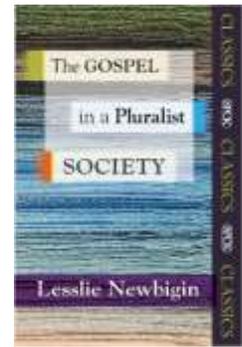


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The Gospel in a Pluralist Society

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Extremely detailed; perhaps more detailed than it needed to have been in order to make the points it was making - though perhaps we're familiar with them in a way we weren't when he wrote it.

1. Dogma and doubt in a pluralist culture

We pluralist not just in sense of being plural in culture, religion, lifestyle, but in that this plurality is approved and cherished. G Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the rise of the modern world*, traces attack on Christian worldview to humanist tradition which ultimately goes back to classical elements in our culture, which surfaced in Renaissance and played a part in the Reformation. This humanist tradition has 2 main strands: rationalist (Gk+Stoic) and spiritual (Europe+India; direct contact with source of being/truth). These strands have in common the conviction that historical events are not a source of ultimate truth. 'Truth can only be that which is accessible equally to all rational human beings apart from the accidents of history, through the exercise of reason and the experience of direct contact with the divine', 2.

Domestication of the gospel - Hinds co-opt Jesus into the Hindu worldview; but so do we, into ours.

'When thinking of our unbelieving English neighbours we speak of evangelism; when speaking of our Asian and West Indian neighbours we speak of dialogue. The gospel is, like the facilities in the parks in South Africa, for whites only. It is a conclusion which the Asian Christians in our cities find exceedingly odd' 4. This is a symptom of the abandonment by Christians of the idea that the gospel is public truth. Odd when you consider that Christianity began with the proclamation of something authoritatively given. We now have 2 worlds, world of values and world of facts; and the church is not generally perceived as concerned with facts, with the realities which govern the world.

Dogma is necessary; no coherent thought is possible without presuppositions. Presupposition of Christian thinking is that God has acted to reveal and effect his purpose for the world in the manner made known in the Bible.

Concept of plausibility structures (Berger) - patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not. We have no need to shrink from accusations that our claim to announce the truth about God and his purpose for the world is arrogant; they rest on assumptions which are part of the reigning plausibility structure.

Classic example of co-option of Christianity into plausibility structure is attempt to explain events of Easter Sunday in psychological terms.

Christian faith is a historical faith not just in sense that it depends on a historical record, but in that it is essentially an interpretation of universal history.

2. The roots of pluralism

Cultural pluralism: attitude which welcomes different cultures and lifestyles within one community

Religious pluralism: belief that differences between religions are matter not of truth/falsehood, but of different perceptions of truth.

Nature of facts.

'If... it were a fact that the one who designed the whole cosmic and human story has told us what the purpose is, then the situation would be different. That would be a fact - a fact of supreme and decisive importance.' 16.

'The language of "values" is simply the will to power wrapped up in cotton wool' [!!] , 17.

Knowing has to begin with an act of faith; trust in evidence of eyes/ears/teachers. Whole work of modern science rests on faith-commitments. All facts are interpreted facts; what we see depends on the way our minds have been trained.

'When I say "I believe" I am not merely describing an inward feeling or experience: I am affirming what I believe to be true, and therefore what is true for everyone... If I try to keep my belief as a private matter, it is not belief in the truth' 22.

3. Knowing and believing

We aren't really pluralist - pluralist in respect of what we call beliefs, but not pluralist in respect of what we call facts. Science is what we all know, and religion is what some people believe...

Hannah Arendt suggests it was the invention of the telescope that caused the trouble - people looked through it and saw things were not as they had been thought to be. Result was Descartes.

Ideas have to be expressed in words, and words are useful only insofar as their meanings are indeterminate; otherwise would need as many words as there are things in the universe. If the meaning of words were determinate, all verbal statements would be tautologies. See Polanyi.

How science proceeds - observation, hypothesis, verification by experiment (Russell). But Einstein: 'the supreme task of the physicist is the search for those highly universal laws from which a picture of the world can be obtained by pure deduction. There is no logical path leading to these laws. They are only to be reached by intuition, based on something like an intellectual love' 31.

Knowing is a risky business; cp new-born learning to focus and evaluate.

