

# Faith and Pluralism: A Response to Richard Gelwick

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**[Editor's Note:** This article is an invited response to Richard Gelwick's review essay "Christian Faith In A Pluralist Society" which treats both George Hunsberger's *Bearing The Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Pluralism* and Lesslie Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Gelwick's essay was included in TAD 27:2 (2000-2001): 39-45.]

**ABSTRACT Key Words:** Richard Gelwick, Lesslie Newbigin, Michael Polanyi, epistemology, plurality and pluralism, objectivity and objectivism, public truth, Christian theology, gospel, knowing and believing *Richard Gelwick has made an important contribution by exploring Lesslie Newbigin's appropriation of Michael Polanyi's epistemology. When certain aspects of Newbigin's epistemological project are understood more clearly and fully, many of Gelwick's criticisms and concerns are answered. His brief challenges regarding Newbigin's theological responses to pluralism, seen against the work of Charles McCoy, signal another important area for consideration. This initial work holds great promise for future dialogue between Polanyi scholars and emerging circles of Newbigin scholarship.*

By exploring the thought of Lesslie Newbigin in light of the self-conscious way he drew upon the insights of Michael Polanyi, Richard Gelwick has done an important service. Any serious reader of Newbigin's work of the last twenty years will know how deeply indebted he was to Polanyi's epistemology and how explicitly and extensively he made use of Polanyi's framework. It served to play out, for Christians of the West, a way to recover a "proper confidence" over against the numbing effects of a culture that had relegated Christian (or any other religious) faith to the realm of private opinion. As one observer, I have found myself calling Newbigin's contribution on this front a "postmodern apologetic"<sup>1</sup> (although more recently I am more tempted to call it a "missional epistemology" or even an "eschatological epistemology"!) and Newbigin himself an "apostle of faith."<sup>2</sup>

For Gelwick to take up this initial foray into Newbigin's work from the point of view of Polanyi scholarship opens up a fertile area of investigation—fertile, I believe, for the Polanyi Society, for the widening circle of Newbigin scholarship, and for what could be a fascinating point of dialogue between them. I hope such a dialogue occurs, and in that hope I offer these responses to Gelwick's article which appeared in the last issue of this periodical.<sup>3</sup>

This initial reconnaissance by Gelwick focuses upon one of Newbigin's books, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, in which Newbigin acknowledges that he has relied heavily on Polanyi, "especially in the first five chapters."<sup>4</sup> Gelwick has set this in the broader context of Newbigin's thought by exploring also my own book *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*.<sup>5</sup> The choices have their advantages and their disadvantages. While Newbigin's book elaborates extensively his Polanyian apologetic and is highly representative of the use he makes of it elsewhere, there are other places where he has extended the argument that would give a much more complete picture. Among those are his earliest uses of Polanyi in *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966; pp. 188ff.) and *Christ Our Eternal*

*Contemporary* (1968; pp. 8-23), and important books written in the 1990s that represent his most matured epistemological work: *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991; especially pp. 15-64); *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (1995; especially pp. 39-64); and *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (1996).<sup>6</sup>

Another caveat centers on the choice of my book for the exploration. It has the advantage of bringing into view a wider range of Newbigin's work. And it traces themes that are the wider frame of reference for the way Newbigin deals with pluralism in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. The drawback may be that other elements of his thought may not be as thoroughly represented. More particularly, it must be recognized that it was not the intent of the book to play out Newbigin's epistemology in any comprehensive way. All it can promise is that it may serve to build bridges to that epistemology from his "theology of cultural plurality."<sup>7</sup>

In his summary of Newbigin's perspective as it comes to light in these sources, Gelwick has captured many of its essential lines. He has located Newbigin in the contexts of India and the West, and in the ecclesial worlds of the Church of South India and the World Council of Churches. He has shown his critique of both objectivism and relativism. He has noted the importance of Newbigin's theological responses to cultural plurality and the central role of the biblical doctrine of election in those responses. He has pointed out the distinction in Newbigin's thinking between *plurality* and *pluralism*. (It can further be noted that the difference shows up in the titles of the two books in view. *Plurality* is a quality of the world's life to be theologically valued as inherent in the gospel. *Pluralist* describes the reigning ideology of contemporary Western culture which the gospel encounters.) Further, Gelwick has noted the triangular relationship of gospel, culture, and church, in terms of which Newbigin worked.

