

The Finality of Christ and a Missionary Encounter with Religious Pluralism: Newbigin's Missiological Approach

Michael W. Goheen

Introduction

It might appear at first blush unlikely that in a book that explores Lesslie Newbigin's global theological legacy for today an investigation of his reflection on world religions would be promising. Charles Ryerson is not the only one to complain that Newbigin did not demonstrate enough enthusiasm for research into other religions when he said that an empathetic study of religions remained an "unfinished agenda" in his legacy.¹ It is true that compared to other major themes that appear in his vast literary corpus the study of world religions does not seem to command a high priority. And yet to draw the conclusion that what he did write on world religions—which is by no means paltry²—should be bypassed for other issues would be a mistake.

In today's climate where religious pluralism is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to the gospel, one cannot overlook Newbigin's vast experience as a missionary amidst the pluralism of India and his "long, instructive contact with Hindu friends and scholars."³ He carried out his missionary role in the shadow of some of the most powerful Hindu temples in India for three decades. He was involved in primary evangelism in Kanchipuram, one of the seven most sacred Hindu cities, spent time there in studying Hindu sacred writings with Hindu monks, and engaged in nation-building in co-operation with Hindus and Muslims as bishop in the cities of Madurai and Madras. His engagement with the issue of world religions was no less intensive as he

¹ Ryerson, "Review of *Unfinished Agenda*," 460.

² By my count he authored approximately 15-20 journal articles and book chapters as well as a couple of small books specifically on the topic although there is repetition and overlap among a number of them. A Ph.D. dissertation has also been written on the topic: Thomas, *The Centrality of Christ and Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Theology of Lesslie Newbigin*. Other books that have dealt with this issue in some detail are Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 194-234; Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*, 204-236; Wood, *Faiths and Faithfulness*, 115-168.

³ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 210.

returned to Britain. His pastorate in Winson Green in the midst of a predominantly Asian neighborhood, his involvement in the Sacred Advisory Council on Religious Education in the public schools, his membership on a committee in the United Reformed Church on ‘Mission and Other Faiths’, his treatment of Islam as a growing global power, and his participation in the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Tambaram in 1988 which vaulted him into ongoing discussions with powerful pluralist voices all led Newbigin to devote himself to further reflection on the proper response to religious pluralism growing in Western cities.⁴ Alister McGrath rightly observes that Newbigin’s “substantial first-hand experience” makes him “one of the most perceptive analysts of the consequences of pluralism for Christian churches.”⁵

Yet if one is looking for a scholarly tome on world religions from Newbigin they will be disappointed. Wilbert Shenk captures the significance of Newbigin for posterity when he describes him as a seminal thinker.⁶ He was a prophet and frontline theologian-practitioner who identified the key issues of the day and sharply articulated them. “Time and again Newbigin led the way in introducing an issue that would become a dominant theme in the ensuing years.”⁷ He was a strategic thinker who clarified the urgent issues and laid out an agenda to address them rather than a systematic scholar who offered a comprehensive analysis of the issues he tackled. He was a missionary pastor who responded to the immediate issues of the church’s mission, often writing *ad hoc* pieces on the run rather than an academic who analyzed an issue in an exhaustive manner. The lively sale of his books well over a decade after his death and the continuing interest in his work at both an academic and popular level is testimony to the fact that he was eminently successful as a catalyst in stimulating the theological imagination.

One of the examples that Shenk notes in both of his brief tributes written on the occasion of Newbigin’s death is that of world religions: “. . . he has forthrightly grasped the nettle of Christian witness in relation to other religions. He has faced the subtleties and complexities of the question without surrendering his commitment to Jesus Christ as lord and savior of all people.”⁸ Indeed, the places where Newbigin does address the topic of world religions remain helpful in articulating themes that have enduring importance to the present. His treatment of the topic developed as his context changed in different stages of his life. Nevertheless there are at

⁴ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 243-246.

⁵ McGrath, “The Challenge of Pluralism”, 361.

⁶ Shenk, “Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution,” 4.

⁷ Shenk, “Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution,” 3.

