# Another Side of 1984

By
David Wasdell

**Critical contribution to the debate on dogma and dialogue raised by 'The Other Side of 1984' (Lesslie Newbigin, WCC 1983). It is argued that a return to faith based on dogmatic foundations is no prescription for the perceived ills of contemporary society. [1983]**

Produced By: Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE
Hosted By: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN), Charity Reg. No. 284542
Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk

# Another Side of 1984

[Critical reflections on 'The Other Side of 1984' by Lesslie Newbigin, pub. by the World Council of Churches 1983]

No-one is completely conscious of all the drives and needs which motivate one's work but it is those points at which we are most unconscious which exercise the most formative, yet intractable influences in determining the outcome of our thoughts and actions. This paper represents an attempt to listen to Lesslie Newbigin's recent book at a level below that at which he was consciously writing. It is also an attempt to see through the logic of his argument to its axioms and assumptions and to examine the contradictions, the paradoxes, the slips, reversals and inconsistencies. It is a painful exercise. It will be experienced at times as destructive, at other times as constructive. It is, however, offered in the spirit of real dialogue in which the fundamental grounds of dogma, the basic assumptions of the scientific enquiry and the axioms of analysis must be opened and exposed to each other with the hope that truth will out, albeit always with the risk that the view of truth with which one starts is not that with which one ends.

For ease of reference the chapter numbers and headings of Newbigin's text are taken as the structure. This way of organising material may, on occasions, lead to a certain amount of repetition and need for cross-referencing but these difficulties are more than outweighed by the gain in clarity as we seek to understand Newbigin's argument as he builds it step by step.

## I: IS THERE A FUTURE? (pp. 1 - 4)

The aftermath of the first world war, the dark years of the depression, with horizons clouded by emergent Nazism and Fascism within the European scene - these constituted the crucible of formation for Lesslie Newbigin and his wife. It was from this matrix that they journeyed to India in 1936 to begin a missionary career spanning more than a generation. Their return to Britain in 1974 exposed them to culture shock at an intensity rarely experienced and hardly anticipated by anyone 'returning home'. The question must therefore be raised as to how much of Newbigin's material represents the rationalisation of his struggle to come to terms with the massive change in British culture which had occurred in his absence.

Significantly he notes that on arrival in India

> "One of the first things I did ... was to be involved in a bus accident which laid me off for two years." [page 9]

So his initial entry into Indian culture was slow, sea-borne, marked by physical trauma and a prolonged period of convalescence in a context which buffered the transition from the ideals of Victorian Empire, through the culture of the British Raj to the struggles, hopes and fears of the Indian people themselves. Today's missionary training takes full account of the effects of culture shock on the lives, health and responses of new missionaries. Perhaps one area that is given far too little attention is the culture shock experienced by returning missionaries, trying

to cope with the problems of re-entry to a context which may, for them, be fundamentally alien from anything they have ever known. The second world war had come and gone, the period of post-war rebuilding, that sense of co-operation and hope for the future of the nation which climaxed in 1955, the point at which we had 'never had it so good', had lingered on into the lazy sixties. It was an era finally closed in 1973 with the realisation of the limits to growth within the community of Island Earth. The oil crisis, inflation, and the beginning of that spiral of technological innovation, declining productivity and increased unemployment which has yet to reach its peak.

The greatest difficulty Newbigin experienced on re-entry to British culture was summed up in his words,

> "The disappearance of hope." [p .1]

His most fundamental response is therefore the attempt, driven by the desperate flight from despair, to recover some ground of hope. How far this existential problem belonged to the culture in which he came to find himself and how far it was his own inner personal struggle it is difficult to say. Certainly we appear to live in a culture which grasps at anything which may give it some sense of hope, whether or not that hope is grounded in the realities of the world in which we live. The fundamental purpose of his text appears to be the generation of hope out of the despair and gloom which characterise the Britain of 1984.

It would seem that during the 38 years of his missionary career, buffered by the vast inertia of the Indian subcontinent, it was hard for Newbigin's understanding of British culture to keep up with the pace of change. He notes the similarities in the sense of hope and confidence in the future which characterised the early years of this century in Britain with the same kind of feel within the Indian population. On his return, however, he is suddenly faced with a discontinuity. He notes,

> "In England, by contrast, it is hard to find any such hope." [p.1]

He notes the disintegration of so many of the familiar values and the terrible spectre of nuclear war, with nothing beyond. He bewails,

> "What has happened to our civilization which, so recently, was confident that it was 'The Coming World Civilization'?" [p.2]

and again, poignantly, he notes,

> "The dramatic suddenness with which, in the space of one lifetime, our civilization has so completely lost confidence in its own validity." [p.3]

Perhaps the dramatic suddenness is represented by the telescoping into a matter of weeks for Newbigin changes which had taken 38 years in his absence. His response, I would argue, bears all the marks of culture-shock as he attempts to reassert in the here and now of the 1980s the values which he imbibed prior to leaving the country in the 1930s and whose loss exposed him to a crisis of hope and an encounter with existential despair with which he naturally found it extremely difficult to cope. It may well be that out of this dynamic stems the process of the whole book in which the hope for the future appears to lie in the past. The first section ends with the words,

> "The mushroom clouds which rose into the sky above the blasted ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have, ever since that day in 1945, hung in menace over the consciousness of modern men and women, posing with fearful poignancy the question: 'Is there a future for civilization as we know it?'" [p.4]

The emotion associated with those symbols hides the subtle assumptions of his concluding clause. Civilisation as Newbigin knew it appears to have fixated in the early years of the 20th century. It has already changed virtually out of all recognition. The question is not to do with the perpetuation of unchanging forms of civilisation held in inert fixation by the inability of humanity to cope with future shock encapsulated in cultural transition. Civilisation tomorrow will not look like civilisation today, let alone civilisation yesterday. Hope lies in the realistic evolution of society, and its structures, in the effective management of change in a changing world.

Newbigin affirms,

> "Every culture goes through periods when self-criticism is general. But it is also true that cultures are born and die. The question now is whether our present self-criticism is merely the normal self-questioning of a healthy culture, or whether we are at the point where a culture is approaching death. It seems to me, and I know that I am not alone, that the truth of our present situation is nearer to the second of these alternatives than to the first." [p.3]

In his 'Journey of the Magi', T.S. Eliot focussed attention on the ambivalence between the two points of birth and death. The approach of birth is so often experienced as imminent destruction and conversely the nearness of death is surrounded with myths of survival and new birth. For Newbigin there is apparently no question of birth. Having raised the antithesis between possible birth or death of the culture he immediately shifts ground. He does not discuss whether the present sense of oppression is one of the signs of cultural change, transformation and the emergence of a new form of civilisation. [See for example: Beyond the Stable State, Donald Schon, Temple Smith, London, 1971; The Third Wave, Alvin Toffler, Collins, 1980; Churches at the transition between growth and world equilibrium, J. Forrester, Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, Vol.7, No.3, 1972] Newbigin's only concern is whether the present turmoil represents the death of a culture or the healthy questioning of its middle age. In affirming his perspective that the present time represents the onset of death of the culture he appears to call for a return to the mid-life point, a reaffirmation of the dogmatic values whose demise appears to have precipitated the terminal condition of society. Now when comments like this are made it is essential to question how far such perceptions represent projection onto society from the inner fears of a man approaching the end of his life and attempting to wrestle with the problems of his own mortality while yet, partly because of the overwhelming effects of culture-shock, unable to internalise these into his own personal struggle. In this externalised position he may well be seeking to solve internal and personal problems by displacement as if they were social problems. In reality, of course, the two may coincide. On the other hand they may not. The logical inconsistencies and paradoxes of his argument, together with the elision of hope founded in the possibilities of birth, change and emergence into some new life beyond the constraints of the present, indicate that some measure of repression, denial and projection may be involved.