In all these depictions, there is much that Gelwick gets right. But, if I may be allowed to quibble a bit, there are a number of points at which his treatment does not seem to have it quite right. At times, the right terms and notions are gathered together, but the relationships between them end up somehow transposed so that it does not sound quite like Newbigin. Perhaps this was due to too quick a pass in a less familiar field of discourse, or a sense of Newbigin's epistemological project too quickly formed. Perhaps it was due to the limitation of materials (although Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi is more nuanced in the early chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*—especially chapters 2, 3 and 4—than is evident here).

It may be useful to share a few examples that illustrate my concern. This is not done with any intent to justify a dismissal of Gelwick's challenges or to discredit in any way the important questions he asks. Rather, it is to invite further, careful work, believing that a well-nuanced appreciation of Newbigin best serves an exploration of the relationship of his work to Polanyi's thought. I also believe that a closer read of Newbigin, and a more complete acquaintance with his epistemological work, will not only answer some of the questions Gelwick has about Newbigin but allow for a deeper level of dialogue among theologies drawing nourishment from Polanyi.

1. "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."<sup>8</sup>

Technically, this gets it out there. But interestingly, in my book I said something of Newbigin that had the same terms but in a reversed order and flow. Newbigin, I said, is "a theologian driven by the personal experience of plurality and the challenge it brings to the universality of the gospel of a missionary Christian

church.”<sup>9</sup> There’s a nuance difference here. I believe it is more fundamentally true to Newbigin’s approach to recognize in plurality the experiential context that challenges the faith and message of the church, rather than focussing on it as a description of the audience of the church’s address. Newbigin speaks less about how other persons are to *be addressed* and more about how the church should *indwell* the gospel, and *embody* it, and *publish* it. His attention is not so much on the form of the message addressed to others as on the form of the community that believes it and addresses it to their companions. While this may sound like a slight difference, it makes a big difference in the attitude structure Newbigin is assumed to have.

Two other notes: I think Newbigin would not want to say that the “universality of the gospel” is what the church should address to its hearers. That is too sharp a way to put it. “Universality” is not the noun of which “gospel” is the modifier, but the other way around. The “gospel” is what the church must speak, free of judgment calls which belong only to God. It must speak it “with universal intent” to be sure (as opposed to a “true for me” relativism). And the gospel is a narrative that makes claims about the life of the world, universally. But he would think it odd to talk of “addressing the universality of the gospel” to our hearers. Rather, I think, he would prefer to say, “address the gospel universally.”

Further, I am not quite sure what “...to plurality” would mean in the statement. Is it “to the plurality of human cultures”? Or is “pluralism” as a cultural ideology what is meant? For Newbigin, the gospel is not to be preached to an abstraction of a culture but to persons. This way of speaking he would find odd.

2. “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.”<sup>10</sup>

This Gelwick says in recognition that in Newbigin’s thought the biblical doctrine of election holds a central place. Several terms have potential to trip us up here: “facts,” “principal facts,” “one (which one?) of the principal facts.” It is not “facts” that it is the Christian mission to share. It is the gospel, the news report of that set of events, witnessed by communities that experienced them and communities that have believed their report, which have Jesus Christ as their center.

It is true that in many places Newbigin will call this gospel, this narrative centered in Christ, “the fact of Christ,” or “the total fact of Christ” (though never, as the Indian theologian Pandipeddi Chenchiah called it, “the raw fact of Christ”!). It is important to note that he draws this language from Carnegie Simpson, one of his Cambridge mentors in the 1930s who characteristically spoke of “the fact of Christ.” Whatever Simpson may have meant, Newbigin does not use the word “fact” in this phrase to assert some set of historical events made certain by scientific verification or historical critical methodology. (And note: it is never “the facts [plural] of Christ,” always singular.) For him, “the fact of Christ” is simply shorthand for the whole complex of events leading to and from the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, seen as the center of the story of God’s self-revealing actions. This “fact of Christ” he takes to be the “clue” that is to be inhabited by the Christian community in mission and told to its neighbors.