⁸ Shenk, “A Tribute to Bishop Newbigin,” 4; cf. also Shenk, “Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution,” 3.

least nine themes over four decades that given more space would warrant careful attention: his astute analysis of Western culture as it sets the terms for the discussion of religious pluralism, his definition of religion that highlights its radical and comprehensive character including in its scope ‘secular’ worldviews, his missiological approach to world religions that foregrounds a missionary encounter, his non-negotiable commitment to the finality of the Christ event in the context of universal history as the true standpoint for approaching other religions, his struggle with and insight into the problem of continuity and discontinuity, his insightful critique of ideological religious pluralism especially in its Western academic form, his reflection on the theological foundations of interfaith dialogue especially dialogue placed in the context of ‘everyday’ life, his reflection on the growing global power of Islam and its presence in the public square as a comprehensive vision of life, and his discussion of the destiny of those who haven’t heard the gospel.

Newbigin’s discussion of these topics is indebted to Hendrik Kraemer. Kraemer’s voice dominated Christian discussions of world religions for over two decades in the middle part of the 20th century. Almost every theme in Newbigin’s position mentioned above bears the imprint of Kraemer. Newbigin believed himself in the late 1980s to be “fighting the same battle that Hendrik Kraemer fought at Tambaram fifty years earlier.”⁹ As he reread the debates surrounding Kraemer’s work, and especially the critiques of A.G. Hogg, the most penetrating critic of Kraemer’s position, Newbigin comments that “I find myself more and more compelled to stand with Kraemer.”¹⁰ While there are differences between the two men, at the heart of the issue Newbigin has carried forward the rich and often misunderstood work of Kraemer into a new context.¹¹ It is my conviction that there is much in this Kraemer-Newbigin legacy that is exceedingly valuable and needs to be mined to address pressing issues today.¹²

⁹ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 243.

¹⁰ Newbigin “A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service,” 328. In 1994 when I first met Lesslie Newbigin, he ushered me into his small apartment in London. The first thing he did was to take down a picture of Hendrik Kraemer prominently displayed on a cabinet. It was one of only two personal pictures he said he had kept when he moved into a smaller place. He asked me if I knew who he was. When I responded that I did, he proceeded to talk at length about how much Kraemer had influenced him, including in his own approach to world religions.

¹¹ Contra James Cox who believes that “it would be wrong in this context to dismiss Newbigin as a latter-day exponent of Kraemer’s position”, a viewpoint with which George Hunsberger appears to be in sympathy (Cox, “Faith and Faiths”, 254; Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 327, fn. 10).

¹² Cf. Perry, “The Significance of Hendrik Kraemer,” 37-59.

Who Can Be Saved? Starting with the Wrong Question

Starting points for a discussion are, of course, highly significant. They function like a surveyor's fixed benchmark that serves as a trustworthy reference point to faithfully orient further surveys. Newbigin is concerned that the starting point for most discussions of world religions has distorted the discussion from the start. Usually three different positions of the relationship of the Christian faith to non-Christian religions provide a framework for discussion. While there is no agreement on how to characterize these positions, generally the exclusivist position holds an exclusive place for Christ and the Christian faith usually requiring a response of faith to the gospel for salvation; the inclusivist position maintains the universal validity of the gospel yet believes it possible for those who have not responded to the gospel to be saved, also believing that other religions may be channels of Christ's salvation; the pluralist position holds that all religions offer alternative yet equally true paths to personal salvation. This categorization, Newbigin believes, "has been fatally flawed by the fact that it has been conducted around the question, 'Who can be saved?'"¹³ Can the good non-Christian be saved? Where will she go when she dies? What happens to the non-Christian after death? Newbigin believes that these are all variations of the same wrong question and, of course, "the quest for truth always requires that we ask the right questions."¹⁴

These questions are the wrong questions for three reasons. First, these questions misunderstand the final judgment of God. God alone is judge and we are only witnesses. Jesus' many warnings and parables make clear that the last day will be a day of surprises, of reversals, and of astonishment. The warnings of eternal judgment given in Scripture are given not to judge outsiders but to produce a godly fear and fend off presumption among God's people. Second, the question about the eternal destiny of the soul assumes an individualistic anthropology that abstracts individuals from the ongoing history of the world. It is reductionistic to speak of a person apart from the full embodiment of his or her life in the context of the history of creation. The final reason is that it focuses on the individual's need of salvation rather than God and his

¹³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176-177.

