

Newbiggin, Polanyi and Impossible Frameworks

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Lesslie Newbiggin, Michael Polanyi, Richard Gelwick, George Hunsberger, religious knowledge, ultimate commitments, unstated assumptions, truth-seeking, dialogue.

Whereas Richard Gelwick has charged Lesslie Newbiggin with failing to distinguish between scientific and religious knowing, Newbiggin was concerned to resist a false dichotomy between the two. Ultimate commitment to such a dichotomy must allow itself to be questioned in any authentic dialogue with religion as ultimate commitment.

I have followed with interest the conversation between Richard Gelwick and George Hunsberger concerning how Lesslie Newbiggin used Michael Polanyi's epistemology. I want to take this discussion a small step further: I shall write more about Newbiggin than Polanyi because I think it is necessary to listen further to Newbiggin before judging the use to which he put Polanyi.

I begin from Gelwick's reference to Newbiggin's 'objection to the teaching of religious studies instead of the catechism in public schools'. In fact Newbiggin served on the Standing Advisory Council on Religion Education in religiously plural Birmingham, England, for six years and wrote 'there are no simple solutions to the problems involved in the teaching of religion in public schools in a religiously plural society'¹. What troubled Newbiggin was the standpoint commonly claimed in such teaching: 'What seemed to me not only questionable but profoundly dangerous, was the assumption that religious education could be provided from a neutral position, as though the teacher was standing on a platform above all the rival claims to truth and in a position to survey them all with magisterial impartiality'. He added 'Unstated assumptions have more penetrative power than explicit assertions; the latter can be recognised and questioned while the former tend to go across the threshold of the mind unnoticed'.²

A kindred assumption which Newbiggin challenged was the assumption that religions do not make rival claims to truth at all, but belong to a realm of private values where diversity is to be celebrated.³ Indeed simply to picture religions within a common horizon is already to posit such a horizon, rather than the horizon offered by any religion, as the ultimate horizon of life. In each case there is a standpoint upon religion which, Newbiggin insists, neither takes seriously religion as a faith-commitment in which all truth-seeking is grounded, nor acknowledges the similar faith-commitment represented by its own framework for understanding religions. In *The Open Secret* he writes 'It is understandable that anyone faced with the clashing diversity of religious commitments should seek some basis for unity among them, or at least some agreed common framework. The difficulty is that we are dealing with *ultimate* commitments, and the basis which I accept can only be *my* commitment.' 'It is understandable', he continues, 'but we have to face the fact that it is impossible. The framework which I devise or discern is my ultimate commitment... as such a commitment, it must defend its claim to truth over against other claims to truth. The claim that I have is simply the claim that mine is the standpoint from which it is possible to discern the truth that relativises all truth. That claim is the expression of the ultimate commitment which is my real religion.'⁴

Two related tasks follow. One is to take seriously that for the Christian, Jesus is the source ‘from whom his understanding of the totality of experience is drawn and therefore the criterion by which other ways of understanding are judged’; while partners in religion dialogue are in a similar position.⁵ The other task, for those who deny this from a platform above religion (including those who profess religious faith but whose ‘real religion’ lies in commitment to this platform), is to acknowledge this faith-commitment of their own and, in vulnerability, to open this up for dialogue on equal terms with religious partners. Without this, as Newbigin says, ‘there is no encounter’ with religion.

Having highlighted the necessary role of ultimate commitments - recognised or unrecognised - Newbigin denies that there is any dichotomy between confession of these and truth-seeking. For the Christian, he writes, ‘His confession is the starting-point of his truth-seeking. He meets his partner with the expectation and hope of hearing more of truth. But inevitably he will seek to grasp the new truth offered him by means of those ways of thinking and judging and valuing which he has already learned and tested. The presuppositions which shape his thinking will be those which he draws from the Gospel.’⁶

Does this run counter to ‘a permanent revolution in our believing’? On the contrary, it takes such revolution to the heart of our ultimate commitments. In authentic religious dialogue the Christian opens his or her faith radically to challenge and to risk. In personal terms, Newbigin writes, ‘there has to be a kenosis, a “self-emptying”. The Christian (meets) his partner in dialogue... as one who bears witness to a truth and holiness which are God’s judgement on him(self) and who is ready to hear the judgement spoken through the lips of his partner of another faith.’⁷ Regarding doctrinal matters, ‘the dialogue with people of other religions will certainly lead to reconsideration and reformulation of Christian doctrines formulated in other circumstances. The possible limits of such reformulation cannot be laid down theoretically in advance.’⁸

Such Christian confession is consistent with, and indeed ought to involve, ‘an eager expectation of, a looking for, and a rejoicing in the evidence of (the work of God) outside the Christian church... (Christians) will join with their non-Christian neighbours in all that serves life against death and light against darkness. They will expect to learn as well as to teach, to receive as well as to give, in this common human enterprise of building up a common human life.’⁹ But he remarks that “‘the light’ is not to be identified with the religious life of men; religion is in fact too often the sphere of darkness, Christian religion not excluded’.¹⁰

Newbigin’s position differs, as I believe Polanyi’s does, from more relativistic post-modern positions. Newbigin insists that in religion as in science there is truth to be sought, and in dialogue to this end there will be found, as in science, mutual teaching and learning, enrichment and correction. In the former case, authentic dialogue is personally demanding, costly and risky. For the Christian the search must return repeatedly to its beginning in the cross, paradoxically not as a place of protection from such cost and risk but as the place where these are personally embodied in a paradigmatic way.

Richard Gelwick has charged Newbigin with positing a false equation between indwelling the truth-claims of religion and of science, an equation which Polanyi did not uphold. I have been concerned to show that Newbigin, for his part, challenged the assumption, rooted in cartesianism, which posits a false dichotomy between religious and scientific knowing, a dichotomy which Polanyi did not uphold.

That Newbigin distinguished between religious and scientific knowledge, Hunsberger has shown. Much more could be added here. That Polanyi’s writings do not commit us to a dichotomy between religious

and scientific knowing, I believe can be argued at length. My concern here has been only to show in what terms Newbigin may be understood to resist Gelwick's judgement upon him; I believe that a further exploration of Newbigin's thought and its connection with Polanyi's work will be a fruitful pursuit.

Endnotes

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*, St Andrew Press, 1993, p.246

² Ibid., p.245

³ See, for example, Newbigin, 'Our Missionary Responsibility in the Crisis of Western Culture', in Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, Eerdmans/St Andrew's Press, 1994, pp. 98-112, p.104.

⁴ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, Eerdmans, 1978, p.184-5. In the quotations which follow I cannot hope to capture Newbigin's careful discussion in the last chapter of this book. For other material on Christian faith and religion pluralism see Newbigin, 'The Christian Faith and the World Religions', in (ed. Geoffrey Wainwright) *Keeping the Faith*, SPCK, 1988, pp.310-340, and Newbigin, 'Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach', *Studia Missionalia*, Vol. 42, 1993, pp. 227-244. The latter includes consideration of 'postmodern' perspectives.

⁵ Ibid., p.191

⁶ Ibid., p.190

⁷ Ibid., p.205

⁸ Ibid., p.209

⁹ Ibid., p.199

¹⁰ Ibid., p.198

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi" which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi; (7) five essays by Michael Polanyi.