



It Seems to Me...

by **Lesslie Newbigin**

Each edition of TransMission will contain a reflective article by a prominent Christian leader. In this edition, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin considers the importance of recovering the biblical narrative as a source of authority and truth for the public life of society. It is based on a keynote address given at the Open Book consultation, "Imagining Tomorrow", at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, January 1997.

If you spend a few months, as my wife and I have done, on a leisurely journey by public transport from Madras to London, you learn one thing: that Asia and Europe are not separate continents. Why then do we talk as if they were? One look at a map is enough to show us that Europe is only the western end of Asia. A look at history will convince us that Europe is the litter bin into which the surplus population of Asia has been tipped, millennium after millennium. So what makes Europe separate?

A Story

The short answer is that for a thousand years, Europe, unlike the rest of the continent, was shaped by a story. It is the story of the Book – the Bible. It is the story of the origin and goal of the entire cosmos and of the whole human race, and of the choices available to us in this life and their consequences. It was a brilliant Hindu scholar friend of mine who opened my eyes to this point (so obvious when you have recognized it). From his wide knowledge of the sacred books of the world's religions, he said, "I find in your Bible something quite unique. It is a unique interpretation of universal history, and therefore an interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor within history."

It was easier for him than it was for me to see this point. He is a product of the Asian world in which ultimate meaning is not found in the events of history, but in those transcendent truths which are beyond particular happenings. They are truths that can only be grasped by the powers of human reason which take us beneath the events of history to the point where movement and human activity ceases. The classical world of Greece and Rome was part of this ancient, Asian world of thought. Why then did the lands to the west take a different course?

The Meaning

We have to look for the answer in those Jewish synagogues scattered through the cities of the ancient world where a story was told: the story of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the one who is both the author of all being, and the one whose purpose is revealed through the events of history. More precisely, these synagogues provided the base from which the story of Jesus – as the one in whom the greater story reached its decisive climax – was launched into the classical world.

It was through *that* story, told in numerous ways (through the liturgy and preaching of the Church, through its art, music, architecture and festivals), that

the mind of a whole society was shaped. It provided a unique set of answers to fundamental questions that every human being has to ask: what is the meaning of my life? Where am I going? What choices are available to me?

After the eighth century, Eastern Christendom was largely cut off from the West by the power of Islam. In the West, the terrible religious wars of the seventeenth century (notably the English Civil War and the German Thirty Years War) discredited the biblical story and led those with intellectual influence in society to turn to another vision of reality. That vision was brilliantly etched in the mathematical physics of Newton and in the new scientific method of Descartes. They seemed to provide a reliable guide to public truth, independent of alleged divine revelation in history.

The biblical story could still function as a guide to the life of the individual, but could no longer claim authority in the public realm. In the often-quoted words of Lessing, "Accidental happenings in history cannot prove eternal truths of reason". The biblical story could no longer provide the context for the ordering of the public life of society.

Other Stories

The biblical story was, for a time, replaced by the story of

The Rt Revd Lesslie Newbigin was ordained a minister in the Church of Scotland, and served as a missionary in India from 1963 to 1974 where he became a bishop in the Church of South India. He has been General Secretary of the World Council of Churches; and, on his return to Britain, was minister of a United Reformed church in Birmingham. He is the author of many books which seek to relate the gospel to contemporary culture, and is frequently in demand as a lecturer.

► “progress”. Stunning new achievements in technology, which the new science made possible, created the hope that human life could be lifted to higher levels of fulfilment and happiness. The new economics would create unlimited material growth.

This new confidence in the future has gone now. European civilization, having extended its power over the entire globe, has lost the confidence it once had to provide a safe and happy future for the world. There is no great story, no “meta-narrative” which can give meaning to human life. The demand for a kind of “eternal truth”, divorced from the happenings of history, has brought us to a dead end. It has denied us the possibility of knowing the purpose of our lives (since purpose, until it is fully realized, can only be known if the one whose purpose it is reveals it and we are willing to believe and trust).

The truth which Nietzsche proclaimed at the beginning of this century has been confirmed: if there is no God, no divine revelation, then all claims to know the way are mere assertions of power. We have lost the only story that makes sense of life, and which is not purely an assertion of power, because it has at its heart the cross of Calvary – the place where the power and wisdom that sustains all things was revealed in humble and costly obedience.

The Open Book

This is why I believe *The Open Book* project (an initiative from Churches Together in England, which is project managed by Bible Society) provides the churches with an opportunity to recall society to the true “meta-narrative” – the biblical story which can make sense for both our public and our private lives. It makes possible the recovery of a confident hope without which our public life threatens to descend into the meaningless hedonism of the consumer society.

On page 6, the Theological Consultant to The Open Book, Dr Colin Greene, introduces the project and some of the ways in which it seeks to influence public life and the life of local churches. ■