

Heuristic Passion And Universal Intent: A Response To George R. Hunsberger

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[Editor's Note: See Richard Gewlick's "Christian Faith In A Pluralistic Society" (*TAD* 27:2, 39-45) and George R. Hunsberger's "Faith and Pluralism: A Response to Richard Gelwick" (*TAD* 27:3, 19-29) for the earlier discussion of Newbigen's theological ideas and use of Polanyi, which this essay supplements.]

ABSTRACT Key Words:Michael Polanyi, Lesslie Newbigen, George R. Hunsberger, Charles McCoy, theology of plurality, science and theology, world religions, heuristic passion, universal intent, biblical doctrine of election, covenant and federal theology.

Despite Hunsberger's apology for Newbigen's use of Polanyi, Newbigen in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society reverses Polanyi's essential elements of heuristic passion and universal intent. The outcome is a misunderstanding of the common ground and differences between science and theology and a stifling and narrowing theology of cultural plurality. In contrast, Charles McCoy's federal theology and understanding of Polanyi shows an approach of openness yet grounding in the biblical God present in the believed-in realities of global life.

My attempt to review¹ Lesslie Newbigen's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and George R. Hunsberger's *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, Lesslie Newbigen's Theology of Cultural Plurality* has evoked a response from Hunsberger that deserves a reply. Before addressing some of our differences, I would like to say that I am glad that he thinks I "captured" many of the "essential lines" of Newbigen's thought and that "there is much that" I get "right." However, Hunsberger's compliments are more than balanced by his criticisms of my not getting "nuances," having wrong order or emphasis, and misrepresenting Newbigen's position. My six pages of review for the two books led Hunsberger to ten pages of response. So I have asked for a little more space.

There are two elements in Polanyi's epistemology that affect my view of Newbigen's use of Polanyi and also my concerns about Newbigen's and Hunsberger's approach to a theology of plurality. These elements are heuristic passion and universal intent. These elements will further suggest why Newbigen, Hunsberger, and any theology of plurality need to consider both the role of discovering new aspects of reality and of how they bear on the wider reality shared by other knowers.

With regard to heuristic passion, Polanyi elevated to a central place in epistemology the role of discovery². Humans belong to a "society of explorers"³ and are driven by intellectual passions⁴ that lead to both errors and to discoveries. Though fallible, the human risk of seeking the truth and stating our findings is the way we make contacts with reality that form the understandings by which we live.

The other element, universal intent, complements the drive of our passion for contact with reality.⁵ Polanyi shows that universal intent works within the personal structure of commitment. Universal intent helps us avoid mere subjectivity and to seek knowledge of an independent reality that can be known by others. Universal intent guides our passions toward the ever-advancing horizons of human knowing. These two elements for Polanyi are not accidental or elective. They are intrinsic to all human achievements of knowledge about reality.

My reviewing Newbigen's and Hunsberger's renderings of Polanyi did not bring these two elements into prominence though they were implicit in my thinking. My criticism tried to focus briefly on what Newbigen and Hunsberger did with Polanyi. Here I applauded their positive contributions of taking up with Polanyi the way relativism and the ideology of pluralism have intimidated Christian faith and other religious faiths. My two criticisms questioned Newbigen's use of Polanyi to put Christian faith on a factual basis comparable to empirical science and Newbigen's and Hunsberger's dearth of theological revisioning from their encounter with the pluralities of religions and of cultures. These two criticisms spring from the way heuristic passions and universal intent are so much a part of Polanyi's epistemology.

Heuristic Passion

Taking up again the first of these criticisms, how science and theology relate in a Polyanian approach, Hunsberger does not see that Newbigen is contradictory to Polanyi's differentiations about the way science and religion function in a fiduciary framework. I contend that Newbigen seeks an authority in the public square to give confidence to Christian mission and evangelism that is like science. My comment on Newbigen was that he seemed to miss Polanyi's differentiation between science as verification and theology and religion as validation. Newbigen opens *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* with strong statements about the way our pluralist society has led to relativistic outlooks. These relativistic outlooks borne out of an ideology of pluralism have disestablished the authority of the Bible and of Christian teaching. He says:

