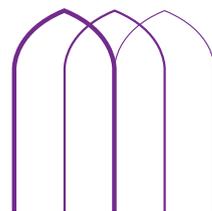


THINKING AFTER NEWBIGIN

FAITH RESPONSES TO RELATIVISM AND PLURALISM IN A SECULAR WORLD



THE CENTRE FOR
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UNEMBARRASSED: LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND SECULAR PLURALISM

“The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about ‘what is true for me’ is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.”¹



The forthright words above are typical of the trenchant critique of contemporary secular pluralism associated with the late Bishop Leslie Newbigin (1909-1998). The missionary bishop in India, who in later life developed a second pastoral and academic career in Birmingham, England, inspired a generation of Christians to rediscover a “proper confidence” in the Gospel and be prepared to tell the Christian story as public truth rather than as personal opinion.²

This term’s edition of *CMCS Research Briefings* features four papers given at a symposium held at Regent’s Park College, Oxford, in November 2016 to discuss Newbigin’s work. The event, entitled *Thinking after Newbigin: faith responses to relativism and pluralism in a secular world*, was jointly sponsored by the *Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies* and the *Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture*. The first pair of articles in this volume present the texts of papers presented at the symposium

and the second pair were later developed from the presentations given on the day. Dr Nicholas Wood, the director of OCCC, who chaired the discussion, opens with an introduction and generous tribute to Newbigin, outlining his epistemology (theory of knowledge) and soteriology (theology of salvation) and pointing out that Newbigin cannot be narrowly labelled as an exclusivist but was rather someone who engaged deeply with the tension of living in a pluralised context. Another Christian academic, Prof Roger Trigg, then uses Newbigin’s work to develop a critique of relativism and to question the idea that well-meaning liberal pluralism can champion tolerance without building a firm foundation on objective truth.

Two Muslim scholars, both based at CMCS, continue the conversation bringing an Islamic perspective. Dr Shirin Shafaei gives a sympathetic appreciation of Newbigin’s work but wonders how it can be applied can be applied to the reality of today’s nation state. Finally in this volume, Dr Shabbir Akhtar provides what he calls “an analogue” to Newbigin’s critique of western epistemology. He explores the Qur’anic concept of the “signs of Allah” to illustrate Islam’s approach to science and reason which he believes has encouraged “inquiry into nature’s mysteries”.

Ultimately, however, Newbigin “was not embarrassed about seeking a privileged position for the Christian faith in the public life of the nation” as he saw it as the only guarantor of the freedom to pursue “the vigorous and continuous struggle for the truth” which is essential for the flourishing of any human society.³

Dr Richard McCallum, editor.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Newbigin, Leslie, 1989, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. London: SPCK.
- 2 Newbigin, Leslie, 1995, *Proper Confidence: faith, doubt, and certainty in Christian discipleship*. London: SPCK.
- 3 Newbigin in Newbigin, Leslie, Lamin Sanneh, and Jenny Taylor; 2005, *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in ‘Secular’ Britain*. 2nd edition ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 163-4

BISHOP LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S THEOLOGY OF CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT¹

The career of Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) is sufficiently well known to require only the briefest of introductions.² Brought up in a devout Presbyterian household in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and educated at the Quaker Leighton Park School in Berkshire, Newbigin read Geography at Queen's College, Cambridge, followed by theological education at Westminster College; he was ordained in the Church of Scotland for service as a missionary in India and sailed for the subcontinent in 1936.

Except for six years with the International Missionary Council and its successor body in the World Council of Churches based in Geneva, India was to be Newbigin's sphere of service for nearly forty years. He became a founding bishop in the United Church of South India, first in Madurai and later in Madras. After "retirement" in 1974 there followed

responsibility for teaching mission studies at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, subsequently coupled with an active inner-city pastorate for the United Reformed Church of which he was elected national Moderator (1978-79).³



St Georges Cathedral, Chennai

His return to the European world in 1974 after twenty-seven years as a bishop in the Church of South India, proved to be a considerable culture-shock,⁴ and much of his writing after his return to Britain was concerned with a Christian critique of contemporary Western society and its culture.⁵ All this was produced over a relatively short period of time, in the context of his relocation into the plural society of Birmingham and the pluralist theology of (especially) John Hick, then H.G. Wood Professor of Theology in the University of Birmingham.

A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT IN THE HUMAN STORY

It seemed to Newbigin that although belief in God had for centuries been a fundamental element in the human story, it was no longer part of the “mental furniture” of secular western humanity. But this question, of whether and how we may know God, cannot be tackled apart from an understanding of how we know or believe anything – the issue of epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is crucial for Newbigin.⁶ He developed an epistemology based on the work of Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*,⁷ stressing knowledge as subjective human experience formed within a framework of community. Knowing is an activity of persons in community involving both risk and commitment. However important the role of scepticism and doubt, the active principle in the expansion of knowledge is faith, and this is nowhere more true than in our knowledge of persons. To know another person is to recognize another centre of decision beyond our control; to ignore the difference between our knowledge of persons and our knowledge of things, to “use” someone or be “used” by them, is legitimately described as impersonal or even inhuman behaviour.

