

'Lesslie Newbigin: A Postmodern Missiologist?'

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to suggest two lines of thinking and reflection upon the missiology of Lesslie Newbigin that merit renewed attention. Firstly, it will suggest that Newbigin can be shown to have developed a missiological approach that effectively anticipates many of the questions raised by contemporary postmodern perspectives; and secondly, that the way in which he harnesses this methodology to the practice of mission can be said to be both appropriate and applicable within a postmodern environment. Newbigin's formal contribution to the debates about postmodernity were necessarily limited by the fact that they began to take centre stage in theological and missiological circles when he had already reached an advanced age^[1] In fact all Newbigin's references to 'postmodernity' occur in his post-1991 writings. ^[2]But inasmuch as he does refer to this new 'movement' of thought, it is important first to address the question of how Newbigin understood its 'mood' and 'mindset', and then to assess the conclusions he drew with regard to the challenges that it presented.

1. Newbigin's engagement with 'postmodernity'

Newbigin sees postmodernity as a style of thinking which is fundamentally opposed to modernity's preoccupation with 'metanarratives'. 'The postmodernists tell us', he writes in 1992, 'that the days of the great "metanarrative" are over. They reject the story which sees the world-wide

expansion of the civilization developed in Europe as the master-thread of history.[3]

In the same year Newbigin develops this perspective in a paper entitled 'Mission Agenda' where he writes that - taking their cue from Nietzsche:

... the postmodernists are telling us that the so-called eternal truths are simply products of particular histories. There are no absolute eternal truths, there are only stories - metanarratives that make rival claims to authority in human affairs. The European narrative is only one among many, and as the recent responses to the five hundredth anniversary of the painful discovery of Christopher Columbus by the peoples of the Americas have reminded us, this narrative is now widely contested[4]

This appraisal is further clarified in Newbigin's 1993 article, 'Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach'.[5] Here he describes the term 'post-modernism' as 'somewhat slippery', but argues that it is 'easy to identify the movement of thought which it denotes'.[6] In what follows, the same features are outlined as before, but these are now articulated in a more narrowly epistemological framework. So, he writes of 'post-modernism' that:

Its main feature is the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth-claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion.[7]

He goes on:

What Nietzsche and his modern disciples have done is to demonstrate that the so called 'eternal truths of reason' are in fact products of particular histories. There is no such thing as a supra-historical 'reason' standing above all actual human reasoning, which is always the reasoning of human beings in a particular cultural and historical situation. So we do not have any 'eternal truths'; we have only narratives of how beliefs and ideas have been born and developed.[8]

Newbigin's interpretation of postmodernity can therefore be characterized by its identification of the epistemological implications of the rejection of the idea of metanarratives. His concerns about the transition to postmodernity emerge accordingly along two connected lines of questioning. Firstly, in the light of this rejection, is the claim to exclusive truth which Christians espouse any

longer possible in the radically pluralised context of postmodernity? Secondly - assuming that such confession *is* still possible - how do Christians counter the argument that their proclamation amounts to an abuse of power (and is therefore suspect on moral as well as ideological grounds)?

It is these twin themes which effectively dominate Newbigin's engagement with postmodernity. In the light Newbigin's work as a whole, it is no surprise to find that both of them are 'epistemologically' focussed - the first obviously so, and the second by implication. In order to assess his contribution in a postmodern context, it is important to see how he develops arguments in response to these questions.

a) Knowledge as culturally and socially embodied

Those familiar with Newbigin's work will know that his approach to the question of epistemology was deeply influenced by the work of Michael Polanyi: in particular that the so-called objectivity of the Enlightenment's approach to the question of truth needed to be reinterpreted by a realisation of the personal and subjective elements in the whole process of knowing. This element in Newbigin's thought - which long predated his discussions of postmodernity - nonetheless makes him immediately sympathetic to the force of postmodern insights about the subjectivity of knowledge. But in addition, Newbigin also appears to go a step further in accepting the force of the postmodern assumption that all truth is - as he puts it - 'socially and historically embodied'[9]

This concession to the postmodern mindset tends to characterize his discussions about the defence of faith claims within a deeply pluralised society. For example, in a paper delivered in Dublin in 1992, he says that when '... postmodernists are telling us that the so-called eternal truths are simply products of particular histories', he expresses his hearty approval. He concurs that: 'There is no exercise of human reason that is not socially embodied, rooted in a tradition that is carried by a language'[10] Or again, in a 1992 issue of *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* he replies to criticisms made against an earlier article of his (entitled 'The Gospel as Public

Truth')[11]in which he had attacked the modernist idea of truths as 'timeless statements'. In reply he states that, 'In the post-modernist revolt against the Enlightenment Lessing's logic is reversed: the so-called eternal truths of reason are in fact products of contingent facts of history.' He then adds significantly: 'I cannot help thinking that at this point Christians are on the side of the post-modernists[12] More recently, he writes (in his 1995 book *Proper Confidence*), 'I have argued (in agreement with the postmodernists) that all truth claims are culturally and historically embodied.'[13]

