community and tradition.¹⁰⁸

The refusal of the "will to power" goes even deeper than that of the cultivation of a humble and respectful attitude towards others. It grows from the center of the gospel truth as it is based on the cross of the Savior:

What is unique in the Christian story is that the cross and resurrection of Jesus are at its heart. Taken together (as they must always be) they are the public affirmation of the fact that God rules, but that his rule is (in this age) hidden; that the ultimate union of truth with power lies beyond history, but can yet be declared and portrayed within history. The fact that the crucifixion of the Incarnate Lord stands at the centre of the Christian story ought to have made it forever impossible that the Christian story should have been made into a validation of imperial power. Any exposition of a missionary approach to religious pluralism must include the penitent acknowledgement that the Church has been guilty of contradicting its own gospel by using it as an instrument of imperial power.¹⁰⁹

In other words, any attempt to usurp power means nothing less than a perversion of the message of the gospel.

In Lieu of Conclusion: Seedthought for Further Reflections

It seems to me it is in keeping with Lesslie Newbigin's evolving and dynamic way of thinking that no "closing chapter" be offered to the reflections on the mission and life of the church in the transitional era between Modernity and postmodernism. More helpful, I think, is to reflect on some tasks and questions for the future and map out some remaining areas of interest.

Let me first return to my methodological musings in the beginning of the essay. Again, in this context I am not concerned about methodology primarily for the sake of academic competence; rather, my interest in it has everything to do with the material presentation of Newbigin's missional ecclesiology and epistemology. I argued that rather than tabulating references to postmodernism in the bishop's writings, nor even looking primarily at those passages which may have a more or less direct reference to postmodernism, a more helpful way of proceeding would be to take lessons from his response to Modernity, particularly with regard to the transitional period when the church lives under two modes of rationalities. This kind of methodology seemed to be viable in light of Newbigin's conviction that postmodernism is parasitic on Modernity. If my methodology is appropriate and does justice to Newbigin's own approach, then it means that his writings on missional ecclesiology and cultural critique continue to have their relevance even if the shift to postmodernism will intensify in the future.¹¹⁰

If my hunch is correct then a main task for the church of the West at this period of time would be to pay attention to the nature of the transition. I do not believe that we live in a culture in which Modernity has given way to postmodernism. Rather, I regard Newbigin's insight that what makes the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century unique culturally is the process of transition. Modernity is alive and well not only in the West but also in the Global South. At the same time, as a result of the massive critique of and disappointment with it, there is an intensifying desire to cast off the reins of Modernity. However, that distancing from the Enlightenment heritage does not mean leaving behind its influence; rather, it is a continual reassessment of Modernity as we continue living under its massive influence. To repeat myself: it is the transition that makes our time unique. To that dynamic Bishop Newbigin's thinking speaks loud and clear.

I have mentioned in my discussion several movements of thought and thinkers to which Newbigin either gives a direct reference such as Lindbeck and Postliberalism or Reformed Epistemology or, say, Stanley Hauerwas with which he clearly has some affinity. It would be a worthwhile exercise to reflect on similarities and differences between the Reformed Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga and others who maintain that Christian faith should unabashedly adopt God as the "foundation" rather than trying to look somewhere else.¹¹¹ Similarly the Hauerwasian connection with its idea of the church as a unique "colony" and thus unique way of understanding reality would make a helpful contribution to our thinking of missional ecclesiology. When it comes to Postliberalism, it seems to me that Newbigin's sympathies – even with some critical notes – might have been a bit misplaced. I have a hard time a *post-Liberal* advocate of the gospel as public truth!

I am not mentioning these tasks for further study primarily to advance academic inquiry but rather in my desire to better understand the scope and location of Newbigin's missional ecclesiology in the larger matrix of contemporary thinking. Is it the case that Newbigin's missional ecclesiology and epistemology represents a movement *sui generis* or is it rather that – like any creative and constructive thinker – he has listened carefully to a number of contemporary voices and echoes their motifs in a fresh way?

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989/Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 232; Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 19, 30.

² Paul Weston, "Lesslie Newbigin: A Postmodern Missiologist?" *Mission Studies* 21, no. 2 (2004): 229.

³ Weston, "A Postmodern Missiologist?" 230.

⁴ Weston, "A Postmodern Missiologist?" 243.

⁵ As a preacher rather than an academic scholar, Newbigin often used ideas and movements as heuristic "talking points" and examples rather than as showcases of detailed academic analysis. His writing style was occasional rather than systematic. To take up obvious examples: his tracing of the pre-history and development of Modernity from antiquity (in terms of the two narratives of Christian faith and Hellenistic philosophy) or his treatment and contrasting of Augustine and Aquinas, in its details hardly stands the scrutiny of rigorous academic investigation. Similarly, his preference for "good guys" in history such as Athanasius and Augustine and disdain for "bad guys" such as Aquinas and Descartes reflect much more their role in the unfolding intentionally biased reading of history than anything else. While for the purposes of academic scholarship the acknowledgment of those kinds of biases should not go unnoticed, in my opinion, they should not blur the significance of Newbigin's critique and constructive proposal. In many ways, it can be said that his innovative and bold proposal can stand on its own feet even if it can shown – unfortunately – that not all the historical and philosophical judgments do.

