

## Space in the City Lecture – Winchester – 7 October 2009

### Lesslie Newbigin



James Edward Lesslie Newbigin, to give him his full name, born in Newcastle on Tyne on 8 December 1909. His father was a ship builder and his parents devout and deeply thoughtful Christians. At 18 Lesslie declared the idea of God as 'no longer tenable'. He went to Queens' College Cambridge to read geography and threw himself into University life. He also came across the Student Christian Movement who he found 'very attractive'. In 1929 in his first summer vacation he volunteered to help at a Quaker centre in south Wales to bring relief and provide recreation for unemployed miners living in the Rhondda valley.

He observed that they needed more than table tennis – 'some kind of faith that would fortify them for today and tomorrow against apathy and despair'. They needed 'the Christian faith that was beginning to draw me'. About 60 of them went to camp near the coast. One evening some of them managed to smuggle large quantities of alcohol into the camp and before long they were completely drunk and began fighting each other. Newbigin was quite out his depth and when things quietened down went to bed with the feeling of total defeat. While lying awake – he experienced something of a spiritual awakening. It was a vivid vision of the cross of Christ 'spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the world'.

I was sure that night in a way that I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to begin again when I had come to the end of my own resources of understanding and courage.

He was greatly influenced by speakers at Cambridge – John R Mott, William Temple and John Mackay (missionary and President of Princeton University). His faith grew in ways that were sensitive to social questions and profoundly ecumenical in dimension. The following summer at a conference at Swanwick he felt called to missionary work (formerly assumed he would join his father's successful shipping business). He went for an interview in Glasgow to become a Student Christian Movement secretary where he met Helen Henderson. Later he wrote, 'I fell in love with her there and then and made up my mind that whether or not the whole committee decided to take me on, I would try and ensure she did.' They worked together for 3 years and married in 1936.

They offered for missionary service with the Church of Scotland and both went for training, Helen in Edinburgh and Lesslie returned to Cambridge. He studied theology and in particular Romans – 'I began the study as a typical liberal. I ended it with a strong conviction about the finished work of Christ, about the centrality and objectivity of atonement accomplished on Calvary... At the end of the exercise I was much more of an evangelical than a liberal.'

They were assigned by the CofS to Madras in 1936, he was horrified at the relationship between the missionaries and the local people (p.6). They learned Tamil but had to return to England for surgery following a serious bus accident. When they returned in 1939 he was assigned to Kanchipuram – one of the most sacred cities in India and a centre of learning – where they stayed for 7 years. He was invited by Hindu scholars to join the leadership of a group who met each week at the Ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission for study and reflection. They took turns to read the Svetasvatra Upanishad and St John's Gospel. This had a profound impact upon him.

He was significantly involved in the development of the Church of South India (CofScot, Anglicans, British Methodists, Reformed Church in America). This led eventually to its establishment in 1947, though in England Lesslie had to defend it and himself from claims of 'popery', and Lesslie was one of its founding Bishops. Initially Bishop of Madurai. His reflection was that 'what we are doing is not patching things together, but being led by the Holy Spirit back to the fullness and simplicity of gospel truth'.

He was then in 1959 made a Secretary to the International Missionary Council in the World Council of Churches in Geneva. At first he was reluctant but in five

years achieved an huge shift in the missionary emphasis of the WCC. He became the editor of the *International review of Missions*. He and Helen were glad to return to India in 1965 and to become the Bishop of Madras. His ministry involved the development of social programmes, outreach and evangelism and engagement with all the faith groups. He retired in 1974 aged 65. By this time he had published 17 books and written 50 articles.

His manner of leaving India was characteristically creative. He and Helen travelled by local transport through India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, then along Turkey to Cappadocia and eastern edge of Europe, through Germany and to Edinburgh. Each Sunday along the way they celebrated worship with local Christians but were by themselves only when they emerged into Europe.

It was the shock of returning to a 'pagan' western Europe which drove him to continue writing and working (15 books and 160 articles). Retirement for Lesslie meant he taught at the Selly Oak Colleges, was Moderator of the United Reformed Church in 1978/9 and became minister of Winston Green URC church in Birmingham at the age of 72! A post he held for 7 years. He and Helen moved in 1992 to Herne Hill in South London to be closer to their children and he died in 1998 following a brief illness. He was 88 years old.

I met Lesslie on two occasions which were quite different. In Croydon when on behalf of the church I was producing a series of lectures on the Lima documents – Baptism, Ministry and Eucharist. We had Archbishops Runcie, and Warlock, Professor Stephen Sykes and Lesslie. He spoke on Ministry. I asked for the script because I did not understand it – read it and still did not! My fault I am sure.

## **What are the key features of his thinking and ministry?**

### **Ecclesiology**

In his *The Household of God* (1953) he explores the question 'Of what is the church constituted?' He discusses three streams. Two were traditional streams: the protestant with its emphasis on salvation by faith alone, and the catholic with its emphasis on the continuing 'body of Christ' and the sacraments. Newbigin adds to these a third stream on the Church as 'The Community of the Holy Spirit'. If the ecumenical movement was to bear its proper fruit then it needed to espouse the Pentecostal movement.

### **The death of Christ**

The supreme revelation of the love of God. 'It is at the cross we understand the infinite depths of God's love... He has come down to bear upon himself the burden of sin, to receive the wages of sin, to suffer the dread penalties of sin.' The cross was not only the way of salvation but also the 'unmasking' of the spiritual 'principalities and powers' that are work in social and political structures, and that assume a power that is not rightfully theirs.