What is significant for an understanding of Newbigin's positioning is that as far as the cultural transition to *postmodernity* is concerned, we find him repeatedly siding with the newer position against the older. In other words, he takes the postmodern assault *against* some central assumptions of modernity and adopts them as his own. To this extent, therefore, Newbigin not only recognizes the change in perspective that postmodernity brings but may be said to be identifying himself with it. But does this mean therefore that Newbigin accepts the radical pluralism of postmodernity? Newbigin certainly recognizes the force of the question. As he puts it in a paper given at the 2nd 'Gospel and Our Culture Conference' in 1992:

. . . can there be any criterion of truth, or is all claim to knowledge so culturally conditioned that we have to live in a world of total relativism? In other words, is pluralism fatal to the claim to know the truth? Can there be affirmation of truth in a pluralist world, in a world where we have to acknowledge pluralism?[14]

In developing his response to these questions, Newbigin (again relying significantly upon the insights of Michael Polanyi) points to the example of the scientific community as an appropriate paradigm of an organization 'which is pluralist without falling into relativism.[15] 'The scientific community is pluralist,' Newbigin argues, in the sense that 'there is no central control determining who shall research into what questions and on what lines.[16]But he continues:

. . . it is not pluralist in the relative sense. If scientists in Tokyo and Cambridge come up with different views about the structure of the atom, the Cambridge dons do not say 'well that may be true for them in Tokyo but it is not true for us'. There is a struggle. There is a

continuous battle to test. The findings of the different scholars are published, they are open to criticism.[17]

Newbiggin proceeds to defend this notion against the charge that the 'truth' established by this approach is finally subjective:

. . . how are the findings of science saved from subjectivity? Not because their truth can be demonstrated from some centre outside the culture of science. Their truth is established . . . firstly, by the fact that the findings are published, are made available to everyone with the belief, that if they are true, they are true for everyone, and therefore they must be published; and secondly that the scientist takes the responsibility by publishing. . . . so he takes the responsibility for this statement; and finally the affirmation is tested in all kinds of situations. There is no other basis for the claim that science gives us true knowledge of what is the case apart from this.[18]

In a similar fashion Newbiggin roots Christian witness in the context of a community: this time of course, the Church. Its claim to knowledge is distinguished from the foundationalism offered by the Enlightenment by its rootedness not in a series of 'neutral' propositions or 'facts', but in a 'story' - the story of God's dealings with the humanity, recorded in the Bible:

Now that is a different kind of coherence from the one offered by the Enlightenment. It's a coherence which is centered in a story, and a person, and which as we know from our experience in the life of the church makes it possible for an immense variety of different cultures and, therefore, different ways of understanding the world to live together in mutual trust and confidence. So the church is a plural society, but it is not a clueless pluralism. It is not a relativistic pluralism.[19]

This approach to the question of knowledge leads Newbiggin into seemingly 'postmodern' territory in that it accepts the principle of 'local' knowledge as espoused by writers such as Foucault[20] He is happy to make this concession as we have seen and even counts 'postmoderns' as 'allies' in the argument against the 'modernist' stress on an Olympian form of objectivism. 'Ironically,' he writes accordingly, 'the post-modernists could be our allies in protesting against the rationalist impasse.[21] But this alliance has its limits. In a 1992 paper, given at a Congress in Hanover he states:

I want to suggest that in our concern to communicate the gospel to our European home, we can regard the postmodernists as allies up to a certain point. . . . Among all the stories that human beings tell about themselves and the world, there could be a true story. No logic requires us to deny this possibility. And this, of course, is what the Christian Church confesses. We believe and confess that there is a true story that gives the clue to the meaning of the whole human and cosmic story, because God has chosen a people to be the bearer of the meaning of the whole story. This is the story the Bible tells, with its center in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our task is to tell this story.[22]

b) Knowledge as the 'will to power'

The other aspect of the epistemological question that Newbigin deals with as part of the postmodern transition, concerns the use of power. This discussion is connected both to his analysis of pluralism, and to his advocacy of the scientific community as a prime example of what he describes as an example of 'committed pluralism'. By this he refers to its 'commitment to search for the truth, a commitment that implies the belief that the truth can be known - not fully and completely, but in part and with increasing depth and range and coherence'[23] But if Newbigin wants to uphold the idea of 'the story as public truth'[24] does this not amount to an imposition of what Foucault calls a 'regime of truth'? Once again, Newbigin is well aware of the question. As he expresses it:

It is characteristic of the 'post-modern' situation that claims to truth are regarded as concealed assertions of power. In this perspective, evangelism is seen as an expression of the will to dominate, and dialogue is seen as the renunciation of this desire[25]