Knowledge of God not only falls within this area of personal knowing – the knowledge of encounter – but points to the profoundly personal character of all our knowing.⁸ To this extent all knowledge is subjective and grounded in faith. But faith in God is faith in someone “other than myself”, and such knowledge as it brings is partial and depends on the willingness of the other to disclose himself to me, and my willingness to attend and to respond: “The man of faith knows that he does not know, but knows that he is known”.⁹ Recent discussion of the question of religious pluralism has tended to categorize the various Christian responses to this issue as “exclusivist”, “inclusivist” or “pluralist”.¹⁰ Such discussions usually place the contributions of Lesslie Newbigin squarely in the “exclusivist” camp. Newbigin himself is reluctant to use this language at all for he believes that it stems from asking the wrong question in the first place and is anyway often inadequate to the task. In the fullest statement of his position on the relationship of Christian faith to the religions,¹¹ he points out that his position cuts across these categories, combining elements which have been assigned to all three at various times. What he is always at pains to point out is that, whilst he acknowledges the fact of plurality, he does not accept the prevailing philosophy of pluralism. Of course the world has always been plural in culture, but he points to the new factor of the widespread acceptance

of “pluralism” as an ideology, reflecting a “privatisation” of religious belief with “tolerance” as the chief virtue.¹²

Newbigin recognizes pluralism as the “reigning orthodoxy”, in which any form of exclusivism is rejected as inappropriate to the urgent needs of the global society. It is claimed that what is required is a common commitment to shared “values” which, it is supposed, may be independent of any one tradition. This would provide the focus for unity in response to nuclear threat and ecological disaster. All this assumes that truth is ultimately unknowable, and for Newbigin it is the final evidence of “cultural collapse”. Total relativism provides no grounds for any talk of salvation at all; people and communities select their own absolutes, but absolutize merely their own wishful thinking or that of the most powerful factions. His own response underlines the way that this thinking depends on the unproven assumptions of modern western culture: the unknowability of truth; the elevation of the individual above the historic communities of which individuals are part; the appeal to abstract values such as “justice” and “love”, without facing the difficult questions of “Whose justice?” and “What kind of love?”.¹³

“ What now demands attention is the human self and its need for salvation, with no objective reality that can confront that self with the offer of salvation.

This type of thinking has shaped an ideology of pluralism for many Christian theologians, based on a “soteriocentric” view of “the universe of faiths”.¹⁴ Newbigin argues that this is in fact a reversal of the so-called Copernican revolution in theology. What now demands attention is the human self and its need for salvation, with no objective reality that can confront that self with the offer of salvation. It is the final step away from the “saving acts of God” to the “religious experience of the individual”, and confirms Feuerbach’s characterisation of theology as a form of anthropology: or as Newbigin argues, “It is the authentic product of a consumer society”.¹⁵

A FORCE FIELD OF CREATIVE TENSION

For Newbigin proper discussion of these questions must focus on “the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world”.¹⁶ These two “poles” produce a force field of creative tension at once both demanding and affirming. Attempts to reduce the tension by moving towards one or other pole lead inevitably to either strict exclusivism or easy universalism. Newbigin argues that the Christian must continue to live within the tension, confessing “the mighty work of grace in Jesus Christ” on which basis he makes this bold affirmation: “I believe that no person, of whatever kind or creed, is without some witness of God’s grace in heart and conscience and reason, and none in whom that grace does not evoke some response – however feeble, fitful, and flawed”.¹⁷

This has (at least) four implications. First, Christians must expect and welcome evidence of the grace of God from those outside the household of faith. It means, secondly, an eagerness to co-operate with people of all religions and none, in projects that reflect the saving

“ It is this grasp of the range of underlying assumptions that prevents Newbigin being classified as neatly as much of the discussion tries to do.

purposes of God. Thirdly, within this context of mutual commitment, true encounter and dialogue will take place, in which, finally, the Christian will have the opportunity to “tell the story”, that is the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible. It is this grasp of the range of underlying assumptions that prevents Newbigin being classified as neatly as much of the discussion tries to do. Thus he concludes:

The position which I have outlined is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not

exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.¹⁸



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Dr Wood is a fellow of Regent's Park College, a member of Oxford University's Faculty of Theology, and director of the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 This introduction is drawn from my book *Faiths and Faithfulness: Pluralism, Dialogue and Mission in the work of Kenneth Cragg and Leslie Newbigin* (Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes 2009).
- 2 See the useful biographical sketch in Paul Weston *Leslie Newbigin Missionary Theologian* (SPCK London 2006) pp1-13 and the Introduction: A Man in Christ to Geoffrey Wainwright's very full 'theological biography' *Leslie Newbigin A Theological Life* (OUP Oxford 2000), pp3-28.
- 3 See Bishop Newbigin's own account in his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda* (SPCK London 1985).
- 4 See Newbigin's account of this experience in *Unfinished Agenda*, chapter 18, pp239-50, and *The Other Side of 1984* (WCC Geneva 1983) pp1-4.
- 5 The key works are: *The Other Side of 1984* (1983); *Foolishness to the Greeks* (SPCK London 1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK London 1989); *Truth to Tell* (SPCK London 1991).
- 6 Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (SCM Press London 1966) p79.
- 7 M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962) Corrected Edition.
- 8 Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, p88f. He goes on (pp88-92) to take issue with John A.T. Robinson's interpretation of knowing God in his well-known book *Honest to God*, (SCM London 1963) pp43-49, which has clearly influenced Newbigin's own title.
- 9 Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, p99.
- 10 e.g. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*. (SCM Press London 1983).
- 11 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (SPCK London 1989) especially chapters 13 & 14.
- 12 Newbigin, 'The Christian Faith and the World Religions' in G. Wainwright (ed), *Keeping the Faith*, (SPCK London 1989) pp312-3.
- 13 Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp152-166. Newbigin acknowledges his indebtedness to philosophers such as Michael Polanyi (see note 7 above) and Alasdair MacIntyre. e.g. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth London 1985) 2nd Edition, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Duckworth London 1988).
- 14 The work of John Hick is crucial to this whole discussion, see for example *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Macmillan London 1977) and especially *An Interpretation of Religion* (Macmillan London 1989).
- 15 Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p169.
- 16 *ibid*, p175.
- 17 *ibid*, p175.
- 18 *ibid* pp182-3.