3. “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.”<sup>11</sup>

Here I believe Gelwick simply misreads Newbigin. He draws the comment from what Newbigin says on page 3 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. But his statement misrepresents the point Newbigin is making there, and in fact overturns his meaning.

The order is wrong. Newbigin does *not* say that it was his missionary approach in India to try to “make his faith fit the reasonableness of timeless truths available to all people in all times” and that this “led to domestication of Jesus into the Hindu worldview.” Rather, it was the other way around. In the course of his weekly meetings with monks in the Hindu monastery, he noticed in the great hall a gallery of portraits of the great religious leaders, and among them the portrait of Jesus. “To me,” he says, “it was obvious that this was not a step toward the conversion of India. It was the co-option of Jesus into the Hindu worldview. Jesus had become just one figure in the endless cycle of *karma* and *samsara*, the wheel of being in which we are all caught up. He had been domesticated into the Hindu worldview.” It was that and similar experiences that eventually caused him to reflect back upon his own Western Christian faith and see in it the same kind of co-option, domestication. “I too had been more ready to seek a ‘reasonable Christianity,’ a Christianity that could be defended on the terms of my whole intellectual formation as a twentieth-century Englishman, rather than something which placed my whole intellectual formation under a new and critical light.” This was training for how he would approach his next large mission field: the West!

It is interesting to note how much of the language Gelwick uses in his comment is not present in any way in Newbigin’s account: “timeless truths,” “available to all people in all times,” “model religion for all,” “it includes all faiths.” It is hard to know what has spun this version of Newbigin’s story, but the impressions given at the end about Newbigin’s view of Hinduism do not match what he says here or anywhere else. Quite the contrary. He does not acknowledge Hinduism as a model religion for pluralism. Pluralist may claim it to be so, his point is the opposite. The Hinduism of that monastery does not give place to the faith of Christians that in the Jesus Christ of history the purposes of God have been revealed and effected. Rather, it co-opts the figure of Jesus into its own version of meaning and reality. In this sense, Hinduism does not “include all faiths” but domesticates them to its own faith. Hinduism, while on the face of it a tolerant, religiously inclusive vision, *is* after all a particular faith that claims to have a universal truth. It assumes that within its religious vision the true meaning of the other faiths is to be found. Its particular form of pluralism is as particular as any other faith, and it has to stand the test of that particularity just as any other must.

4. “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. When this new understanding occurs, conversion also can happen.”<sup>12</sup>

Here the meaning is closer to Newbigin’s, but again the movement is reversed and that tends to obscure things. The comment suggests a progression: a “new epistemological outlook” will allow people to have a “new ‘plausibility structure’” through which they can “hear and receive the gospel” based on which “conversion also can happen.” For Newbigin, the paradigm shift to a new plausibility structure is what conversion *is*, and hearing and receiving the gospel is its form. These things are not separate psychological or existential moves, nor do they follow in some succession upon one another. These are all themes in Newbigin’s thought, but the way they are crafted and related here is not representative of his way of seeing

them.

In addition, Newbigin would not, I think, want to speak of “the need for a new epistemological outlook” as a necessary precursor that would “allow” the paradigm shift that is conversion. To be sure, Newbigin is concerned to forge—Polanyi being his companion—a new epistemological outlook, but he plays that out as the way the Christians should understand what is true of their faith, not as a preparation stage in evangelism.

5. “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.”<sup>13</sup>

This is a smaller matter. But it makes it sound as though Newbigin’s notion of the “inward” or “inner” dialogue of the church refers to an inter-personal dialogue of prior Christians with newly converted Christians. He certainly expects such a dialogue, and expects it to be lively and crucial. But this misses his main point about the inner dialogue, that it is a dialogue that is *inner-personal*, both in the sense that it goes on within each person and within each Christian community. It is a dialogue between the faith Christians have come to embrace, however strongly or weakly, and the cultural perceptions, preferences, practices, and dispositions which are the givens of their cultural identity. This is a continuous, on-going dialogue from which the church should never see itself free. It is this dialogue of the gospel with “our culture” within the Christian community that is logically if not chronologically antecedent to the outward dialogue with other companions who share that same culture or some other.

