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## IS LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S MODEL OF CONTEXTUALIZATION ANTICULTURAL?

### *The Critique*

In a critique of "The Gospel and Our Culture" movement in Britain, Elaine Graham and Heather Walton remark that Lesslie Newbigin's position on gospel and culture<sup>1</sup> "might more adequately be described as the "Gospel Against Our Culture" movement" (Graham and Walton 1991: 2). They base their analysis of Newbigin on their own syncretistic accommodation to postmodernity, as Newbigin clearly demonstrates in his response (Newbigin 1992: 1-10). Yet analyses of the American Roman Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans and the Dutch neo-Calvinist philosopher Sander Griffioen make a similar point but in a much more sympathetic and nuanced way.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Bevans groups Newbigin together with Protestants Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Roman Catholics Avery Dulles, Mary Jo Leddy, and John Coleman under "The Counter-Cultural Model" of contextualization. Bevans articulates this model as one that is primarily found among theologians who do theology in the deeply secularized context of the West (Bevans 1993: 6; see 2002: 143-167). There are two things that Bevans highlights about this model. First, "culture is regarded with utmost suspicion," almost as "utterly corrupt and resistant to the

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gospel” (Bevans 1993: 6, 14). He rightly observes that Newbigin believes that the gospel is not to be read in the light of the culture but the culture in the light of the gospel and that “counter-cultural” means that “the biblical worldview provides a vision that runs deeply at odds with what has developed in the West” (Ibid.: 6). Second, Bevans notes that the gospel has primarily a critical function in relation to culture. “The first task of theology according to the counter-cultural model is to expose those pagan, anti-gospel assumptions as false and ideological. This is done by a re-reading of the gospel over against these cultural assumptions . . .” (Ibid.: 12). In both cases, Bevans highlights the negative side: the sinful corruption of culture (and not the creational goodness) and the critical function of Scripture (and not the renewing function). In an article published six years later and in the second edition of his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans more carefully nuances his position. He recognizes that various adherents of this model exhibit a spectrum: while Hauerwas and Willimon approach more of an anti-cultural position, Newbigin takes more seriously the cultural responsibility of believers. In other words, Bevans acknowledges Newbigin’s emphasis on the positive side of the relationship of the church to its culture (Bevans 1999: 151-152; 2002: 144-145).

Sander Griffioen wrestles in a similar way with Newbigin’s model of contextualization. While he recognizes that Newbigin’s position cannot simply be defined by its critique of culture, he raises questions about whether a more positive view of culture is adequately expressed. Analyzing *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he observes that the first half of the book is primarily concerned with cultural critique and the second with the more positive role of cultural development. He comments: “The question which arises is how these two anthropological conceptions—that of the critic of culture and that of the manager of the world—are related to each other. Does Newbigin intend to say that these are two sides of the same coin, or must we conclude that they are incompatible?” (Griffioen 1996: 11). Griffioen believes that in the church’s cultural calling the struggle against idolatry and the task of managing creation belong together and are only distinguishable theoretically. While Newbigin never really works out his own position, Griffioen sees “some indication” of an incipient tension between these two. Griffioen illustrates the problem by reference to Martien Brinkman’s book *De Theologie van Karl Barth* (Brinkman 1983). Brinkman discusses a controversy between the Barthian theologian Kornelis Miskotte and the Dutch Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder. Schilder emphasized Christ as the renewer of culture who restores his

people to pursue their cultural task. Miskotte believed that Schilder was lacking in prophetic and critical spirit: "... the prophetic light of the church has been almost completely extinguished" (Griffioen 1996: 12). Schilder emphasized the developmental task of the church's cultural responsibility and lost the critical dimension, while Miskotte stressed the prophetic task of the church in culture and failed to find an adequate place for cultural development. Griffioen believes that the neo-Calvinists Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd have been able to state more positively the relationship by speaking of the "inner reformation" of culture. The gospel renews culture; this means that development and critique are two sides of the same coin. Miskotte is not able to move beyond an "impersonal relationship" of the gospel to culture and thus critique and affirmation are not unified. Griffioen sees in Newbign some of this tension. He comments: "I find it striking that in his discussion of contextualization he pays virtually no attention to the gospel as an agent of inner reformation or cultural renewal. All the emphasis is on the critical and judging function of the Word" (Ibid.: 12). Yet Griffioen immediately adds that this is not the whole picture. In his treatment of the various public domains of western culture (politics, science) Newbign gives consideration to faith as an agent of cultural reformation (Ibid.: 13).

### ***Two Sides of Cultural Responsibility: The Church For and Against Culture***

An evaluation of Griffioen's and Bevens's analyses is needed. It is true that the affirmation of creation's goodness and of humankind's calling to cultural development are not given the explicit attention in Newbign's writings that the biblical record warrants. It is not surprising that Bevens and Griffioen represent two traditions, Roman Catholic and Dutch neo-Calvinist, both of which have paid close attention to Scripture's teaching on creation. While a careful reading of Newbign's vast literary *oeuvre* fixes in one's mind his implicit assumption of these dimensions of biblical thought, his discussions of contextualization often do not make these themes explicit. His starting point in the cross and resurrection does not open up into a full doctrine of creation and this draws the critique of Bevens and Griffioen. However, it must be stated that an implicit understanding of creation and humanity's role in its development underlies so much of his writing that Newbign cannot be read as one who entertains *only* a deep suspicion of culture; nor is culture completely resistant to the

gospel (Newbiggin 1986: 65-123). Here Newbiggin must be distinguished from Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, and Douglas John Hall.<sup>3</sup> Bevans is correct in saying that Newbiggin is concerned for transformation; Newbiggin is also concerned to identify and embrace the good within culture (Newbiggin 1977: 119).