### **Election**

He ignores the historic emphasis of the choosing of a people for redemption (and therefore the choosing of a people for perdition, the 'scandal of particularity') which is a hallmark of reformed theology. Instead he focuses on God's choosing of a people at particular times to mediate his universal reign. Newbigin emphasises the missionary imperative of this calling. The Church is brought into being not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world, as the bearer of God's universal message of salvation.

## **Christ as the clue to History**

He was influenced by the rise of ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Nazism, Marxism and materialism. He challenged the notion that humans could sustain progress unaided within history. It needed the redemptive work of God in Christ. Similarly, in a culture of Hinduism, he declared history was not cyclical, but linear. We are not always hoping for a better life next time round, but to the transformation of history which God promises.

But it was crucial for Newbigin that the Christian faith was set in space and time and history – within which Christians can commit themselves to constructive action.

## **Ecumenical vision**

From his Cambridge days as an undergraduate, the SCM had taught him ‘to see unity and mission as two sides of a single commitment.’ This was strengthened by visits to Cambridge by the statesmen of the Edinburgh Conference Joe Oldham and John Mott. The pinnacle of his own ecumenical achievements was the inauguration of the Church of South India of which he was to become a founding Bishop. It was a matter of considerable anguish to him that, despite Archbishop Fisher’s welcome of the move, the CSI was not received as part of the Anglican Communion.

## **Trinitarian Mission**

Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the notion was that the primary ‘agent’ in mission was the Church. Thus the *International review of Missions*, and at times Newbigin was supporter of this view but he came to see that God the Trinity was the agent of mission. Only a fully Trinitarian view of mission would do justice to what the bible had to say about mission. The proclamation of the Kingdom (in the authority of the Father), the presence of the Kingdom (in and through the Son), and the ‘prevenience’ of the Kingdom (through the ministry of the Spirit who ‘goes before’ the Church in its missionary work). This threefold view of mission is rooted in the triune being of God himself. If any of these is taken in isolation as the clue to the understanding of mission, distortion follows.

## **Christ and cultures**

From early on in his time at Kanchipuram in the 1930s Newbigin met weekly at the Ramakrishna Mission with committed leaders of other living faiths. There they would read from the sacred scriptures of each faith and discuss together. (The American Methodist E Stanley Jones used to do the same thing but round the hospitality of his table). So interfaith dialogue was foundational to his understanding. This developed later into a critique of 'over bearing proselytism' on the one hand and the empty and uncommitted use of words on the other. Christianity from its beginning had always existed in a religiously plural world, people in Western Europe had forgotten that! Dialogue in the sense of sharing is not enough – Christian faith drives us to make truth claims for the revelation of God in Christ and to humbly share that with people of no faith or other faith is both duty and privilege.

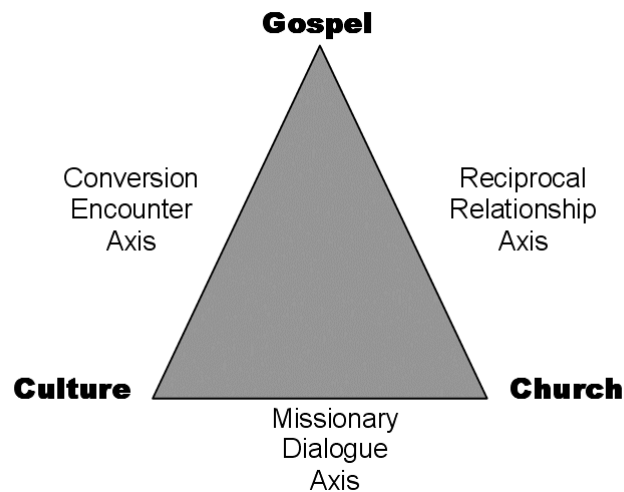
## **The Missionary crisis in the West**

It was in his return from India that he discovered 'the dramatic suddenness with which, in the space of one lifetime, our civilization has so completely lost confidence in its own validity.' His constant reply to those who asked him about the most difficult part of the transition from India to the UK was – 'The disappearance of hope'. He therefore set about writing and speaking to develop a 'truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism'. His later books were all devoted to this 'greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church'. His book *The Other side of 1984* did not contain anything which considered new or revolutionary, rather he thought it resembled 'a small blast not of a trumpet but of the tin whistle'. The first print run sold out immediately and eventually sold 20,000 copies.

## **The Gospel and Public Life**

From 1989 in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* he challenges the normal way of doing western apologetics – seeking to find neutral ground on which to argue. No, building on his experience in the Ramakrishna community he encourages to a new approach. It is not that Christianity is faith based over against scientific proposals which are fact – he drew on the work of Michael Polyani to propose that at the heart of all kinds of knowledge there lies the indispensable exercise of faith. Consequently the Christian message which is seen as private opinion is in fact public truth. It deserves to be declared in the public arena

boldly and creatively. Not surprisingly his last book published in 1995 was entitled *Proper Confidence: faith, doubt and certainty in Christian Discipleship*.



The second occasion I met Lesslie was when he came to Cliff College to speak to an invited audience of senior Methodists. Over 48 hours he gave a number of lectures and seminars. By this time his sight was poor. People came to read letters, journals and new publications to him at his home. He spoke without notes at the consultation on wide ranging subjects, quoting from memory philosophers, theologians and contemporary publications. His were captivating and inspirational lectures. We will never forget them. He died just a few months later.

Howard Mellor  
October 2009