

The Gospel and the Cultures

By Lesslie Newbigin

In the two previous chapters I have been exploring the issue of religious pluralism. I have given reasons for rejecting a total relativism among religious options and have tried to suggest what is implied for our understanding of the religions by our confession that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. I want to turn now to another aspect of pluralism, the plurality of human cultures. These two different issues are easily confused because, from the point of view of a sociologist, religion is part of culture, and no religious belief is without implications for culture. On the other hand, religions may be multicultural, and that is certainly true of Christianity. There are enormous cultural variations between the ways in which Christians in Nigeria, India, Samoa, and the USA express their faith. The question of the relation between the gospel and the different human cultures is a very live one in contemporary missiology. At one extreme Dr. McGavran and the "Church Growth" school of missiologists affirm—in McGavran's words—that "God accepts culture" (Lausanne Congress for World Evangelisation, 1994); they therefore tend to absolutize culture and to minimize the cultural changes with conversion out to imply. People who accept the gospel, they affirm, ought to retain their traditional culture. Surely, however, the church Growth missiologists are thinking here of such aspects of culture as music, are, dress, habits of eating and drinking, and—of course—language. They would not, certainly, agree that the gospel leaves unchallenged such elements of culture as cannibalism, the death penalty for petty offenses, or the ancient Indian custom of *sati*—the burning of a man's widow with his body on the funeral pyre. So if we do not accept a total relativism in respect of the varieties of a human culture, what degree of relativism can there be?



The most fundamental element in culture is language. When people are forbidden to use their traditional language, as for instance the highlanders of Scotland in the eighteenth century, or the Taiwanese in our own time, then they feel that the very foundation of the common life has been destroyed. Do the nations of the world with the many thousands of different languages, have to lose their language in order to become part of the universal Christian church? Perhaps the early church was spared the sharpness of that question by the fact that Greek was available as a common language throughout such a large part of the known world. A similar situation today, when English is so widely used throughout the world, helps us to evade the sharpness of the problem. For many centuries the Roman Catholic church insisted that the only language in which the gospel could be properly expressed was Latin. And everyone who has wrestled with the task of communicating the gospel in a language which has been formed in total isolation from Christendom knows that every translation involves a fresh interpretation. Islam insists to this day that God's word as given to the Prophet can only be heard in Arabic. According to strict Islamic teaching the Qur'an cannot be translated, only interpreted. Yet at the birth of the Christian Church we have the story of what happened

on the day of Pentecost, when people of a score of different nations heard the mighty works of God communicated to them in their own languages. In the Eastern tradition this is spoken of as the baptism of the languages, and it is on the basis of this understanding that the pioneers of Greek missionary outreach, such as Cyril and Methodius in their work for the conversion of the Slavic people, began by translating the Bible and the liturgy into the Slavic Languages. Russians did not have to learn Greek in order to be Christians. Pentecost is our biblical warrant for saying that God accepts languages.

But does that mean that God accepts all the elements of human culture? Human culture is simply the way in which human societies order their corporate life, and as such it is corrupted by sin. I have mentioned such very ancient elements of certain human cultures as cannibalism and *sati*, which are now almost universally condemned. It is worth remembering that even these have had their defenders. Missionaries in Papua New Guinea have told us how shocked tribal peoples were at the idea of burying the bodies of their loved ones in the ground to be eaten by worms, and how much more appropriate it

seemed to them that they should be eaten by members of the family; and *sati* had, and still has, defenders who see it as the ultimate symbol of wifely devotion. Slavery is another extremely ancient element in many human cultures, and in the culture in which the Church first developed. While St. Paul affirms that there is a new creation in Christ which makes slaves and their masters brothers in one family, and which therefore radically subverts the

whole institution of slavery, yet he seems to imply that it remains a permanent part of the social order within which Christians must live their lives. It took seventeen centuries for the Church to become persuaded that the institution of slavery was incompatible with the gospel.