George Vandervelde rightly observes that Newbiggin's idea of a "missionary encounter" includes both a "positive relation" to *and* a "critical appraisal" of culture: "Newbiggin calls for an encounter that entails a positive relation to culture by way of a critical approach" (Vandervelde 1996: 6).<sup>4</sup> Vandervelde is critical of others who have been so fearful of Christendom that they advocate a strictly counter-cultural stance. In fact "being simply counter-cultural is impossible" (Ibid.: 7). Vandervelde rightly contrasts Newbiggin with this emphasis: "For Newbiggin, however, the Christian community is properly *counter-cultural* only to the extent that it is *engaged in culture*; conversely, the church is properly engaged in culture only to the extent that it is counter-cultural" (Ibid.: 6).

Newbiggin roots these two sides of his contextualization theory in Christology. Sometimes he articulates the relationship of the church to its cultural environment in terms of the threefold relation of Christ to the world (Newbiggin 1977: 118-119). Since Christ is the creator and sustainer of the world the church is to "love and cherish all of its created goodness" (Ibid.). Since Christ is the consummator of all things and the one in whom reconciliation takes place, the church will be a sign of the true end for which the particular culture exists. Since Christ is the one who has died and risen to take away the sins of the world, the church will stand opposed to the evil of each place. Thus the church must assume this threefold relationship: "It must communicate in the idiom of that culture both the divine good that sustains it and the divine purpose that judges it and summons it to be what it is not yet" (Newbiggin 1978b: 150). Most often Newbiggin expresses the proper relationship to culture in terms of the cross of Jesus Christ (Newbiggin 1989: 195). The church must be recognizable as the church *for* its cultural context. That "for" must be defined in terms of the way Christ is *for* the world. The atonement is where we see this most clearly: in the cross, Christ, on the one hand, totally identified with the world; at the same time, Christ is totally separated from the world (Newbiggin 1994: 54). "The Cross is in one sense an act of total identification with the world. But in another sense it is an act of radical separation. It is both of these at the same time" (Newbiggin 1974: 98). Following its Lord, the church will be for and against its culture: "We must

always, it seems to me, in every situation, be wrestling with both sides of this reality: that the Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point” (Newbign 1994: 54). And again:

A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standards of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the Cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection (Newbign 1970: 6).

Even though Newbign emphasizes both of these sides of church’s posture to culture, it must be noted that he *begins* with affirmation: the church is *for* the world (Newbign 1994: 53-54). It is precisely because the Christ and the church are for the world that it must stand against the sin and idolatry that oppose the abundant life of the good creation. There are two reasons, according to Newbign, the church must take this stance of affirmation. First, culture gives expression to God’s good creation. Second the church lives in solidarity with its community in the cultural task of humankind. This theme arises at two points in Newbign’s writings: in connection with the calling of the church in nation-building in the Third World, and in the challenge to the western church not to privatize the gospel but take responsibility for the public life of the nation: “. . . the church today cannot without guilt absolve itself from the responsibility, where it sees the possibility, of seeking to shape the public life of nations and the global ordering of industry and commerce in light of the Christian faith” (Newbign 1986: 129).

While Newbign begins with affirmation he *stresses* the antithetical side of cultural involvement. During his time in leadership within the ecumenical movement he observed the pervasive chameleon theology of many within the World Council of Churches (WCC). This led him to speak of the church as “discriminating non-conformists,” “radical dissenters,” and “radical critics and misfits” with a relationship of “conflict” and “radical discontinuity with the world” (Newbign 1968a: 26; 1970: 6; 1972: 59-60). Since the church is shaped by a different story about the world than its

culture there is “a stark contrast between the faith by which the Church lives and the mind of the world” (Newbigin 1968b: 13). In response to the advanced state of syncretism in which he found the church in western culture Newbigin increasingly emphasized the antithetical side of cultural engagement. Western culture is a pagan society and the western church has “in general failed to realize how radical is the contradiction between the Christian vision and the assumptions that we breathe in from every part of our shared existence” (Newbigin 1987: 4). It is precisely Newbigin’s *stress* on the critical dimension of the church’s posture that has led Griffioen, Bevans, and others to characterize Newbigin’s theory as, in some sense, “countercultural.”

This stress comes to expression especially in Newbigin’s *theory* of contextualization. While both involvement and antithesis are found in Newbigin’s writing, his theory of contextualization highlights almost exclusively the antithetical side of cultural responsibility. It is instructive to note Griffioen’s structural analysis of *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Griffioen observes two parts in Newbigin’s book: the first part he sees as devoted to a critique of idolatry, while the latter part develops the more positive role of cultural development with humanity as manager of creation. Griffioen’s complaint is that Newbigin’s *theoretical development* of the church’s involvement in culture emphasizes exclusively the critical side while his *practical proposals* for politics and science bring both the critical and constructive side of cultural participation into view (Griffioen 1996: 12, 13).