¹⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176-177.

glory. When the question of the individual's destiny shapes the issue, the whole cosmic drama of salvation seems to culminate in the words "For me; for me . . ." ¹⁵

Newbigin certainly demonstrates that to make the salvation of the individual the starting point is to skew the whole issue from the beginning. Yet we can ask if by rightly reacting against a distortion he has not overstated his case neglecting something important. The question of individual salvation is not the *only* or *central* question; but surely it is *a* legitimate secondary question. ¹⁶

Starting in the Right Place—Jesus, the Center of World History

If the salvation of individuals is the wrong place to start the question, of course, is where is the right place? It is Jesus who stands at the center of universal history revealing God's purpose for the creation. It is "virtually impossible to read anything ever written by Lesslie Newbigin without gaining a sense of his feel for history, his awareness of being part of a story, indeed of being caught up in *the* story of the unfolding drama of the purposes of God." ¹⁷ The claim made for Scripture is that it is universal history: "The Bible tells a story that is *the* story, the story of which our human life is a part." ¹⁸ It is possible for us to know the meaning of universal history because in Jesus God has decisively and finally revealed and accomplished the end. In an early discussion of the world religions, he articulates the gospel as "secular announcement." The gospel is an announcement of an event in which God has acted decisively and finally for the restoration of the creation. It is not "a religious message which brings to completion and perfection the religious teaching of the ages" but "an announcement which concerns the end of the world." ¹⁹ The gospel is news about the goal of universal history, the corporate and cosmic completion of God's purpose for the creation whereby in Christ all things and all of human life are restored to the unity for which they were created. This is not a message about God for individual people detachable from their place in the world nor a message about salvation if that is understood to merely be what happens to the individual soul after death. Rather it is about the ultimate destiny of this whole creation. It is not a message that is concerned with only one aspect

¹⁵ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

¹⁶ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176-177. Cf. Matthew Thomas, "The Centrality of Christ," 318.

¹⁷ Wood, *Faiths and Faithfulness*, 147.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 82.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, 48.

of human life (something called religious) but with the whole human situation—all people and the whole of their life.

Newbigin's ways of speaking of the exclusivity of Christ contrasts with other ways. It is in this way, as the center and revelation of universal history, which Newbigin speaks of the finality of Christ. The gospel "concerns the consummation of all things. Its character as 'final' lies in this fact."²⁰ Paul Knitter piles up terms that have been used to describe the truth claims made for the Christian faith: "unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative, absolute."²¹ Each function within a different universe of thought and thus will express the truth of the gospel variously. Moreover each has different implications for relating the gospel to other religions. Newbigin consistently expresses the universal truth of the gospel in terms of historical finality, an event in which God has acted to reveal and accomplish the goal of cosmic history. In the biblical view "all of history is in some sense a unity, with the incarnation of the eternal Word of God as the centre which gives it meaning. It is only within the framework which this view provides, that we can understand the decisiveness of the Christ-event for all times and all peoples."²²

The first question, then, is whether or not the historical testimony to this event and its meaning is true. If one believes it to be true it must be the starting point for thinking about everything else including the religious life of humankind. If one does not believe it, it will be on the basis of another more ultimate faith commitment that must serve as the clue to understanding the world and the meaning of history including other religions.

This way of expressing the Christian faith gives rise to a quite different way of understanding religion than is popularly conceived. Often in Western culture the word 'religion' is used in a limited way to describe practices and beliefs regarding the transcendent, or more specifically regarding the relationship of God to the immortal soul. Thus it is a department of life concerned with such things as worship, prayer, reading sacred scriptures, an ethical system, beliefs about God and the afterlife, and so forth. Newbigin is impatient with this narrow understanding religion. Religion defined in this way arises from commitment to a story different than that of the Bible. Religion is much more basic and comprehensive, and it is a peculiarity of Western culture to isolate the domain of religion from the rest of life.

²⁰ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, 49.

²¹ Knitter, *No Other Name*, 18.

²² Newbigin, "Christ and the World of Religions," 28.