THE SEDUCTIVE PERILS OF RELATIVISM

THE CHALLENGE OF TRUTH

Many in contemporary society are suspicious, and even afraid, of those who claim something that is true for everyone, even those who disagree with them. It seems a first step towards an intolerance that can easily lead to the coercion of others. All too often a claim to objective truth, particularly in the sphere of religion, is labelled as fundamentalist and for that reason dismissed. Yet what is the alternative to such a position?

For many it seems that the obvious line to take is that there is no such thing as truth, but that we each possess our own. Then, at the extreme, whether as individuals or as groups, we have our own gods. There is no one God, given that so many either disagree about His nature, or deny the existence of any divinity. Such a repudiation of truth can seem tolerant and liberal. It seems to respect the freedom that should be intrinsic to the life of every human being. Yet the minute we ask why we should respect others, and why other people's freedom matters, we begin to raise questions of truths about human nature and the world we live in. We immediately step back from relativism. We cannot have it both ways. A genuine relativist has to accept that some societies may well regard it as right for them to be coercive, and even cruel to their members.

In this context, the work of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin is still of significance. Writing almost a generation ago and much influenced by his experience in the pluralist society of India where he was a Bishop of the Church of South India, he saw the importance both of affirming religious truth and respecting religious diversity. He said in one of his books, significantly entitled *Truth to Tell*, "A serious commitment to evangelism means a radical questioning of the reigning assumptions of public life. It is to affirm the gospel, not only as an invitation to a private and personal decision, but as public truth which ought to be acknowledged as true for the whole of society" (Newbigin: 1991, 2). This view has many implications for the way we live together, whether Christian or not, and it runs up against two powerful currents in modern society, which holds that religion cannot claim any such objective truth, particularly one that transcends disagreement. Religion should certainly, it seems, not be paraded in the public square (Trigg, 2007, 2012, 2014).

The first stems from the view that science explains everything and that religious claims have at best a subjective validity like tastes. This is derived from an empiricist view that only evidence accessible to science

(even perhaps contemporary science), can be used in rational argument. Anything unscientific, whether ethics, aesthetics or religion, has to be swept aside on the grounds that it has no place in rational debate. This stems from the attack on metaphysics made popular by the logical positivism exemplified by the Vienna Circle before the Second World War. Yet it means that science cannot explain the conditions necessary for its own success, and suggests that in the end a commitment to science itself must rest on blind faith (Trigg, 2015).

“ Anything unscientific, whether ethics, aesthetics or religion, has to be swept aside on the grounds that it has no place in rational debate.

The second current in modern society is the one that we started off from. It confronts disagreement by dismissing it as mere diversity. It may be respected but not confronted, since what is true depends on what different groups of people believe. Our God may not be your God. Both these views, scientism and relativism, have the result of excluding religion from public life. They inhibit the proclamation of the truth of the Christian gospel and discourage confronting the perceived truths of other religions. Both views leave no room for the possibility of any rational discussion between people who disagree. The idea of dialogue between different religions is rendered impossible.

Relativism of its very nature is centred on humanity, on us - even just me. One of the early relativists mercilessly attacked by Plato in ancient Athens, was Protagoras who said that "man is the measure of all things". The anthropocentric nature of this claim is self-evident. Instead of proclaiming the reality common to us all, and beyond us all, which we all must try to understand, everything becomes a reflection of ourselves,

a mere temporary construction, which may change as fashions change. Religions then do not proclaim an eternal truth, but merely reflect the nature of the society from which they come. They, like all forms of human understanding, become exercises of construction, not discovery.

CONFIDENT PLURALISM?

Newbigin talks of the Church having to challenge society “to wake out of the nightmare of subjectivism and relativism, to escape from the nightmare of the self turned in on itself” (1991, 2). Indeed this is the path to nihilism, the inability to believe in any purpose in the world at all. It is a view which recent research on the cognitive science of religion has shown to be against one of the most basic features of human nature, namely the inclination to look for purpose in everything. Yet to look outwards to other people and groups, and their beliefs, we need common ground on which to stand. One thing all humans should have in common is an ability to reason, and indeed many Christians have seen reason as the gift of God and rooted in his nature. We need only recall this slogan of the so-called Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century that “reason is the candle of the Lord” to see the connection in many people’s minds between a truth rooted in the nature of God and the human ability to work our way some way towards it. Yet even Newbigin sometimes appears to stress Christian revelation to such an extent that there is no other ground on which to stand.