⁶ One of the many contributions of Weston's "A Postmodern Missiologist?" essay is that it outlines the key aspects of Newbigin's indebtedness to Michael Polanyi, the philosopher of science from whom the bishop borrowed well-known ideas such as "universal intention," testimonies "from within the tradition," and so forth. These are concepts that helped the mature Newbigin to construct his cultural critique and point the way towards his view of "the gospel as public truth."

⁷ Elaine Graham and Walton Heather, "Walk on the Wild Side: A Critique of *The Gospel and Our Culture*." *Modern Churchman* 33, no. 1 (1991): 5-7.

⁸ In my investigation of many aspects of Newbigin's thinking I am indebted to the published doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki by Jukka Keskitalo. That careful study is the most comprehensive theological analysis of Newbigin's thinking. Unfortunately, it is written in Finnish and has only a brief English summary. Therefore, I do not give references to it unless there is a direct citation or otherwise important reason in terms of academic integrity. Jukka Keskitalo, *Kristillinen usko ja moderni kulttuuri: Lesslie Newbigin käsitys kirkon missiosta modernissa länsimaaisessa kulttuurissa* [The Christian Faith and Modern Culture: Lesslie Newbigin's View of the Church's Mission in Modern Western Culture], Suomalaisen Teologisen Kirjallisuusseuran Julkaisuja 218. Helsinki: Suomalainen Teologinen Kirjallisuusseura, 1999.

⁹ Keskitalo, *Kristillinen usko*, 214 notes that Colin Gunton's view of postmodernity is similarly parasitic.

¹⁰ Among others, Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 27, 51; Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 82.

¹¹ Among others, Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 83.

¹² Among others, Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 7.

¹³ So also Keskitalo, *Kristillinen usko*, 214.

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, "Modernity in Context," in *Postmodern and Christians*, ed. John Reid, Lesslie Newbigin, and David Pullinger (Carberry: The Handsell Press, 1996), 8.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 77.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach," *Studia Missionalia* 42 (1993): 231.

- ¹⁷ See again, e.g., Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 77 cited above.
- ¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no. 2 (1989): 50. Newbigin refers several times to the well-known ideas of the Jewish-American philosopher Alan Bloom, who in his influential work *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) sees a total relativism as the dominant feature of Western culture; see, e.g., Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission*, ed. Eleanor Jackson (Grand Rapid, Mich.: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1994), 105-6.
- ¹⁹ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 27.
- ²⁰ See, e.g., Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 26-27.
- ²¹ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 8.
- ²² Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 8.
- ²³ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 26.
- ²⁴ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 73-74.
- ²⁵ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 27.
- ²⁶ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 27; see also 36, 105; and Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 9.
- ²⁷ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus," 52.
- ²⁸ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 227-28 (227).
- ²⁹ Peter Berger, *Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (London: Collins, 1980).
- ³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (1987): 2-7; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 39-40, 53..
- ³¹ Berger uses the term "modern" when speaking of contemporary Western culture. I have changed it to "contemporary" to avoid confusion: obviously, what Berger is describing is the culture of postmodernity which encourages each individual have his or her own beliefs.
- ³² Berger has named these three options deductive (Karl Barth as an example), reductive (Bultmann's demythologization program as a paradigm), and inductive (Schleiermacher, as mentioned, as the showcase).
- ³³ See, e.g., Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 13.
- ³⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 14-15.
- ³⁵ E.g., ch. 2, "Roots of Pluralism," in Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.
- ³⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 13-14.
- ³⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 79. For references to this phrase, see Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 76-77; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 55.
- ³⁸ Keskitalo, *Kristillinen usko*, 230.
- ³⁹ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 47 (again, in reference to Yu's phrase, cited above).
- ⁴⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986: Questions to the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984), 1-2, 6; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 112; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 46-47.
- ⁴¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 90-91.
- ⁴² Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 1.
- ⁴³ Lesslie Newbigin, "The Secular Myth," in *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in "Secular" Britain*, ed. Lesslie Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh, and Jenny Taylor (London: SPCK, 1998), 13.
- ⁴⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 90-91; see also pp. 111-12.
- ⁴⁵ Werner Ustorf, *Christianized Africa – De-Christianized Europe? Missionary Inquiries into the Polycentric Epoch of Christian History: Perspektiven der Weltmission*, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge Band 14. Herausgegeben von der Missionsakademie an der Universität Hamburg (Ammersbek bei Hamburg: Lottbeck Jensen, 1992), 108-10; for Newbigin's response, see "The Secular Myth," 6, 13.
- ⁴⁶ See, e.g., Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 55.
- ⁴⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 3; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 93.
- ⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 19; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 2.
- ⁴⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 40-41, 45.
- ⁵⁰ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 81.
- ⁵¹ Cf. Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 55 (which of course speaks of an initiative in relation to the culture of Modernity.)