Neither in practice nor in thought is religion separate from the rest of life. In practice all the life of society is permeated by beliefs which western Europeans would call religious, and in thought what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience. The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture.²³

Religion is a “set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty.”²⁴ Thus religion includes not only what are traditionally referred to as the world religions but also the ideologies and comprehensive worldviews that shape Western culture like the modern scientific worldview in both its Marxist and its liberal-democratic-capitalist expressions.²⁵ The phenomena we traditionally call ‘religions’ are comprehensive worldviews which are marginalized because they don’t share the faith commitment in science of the reigning worldview: “The things now called ‘religions’ have very little in common with each other except that they dissent from the reigning ‘public doctrine’—the doctrine which denies the reality of anything that cannot be handled with the tools of modern science.”²⁶

If the gospel offers a comprehensive way of understanding and living in the world and all the world religions do as well this will mean that inevitably religions will meet in terms of a missionary encounter between ultimate faith-commitments. One does not adjust the claims of the gospel to fit other visions of life including a pluralist vision. Rather there will be a clash of ultimate and comprehensive visions of life. From the side of the Christian faith the gospel will challenge and call into question the fundamental assumptions of all other ultimate faith-

²³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172.

²⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 3. George Hunsberger speaks of Newbigin’s understanding of religion in a “totalistic sense” and a “limited sense.” He believes Newbigin is not clear and that he exhibits an oscillation from one position to the other. Sometimes religion is an element, aspect, dimension, or sphere of human life. At other times it is comprehensive and all-pervading, ultimate and decisive beliefs that provide stances for living all of life. Cf. *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 201-203.

²⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 161-162.

²⁶ Newbigin, “A Question to Ask”, 11.

commitments. Ian Barnes describes this missionary encounter well when he says that Newbigin's "purpose is not to make a 'space' for Christianity *within* a wide pluralism, but to recover the alternative universalist *counter* claims of Christianity based on the particular grammar of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus."²⁷ All three adjectives used by Barnes to describe the claims of Christianity are important: *alternative* because the gospel presents another way of understanding the world; *universalist* because the truth of the gospel is valid for all people and claims the whole of human life; and *counter* because the gospel challenges all other ways of understanding the world calling for repentance and conversion.

Two Approaches that Pre-empt a Missionary Encounter

If one starts with the finality of Christ this means the proper approach to other religions is in terms of a missionary encounter between ultimate commitments. This excludes at least two common ways of interpreting world religions that ultimately eliminate a missionary encounter by covertly assuming the truth of its own ultimate faith-commitments and masking them in the widely-held plausibility structure of our culture. The first is the supposed claim to be able to stand outside of any religion in order to interpret all religions in a neutral and impartial manner. This is the way of comparative religion. Newbigin offers a definition of this discipline by one of its pioneers Friedrich Max Müller as "a science of religion based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important religions of mankind."²⁸ Müller calls upon the scientific community to "take possession of this new territory in the name of science."²⁹ This commitment to science is not neutral or impartial but as religiously committed in faith as one who believes the gospel. Indeed it manifests missionary zeal for its religious cause: "This is the confident language of the pioneer missionary who has not yet found it necessary to consider the truth-claims of the tribal myths and religions of the natives."³⁰ It is precisely the unchallenged dominance of the commitment to scientific neutrality in Western culture that enables Müller to conceal this as an ultimate faith-commitment. It is not envisaged by such scholars that maybe this faith commitment to scientific neutrality will be questioned by

²⁷ Barnes, "Christianity in a Pluralist Society," 29.

²⁸ Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 26.

²⁹ Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 26-27.

³⁰ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 161.

the alternative faith commitments of one of the religions studied. A missionary encounter is simply eliminated at the outset by assuming the truth of one ultimate commitment and camouflaging it in the language of scientific neutrality.

A similar problem emerges with the pluralist approach to world religions. This position also sets aside a missionary encounter by simply assuming its own ultimate faith-commitment and concealing that faith in the widely-held ideology of pluralism of the broader culture. In fact, Newbigin insists, “pluralism is itself one position among other possible ones. It also makes truth-claims that have to be set against rival truth-claims which have to be denied. It cannot pretend to innocence among its arrogant rivals.”³¹ The only reason it is able to pretend humility in the midst of supposed arrogant and dogmatic truth claims is that pluralism is the “contemporary orthodoxy” and “reigning assumption” today.³² Its widespread acceptance allows the dogmatic and arrogant claims of the pluralist to go unrecognized. Newbigin is concerned to unmask this illusion so that there can be a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and all other fundamental loyalties including pluralist faith.