The Bible became the book through which the life of the soul, the interior life, the spiritual life was interpreted – at least for those who were content to remain under its influence. It could not hold its own in the public sphere. Scientists and philosophers were no longer theologians and biblical scholars. The catechism could no longer be part of the curriculum in the public schools. There could be what are called “religious studies” because religion is a fact of human life. But the things which religious people believe in are not facts in that sense. Only what can stand up under the critical examination of the modern scientific method can be taught as fact, as public truth: The rest is dogma. One is free to promote it as personal belief, but to affirm it as fact is simply arrogance. How, in this situation, does one preach the gospel as truth, truth which is not to be domesticated within the assumptions of modern thought but which challenges these assumptions and calls for their revision?⁶

Some of this statement concurs with Polanyi's view that the modern scientific outlook as based on an objectivist epistemology has undercut the values of our society. Unlike Polanyi, the statement also suggests a nostalgia for the past of Christian dominance of our culture.

This difference between Polanyi and Newbigen begins to appear sharper a few pages later when it seems that Newbigen's theology of plurality wants a status for Christian establishment in public education. Speaking of the separation of church and of state in the United States and the teaching of religion in the public schools, Newbigen says:

There is a legally enforced division between what is called science and what is called religion. The one may be taught as public truth, the other may not. To teach that humans exist as the result of the successful elimination of the weaker species by those which have accidentally inherited superior strength is allowed. To teach that human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him

forever is not allowed. Yet both of these beliefs refer to what is believed to be true for all human beings. They are both – if true – extremely important. Both of them are affirmations about what is the case. One is held to be a matter of objectively true facts, even though Darwinian theory is obviously incapable of proof; the other is held to be a matter of private opinion. It may be taught in churches which are voluntary associations of those who choose to belong to them; it may not be taught as part of public truth.⁷

This statement shows in Newbigen a tendency to assume a univocal meaning between the truth claims of science and the truth claims of theology and of religion. It is a view that could support the teaching of “creationism” as science in the public schools.

This tendency appears in Newbigen’s references to “the fact of Christ” and his references to his communicating the gospel as witness to “the happenedness” of Christ. He ignores the obvious difference between facts of science established by the work of the scientific community and accepted by the larger consensus of the public and the norms of the Christian community and other religious communities.

Hunsberger tries to deny this as my mistaken reading and says:” I am not sure Newbigen can be found anywhere saying that ‘objectivity in the public square’ is what he seeks or proposes.”⁸ Yet Newbigen says when contrasting today the authority of science and of statements about Christian belief “How, in this situation, can Christians affirm their statement as public, factual, objective truth?”⁹

Several pages later, Newbigen shows the parallels between the role of faith and of tradition in science and in Christian belief to justify a Christian confidence that they are both in pursuit of truth about reality and God. Newbigen then concludes that the differences between science and theology seem to be only that science is a tradition of “human learning, writing, and speaking” and the Christian community is a tradition of “witness to the action of God in history, action which reveals and effects the purpose of the Creator.”¹⁰ Newbigen’s lack of grasp of the significant difference here also appears in Newbigen’s objection to the teaching of religious studies instead of the catechism in public schools.¹¹

Hunsberger tries to redeem Newbigen from his difficulty with a much better statement: “Thus Newbigen demonstrates a companionship of scientific and religious knowing and faith –companionship, not identity – by which 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.”¹²

It would be much better if this statement of Hunsberger were consistently true of Newbigen. To me it seems that Newbigen has two messages. One is that he wants Christian faith to have the factual authority of science. The other is that Christian faith is the telling of the biblical story with the universal intent that others will discover its factuality and truth and join this community of believers. In this discrepancy between “be like the authority of science in the public square” and “be a part of a community of Christian faith,” Newbigen fails to distinguish well between the nature of knowing in science and in theology.

Involved in this is Newbigen’s lack of heuristic passion for science’s achievements such as the theory of evolution and for the great world religions. In these cases, he does not show an openness to other views of reality. The heuristic passion to make new contacts with reality seems stifled in Newbigen’s and Hunsberger’s thought. Newbigen’s experience with other cultures and religions does not seem humble or open. We learn most about

their deficiencies and short comings.