Loss of hope and social despair are epitomised for Newbigin in the splitting of east and west, which he rightly traces back into the heart of "the Enlightenment". As the spirit of scientific

enquiry, in a context of surplus wealth creamed out of the edges of Empire by unjust trading practice gave birth to the industrial revolution, so the neo-feudal class conflict emerged within the European arena with great intensity. It is significant that out of the loss of hope within this matrix arose the fundamental split between left and right, east and west, as the dissidents within each side of the cultural split sought to generate a different form of culture beyond the boundaries of the old world. That process did not, of course, elide social splitting which has now reached a second generation. It is the dissidents of the capitalist west who are seeking through revolution to rejuvenate the culture .and it is the dissidents of the communist east, despairing of finding, fulfilment within communism, who seek new hope in western ways. If realistic hope lies only with those in flight from the despair of the cultural core, then in today' s world of antithetical core cultures that source of hope is of all most doomed to impotence and destined for despair. For Hegel hope would have lain somewhere in the future through synthesis of the antithetical cultural norms. For Newbigin hope lies in the past, through some kind of reconstitution of the ground from which these warring antitheses sprang deep in the mores of the 'Enlightenment' and, deeper still, the Augustinian dogmas of the dark ages.

In this opening section then, there are elements which would indicate that the twin internal struggles of culture shock and the approach of death have set up a process of displacement from the intrapersonal to the social, coupled with a reversal of the time-trace moving away from the future in regressive retreat to the past.

## II: THE ROOTS OF MODERN CULTURE (pp. 5 - 16)

In discussing our modern culture, Newbigin makes it clear that he is essentially speaking of the British experience, though to be sure that this a western European phenomenon which has in turn permeated and influenced other cultures on a world wide basis. He traces the seeds of the movement which generated our modern culture from the first stirrings of the Renaissance, via the Reformation to the 'Enlightenment' of the mid-l8th century.

> "But it is clear that by the middle of the eighteenth century there was a widespread feeling that Europe had reached a turning point. Developments which had been going on continuously for several centuries seemed to have reached a point of clarification such that people could only use the word 'enlightenment' to describe what had happened. Light had dawned. Darkness had passed away. What had been obscure was now clear. Things would henceforth be seen as they really are. 'Enlightenment' is a word with profound religious over-tones. It is the word used to describe the decisive experience of the Buddha. It is the word used in the Johannine writings to describe the coming of Jesus: 'The light has come into the world' (John 3:19). The leading thinkers of the mid-eighteenth century felt themselves to be at such a moment of enlightenment, and this moment provides a proper point from which to begin an understanding of our culture." [p.7]

Light is always relative to darkness and the darkness which gave clarity to the light in Europe itself was perceived in historic terms so that Newbigin notes,

> "A light had indeed dawned compared with which the preceding centuries of European history and the previous history of most of the human race were darkness." [p.8]

The darkness was not only in historic terms. But also seen as geographically related to the non-European cultures, so that European peoples saw themselves as,

> "The bearers of light in a world still largely dark. They had therefore both the duty and the capacity to carry their civilization into every corner of the world." [p.8]

It is perhaps worth noting the process of idealisation here. The splitting between light and darkness becomes absolute so easily. Those who perceive their own way of seeing things as enlightened tend to do so at the expense of the endarkenment of all else. The out-group, whether in history or geography, is rendered light-less in order to enhance the contrast and to justify the missionary and ideational invasion of outer space. The process in the internal field of European culture is also idealised in the sense that it is perceived as completed, totally enlightened and static. Light had come. There were, of course, even within the terms of reference of the enlightenment dark areas within European thought and culture. Areas of superstition and unenlightened folk religion persevered. At times the church was engaged in a vicious rearguard action in an attempt to preserve the boundaries of the kingdom of darkness from invasion by the new forces of light!

One way of describing culture is as a complex social network of ideas, images, institutions, symbols, myths, rituals, roles and activity, one function of which is to provide a framework of "meaning" for the society as a whole and for the individuals and institutions within it. As such, culture provides a way of dealing with those fundamental anxieties about meaninglessness, purposelessness, alienation and suffering, which otherwise tend to irrupt and overwhelm the human psyche. Newbigin underlines the fundamental shift in the foundations of culture which was experienced during this period, moving as it did from the realm of metaphysics and the supernatural to physics and the natural. That fundamental shift is summed up in Newbigin's quote from a work by Cassirer,

> "The systematic concepts developed by seventeenth century metaphysics are still firmly anchored in theological thinking with all their originality and independence. For Descartes and Malebranche and for Spinoza and Leibniz there is no solution of the problem of truth independently of the problem of God because knowledge of the divine being forms the highest principle of knowledge from which all other certainties are deduced. But in eighteenth century thought the intellectual centre of gravity changes its position. The various fields of knowledge - natural science, history, law, politics, art - gradually withdraw from the domination and tutelage of traditional metaphysics and theology. They no longer look to the concept of God for their justification and legitimation; the various sciences themselves now determine that concept on the basis of their specific form. The relations between the concept of God and the concepts of truth, morality, law are by no means abandoned, but their direction changes. An exchange of index symbols takes place, as it were. That which formerly had established other concepts, now moves into the position of that which is to be established, and that which hitherto had justified other concepts, now finds itself in the position of a concept which requires justification. Finally even the theology of the eighteenth century is affected by this trend. It gives up the absolute primacy it had previously enjoyed; it no longer sets the standard but submits to certain basic norms derived from another source which are furnished it by reason as the epitome of independent intellectual forces." [p.11f.]

The shift is essentially that from theology to science, from worship to critical rationality, or in Newbigin's terms from faith to doubt.

Now any period of massive cultural .change of this kind passes through an era of transition in which the old framework is perceived as crumbling and inadequate to give the guarantees against overwhelming psychotic anxiety within society. Meanwhile the new framework is not yet sufficiently clear or firmly established to take up the weight of anxiety defence and cultural projection. Such periods are inevitably characterised by the violent acting out of anxiety within social systems, the fragmentation of one group from another, each seeking to

establish its own cultural mores as normative for society as a whole. Two examples of this kind of cultural shift are given, each of which was accompanied by massive boundary conflict between the old and the new. The first is represented by the culture emerging in "the New World", which was itself a mixture of people in flight from oppression or persecution in the cultural mores of the old. Some were seeking a new context in which to regress to the more mediaeval ideas of theocracy, while others sought in the new land the possibilities of breaking free from the trammels of the old order.

> "Mediaeval society had emphasized the idea of the duties involved for each person by his or her position in society. From the Enlightenment onwards, it was the "rights of man" which seemed axiomatic. To the founding fathers of the new republic created in the New World to embody the principles of this new philosophy, it seemed necessary and natural to begin with the famous words: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.' The rights of the human person are the unquestioned starting point from which all else follows." [p.13]

Perhaps it would be too cynical to observe that for the founding fathers of the New World women were not as equal as men, whites were more equal than blacks, with reds even less equal, and Christians were decidedly more equal than those of other religions.

It is fascinating to note, however, that while the institutions of power and authority were perceived no longer to derive that power and authority by introjection from the absolutes of the metaphysical world, but by projection and validation from the wills of the individuals and institutions which made up the society concerned, the value system upon which that kind of society was constructed was still perceived to be absolutised, metaphysically guaranteed and given. Laws were essentially the laws of God and science had the task of discovering what those laws might be. Rights were absolutised and vested in the will of the Creator from which they were introjected into human culture, to be applied by the powers that be, who were themselves deriving their authority from the populace and the consent of the governed. So the constitution of the New World represents some kind of compromise between the old and the new. The old still manages the boundaries within which the new has freedom to play. I would suggest, however, that this compromise does not represent 'modern' culture, though it may be an accurate representation of the cultural norms of the early 20th century which appear to have formed the matrix of Newbigin's ideas.

The second area in which new cultural norms were seen to have massive impact was in the emergence of the nation state. Newbigin notes,

> "After the trauma of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, Europe settled down to the principle of religious coexistence, and the passions which had formerly been invested in rival interpretations of religion were more and more invested in the nation state." [p.14]

It was the nation state which had the responsibility for securing and enacting the fundamental human rights (or alternatively which bore the responsibility for failure to enact such rights). Again we must notice the period of inter-norm conflict described here as "the trauma of the religious wars" as the anxieties carried and repressed by the old structures are acted out in the absence of consensus about the new. One way of understanding current arenas of conflict in the world is as a new level of the religious wars of the seventeenth century. The most violently irruptive flash-points are those social interfaces between the great tectonic plates of world religion and ideology.