It seems clear that no one is willing, in the last resort, to accept a total relativism about culture. All of us judge some elements of culture to be good and some bad. The question is whether these judgments arise from the gospel itself or from the cultural presupposition of the person who makes the judgment. And, if one replies that they ought to be made only on the basis of the gospel itself, the reply must be that there is no such thing as a gospel which is not already culturally shaped. Missionary history is replete with examples of judgments made on another culture by missionaries who were unaware of the extent to which their judgments were shaped by their own cultures rather than by the gospel. The difficulty of these issues is well illustrated in the long running and still continuing debate about the relation of the gospel to one of the most fundamental elements in Indian culture—caste. Missionaries from Europe in the eighteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant, regarded caste as a social arrangement with which missionaries had no business to interfere. It was seen as analogous to the hierarchical social structure which was then normal in Europe. Indian Christians

were not asked to drop their caste identity, any ore that English Christians abandoned their place in the social order, or European Christians abandoned their national identities. There was no embarrassment about adding the caste name to the personal name. But the new generation of missionaries who came to India in the nineteenth century, filled with the egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution, regarded this situation with horror. They saw it as a betrayal of the gospel. They accused their missionary predecessors, and the Indian Christians of their time, of having fatally compromised the gospel. Modern secular opinion in India, very largely shaped by 150 years in which all higher education has been in the English language and in which generation of national leadership have been deeply influenced by modern European culture, endorses the condemnation of caste-whether or not one judges the condemnation to have been effective. Looking back on this controversy from our perspective at the end of the twentieth century, one is bound to ask whether the outright condemnation of caste by the nineteenth-century missionaries was primarily the fruit of their biblical study or primarily the fruit of the new movement of Enlightenment in Europe. Perhaps one might judge that this was an occasion when the Enlightenment brought to light neglected elements of biblical teaching. One is bound to ask, however, whether these “enlightened” missionaries did not, perhaps, communicate an atomic individualism which was farther from the biblical picture than the strongly cohesive, albeit narrowly exclusive texture of the traditional society. Surely every Christian today must condemn the inhuman treatment of the so-called “untouchables” under the traditional caste system, and must applaud the courage with which the nineteenth-century missionaries attacked it and upheld the cause of those excluded from Hindu society; but it is arguable, too, that missionary impact was flawed by a kind of individualism which failed to do justice to elements of value in the tradition, namely the sense of mutual responsibility in the extended family.

A similar issue is raised by missionary experience in Africa. Polygamy is part of the traditional culture in many parts of Africa.

Protestant missionaries took it for granted that anyone wishing to be a Christian must acknowledge that monogamy is God’s will and must therefore put away all but the first wife. Very large numbers of men, desirous of giving their lives to Christ, have nevertheless refused to do what the missionaries told them and therefore remain non-communicant adherents of the Church. Many of us would conclude that these refusals were justified, since it would surely be

a very great wrong to send away a woman married in good faith, with the knowledge that she can have no future except perhaps as a prostitute (as would be the case in India) or in another polygamous marriage. To contemporary African Christians, looking at Western society with its serial polygamy, it seems obvious that the traditional African pattern is more true to the gospel, since it at least acknowledges binding covenant obligations while the Western model dissolves them. When one looks back at the whole argument, it seems obvious that the difference between the two estimates of

polygamy was not based only on biblical teaching (in regard to which Africans could and did appeal to Old Testament models of polygamy among revered patriarchs) but also, and perhaps much more, on different estimates of the role of the individual in society. For African society the human person is seen as a partner in a whole network of relationships binding him or her horizontally across a widely extended family and vertically to the ancestors who have died and to the children yet to be born. To be human is to be part of this closely woven fabric of relationships. By contrast, the Western post-Enlightenment understanding of the human person centers on the autonomy of the individual who is free to make or to break relationships at will. It can indeed, and I think must be said that the biblical teaching as a whole leads to the conclusion that the proper, God-ordained pattern is truly embodied only in a lifelong partnership of one man with one woman. When measured by this standard, both European and African cultures must be judged wanting. But it is by no means clear that the former is nearer to the biblical model than the latter.

