

Christian Faith In A Pluralist Society

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Lesslie Newbigin, George Hunsberger, plurality and pluralism, mission, objectivity and objectivism, public truth, biblical election, Christian theology.

Lesslie Newbigin and his interpreter, George Hunsberger, see Polanyi's epistemology giving a basis for the objectivity of the Christian message in a pluralistic world. But Polanyi's view of science and of theology is differentiated leaving open the choice of religious faith.

George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing The Witness of the Spirit, Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998. ISBN: 0802843697

Introduction: The Gospel and Public Truth

In 1989, Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* made extensive use of Polanyi's critique of objectivism.¹ Building on Polanyi's epistemology and critique of the modern scientific outlook's impersonal view of knowledge, Newbigin argues for Christian mission in a pluralistic world. In his preface, Newbigin says: "Throughout the work and especially in the first five chapters, I have relied heavily on the work of Michael Polanyi, especially his *Personal Knowledge*."²

Newbigin's use of Polanyi has worldwide influence among Christians because of his international leadership and ministry for sixty-three years. His stature and significance rests in large measure on two facts. First, he was a prominent and a practical theologian of the church's mission on a global scale. Throughout his career, he wrote and lectured internationally in church conferences and in academic theological centers.³ Second, he was a world ecumenical leader for Christian unity in missions and in the World Council of Churches. In India, he was one of the first bishops of the Church of South India and familiar with the problem of addressing the gospel to renewed and vibrant non-Christian faiths. In the World Council of Churches, Newbigin was a leader for unity among Christian missions in a pluralistic age and helped to integrate the International Missionary Council into the World Council organization.⁴

When Newbigin retired and returned to England, he discovered that Great Britain and Western Christianity were a mission field, too. The challenge in his homeland was not to revive a weakened Christianity but a mission to convert even its leaders. In his 1993 autobiography, Newbigin spoke of this challenge of ministry in England compared to India. He said that it "...is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition.... England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church."⁵ Seeing this challenge, Newbigin continued to write and to teach, and he found a responsive audience. He became in 1984 the motivating founder of the Gospel and Our Culture movement that now reaches around the world including the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America.⁶ This growing organization and network is focused on the basic assumptions underlying our contemporary Western worldview and how to address the Christian message to this Western culture now gripped by a relativism rooted in pluralism.

Addressing these deep-underlying assumptions of our culture is the point where Newbigin found helpful the thought of Michael Polanyi. As Newbigin experienced Christian understanding in Western culture, he saw its diminished outlook. Christian faith was intimidated and confined by a secular and a pluralistic society. It had lost its nerve and authority in a society controlled by an ideology of pluralism. This pluralism had led Christians as well as others to regard all faiths as private and subjective concerns. One of the principal reasons for this retreat to privacy was the pluralist belief that only ideas and truths established by scientific standards should be accepted as true. All religious beliefs are finally just private preferences and therefore without universal validity.

Against the pluralist ideology, Newbigin aimed to show that its assumptions are falsely grounded in a mistaken view of scientific objectivity, particularly as shown in the work of Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. From this critique of the relativism of ideological pluralism, Newbigin went on to argue that Christian faith ought to be proclaimed and regarded as “public truth.”⁷ Newbigin’s challenge is emphatic:

In this cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith sounds like an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others. As long as the Church is content to offer its beliefs modestly as simply one of the many brands available in the ideological supermarket, no offense is taken. But the affirmation that the truth revealed in the gospel ought to govern public life is offensive.⁸

Newbigin finds in Polanyi’s redefining objectivity the basis of Christian faith, “the total fact of Christ,” a claim to objectivity in the public square. In short, Christian faith is the announcement of “a new fact - namely that in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has acted decisively to reveal and effect his purpose of redemption for the whole world.”⁹

A Christian Theology About Cultural Plurality

George Hunsberger, in his recent book *Bearing The Witness of the Spirit, Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural Plurality*, embraces Newbigin’s approach and covers studiously the totality of Newbigin’s teaching and writing. Hunsberger says that Newbigin “...modeled for a coming generation what we must follow as a major agenda for a very long time into the future.”¹⁰ Besides Newbigin’s arguments for the public mission of the Christian gospel, Hunsberger elucidates the meaning of Newbigin’s conception of a theology of plurality. Hunsberger sees Newbigin contrasting with Paul Tillich’s theology of culture, which sought to find the theology or religious dimension in various cultural expressions. In this way, Tillich made manifest underlying ultimate concerns of many different cultural movements and institutions and tried to correlate them with his understanding of the Christian faith. What Newbigin is doing, however, is developing a theology about cultural plurality and how a Christian missionary church should address the universality of the gospel to plurality.¹¹ Newbigin’s work is a theological response to the plurality of cultures. Newbigin accepts plurality as true and normal in our world condition. What he does not accept is the ideology of pluralism that reduces Christian faith to a private and relativistic matter.