- ⁵² Cf. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 22; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222 (which, again, speaks of the Church in relation to Modernity.)
- ⁵³ Cf. Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 55.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9-10.
- ⁵⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97-99; Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 111.
- ⁵⁶ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 24.
- ⁵⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 35.
- ⁵⁸ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 233.
- ⁵⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, "Gospel and Culture," audio recording of an address given to a conference organized by Danish Missions Council and the Danish Churches Ecumenical Council in Denmark on 3 November 1995 (www.newbigin.net), p. 8.
- ⁶⁰ Newbigin, "Gospel and Culture."
- ⁶¹ Newbigin finds many faults in the Fundamentalistic Bible interpretation: (1) "It is difficult to maintain without a kind of split personality if one is going to live an active life in the modern world." (2) "Those who hold this position are themselves part of the modern world; consequently, when they say that the Bible is factually accurate, they are working with a whole context of meaning, within a concept of factuality that is foreign to the Bible." (3) In the final analysis, to "prove" the Bible, Fundamentalists must appeal to experience, the experience of the Church concerning the Bible; if so, then Fundamentalists have succumbed to the same trap as Liberalism, their archenemy. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 46; see also Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 42-43, 49; Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 85-86.
- ⁶² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 19.
- ⁶³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 82.
- ⁶⁴ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 50.
- ⁶⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 28; see also pp. 4-5.
- ⁶⁶ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 24; Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 7.
- ⁶⁷ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 67.
- ⁶⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 300; see, e.g., Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 51-52, 54-55.
- ⁶⁹ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 67.
- ⁷⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 35.
- ⁷¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 23.
- ⁷² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 33.
- ⁷³ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 48, 105; Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1986*, 20; Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 20.
- ⁷⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 35.
- ⁷⁵ See Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 187.
- ⁷⁶ Newbigin also refers at times to the well-known philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970]), who spoke of dramatic turning points in the development of science when new paradigms emerge and transform not only the methods and results but also the whole way of thinking scientifically; see, e.g., Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 91-92.
- ⁷⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 87.
- ⁷⁸ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," 50; so also p. 52; the reference is to A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, What Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).
- ⁷⁹ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," 54.
- ⁸⁰ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 53.
- ⁸¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 87-88.
- ⁸² Lesslie Newbigin, "The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12 (1988): 50.
- ⁸³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 64; Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 52.
- ⁸⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53.
- ⁸⁵ See, e.g., Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 24-25; Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 83-84.
- ⁸⁶ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 85 (emphasis mine).
- ⁸⁷ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 236.
- ⁸⁸ Ch. 8 in Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is titled "The Bible as Universal History." This view of course resonates with Wolfhart Pannenberg's view of revelation as history. For some reason,

Newbigin does not engage this Lutheran theologian's ideas even though many of them, including the historicity of the resurrection or the importance of eschatology, are obvious common points.

⁸⁹ Ch. 9 in Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is titled "Christ, the Clue to History."

⁹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 5.

⁹¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995 [orig. 1978]), 50-52.

⁹² Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, 52.

⁹³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 63.

⁹⁴ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," 54.

⁹⁵ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 158.

⁹⁶ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 168.

⁹⁷ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 168-69 (168).

⁹⁸ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 170.

⁹⁹ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 233.

¹⁰⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, ch. 10 is titled "Logic of Mission."

¹⁰¹ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 233.

¹⁰² Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 240.

¹⁰³ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 170. Newbigin notes in another context how ironic it is that the introduction by the West of ideas, science, technology, and such products of "development" were for the most part not considered as the "will to power" in the Third World. Rather, they were welcomed and embraced. Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 122-23.

¹⁰⁴ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 168.

¹⁰⁵ Newbigin at times calls the witnesses "seekers of the truth" and commends the apophatic tradition of Christian theology for its acknowledgment that "no human image or concept can grasp the reality of God."

Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53-54.

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 34-35.

¹⁰⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 234.

¹¹⁰ My own growing conviction is that, similarly to Modernity, postmodernism has such built-in contradistinctions in its texture that it may not survive for a long time. Its contribution in my opinion has been mainly deconstructive: it has helped the culture of the West to wake up from the Modernist slumber. What becomes "post" this, I am not yet sure about.

¹¹¹ Keskitalo (*Kristillinen usko*, 167-72) offers an insightful excursus on the topic; unfortunately, it is not accessible for English readers.