A closer look at the story of the blind men and the elephants is one way Newbigin accomplishes this unmasking. This story is often used to illustrate the humility of pluralism over against the dogmatic arrogance of the various religions. Each blind man takes hold of a different part of the elephant and all disagree on what the elephant is. One takes hold of the trunk and believes it to be like a snake; another touches the ear believes it to be like a fan; still another grasps the tusk and thinks it to be a spear; and so on. It ends: “And so these blind men argued loud and long. Each of them was partly right but all of them were wrong.” And so, says the pluralist, each religion has part of the truth and their dogmatic and exclusive claims show they are blind to the fact that they only have a partial perspective on the bigger truth. But as Newbigin astutely observes the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of the truth. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmation of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind there

³¹ Newbigin, *Religion in the Marketplace*, 137.

³² Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, 156.

would be no story. The story is told by the king, and is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth which all world religions are only groping after.³³ From what standpoint can they make such a claim?

A distinction made by John Hick offers an example of a pluralist attempt to pre-empt a missionary encounter. John Hick distinguishes between two kinds of dialogue—confessional and truth-seeking dialogue. Confessional dialogue is carried out in the context of the varying ultimate faith commitments of the adherents. For Hick, this kind of dialogue will end either “in conversion or in a hardening of differences.”³⁴ Instead Hick calls for a shift to truth-seeking dialogue in which adherents of the faiths engage in Socratic dialogue for a mutually enriched understanding of the Transcendent Being. Newbigin argues that such a contrast is false: “There is no dichotomy between ‘confession’ and ‘truth-seeking.’ A confession of faith is the starting point of their truth seeking.”³⁵ Hick does not seem to recognize this and accordingly substitutes his faith commitment for the truth and so pre-empts any kind of encounter: “On the basis that Hick proposes, there is in fact no encounter between faiths. It is eliminated at the outset by the dogma that only one set of presuppositions can provide the conditions for truth seeking.”³⁶ Hick seems to be unaware that his view is only one of many ways in which people grasp their experience, one vision of life based on faith amongst others. This position allows for neither a missionary encounter nor dialogue: “There is only the monologue of the one who is awake addressed to those who are presumed to be asleep, or who have not yet wholly roused themselves from their ‘dogmatic slumbers.’”³⁷ Hick has not eliminated the confessional stance at all; rather he has assumed and imposed his own and thereby eliminated a missionary encounter. It is true of Hick, no less than any other position, that

no standpoint is available to anyone except the point where they stand; that there is no platform from which one can claim to have an “objective” view that supersedes all the “subjective” faith-commitments of the world’s faiths; that everyone must take their stand on the floor of the arena, on the same level with

³³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9-10; *Open Secret*, 162.

³⁴ Hick, “Christian Theology,” 7.

³⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 168.

³⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 167.

³⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 167.

every other, and there engage in the real encounter of ultimate commitment with those who have also staked their lives on their vision of the truth.³⁸

Living as a Missionary Community in a Religiously Pluralistic Society

If the fundamental stance toward other religious communities is that of a missionary encounter a pressing question is: what is involved in a missionary approach to adherents of other religions in a religiously plural society?

First and foremost, the church must tell the story that has been entrusted to it. One may come to certain kinds of truth through observation and experiment, and to other kinds of truth through rigorous dialogue. However, if ultimate truth is bound up in a historical event the only way one can possibly know it is if they hear it from someone else. In a pluralist setting dialogue has often been introduced as a more humble substitute for evangelism. Newbigin counters that dialogue can never be an alternative to evangelism: historical truth comes neither by modernist dialogue in which dialogue brings its partners nearer to the truth nor by postmodern dialogue in which adherents share the riches of their religious tradition for mutual enrichment. “The problem here is that the message of Christianity is essentially a story, a report of things which have happened. . . . A fact of history does not arise out of dialogue; it has to be unilaterally reported by those who, as witnesses, can truly report what happened.”³⁹ While arrogant and aggressive proselytizing has been only too real, this does not abolish the task to tell the story, to seek to convince others of the truth, and to aim at conversion and discipleship. This is not necessarily an act of dogmatic arrogance but simply discharging the task that we have been chosen for. “For those who have been called to be part of this community and commissioned to be bearers of this witness, it is simply unthinkable that one should keep silent about it, and unthinkable that one should be willing to allow this witness to be listed as merely an expression in story form of one of the varieties of human religious experience. It must be shared as the clue both to the whole human story and therefore to every person’s story.”⁴⁰

Newbigin often adds—and this is the second point—that it is also necessary if the words of the gospel are to be believed that the church must “be the place where the reign of God is present

³⁸ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 168.