Once the metaphysical had been reduced to a boundary structure of the culture:

> "Nationalism became the effective ideology of the European peoples, always at times of crises proving stronger than any other ideological or religious force. If there is any entity to which ultimate loyalty is due, it is the nation state. In the twentieth century we have become accustomed to the fact that - in the name of the nation - Catholics will fight Catholics, Protestants will fight Protestants, and Marxists will fight Marxists. The charge of blasphemy, if it is ever made, is treated as a quaint anachronism; but the charge of treason, of placing another loyalty above that to the nation state, is treated as the unforgivable crime. The nation state has taken the place of God." [p.15]

This is somewhat of a generalisation of historic process, for there were international conflicts within Christendom prior to the Enlightenment, and there are intra-national conflicts between opposed religious groupings in today's world.

The values which under-gird the structure of the nation state and which validate its inalienable rights of sovereignty over internal affairs etc. are not always consciously articulated within the culture of the nation state concerned. They do, however, operate at the international cultural level, representing a different order of "human rights" in which the nation state takes the place of the individual within the global constitution. As such the "rights of the nation state" are deemed to be absolutes, given, introjected and received from the creation and ultimately from the Creator. In other words the boundaries and norms of modern international relationships are, to a large extent, unconsciously governed by the metaphysical construct of pre-Enlightenment dogma (the Darkness), peripheralised in the late-l8th century, but still reified as the guardian of the norms, values, rights and principles of social structure in the modern western world. Cultures which do not share this fundamental, mediaeval, western, Christian, construct experience fundamental mismatch and threat at the very heart of their social being. Boundaries between fundamentally different cultural foundations are therefore invested unconsciously with all the anxiety, conflict and armour of a people for whom examination of the fundamental carriers of meaning is so fraught as to be taboo.

## III: A NEW FRAMEWORK

The third chapter of Newbigin's book take us into the core of his argument. In a nutshell he argues that the norms of the Enlightenment have not worked, in particular they have failed to provide for the coherent sense of meaningfulness within our culture. It is therefore necessary to reverse the conversion reaction of the Enlightenment, to reassert the primacy of God, the supernatural and the metaphysic, placing man, the natural and the physical back in its proper, or secondary derivative place.

Newbigin introduces this section with a brief two-page sketch of the collapse of Enlightenment structures. It has become clear that the "self-evident" truths are no longer self-evident. In spite of the massive steps in the evolution of science and technology there would appear to be a fundamental failure in human institutions. Perhaps the most accurate distinction to draw here is between progress in the field of the natural sciences and progress, or lack of it, within the fields of human behaviour, so in spite of scientific advances he notes that:

> "The world which results does not appear to us to be a more rational world than that of previous centuries. More and more people among the most powerful nations on earth feel themselves helpless in the grip of irrational forces" [p.17]

People experience that power is vested in the irrational psychodynamics of human systems over which the 'rational' political structures, whether of East or West appear to have little control. There is the acting out of social anxiety, meaninglessness, futility and despair, demonstrated in interpersonal violence, vandalism, anarchy, terrorism and international struggle. The irrational dynamics are then countered by governmental intervention in terms of oppressive application of law and order, increasing authoritarianism, denial of human rights and the armouring of national boundaries. Those not actively caught up in one side of the struggle or the other experience "a profound sense of meaninglessness, of 'anomie '".

The fundamental means by which Newbigin seeks to regain lost hope would appear to be the reassertion of control of the irrational by the establishment of that dogmatic frame of meaning which alone, for Newbigin, would make human existence and interaction tolerable. It is perhaps significant that again and precisely at this point Newbigin raises the issue of the debilitating bus crash at the start of his missionary career. One senses that the 'Indian pastor', for whom the 'explanation' that the brakes had failed was inadequate, represents a part of Newbigin himself, the would-be Indian pastor, struggling with the random irrationality and apparent unfairness of fate which the event represented for himself. As he struggles with the questions raised for him he writes:

> "One might trace the failure of the brakes through an endless regress of causes back to the creation of the world itself, but that would not explain why I happened to be the one whose leg was broken just at the start of a missionary career. How can this event be meaningfu1 for me?" [ p .18 ]

That deep searching cry for meaning out of meaninglessness "Why did this happen to me?" that emerges out of the heart of human suffering, that posed the agenda for the Deuteronomist, that was wrung from the lips of the crucified and that today haunts the hearts of the post-Holocaust Jew, provides a clue to the fundamental motivation of the text. It is a clue which resonates with the depths of human experience down the ages. It is the same question which drove the young Marx to wrestle with the meaning of alienation, it is supremely the heart-cry of the bereaved, of the helplessly impinged, the unjustly done to, the sinned against, the poor, the marginalised and the victimised. Perhaps most deeply of all it is that unuttered, proto-verbal cry of the neonate, buried deep in the religious heart of the adult, seeking always an answer to the question, "Why did this happen to me? Why the eviction, why the crushing, why the trauma?" In a very deep sense the answers given in terms of credal systems, dogmatics, fiduciary frameworks, ideology and world religion, represent schizoid attempts to cope with the overwhelming emotion associated with the traumatic impingement, the psychotic levels of terror, of rage, of impotence, of retaliation, of guilt, of grieving and loss which lie at the core of the experience. Science does not ask and does not pretend to answer the kind of question which Newbigin presents, for the question itself is an improper question, a displacement. Perhaps the underlying agenda is more closely that of the cry of dereliction - how can I cope with the traumatic emotions involved? How can I release the dammed up pain, the repressed distress, how can I contain the uncontrollable rage, the devastating terror, and the grief pitched past pitch of grief which I sense lie dangerously close to the surface of my psyche, hidden behind defences which I fear may not be effective in their control?

Sensitively, Newbigin places his finger right on the heart of the matter:

> "We are coming to see that there are ' problems' in human life for which there are no 'solutions'. The question has to be asked whether we do not need new models for understanding our human situation. This means that we have to re-examine our accepted framework of understanding. The pre-condition for effective action in any field is a true perception of how things are. Our culture has been confident, during the past two centuries, that it could change the world. Perhaps we may now have to insist that the point is to understand it" [p.18]

Perhaps that represents the watershed of the book. The "human situation" both social and individual poses problems and raises questions to which the natural sciences appear impotent to provide effective solutions and answers. Just as in the early days of the pre-Enlightenment struggle it was found that our human experience of the physical world presented problems and posed questions that the dogmatic framework of mediaeval religion could neither solve nor answer, so today our experience of the irrationality of human behaviour poses problems and raises questions which neither dogmatic religion nor natural science can answer. As Newbigin rightly asserts, "The pre-condition for effective action in any field is a true perception of how things are", in which case the reversal of Karl Marx's famous dictum is incomplete. The task now facing us is that of understanding our world <u>better</u> in order to change it more effectively. Better understanding, or 'true perception', however is unlikely to emerge from a process of dogmatic exposition.

Newbigin may well be right in asserting that humankind stands again on the threshold of a crisis as deep, if not deeper, than that at the heart of the Enlightenment. From that point on, however, his diagnosis appears fundamentally faulted and in consequence, his prescription takes the form of regression. It is therefore to the critical analysis of that diagnosis and prescription that we must now turn our attention.

Newbigin describes the Enlightenment as conversion reaction, an interchange of the fields of good and evil, darkness and light. The polarised field elements are those of dogma and doubt. He notes :

> "In the older Christian tradition 'dogma' was a good word. It stood for the blessed gift of an assured truth on which we could rely. 'Doubt', on the other hand, stood for something evil, something of which the symbol was the sin of Adam and Eve in doubting the goodness of God's prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. According to the biblical story, the primal sin, which was the root of all that followed, was the willingness to entertain a suspicion that God could not be wholly trusted, and therefore to wish to see for oneself what God had hidden. The limit which God had set was - according to the Genesis saga - an invitation to trust. Evil is what God has not willed; his will is that men and women should know only good. But if God is not to be trusted, then men and women must be able to look at both sides and make up their own minds. Thus, says the tempter, 'your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (Gen. 3:5). In this way of understanding the human situation, faith - in the sense of loving trust - is the primary virtue and doubt is the primal sin." [p.19]

So within the mediaeval world view, goodness, truth and light were identified with dogma, characterising pre-fall existence in loving and obedient communion with the Creator. In stark antithesis, darkness, sin and evil were identified with doubt as characteristic precipitators of the fall, that untrusting rebellion against the dogma of God, in punishment for which man was evicted from Eden.