The discussion of this particular African case leads to a more basic question. The question of the relation of gospel to culture is one of the most vigorously debated subjects in contemporary missiology. But one has to ask whether the way in which the question is posed does not imply already an unacknowledged and disastrous dualism. Culture is simply the social aspect of human living. It is defined in my dictionary as “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another.” Culture is human behavior in its corporate aspect. The gospel comes to any human community in words of a particular language which is the primary vehicle of a culture, and in a community (the church) which itself embodies and illustrates a culture. The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite separate things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life. And the reason why this dualism is present is, one must suggest, that in fact the gospel has been reduced to a



matter of individual belief and conduct as though this could be separated from the shared life of society. The point is very vividly illustrated in a contrast between two missionary experiences in Africa. Ronald Wynne was sent as a missionary to a remote and isolated African community which had had no contact whatever with Christianity, the Hambukushu of Etsha in Botswana. Wynne lived with them for eight years, learning

their language, entering deeply into their culture, sharing with them stories from the Old Testament which resonated deeply with their own experience of exile and persecution, and becoming part of their life, before he took the momentous step of naming the name of Jesus and inviting them-as a community-to accept him as Lord (The Pool That Never Dries Up, London). In other words, the gospel was seen from the very beginning as something which would affect the entire life of the community and all their customs and tradition. A decision for Christ would be a decision that put the whole of their

shared life, their culture, into a new setting. The result was a profound change in the whole corporate life of the community. Wynne contrasts this with what happened in many parts of Africa where a religion of individual salvation had been taught, along with a wholesale rejection and condemnation of traditional culture. The result has been, as he says, a superficial and sentimental attachment to everything in the discarded culture.

This raises, it seems to me, sharp questions for us in the old Western Christendom. The very way in which we raise the question, with its dichotomizing of gospel and culture, reveals the dualism in our thinking: a purely individualistic Christianity which reflects the individualism of our culture with its enthronement of the autonomous human reason as the judge of all things has to face—as though it were a separate question from conversion—the matter of relating gospel to culture. I was recently in a meeting where a missionary home from Africa remarked that it had struck him that when his African Christian friends were faced with a difficult decision, he often found that, although they were devout and committed Christians, it was often the traditional African way of thinking which determined the decision. He seemed to be quite unconscious of the fact that the same was obviously true of an English or American Christian. The individual has accepted the gospel, but the culture has not been converted. Or, to put it more accurately, one part of the person has been converted, but not the whole person.

We must recognize the falsity of this dualism and acknowledge the fact that there is not and cannot be a gospel which is not culturally embodied. This is simply another way of affirming, as I have tried to do in the earlier chapter, the historical nature of the gospel. The gospel is about events which happened at a particular time and place in history. The events were in Palestine and not in Japan or Africa. The language in which they were told was Hebrew and Greek, not Sanskrit or Chinese. Whenever the gospel is preached it is preached in a human language, which means the language of one particular culture; whenever a community tries to live out the gospel, it is also part of one particular human culture. Wherever and whenever missionaries have gone preaching the gospel, they have brought not an ethereal something disinfected of all human cultural ingredients; they have brought a gospel expressed in the language and the life-style of a particular culture. It seems to be almost inevitable that, when the gospel is first received, it is accepted in the form in which it was brought, with all the cultural particularities of the missionaries. The first converts reproduce faithfully the forms of Christian life and worship which the missionaries brought. This is not always or only because the pressure by the missionaries; the new thing is often welcomed just because it is new, for there are always in any society both conservatives who cherish the old traditions and radicals who question them. Later, when there has been time for deep study of the Bible in their own language, the new Christians—or more probably their children and grandchildren—will begin to look critically at the forms of Christianity which they have received and begin to make distinctions which the missionaries could not make between what is proper to the gospel according to the Scriptures and what is simply part of the traditional culture of the missionaries. An if, as Wynne says, the conversion has been superficial, there will then be a sentimental reaction which applauds the ancient culture as indiscriminately as it had previously rejected it.