### *Factors Leading to a Countercultural Emphasis*

What has led Newbigin to emphasize the antithetical side of cultural engagement in his contextualization theory? Perhaps a clue can be found when the particular settings for Newbigin’s writings are taken into account: his missionary experience in a climate where an ancient religion stood opposed to the gospel; his ecumenical experience where he met syncretistic accommodation to the currents of the day; and his return to Britain where he found a timid and deeply compromised church. It is especially the British context that must be highlighted. The majority of his writings on the issue appeared after 1974, when he returned to Britain. In those speeches and articles Newbigin is primarily concerned to work out a model of contextualization that is appropriate to western culture.<sup>5</sup> For a church that has lived long in its environment developing a symbiotic

relationship with its cultural context, the need of the hour is the call for counterculture, so that the church may be freed from its syncretistic accommodation. In a situation where the church exhibits “an advanced case of syncretism” (Newbigin 1994: 67), Newbigin stresses the antithetical side of the contextualization dynamic. Miskotte’s comment about the extinguishing of the prophetic light of the church is telling. While Schilder would speak of both cultural development and antithesis, it appears that development has swallowed up the antithesis. It is difficult to hold these two together, even when they are seen as two sides of the same coin. While Griffioen’s critique of Newbigin is valid, Newbigin’s prophetic response to a situation where the antithetical side of the cultural task has been eclipsed is entirely understandable and, indeed, strategic. When a fat man is sitting on one side of a seesaw it is necessary to jump very hard on the other end.<sup>6</sup> The weight of the Christendom tradition, in which the church has exercised culturally formative power, has led to a loss of distinctive identity and this requires “jumping hard” on the critical aspect of the church’s conflict with its culture.

This problem is articulated in Konrad Raiser’s contrast between the missionary situations of the West and the Third World. He distinguishes between two different forms of missionary witness (Raiser 1994: 628-629). There is a difference between the missionary situation in Europe and North America on the one hand, and Africa and Asia on the other. While the central missionary problem of the “younger churches” is the experience of *cultural estrangement*—the gospel is felt to be a foreign element that disturbs cultural traditions—the central missionary problem of the “older churches” is the *cultural captivity* of the gospel. In other words, in Africa and Asia the problem is for the gospel to be at home in culture. In the West the gospel has become absorbed and co-opted into culture and the need is to see the gospel at odds with the culture.

Any critique of Newbigin’s antithetical stress must take this situation into account. There is a similarity here between Newbigin’s and Hendrik Kraemer’s critics in their analyses. Most scholars of non-Christian religions label Kraemer’s position with the term “discontinuity.” A careful reading of Kraemer, however, shows a fine integration of continuity and discontinuity within the concept of “subversive fulfillment.” Yet in the situation of the day, where the majority of writers were stressing continuity, there was a need for the emphasis that was missing. Kraemer says: “In fact, therefore, the only reason we have to side so resolutely with “discontinuity” and argue for it, is that the “continuity” standpoint has so many able

advocates, and that it is evidently so seductive” (Kraemer 1956: 352). Marc Spindler’s comment about Kraemer is also to the point: “. . . the idea of ‘discontinuity’ was misunderstood as being totally negative, whereas it must be interpreted in the dialectical framework of the pascal [sic] mystery of death and resurrection, judgement and grace” (Spindler 1988: 12). Both Kraemer and Newbigin stress emphases that have been neglected.

### *Newbigin’s Missionary Experience*

Another important factor in shaping Newbigin’s view of gospel and culture, and also his stress on countercultural engagement, was his missionary experience in India. Street preaching was a regular evangelistic activity for Newbigin during his missionary days in India. The question that pressed itself upon him was “how can one preach to a crowd of people who have never heard of Jesus?” Cross-cultural communication of the gospel means that the evangelist must relate him or herself to the culture in two ways; indeed for the missionary maintaining both relations is a matter of life and death. On the one hand, there must be solidarity; the evangelist must use the language of the hearer. If there is to be communication, the evangelist must use cultural forms that are familiar to the hearer. The gospel must be “at home” in the culture. On the other hand, there must be conflict; the language uses terms that reflect a worldview or foundational religious commitments by which the hearer must make sense of the world. These foundational assumptions are in conflict with the gospel. The gospel is “at odds” with the culture. The Tamil language, for example, is a shared way of understanding the world that reflects Hindu faith commitments. As such it expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. Therefore, there will be a clash of ultimate commitments between the gospel and Hindu culture. Thus cross-cultural communication of the gospel will call into question the underlying worldview implicit in that language. The problem is how to use the language and yet call into question the worldview that shapes that language.