Newbigin then describes the "Enlightenment" as a conversion reaction, a role-reversal between these two fundamental poles.

> "The Enlightenment reversed the roles of the two words. ' Doubt' was elevated to a position of honour as the first principle of knowledge. The readiness to question all accepted opinions was the prime condition for arriving at the truth. 'Dogma', on the other hand, became a bad word, standing for all that shackles the free exercise of human reason. And so it has remained to this day. Few contemporary English theologians like to hear their discipline referred to by its traditional name - 'Dogmatics'. The reversal of roles between these two words was at the heart of the experience which ushered in the modern scientific world view." [p.19]

So for the author, the Enlightenment was actually the endarkenment - it was an enshrining of the dogma of anti-Christ, the calling of light darkness and darkness light, of good evil and evil good, it was the elevation of the sin of Adam into the epitome of human fulfilment. If those basic assumptions about the historic process are accepted, then his conclusions appear to be inevitable, provided, that is, that you believe the Christian dogmatic tradition in the first place as it stands in judgement on the sin of Adam. Under these terms of reference the Enlightenment was a fall from grace, of which we are now reaping the just rewards in the psychotic irrationalities of human alienation, meaninglessness and despair. What is required is cultural metanoia, a repentance, a conversion, a re-reversal. His position bears close resemblance to the counter-revolutionary. A given social system presents certain problems which appear intractable. The revolutionary provides a "solution" in the reversal of fundamental roles within the culture. However, once the revolution is achieved, the same problems emerge. The counter-revolutionary therefore presents his agenda, attributing the social problems to the evils of the revolution and calling for some kind of reversal, a regression to the good old days. Both proposals represent illusions. The revolutionary and the counterrevolutionary simply represent society going round in circles, albeit in opposite directions.

Newbigin's axiomatic grounds are clarified on his next page:

> "Yet doubt can only be secondary, not primary in the activity of knowing. The critical faculty can only operate on the ,basis of beliefs which are - in the moment of critical questioning - unquestioned. It is impossible to doubt all one's beliefs at the same time without falling into imbecility." [p.20]

Such axiomatic statements simply do not stand up to examination. On what grounds are these assertions made? It would appear that Newbigin shares with Polanyi a very specialised definition of 'knowing' which is tautologically dependent upon its being an exposition of dogma, for which doubt can be no ground. However, not all would share his understanding of knowing. The absolutising of knowledge is certainly pre-Einsteinian and arguably mediaeval. Is it not at least possible that 'knowing' is an iterative activity emerging, whether for the individual or the social system, through the interactive process of experience and reflection which slowly and cumulatively builds up a world view, not by the introjection and extrapolation of received dogma, but by the construction and reification of cumulative experience, always relative, never absolutised, always open to new experience which may challenge it and require its modification and therefore always and fundamentally operating with a certain element of doubt about all present 'beliefs'? Far from such a position being an inevitable precursor of imbecility, it would appear to be one of the most fundamental pre-conditions of sanity. It is quite understandable that certain persons may be so dependent

upon a 'faith construct' as a defence against psychotic irrationality, that raising the very possibility of doubt threatens them or the social system within which they live and move and have their being with chaoticisation and breakdown. Such a position is not usually regarded, however, as a mark of mental health, wholeness and maturity.

As if aware of the irrational paradoxes underlying his own axiomatic position, Newbigin immediately moves into a section shot through with ambivalence which modifies some of his basic definitions almost beyond recognition.

> "All understanding of how things are has to begin with an act of attention ... This primal act is an act of faith ... We have no means of knowing in advance that the thing is worth attending to ... This is an action of 'receiving'. But in order to 'receive' we have to relate it in some way to the experience we already have. Only in this way does it have meaning. But in this act of relating, we are obliged to ask questions. This thing newly apprehended may call into question, or be called into question by, the experience we already have. Without this element of questioning, in fact of doubting, there can be no secure knowledge of how things are. We are at the mercy of superstition. Yet the critical faculty which enables us to question any belief is itself dependent upon beliefs which provide the grounds for our questioning. Doubt, therefore, is essential, but secondary in the enter rise of knowing how things are. What is primary is the act of attending and receiving, and this is an action of faith. [p.20 ]

Now to be sure, all understanding depends upon the attentive taking in of information. The very word 'inform' encodes this movement of data from outside to inside with a formative influence upon the inside generated from the outside. The very survival of life itself depends upon that transaction between the organism and the environment. It is rightly described as a "primal act" but it would seem somewhat misleading to describe it as "an act of faith". Moving on Newbigin develops the concept of meaning in terms of the inter-relationship between the newly received data and the already incorporated experience base which provides some more or less dependable frame of reference within which the new information "makes sense". This is, of course, the very heart of the scientific method. An attention to the real world, a taking in of information, which in turn tests, and is tested by, the information already -in store and its organisation into hypotheses, theories or 'laws'. This interactive process is indeed the foundation of any ' knowledge of how things are'. However, Newbigin then makes the axiomatic jump from this position of attentive questioning to the a priori primacy of belief. The crucial sentence is the one "Yet the critical faculty which enables us to question any belief is itself dependent upon beliefs which provide the grounds for our questioning". Now if the critical faculty, which enables us to question any belief, is itself really dependent upon unquestionable beliefs which provide the ground for our questioning, then the critical faculty does not, in fact, enable us to question 'any belief' but only those upon which it is not dependent. In any case where did this concept of 'belief' come from? It is clearly not the same as the 'primal act of faith' which was simply the attitude of receptivity to information. Beliefs normally refer to the intellectual constructs utilised in the organisation of information and we have already accepted that such constructs are essentially open to question in the light of new information. Newbigin's conclusion restates the obvious that doubt, or questioning, is essential in the enterprise of knowing how things are and that that is itself dependent upon the act of attending - the attitude of receptivity. If he wishes to define this as 'an act of faith' so be it. That is precisely not the same thing as to ascribe the primacy appropriate to the act of attentive questioning to the unquestionable primacy of certain unquestionable beliefs. This confusion is fundamental and represents a major flaw in the rest of his argument. Modern culture could be described as having the 'belief', which is itself open to question, that all beliefs are open to question. But in this tautological maze the

concept of 'belief' is itself virtually meaningless and the position can in fact be reduced to precisely that central statement in Newbigin's paragraph, that all new information may call into question, or be called into question by, the cumulative experiential base.

Newbigin goes on to say that at the centre of the movement which created our modern culture was a shift in the balance between faith and doubt. Yet here immediately 'faith' is used in the terms of 'belief' of his previous paragraph since the modern culture identifies as inseparable prerequisites of 'knowledge of how things are' the twin principles of faith and doubt, in terms of Newbigin's earlier definition, namely, an attitude of questioning attentiveness. That at this precise point, by 'faith' Newbigin means 'belief ' is borne out by the parallelism of his next sentence in which the shift is restated as being between "a dogma based on divine revelation" and "doubt". So for Newbigin the word "faith" has these two distinctive meanings: the first an attitude of questioning attentiveness, the second the content of an unquestionable dogmatic belief framework. In his own argument the first lies on the side of darkness, the second on the side of light. The confusion stemming from this paradoxical contradiction is then confounded in every subsequent section. His axiomatic statement that :

> "The critical faculty can only operate on the basis of beliefs which are - in the moment of critical questioning - unquestioned. It is impossible to doubt all one's beliefs at the same time without falling into imbecility"

lies at the heart of the ambivalence and paradox of dialogue in which dogma becomes that belief system which cannot be questioned within the course of dialogue and yet dialogue involves the questioning of any belief system. The attempt to have one's dogma and dialogue it presents for Newbigin a logical impossibility which emanates from the paradoxes of this section. But more of that anon.