How then do we come to separate what purports to be factual knowledge (which we are supposed to accept) and the world of beliefs and values (which we are all free to choose)? Particularly when we consider quantum physics, and the concept that we are part of the picture - so purpose *does* have to come into it. The concept of a cosmos without purpose provides the validation for the division of our world into two, facts without value and values which have no basis in facts.

4. Authority, autonomy and tradition

In science. Need to be immersed in the tradition before can be original.

'Like all visions of ultimate truth, science is necessarily involved in a circular argument. It has to assume from the beginning the truth of that which it seeks to prove. It begins from the conviction that the universe is accessible to rational understanding, it refuses to accept as final evidence that which seems to contradict this faith, and it seeks with a passion which is one of the glories of human history to prove that the faith is true. It can only pursue this task within a tradition which is authoritative' 48.

When we are received into the Christian community we likewise enter into a tradition which claims authority. That tradition has the same presupposition about the rationality of the cosmos as the natural sciences do, but it is a more comprehensive rationality based on the faith that the author and sustainer of the cosmos has personally revealed his purpose' 49.

5. Reason, revelation, and experience

Reason and revelation have been opposing principles.

Reason depends on tradition. Traditions of rationality are embodied in language - and language doesn't correspond word for word with other languages, but is conceptual as well.

When reason is set against Christian tradition, it is obvious that the plausibility structure is at work again. Every exercise of reason depends on a social and linguistic tradition which has the contingent, accidental character of all historical happenings. 'If it is the case that the ultimate reality which lies behind all our experience is, in some sense, personal... then it will follow that personal knowledge of that reality will only be available in the way in which we come to know another person' 61.

6. Revelation in history

Historical religions vs others.

'The presupposition of most historical scholarship since the Enlightenment has been that God is not a factor in history' [!], 69.

7. The logic of election

Can only understand biblical teaching about election if we see it as part of the whole way of understanding the human situation which is characteristic of the Bible. Bible doesn't attempt to see the human person as an autonomous individual, and the human relation with God as the relation of the alone to the alone. From its very beginning the Bible sees human life

in terms of relationships. It follows that this mutual relatedness is not merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself. There can be no private salvation. Not just at the beginning but all the way until the end, salvation involves us with the neighbour whom God chooses to be the bearer of salvation, and there is no salvation otherwise.

8. *The Bible as universal history*

'The universe.. is nothing like a clock with fixed and predictable movements. It is full of surprises and will continue to surprise us. If it has any coherent purpose, if the story of which we are part has any real point and is leading to any worthwhile end, then there is no alternative way of knowing it other than that its author should let us into the secret. There can be, in strict logic, no other way' 92.

Implications:

1. The communication of the secret calls for faith
2. The secret is communicated through happenings in the course of the history of one nation, Israel.
3. The happenings are recorded in words.
4. Event and interpretation are thus indissolubly linked, but not fixed; Jesus did not write a book.
5. We have to try and understand modern thought in the light of the biblical story, not vv. The important thing in the use of the Bible is not to understand the text but to understand the world *through* the text. It isn't just that we examine the text, but rather that the text examines us.

This means inhabiting an alternative plausibility structure to the one in which our society lives. A plausibility structure is not just a body of ideas but is embodied in an actual community.

9. *Christ, the clue to history*

There is meaning in history only if there is some sense in which history moves towards a goal which is worth achieving. Kingdom of heaven. 'The key to the seeming contradiction between the statements which speak of the kingdom as present and those which speak of it as future is to be found [in the day when what is hidden will be uncovered, when the rule of God will be manifest on earth as it is now in heaven]. It is not the different between the incomplete and the complete; it is the difference between the hidden and the manifest.' 105. The point of the gap is found in the mission of the church to the nations.

Our life is still lived as his was, in a world in which the power of darkness is still at work. The more actively we challenge these powers in the name of Jesus, the more violently will they attack. But exactly when this attack is most violent and exactly when we are at our most vulnerable, signs will be given of the presence of the kingdom, the power of the Spirit to speak the word that bears witness to Christ's kingly power and assures us that the victory is to him and not to the powers of darkness.

10. *The logic of mission*

Mission should not be a burden but a joy. Nowhere does Paul lay it on the conscience of his readers that they ought to be active in mission; the news that Jesus is alive cannot be suppressed, it must be told; and the mission of the NT church is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, but one which is not lethal but life-giving.

The beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power.

Paul regarded his work in a region as complete as soon as he had fully preached the gospel and left behind a community of people who believed it and lived by it - not when society had been changed, or the church grown, or anything else measurable. Task is to get believing communities in every region.

'The logic of mission is this: the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part. Wherever the gospel is preached the question of the meaning of the human story - the universal story and the personal story of each human being - is posed. Thereafter the situation can never be the same.' 125.

11. Mission: word, deed and new being

We should start with the Bible as the unique interpretation of human and cosmic history and move from that starting point to an understanding of what the Bible shows us of the meaning of personal life - not vv.

Do we communicate the gospel with deeds or words? In the gospels, the words explain the deeds. In Acts, the words preached are in response to a question. Something has happened which makes people aware of a new reality, and therefore the question arises: what is this reality. The communication of the gospel is the answering of that question. The new reality is the presence of Jesus himself; in him the kingdom of God has come near so that it now confronts men and women with its reality and requires them either to be so radically turned round that they recognize the truth and believe, or else to continue on their way facing the wrong direction and pursuing that which is not God's kingdom. That is to continue with us - cp Jn 16 prayer.

2 wrong concepts of mission:

1. Those who place exclusive emphasis on the winning of individuals to conversion, baptism, and church membership; action in the world is secondary; the gospel is about changing people, not structures.
2. Those who say the gospel is about God's kingdom; what is needed is not threatening evangelism but action to tackle the problems of the nation.

The conflict is weakening the church's witness. Both sides are unaware of the reality that mission is God's work. 'Both parties to this dispute need to recover a fuller sense of the prior reality, the givenness, the ontological priority of the new reality which the work of Christ has brought into being... This new reality, this new presence creates a moment of crisis wherever it appears. It provokes questions which call for an answer and which, if the true answer is not accepted, lead to false answers.' 136.

Therefore:

- So we mustn't set word and deed, preaching and action, against one another. The central reality is neither word nor act, but the life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ.
- It is also clear that action for justice and peace belongs to the heart of the task; Jesus's action in challenging the powers that ruled the world was central to his ministry. But it wasn't a challenge which offered an alternative way of exercising power.
- So action for justice and peace can't mean total commitment to any particular project.
- Nor must concentration on the gospel as the meaning of the whole human story mean we withdraw attention from the immediate possibilities which the lord of history offers.
- It follows that the role of the church in relation to issues of justice and peace will be in its nourishing and sustaining people who will act as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens.
- We will always need to point to the central reality by which the church exists - Christ.

12. Contextualisation: true and false

'If the gospel is to be understood, if it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the real human situation ... it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.' 141

Pictures of Jesus through the ages - are more like self-portraits of the age.

Contextualisation familiar subject amongst missionaries. But equally necessary here.

Need to start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that we mean something which is not embodied in a culture; simplest statement 'Jesus is Lord' depends on meaning the culture gives to the word 'lord'.

Tussle in early church - gentile converts to be circumcised or not? Food offered to idols.

When is the missionary's job done - Paul stayed only long enough to plant the gospel; C19th missionary stayed a lifetime - but because he was planting a whole culture along with the gospel!

'Where there is a believing community whose life is centered in the biblical story though its worshipping, teaching, and sacramental and apostolic life, there will certainly be differences of opinion on specific issues, certainly mistakes, certainly false starts. But it is part of my faith in the authenticity of the story itself that this community will not be finally betrayed.. But when something else is put at the centre, a moral code, a set of principles, or the alleged need to meet some criterion imposed from outside the story, one is adrift in the ever changing tides of history, and the community which commits itself to these things becomes one more piece of driftwood on the current.' 148.

'Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matt.4.4)' 151.

13. No other name

The statement that there are no absolutes in history is a pure assertion for which no proof is offered or can be offered; it is simply one of the axioms of our contemporary W culture.

14. The gospel and the religions

Pluralism. 'When the Fourth Gospel affirms that the light of the Logos who came into the world in Jesus shines on every human being, there is no suggestion that this light is identified with human religion. The text goes on to say that this light shines in the darkness, and the ensuing story constantly suggests that it is religion which is the primary area of darkness, while the common people, unlearned in religious matters, are the ones who respond to the light.' 173.

If we start with the thought of the glory of God rather than with that of the need of the individual, there are a number of implications.