John Inazu, a contemporary American legal theorist talks in a new book on pluralism in America’s fractured society of “beliefs and intuitions resting upon tradition-dependent values that cannot be empirically proven or fully justified by forms of rationality external to those traditions” (Inazu, 2016, 88). All of us, he says, religious or not, have to live and act on a kind of faith. It is significant that he is able in this context to quote Newbigin and continues: “As the theologian Lesslie Newbigin observes, ‘we are continually required to act on beliefs that are not demonstrably certain, and to commit our lives to propositions that can be doubted.’” Yet Inazu himself like Newbigin is no relativist and wants to distinguish relativism from pluralism (itself a slippery concept). The stress, though, on the prior importance of our commitments leaves little room for any scope for reasoning beyond them.

Inazu wants to advocate a “confident pluralism”, according to which we remain strongly committed to our own truths whilst recognising the reality of diversity. Yet for him, like Newbigin, there is a difficulty. If pluralism means anything more than the recognition of the obvious fact that people disagree, it presumably must involve some element of positive respect for those of other religions. Yet the perennial difficulty is that if we believe in the truth of our own religion, must this exclude any consideration of the affirmations of others? The tug between intolerant dogmatism and an easy-going acceptance of difference can be all too real. What middle way can there be? Can we respect others’ beliefs to the extent of even being willing to learn from them, while still being true to our own? However strong our faith in our own religion we have to realise that all knowledge is partial. As St Paul memorably put it:

“Now we see through a glass darkly”. No one knows everything and a certain humility is in order, when making claims to knowledge. Yet we all have to live by something and we have to make our minds up as to where the truth lies. Newbigin wants to say that we should respect and recognise difference, but believe in what we conceive to be true not as our own truth but as one that is true for all. Too much humility about claiming truth can induce a detached agnosticism that itself can lead to nihilism. Too much respect for so-called pluralism can lead to the abyss of relativism. Yet if truth is objective, we must still always realise that we may not possess all of it. The very fact that it is objective means that we should never give up in our search for it. A robust view of objective truth can produce a humble, even if firm, commitment to our beliefs. We can still learn since we cannot know everything.

Too great an emphasis on the difference between various traditions and religions can make us each withdraw into a ghetto. There can then be no point of contact between any of us, no common basis. We must instead embrace a pluralism that is not content with setting boundaries. Just as we all possess, as humans, a common ability to reason, we all share a wider human nature. Human flourishing is not a relative concept, any more than the idea of what it is to be human. We all live in the same world confronting the same reality, about which we can reason. Despite the reality of our differences we have to accept that something lies beyond them, indeed transcends them. If we are to find some unity in our diversity, there must be something to unify around. Our common humanity, and our common predicament as humans, is a place to start.

LESSONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The idea of an objective truth which should be publicly accessible carries implications, as Newbigin saw and lived, for the life of the Christian Church itself. There is not only a message for society here about the relevance of Christianity and other religious claims for the conduct of public life, but also one for the life of the Church itself. If there is ultimately one truth, and this is to be proclaimed (even if not always exclusively) by the Christian Church, should it not seem itself to be at one in its message? Newbigin says: (1991, 96) “The word of truth the Church speaks to Caesar must be, or must aim to be, the word of the whole Church. Splintered, confused, and compromised, the Church seldom seems worth listening to...The truth entrusted to her is the truth of God.” If Christians think that they are preaching a gospel of peace and reconciliation, should not they be seen to be at peace and reconciled with each other? If truth is not subjective or relative, the Christian Church in its proclamations should not speak with many voices. Just as Christians can learn from members of other religions, so it should be even more the case that they can learn from Christians of other Christian traditions. This carries tremendous implications for the importance of visible Christian unity, and Newbigin, himself a minister of the then newly created United Reformed Church, epitomised this in his own person. At one time the Church of South India, in which Newbigin was a bishop, seemed to be leading the way to a more united and universal Church, but few eventually followed.



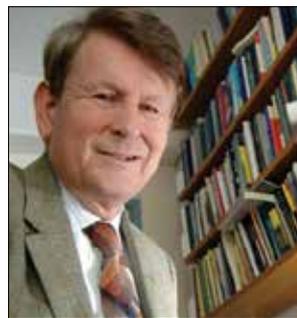
“ It is a paradox that, in a world of great diversity and disagreement, the notion of a truth that lies beyond us all gives dialogue and rational discussion between competing views their point.

FASHIONABLE CAUSES OF THE MOMENT

Newbigin's work also raises the question of the relationship of the Church to politics. He says, "The Church is not to identify with any political programme, and yet cannot leave political issues out of her concern, as if the sovereignty of Christ did not extend beyond the walls of the church" (1991, 79). That must be right because this is God's world, and Christians should be concerned with what happens in it. If the sovereignty of God is ignored, the sovereignty of the State will take His place. Even so, there are dangers in this approach, which over the last fifty years have become all too apparent. It is very easy for the Church to be seduced by the fashionable causes of the moment. Indeed the currents of relativism lead to the idea that we should not be out of step with a society around us.

Once we lose sight of any objective truth transcending society, we can become too immersed in what seems important at a particular time. It is the nature of relativism to be preoccupied with fashionable public opinion, and lose all grip on any idea of unchanging truth. It is a paradox

that, in a world of great diversity and disagreement, the notion of a truth that lies beyond us all gives dialogue and rational discussion between competing views their point. Relativism encourages us to be locked up in our own little ghettos of thought, content with them, and associating only with people with whom we agree. The idea of objective truth, so far from giving a licence to coerce others, itself gives a motive for trying to understand what they believe about a truth that ultimately lies above and beyond all of us.



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LESSLIE NEWBIGIN: A SECULARIST AND POSTMODERNIST CHRISTIAN LEADER?