The Enlightenment represented that movement in social history at which the centre of gravity shifted away from dogma and toward attentive questioning as a modus operandum in the search for knowledge. The results within the fields and application of natural science have been 'fruitful beyond dreams'. The burning question reasserts itself:

> "Why then do we now find ourselves at what feels like a dead end? Why has life become meaningless for so many in our culture?" [p. 20]

At this point the arguments of Michael Polanyi (Personal Knowledge 1958) are introduced as 'the answer'. For Polanyi as for Locke,

> "Faith was a persuasion of our minds short of knowledge"

It was identified with "dogmatic belief" and precisely not with the attitude of questioning. From there on, faith and dogmatic or fiduciary framework are identified and faith as attentive questioning disappears from view, to join the scientific method in the realms of secondary, dependent, darkness. The erosion of the Christian dogmatic framework as an organising structure of public life, and then ultimately of the educational institutions, is traced, together with the church's reaction of both defence and syncretistic incorporation, until today

> "The peaceful co-existence of Christianity with the post-Enlightenment culture which this secured has endured so long that it is hard for the Church now to recover the stand-point for a genuinely missionary approach to our 'modern' culture. When the Gospel is brought for the first time into contact with a culture previously shaped by another vision, the missionary has

> to be aware of the differences between the two 'frameworks' and to find ways of making the message intelligible and challenging to the other culture as a whole ." [pp. 22 f.]

Newbigin speaks as if a "genuinely missionary approach" is a universally self-evident concept. It is not, and his assumption begs many questions. Many would argue that Newbigin's 'genuine missionary' is at the least an anachronism and probably an anathema. The Gospel is apparently dogma, part of the unquestionable fiduciary framework which has to be made intelligible and challenging to the other culture. What has happened to dialogue? What has happened to faith as 'questioning attentiveness' which at least gives to the 'other culture' the benefit of the doubt as being equally as valid a way of looking at things as the one with which the 'genuine missionary' started out? What has happened to the process of risk taking in the engagement, or is the risk only on one side? Newbigin pins two dangers. One is that the 'other culture' is so misunderstood that the dogmatic framework is not seen as relevant and the second danger is so to accept 'the other culture' without radical criticism that the message poses no challenge whatsoever and is simply absorbed in a syncretistic manner. There follows another massive paradoxical jump.

> "It would be hard to deny that contemporary British (and most of western) Christianity is an advanced case of syncretism. The Church has lived so long as a permitted and even privileged minority, accepting relegation to the private sphere in a culture whose public life is controlled by a totally different vision of reality, that it has almost lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision and therefore to 'modern western civilization' as a whole. Looking at the world missionary situation as a whole, this failure is the most important and the most serious factor in the whole world situation, because this western culture has penetrated into every other in the world and threatens to destabilise them all." [p.23]

It would appear that there has been a reversal of the missionary role. 'The other culture' is now identified with Christianity which has uncritically taken on board the framework of the new missionary movement, namely, post-Enlightenment, scientific method. It reads like a statement of reaction on behalf of mediaeval dogmatism against the effects of a dialogical engagement between Christianity and 'modern culture' which has been going on at various levels of intensity for the last 200 or 300 years. To describe this as 'failure' and then to designate that 'failure' as 'the most important and the most serious factor in the whole world situation' is a fundamental judgement upon the whole process of dialogue which has brought the Christian church to its present position in the world. If that judgement cannot be substantiated then it must inevitably rebound in judgement upon the author himself.

At this point Newbigin returns to the argument of Polanyi who:

> "Claims that the time has come for a shift in the balance between faith and doubt in the whole enterprise of understanding, a recognition that doubt - though always an essential ingredient - is always secondary and that faith is fundamental. His book is a massive attempt to demonstrate that all knowledge of reality rests upon faith-commitments which cannot be demonstrated but are held by communities whose 'conviviality' is a necessary factor in the enterprise of knowing. This is as true for the scientist as for the Christian believer." [p.23]

There is a world of difference between describing a pair of items in terms of primary and secondary and polarising them under the descriptors 'good and evil', 'light and darkness'. It is important to note again that for Polanyi faith is here being used in terms of a dogmatic fiduciary framework and precisely not in terms of that attentive questioning which emerged as one possibility within Newbigin's earlier text. Criticism of Newbigin's development of Polanyi's position must also take into account fundamental criticism of Polanyi's own theory

of knowledge and meaning, which Newbigin appears to accept so uncritically and on which his thesis depends so fundamentally. It would appear that for Polanyi, "knowledge of reality" and "meaningfulness" are interchangeable concepts, both of which are distinct from the 'knowledge of how things really are' which is a relatively uncertain organising of information received in an attitude of attentive questioning. Knowledge for Polanyi appears to be a construct of the communal unconscious, a common mutual commitment so to see things in one particular way that there is a common mind and a foundation for common action. In this sense the knowing is a projection of the belief system, the commitment pattern. In so far as a questioning of the knowing would threaten the communality of believers, just so far is such questioning taboo and the knowledge and faith commitment seen as primary and unquestionable. This may be an accurate sociological description of constructs of meaning, but as a prescription it begs the question of the possibility of the questioning of that construct which prohibits the questioning of the construct. In other words it outlaws dialogue between the construct of the scientist and the construct of the Christian and in particular would appear to prohibit the interfacing of the Christian construct with any information which might call it fundamentally into question.

On the basis of his theory of knowledge and meaning, Polanyi pleads for a 'post-critical philosophy' as the necessary condition for the renewal of our culture and Newbigin affirms his plea.

To expound what is meant by 'post-critical philosophy' Newbigin follows Polanyi in turning to the work of Augustine which 'brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy'. He sees this example as:

> "Particularly relevant to our time because the 'turn' which brought Europe into its modern period of brilliance was the opposite of that effected by Augustine; it was a turn away from the Christian dogma to the spirit and method of the pre-Christian classical world." [p.24]

Now it can well be argued that the term 'classical' covers in itself a complex interplay between the scientific and the dogmatic, the conflicted inter-face between which is nowhere more potently portrayed than in the demise of Socrates. In a sense we may see the classical culture itself as emerging with dogmatic foundations, which are then challenged by a movement of philosophical and scientific enlightenment, in reaction to which the dogmatic base reasserts its power. However, assuming that Newbigin refers primarily to the classical period in terms of the flowering of its scientific and philosophical cultures, rather than its religious and reactionary cultus, it can be cogently argued that what Augustine offered was precisely not a 'post-critical philosophy' except in the sense that it followed a period of brilliant critical philosophy in the sequence of time. The overwhelming of the classical period of critical philosophy ushered in the dark ages, characterised by a return to a pre-critical dogmatic framework of which that expounded by Augustine is our most familiar and indeed, most formative example. The Augustinian contribution,

> "Began with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and claimed that the acceptance by faith of this revelation provided the starting point for the endless enterprise of understanding. The revelation furnished a new framework for grasping and coping with experience." [p.24]

To describe such a position as "a post-critical philosophy" is to apply a misnomer. Rightly understood it could more appropriately be characterised as "an uncritical philosophy" or even as "a pre-critical dogmatic framework". In this case the "enlightenment" is seen as a step

forward, recovering some of the insights of the classical era, buried under the barbarian avalanche at the implosion of the Roman Empire to emerge from the tunnel period of the dark ages only as the intense defensive construct of Christendom began to crumble.

The dogmatic framework had great power. Newbigin asserts that "it overcame the old dichotomies from which classical thought could not escape" namely that split between material and spiritual and the irrationality that turned all human history into a conflict between human courage and skill on the one hand and the blind power of fate on the other. "The revelation of God in Jesus Christ articulated in the doctrine of the Trinity provided a way of understanding which overcame these dichotomies." We must, however, deal with the question of truth, not that of power. The indisputable historical fact that the dogmatic Christian construct had power to bring vast social systems into coherent sway may make it a better instrument for social control, but it says nothing about its relationship to truth and reality. It may well provide a framework for grasping and coping with experience but then so does any commonly held illusion.

Newbigin continues:

> "To accept the trinitarian model means to believe that the power which rules all events in the visible world and the power that can illuminate and fortify the inner person is one with the man who went his humble way from Bethlehem to Calvary in the days of Pontius Pilate. The starting point for this new understanding was faith. Augustine quotes Isaiah: 'Unless you believe you will not understand' (7:9). Faith is not a terminus but a starting point from which understanding can begin. This model is offered for acceptance by faith as the way to understanding. Its motto is Credo ut intelligam, I believe in order that I may understand." [p.24] ·

So acceptance of the dogmatic framework leads to belief that whatever happens is within the knowledge and power of the Almighty as demonstrated in the person, life, work, teaching, incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However bewildering events may seem, however disturbing the information may be, it precisely cannot disturb the ground of Credo and therefore cannot jettison the meaningfulness of life. On these foundations meaning is independent of information, for it is derived from the primary framework which is itself unquestionable and unquestioned, immune from challenge in the dialogue with reality. It does indeed provide a magnificent defence against overwhelming anxiety and anomie, particularly in the face of traumatic experience, unjust persecution and untimely death, but if the framework were not a commonly accepted and highly respected 'way of looking at things' it would quite clearly be designated as psychosis in modern clinical terms. To elevate Credo as the source of meaning raises the question of the meaning of meaning itself and ultimately, the question of the source of Credo. To outlaw such questions as illegitimate within the Christian construct is to abdicate from the possibilities of dialogue into the closed circle of the fundamentalist.