The history of cross-cultural missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is extremely complex, full of unexpected twists and also full of ironies. Chinese intellectuals rejected the invasion of missionaries in the nineteenth century partly at least on the ground that they brought with them a foreign culture. Today missionaries like Timothy Richard are honored by the leadership precisely because they brought China into touch with Western society and so prepared the way for what is now called modernization. The work of missionaries in India is praised by non-Christians because they brought Western science, medicine, and technology. European Christians criticize the Indian Church for being too Western and express their enthusiasm for Indian cultural styles—not recognizing that the reason why they appreciate things Indian is the same as the reason why many Indians appreciate things Western—namely that they are a welcome change from the tradition. Modern critics of nineteenth-century missions have often criticized the early missionaries in the South Pacific for making the women put on more clothes, although there seems to be evidence that the women regarded this as a way of asserting their new-found dignity in the Christian society. Today Christians in the South Pacific are scandalized by the clothing—or absence of clothing—of the tourists from Europe.

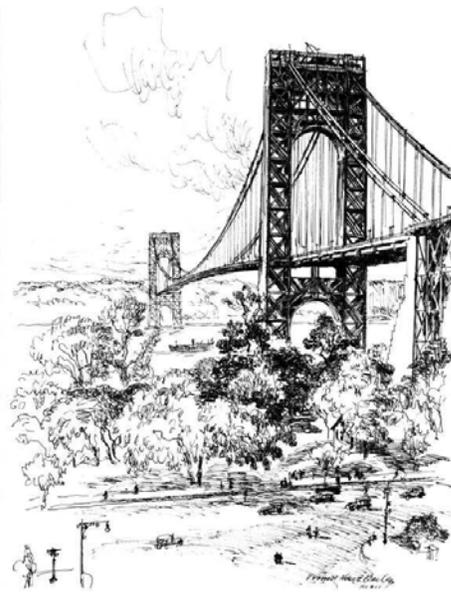
Reference to these twists and turns in the story of cross-cultural missions reminds us of the fact that our judgments are very much governed by the emotions generated by the profound cultural changes in the Western world in the past seventy-five years. The world missionary conference of Edinburgh 1910, with its vision of the evangelization of the world in that generation, is criticized for its alleged confusion of confidence in the gospel with confidence in the expansive power of Western civilization. The charge is not entirely true, for there were strong voices bringing a Christian critique to bear on elements of the so-called Christian civilization. But it is certainly true that there was then still a great confidence in the onward spread of civilization—the kind of civilization which Europe and North America had produced, and that this confidence was also — inevitably — a factor in the confidence of missions. For many at the time, Christianity and modern civilization went together. After the experiences of the past seventy-five years that is no longer so. There is a profound collapse of belief in the future of our civilization. The missionary movement is widely perceived as simply one element of what the Indian historian Panikkar calls the Vaso de Gama era — an era now definitely over. Many sensitive people, including Christians, sensing that our culture is bankrupt, look elsewhere for salvation. Salvation, if it is to be found anywhere, will surely not (in this view) be found in Europe or America: we must now learn to listen humbly to the voice of other cultures. In this climate all judgments about culture and about the relation of the gospel to culture are colored by this profound pessimism about our own. If our own culture has proved bankrupt, and if all expressions of the gospel are culturally embodied, it is understandable that a collapse of confidence in our culture goes along with a faltering of confidence in the gospel. And that is certainly what has happened in the old heartlands of the great missionary movements of the past two centuries.

If this is the true diagnosis of our situation, what is the next move? If the gospel is always and everywhere culturally embodied—in

a particular language and a particular life-style, how can it be possible for the gospel to have a critical relation to culture? To be specific, can we who are both Christian believers and also products of this collapsing Western post-Enlightenment culture, can we find a stance from which we can criticize our own culture? A recent writer in theology, reviewing my book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, says bluntly that it is impossible. Trying to criticize one's own culture is, he says, like pretending to move a bus when you are sitting in it. We are what our culture has made us and we have to accept that fact. To appeal to the Bible is futile. After two centuries of scientific historical-critical analysis of the contents of the Bible, we know that it also is simply part of human culture. We can examine its tests more and more minutely and place them more and more precisely within the continuum of human culture, but there is not sense in which the Bible can speak a critical word to our culture. In fact we have not way of understanding the Bible except through the reason and imagination, the concepts and categories which our culture supplies. What answer can be given to this?

