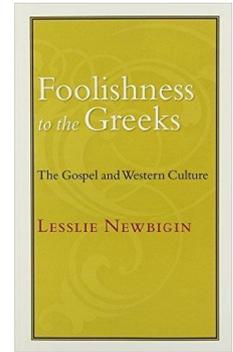


# Lesslie Newbigin

## Foolishness to the Greeks - The Gospel and Western Culture

SPCK 1986  
Alison Morgan Feb 2000



Only 150pp but packed with dense and illuminating argument. Some slightly dated, especially at end. Last 2 chapters the least good.

### *1. Post-Enlightenment culture as a missionary problem*

Purpose to consider what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture of Europe/NAmerica plus its offshoots - the 'modern' culture. 'Modernisation' of 3rd world is in fact their co-option into this culture.

See Niebuhr and Tillich for background.

The problem: a shrinking church, and the gospel falling on deaf ears.

Culture: 'the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation' 3.

Gospel: 'the announcement that in the series of events that have their centre in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has happened that alters the total human situation and must therefore call into question every human culture' 3-4

'Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part, and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life. There can never be a culture-free gospel. Yet the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied.' 4.

So what is involved in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel?

Gospel had origin in cultural world of Judaism, and was articulated in language and practice of Greek speaking Gentile communities. Communication of gospel has to be in language of the receptor culture, using the way of understanding things that is embodied in that language. BUT it will call radically into question that way of understanding embodied in the language it uses. This it will do only by work of God, supernaturally, not by human persuasion.

Perfectly exemplified by gospel of John. John uses language and thought forms of the religious world for which he writes (loosely, gnostic). BUT he uses them in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. The logos is no longer an idea in the mind of the philosopher/mystic, but the man Jesus. So it starts in familiar language and categories, then drops bombshell. Convert then has to learn to look in new way both at his own culture and at the message he has received.

Problem - most missionary outreach across cultural boundaries comes from people who belong to the modern western culture [irony, if that is exactly where the gospel is falling on deaf ears; if we can't make it work in those terms here, why should it do so there?] Need a voice that will challenge our culture on its own terms, a voice that speaks its own language and yet confronts it with the authentic figure of the crucified and living Christ so that it is stopped in its tracks and turned back from the way of death.

Berger, *The Heretical imperative*, argues that the distinctive feature of our culture is that there is no generally acknowledged plausibility structure, no common accepted framework of belief. We all have to choose, to make personal decisions about ultimate questions. Not so in, eg Christendom or in Saudi Arabia. Our culture has indeed enormously enlarged the area in which the individual is free to make his own choices - what other ages have taken as givens, we have as choices: community we belong to, job, lifestyle, spouse. Religion drawn into this, and becomes a matter of personal choice.

Newbigin amends: it isn't that there is no socially accepted plausibility structure and so we make our own choices, but rather that this *is* the plausibility structure, and we make our choices within its parameters. The autonomous human being is in the centre, with total freedom of choice. There is nothing that is simply given. He excludes the possibility that it might actually be the case that the one who created and sustains the entire universe of created beings has personally made himself known at a certain time and place in universal history. Any claim that this has happened is bracketed with other similar claims to be included in a syllabus for the comparative study of religion - confined to private world, excluded from public world.

Need to recognise that while our choice is free where values are concerned, our culture does not accord the same flexibility to facts. Need to insist that religion's claim to truth must be tested in the public world of facts where scientific disciplines operate. Means denying belief that Christianity is essentially the same as the other world religions. Church lost the battle to control education, and was badly battered in its encounter with modern science, and so has largely accepted relegation to the private sector, thus assuring for itself a continuing place, at the cost of surrendering the crucial field.

We don't have a secular society. We have a pagan society.

## *2. Profile of a culture*

Chinese proverb: 'if you want a definition of water, don't ask a fish' - how can we study our own culture? As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of its scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view to the place where we explain our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?

- listen to witness of Christians from other cultures

- look at the genesis of our modern culture and especially at Enlightenment; the conviction that Europeans now knew the secret of knowledge and therefore the secret of mastery over the world. Key element was vision of nature of reality opened up especially by Newton (real world discovered by science is governed not by purpose but by natural laws of cause and effect). Thinkers proclaimed it as age of reason; it assumes that the individual has the potential and right to exercise his reason in the search for reality, and is dependent on right to hold property, which is the precondition for any human activity.