Newbigin now turns from the fall of the Roman Empire to the time of the fall of the British Empire. He draws the parallels between the two situations:

> "We stand at what feels like the end of a period of extraordinary brilliance. The feeling of being 'at the end' is - as I have suggested - the feeling that our culture has no future and that life therefore has no meaning ... if we too have come to a point where our culture seems to have no future ... if the immense achievements of autonomous reason seem to have produced a world which is at best meaningless and at worst full of demons, then it could be that Polanyi is right ... that there is needed a radical conversion, a new starting point which

> begins as an act of trust in divine grace, as something simply given to be received in faith and gratitude." [p.25]

Here again, of course, the meaning of faith is fundamental. If faith means that attitude of questioning attentiveness whereby new information is tested by and in turn tests the cumulative store of processed experience, then the results could hardly be further from the intentions of Polanyi whose understanding of faith is as diametrically opposed to that as doubt is opposed to dogma.

In the light of the fundamental paradox at the heart of his understanding of faith, Newbigin now introduces the first of his major qualifiers. Still following Polanyi in 'asking for a post-critical philosophy as the pre-condition for the renewal of our culture' which he expounds as being 'ready to stake our whole future on consciously a-critical statements' he asserts that this can only be done 'in the full acknowledgement of the irreversible nature of our experience in the past 250 years'. It would appear that he is pleading for the post-critical dogmatic foundation to be built upon the footings of critical thought. That that is not, however, the case is obvious from his affirmation of the passage from Polanyi which immediately follows:

> "This invitation to dogmatism may appear shocking; yet it is but the corollary to the greatly increased critical powers of man. These have endowed our mind with a capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves. We have plucked from the Tree a second apple which has for ever imperilled our knowledge of Good and Evil, and we must learn to know these qualities henceforth in the blinding light of our new analytical powers. Humanity has been deprived a second time of its innocence, and driven out of another garden which was, at any rate, a Fool's Paradise. Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity - and our own critical powers have shattered this hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it as a profession of nihilism...
>
> "The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness." [p.25 ff. from Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 1958, p .268]

To be sure Polanyi asserts that the "greatly increased critical powers of man ... have endowed our mind with the capacity for self-transcendence of which we can never again divest ourselves" which would seem to assume that the initial antithesis which identified doubt with evil and darkness is to be fundamentally repudiated. Critical thought is enthroned as a never to be abandoned element of human enquiry and understanding. However Polanyi moves immediately to the most extraordinary redaction of biblical symbolism. It is couched in the form of a parallel to the fall narrative of Genesis 3. A second apple has been plucked from the tree. In the original narrative the tree bore the fruit, the eating of which gave the knowledge of good and evil, yet in Polanyi's understanding, the plucking of this second apple "imperils" our knowledge of good and evil. So in this perception of enlightenment as second fall is embedded the paradox of the second fall being the anti-fall. The first apple represents the questioning of divine taboo, the disobedience of divine command 'You shall not eat'. The second apple represents a questioning of the goodness of good and the evilness of evil. It introduces the relativisation of absolutes, the decay of clear criteria for ethical judgement, which can no longer be assumed as clearly self-evident, or derived from the laws of nature, or given to all creation by the Creator. If the first rebellion was against the absolutes of trust, then the second rebellion is against the absolutes of ethics. So Polanyi sees the enlightenment as a pseudo-Eden, a fools' paradise, populated by the proud illusions of a

culture seeking to manufacture the deities out of its own mind and then to internalise and order its life by the self-evident truths derived from the gods of human generation. In the first Eden there was no knowledge of good and evil, simply trusting communion in the living God in the presence of whom mankind lived and moved and had its being. The enlightenment as the second Eden provided a place in which responsibility for the absolutes of good and evil was vested in the new environment. The second apple shattered this dependency and thrust humanity out into a new darkness of relativism, even further from the tree of life. Polanyi's recipe is a strangely collusive prescription, for man prefers the security of known paths, whose directions are guaranteed, even if the guarantees are based on an illusion. Anything is apparently to be preferred to the emotional struggle of what life might actually "mean" as a temporary complexification of molecular structure in a tiny counter-entropic pocket, whirling around the edges of one of the minor galaxies of the Virgo cluster in a universe whose immensity staggers the mind.

Newbigin goes on to argue that one of the fundamental human rights acknowledged in post-Enlightenment culture is the right of any individual to hold to a dogmatic faith-commitment and that that human right itself was a self-evident right built into the very being of creation. In other words, the private freedom and autonomy of the individual was guaranteed by the creator himself. Public space on the other hand was deemed to be free from such dogmatic or ideological constructs and should be regulated by self-evident or demonstrable principles. Newbigin interprets Polanyi's position as requiring that the role of the dogmatic fiduciary framework be extended to public space as a ground for social meaning (Polanyi may well be saying this but it is certainly not evident from the extracts quoted by Newbigin within his text).

Before coming to the conclusion of this section Newbigin has a brief excursus on the post-enlightenment developments of modern culture. He asserts that the self-evident truths of the enlightenment have "all been much modified and developed in the course of the past 200 years". However, the specific contribution of two centuries of progress is summarised in one sentence and its effects then dismissed as irrelevant:

> "In particular, the developments in modern physics, especially since Einstein, have destroyed the Newtonian picture of an 'objective' world of matter in motion to which the observer is wholly external. But these new perspectives in science have not yet changed popular ways of thinking. The 'public world' is still controlled by the ideas which came to vivid consciousness at the Enlightenment. Normally they are not called in question. They are the self-evident starting point for argument." [p.27]

I read and re-read those words at first with a sense of bewildered incredulity, then rising into a feeling of inarticulate outrage that anyone who dares to seek to speak to the fundamental concern of the western, post-Christian, post-industrial culture of 1984 could be so fundamentally out of touch. His world is not my world. This is no place for an exposition of the fundamental shifts in culture which have rocked enlightenment ideals in the past half-century: the developments in astrophysics which have placed the earth in a totally new context; the developments in fundamental particle physics; in genetic engineering; in medicine; developments in anthropology; the study of social psychology which has relativised the previously reified and absolute constructs of different human cultures; the fundamental questioning of the ground of ethics and the relativisation of human decision-making; the internalisation of responsibility and the recognition of the process of projection in constructing the 'self-evident' truths of the Enlightenment; above all the rising awareness

of the role of the human unconscious, its origin, contents, effects, in both individual and social system behaviour, as generating those very processes of meaninglessness, anomie, withdrawal of commitment, irrationality, conflict and bonding, armour and openness of human being. The ideas of the Enlightenment are fundamentally called in question and they are precisely no longer the self-evident starting point for argument. Even as far back as 1958 Polanyi's parable of the second apple indicated his awareness of the massive shift away from the self-evident ideals of the Enlightenment but that meaning of the parable appears to have escaped Newbigin's notice. Newbigin does not write in 1984. His is a world of yester-year, fixated somewhere the other side of the second world war and firmly looking backwards in time, wrestling from a past perspective with the events of a previous century, not anchored in the present facing the realities of advents as they reach us proleptically from tomorrow's world.

Maybe Newbigin does require a 'new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal' of his culture, for without such a radical renewal his culture indeed has no future. Yet I question very deeply indeed whether a return to pre-classical dogmatic foundation, however made up with the cosmetics of 'a post-critical philosophy' can provide such a model.

## IV: THREE QUESTIONS (pp. 28 - 54)

In this section Newbigin introduces a modification of Polanyi's thought which opens up a crucial section on the conduct of dialogue, followed by a section of expository application of his thesis to the task of the church in the world.