Newbigin is sensitive to this aspect of the postmodern critique - not least because it so directly challenges his thesis at the point where he wishes to establish the 'public' dimensions of truth, and to encourage Christians to proclaim the good news. The 'typically post?modern situation' he writes, is one 'in which any statement of truth is examined, not with the question, "Is it true?" but with the question "whose interests is it serving?" "Whose power is it trying to assert?"[26]

There are three stages in Newbigin's response to this challenge. In the first place, he argues that *every* assertion of 'truth' is actually an expression of 'power'. [27] As a result, one cannot escape the claim to truth of any and every public utterance. In this sense, *all* narratives carry within themselves the potential for oppression, and must therefore be intrinsically and characteristically narratives of 'power'. 'There are only stories,' he writes, 'and the Christian story is one among them. These stories are, as the post-modernists correctly perceive, also claims to power [28]

But, secondly, Newbigin argues that the relationships involved in the process of Spiritual knowing do not in fact set up the kinds of 'power structures' attacked by postmodernists. The relationship of the Christian 'knower' to the object of 'knowledge' is not to be characterised as one of 'possession'. The Christian disciple is by contrast a 'seeker' after truth: one who is 'invited' or 'drawn' into further truth, rather than one who takes 'possession' of it. Accordingly, the true Christian is not a 'captor' of truth but one who is taken captive by it. The believer is 'on the way' to an ever-deeper appreciation of the truth through a process of self-giving and 'indwelling'. Newbigin expresses this concept in the following way:

I find the locus of truth in a story of which I am a part. I see my relation to truth as being not that of a possessor but of a seeker who trusts that he is on a path that leads to further understanding, but who knows that full understanding of the truth is something promised only at the final consummation of the story. [29]

He uses similar language elsewhere: 'Truth is a future assurance which beckons,' he writes, 'not a possession of our own' [30] Or again:

Christian discipleship is an exploration - spiritual, intellectual, practical - of the real world from this starting point. The 'certainty' of a Christian is not (or ought not to be) a claim to possess full and unrevisable truth. It is a personal trust in one who has proved trustworthy. [31]

The concept of 'personal' trust in God is therefore irreconcilable with the idea of 'possession' or 'control', but involves the altogether different ideas of 'relatedness' and 'fellowship'. Moreover, the claim to 'possess' the truth is tantamount to godlessness, for it denies the priority of faith as the only

grounds for certainty, and thereby falls back into a false Enlightenment belief in some kind of neutrally objective truth. As he puts it:

Here is the heart of the matter. A kind of 'indubitable certainty' which claims to possess knowledge is all part of our alienation from God. The reality is a gracious God who leads us into a knowledge of Him by a love which calls forth the commitment of faith. Faith is not a claim to indubitable and irreformable certainty. It is a personal and total personal commitment to the One who is able to lead us into truth in its fullness.[32]

The third level of Newbigin's response to the charge about 'power' is to argue that although Christianity may rightly be numbered amongst what he calls the 'master-narratives', it is nonetheless 'in one vital respect unique'[33]

Its uniqueness can most simply be indicated by saying that from start to finish it is marked by the sign of the cross. Every 'master-narrative' has an in-built tendency to imperialism, because it looks for an intra-historical triumph of the truth for which it stands. Christians (God forgive us) have frequently been seduced into thinking and acting in precisely this way. But when they are so seduced, and we still are, they deny the true story. At the centre of the Christian story stands the fact that the incarnate Lord, by whom and for whom all things exist, suffered rejection and death. That fact precludes any expectation that there can be a total union of truth and power within history.[34]

In concluding this summary of Newbigin's responses to the epistemological challenge of postmodernity, it is worth noting a very significant point. Newbigin's responses are not newly 'minted' - as it were - but represent the development of arguments that he had previously deployed in the context of 'modernity'. Significantly therefore, Newbigin's existing framework which had already been in place for some years makes his thinking conducive to certain central postmodern assumptions when first he meets them. We turn therefore to consider the roots of this engagement.

2 Roots of engagement: the influence of Michael Polanyi

The key influence on Newbigin's thought in this context is the philosopher Michael Polanyi - to whom reference has already been made. He it is who supplies the 'hermeneutical key' to the later missiology of Newbigin, and it is

precisely this indebtedness to Polanyi's work that helps to illuminate Newbigin's postmodern 'credentials'.