A CRITICAL READING OF THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

In his seminal work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), Lesslie Newbigin provides a powerful critique of the perceived dichotomy between science as public fact and faith as personal value. He rejects the status quo in which faith is relegated to the realm of private choice. In this work, Newbigin calls for a society in which the truth of the gospel is acknowledged and practiced as a matter of public concern. However, what remains to be explained is Newbigin's vision of what such a society would (or should) look like and how in practice the truth of the gospel can reign in public life.

Newbigin does not promote the coercive implementation of faith. Neither does he call for a cultural revolution instigated by religious leaders from above or believe in the establishment of a Christian political party. As he rightly points out, we have often seen how calls for justice, peace, liberation, and equality on the part of the oppressed have led to the coming to power of forces, previously oppressed, that continue to use the same tools of power for oppression. Thus he warns against the danger of religious coercion:

When coercion of any kind is used in the interests of the Christian message, the message itself is corrupted. ... We must affirm the gospel as truth, universal truth for all peoples and for all times, the truth which creates the possibility of freedom; but we negate the gospel if we deny the freedom in which alone it can be believed.¹

The question is, if coercion of the individuals is not the solution, how else is it possible to promote and exercise the universal message of faith in the society? How is "the truth of the gospel" going to govern public life if there is no political agenda to that effect on the part of Christians who would like to see their faith reclaim its status as a matter of public concern?

In order to answer this question we need to clarify our conception of the public. A void and empty conception of the public that is vacant of individuals will remain only a conception. We cannot find an answer to the question of how the truth of the gospel can govern public life unless we first ask, how the truth of the gospel can govern our individual lives.

For individuals to have agency, they must embody both words and deeds. According to Newbigin, "If we turn to the gospels we are bound to note the *binding nexus between deeds and words*."² In other words,

"word and deed, preaching and action" are two sides of the same coin and to set them "against each other is absurd".³ Both the words and acts of the community that indwell the story of their Scripture "may at any time provide the occasion through which the living Christ challenges the ruling powers".⁴

Sometimes it is a word that pierces through layers of custom and opens up a new vision. Sometimes it is a deed which shakes a whole traditional plausibility structure. They mutually reinforce and interpret one another. The words explain the deeds and the deeds validate the words. Not that every deed must have a word attached to explain it, but that the total life of the community whose members have different gifts and are involved in the secular life of the society in which they share, will provide these occasions of challenge. ... The ways by which the truth of the gospel comes home to the heart and conscious of this or that person are always mysterious. They cannot be programs and they cannot be calculated. But where a community is living in alert faithfulness, they happen.⁵

This view is in line with the example of Jesus Christ. He did not provide yet another political system of governance. He lived by example and paid a costly price for it. In Newbigin's terms, "Jesus' action in challenging the powers that ruled the world was not marginal to his ministry; it was central to it ... But Jesus' challenge was not in the name of an alternative way of exercising power: He did not offer an alternative government."⁶

This brings us to the issue of secularism and the state. Even if individual Christians succeed in following the example of Jesus in their private and public lives, what is to be done about the state and indeed the international arena which both have an impact on the life of the individual and the society? Newbigin's work may not include any direct

answers to this question, but there are keys in his work that could be the solution. One of these keys is secularism.

Secularism so far as it means the separation between religion (or Church) and the state is at best a fuzzy idea. One might argue that Jesus Christ was himself a secularist so far as he did not believe in establishing universal and unchangeable rules for governance of social and political life.⁷ His mission was not to establish a "Christian state".

Here lies one of the most significant differences between prophet Mohammad's mission to establish God's will in the society and that of Jesus Christ. According to Newbigin, the Christian objective will not be achieved:

by the universal application of an unchanging pattern of personal and social behaviour as laid down in the faith and practice of Islam. It will not be in a series of abstract moral and political principles. It will be in the life of a community that remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament.⁸

Understood in this way, secularism is not necessarily the enemy of faith. From this perspective Newbigin can himself be seen as a secular Christian leader as he is clearly against the idea of Christians' direct involvement in formal politics of the state.

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the "high ground" which they vacated in the noontime of "modernity", it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns ... it will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation ... from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ.⁹