It is now possible to reflect critically on Newbigin's methodology. His fundamental argument is that knowing and meaning are impossible other than within the terms of a fiduciary framework whose unquestionable dogmatic ground is accepted by faith. That view of the meaning and origin of knowledge and meaning would appear to be part of Newbigin's own unquestionable dogmatic framework whose acceptance is an act of faith. If that is so, then it must be asked why he seeks to argue, to establish, and to justify that fundamental position with such dependent reference to the work of Polanyi? There is a kind of incestuous tautological collusion at the heart of the whole enterprise which hides the naked core of Newbigin's position. If dogma is, then let dogma be dogma. Newbigin's ambivalence at the core of his construct, however, drives him to seek justification for his dogmatic stand in dependence upon some other dogmatic expositor of the position which he himself already holds. One suspects that the author of "Church Dogmatics" would perceive Newbigin's attempt to justify the role of dogma as itself a betrayal of dogma. It is ' yes' and 'no', wrapped up in ambivalent contradiction in response to the self-authenticating divine word addressed to humankind in Christ. Newbigin, however, shrinks from the bold uncompromising clarity of Karl Barth and in so doing is caught up in the contradictory paradox of, on the one hand, affirming the primacy of dogma, while on the other, attempting to preserve the integrity of dialogue. In so doing he gets caught up in the process of justifying the unjustifiable, which implies the possibility of questioning the unquestionable.

Newbigin introduces his modification of Polanyi's thought by affirming:

> "At the crucial point in my argument I have been following Polanyi, and I shall venture to quote him once again. The fundamental point which Polanyi makes is that knowing any reality is impossible except on the basis of some 'framework' which is - in the act of knowing -

uncriticized, and which cannot be demonstrated by reference to some more ultimate ground of belief. He writes:

> "We must now recognise belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework." [pp. 28f., Polyani, Personal Knowledge, 1958, p.267]

Within Polanyi's understanding of 'knowing' is a fundamental tautology. The kind of 'knowing' or 'meaning', which are derived by that attitude of questioning attention to information, the taking in of which challenges and is challenged by the cumulative but always questionable deposit of previous information and understanding, is in itself for Polanyi precisely not 'knowing'. For him such endeavour has no 'meaning'. Knowing and meaning for Polanyi are interpretations of the information, stemming from the unquestioned dogmatic or fiduciary framework. Within this specialised use of words, 'knowing' is reduced precisely to that projection onto the information of a fundamentally underived, unjustified, unquestionable, and therefore in the point of application absolutised, fiduciary or dogmatic framework. The tautology is absolute and is itself absolutised. It is unquestionable, unjustifiable and therefore within Polanyi's own terms of reference is itself fundamentally meaningless. It is a contentless, tautological construct, dependent reference to which adds precisely nothing to Newbigin's own assertions.

Now it is the unquestionableness of the framework which, for Polanyi, generates the possibility of knowing and meaning. The meaning framework is fundamentally dependent therefore upon the axiomatic set employed. So far any mathematician would concur, while adding that any axiom set is but one such set among many which may be more or less helpful in enabling our understanding, our handling of information, our relation to the realities of the world in which we live and move and have our being. Polanyi, and in his footsteps Newbigin, however, press beyond that to an absolutising of one particular axiom set in the light of which all other such sets must be evaluated. It is a position which would appear to elide the possibility of fundamental dialogue. Newbigin, wishing to preserve this possibility, first draws out Polanyi's conclusion and then modifies it fundamentally. He quotes:

> "The process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it: a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis. Our fundamental belief s are continuously reconsidered in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premises." [p.29, referring to Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 1958, p.267]

It is important here to notice the distinction which begins to emerge between fundamental beliefs and basic premises. This distinction is quite crucial in Newbigin's further treatment of dialogue. The fundamental beliefs are open to question at all times, are tested by incoming information and in turn test incoming information. However, there are limits to the extent to which such reconsideration is allowed and these limits are set by the 'basic premises', the dogmatic framework which is fundamentally unquestionable, since to question it would be to dissolve the total structure of knowledge and meaning of the system. Newbigin, in pursuit of integrity of dialogue, takes "a further step which Polanyi does not take". It is a step which Newbigin sees as building on the foundation which Polanyi has laid, but which in reality demolishes that very foundation and with it the very core of Newbigin's own position -

except of course that Newbigin's position is dogmatically affirmed and therefore is not open to any such testing or challenge. Newbigin goes on to describe the Christian mission as:

> "an acting out of a fundamental belief and at the same time a process in which this belief is being constantly reconsidered in the light of the experience of acting it out in every sector of human affairs and in dialogue with every other pattern of thought by which men and women seek to make sense of their lives ." [p.29, quoting from The Open Secret, 1978, p.31]

So for Newbigin the Christian mission is essentially dialogical. It is the commitment consistently to act out the Christian faith as if it were absolutely true and yet in so doing to engage with other fundamental beliefs, constructs and cultures with a mutually questioning attentiveness, as if the Christian faith might not be absolutely true. Strangely, Newbigin resorts at this point to the incorporation of one of the norms of modern western culture as normative in setting the terms of reference of Christian mission.

> "Our modern western culture now acknowledges plurality as an irreversible fact. We recognise that different 'fiduciary frameworks' co-exist and will continue to do so. The question is whether they are to co-exist merely in mutual toleration or in dialogue. Polanyi writes: "Our fundamental beliefs are continuously re-considered ... but only within the scope of their own basic premises. 'Dialogue, if it is genuine, takes us beyond this point to the place where we allow the 'fiduciary framework' itself to be called in question." [p.30]

In opting for a genuinely dialogical approach to other fiduciary frameworks, Newbigin asserts that the fundamental premises of the Christian faith must themselves be called in question during the process of dialogue, a position which when compared to Polanyi's own argument (namely that knowing any reality is impossible except on the basis of some framework which is, in the act of knowing, uncriticised) renders the whole realm of knowledge, understanding, and meaning a nil set in Polanyi's terms. The introduction of the possibility of genuine dialogue destroys one pole of Polanyi's tautological position and therefore inevitably destroys the whole foundation of Newbigin's 'argument' if such it can be called.

In the next pages the author makes it quite clear that the possibility of fundamental questioning of the dogmatic presuppositions is an essential element of dialogue.

> "In genuine dialogue it is the ultimate 'fiduciary framework' which is put at risk, and there is therefore always the possibility of that radical 'paradigm shift' which is called 'conversion'." [p.31]

> "My proposal would be retrogressive and sterile if the plea for a proper acknowledgement of the role of dogma were not coupled with the requirement that we learn to live in real dialogue with those who operate from other 'fiduciary frameworks'." [p.31]

Consistently with this position, he uses the indefinite article "the Church ... is entrusted with a 'fiduciary framework' which offers a new starting point for understanding and coping with experience". The implication quite clearly is that there are other such communities with other fiduciary frameworks which might offer other starting points, which might be more or less able to act as a framework for understanding and coping with experience. In the light of this the church:

> "must live in genuine and open dialogue with those who live by other 'frameworks'. But the supremely critical dialogue which it must now face is not the dialogue with other religions (important as that certainly is) but the dialogue with the culture which took its shape at the

> Enlightenment and with which the European churches have lived in an illegitimate syncretism every since. Such a dialogue will always mean that our own basic presuppositions are called in question by the other party." [p.31]

The judgement involved in the word 'illegitimate' would appear to imply that any dialogue of the last two centuries which might have resulted in a change in the basic and fundamental fiduciary framework of the Christian church was, in itself, illegitimate, a comment which is underlined by Newbigin's distancing from "the other party". These phrases belie the depth of splitting between Newbigin's perception of Christian culture and his perception of the social culture with which it is embedded in the western world. It is extremely difficult in practice to sustain such a position of idealisation and differentiation. It would appear that within his definition any two such fiduciary frameworks which had been in a condition of genuine dialogue over a large number of years would both appear to have arrived at a position of illegitimate syncretism. Perhaps, for him, "genuine dialogue" is only genuine in so far as the dialogue does not, in fact, result in any change whatsoever in the fundamental fiduciary framework of the missionary community of which he happens to be a member. The position from which he makes these judgements becomes clearer in his next sentence.