## **Gelwick's Challenges**

We come now to what is most at the heart of the matter for Gelwick: (1) his challenges regarding Newbigin’s epistemology (and mine) and (2) his critique that our theological formulations lack a “revisiting or renewal of Christian theology” in the face of today’s pluralisms and pluralities. These two lines of critique correspond to two distinct strands of concern that are not entirely sorted out along the way: epistemology in the wake of modernity, and theology in the context of plurality. Running intertwined throughout Gelwick’s treatment, the twin concerns cause a certain amount of crossfire that may account for some of the difficulty in gaining handles on Newbigin’s position. It is not always clear which is Gelwick’s primary concern. Is he measuring Newbigin and my exposition of him against Polanyi’s epistemology? Or is he measuring our theological formulations against those of his own mentor Charles McCoy?

The shift in foils at the end—from Polanyi to McCoy—is the clue that Gelwick’s article is working on two fronts simultaneously. He is carrying forward two separate and distinct discourses, with two agendas, each presenting its own dialogue partner. The confusing element is that the relationship between these two sets of issues is not made clear, nor is the reason why they are both being taken up together. The connections are not immediately apparent, nor are they argued or demonstrated.

## **The First Challenge: Epistemology**

Gelwick turns toward his critique of Newbigin by affirming that he “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.”<sup>14</sup> Further,

he adds that “[t]hroughout, 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.” What is meant by “theology as Newbigin is doing it” remains unclear to me, as does exactly what correction to it is required. But presumably that is defined by what follows: “Polanyi would object to ‘the fact’ of Christ if it were equated with the kind of facts that science uses for verification.”<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Gelwick believes that Newbigin has equated science and theology in the way they bear upon experience. He believes Newbigin does not properly distinguish between science and religion, particularly in the way religion “takes us to a sacred level of experience that is beyond the verifiable facts of science.”<sup>16</sup> He sees Newbigin’s failure to lie in a false use of verification for non-scientific (historical and religious) knowing. He finds this to be a fundamental problem in Newbigin’s epistemology.

Were this failure to be true of Newbigin, I would concur. But it is not. Here is where a more adequate and complete read of Newbigin’s epistemology would help.

For one thing, there are clues in Gelwick’s language that he is taking Newbigin’s whole project in a way I believe is not true of him. Just before the critique begins, the affirmation of Newbigin’s commonality with Polanyi casts his view as encouraging Christians to “assert their truth claims.” (“Tell the witness for which they have been laid hold of by God,” Newbigin would prefer to say.) The choice of language sharpens a sense, lingering from earlier comments characterizing Newbigin’s approach, that Gelwick thinks of Newbigin as moving in an objectifying direction. In the article’s abstract, he asserts that Newbigin and I “see Polanyi’s epistemology giving a basis for the objectivity of the Christian message in a pluralistic world.”<sup>17</sup> A basis for some “objectivity of the message” is certainly not what I would say I find through Polanyi’s epistemology, and I am not sure what in Newbigin’s discourse would lead one to that conclusion in his case either. This seems to be casting Newbigin in terms not his own, construing him in directions other than the ones he takes. The same effect follows when Gelwick says that “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.”<sup>18</sup> I am not sure Newbigin can be found anywhere saying that “objectivity in the public square” is what he seeks or proposes. Proper confidence and public witness of what is believed with universal intent, yes. But “objectivity,” I think not.

What is most telling is to note the bottom line in the critique: Polanyi would object to ‘the fact’ of Christ if it were equated with the kind of facts that science uses for verification. The interesting point is that Newbigin objects to that as well, if that is what is meant! As noted above, Newbigin is not well enough understood on this point and there is a tendency to understand his phrase, “the total fact of Christ,” as an assertion of some verifiable scientific or historical certitude when it is explicitly not his intent. Perhaps this is the stumbling point that suggests to Gelwick that Newbigin’s is an objectifying project.

Newbigin is very clear about taking another direction than some assertion of “objective truths.” He steers a course to avoid what he calls “...the falling apart of the objective and the subjective poles of knowing.”