Newbigin illustrates the problem with his evangelistic preaching in India (Newbigin 1978a: 1-3). What word can be used by the missionary to introduce Jesus to a population who has no idea of who he is? *Swamy*, meaning Lord, offers a possibility. The problem is that there are many lords—three hundred and thirty million of them according to Hindu tradition—and if Jesus is just one more lord there are more important matters to attend to than a message about another *swamy*. *Avatar* seems like an



obvious choice since it refers to the descent of God in creaturely form to put down the power of evil and establish the faltering power of righteousness. The trouble here is that *avatar* is bound up in a cyclical worldview that cannot ascribe finality to any *avatar* the way the finality of Christ is portrayed in the Scriptural story. Maybe one could just begin to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. But if one proceeds in this way, Jesus will be identified with the world of *maya*, the world of passing events which is simply illusion in the Hindu tradition. Indian hearers will lose all interest. All other attempts—*kadavul*, supreme transcendent god; *satguru*, teacher who initiates his disciple into the experience of realization; *adipurushan*, the primal man who is the beginning of all creation; *chit*, the intelligence and will which constitute the second member of the triad of ultimate reality—eventually founder on the same problem. “What all these answers have in common is that they necessarily describe Jesus in terms of a model which embodies an interpretation of experience significantly different from the interpretation which arises when Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely” (Newbigin 1978a: 2-3).

In the work of evangelism, two dangers present themselves: irrelevance and syncretism. If the evangelist is to be relevant, he or she must employ the language risking the absorption of the gospel into the reigning worldview. Then the gospel loses its power to challenge cultural idolatry. If the evangelist is relevant, he or she risks syncretism. The problem is how can the missionary be *both* relevant and faithful to the gospel. This problem moves far beyond evangelism to the relation of the gospel to all cultural products. In relation to the problem of gospel and culture, the burning question for Newbigin is how does one avoid the twin problems of irrelevance and syncretism?

Yet there is more to the problem of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. The issues is distorted if it is considered simply as the missionary’s attempt to communicate a culture-free gospel into a pagan environment. The communication process enabled Newbigin to realize how deeply his own understanding of the gospel was shaped by the culture from which he had come, and that western culture was also in conflict with the gospel. In his writings Newbigin describes a number of events that enabled him to see just how deeply his own understanding and embodiment of the gospel was shaped by his western roots (Goheen 2000: 40-41). Especially noteworthy were his weekly meetings with Hindu monks at the Ramakrishna monastery where he studied the Svetasvara Upanishad and the gospel of John with them. Here he learned to “see the profound

rationality of the world-view of the Vedanta” (Newbigin 1993: 54). He reflects his experience prior to India when he writes: “My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply ‘how things are’ . . . . No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are” (Newbigin 1978a: 3). An encounter with the “immense power and rationality of the Vendantin’s vision of reality” (Newbigin 1982: ix) enabled Newbigin to understand the formative power of western culture on him. The problem of gospel and culture that he encountered in India is not simply a problem there; all cultures are shaped by foundational religious commitments that distort its forms and institutions. There will always be a tension between gospel and culture.

The more deeply the church senses the contradiction between the gospel and the idolatrous foundational assumptions that shape the culture, the more the unbearable tension of living between two different worldviews is felt. As Newbigin moved to Britain and engaged western culture, he stressed the public doctrine of the West *as a story*. Both the gospel and the worldview of western culture are in the form of a story—an interpretation of universal history. The people of God find themselves at the crossroads between two stories.

This unbearable tension of living at the crossroads arises from three factors. First, the church is part of a society that embodies a cultural story. That cultural story is rooted in an idolatrous religious faith, is determinative of every part of human life, and is embodied by a community. By virtue of the creation mandate, the church is part of that community that embodies this pattern of social life. Second, the Christian community finds its identity in another story, one that is also rooted in faith, equally comprehensive, and also socially embodied. The gospel is not a disembodied message, “an ethereal something disinfected of all human cultural ingredients” (Newbigin 1989: 188), but is always incarnated in a community. Third, the unbearable tension emerges because of “two embodiments” in the life of God’s people. As members of the cultural community, the church is shaped by the cultural story. As members of the new humankind, if they are faithful they are shaped by the Biblical story. Therefore, the embodiment of the gospel will always be shaped by the culture: “there is not and cannot be a gospel which is not culturally embodied” (Ibid.: 189). The tension

arises because the gospel and the cultural story are, to some degree, at odds and yet “meet” in the life of the people of God. Contextualization is not the meeting of a disembodied message and a rationally articulated understanding of culture; to pose the issue in that way is both abstract and dualistic (Ibid.: 188-189). The encounter between gospel and culture happens in the life of the community called to live in the story of the Bible. The people of God incarnate the intersection of gospel and culture; the incompatibility of the two stories, even “radical contradiction” (Newbigin 1987: 4), produces an unbearable tension. Hendrik Kraemer, who perhaps shaped Newbigin more than any other person, writes: “The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in the world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that lost its savour” (Kraemer 1956: 36). Authentic contextualization is the faithful resolution of this tension.

***Challenging Relevance:  
Connecting the Two Sides of the Church’s Cultural Task***

It is in Newbigin’s understanding of challenging relevance that he finds a resolution (Newbigin 1978a: 10-13). In this concept we see how Newbigin relates the two sides of cultural involvement. While this notion finds its origins in Newbigin’s attempt to communicate the gospel in India, it has been expanded to relate the gospel and church to culture more generally (Newbigin 1978a).