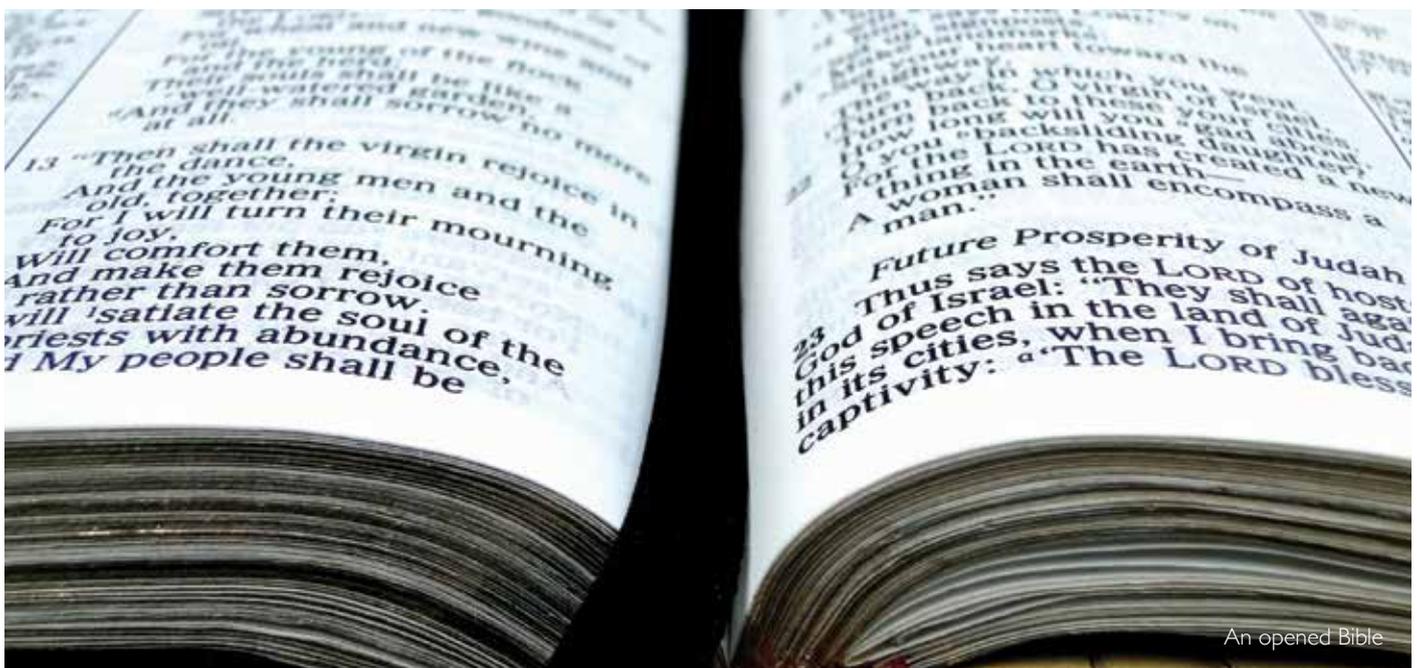
Secularism here is understood not as a denial of the public role of faith but as a rejection of faith becoming yet another political actor in competition with other parties for seizing control over the state often for economic and political purposes and not for the sake of God.

After suggesting that Newbigin is a secularist Christian leader, I would like to move the analysis forward by proposing him as a postmodernist critic of the status quo as well.

Postmodern thought has sometimes been misunderstood as a denial of the existence of absolute truth. But in reality, it often only denies human capability to access and understand absolute truth due to humanity's temporal and finite nature. Newbigin's thought appears to correspond to the postmodern conception of history. To him "the truth is, of course, that all history is interpreted history,"¹⁰ and the question, "'What is the frame within which history is interpreted?' requires an answer which can only be a matter of faith."¹¹ He further asserts that any "indubitable knowledge of the meaning and goal of history will only be available when history has reached its terminus."¹²

This in fact is a politically significant statement. Such a belief stands in sharp contrast to the predictive theories of policy-oriented philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington which have shaped the reality of much of the international affairs in the shape of their own self-fulfilling prophecies and in the interest of the dominant political and military powers that they serve, rather than in the interest of humanity as a whole.¹³

We find other postmodernist tendencies in Newbigin's thought, for example in the following passage:



An opened Bible

Although event and interpretation are thus indissolubly linked, this does not mean that there is only one interpretation. Evidently not ... It is therefore of great positive significance that Jesus did not write a book to record in unchangeable form the revelation which he brought. It is not an unfortunate accident, but of the very heart of the gospel, that we do not know exactly what Jesus said and did. It is of the essence of the matter that he did not provide us with such a record, but communicated the secret to a community which was then sent out into the world to carry the secret into the life of the world, always reappropriating and reinterpreting it in the light of new circumstances.¹⁴

Thus it could be argued that contemporary postmodernist thinkers and writers (for example within feminist theory and postcolonial theory) can act as reliable allies to faith leaders in the international arena because they too challenge the one-dimensional and positivist approaches to human life and governance.

THE WAY FORWARD?

If Christianity cannot be based on any policy-oriented political programme, and if exclusive religious governance has not been much of a success elsewhere in the world, and if individual believers have failed to act even remotely as their founding faith leaders did, what other avenue is left to explore? Newbigin's answer to this question lies in the idea of discipleship of Jesus; however the problem is that for him it is not clear what discipleship today involves:

It cannot mean that one accepts the lordship of Christ as governing personal and domestic life, and the life of the Church, while another sovereignty is acknowledged for the public life of society. It cannot mean that the Church is seen as a voluntary society of individuals who have decided to follow Jesus in their personal lives, a society which does not challenge the assumptions which govern the worlds of politics, economics, education, and culture. The model for all Christian discipleship is given once and for all in the ministry of Jesus. His ministry

entailed the calling of individual men and women to personal and costly discipleship, but at the same time it challenged the principalities and powers, the ruler of this world, and the cross was the price paid for that challenge... discipleship today ... I do not think that any of us yet knows what this will involve.¹⁵

Despite this lack of clarity with regards to Newbigin's vision of a public that is governed by the truth of the gospel, and despite his inability to explain what discipleship will involve in our contemporary context, the following guidelines can still be derived from his work.

The community of faith should reinterpret the very idea of secularism and postmodernism and explore opportunities for acting as secular believers in the public realm of education, economics, and most importantly politics. This would involve the training of future political leaders (not just faith leaders) and educators based on the truth of Scripture but without imposing dogma from above, so that they are armed with the tools that are needed to exert influence in the so-called secular institutions of society and state. If there are enough such people in our governments, without needing a Christian or an otherwise religious party to frame their activities, we might be able to change the state and the society from within and from below, and by extension change international relations as well.