It is obviously true that we have no way of understanding the Bible except through the concepts and categories of thought with which our culture has equipped us through our whole intellectual formation from earliest childhood. But the Bible speaks of things which are not simply products of human culture but are words and deeds of God, creator and sustainer of all that is. How can we know that these biblical stories are more than an objectified representation of the religious experiences of a particular people, the peoples of Isreal and of the Eastern Mediterranean, with their own particular cultural conditioning? It is also true that we have no way of understanding the natural world around us except through our five senses. How do we know that these experiences convey valid information about what is really "out there"? How can we know we are not misled by our sense experiences. Only by making our perceptions public, sharing them with others, comparing our different perceptions and checking their reliability against those of others. On one hand we have to take responsibility for what we claim to know by seeing and hearing and touching; on the other hand these claims, because they are claims to be in contact with a reality beyond ourselves, must be made "with universal intent." We must show others they are valid.

The way in which any Christian perceives God's revelation in Christ and in the whole biblical story will be shaped by the culture through which that individual was formed. It is simply a fact of history that Jesus has been and is portrayed in an amazing variety of portraits from the Byzantine Pantocrator through the medieval crucifix and the Jesus of the sacred heart, to the blue-eyed blond of American Protestantism and the Che Guevara freedom fighter of liberation theology. For some writers it seems obvious that Jesus can be portrayed in any guise that is (as they would say) "meaningful"



for them and their contemporaries. But "Jesus" is not a name to which we can attach any character we like to imagine. Jesus is the name of whom we have information in the books of New Testament interpreted (as they must be) in the light of the books which were Jesus' own scriptures. The Jesus of whom the New Testament writers bear witness is not an inaccessible figure. Our varying perceptions of him — and of course they will vary because we are culturally different people — have to be checked in the same way that that all our claims to perceive reality have to be checked. We have to share them with others who perceive Jesus with the different lenses furnished by their different cultures. And it is this matter on which we speak with solid experience. It is a matter of fact, for example, that in an Assembly of the World Council of Churches, where

Christians from an enormously wide variety of cultures, with correspondingly varied perceptions of Jesus, long periods of Bible study share by people with these clashing perceptions lead to a fresh assurance of the reality of Jesus' authority and more fully shared perception of his nature and purpose. Not that all differences are removed, but that there is a fresh assurance that — from different perspectives — they are speaking of the same person.

And in this experience, we are being faithful to the nature of the Biblical witness. It is, for example, a matter of scandal to Muslims that Christians have four Gospels and not one. Muslim speak of the Gospel ("Injil"), but it is axiomatic for them that there is one gospel, and if Christians have four then that is proof that the four are not authentic. This is of course in line with the Muslim conviction that the Qur'an cannot be translated. God has only one speech, and that is Arabic. The same kind of logic underlay the attempts from early times to eliminate the discrepancies in the Gospels by producing a harmonized version. But the church's canon includes four Gospels, each of which gives a somewhat different portrait of Jesus. Modern scholars have devoted great energy and skill to drawing out the differences, and that is of value. But for millions of Christians in past centuries and today, the devout study of these four gospels has led to a growing assurance there is indeed one Lord Jesus whom they are learning to know and follow.

It will of course be pointed out that my reasoning is defective, since the sharing of our experiences of sight and sound and touch is potentially a sharing with the whole human race, whereas the sharing of experience of Jesus is limited to the community of believers. This is of course true. And it is to be understood as I have been pointing out earlier, in terms of the biblical doctrine of election. It is our faith that God has called this community to be the bearer of his gospel for all communities. Once again, of course, this faith cannot be shown to be valid by reference to some more ultimate belief. Like every other human belief it is part of the tradition of belief developed and handed down in one particular human community.

But this community is one which is more and more fully represented in all the vast variety of human cultures. Those who belong to it are people formed both by the human cultures in which they have been nourished and also by the traditions which they share with all Christian believers. They belong to two cultures. In Pauline language, while living as the people of Philippi or Corinth or Rome, they have a citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20). What, then, is the relation between these two citizenships, these two affiliations?