In studying as a missionary one evening a week with the Ramakrishna Mission in India, Newbigen found that their Christmas Day worship “was not a step toward the conversion of India” but a “cooption of Jesus into the Hindu worldview.”¹³ Elsewhere, Newbigen contrasts the religions originating in the Indian subcontinent with the historical religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹⁴ He sees the Indian religions as conveying truths that can be gained apart from the historical story of their founders, meaning they have no historical events of divine revelation. Judaism and Islam though religions of divine revelation are virtually ignored except for Israel as part of the story of Christianity, and Islam as unlike Jesus in prescribing a book of teachings. In contrast to other religions, Christians have in the Bible the “secret” to the meaning of universal history.¹⁵

Missing in Newbigen’s encounters with other cultures and religions seems to be recognition that these are also believers in the Polanyian sense that all knowledge is based on faith. As believers, whether secular or religious they have experiences bearing on reality, too. This seems to undermine the triangular model of gospel-culture, gospel-church, and church-culture because the other faiths or outsiders cannot be a real part of the interaction except by accepting a privileged view of the gospel already held. This model of interaction looks like what Newbigen and Hunsberger intend to be openness and a dynamic understanding of the gospel. Newbigen often calls for the gospel to be the standard by which all our standards and plausibility structures are called into question and transformed. The difficulty is that while it calls for indwelling the Biblical story, it presumes a Biblical story defined by their view of the Biblical doctrine of election.¹⁶

Many theologians would agree that the Biblical story is a specific historical story yet as a living story always renewing and speaking through the worship, study, life, and interaction of Christians with the world. As Newbigen himself tries to refute many theologians open to other religions,¹⁷ he exhibits the serious dissent from his view of the Christian faith. In summary of his views against other Christian theologians and the relation of Christian faith to other religions, Newbigen classifies his views in three ways: 1) exclusivist in affirming “the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ” but...not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation of the non-Christian, 2) inclusivist in not limiting the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church, but exclusivist in rejecting the non-Christian religions “as vehicles of salvation,” 3) pluralist in “acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings,” but rejecting “a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

The point that Newbigen makes here is my concern, namely, that he is so sure that the Christian faith has no equal among religious traditions and that global unity cannot be achieved by the co-equal relations of the other great traditions.¹⁹ So far as Polanyi’s thought is concerned, this outlook seems too closed in terms of heuristic passion about the realities presented in a pluralistic world.

Universal Intent

A major part of Newbigen’s apologetic for his theology of cultural plurality is his use of Polanyi’s notion of universal intent. When Newbigen makes his truth claims about Jesus Christ as the unique and decisive revelation of God and the Bible as universal history, he defends this against subjectivity by saying:

There is nothing more ultimate than Jesus Christ, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things will find their consummation. Polanyi’s answer to the charge of subjectivism

is that while we hold our beliefs as personally committed subjects, we hold them with universal intent, and we express that intent by publishing them and inviting all people to consider and accept them. To be willing so to publish them is the test of our real belief. In this sense missions are the real test of our faith.²⁰

At the level of Polanyi's general argument for personal knowledge, Newbigen's statement seems true to Polanyi. But as Hunsberger said of my reading of Newbigen, the nuances are not quite right. First, Polanyi's notion applies to all truth claims including all religions and non-religious believers. The Muslim and the atheist also speak with universal intent. Second, universal intent does not establish the universality or truthfulness of a claim but points out that our personal sense of truth leads to a belief that our belief has universal implications.

Polanyi's argument allows for errors in judgment and calls for responsibility in our assertions. Further, the test of our beliefs is in their evaluation by further experience and the appraisal by others. Some beliefs may be rejected by their hearers and later turn out to be true as seen in the history of scientific change. This test of the truth of our beliefs becomes still more complex as we move from science to the arts, myths and to religion.

This complexity is why Polanyi made a distinction in *Personal Knowledge* between verification and validation for science and for theology and religion. Polanyi later, with Prosch, tried to clarify this distinction by showing a difference in the epistemic integrations. The "natural integrations" of science are based on observation, and arts, myths, and religion are based on "transnatural integrations."²¹

In this discussion, Polanyi and Prosch show, among other things, that the truth claims of science are different from the truth claims of art, myths, and religion. The creative natural integrations of science that make discoveries can be accepted and later used without our giving a great sense of effort or indwelling.²² For this reason, these integrations are called "self-centered" integrations in that they involve less of the investment of us in seeing their claims. On the other hand, transnatural integrations, such as in myths and in religion, attempt to speak about meanings far beyond the ordinary and everyday. These integrations take us to extraordinary views.