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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK Publishing, 1994, p. 10.
- 2 Ibid, p. 131. (emphasis added)
- 3 Ibid, p. 137.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The use of the term "secularist" here should not be confused with what Rowan Williams has aptly defined as "programmatically secularism" which "assumes that any religious or ideological system demanding a hearing in the public sphere is aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere." The more appropriate form of secularism for Williams and Newbigin is "procedural secularism" which provides "a situation in which ... religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as

beyond criticism, but one in which they are attended to as representing the considered moral foundation of the choices and priorities of citizens." Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, Bloomsbury, London, 2012, pp. 26-27.

- 8 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 147.
- 9 Ibid. p. 233.
- 10 Ibid. p. 93.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992, Harmondsworth: Penguin; and Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- 14 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 94-95. This view in fact comes close to the Shia understating of interpretation of sacred scripture under the rubric of perpetual *ijtihad* or the interpretation and re-interpretation of Scripture in the light of new circumstances.
- 15 Ibid. p. 220.

UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNS OF ALLAH

Throughout the late 1980s, until his death, I corresponded with the late Lesslie Newbiggin and he was kind enough to favourably review my book, *The Light in the Enlightenment: Christianity and the Secular Heritage* (London: Grey Seal, 1990). Would the Bishop have approved of my Islamic reservations about the secular pursuit of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, divorced from religious humility? He himself was certainly critical of western secular hubris in aggressively secular modern western cultures.

For me, the Muslim believer who is a true philosopher drops by at the mosque after leaving the laboratory and the academy. Newbiggin would surely have approved of this schedule of priorities! The Bishop was a man of outstanding Christian humility.

To trace the genesis of the secular revolt against the strictures of Christian faith in the larger pursuit of knowledge, we do well to attend to the thought of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), that most iconoclastic

of empiricist natural philosophers. His regrettably influential project endorsed torturing nature to extract her secrets, an attitude that has eventually led to the emergence of an empirical science and an allied technology totally divorced from ethical constraint. Bacon's rather cruel and exploitative view of science contrasts with the Quran's resources which yield a lenient and optimistic theory of knowledge in which one respects moral limits imposed from a superior extra-scientific, indeed transcendent source. The Quran's notion of the signs of Allah, external



nature's concealed purposes, makes it susceptible to the inquiries of empirical science.

The Quran's mystical, rather evasive, notion of God's signs encourages a rational perspective on nature. Muslims are confident that any intelligent inquiry into nature's mysteries will strengthen faith. Believers are ordered to read from (and into) nature the spiritual meanings inherent in creation. That is the rational project of understanding the world "in the name of God". It opposes any scientific literalism that reduces nature to an object. The signs of God are sacramental: they demystify the natural order without permitting a sceptical perspective that rejects as illusory, as merely human projection, any such religious claims about purpose inhering in nature. Traditional Muslim scientists kept the cosmos a cosmos. It never became a mere universe, a closed system of natural causality.

Islam rejects the disengaged agency of the observer; the critic, and the analyst, the lasting legacy of Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) project of "dislocated" and disembodied inquiry. This aggressively secular project conceals a scientific literalism which corresponds to the rather intolerant orthodox position of scriptural literalism. There is no purpose beneath or behind nature; scripture conceals nothing deeper and hence needs no interpretation. The decreasing focus on the purpose and transcendence of nature led inexorably to agnosticism, deism and finally an atheism which pontificated that the emergence of the autonomous capacity to feel required no supernatural explanation. The atheist's instrumentalist and pragmatic view of nature contradicts the spiritual view which motivates us to celebrate nature and endorse ecological and aesthetic rather than economic, technological and exploitative objectives.

The natural order is the visible token of an invisible grace which suffuses nature with a sacramental quality. The earth's beauty and bounty disguise God's presence. Residing in nature and society, this presence is mediated through the "signs of God" which attest to his sovereignty. We must interpret human phenomena consistently and continuously with the rest of nature. Penitent servants ponder these divine portents in the four loci of God's presence and activity: external nature, human nature, history, and contemporary community. In this square, believers detect hints of God's gracious association with humanity – but the divine reality is fully accessible only to faith rooted in obedience and surrender. Such faith and the purity that characterizes its possessors are gifts of grace by-passing human initiative but not subsequent human cooperation and contribution. The Quran sees itself as rationally comprehensible to all its readers.

The signs of God rationally attest to God's sovereignty. Application of reason leads to faith, the basis of the design argument (see Q:50:6-11; 89:17-21). Natural events supply evidence of divine craftsmanship, not of undirected biological evolution. God is continuously evident in routine but dynamic processes in nature and society. He is not only merely a dramatically interventionist or capricious deity. Natural order implies the existence of the merciful one (Al-Rahman), not merely of

an abstract Deity (see e.g. Q:43:45; 67:3-4). One Quranic surah opens with this moral attribute of the creator (Q:55:1). Only philosophers have, wrongly, "de-moralized" God to a first efficient cause in a physical system and then sought to prove the existence of such an anaemic and irrelevant being.