For Newbigin, the two problems the church constantly faces in its relation to culture is syncretism and irrelevance. The issue is *how* all of culture can be both affirmed (since it is creational) and rejected (because it is twisted by sin), how God’s yes and no, God’s word of grace and judgement can be heard. Failure in contextualization within a particular culture takes place when either of these “words” of the gospel are suppressed. When God’s “No,” God’s word of judgement is not applied, syncretism will be the result. The culture is simply affirmed and the gospel is domesticated into the idolatrous plausibility structure of the culture. Alternately, when God’s “Yes,” God’s word of grace is not present, irrelevance will be the result. The culture is rejected and, since cultural embodiment is inevitable, the church will resort to a cultural form of the gospel from another time or place, and will, thus, be irrelevant to its

culture.

Newbigin finds a solution to the issue of affirmation and rejection in his notion of challenging relevance—a term he borrows from Alfred Hogg. His articulation of this concept is indebted to Hogg (Hogg 1945: 9-26), Hendrik Kraemer (Kraemer 1939: 4), and Willem Visser ‘t Hooft (Visser ‘t Hooft 1967: 13-14; Newbigin 1992: 80; 1994: 163).

For Hogg, the missionary who refuses to employ Hindu concepts and institutions will not be heard. At the same time, the danger of utilizing Hindu forms is the possibility of “a Christianizing of Hinduism instead of an Indian way of expressing Christianity” (Hogg 1945: 23). The only way forward, according to Hogg, is to employ the familiar images and forms of Hinduism which express the religious longing of the Hindu and burst them open, giving them new meaning with the fact of the gospel. Choosing a familiar category is inevitable, yet challenging it is necessary because there is not straight line from Hinduism to the gospel. Hogg illustrates this with Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus chooses the well-known category of the kingdom of God. However, he did not simply accede to the current popular religious and cultural beliefs about the kingdom; instead he challenged them filling the notion with a new understanding that called for repentance. The terms were familiar and relevant; yet the proclamation challenged the distorted notions calling for repentance.

Kraemer’s notion of subversive fulfillment is quite similar (Kraemer 1939). The gospel comes as fulfillment to the religious longing in the heart of humankind. Yet there is not simply continuity; the gospel stands in contradiction to human wisdom twisted by sin. Visser ‘t Hooft utilizes Kraemer’s notion of subversive fulfillment in the context of contextualization in culture. He writes:

Key-words from other religions when taken over by the Christian Church are like displaced persons, uprooted and unassimilated until they are naturalised. The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to re-interpret the traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. Kraemer uses the term “subversive fulfillment” and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the

traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts (Visser 't Hooft 1967: 13).

Newbign employs the notion of challenging relevance to avoid both syncretism and irrelevance. Like Visser 't Hooft, he utilizes the model of missionary communication that John offers in his gospel (Newbign 1986: 6; 1995: 336). Of the gospel of John, Newbign writes:

I suppose that the boldest and most brilliant essay in the communication of the gospel to a particular culture in all Christian history is the gospel according to John. Here the language and thought-forms of the Hellenistic world are so employed that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them. And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity (Newbign 1986: 53).

John freely uses the language and thought forms of classical religion and culture that form the world of his hearers—light and darkness, body and soul, heaven and earth, flesh and spirit, and more. Yet John uses this language and thought-forms in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. John begins with the announcement “In the beginning was the *logos*.” As he continues it becomes apparent that *logos* is not the impersonal law of rationality that permeates the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. The *logos* became *sarx*. John begins by identifying with the classical longing for the source of order expressed in the term *logos*, but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world (Newbign 1982: 1-3). In this way John is both relevant and faithful: relevant because he identifies with the existential struggles of his contemporaries and uses familiar categories those longings express, and faithful because he challenges with the gospel the idolatrous worldview that shapes those categories calling for repentance. Similarly in the Hindu context the missionary must work with models, words, forms, and institutions the Hindu is accustomed to use. But the missionary must challenge those forms with the fact of the gospel.

The notion of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance is applicable not only to language and verbal missionary communication. It is the process by which the Christian community interacts with all the various institutions and customs of its culture. The gospel speaks a Yes and a No to each cultural form—yes to the creational structure and no the idolatrous distortion. The church must discern what subversive solidarity means in each situation. Nor is the notion of subversive fulfillment only applicable in a non-western context. Western culture no less than Hindu culture is shaped by core religious convictions.

Newbigin's understanding of challenging relevance is similar to Johann Bavinck's understanding of *possessio*. Bavinck writes:

We would . . . prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take possession [as opposed to the common terms “adaptation” and “accommodation”] . . . Within the framework of the of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come. . . . [Christ] fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it new direction. Such is neither “adaption” nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth (Bavinck 1960: 178-179).

On the one hand, Newbigin has elaborated the concept further than Bavinck and brought it to bear on western culture. On the other hand, Bavinck has offered a more solid theological and philosophical foundation for this concept than Newbigin. This foundation is provided by Bavinck in his philosophical understanding of culture and in his theological understanding of creational revelation and common grace.