In considering Newbigin’s goal of a theological response to the plurality of cultures, some of his basic guidelines must be noticed. One is about the imperialist danger of any religion claiming to be based

on objective truth. Newbigin's view is that there are two parts to this problem. One is that Christian faith rests on historical events that Christians believe to reveal saving truths for all human kind, and they have a calling to share that knowledge. Second is that Christians, according to scripture, do not know the fate of non-Christians or anyone. The Christian role is to be a part of a missionary church sharing, not imposing, the gospel.¹² Newbigin is agnostic about the salvation of those outside the Christian faith, but he is committed to belief in the saving deeds of God in Christ and the mission to tell this story to the entire world.

Central to Newbigin and to Hunsberger's thorough exposition of Newbigin's thought is the biblical doctrine of election. The grand biblical story of creation, fall, election of a covenant people and then a savior to redeem humankind is one of the principal facts to be shared in the Christian mission to the plurality of cultures.¹³ The gospel is based upon response in faith to historical events focused upon the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. These events are authoritative for Christians, make truth claims, and invite belief or unbelief.

The biblical doctrine of election is not only central to Newbigin's thought, it is also one of the reasons why Michael Polanyi appealed to Newbigin.¹⁴ Newbigin points out that the doctrine of election in the biblical story teaches that God is personal and comes to us through persons. God's gift of salvation works by one being chosen to be the means of God's saving grace to others. Underlying this notion is the interpersonal and relational nature of human beings. General philosophical truths or mystical understandings are less social in nature. They tend to be individualistic. Election works by personal communication from one person to another. God works through a chosen one so that we come to salvation by relationship to our neighbor. Personal encounter breaks open the egotism of the self and opens the self to the corporate and cosmic nature of redemption. God chooses specific persons and events for communicating with humans. God is known not as a set of propositions but as personal encounter with the Christian community's faith and action. This community is rooted in the good news of God's saving acts in history and in Jesus Christ.

In the relation of pluralism and the biblical doctrine of election, Newbigin makes an important distinction. Plurality and pluralism are not the same thing. The plurality of cultures is not new, but the ideology of pluralism is a recent view that does not examine its own assumption of knowing the truth about all views. Pluralism presumes that all truths and all valid religions, if there are any, must be based on the standards of physical scientific research. With this assumption comes a requirement that all truths be like universal laws in physics and chemistry. In this regard, Newbigin found in his experience in India that trying to make his faith fit the reasonableness of timeless truths available to all people in all times led to a domestication of Jesus into the Hindu worldview. For pluralism, Hinduism would be the model religion for all, since it includes all faiths.¹⁵ Pluralism rules out *a priori* the possibility of a particular religion having a universal truth. What such pluralism, as opposed to plurality, denies is the Christian biblical view that we are in a drama of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. In this drama, truth is revealed as unfolding in history, which challenges the person to choose between the gospel and other faiths. Thus, Newbigin accepts the particularity of the Christian revelation as the way a personal God chooses to redeem humankind in a pluralistic world.

In his book, Newbigin employs Polanyi's analysis of the problem of objectivism and the general skepticism of our culture. Agreeing with Polanyi, Newbigin sees the need for a new epistemological outlook that will allow people to have a new "plausibility structure" through which they can hear and receive the gospel.¹⁶ When this new understanding occurs, conversion also can happen. Conversion for Newbigin includes what we today call a paradigm shift or finding a new plausibility structure.¹⁷

Against the notion of objective truth as like scientific detachment, Newbigin uses Polanyi's Augustinian understanding of the relation of tradition, authority, and faith.¹⁸ All notions of ultimate truth are dependent upon unproven assumptions that the knower seeks to understand. Science begins from the assumption that the universe is rational and accessible to understanding. It seeks against difficult odds to show that this belief is true. The pursuit of science is guided by the community of science that holds this belief and guides its explorers, but it is the personal grasp of the truth by the inquirer who shows the tradition new dimensions of its basic beliefs. In this way, the authority of the tradition continues as the faith of the individual scientist discovers and renews the general authority of what is held to be true. In this way, followers of the scientific model ought to see how faith is vital to knowledge and how it works through a community and a tradition both reforming and sustaining itself.