There are on the one hand those who seek to identify God’s revelation as a series of objectively true propositions, propositions which are simply to be accepted by those who wish to be Christians. And on the other hand there are those who see the essence of Christianity in an inward spiritual experience, personal to each believer, and who see the Christian doctrines as formulated during

church history as symbolic representations of these essentially inward and private experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Newbigin very clearly rejects “a conception of ‘objective truth’ that seeks it in a series of timeless propositions in the affirmation of which we are not personally involved, for which we do not have to commit our whole lives; it means that we affirm that truth is to be found only in the personal commitment to a life of discipleship with Him who is himself the truth.”<sup>20</sup> On that ground he affirms that “the only way in which we can affirm the truth and therefore the authority of the gospel is by preaching it, by telling the story, and by our corporate living of the story in the life and worship of the church.”<sup>21</sup>

A clearer sense of what Newbigin’s project *is* will help in all this. That may be discerned by first teasing out the threads of the argument in chapters 2 through 4 in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* where the features of Polanyi’s epistemology are used to show a certain kind of commensurability between scientific knowing and Christian believing. What he finds so helpful in Polanyi, at the bare bones of it, is the demonstration that science is not so objective as the cultural attitude takes it to be, and religious believing not so absolutely different from it. Science is more historically conditioned, and Christian faith more epistemologically valid, than the common take on things.

He shows this in the elements of Polanyi’s view: “...the whole work of modern science rests on faith-commitments which cannot themselves be demonstrated by the methods of science” (20); “The authority of science is essentially traditional” (43, quoting Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 66); “The authority of this tradition is maintained by the community of scientists as a whole” (46); “Like the scientist, the Christian believer has to learn to indwell the tradition” (49); “there is a close parallel between the ways in which the authority of tradition works within the scientific community and within the Christian community.” (50)

Thus Newbigin demonstrates a companionship of scientific and religious knowing and faith-companionship, not identity—by which contemporary Christians can recognize in such faith as theirs not mere subjective opinion but a faith which may be held with confidence and which can be publically attested, with humility, by action and speech.

Newbigin’s concern is to help Christians nuance and critique the general public attitude to which they themselves are also susceptible, namely, that science is objective and factual and religion cannot be more than a personally chosen opinion. He wants to show that such an easy dichotomy does not hold true. There is more commonality than is popularly supposed between the dynamics of knowing in scientific investigation and in seeking God. Differences in the way knowing comes about in each are due to other factors than simply, “science is about facts and religion is about faith.”

“The parallel, however, is by no means complete,” Newbigin goes on. “In the case of the scientific community, the tradition is one of human learning, writing, and speaking. In the case of the Christian community the tradition is that of witness to the action of God in history, action which reveals and effects the purpose of the Creator.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, Newbigin understands that while commensurate at some points, a scientific knowing of the natural world and a Christian knowing of God’s purposes are not the same. This is demonstrated by the fact that invariably, having once laid the groundwork of Polanyi’s epistemology, he then makes two kinds of moves in his argument.

The first is the move toward dealing with what is of necessity involved in “knowing” a “personal God.” This means extending beyond “personal knowledge” as a recognition that persons are subjectively involved in knowing, and reckoning with what happens whenever that which is to be known is another person. “Interpersonal knowledge,” as we might call it, is what must be engaged if in fact the God to be known in Christian faith is a personal God. The affirmation of the “personhood of God” (cf. John Oman) is for Newbigin a most fundamental presupposition and axiom, one, however, which he would assert is everywhere present in the Christian scriptures and lies at the heart of historic Christian affirmations regarding “revelation.” Persons are known by other persons as they reveal themselves. Inherent in the notion that God is personal, Newbigin says, is that God—as personal—can and does choose the time and place of actions (including speech acts) by which God’s character and purposes become known to “other” persons. This lies beneath the characteristic way that Newbigin puts his understanding of the Bible. At their most basic level, Newbigin takes the Christian scriptures to be that “body of literature which—primarily but not only in narrative form—renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God,”<sup>23</sup> a source of knowing appropriate to a personal God.