There are two important aspects of Bavinck's philosophical analysis of culture that are important. On the one hand, culture is a unified whole: “We regard them [pagan religions and cultures] as powerful, life-controlling entities, as complete indivisible structures, because each

element coheres with all others and receives its meaning from the total structures” (Bavinck 1960: 173). On the other hand, each aspect of culture is shaped by an idolatrous religious core: “The entire culture, in all its manifestations, is a structural totality, in which everything hangs together, and in which religion occupies a central position” (Ibid.) While both of these elements of culture are implicit in Newbign’s thought, they are insufficiently developed.

Affirming only these two dimensions of culture by itself would lead to a pessimistic analysis of culture which could only provide a basis for an anticultural rejection but not subversive fulfillment. Therefore, the second theological observation is equally significant: God’s creational revelation or common grace continues to uphold his creation and does not permit human idolatry to run its gamut.<sup>7</sup> Bavinck comments: “We must remember that although man has fallen from God, and that the results of this fall are in evidence in his every thought and deed, nevertheless, thanks to God’s common grace, man is safeguarded against complete deterioration” (Ibid.).

It is precisely a recognition of both of these factors—the idolatrous shaping of all parts of a coherent culture and the powerful creation revelation of God<sup>8</sup>—that provides a foundation for subversive fulfillment. Every custom, institution, and practice of culture is corrupted by sin; yet the goodness of the creational structure remains because of God’s faithfulness to creation. This means that culture is redeemable; it also provides a strategy for cultural involvement.

While Griffioen is critical of Newbign, in fact, their views are quite similar. Griffioen has argued that the notion of “inner reformation” issuing from the Dutch neo-Calvinist or reformational tradition makes an inner connection between involvement in and opposition to culture. Henk Hart, for example, uses this term to describe the relation of the gospel to scholarship, one aspect of cultural development. He explains: “Christian scholars should work in science for continuing reformation, changing science radically from within, pulling its roots out of its traditionally idolatrous soil and transplanting them in the soil of the gospel” (Hart 1988: 14). Another Dutch neo-Calvinist, Al Wolters suggests that the way inner reformation takes place is when cultural products or institutions are renewed from within by discerning both the creational structure of each cultural product and how this structure has become misdirected by religious idolatry (Wolters 1978: 12, 13).

Newbign’s challenging relevance, Kraemer’s subversive

fulfillment, Bavinck's *possessio*, and Griffioen's inner reformation are quite similar in their approach to culture. All reject a revolutionary sweeping away of cultural institutions as well as a conservative acceptance of the status quo. All maintain the solidarity of the church with its culture, and thereby the attendant responsibility, while at the same time recognizing the separation from its culture that arises from differing religious commitments. All affirm that each part of culture is distorted by sin and must be reformed or subverted. All distinguish between cultural form or structure rooted in creation and the underlying faith commitments that shape it. The missionary encounter is at the level of ultimate faith commitments that shape the culture and not at the level of cultural structures *per se*. The language, emphases, and foci differ; but there is a fundamental agreement.<sup>9</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Is Newbigin's model of contextualization anticultural? Definitely not. Culture is the development of the creation and as such participates in the goodness of creation. The task of humankind in the creation is to care and cultivate it. The gospel is God's power in Christ and by the Spirit to restore the good creation. While the gospel judges the evil twisting of culture (God's no), it affirms and restores the good cultural formation (God's yes). More to the point is the question of whether or not Newbigin is countercultural. In comparison with many models of contextualization, Newbigin has highlighted the antithetical side of the cultural task, leading to this characterization. Perhaps his emphasis on the "forgotten word" of the gospel has been too strong at times. Yet he has rightly rooted the antithesis in Scripture's teaching on the comprehensive scope of sin's distortion and the gospel's restoration—two spiritual powers struggling for one domain. For the church to embody the comprehensive demands of the gospel will mean that it stands in opposition to the powers of idolatry that shape cultural unfolding. The church is only countercultural to the extent that it is engaged in the cultural task. And that countercultural stance is for the sake of obedient cultural development in keeping with the justice and love of the kingdom of God. It is ironic that Newbigin's emphasis on the solidarity of the church with its cultural community has led to a very different critique—that of a nostalgic hankering after Christendom. Yet his emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to exercise culturally formative power is rooted in his understanding of Scripture's teaching on creation. It



may be fairly said that at a number of points his articulation of the doctrine of creation remains undeveloped. Nevertheless, Newbigin has sought to forge a theory of contextualization in the way of creation, sin, and redemption. Yet there remains work to be done in providing a theory of contextualization that makes an inner connection between the two side of cultural involvement that the confession of Christ as Creator and Redeemer entails.

### Notes

1. Newbigin's most important paper on the subject of gospel and cultures is found in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1978a). For an analysis of Newbigin's understanding of contextualization see Goheen 2000: 331-370.

2. Bevans says the counter-cultural model, in which he places Lesslie Newbigin, "has much power and is quite attractive in many ways" (1999: 153). Griffioen is similarly appreciative referring to this model of contextualization as "inspiring" and "brilliant" (1996: 1).

3. About the same time that Newbigin delivered the paper *Can a Modern Society Be Christian?* (1995c), offering his agenda for the church's pursuit of this goal, Douglas John Hall made the comment at the 1996 Gospel and Culture Conference that it is wicked to seek a Christian society (see 1999: 73). For Hall, cultural power was one of the problems of Christendom; for Newbigin Christendom cannot be judged so easily.