Besides the recovering of knowledge as based on faith and criticizing scientific objectivism, Newbigin is also close to Polanyi in including the importance of the social dimensions of knowledge that shape our subsidiary awareness. Hunsberger sees this side of Newbigin in a triangular model: the gospel at the apex, and culture and church at the base corners, forming three relationships of gospel-culture, gospel-church, and church-culture.¹⁹ The gospel-culture encounter takes place in "the language of the receptor culture," but it is from and toward an "other" beyond them both. This dialogue is the work of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God. The second side of the triangular model is the gospel (or Bible)-church relationship. Here the Bible operates as the authority for the church but it is a challenging and renewing authority as it includes the impact of converts from plural cultures in its community. These new members open up and extend the meaning of the scriptures so that the total church is pluriform.²⁰ In the third part of the triangle, the church-culture relationship, new converts and renewing understanding of the gospel join other Christians in their dialogue within the church and the outward dialogue with all others and their cultures. In this outward dialogue, Newbigin reminds us again that all thinking begins from some faith-decision and that all positions depend upon some ultimate axioms that cannot be proved by any other set of axioms that are more ultimate. So a Christian speaks to non-Christians out of a conversion or paradigm shift known and practiced in a community of believers.

With his emphasis upon the personal side of God and the doctrine of election, it is also important for Newbigin that it be seen how the gospel is a basis for political action and involvement.²¹ Newbigin particularly objects to the dualism of private and of public and the separation of the individual from society. The personal encounter of the gospel is through a specific event of Christ but it is about the meaning of the whole of history. The liberation personally experienced is also meant for all humanity. Separating the public and the personal leads to dehumanizing the individual and to isolation. Sole emphasis upon the public leads to individuals being subordinated to the state. Sole emphasis upon the individual leads to non-involvement in the life of humanity. The biblical story of redemption centered in Christ is one of both personal encounter and community involvement.

Scientific Objectivity and Objectivity in Christian Theology

Newbigin's and Hunsberger's approach to pluralism and to plurality leads to discussion of their interpretation of Polanyi's implications for this topic. Certainly Polanyi would find much agreement with the criticisms of the way scientific objectivism has weakened the voice and the authority of Christian faith and of other religious faiths. Polanyi's theory of knowledge would also agree that Christian faith and theology have

a contact with reality and are not purely subjective. Newbigin would seem to be correct in saying that Christians following Polanyi's theory of knowledge ought to dare to assert the truth claims of their faith. Polanyi, however, did not equate science and theology in the way they bear upon experience. While Polanyi in response to Tillich's separate dimensions for science and for theology argued for common ground in their use of tacit knowing,²² Polanyi saw also a different function for theology and religion. Polanyi's vision of the relationship was a contrast between verification and validation, between frameworks of indwelling, and between horizons of reality. The facts of experience in science are more specific which makes them more suitable to verification. The experiences of mathematics, art and religion are more general and suitable to validation.²³

In *Personal Knowledge*, in the 1969 University of Texas and University of Chicago lectures on "Meaning: A Project," and in *Meaning*, Polanyi sees science and religion as sharing the common ground of tacit knowing but also functioning in different ways in their epistemic claims. Science, art, myth and religion all share in the use of tacit integrations to form meaningful subjects. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi says that Michaelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel tells us more about ourselves than science's view of the origin of the universe as a chance collocation of atoms. In "Meaning: A Project," Polanyi says: "What science says about its own subject is, for the most part true and interesting. But it does not give us an image of the world in which our position as responsible creative beings can be understood."²⁴ In *Meaning*,²⁵ Polanyi and Prosch continue to differentiate science from religion in the way it takes us to a sacred level of experience that is beyond the verifiable facts of science. They say:

It is therefore only through participation in acts of worship - through dwelling in these - that we see God. God is thus not a being whose existence can be established in some logical, scientific, or rational way before we engage in our worship of him. God is a commitment involved in our rites and myths. Through our integrative, imaginative efforts we see him as the focal point that fuses into meaning all the incompatibles involved in the practice of religion. But, as in art - only in a more whole and complete way - God also becomes the integration of all the incompatibles in our lives.²⁶

Throughout, Polanyi sees both science and religion as bearing on reality, involving our personal commitment, but art, myth, and religion have a more comprehensive integration of experience and of meanings. This difference has to correct theology as Newbigin is doing it.

Polanyi would object to "the fact" of Christ if it were equated with the kind of facts that science uses for verification. Polanyi would not object to the claims of Christian faith as resting on facts of history, but he would not think that the meaning of those facts should be compared to the level of the facts of science. To choose the level of factuality used in scientific work as the norm for the truth of religion would be to fall prey to the very scientific reductionism that Polanyi is trying to overcome. Both science and religion are integrations of incompatibles, but the meaning offered by religion through using the "facts" of its history and of its continuing experience leads to truths beyond science's domain.