So teleology is banished from the universe, and with it, any sense of values other than the material - the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is all that remains. Runs counter both to Greek world view and to that of Christian faith. We look not to God but to the nation state for our fulfilment, and to nature as the reality within which we must seek it.

Division private/public realms is accentuated by removal of work from the home to places where workers are anonymous, replaceable units, not irreplaceable persons as in the home. Exacerbated by the urbanisation which followed on from the mechanisation of work - urbanisation breaks up traditional family-based communities and introduces people to world of networks each with a different purpose. Identity thus becomes a matter of choice, and the world loses its landmarks.

Central fact however is the elimination of teleology, in favour of looking for explanation of everything without reference to purpose. And yet purpose remains an inescapable element in life. People do have purposes, and so a strange fissure runs right through the consciousness of modern Western man. It is manifested in the dichotomy between the public and private worlds, and between what we call facts and what we call values. Purpose doesn't belong to the world of facts any more, so has to be confined to the world of values.

No conflict between science and E religion, because the E religions do not understand the world in terms of purpose. Bible, on the other hand, is dominated by idea of divine purpose, and it can't be about the private realm. It is dominated by the living God who acts, speaks, calls, and expects an answer. The biblical language is as much about God, about the created cosmos, and about the world of public events as about what can be called religious experience. This can be translated into religious language. But might it not be otherwise? 'What if it were simply a fact that the one by whose will and purpose all things exist, from the galactic system to the electrons and neutrons, has acted and spoken in certain specific events and words in order to reveal and effect his purpose and to call us to respond in love and obedience? If this were a fact, we might still sit down coolly to consider it in relation to other facts. But by doing so we would be asserting our right to make the final decision, and we have n means of proving that we have that right. It might be that we do not, that the history of Western man in the past two hundred years has been shaped by an illusion. And it might be that the signs, manifest all around us, of the disintegration of this culture of ours are ultimately attributable to that illusion.' 41.

### 3. *The word in the world*

Has focussed on the culture so far; now the gospel.

Bible and church are part of our culture; how shall a part of our culture make claims against our culture?

John's gospel. In language and thought forms of Gnostics. 'And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity'. Chaps 1-12 trace inability of people to grasp what is being offered and end with rejection of Jesus as blasphemer. Then from 13-17 we find selves in different world, in which Jesus is the centre of light and love, and all circumstances and future history are illuminated by that light and love.

'Contemporary exponents of the sociology of knowledge have made us familiar with the fact that our sense of what is real is, to a large extent, a function of the society in which we live. It is almost impossible for an individual to deny steadily the reality of things that society regards as real, or to affirm the reality of things that society regards as illusions. The plausibility structures that largely control our perception of what is the case are socially produced.' 54

It is an illusion to suppose that there are 2 kinds of history, sacred and profane, salvation history and secular history. We who are at the moment making and suffering history know there is only one history; but it can be understood theistically or atheistically. There is only one Jesus, and only one history. The question is whether the faith that finds its focus in Jesus is the faith with which we seek to understand the whole of history, or whether we limit this faith to a private world of religion and hand over the public history of the world to other principles of explanation.

The difference between the 2 plausibility structures, secular and Christian, is seen most sharply at the point where we meet the resurrection. Belief; or fact? 'From the point of view of our contemporary culture, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is irrational. It cannot be incorporated into the existing plausibility structure. The widespread phenomenon of 'religion', with Christianity regarded as one of its many varieties, can indeed be accommodated without difficulty in our culture. But this claim cannot. It must be regarded as the esoteric belief of a community that is living in a world of make-believe rather than the world of facts. There is no way by which the truth of the claim can be demonstrated within the plausibility structure that shapes the modern mind.' 63.

