

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Leos Moskos, *The Last Judgement* (1653)

PART 2 • CHAPTER 7

Lesslie Newbigin as Public Theologian

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Lesslie Newbigin was born in 1909 in Northumbria, England, the son of a Presbyterian businessman. His academic studies took him to Cambridge University to study Geography and Economics, and it was at the end of his first year there that he had a conversion experience:

As I lay awake a vision came to mind ... a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world.¹

This vision shaped not only Newbigin's understanding of the atonement but also his life work. For the next forty years, he served as a missionary, initially on university campuses, then in India in various roles. On his retirement from the Bishopric of Madras in 1974, Newbigin was awarded the honour of Companion of the British Empire.

Then, with only two suitcases and a rucksack,² Newbigin returned to England

1 Lesslie J. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: an Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 11.

2 Dan Beeby, "Obituary: The Right Rev Lesslie Newbigin" in *The Independent*, (4 February 1998), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-the-right-rev-lesslie-newbigin-1142813.html>.

in 1974 to take up a lectureship at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. The return to England was more difficult than expected. Newbigin writes that the re-immersion experience was:

much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than any opposition ... England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.³

This reverse culture shock prompted Newbigin, at the age of 65, to undertake his most significant theological and missiological project – the "Gospel and Our Culture" (GOC) programme. At the same time, he took up an unsalaried position as the United Reformed Church minister of a declining congregation in a deprived area of Birmingham. He served there for eight years and then retired to London, but he was still an active speaker and author for the GOC movement. It was in this advanced stage of his life that Newbigin articulated his approach to public theology.



Bishop Lesslie Newbigin

3 Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 249.

Three aspects of Newbigin's public theology are uniquely crucial for our cultural moment: the epistemological basis for proclaiming the gospel as public truth, the ecclesiological reality undergirding the gospel's proclamation as public truth and the eschatological credibility of preaching the gospel as public truth. A brief exploration of these aspects reveals Newbigin's distinctive public theology.

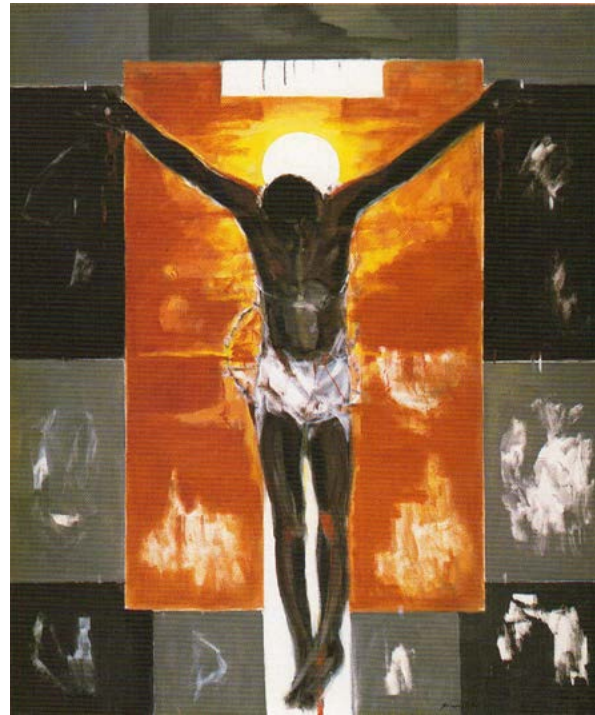
The Epistemological Basis of the Gospel as Public Truth

The first aspect to note is the epistemological basis for proclaiming the gospel as public truth. In a programmatic essay, "Can the West be Converted?"⁴ Newbigin set forth the contours for a missional engagement between the gospel and Western culture. He pointed out that the critical area of contention in this engagement is the nature of religious belief, specifically the bifurcation between the public world of facts and the private world of values. This observation is significant in Newbigin's missiological project in general and his public theology in particular.⁵

Newbigin rejects the truth/values dichotomy in modernity, arguing that the gospel belongs to the public realm of truth, not the privatised realm of values. Newbigin uses Polanyi's epistemological framework to argue for the universal truthfulness of the gospel, recognising that understanding and justification of a belief is fallible and incomplete and nevertheless holding that if true, it should be adopted by everyone. Newbigin humbly admits that the gospel has not been finally proved according to any modernist conception of objective proof and is therefore open to refutation. However, he also suggests that the gospel is the means through which humans tacitly approach the world. Because of the historical veracity of the resurrection, it can be used quite fruitfully as a heuristic device to explore the world, and it is judged by its winsomeness, coherence and consistency in explaining the world around us.

The Ecclesiastical Reality of the Gospel as Public Truth

The second aspect is the ecclesiastical reality undergirding the gospel's proclamation as public truth. Unlike many evangelical apologists, Newbigin grounds his epistemological defence of the gospel as public truth in his commitment to the church's missional centrality. He does this through biblical exposition and dialogue with philosophy.



Ruizanglada, *Cristo Negro* (1995)

From his earliest writings, Newbigin argued against an overly individualistic understanding of witness and evangelism.⁶ In his more mature work, Newbigin continues this theme, offering the local congregation as the crucial place⁷ where men and women live out their faith and thereby impact public life. He writes:

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel – evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have their power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.⁸

In later writings, Newbigin goes on to show the importance of the church's involvement in social issues at a global and local level and criticises those who make the church the end rather than the means of mission.⁹ He sees the church as a sign of the coming kingdom of God, with a prophetic calling to reveal in its life and

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?" in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6(1) (1985): 25–37.

⁵ Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?," 30.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, "The Duty and Authority of the Church to Preach the Gospel" in *The Church's Witness to God's Design*, Amsterdam Assembly Series 2 (NY: Harper, 1948), 32.

⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

⁹ Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 42.

preach the kingly reign of Christ over the totality of life. This has not only private implications but also public, national, and even international scope.

The Eschatological credibility of the Gospel as Public Truth

The third aspect is the eschatological credibility of proclaiming the gospel as public truth. Newbigin is emphatic that the church must be “a sign of the kingdom in the same sense in which Jesus was a sign of the kingdom.”¹⁰ This means the church must be willing to emulate Christ in challenging the powers of evil and accepting total solidarity with those who are their victims.¹¹

Newbigin sees the eschatological role of the church as revealing now in its life and actions the coming reign of God. The church should not be content with privatised religion but must be involved in public life. The local congregation is a visible embodiment of the age to come, but its message also calls people towards the new order God will bring about.

Newbigin writes that “the church is only properly itself when it calls people to conversion,”¹² which is to leave the old way of life and to submit to the coming reign of God in the new creation. It is evident for Newbigin that the church can only be understood “in a perspective that is at once eschatological and missionary, the perspective

of the end of the world and the ends of the earth.”¹³

Conclusion

Without epistemic recognition of the nature of Christian truth, we risk losing the gospel in a sea of relativism. Without the ecclesial foundation of the witness of the church, we risk losing the gospel in a consumer-based individualism. Without the eschatological ambition of the church’s witness, we risk losing the gospel in a hopeless nihilism of much of our cultural moment. Therefore, these three components of public theology – the epistemological justification of the gospel as public truth, the ecclesiological location of the public truth of the gospel embodied in the life and proclamation of the church and the eschatological vocation of the church to be the sign of the coming kingdom of God, Newbigin argued, must coalesce to underpin any contemporary understanding of Christian public theology.

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10 Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, 45.

11 Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, 51.

12 Newbigin *Sign of the Kingdom*, 68.

13 Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), ix.



Ruizanglada, *Piedad Humana* (1995)



Ruizanglada, *Ascension* (1995)