There have been and are many situations which Christians feel a deep attachment only to their heavenly citizenship, in which they reject and are rejected by the earthly city. Such was – in large measure – the situation for many in the earliest decades of the Church. It is a situation reflected on many pages of the New Testament. It is a situation which has its paradigmatic form in the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross, where Jesus was rejected and cast out by the representatives of human cultures in religion, politics, law and morals, would (if it were the last word) imply that the normal situation for Christian is that the reject and are rejected by the world. That is the implication of the words of Jesus, “Whoever would be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me.” Nothing could suggest more forcibly a total rejection of the believer by the world and of the world by the believer.

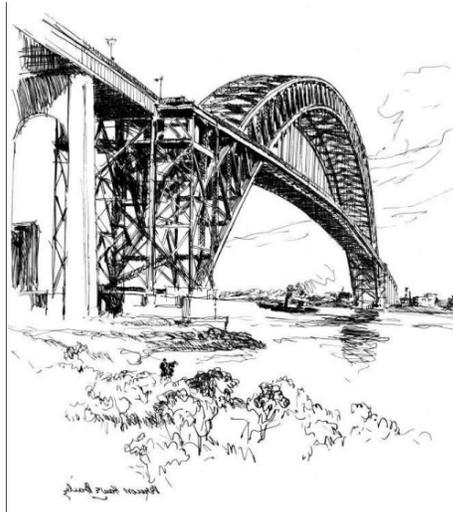
But the cross is not God's last word. In raising his beloved Son from the dead, God has given the pledge and the foretaste of his unconquerable grace in kindness and patience toward the world which rejects him. In the resurrection of Jesus, the original covenant with creation and with all human life, the covenant with Noah and his descendants, is reaffirmed. The world of human culture rejects God and is under God's judgments. But God in his patient and long-suffering love sustains the created world, and the world of human culture, in order that there may still be time and space for repentance and for the coming into being of the new creation within the womb of the old. God still cherishes and sustains the world of creation and culture, in spite of its subjection to illusion and vanity. The covenant with Noah and its rainbow sign refer explicitly to one of the most basic elements in human culture, namely the work of the farmer who cultivates the wilderness in order that it may bring forth food for human beings (Gen. 8:22) Here the interdependence of human beings and nature, and the dependence of both on the grace of God, are at their most manifest. God's promise that while earth remains seedtime and harvest shall not cease stands over the entire story of human culture. It is an assurance and an invitation to cherish and care for the earth and all that is in it, because God their creator cherishes and cares for them. And one of the counter themes of the Old Testament is the perpetual tendency of Israel to forget the awesome and holy God who was the true author of prosperity, and to turn to the gods whose only function was to provide plenty of grain and oil and wine. Israel had to be reminded again and again by devastating disasters that the work of the farmer is only rightly understood when it is done as graceful acknowledgment of a gracious God. This double theme is also illustrated from another area of culture, that of politics. The same double theme runs through the Old Testament account of the political life of Israel: the king as one anointed by God to bring peace, justice, and good order, the true son of David; and – on the other hand – the king who uses his

good given power to serve his own ends and so brings disaster on the people. (cf. 1 Samuel 8 and 9).

If this interpretation of the human story with its center in the double event of Jesus' death and resurrection, is our clue, then it will follow that we are called neither to a simple affirmation of human culture nor to a simple rejection of it. We are to cherish human culture as an area in which we live under God's grace and are given daily new tokens of that grace. But we are called also to remember that we are part of that whole seamless texture of human culture which was shown on the day we call Good Friday to be in murderous rebellion against the grace of God. We have to say both “God accepts human culture.” and also “God judges human culture.” There will have to be room in the Christian life for the two attitudes which Von Hugel used to call the homely and the heroic. Christianity can never be all homeliness nor all heroism. It has elements of both and it has to learn from day to day when to accept the homely duties of life as it is, and when to take the heroic road of questioning and challenging the accepted ways. It was necessary for the early church, at crucial moments, to take the heroic path and accept martyrdom rather than submit to what the vast majority of people took for granted. But it was also right that, when the time came with the conversion of Constantine, the Church should accept the role of sustainer and cherisher of the political order. It is right for churches to be dissenting communities challenging accepted norms and structures. It is also right in other circumstances for the Church to be the church for the nation or the parish, the cherisher and sustainer of the ordinary work of the farmer, the judge, and the soldier. What is wrong is the absolutizing of one position against the other and corresponding ex-communication of those who take the other role. What is needed is the discernment to know, from day to day and from issue to issue, when the one stance is appropriate and when the other.