### 4. *What can we know? The dialogue with science*

Most obvious distinguishing feature of our society, compared with those that have preceded it, is that it is atheist. Religion has retreated before science, and we cope by regarding this as an example of 2 ways of seeing. If religion does not hold the idea of purpose as central, and is construed in mystical terms, then there is no clash. 'But if we are talking as the Bible talks about God, who is Creator and Governor of all things, who acts in specific ways, and whose purpose is the criterion for everything human, whether in the public or the private sectors, then there is an inevitable conflict. Is it or is it not the case that every human being exists for the joy of eternal fellowship with God and must face the possibility of missing that mark, forfeiting that prize? If it is the case, it ought to be part of the core curriculum in every school. It will not do to say that the determination of character by the structure of the DNA molecule is a fact that any child must learn to understand, but that the determination of all proper human purposes by the glory of God is an opinion that anyone is free to accept or reject. The question of which is the real world simply cannot be permanently evaded. There can be no genuinely missionary encounter of the gospel with our culture unless we face these questions. For there can be no question that for the ordinary educated person in our society, the real world is not the world of the Bible but a world that can be explained, and is being more and more fully explained, without reference to the hypothesis of God.' 67.

For most people, the vision of the real world is the one derived from Newtonian science. We know this has been altered by the new physics, Einstein onwards, but we haven't taken it on board. Matter isn't small and predictable; 'matter is an affair of changing relationships between non-material entities' (Thorpe) 69.

Can contend that the world of modern science is made possible only by the biblical view of the world as both rational and contingent. Science would be impossible if there were no principle of rationality in the universe. Hence why other great civilisations, with non-rational or non-contingent faiths, have not developed science.

New physics opens way for real dialogue between believers and scientists, impossible when the mechanistic model dominated physics. But other branches of science are still largely controlled by the mechanistic models. Concept of a world of facts is a folk-concept now denied by the actual practice of science.

We all engage in purposeful activity, yet accept as the final product of this purposeful activity a picture of the world from which purpose has been eliminated.

'A missionary encounter with our culture must bring us face to face with the central citadel of our culture, which is the belief that is based on the immense achievements of the scientific method and, to a limited but increasing extent, embodied in our political, economic, and social practice - the belief that the real world, the reality with which we have to do, is a world that is to be understood in terms of efficient causes and not of final causes, a world that is not governed by an intelligible purpose, and thus a world in which the answer to the question of what is good has to be left to the private opinion of each individual and cannot be included in the body of accepted facts that control public life'. 79

Fallacy - can you understand even the simplest machine without understanding its purpose?

Oddity. Fundamental law of physics, the 2nd law of thermodynamics, states that the universe is relentlessly descending into entropy. The fundamental law of biology, evolution, shows us the continuing evolution of more and more complex organisms. And so a paradox: they work in opposite directions. Why? If the physical universe as a whole is running down, but life moving towards completion, surely this must be not by any purely mechanical or organic process, but in response to a loving purpose.

### *5. What is to be done? The dialogue with politics*

Gospel concerns not just ideas and beliefs of a people but also its ways of behaving. These are not just private and domestic but public and political. So have to dispute claim that gospel has nothing to say on these matters. Bible views individual as someone always involved in relationships; is no separation of the inward and spiritual from the outward, visible and social. As far as our society is concerned, it has been formed by Christendom; but at the same time, Christendom is no more and never will be.

Augustine coined word 'peregrini', best translated as 'resident aliens' to designate relationship between the Christian and the world. Ideals of capitalism and of Marxism as way to run the world have faded. Capitalism pursues freedom of each individual to choose and pursue his own ends to the limit of his power; but the family is precisely the place where the opposite values are the case, and so we see the disintegration of marriage and family life. Islam identifies religion and law, but possible only because it denies original sin. Try and build a society on that basis and you get unleashing of demonic powers.

Capitalism is about freedom.

Socialism is about equality.

But neither takes us to the heart of human nature/need. True freedom is not found by seeking to develop the powers of the self without limit, for the human person is not made for autonomy but for true relatedness in love and obedience.

### *6. What must we be? The call to be church*

Church can't be attempt to re-establish Christendom

Church can't be provision for individuals a place in the private sector where they can enjoy an inward religious security but are not required to challenge the ideology that rules the public life of nations.

Middle way is to sound the note of protest; and to seek to shape public life in the light of the Christian faith, as forenote of kingdom.

Conditions for recovery by church of its distinction from and responsibility for our culture:

- recovery of eschatology - seeking the kingdom means more than social progress
- Christian doctrine of freedom - we to combine belief in Jesus as way, truth, life with willingness to dialogue
- a declericalized theology
- a radical theological critique of the theory and practice of denominationalism
- need for help in seeing our own culture through Christian minds shaped by other cultures
- courage to hold and proclaim a belief that cannot be proved to be true in terms of the axioms of our society