1. We shall expect and welcome all the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord.
2. We will be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian's understanding of God's purpose in history
3. True dialogue comes in context of this kind of shared commitment
4. The essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will be the telling of the story of Jesus.

Christian mission is therefore an affair of love, not of truth.

15. The gospel and the cultures

If the gospel is always culturally embodied, how can it 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?' 191. Through scripture, and through reflection with Christians from other cultures.

'If this biblical interpretation of the human story, with its centre at 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'.' 195.

16. Principalities, powers and people

Our concept of gospel being for individuals is the product of our culture; Africa sees it as for communities - as in OT. But witness of NT also - Paul on principalities, powers etc. The central phrase of the gospel, the kingdom of God, is obviously about power, authority, rule; NT adamant that these are realities of human society too. It is clear that behind human powers lie spiritual ones [this is the Wink chapter]. One spiritual kingdom is opposed to another spiritual kingdom, the heavenly and the earthly; and human beings are caught up as a community in both.

'The principalities and powers are real. They are invisible and we cannot locate them in space. They do not exist as disembodied entities floating above this world, or lurking within it. They meet us as embodied in visible and tangible realities - people, nations, and institutions. And they are powerful. What is Christ's relation to them? To recapitulate briefly: they are created in Christ and for Christ; their true end is to serve him; some do ... but they become powers for evil when they attempt to usurp the place which belongs to Christ alone. In his death Christ has disarmed them... and the Church is the agency through which his victory over them is made manifest and is effected as the Church puts on the whole armour of God to meet and master them.' 207-8.

17. The myth of the secular society

General belief that W society getting more secular isn't borne out by the evidence; cp US. 'It would seem to be proved beyond doubt that human beings cannot live in the rarefied atmosphere of pure rationality as the post-Enlightenment world has understood rationality. There are needs of the human spirit which simply must be met. It seems that those religious bodies which have tried to accommodate as much as possible of the rationalism of the Enlightenment are those which are in decline, and that those which have maintained a strong emphasis on the supernatural dimension of religion have flourished.' 213. What we have is not a secular society but a pagan society - one which worships gods which are not God. 'Christian affirmation in this context cannot mean simply the affirmation of a way of personal salvation for the individual. It must mean this, and no less than this... But it cannot mean that one accepts the lordship of Christ as governing personal and domestic life, and the life of the Church, while another sovereignty is acknowledged for the public life of society. It cannot mean that the Church is seen as a voluntary society of individuals who have decided to follow Jesus in their personal lives, a society which does not challenge the assumptions which govern the worlds of politics, economics, education, and culture. The model for all Christian discipleship is given once and for all in the ministry of Jesus. His ministry entailed the calling of individual men and women to costly discipleship, but at the same time it challenged the principalities and powers, the ruler of this world, and the cross was the price paid for that challenge. Christian discipleship today cannot mean less than that. I do not think that any of us yet knows what this will involve.' 220.

18. The congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel

Liberal, secular, democratic state is in grave trouble. Disintegration of family life, growth of mindless violence, vandalism, destruction of environment by limitless consumption, threat of nuclear war, and above all the loss of any sense of a meaningful future. What could it mean for the Church to make once again the claim which it made in its earliest centuries, the claim to provide public truth by which society can be given coherence and direction? And 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? The only answer can be a congregation of people who believe it and live by it. This community will have 6 (!) characteristics:

- praise
- truth
- live for wider community not for itself
- community when people are prepared for and sustained in exercise of priesthood in the world
- community of mutual responsibility
- community of hope

Chinese Christian writer Carver T Yu finds 2 key elements of W society to be 'technological optimism and literary pessimism', 232.

19. Ministerial leadership for a missionary congregation

Men/women are ordained to the priesthood not in order to take it away from the people but in order to nourish and sustain the priesthood of the people. The task of ministry is to lead the congregation as a whole in a mission to the community as a whole. If this is our model it will stop us being captive to either of the 2 usual models: personal conversion vs diffused influence through the community.

20. Confidence in the gospel

2 moods in the church: timidity and anxiety! 'Christianity is perceived to be a good cause which is in danger of collapsing through lack of support' 243. Must welcome plurality but reject pluralism; take heart from spread of gospel world-wide, and go forward in faith.