> "Because of what I believe about Jesus Christ I believe that this open encounter can only lead both the Church and the other partners in the dialogue into a fuller apprehension of the truth. This is not 'dialogue insured against risk'; it is part of the ultimate commitment of faith - a commitment which always means rising everything." [p.31]

So genuine dialogue for Newbigin is not dialogue insured against risk. It is, however, dialogue in which he believes there is no risk because, precisely because, of what he believes about Jesus Christ. It is a faith commitment, which always means risking everything but which believes that nothing is being risked. Within such a framework, dialogue is quite a possibility, because you are dogmatically quite certain that when dialogue is over and done with, the dogmatic framework will have survived intact. It is as if, although there is a theoretical consent to the possibility of questioning dogma, there is also and at the same time a dogmatic belief that the basis of the dogmatic framework is itself unquestionably true and therefore the dialogical questioning of such a framework can result in precisely no sustainable fundamental challenge. In such a way, genuine dialogue dies the death of a thousand definitions.

The paradoxical ambivalence underlying this understanding of dialogue comes out in his description of 'a truly missionary approach' to modern culture which:

> "Would recognize frankly the fact that the Christian dogma offers a 'fiduciary framework' quite different from and (in some respects) incompatible with the framework within which modern European culture has developed; and would be quite bold and uncompromising in setting forth the Christian 'dogma', but also very humble and teachable in engaging in dialogue with those who live by other fundamental beliefs ." [p.32 ]

So the problem with which the author wrestles is his perception that Christian dogma or 'fiduciary framework', is quite different from and incompatible with that of modern culture and yet must engage in genuine dialogue with that with which it perceives itself incompatible. It is difficult to see how the attitude of being 'humble and teachable in engaging in dialogue' can co-habit with the clauses in the earlier part of the sentence.

The contradiction in Newbigin's position becomes very clear indeed if we skip the next 15 pages of historical material and turn again to his description of a "genuinely missionary encounter between a scriptual faith and modern culture".

> "By this I mean an encounter which takes our culture seriously yet does not take it as the final truth by which scripture is to be evaluated, but rather holds up the modern world to the mirror of the Bible in order to understand how we, who are part of modern culture, are required to re-examine our assumptions and reorder our thinking and acting. This is, I believe, our present task." [p.47]

That may or may not be the present task of the church but it is difficult to relate the process of genuine dialogue to this bold, uncompromising dogmatic interfacing of modern culture and its incorporation within the church with the unquestionable dogmatic framework of biblical authority, which Newbigin here propounds. This is not genuine dialogue - it is fundamentalist confrontation. He goes on to assert:

> "The Church has never ceased to place the scriptures in the centre of its life. In doing so, it continues to bear witness to a 'fiduciary framework' different from and older than that of our culture. What would it mean to confront the axioms and assumptions of our culture with those of the Bible?" [p.47]

The language of genuine dialogue has given place to the language of dogmatic confrontation. If genuine dialogue is to survive under such conditions, then it too will be forced into a confrontational stance and the counter question must also then be asked "What would it mean to confront the axioms and assumptions of the Bible with those of our culture?" I question, however, whether mutual confrontation from dogmatically held fiduciary frameworks is really consistent with the "very humble and teachable" attitude which Newbigin encouraged in his previous section.

As he moves toward the conclusion of his section, expounding what is involved in the genuinely missionary encounter between scriptural faith and modern culture he affirms,

> "But it remains testimony, not coercive proof. And (let it be said again) the context is a trial in which the witness has to stake his or her life on a truth which will not be demonstrated until the end. If the Church is bold in giving its testimony to the living God who is revealed in particular events and in the scriptures which are the primal witness to these events, then it must necessarily clash with our contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole 'fiduciary framework' within which our culture operates. It must call unequivocally for radical conversion, a conversion of the mind so that things are seen differently, and a conversion of the will so that things are done differently. It must decline altogether the futile attempt to commend the biblical vision of how things are by seeking to adjust it to the assumptions of our culture." [p.53]

Here his wording becomes even more decisive. The encounter is one of testimony in the context of trial. There is a life and death commitment to the absolute truth of the dogmatic framework of the Christian church, even though that position will not be vindicated until the end. This total, unquestioning, life and death commitment to revelation means that the Christian witness must "necessarily clash with our contemporary culture". The conditions of genuine dialogue have now been mutated into a condition of challenging the whole fiduciary framework of the opposition, a calling unequivocally for radical conversion, and a position which declines to make adjustments to the biblical vision in the light of the assumptions of our culture. By no stretch of the imagination can such an encounter be described as 'genuine dialogue'.

In the light of this examination it would appear that Newbigin's attempt to extend Polanyi's position to include the possibility of dialogue and genuine questioning of the assumptions of the fiduciary framework employed, not only involved him in a fundamental demolition of the foundations upon which his whole argument was based, but was in itself a facade. There is here no intention in practice of allowing dialogical encounter with modern culture to question the fundamental assumptions and axioms of biblical dogma. Newbigin appears to have been caught in the paradoxical impossibility of attempting to hold his dogma and dialogue with it.

## V: AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE (p.55 - 62)

Newbigin opens his final chapter with some telling words:

> "The argument of this essay has been open to critical question at almost every point. I am trying to express a conviction which needs testing by abler minds working in many different disciplines. I have written in the hope of eliciting such questioning and testing because I believe that my main thesis is true even if inadequately stated. If it is true, then a new initiative is needed by the churches." [p.55]

That little word 'almost' is precisely the problem. If I have understood the argument of his essay correctly, then it is precisely not open to critical question at that fundamentally most important point of all - namely its dogmatic or fiduciary framework. As such the essay has no argument, it is kerygma. In the same way, Newbigin's concept of genuine dialogue is of an engagement which is open to critical questioning at 'almost' every point, but because the dialogue is closed to critical questioning at its most crucial core, it is in fact not dialogue at all. So in his first sentence Newbigin describes his work as an 'argument', while in the second sentence he speaks of himself as 'trying to express a conviction'. Now, to be sure, that conviction needs testing as well as people are able from the perspectives of many different disciplines, but there is a cynical niggling doubt in the back of the mind of this writer that the invitation to test is also subject to the constraint of 'at almost every point'. The most important testing must be levelled at precisely those points at which the author vetoes testing. At least the question, 'Why not?' must be levelled against his 'Thou shalt not'. If in so doing the tester runs the risk of coming under the judgement of having committed the primal sin, so be it.

In his next sentence, Newbigin's willingness and motivation in eliciting such testing is clarified. It is, he says, because "I believe that my main thesis is true". I take it, therefore, that whatever form the testing takes, if it fundamentally challenges his thesis, he will 'believe' the testing to be false because the judgements 'true' and 'false' like Polanyi's definitions of 'knowing' and 'meaning' are fundamentally derivatives based upon the dogmatic framework which is assumed to be untestable. In the light of that it is difficult to understand the 'invitation to explore' as genuine invitation to interactive dialogue.

The final sentence in the passage quoted above begins "If it is true". That little conditionality appears to indicate the possibility in the mind of Newbigin that it might not be true and in that word 'if' I place my confidence in responding to his invitation as if it were genuine. However, his own position commits him to saying, 'But I believe it is true' and then going on in the final sections of the chapter to an exposition as if it were true. The priority agenda is not an exploration of issues as if Newbigin's argument is true. The preliminary and

fundamental task is an examination of his argument which must be treated as open to critical question at every point, to ascertain whether and in what way and to what extent it is true. Only in the light of that debate can the churches move on to the secondary agenda of application.

The concluding section of this paper represents an attempt to initiate that radical debate called for in response to 'The Other Side of 1984'.

## INTERLOGUE

May it be that 'Fides quaerens intellectum' is essentially and precisely neurosis reifying its construct: the rationalisation of irrationality at the very heart of culture? If 'Credo ut intelligam' then the intelligence, the understanding, the meaning which results is supremely a projection of the unconscious ground of Credo, the examination of which is taboo. The Gods are raised as symbolic battlements, defending those within from the terror of unknowingness, protecting the psyche from the realities of existence and managing the boundaries of phantasy.

The temptation, the seduction, to which Newbigin beckons is to retreat once again behind the battlements of yesteryear in a vain attempt to avoid the perceived dangers of tomorrow. It is an invitation to renew the opium habit, all the more powerful to those whose addiction is still a living memory and whose exposure to the searching winds of tomorrow's world threatens them with an existential struggle from which they would rather turn in flight.

David Wasdell
January 1984