³⁹ *Religious Pluralism*, 232-233.

⁴⁰ Newbigin, “Christian Faith and World Religions,” 334.

and therefore where the battle with the powers of darkness is joined.”⁴¹ Words must be joined to deeds, and both must flow from a community where the new power of the kingdom is evident. “The life of the Church, its words, its deeds, its corporate life and—above all—its worship may in the providence of God provide the occasions for the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of an unbeliever. Christians must pray for that. But the answering of the prayer is in the hands of God alone.”⁴²

A third point, one that Newbigin never fails to mention, is that it is tremendously important for the church to “acknowledge, and welcome, and thank God for, and cherish, and admire, and reverence all the signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths . . .”⁴³ The way Newbigin piles up verbs to make his point is indicative of the importance he attaches to this aspect of a missionary approach. His starting point is Christ: the same Jesus who appeared in history is also the Word of God active in all creation. There will be some evidence of His work throughout the creation including in the adherents of other religions. At the same time Newbigin does not shrink back from observing that “it is often the higher religions, and those in them who are ethically farthest advanced, that offer the most bitter resistance to the preaching of the gospel.”⁴⁴ Since sinful humanity will “take the good gifts of God and make them into an instrument to cut ourselves off from God” it is important to stress that the gospel “confronts the claim of every religion with a radical negation.”⁴⁵ Often Newbigin leaves these two poles of God’s work and sin’s corruption in a paradox but at other times draws them together:

In the light of the highest of human standards of truth and righteousness, Jesus appears as a *subverter*, as he did to the spiritual heirs of Moses, and as he does for the noblest and the most sensitive among the adherents of other faiths and

⁴¹Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism,” 239.

⁴²Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism,” 242.

⁴³Newbigin, “Confessing Christ in a Multi-Religion Society,” 129.

⁴⁴Newbigin, *Faith for this One World?*, 73.

⁴⁵Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 176-177. Newbigin speaks of “fundamental continuity” and “radical discontinuity” between the gospel and other religions (*Christian Witness in a Plural Society*, 15). Although he does speak of radical discontinuity and negation, he is much quicker to stress God’s gracious work among adherents of other religions. When Newbigin envisages a missionary encounter with the religious faith-commitments of modern Western culture he is quick to challenge the distortions and much slower to cherish the insights. With a missionary encounter with other world religions it is the opposite. Are these examples of the ‘fat man on the seesaw’ principle? When there is a fat man sitting on one side of the seesaw it is necessary to jump very hard on the other side. In our climate is it necessary to stress the distortions in Western culture but the insights in world religions?

ideologies. It is only after the total overturning of the traditional world of values that he is seen as the *fulfiller*, not the destroyer, of what went before.⁴⁶

Fourth, the church is called to live at peace with other faith communities participating with them in the task of building a just and sustainable order. A missionary encounter does not mean a repellent and polemical confrontation that simply asserts an incommensurable Christian truth over against other religious accounts of the world or seeks to coercively displace them. Rather, the church should pursue cordial co-operation on many social, political, and ethical issues that is based on mutual respect. We share a common cultural task and participate in a civic order that draws together many faith communities. Our task is to “join hands with those of other faiths and ideologies to achieve specific goals, even though we know that the ultimate goal is Christ and his coming in glory and not what our collaborators imagine.”⁴⁷ Newbigin suggests a “committed pluralism” in which various faith communities, including the church, take responsibility to know the truth and to enter vigorously into the struggle for truth in the public domain.⁴⁸ In this way the church avoids a ghetto mentality as well as the imperialism of Christendom.