4. Vandervelde is correct in seeking a resolution of the two sides of the cultural task in Newbigin's notion of "missionary encounter." Involved in this notion of missionary encounter are the following elements: the involvement of the church in every part of cultural life in solidarity with those of other faith commitments; the embodiment of the gospel as an alternative way of life to the cultural story; the challenge of the foundational beliefs of the cultural community that shape all aspects the society; the call for radical conversion, an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel.

5. Note Stephen Bevans's comment: "All of these models are valid as such, and all could be valid in the context of contemporary North America. However, I would suggest that serious consideration should be given to what I have called the 'counter-cultural model' for carrying out the church's mission in this context" (1999: 153).

6 I borrow this metaphor from Jack Thompson of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland

7 The term common grace is often misunderstood Bavinck does not stop to explain this term but his understanding is similar to G C Berkouwer who writes “Life of this earth does not yet disclose the full consequences of sin Calvin speaks of ‘common grace’ and, in this connection, he discusses virtues to be seen also in the lives of unbelievers He did not wish to ascribe these phenomena to a left-over goodness in nature—as if apostasy from God were not so serious—but rather he discerned here the power of God in revelation and in grace preserving life from total destruction” (Berkouwer 1959 20-21, see Berkouwer 1955 137-230)

8 Bavinck does not bring this notion to bear on western culture To do so requires the affirmation of another factor, that is, the formative effect of the gospel on western culture throughout Christendom Bavinck is dealing with cultures where the gospel has had no shaping influence However, in the West the gospel has shaped the world of culture This factor is important also for the notion of subversive fulfillment

9 There is a difference in focus, for example, between Newbigin on the one hand and Griffioen and on the other Newbigin’s concerns are *kerygmatic*, he is concerned for the preaching of the gospel Griffioen’s concerns are *philosophical*, he is concerned to reflect on the implications of the gospel for a philosophical description of the world Nevertheless, the fundamental agreement remains, both are concerned for a right relationship between gospel and culture

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### Summary

Newbigin's understanding of contextualization has been criticized as being countercultural, even anticultural. Is this a fair criticism? There are a number of reasons that this critique has been made. Newbigin's theoretical expression of contextualization stresses the judging character of the gospel, at certain points he lacks a well-articulated doctrine of creation, and his missionary experience in India and in Britain led to the emphasis on the antithetical side of the cultural task. However, Newbigin's understanding of contextualization affirms the two sides of the cultural task: solidarity in cultivating creation in cultural development and opposition to the sinful twisting of that development. This is rooted in Christ's relation to the creation as Creator and Redeemer and revealed most clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus. These two sides of the cultural task are formulated in Newbigin's notions of "missionary encounter" and "challenging relevance." The latter notion is borrowed from Alfred Hogg and is further shaped by Hendrik Kraemer's notion of "subversive fulfillment" and by Willem Visser 't Hooft's notion of "subversive accommodation." Newbigin's understanding is quite similar also to J. H. Bavinck's notion of "*possessio*" and Sander Griffioen's concept of "inner reformation." Newbigin utilizes the missionary communication of John's gospel as a model of challenging relevance. An analysis of these varying concepts uncovers an inner connection between affirmation and rejection, solidarity and opposition, development and antithesis in the church's responsibility to its cultural context. Newbigin's model of contextualization is not anticultural, it may be termed "countercultural" if it is recognized that the church's opposition to the distortion of culture that comes from its formative idolatrous core is for the sake of healthy cultural development. The church only takes a countercultural stance as it is engaged in cultural development and for the sake of obedient cultural unfolding.

Newbigin's Verständnis von Kontextualisierung ist als konterkulturell, ja sogar antikulturell kritisiert worden. Ist diese Kritik berechtigt? Es gibt eine Anzahl von Gründen, warum diese Kritik laut geworden ist. N's theoretischer Begriff der Kontextualisierung betont den Urteilscharakter des Evangeliums, an bestimmten Stellen lässt er eine klar formulierte Schöpfungslehre vermissen, und seine missionarischen Erfahrungen in Indien und Großbritannien führten zu einer (Über)betonung der antithetischen Seite der kulturellen Aufgabe. Allerdings bestätigt N's Verständnis von Kontextualisierung die beiden Seiten der kulturellen Aufgabe: Solidarität beim Pflegen der Schöpfung in der kulturellen Entwicklung und Opposition gegenüber der sundhaften Verzerrung dieser Entwicklung. Dies