Nature is placed under a single unified sovereignty and thus rescued from the capricious rivalries of the many gods of paganism, a total situation that made human beings victims of their unpredictable superstitions. The idea of a coherent and rational government of the world enabled the rise of experimental science among Muslims. It motivated the right kind of curiosity about nature and its workings. Muslims rightly attribute this attitude to the Quran, the book that motivated the movement which initiated and enabled the transmission of western classical learning back to the west. Polytheistic and Taoist societies, such as classical though not modern India and China lacked the outlook that enables empirical science. A pantheistic Taoist metaphysics is, for example, compatible with the curiosity that inspires empirical research but it need not stimulate or initiate such a quest. The Quran encouraged a healthy curiosity which encouraged inquiry into nature's mysteries. Analogously, biblical Christianity, in its European environment, did likewise, a fact not lost on Newbigin, a missionary who lived in the south of India for almost 40 years.

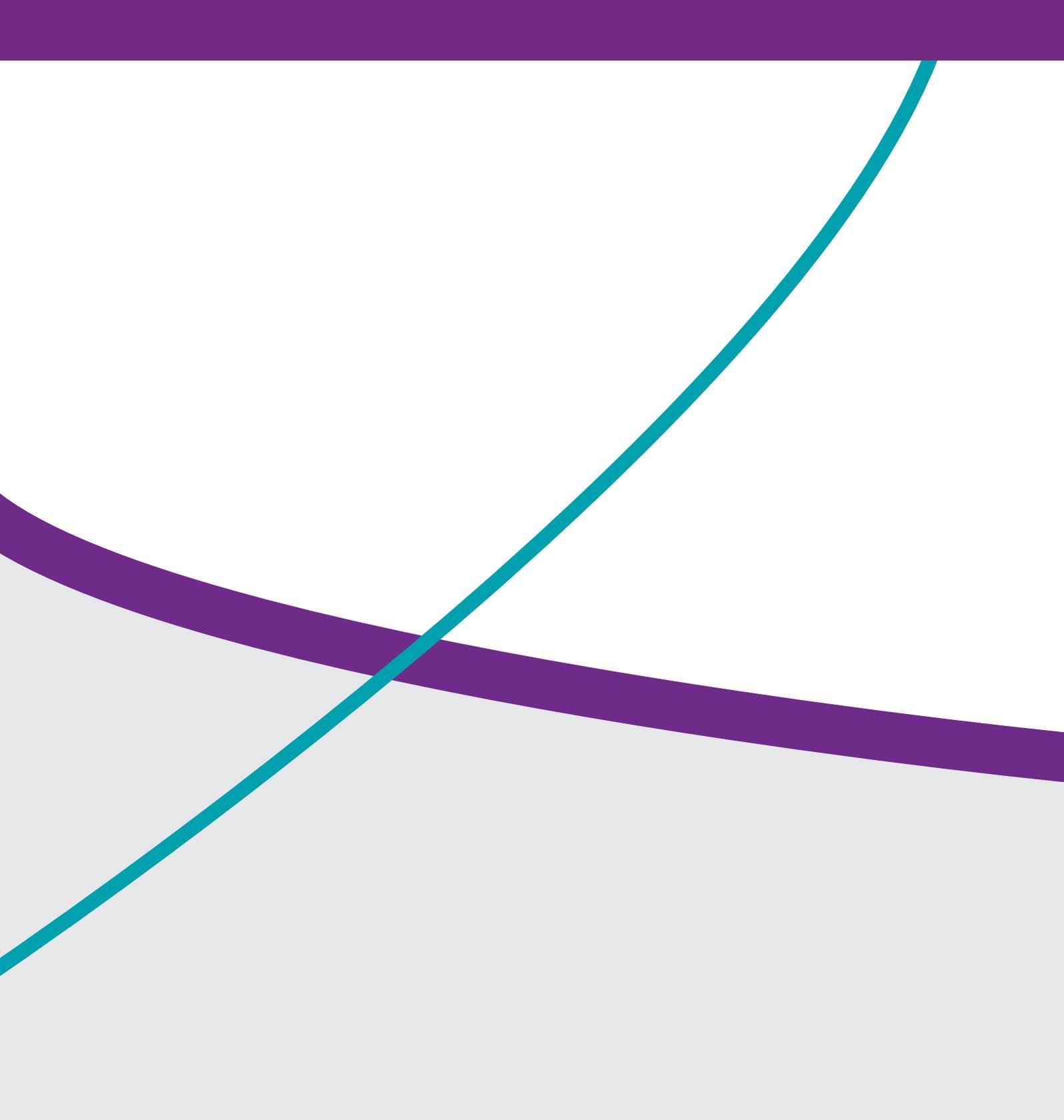
While Islam rejects any pantheistic metaphysics which might affirm the operation of occult forces concealed within nature, it does not go to the opposite extreme of seeing nature as only a machine whose workings yield scientific knowledge and a reliable technology that betokens our control of nature's mysterious powers. Rather, the Quran reveals and affirms that nature is a forum which conceals a benevolent subject (namely, God) rather than only inanimate objects and some animate creatures like us who evolved autonomously into indefinite animate complexity from inanimate origins. This outlook enabled Muslims to develop an empirical science that remained ethically restrained. Just as Islam rejects the pursuit of art for art's sake as immoral, it rejects the utilitarian notion of an autonomous science and auxiliary technology which is not accountable to any higher spiritual or ethical restraints. We are only custodians and responsible stewards of nature: "colonialists" lording it over nature but only on condition that we are servants of God. Any and all hubris would be anathema to Newbigin's Christian humility.



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