But how shall we find that discernment? Once again we face the problem posed by the critic who said we cannot pretend to move a bus while sitting in it. We *are* what our culture has made us: our Christianity is part of our culture. We read the Bible in our own language and it is full of resonances which arise from past cultural experience. Where do I find the stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of the Bible when my reading of the Bible is so much shaped by the person I am, formed by my culture? I think we can be helped toward an answer by looking at the experience of the churches in the present century. During the 1914—1918 war the churches on both sides made an almost total identification of the cause of Christ with the cause of their own nation. Christianity had become almost absorbed into

national identity. It was the scandal of that situation that shocked many – including notably a young pastor in Safenwil called Karl Barth – and caused them to realize that European Christianity was guilty of a fatal syncretism, and to send them back to a fresh and more humble listening to the Bible. Out of that grew the ecumenical developments of the 1930's and '40s. In the Second World War the blasphemies of the First were not repeated, at least not on anything like the same scale. Spiritual bonds remained through the years of conflict, and almost as soon as the war was over the church leaders on the two sides were meeting together to work and pray for a new form of Christian presence in Europe. They knew that it was no longer tolerable that the churches should be content to be domestic chaplains to their nations: there had to be a supranatural entity which could in some measure embody and express the supranatural and supracultural character of the Gospel. That recognition was given concrete form when, at Amsterdam in 1948, churches whose nations had been so recently at war pledged themselves to be faithful to one another in a mutual commitment to receive correction from one another. That reference to mutual correction is the crucial one. All our reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us. In Europe over the past four hundred years these cultures have been embodied in nations which have take the place of God as the supreme reality, calling for absolute and total devotion. The fruit of that idolatry was reaped in two terrible wars. In that situation, the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretations of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. We have to listen to others. This mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but it is necessary and it is fruitful.



great diversity of cultures can be welcomed and cherished and the claim of any one culture to dominance can be resisted.

Bishop Newbigin went to India to work among the Tamil people as a Presbyterian Missionary in 1936. He was Bishop of the Church of South India for over twenty years, and worked with the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches for many years. Upon returning to England in 198_ he turned down an offer to be Asst Bishop of the Church of England to become a pastor of a United Reformed Church. One of his calls in his latter years was for the "Re-evangelization of the West" challenging both modernism and postmodernism. This chapter was taken from his book The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. While we may not agree with him on some points, and for clear reasons of truth and doctrine are not a part of the World Council of Churches and the ecumenicism of the present day, still we ought to listen to what he has to say to our day and culture. He passed away on 11 January, 1998.

As so often, the answer to the complex questions about the relation of the gospel to human culture has to be a practical one and not merely a theoretical one. It is only by being faithful participants in a supranatural, multicultural family of churches that we can find the resources to be at the same time faithful sustainers and cherishers of our respective churches and also faithful critics of them. The Gospel endorses an immensely wide diversity among human cultures, but it does not endorse a total relativism. There is good and bad in every culture and there are developments continually going on in every culture which may be creative or destructive, either in line with the purpose of God as revealed in Christ for all human beings, or else out of that line. The criteria for making judgments between the one and the other cannot arise from one culture. There is the familiar error of cultural imperialism. There can only be one criterion if God has in fact shown us what his will is. He has done so in Christ. If that is denied in the name of religious pluralism, then there can be no valid criterion by which the positive and negative developments in human culture can be accessed. On the other hand, the content of the revelation of Christ, defined crucially by the twin events of cross and resurrection, provides a basis on which the