Newbigin had first come across Polanyi's writings after the publication of Polanyi's major treatise, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, in 1958. His friend J.H. Oldham had been encouraging him for many years to engage with the thought of the Hungarian philosopher,[35]and Newbigin was immediately impressed with the book. Indeed, he resolved thereafter to reread it every ten years, and commented in the 1990s that he had certainly 'read it several times since'.[36] This indebtedness can be outlined in three areas.

a) The rejection of the Enlightenment's quest for certainty

Newbigin writes in an article explaining the background to the writing of *The Other Side of 1984*, that in his quest for answers to the question 'What would be involved in a really missionary encounter of the gospel with this European culture of which I am a part?', he had found 'great help in Michael Polanyi's *Post-Critical Philosophy*' - specifically at the level at which Polanyi 'exposed the fallacies underlying that dichotomy which is so pervasive in our "modern" culture between "scientific knowledge" which is supposed to be "objective" and faith or belief, which is supposed to be "subjective"'. [37]

Increasingly from the 1980s onwards Newbigin deploys the argument about the 'personal' component of the scientific enterprise in order to highlight the more 'subjective' element in all that the Enlightenment project (by means of its 'scientific method') assumed to be essentially 'objective'. He writes for example in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* that:

I have emphasized the character of scientific knowledge as - in Polanyi's phrase - 'personal knowledge.' It is knowledge to which the scientist commits herself personally and on which she stakes her professional reputation. She accepts the risk that she might be wrong.[38]

Then he continues:

If this is so, must we not say that it is part of the deep sickness of our culture that, ever since Descartes, we have been seduced by the idea of

a kind of knowledge which could not be doubted, in which we would be absolutely secure from personal risk?[39]

On one occasion he even refers to 'the new Cartesian starting point' as 'a small-scale repetition of the Fall'(!)[40]

Polanyi's own rejection of 'neutral' standpoints stems from his reaction against the mindset of the communist regime in Hungary (from which he had fled) which distanced truth claims from the moral responsibilities attached to them.[41] Likewise, his approach to the 'subjective' perspective of truth and his advocacy of the concept of 'personal knowledge' can also be said to have grown out of this rejection, representing the outworking of the view that to claim truth involves a personal and moral responsibility. It is interesting (and suggestive) that Polanyi, though chronologically prior to the contemporary 'postmodern' era, comes from a background of communist oppression whose evils also motivated postmodern writers like Foucault or Lyotard in the France of the 1960s. This similarity of origin results in an intense suspicion of 'unifying discourses' in all three writers, though each develops his case in different ways.

From this premise about the personal nature of knowing, Polanyi develops both an individual and corporate understanding of its development.

b) The communitarian nature of knowing

Polanyi argues that the reason why all knowing is 'personal' is that one of its major components is the 'indwelling' of assumptions and skills which are for the moment subconscious to a person's specific actions or thinking, but which are nonetheless real. 'To affirm anything', he writes, 'implies . . . an appraisal of our own art of knowing, and the establishment of truth becomes decisively dependent on a set of personal criteria of our own which cannot be formally defined.[42] Polanyi proceeds to develop this line of argument in both its individual and corporate dimensions.

At an individual level, he uses the example of language to show how the articulation of concepts and ideas is integrally related to a 'latent knowledge' within humans which 'gropes' towards clarity of expression. As he puts it:

'Languages are the product of man's groping for words in the process of making new conceptual decisions, to be conveyed by words.[43] Polanyi makes the link between this example and the wider thesis about the 'personal' nature of knowing by showing how even at the most basic level, there is a 'personal coefficient' in the very act of 'uttering speech'.[44] Consequently, speech emerges out of an 'active shaping of knowledge' which is part and parcel of the most basic exploratory activity characteristic of human beings[45]

Polanyi moves on from here to develop the 'corporate' dimension to this conception of 'indwelling'. He introduces the idea that learning is the submission of the learner to an 'authoritative tradition'.[46]

This 'grounding' of the idea of knowledge within the contextual life of a community is central to Polanyi's articulation of how such communities both survive, and expand. The idea of 'apprenticeship' is an extension of the concept of 'indwelling', and Polanyi again uses the example of language to illustrate its operation:

All arts are learned by intelligently imitating the way they are practised by other persons in whom the learner places his confidence. To know a language is an art, carried on by tacit judgements and the practice of unspecifiable skills. . . . Spoken communication is the successful application by two persons of the linguistic knowledge and skill acquired by such apprenticeship, one person wishing to transmit, the other to receive, information.[47]

From this foundational example, Polanyi proposes that the same kind of apprenticeship exists within every kind of community and is exhibited in its pursuit of further knowledge. Thus, to make progress within such a community requires a 'previous act of affiliation, by which the novice accepts apprenticeship to a community which cultivates this lore, appreciates its values and strives to act by its standards.[48] But such progression depends upon both a recognition of, and an adherence to, 'the framework of interpersonal obligations imposed by the social lore of the group.[49] As a result, he can say that the 'combined action of authority and trust which underlies both the learning of language and its use for carrying messages, is a simplified instance of a process which enters into the whole transmission of culture to succeeding generations.[50]

Both these elements of 'apprenticeship' and 'tradition' are deployed by Newbigin to form the structure of the missionary ecclesiology of his later writings. Firstly, Newbigin uses the idea of apprenticeship within a tradition to re-affirm the strength of the Christian 'tradition' of knowledge and experience in which the believing community has been nurtured, and upon which it must continue to draw if it is to grow in maturity. Indeed, part of the Church's incapacity for effective mission is explained by its refusal to espouse and live in the strength of this 'tradition'. 'One of the conditions for the Church's faithful participation in . . . a pluralist society', he argues, 'would be that the Church would have the same kind of respect for its tradition as the scientific community has for its scientific tradition'.^[51] Note the parallel. He continues:

