



Lesslie Newbigin A New Zealand Perspective

by Harold Turner

The Revd. Dr Harold Turner has had a long career teaching Religious Studies and is a renowned scholar of primal religions. In 1989 he founded the Gospel and Cultures Trust in New Zealand, where he lives in retirement.

From my many memories of Lesslie Newbigin I can indicate something of his influence on the other side of the world, in New Zealand. When I went to Birmingham in 1981 Alan Brash, my fellow New Zealand Presbyterian minister who had been associated with Newbigin through the WCC, told me that Lesslie and I, having so much in common, would ‘fall on each other’s necks’, or some such. Newbigin was then ensconced in a carrel in the Selly Oak Colleges library writing his commentary on St. John’s Gospel, and I was establishing the Centre for New Religious Movements in the same building, but somehow we did not ‘connect’.

It was only when *The Other Side of 1984* appeared and the Gospel & Culture movement took shape that a warm friendship quickly developed. I just ‘happened’ (as we say before we recognise Providence at work) to be there, and found it congenial to everything that had gone before in my own life. Newbigin and I lived close to the Colleges and latterly worshipped at the same URC church, and it was a high privilege to be involved with him from the mid-eighties until his death.

As one specific example of our relationship, I was moved by his humility in asking me (an unknown newcomer to his world) to read each chapter as it came off his typewriter for the Robertson lectures he gave in Glasgow University in 1988 - the text for his subsequent major book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

In 1989 I returned to New Zealand and he managed to find time to correspond, and warmly support the establishment here of an equivalent Gospel & Culture

initiative; in fact I think ‘distance lent enchantment’ and he had a rather exaggerated view of what we were managing. This probably reflected what was happening in Britain at the same time - the failure of the movement there to take off independently of its ageing chief articulator. I am glad that he did live to see the Bible Society in Britain officially take up responsibility for developing the Gospel & Culture issue.

In New Zealand there was no question of my abandoning the new vistas and activities, and I was resolved to be a link with what was happening in Britain and elsewhere. Here there was a good deal of respect for Newbigin’s earlier theological writings among the more serious-minded ministers, but missiology has not been developed in ministerial training nor in the mission societies. There was, therefore, less understanding of the mission thrust that had marked his later writings, even before the Gospel & Culture development. The man himself was not known, except for a few New Zealand missionaries who had met him in India; he had paid only one short visit to New Zealand many years before.

His influence here in the nineties is, therefore, all the more remarkable, both through his writings since the 1984 book, and through the inspiration he provided for the Gospel and Cultures Trust that was established in 1990. I should, therefore, give some outline of its activities, all of which Lesslie followed with intelligent interest and warm support.

You will note the plural ‘Cultures’, because we could no longer refer simply to ‘our’ culture, i.e. Western culture, in a society where we are very aware

of the Maori heritage and there are growing numbers of Pacific Islanders and now of Asian immigrants. Multiculturalism is the public context and the social reality and so the original British agenda had to widen, even while the chief focus remains on the dominant and modern Western culture. Lesslie, of course, after half a lifetime in India, fully understood this as well as appreciated the great advantages of operating in a small society.

Thus we were able to form a group of Trustees including the Anglican Archbishop, the Catholic Cardinal, a retired general secretary of the then National Council of Churches in New Zealand (a Baptist), a Presbyterian theological lecturer, a retired professor of education, and the national Principal of the Bible College of New Zealand (a Christian Brethren member). This would not have been possible in any other country. Nor would it have been so easy to secure as Patron the present Governor-General of New Zealand – Sir Michael Hardie-Boys, a committed Christian. When the movement seemed to be in the doldrums in Britain, Lesslie found this all very exciting and he was liable to read too much into it.

In addition to the Trustees, a management team has been drawn together consisting of local people in Auckland. These include an industrial chemist who directs the University of Auckland marketing body, Uniservices, a medical doctor, a university chaplain, a lecturer in history, an accountant, a school teacher and several ministers.

Experience in England, along with Lesslie and Dan Beeby, meeting with Christian foundations for funding Gospel

“The minister’s leadership of the congregation in its mission to the world will be first and foremost in the area of his or her own discipleship, in that life of prayer and daily consecration which remains hidden from the world but which is the place where the essential battles are either won or lost.”

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 240-241.)

“...the human spirit cannot live permanently with a form of rationality which has no answer to the question ‘Why?’”

(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 213.)

& Culture suggested that it would be a waste of time appealing here for funds for such an unknown enterprise. So we have been privately financed thus far, largely by one family, and economically set up with two office rooms downstairs in my house. I was the one full-time and honorary staff member until 1997 when health problems forced retirement and John Flett with some assistance took over as part-time Secretary and office manager.

Our activities have included a residential conference of church leaders in 1991, similar to the Gospel & Culture Swanwick conference, and a three-yearly Newsletter, *New Slant*, akin to the former British one, is now in its sixth year. In 1995 I conducted a thirty-hour course over ten Saturday mornings, for over thirty laity. This provided a solid introduction to the relation between the Gospel and the basic assumptions of our Western worldview – epistemological, ontological and cosmological. It will, hopefully, lead to a book before the end of this year, *Frames of Mind: A Public Philosophy for Religion and Culture From a Christian Stance*. At the same time, Lesslie was quite excited about teaching lay groups at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton. This drew upon his biblical–theological position as compared with our own more philosophical–theological approach; but when we discussed them he recognised how the two were complementary.

He was also fascinated by the M.Th. research of John Flett

into the earlier major initiative on Gospel & Culture in Britain in the 1930s-50s. Led by J.H. Oldham, this was undertaken through his Christian Newsletter and elite think-tank, The Moot, which later became the Christian Frontier Council and its journal became *Frontier*. Newbigin himself was invited to read a paper (that Oldham disliked!) to The Moot and followed with keen interest what Flett is opening up as to where that high-powered initiative differed from the new Gospel and Culture movement and why it had failed. To relate these two sections of Christian history is of the greatest importance to us all, and this research is guiding our further and major development in the form of a ‘DeepSight Institute’ permanently funded and adequately staffed for this new ‘deep mission to deep culture’.

Our connection with the British Gospel and Our Culture movement will now be developed further by Bible Society. Another joint development has been the establishment of a single shared internet site on behalf of the Gospel & Culture movement in Britain, the USA and New Zealand, at <http://www.voyager.co.nz/-dozer>. Although Lesslie was not up in these latest technologies he thoroughly approved and was intrigued at the page devoted to himself as inspirer of the whole enterprise.

As his blindness advanced, voluntary readers visited and read to him. New Zealanders Murray Rae and Graham Redding (both

on our management committee here) were members of this team while they were studying at King’s College, London. So the New Zealand connection has been manifold. Over the last four years of his life Lesslie and I corresponded by cassette tape. Receiving these tapes was for me a great privilege and tremendous support. Since he covers on them so many issues and events in a free and informal way, they are an invaluable archive of his thinking.

So now I share with hosts of others my thanksgiving to God for the gift of Lesslie Newbigin as a prophet of our age, as the formative influence in his further Gospel & Culture development in my own country, and for me personally as a major presence in my life.

