

Roots and Fruits

Mission to Structures and Ideologies

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At the last lecture he gave in Scotland, at Carberry Tower in 1992, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin spoke about three forms of Christian mission:

- Mission to individuals
- Mission to structures
- Mission to ideologies

Newbigin was a missionary of the Church of Scotland and one of the leading missiologists of the 20th century. Foreign mission, such as he was engaged in for much of his life in India, involved evangelization, teaching and pastoral care. This was traditional *mission to individuals*, but as his books on the theology of mission reveal, the churches' understanding of mission – whether in South India, Geneva or elsewhere – was evolving all the time.

The French Worker Priest Movement during and after the Second World War called for a particular kind of missionary commitment in industrial society. Naturalisation, inculturation and incarnation were some of the terms used by the theology of presence out of which it grew. Its mission was to establish the church in the industrial milieu, whether that of deported French workers in Germany or the disaffected and secularised French working class of the post-war years. Already its scope was more comprehensive than mission to individuals; it involved structures as well – economic, social and political structures. This form of Christian social engagement was an indigenous European missionary development, one of the roots out of which grew the Christian Marxist dialogue, the ecumenical openness of Vatican II and later, Latin American liberation theology.

As a Roman Catholic theology of mission reflecting the Catholic understanding of church and priesthood, the experiment eventually got too political for the church to handle, and it was abandoned in its original form. But it was later adopted as a strategy by the French Protestant Industrial Mission, a small missionary movement founded by a Scotsman, McColl in 1870, in response to the repression and destitution of workers and their families in the faubourgs of the capital following the Paris Commune. The McColl Mission had close connections with the church in Scotland, and several of my generation of theological graduates in the late 1960s were influenced by it, as we were also by the Fraternity of the Transfiguration at Roslin, Midlothian, where our teacher Roland Walls and a couple of other brothers, inspired by Charles de Foucauld, lived a life of poverty and commitment to working people and the poor.

Europe was always my continent. I joined the Mission Populaire as an *équipier au travail* and worked as a welder-boilermaker in Roubaix and Paris from 1972-77. But the internationals like me who did this in France or elsewhere in those years were not missionaries in a traditional sense. We were breaking out of the missionary mind-set, half-breed children of the Church and the Spirit of the 'Sixties. Our vocation was in a sense recognised at the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra and described thus: "There is an urgent need today for a new type of mission, not into foreign lands but into 'foreign' structures. By this term we mean economic, social and political structures which do not at all conform to Christian moral standards." (*Signs of the Spirit*, WCC, 1991, p.66) This is what the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society in Brussels had been doing in

its relations with the European institutions for thirty years. In the excitement that followed the reunification of Europe in 1989 and the build up to the Single Market in 1992, the Church of Scotland sent a series of ‘missionaries’ to join the EECCS team. I was the first, from 1991-99. I preferred to use the term ‘missionary’ for my work as it had more potential than the bland ‘mission partner’ when explaining to church people what it was all about.

In the 1980’s Lesslie Newbigin had caught the imagination of Christians throughout Britain with an ecumenical missionary programme, sponsored by the British Council of Churches, called *The Gospel and our Culture*. It began life as *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*. Newbigin’s aim was to challenge the Enlightenment rationalism and scientism which govern Western civilisation with a critique based on Biblical faith and the truth of the Gospel.

But the true nature of the economic and technological culture we inhabit is not obvious. As the Chinese proverb says, if you want a definition of water, don’t ask a fish. How can we be missionaries to it when we are part of it ourselves? Newbigin saw the problem from the perspective of his long inculturation in Indian and particularly Tamil culture. “For those who have never lived in any other cultural world than that of the contemporary West it is very hard to see that theirs is only one of the tribal cultures of humankind. They are inclined to see it simply as the ‘modern scientific world view’.” (*The Open Secret*) Twenty years on, Western monoculture has immeasurably strengthened its hold on the imagination of the world. A prophetic Word over against the ‘tough new paganism of the modern Western world’ was what Newbigin understood to be the urgent task of the churches together today.

Lesslie Newbigin did not add ‘mission to the churches’ as a fourth form of mission in his scheme quoted above, but the force of his criticisms of the church might suggest that he should have done so. If anything the mission field of modern economic and technological culture is as much the church itself as capitalism and a consumer society. In his long march through the institutions of western society, Ivan Illich, one-time Catholic priest, historian and critic of civilisation, underlines the same thing. Throughout my life, his writing more than that of anyone else has informed my understanding of culture and society and my approach to ‘mission’ in the world.

I see no missionaries converting our world from its pagan gods in the century ahead. But change is coming. The shaking of the foundations of Capitalism has begun, confirming the collapse twenty years ago of Communism, its sister religion. As catastrophe strikes the economic and technological idols of our civilization, we need prophets like Newbigin and Illich to interpret what God is doing in the world. Meanwhile the church would be wise to get an allotment like Jeremiah and plant cabbages while it waits for the judgement that is coming.

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