Newbigen gets this partly right in stressing that one has to indwell the Biblical story through a community. He misses, however, the difference between indwelling when we accept the claims of science and when we accept the claims of a faith tradition. The faith tradition may make no sense in literal terms but it may by its integration of our ordinary lives into a grand story of cosmic meaning carry us to sublime understandings.²³ The demands of this understanding are ones that "carry us away." Both scientists and theologians make claims with universal intent, but the bearings of their claims on reality have great differences. They share a common ground in involving the person in the tacit structure of knowing. Yet their focal awareness is not the same. These differences are ones that make some theologians uncomfortable with Newbigen's use of Polanyi to uphold a theology of cultural plurality that is so confined to the Biblical doctrine of election.

Another View Of Theology And Cultural Plurality

Hunsberger rightly notes that behind my concerns are also theological assumptions that were not clearly exposed in my review. I did suggest that the work of Charles McCoy in *When Gods Change, Hope For Theology*²⁴ provides a different use of Polanyi in the treatment of plurality. McCoy has been one of the principal teachers and researchers in the thought of Michael Polanyi. Not merely because he was my teacher but also because of his personal and scholarly knowledge of Polanyi and because of his offering a paradigm that is more

responsive to the positive as well as the negative aspects of plurality did I turn to him. In closing, I want to extend this suggestion by showing a few of the possibilities for Christian theology and Christian life in McCoy's approach.

McCoy through a long line of key thinkers including the covenant or federal theologian Johannes Cocceius, H. Richard Niebuhr and Michael Polanyi takes the position that we are all believers in the sense that we all live by faiths that occur in the very process of living. These faiths are about believed-in realities and they may become a part of a life-guiding faith. Since these faiths or faith are about reality, they are also about deity or what persons believe is ultimately true. In our situation, McCoy uses the term pluralism for both the diversity in our cultures as well as for an attitude about this diversity.²⁵

For McCoy, pluralism is not necessarily relativistic. Pluralism (or plurality in Newbigen's terms) can be the encounter with the dynamic presence of God in history that challenges our static and limited outlooks. McCoy sees Christian theology called to respond by learning from these many voices of believed-in reality.

In a comprehensive discussion of where we are in Christian theology, McCoy proposes a covenant or federal way of doing theology. This approach widens the understanding of theology for a global society and for the liberation of persons from the oppressions of exclusivist and of imperialist approaches to other faiths. It sees theology as not just Christian but as "reflection on ultimate commitments governing action."²⁶

In McCoy's view, the Biblical story of a liberating God invites theology to transformation through the covenanting with others who share in pluralism. His trust in the Biblical God as not limited or confined to our past or present formulations appears throughout his book such as in the following statement:

The most sovereign power of our experiencing as Christians is God not only of our history, of Hebrew-Christian history, but of all human histories. In choosing us, God chooses all humanity. The old tension in Hebrew faith between the exclusiveness of our limited loyalty and the inclusiveness of God's unlimited love remains. We live by what we have learned from our ancestors, but we hope also to learn of God from all humans. We do not relinquish the heritage of our faith, but we understand it through the expanding experience of global relationships.²⁷

This approach leads in a different direction to finding through theological exploration a permanent revolution in our believing. It is a trust in the God of Israel and of Jesus as, not human conception, but as the reality that ever challenges and transforms our relationships and understandings.

The theological controversies raised by Newbigen's work involve some of the most basic questions of the 19th and 20th centuries including the interpretation of the Bible, Christology, and the relations of Christian faith and culture. Polanyi certainly has a contribution to make to this discussion, but there is room for debate about how to apply his insights. To me it seems that theology ought to continue what Polanyi saw when he wrote: "Christianity is a progressive enterprise....An era of great religious discoveries may lie before us."²⁸

Endnotes

¹ *Tradition & Discovery*, XXII, No. 2, 2000-2001, pp. 39-44.

² I emphasize this element in my book, *The Way of Discovery*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City, New York, 1966, pp. 90-92.

⁴Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, Chapter 6.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁶Newbigen, p. 5.

⁷Newbigen, pp. 24-25.

⁸*Tradition & Discovery*, p. 24.

⁹Newbigen, p. 40.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²*Tradition & Discovery*, p. 25.

¹³Newbigen, p. 3.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 66-68.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 92, 89, *et passim*.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, Chpt. 7.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Chpts. 13 and 14.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Pp. 182-183.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 126, see also pp. 77, 92, *et passim*.

²¹*Meaning*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 125-126.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 85.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 157

²⁴Nashville, Abingdon, 1980.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁸*Personal Knowledge*, p. 285.

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