wurzelt in der Beziehung Christi zur Schöpfung als Schöpfer und Erlöser und wird besonders deutlich offenbar im Tod und in der Auferstehung Jesu. Diese beiden Seiten der kulturellen Aufgabe werden formuliert in N's Begriffen von „missionarischer Begegnung“ und „fördernder Anwendbarkeit“. Letzterer Begriff ist von A. Hogg entlehnt und weiter ausgeformt nach H. Kraemers Begriff der „subversiven Erfüllung“ und W. Visser 't Hoofts Begriff der „subversiven Anpassung“. N's Verständnis ahnelt auch J. H. Beavincks Begriff der „*possessio*“ und S. Griffioens Konzept der „inneren Reformation“. N verwendet die missionarische Kommunikation des Johannesevangeliums als ein Modell der fordernden Anwendbarkeit. Eine Analyse dieser unterschiedlichen Konzepte enthüllt einen inneren Zusammenhang zwischen Bestätigung und Ablehnung, Solidarität und Opposition, Entwicklung und Antithese in der Verantwortung der Kirche für ihren kulturellen Kontext. N's Modell der Kontextualisierung ist nicht antikulturell, man könnte es als „konterkulturell“ bezeichnen, wenn man anerkennt, dass die Opposition der Kirche zur Verzerrung der Kultur, die aus deren vom Gotzendienst geprägten Kern hervorgeht, dem Zweck einer gesunden kulturellen Entwicklung dient. Die Kirche nimmt eine konterkulturelle Position bloß in so fern ein, als sie sich für kulturelle Entwicklung einsetzt um einer gehorsamen kulturellen Entfaltung willen.

El concepto de Newbigin de la contextualización ha sido criticado como contracultural, inclusive como anti-cultural. Es esta una crítica justa? Hay una serie de razones para que se haya hecho esta crítica. La expresión teórica de Newbigin de la contextualización enfatiza el carácter juzgador del evangelio, en ciertos momentos le falta una doctrina bien articulada de la creación, y su experiencia misionera en la India y en Gran Bretaña llevaron a un énfasis sobre el lado antitético de la tarea cultural. Sin embargo, la comprensión de Newbigin de la contextualización afirma los dos lados de la tarea cultural: solidaridad al cultivar la creación en un desarrollo cultural y la oposición a la tergiversación de este desarrollo. Esto se enraza en la relación de Cristo con la creación como Creador y Redentor y se revela con toda claridad en la muerte y resurrección de Jesús. Estos dos lados de la tarea cultural se formulan en las nociones de Newbigin de un “encuentro misionero” y de una “relevancia desafiadora”. Esta última noción la presto de Alfred Hogg y se conformo más detalladamente por la noción de Hendrik Kraemer quien habla de un “cumplimiento subversivo,” y la idea de Willem Visser 't Hooft de una “acomodación subversiva”. El concepto de Newbigin es muy parecido también con la idea de J. H. Bavinck de la *possessio* y con el concepto de Sander Griffioen de la “reforma interior”. Newbigin usa la comunicación misionera del evangelio de Juan como un modelo para la relevancia desafiadora. Un análisis de estos conceptos cambiantes descubre una conexión interna entre la afirmación y el rechazo, la solidaridad y la oposición, el desarrollo y la antítesis en la responsabilidad de la Iglesia por su contexto cultural. El modelo de la contextualización de Newbigin no es anti-cultural, puede ser llamado

“contracultural,” si se reconoce que la oposicion de la Iglesia a la distorsion de la cultura que sale de su medula idolatrica formativa es para el bien de un desarrollo cultural sano. La Iglesia solo toma una postura contracultural cuando esta comprometida en el desarrollo cultural y en favor de un despliegue cultural obediente.

On a critique la conception que Newbigin avait de la contextualisation comme etant contreculturelle et même anticulturelle. Cette critique est-elle justifiée ? Il y a plusieurs raisons a ce point de vue. La façon dont Newbigin a theorise la contextualisation souligne l'aspect 'jugement' de l'Evangile, il lui manque parfois une doctrine de la creation bien developpee, et son experience missionnaire en Inde et en Grande Bretagne l'a conduit a souligner l'aspect antithetique de la tâche culturelle. Pourtant, Newbigin affirme bien les deux faces de la tâche culturelle : cultiver activement la creation dans le developpement culturel et s'opposer a la distorsion que le peche introduit dans ce developpement. Cette conception est enracinee dans la relation du Christ a la creation, comme createur et redempteur, et revelee de façon la plus claire dans sa mort et sa resurrection. Il a exprime ces deux côtes de la tâche culturelle dans les notions de « rencontre missionnaire » et de « pertinence critique ». Cette dernière expression est empruntée a Alfred Hogg et a été developpee par Hendrik Kraemer et son « accomplissement subversif », et par Willem Visser't Hooft et son « accueil subversif ». La conception de Newbigin est également tres proche de la notion de « *possessio* » de J. H. Bavinck et de l'idee de « reforme interieure » de Sander Griffioen. Newbigin utilise la communication missionnaire dans l'Evangile de Jean, comme modele de pertinence critique. Une analyse de ces divers concepts devoile un lien interne entre la mise en valeur et le rejet, la solidarite et l'opposition, le developpement et l'antithese dans la responsabilite de l'Eglise envers son contexte culturel. Le modele de contextualisation developpe par Newbigin n'est pas anticulturel, on peut l'appeler « contreculturel » si l'on accepte que l'opposition de l'Eglise a la distorsion de la culture qui vient de son fond idolâtre, s'exerce en faveur d'un developpement culturel sain. L'Eglise ne prend une position contreculturelle que dans la mesure ou elle est engagee dans le developpement culturel et en vue d'un deploiement culturel en conformite avec le dessein de Dieu.



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