While recognizing that all traditions are open to correction and development, it must ensure that those who undertake these tasks have first had a thorough *apprenticeship in the tradition*. . . . Science has become the most dynamic element in our culture because the scientific community has continued to believe that truth is knowable and that, insofar as it is known, it has authority. Science thrusts powerfully forward because it has strong traditions.^[52]

Newbigin argues strongly that the Church must follow this example, and lays the blame for what he calls the 'relatively anaemic state of theological studies' on the fact that Christians have 'lost their roots and are drifting with the current of contemporary fashion.'^[53]

At a second level also, Polanyi's notion of an 'apprenticeship within the tradition' is incorporated by Newbigin as an intrinsic element in his understanding of how true disciples are developed. 'Like the scientist,' he argues, 'the Christian believer has to learn to indwell the tradition. . . . He has to trust the tradition and trust the teacher as an authorized interpreter of it. . . . There is no alternative to this. . . . It is a personal and practical discipleship within the tradition.'^[54]

At both these levels then, Newbigin builds on Polanyi's insights about 'apprenticeship' within the scientific community and applies them to the Christian Church. Not surprisingly perhaps, he also finds no difficulty in drawing parallels between what Polanyi calls the 'Republic of Science' (the community of scientists within which the enterprise of science is

pursued)[55]and the body of Christ. In a manner corresponding to the behaviour appropriate to the scientific community, the Church must act as a community of responsible investigators, located in a tradition of shared knowledge, and engaged in exploring the reality of the created world by means of an inherited and 'indwelt' tradition. Only as a result of this may Christians be in a position to declare (or in Polanyi's word, 'publish') what they know.[56]

The integration of these dimensions of 'knowing' within the Church leads Newbigin in turn to a description of the missionary aspect of ecclesial 'indwelling'. This is that by means of such an 'indwelling', the gospel might not only be 'interpreted' with increasing clarity to those who are already Christians (and so strengthen the ongoing life of the Christian tradition itself), but might also be made known to those *outside* the church community as well. This further dimension to the notion of 'indwelling' is encapsulated by Newbigin by means of his reference to the local congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'.

From these foundations it is therefore interesting to note the manner in which Newbigin describes the Christian call to proclaim the good news.

c) Witness from within a tradition

One of the fundamental premises undergirding Polanyi's notion of knowledge is that it is 'objective' in the sense of 'establishing contact with a hidden reality' and therefore claims 'universal validity'. [57] This notion is developed as an intrinsic aspect of the 'personal' nature of all knowing, for it involves an 'originality' [58] on the part of the 'discoverer' which may not appear to be integrated with other knowledge at the point of discovery. It therefore represents a personal 'intuition' involving 'risk'. 'Personal knowledge' he writes 'is an intellectual commitment, and as such is inherently hazardous. [59] Nonetheless, this passion for discovery (what Polanyi calls a 'heuristic passion') carries within its self-understanding an inevitably 'public' side. Discoveries demand by their very nature to be 'published' because they bear upon 'an aspect of reality, a reality largely hidden to us . . . [60] As a result he

asserts in a significant statement, that: 'By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact necessarily carry *universal intent*.' [61]

Consequently, Polanyi's plea is that although a scientist's 'intimations of a hidden reality are personal' and constitute beliefs 'which - owing to his originality - as yet he alone holds':

Yet they are not a subjective state of mind, but convictions held with universal intent, and heavy with arduous projects. It was he who decided what to believe, yet there is no arbitrariness in his decision. For he arrived at his conclusions by the utmost exercise of responsibility. He has reached responsible beliefs, born of necessity, and not changeable at will. In a heuristic commitment, affirmation, surrender and legislation are fused into a single thought, bearing on a hidden reality. [62]

It follows from this that the scientist will of necessity want to place his findings in the public arena not only because he believes that he has made contact with 'reality', but also because to do so will be to test whether the results of his findings can be borne out in practice, leading himself and others to fresh discoveries and to further truth. Polanyi therefore states that 'in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my finding.' [63] Indeed, the knower 'can do no more, and he would evade his calling by doing less.