The second move Newbigin invariably makes is toward what is involved in “knowing” the meaning of the world’s history. This is very different ground from scientific knowledge. That it becomes a prominent feature in his apologetic derives from what he takes to be the essential historicity of the Christian faith (over against, for example, advaitic Hinduism) and from the eclipse of teleology in the post-Enlightenment, modern scientific worldview. The meaning of the world, he asserts, is to found in its purpose, its end. The meaning of a story is known by the way it ends. This, he believes, is what the Biblical narrative brings to light.<sup>24</sup>

But in this turn to history, Newbigin does not (as some might suppose) revert to some objectifying, scientific-like proofing (or, *verification*, to use Polanyi’s term). He is not on a project to prove the factuality of events by some modern critical method. He rather draws attention to the communities that have *indwelt* and *embodied* the meaning of the world which is revealed and effected by God’s actions and told in the narrative which renders them. The biblical narrative which has at its center the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus are understood by Newbigin to be the “clue” to the meaning of the world.<sup>25</sup>

The suggestion, then, that Newbigin does not distinguish science and religion (and history!) is not well-grounded. Newbigin sees science and theology as quite distinct.

[U]nlike science, [the Christian tradition] concerns questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of things and of human life—questions which modern science eliminates as a matter of methodology. The models, concepts, and paradigms through which the Christian tradition seeks to understand the world embrace these larger questions. They have the same presupposition about the rationality of the cosmos as the natural sciences do, but it is a more comprehensive rationality based on the faith that the author and sustainer of the cosmos has personally revealed his purpose.<sup>26</sup>

And for history and theology alike, scientific verification is not appropriate.

What, then, of the objectivity of our knowledge? It is obvious, for example, that when conservative Christians insist that their Christian faith refers to objective realities, they are (rightly) seeking to deny the opinion that these Christian beliefs are simply expressions of subjective feelings or experiences and to affirm that they make contact with a reality beyond the self. But it is also clear

that it is futile to deny the subjective elements in the Christian's confession.<sup>27</sup>

Noting next that Polanyi answers the charge of an ultimate subjectivism first by his notion of speaking with universal intent, he goes on to indicate that "Polanyi says that the truth of the claim either will or will not be validated depending on whether or not it leads to further truth. A valid truth claim will lead to new discovery...."<sup>28</sup>

## **The Second Challenge: Theology**

Gelwick's second area of challenge to Newbigin and me lies in the area of our theological responses to plurality, or as he prefers, pluralism. "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." He goes on to say that in his view, "The book [which I take to mean *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*] does not embody the dialogue and vitality of the triadic formulation of gospel, church, and cultures that Hunsberger formalizes...."<sup>29</sup>

This is intriguing, but to respond I would need much more to go on. It may well be that Newbigin in this book fails to embody the dynamic and vitality of his own theological and missionary method. But Gelwick has not demonstrated how Newbigin's book constitutes such a failure. Unless he simply means that Newbigin failed in his book, and Newbigin and I have failed to respond to pluralism with "a revisioning or renewal of Christian theology," because we have not come to the same theological place that Gelwick's mentor, Charles McCoy, (and perhaps Gelwick himself) has espoused. Gelwick's comment that "[o]ne could wish that Newbigin, or Hunsberger as his exponent, had tried to advance the encounter as Charles McCoy did...." is the best clue I have about the "revisioning or renewal of Christian theology" Gelwick believes Newbigin and I should have achieved.

But it also begs the most questions. On what basis does Gelwick wish this of us? Is there only one way to respond to pluralism? (Yes, a bit of irony is intended!) What is it about McCoy's theology that would compel us to "advance the encounter" as *he* did? Who defines, after all, what is advance and what is retreat, what is defection and what is faithfulness? And if McCoy sees in pluralism an opportunity for theology "to reflect and grow in understanding"<sup>30</sup>, can there be now no going beyond where he was? And cannot the going beyond incorporate the retrieval of the tradition in new and fresh ways?

If the suggestion is that because McCoy worked along the lines of Polanyi so thoroughly, other theologians who claim to do so should follow a similar path, more particular questions arise. Is Gelwick claiming that consistency with Polanyi's epistemology leads inexorably to a singular theological result? Did Polanyi claim that? Is this even consistent with Polanyi's thought? Or would he say it represents a static approach that can find no new discovery?

And is there anything in Polanyi that would indicate one theological direction rather than another? Are the theological proposals of Newbigin and McCoy equally commensurate with Polanyi's epistemology? What does each do that builds beyond or contradicts Polanyi? Is that warranted in each case?