It is precisely Newbigin’s epistemology that enables him to both make exclusive claims for the gospel while affirming an ongoing search for the implications of the gospel for all of life that would include other faith communities. Christopher Duraisingh cannot easily reconcile Newbigin’s post-empiricist epistemology and the story character of the gospel, on the one hand, and the final and exclusive claims made for the gospel on the other. He writes, “One may also sense a certain tension between the perspectival and the story character of the gospel and the absolute claims that are made for the gospel.”⁴⁹ Yet it is precisely in the ‘story character of the gospel’ that we find the absolute character of the gospel. The story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection reveal and accomplish the end of history, and since this end encompasses all things, the claim has absolute and universal significance. This is the clue or light in which the church, as a hermeneutical community, explores and attempts to understand the world. All hermeneutical communities work in the light of some faith commitment, and so establish a tradition of

⁴⁶ Newbigin, *Christian Witness in a Plural Society*, 15 (my emphasis). His use of the words ‘subvert’ and ‘fulfill’ are deliberate following Kraemer. Kraemer offers an exceedingly helpful notion of “subversive fulfillment” (“Continuity and Discontinuity,” 2-4). Newbigin calls attention to this phrase approvingly in his article on W. A. Visser ’t Hooft (“Legacy,” 80-81; cf. Visser ’t Hooft, “Accommodation,” 13).

⁴⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 181.

⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 56.

⁴⁹ Duraisingh, “Foreword,” viii.

rationality that attempts to grasp and understand the world. As the ‘Christian hermeneutical community’ attempts to understand the world in the light of Christ dialogue with other faith communities can lead to deepening insight. Ian Barnes correctly observes that Newbigin’s “tradition-based epistemology provides a basis for a non-coercive claim to truth because it opens the way for a dialogical engagement with culture.”⁵⁰ The Christian church “does not claim to *possess* absolute truth: it claims to know where to point for guidance (both in thought and in action) for the common search for truth.”⁵¹ Barnes comments that Newbigin’s approach “enables him to engage more effectively in dialogue with alternative belief systems—a dialogue in which the language and more specific knowledges of other religions, cultures and modern science can be critically interpreted in terms of the ‘plausibility structure’ and ecclesial practice of Biblical faith.”⁵²

The final dimension of a missionary approach to adherents of other religions is dialogue. Newbigin’s concern is that dialogue is often placed in the context of religion narrowly defined. There is an “unspoken assumption” that religion understood as beliefs about God and the afterlife is “the primary medium of human contact with the divine.”⁵³ Rather the proper “context for true dialogue” is the shared commitment to the business of this world.⁵⁴ The proper context for dialogue is our shared cultural, social, and political tasks. It enables adherents of different faith communities to explore the possibility of common action where they share common goals and objectives. It may also contribute to a civic society by opening up insight into the religious experience of others thus creating mutual understanding and so building friendship. Ultimately, it is a dialogue about the meaning and goal of the human story in the midst of our shared life together. In this way the purpose of dialogue is an obedient witness to Jesus Christ.

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⁵⁰ Barnes, “Christianity in a Pluralist Society,” 36-37.

⁵¹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 163.

⁵² Barnes, “Christianity in a Pluralist Society,” 33

⁵³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172.

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 181.

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Newbigin was preeminent as a theologian passionately devoted to the mission and unity of the church. The influence of his thought and style are found in countless ecumenical conference reports he wrote or edited, in articles, sermons, and biblical studies throughout his career, and in his books, especially *The Household of God* (1953) and *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (1978, rev. ed.). His earliest memories were happy ones, with a caring mother and a devout and politically radical father. He attended a Quaker boarding school called Leighton Park in Reding, Berkshire. By the time he headed to Queen's College, Cambridge in 1928 he had left his religious upbringing but not dismissed it as irrational. Newbigin loved this community, with all its cultural and religious diversity. He was always a pastor. But he was also a scholar who studied cultures theologically and philosophically. In *The Gospel and Pluralism Today*, Scott W. Sunquist and Amos Yong bring together a remarkable collection of papers that reveal the ongoing value and contribution of Newbigin's work. But Sunquist and Yong's book doesn't stop at Newbigin's contribution. It builds on Newbigin's thought, and it explores critical cultural and missionary issues that have emerged in the twenty-first century. In *The Right Reverend James Edward Lesslie Newbigin C.B.E.* (December 8, 1909 – January 30, 1998) was a distinguished British theologian, missionary, church leader and bishop who served as the last General-Secretary of the International Missionary Council and the first Director of the World Council of Churches' Division of Mission and Evangelism (1960 to 1965). From 1936 he was a Church of Scotland missionary in India, where he was consecrated as a bishop of the new Church of South India in 1947. He