Note therefore how Newbigin himself articulates the vision for a Christian proclamation. It is - he says - a commitment 'to the understanding of a reality which is not in my mind but "out there." And the proof of this is in my willingness to publish it and to test it in all relevant situations.' [64]

(i) On the theme of 'testing'

Newbigin explicitly adopts Polanyi's view in his 1995 book *Proper Confidence* as follows :

Polanyi says that the truth of the claim either will or will not be validated depending on whether or not it leads to further truth. A valid truth claim will lead to new discovery ? often to discoveries undreamt of by the scientist [*sic*] themselves. The truth claims of scientists are

thus not irreformable and indubitable claims to possess the truth; rather they are claims to be on the way to the fullness of truth.[65]

That this understanding of truth is central to Newbigin's later missiology may be seen in a quotation from Newbigin's 'Conference Call' for the 'Gospel and Culture' conference in July 1992. Here, without specific reference to Polanyi, we find both the Polanyian call for a 'new starting point' alongside a Polanyian conception of truth. Newbigin argues that:

To affirm the Gospel as public truth is to invite acceptance of a new starting point for thought, the truth of which will be proved only in the course of a life of reflection and action which proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals.[66]

(ii) On the theme of 'publishing'

Newbigin once more carries over Polanyi's language of 'publishing with universal intent' (using it eight times in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*).[67]and does so in a way that - like his mentor - closely connects it to the future 'testing' and 'establishing' of truth.

The following quotation from Newbigin's 1988 article 'Our Missionary Responsibility in the Crisis of Western Culture' illustrates these interrelated aspects:

. . . this personal commitment is, as Polanyi says, 'with universal intent'. . . . It is made in the belief that this is the way to grasp reality more truly, not just that it is what I personally prefer. It is made in the faith that what is shown as truth is truth for all. And if it is indeed what I believe, it will prove itself so by opening the way to fresh discoveries and fresh coherences and fresh clarities. [68]

Like scientific discoveries which make contact with a hidden reality, it is precisely because faith claims have 'universal intent' that they must be published. 'We must seek to show others that they are valid' he argues[69]and 'we express that intent by publishing them and inviting all people to consider and accept them'.[70]By the same means this 'publication' will provide the grounds upon which religious claims are tested for their ability to lead the enquirer to what Newbigin describes variously as 'confirmation by further

experience',[71]or 'experimental verification',[72] or to what he summarises elsewhere as 'fresh discoveries and fresh coherences and fresh clarities'.[73]

3 Conclusion - Newbigin: a 'postmodern' before postmodernity arrived?

One can argue on the basis of these observations that Newbigin's programme is one that engages much more constructively with the postmodern context than has yet been noted. Indeed, one can argue that inasmuch as his missionary agenda is to be taken seriously, it has to be taken seriously in the context of 'postmodernity' at least as much as in that of 'modernity'. This is primarily in our view because the *means* whereby he mounts his response to the postmodern challenge can be shown to have already adopted positions that make such a response both sustainable and engaging to postmodern thinking.

There are three aspects to this 'sustainability'. The first is the fact that with most postmoderns he has already rejected the notion of an overarching 'Enlightenment' standpoint by which to judge between different standpoints. As he engages with the challenges of postmodernity, this enables him to undercut the challenge that Christian faith is ultimately in harness with certain powerful Enlightenment notions about the supremacy and primacy of Reason. As we have shown, the fact that he doesn't have to defend Christianity from this standpoint (however 'modified' is its structure) means that his apologetic is able to begin its work much 'further down the line' than some 'modernist' approaches that are more concerned with establishing prior foundationalist criteria with which to judge competing truth claims.

Secondly, and closely allied to this, is his appeal to the gospel as a 'story' rather than as a set of 'doctrines' or as some sort of propositional 'system'. As he repeatedly insists, 'the dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.[74]The older 'orthodoxy' (particularly amongst evangelicals) has often been characterised by the attempt to 'share the gospel' as a systematic framework of belief or as a set of doctrinal 'points' abstracted from the wider biblical narrative, rather than as the

narrative or story itself.[75] That this newer appeal to the gospel as 'story' has become the 'vogue' in positioning Christian faith in a postmodern context[76] should not detract from the fact that Newbigin was doing it long before postmodernity came into focus as a cultural phenomenon.[77] Newbigin's apologetic can therefore be said to have already taken seriously the power of 'narrative' to convey truth over against an older insistence, for example, upon notions of the referentiality of the biblical text to 'ideas' and 'concepts'. [78] Newbigin's 'narrative' approach is similar in its central emphasis to that of Hans Frei in arguing, as Newbigin puts it, that 'the Bible, taken as a whole, fitly renders God, who is not merely the correlate or referent of universal natural religious experience but is the author and sustainer of all things.[79]

In addition, we have seen that part of Newbigin's response to the postmodern challenge about 'power' is to insist that the biblical story itself revolves around a suffering and dying saviour. This enables him to hold together a commitment to the gospel story as 'metanarrative' as well as an emphasis upon 'publishing' it evangelistically, in the knowledge that the claims of the story itself undercut the postmodern challenge about 'power'. Once more, Newbigin was doing this before other writers began to advocate the value and appropriateness of such strategies amongst postmoderns.[80] Moreover, Newbigin's pre-existing commitment to an understanding of evangelism as 'telling the story' had already placed him in a position that made this connection a natural progression, rather than a change of tactic.[81]

Thirdly, Newbigin's Polanyian approach to the nature of the Church - as an indwelt 'hermeneutic of the gospel' - long predated the onset of postmodernity. As such it anticipated the current re-emphasis upon an 'integrated' understanding of congregational evangelism in which verbal witness and corporate holiness are held together. This integrated and vital connection between belief and demonstration has now become common amongst apologists seeking to engage with postmoderns - perhaps because the traditions from which such apologists have come had managed effectively to divorce the two.[82] Again, Newbigin's own methodology is one that had already perceived this vital connection and had expressed its necessity not

only as an apologetic expedient, but as a challenge - first and foremost - to the authenticity of the Church.