The strength of Newbigin is that he calls attention to the central biblical story that forms the core of Christian faith and dares to point out that it cannot be understood if one does not challenge the ideology of pluralism that has denied truth claims about the meaning of life. Newbigin is also strong in showing that one can be committed to the foundations of Christian faith and also be open and progressive. The weakness of Newbigin's

discussion in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and Hunsberger's discussion of Newbigin is that, despite Newbigin's major encounter with both the non-Western Christian communities and with non-Christian religions, there does not seem to be a revisioning or renewal of Christian theology. The book itself does not embody the dialogue and vitality of the triadic formulation of gospel, church, and cultures that Hunsberger formalizes, as indicated above. One could wish that Newbigin, or Hunsberger as his exponent, had tried to advance the encounter of plurality as Charles McCoy did in *When gods Change, Hope for Theology*.²⁷ Thoroughly aware of Polanyi's critique of scientific objectivism and its influence, McCoy sought to show that plurality or "pluralism," as he calls it, is an opportunity for theology to reflect and to grow in understanding. Besides upholding the validity of the gospel in a pluralist context, there is much need for discussing how Christians relate to the Spirit's leading in the global search for peace and justice.

Newbigin's and Hunsberger present at least two major considerations that will not disappear. First is the importance of recovery of confidence in the authority of the Christian message as a truth-bearing message in a pluralistic world. Second is a calling to engage the plurality in a way of mutual interaction between the preacher and the hearer. But with the Spirit's calling of humankind to deal pluralistically with the global problems of ecological devastation, poverty, health, justice, and peace, it is important for Christian mission to have not only integrity and confidence in the gospel, but also openness to the acts of God through those outside its community.

Endnotes

¹ William B. Eerdmans, 1989, 244 pages.

² P. X

³ George R. Hunsberger in his book, *Bearing The Witness of the Spirit, Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998, 341 pages, lists over 200 publications from 1933-95, including *That All May Be One, The Household of God, Honest Religion For Secular Man, Foolishness To The Greeks, The Open Secret, and The Other Side of 1984*.

⁴ Hunsberger, pp. 22-25.

⁵ Tim Safford, "God's Missionary To Us," <http://www.deepsight.org/articles/stafford.htm>.

⁶ See the website: <http://www.deepsight.org/goscul>.

⁷ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Hunsberger, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹² *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 84-88, Hunsberger, pp. 166-67, 225-34.

¹³ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 6, 116, *ET passim*, and Hunsberger, p. 44.

¹⁴ Hunsberger, p. 56.

¹⁵ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 8, 53.

¹⁷ Hunsberger, p. 158

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²¹ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Chpts. 16,18, and 19; Hunsberger, pp. 123-138.

²² Michael Polanyi, "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?" *Philosophy*

Today, 7, Spring, 1963, pp. 4-14.

²³ *Personal Knowledge*, p. 202.

²⁴ Unpublished lecture circulated as part of "Meaning: A Project," "Acceptance of Religion," Soc Th 443, Supplement 4, p. 11.

²⁵ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁷ Nashville: Abingdon, 1980.

Polanyi Society Membership

Tradition and Discovery is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supersedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members across the world though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally three issues of *TAD* each year.

Membership dues for the Polanyi Society are regularly paid in the fall at the beginning of the academic year. The first issue of a new *TAD* volume normally includes the dues payment notice. Because the Polanyi Society is sponsoring a major conference in June of 2001 (see p. 3), you are invited to combine your dues payment with a contribution. In order to encourage you to “think generously,” the chart on the facing page sets forth some “rungs” on the contribution ladder. We hope you will reach as high as it is possible for you conveniently to stretch. Unlike the Public Broadcasting System and National Public Radio drives in the US, we do not have Polanyi Society coffee mugs, book bags and other memorabilia to distribute to those who are generous. But for those who do stretch (at least the first 50) to the Benefactor or Patron level, we can provide a copy of Andy Sanders’ very good 1988 (Rodopi) book, *Michael Polanyi’s Post-Critical Epistemology: A Reconstruction of Some Aspects of “Tacit Knowing”* (currently being sold by Amazon.com for \$47).

The Polanyi Society is presently applying for tax deductible status in the US. If that application is approved and we are allowed to provide a charitable donation letter, we will do so later in the year. Dues and donations can be sent by post, fax or e-mail. Credit cards donations are welcome.

Polanyi Society Membership Renewal/Fund Drive

Dues may be paid by check or credit card using regular mail, e-mail or fax. Be sure that you provide the full credit card information listed below. Make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Regular mail should be addressed to Phil Mullins, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507, USA. A fax with credit card information can be sent to 816-271-5680; attention: Phil Mullins. E-mail can also be used to provide credit card information (mullins@mwsc.edu). Please duplicate or tear off and use the form below or provide all of the required information if you are using e-mail.

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