There is obviously too little said by Gelwick in these scant final paragraphs of his article to answer these questions or even to know which ones of them are relevant. Further dialogue would be fun. Two final comments are in order, and are offered because Gelwick sincerely notes with appreciation a great deal

of what he reads Newbigin and me to be saying.

Gelwick asserts that “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.”<sup>31</sup> What is striking to me is that “the gospel” seems here to be understood as something which is not itself concerned with “peace and justice.” If that is how “gospel” is to be understood in Newbigin’s rhetoric, I can understand his concern. But if the gospel that is publically attested by the church is the gospel of the New Testament, it is (Newbigin believes) the announcement of the reign of God in Jesus Christ, and that constitutes a fundamental political and economic challenge to the powers-that-be. It cannot be other than a gospel about peace and justice in the public life of the world, which is the world’s true end in the intentions of God. This is what Newbigin means—when rightly understood—by his assertions of “public truth.” The gospel’s truth-telling is about the public life of the world.

Secondly, Gelwick says that “it is important for Christian mission to have not only integrity and confidence in the gospel, but also the openness to the acts of God through those outside its community.”<sup>32</sup> With this, Newbigin and I heartily concur. I hope that can be heard in what we have written. This is not without its problems, however. The matters of discernment and criteria are not easy ones. Gelwick recommends that Christians “relate to the Spirit’s leading in the global search for peace and justice” and respond to “the Spirit’s calling of humankind to deal pluralistically with the global problems.” Alisdair MacIntyre might be tempted to respond, “Whose Spirit? Which leading and calling?” How do we discern which among human activities are the Spirit’s doings? Which signs are the signs of the Spirit? How do we adjudicate between our different conclusions about what the Spirit is calling and leading us to do? Here there is not one singular way, and no clear singular way to move toward discerning what it might be. The ground is tricky, and I suppose that is what makes me want to invite Gelwick to more exploration in comparison of Newbigin’s and McCoy’s evidently different theological proposals.

## Conclusion

My work with Newbigin’s thought convinces me that his use of Polanyi is extensive, his positive appropriation of the main lines of Polanyi’s proposals is pervasive, and the effect of all that on his articulation of a number of theological points is great. How fully that satisfies scholars of Polanyi will be one important testing ground for the integrity and consistency of Newbigin’s epistemology. I for one would welcome continuing dialogue along those lines.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Apostle of Faith and Witness,” *The Gospel and Our Culture: A Network for Encouraging the Encounter in North America*, Special Edition, April, 1998, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gelwick, “Christian Faith in a Pluralist Society,” *Tradition & Discovery*, Volume XXVII, Number 2 (2000-2001), 39-45.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989). See p. x .and pages 1-65.

<sup>5</sup> George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural*

*Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> All by Lesslie Newbigin: *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press and London: SCM Press, 1966); *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1968); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991); *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995); and *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Jukka Keskitalo, a Finnish scholar, completed a Th.D. thesis (in Finnish) at the University of Helsinki in 1999 which gives special attention to Newbigin's epistemology. The English translation of the title is "The Christian Faith and Modern Culture: Lesslie Newbigin's View of the Church's Mission in Modern Western Culture."

<sup>8</sup> Gelwick, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Gelwick, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Gelwick, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Gelwick, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Gelwick, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Gelwick, 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> Gelwick, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Gelwick, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Gelwick, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Gelwick, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 80-81.

<sup>22</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Newbigin notes in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (p. x) that he depends on Polanyi especially in the first five chapters, where he lays out his fundamental epistemological approach. But it is a mistake to stop there. It is important to note that epistemology remains in view for the next four chapters, but now with history, not science, at center stage. Those chapters are entitled: "Revelation in History," "The Logic of Election," "The Bible as Universal History," and "Christ, the Clue to History."

<sup>25</sup> As my book points out, "Newbigin views a 'clue' as a potential 'model' by which the mind may be able to grasp and understand a particular field of inquiry.... The word 'clue,' therefore, does not mean 'evidence' or 'proof' in Newbigin's usage." *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 322, note 4.

<sup>26</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Gelwick, 43-44.

<sup>30</sup> Gelwick, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Gelwick, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Gelwick, 44.