In these ways then, Newbigin can rightly be considered a 'postmodern' before postmodernity 'arrived'. But in addition one can argue that he offers the contemporary apologist appropriate and applicable strategies within a postmodern context. Newbigin can helpfully be situated amongst those who take the postmodern transition seriously - with its implications about neutrality and the place of narrative traditions. But unlike some contemporary thinkers like Hauerwas or Lindbeck, he does not accept that the church's story must now become 'boundaried' or 'sectarian' because of the nature of its language and tradition.

We are commissioned to bring good news, to tell the story of God's marvellous and mighty acts for the salvation of the world. We must not withhold this story from anyone. To keep it to ourselves, as though it were a private 'in-house' story of the Church, as though Jesus were the lord of Christians but not the lord of all, would be intolerable sectarianism. We have no right to keep silent about it, and if we try to do so we deny its truth.[83]

If modernity's outlook was about rational 'certainties', and postmodernity's about a radical perspectivism, Newbigin presents us with a model of a third possibility: 'witness' to the truth from within a tradition. It seems therefore that Newbigin has much to offer the contemporary apologist in a postmodern milieu. As Newbigin put it: 'We stand among all other human beings with their different stories to bear witness to what God has done. We do so because we have been laid hold of and commissioned to do so.'[84]

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Notes:

i[1] His interaction with modernity (let alone postmodernity) began only after he had 'retired'. He was 74 when *The Other Side* of 1984 was published in 1983.

i[2] Purely as a matter of linguistic usage, he uses the word-group 'postmodern' (with various suffixes) twenty times in his writings, and the word-group 'post-modern' (with various suffixes) thirty times. The phrase 'post modern' (without hyphen) occurs once.

i[3] Newbigin 1992c: 1. For the idea of postmodernity as the rejection of metanarrative, see also Newbigin 1993a: 343; 1995: 27; 1997: 4; 1998: 151.

i[4] Newbigin 1992e: 187.

i[5] Newbigin 1993b

i[6] Newbigin 1993b: 231.

i[7] Newbigin 1993b: 231. For the influence of Foucault in this analysis, see Newbigin 1991c: 2; 1992d: 1, 4, 6; 1993a: 343; 1994: 63; 1995: 27, 73; and 1996: 9..

i[8] Newbigin 1993b: 232.

i[9] Newbigin 1992d: 2.

i[10] Newbigin 1992e: 187.

i[11] Newbigin 1991a.

i[12] Newbigin 1992d: 2-3.

i[13] Newbigin 1995: 97 (also 73).

i[14] Newbigin 1991b: 2-3.

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- i[15] Newbigin 1991b: 4.
- i[16] Newbigin 1991b: 4.
- i[17] Newbigin 1991b: 4.
- i[18] Newbigin 1991b: 5. The available transcript of the lecture leaves some infelicities of style!
- i[19] Newbigin 1991b: 7.
- i[20] Newbigin refers to Foucault with approval in this context (e.g., Newbigin 1992d: 6, where, having written of postmodernity's belief that: 'The so-called "eternal truths of reason" are in fact products of particular histories' he comments that - as a result '... we have *The Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche) and the Archaeology of the Social Sciences (Foucault).' He concludes that: 'It seems to me that, at this point, the Christian has to side with the post-modernists against the Enlightenment').
- i[21] Newbigin 1992f: 23.
- i[22] Newbigin 1992f: 202-3.
- i[23] Newbigin 1991e: 168. He contrasts this notion with that of 'agnostic pluralism' ('a situation in which it is assumed that ultimate truth is unknowable').
- i[24] Newbigin 1991b: 9.
- i[25] Newbigin 1993b: 240.
- i[26] Newbigin 1991b: 4 (also 3).
- i[27] Newbigin 1991b: 3: 'Affirmations of truth . . . are merely assertions of power.'
- i[28] Newbigin 1993b: 233.
- i[29] Newbigin 1992d: 7.
- i[30] Newbigin 1991d: 2.
- i[31] Newbigin 1992a: 2.
- i[32] Newbigin 1993a: 350
- i[33] Newbigin 1992d: 8.
- i[34] Newbigin 1992d: 8; also 1993b: 234f.
- i[35] Oldham had first met Polanyi in 1944 and corresponded with him until Oldham's death in 1969. Polanyi also participated in Oldham's intellectual

discussion groups (originally called 'The Moot') for about sixteen years. This is doubtless the background to Oldham's recommendation of Polanyi to Newbigin. Note Polanyi's dedication of Polanyi 1959 to Oldham.

i[36] Quoted in Wainwright 2000: 22.

i[37] Newbigin 1985: 8.

i[38] Newbigin 1989b: 48.

i[39] Newbigin 1989b: 48-49.

i[40] Newbigin 1991e: 27, adding that he hopes that this view is 'not overdramatizing'!

i[41] See his essays 'Beyond Nihilism' and 'The Message of the Hungarian Revolution' in Polanyi 1969. He came to Britain as Professor of Physical Chemistry at Manchester University in 1933 and was offered a new chair in 'Social Studies' in 1948.

i[42] Polanyi 1958: 71. Polanyi summed up this aspect of knowing in his phrase 'We know more than we can tell' (e.g., 1969: 172, and 1966: 4).

i[43] Polanyi 1958: 112.

i[44] Polanyi 1958: 132

i[45] Polanyi 1958: 132.

i[46] Polanyi 1958: 203ff.

i[47] Polanyi 1958: 206.

i[48] Polanyi 1958: 207 (emphasis original).

i[49] Polanyi 1958: 212

i[50] Polanyi 1958: 207.

i[51] Newbigin 1988a: 170

i[52] Newbigin 1988a: 170 (emphasis added). Note once more the immediate connection with the scientific community.

i[53] Newbigin 1988a: 170.

i[54] Newbigin 1989b: 49-50.

i[55] The phrase is used by Polanyi in the title of a 1962 essay (in Polanyi 1969: 49-72).

i[56] See e.g., Newbigin 1989b: 43-51, or 1995: e.g., 39-44 for Newbigin's comparison of the Church with Polanyi's description of the scientific

community. He refers specifically to Polanyi's phrase 'The Republic of Science' in 1988a: 168; 1989a: 1; 1991e: 57-8; 1991b: 4.

i[57] Polanyi 1958: vii.

i[58] See e.g., the use of this word in Polanyi 1958: 301, 311

i[59] Polanyi 1958: viii.

i[60] Polanyi 1958: 311.

i[61] Polanyi 1958: 311 (emphasis original).

i[62] Polanyi 1958: 311.

i[63] Polanyi 1958: 315 (the phrase is repeated exactly on page 299).

i[64] Newbigin 1991e: 33.

i[65] Newbigin 1995: 43.

i[66] Newbigin 1992b: 2. Cf. also Newbigin 1989b: 77: where he argues that the Church's obligation is 'to seek to show in the practice of life today that (the gospel) is the rational tradition which is capable of giving greater coherence and intelligibility to all experience than any other tradition.'

i[67] 1989b: 35, 47, 48, 50, 77, 92, 126, 192.

i[68] Newbigin 1988b: 108.

i[69] Newbigin 1989b: 192.

i[70] Newbigin 1989b: 192.

i[71] Newbigin 1989b: 35.

i[72] Newbigin 1989b: 48.

i[73] E.g., Newbigin 1988b: 108.

i[74] E.g., Newbigin 1989b: 12.

i[75] One thinks of 'tracts' like 'Bridge to Life' (The Navigators, 1985), or 'Knowing God Personally' (Campus Crusade, 1985).

i[76] See e.g., Clark 1993; Hauerwas 1991: 52; Lindbeck 1997: 432f.; Middleton and Walsh 1995b: 63-79; Sims 1995: 332ff.; Werpehowski 1986: 301. See also in a broader context, Carson 1996: 141-367, who commends the preaching of 'the Bible's plot-line' in the face of widespread biblical illiteracy (esp.194).

i[77] For Newbigin's early understanding of evangelism as 'telling the story' cf. e.g., 1958: 22, or 1961: 90: 'There is and there can be no substitute for telling

the good news. Evangelism, the activity of telling men in words of mouth or pen the story of Jesus, is a necessary and indispensable manifestation of the new reality in action.'

i[78] E.g., Groothuis 1999; or Henry 1987.

i[79] Newbigin 1986: 59. He quotes Frei (Frei 1974) both here and at 1995: 72.

i[80] Cf. e.g., Middleton and Walsh 1995a.

i[81] Compare in this context, Middleton and Walsh's change of strategy in favour of a more 'narrative' approach in their engagement with 'postmodernity' (Middleton and Walsh 1995b), as compared to their earlier engagement with 'modernity' (Middleton and Walsh 1984).

i[82] For 'conservative' advocates of this integration as a necessity amongst postmoderns, cf. Hollinger 1995; Vanhoozer 1993: 27, and 1998: 12-13. For a similar emphasis as a response to postmodernity from a more 'liberal' perspective see Hauerwas 1991: 152; or Lindbeck 1984: 36, who argues that the story 'gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action'. (Cf. Lindbeck 1989.).

i[83] Newbigin 1993b: 241.

i[84] Newbigin 1992e: 187.