

Book Reviews

Cross-Cultural Servanthood – Serving the World in Christlike Humility

Duane Elmer, IVP, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2006, 212 pp.

(I) Servanthood: Basic Perspectives

The book is relevant to Christians wanting to serve others in a cross-cultural context. It raises issues such as: why some who say they want to serve are perceived as having an attitude of paternalism, superiority and neo-colonialism; how people from other cultures perceive servanthood; what the Bible says about it; what the social science literature says makes an effective cross-cultural worker; and how these different sources connect.

Servanthood. It is God's nature to serve, which is why Jesus came as a servant. Metaphors of the towel (service) and the robe (status, power) are compared. Christians are never more like Jesus than when they serve.

Humility. DE notes the danger of regarding our theological/missiological training as giving us knowledge that makes us superior – e.g. 'I tell you, lecture you, correct you and have little time for listening to you' (30). Humility is a lifestyle, not isolated incidents. The challenge is to find cultural equivalents that express humility in ways that people interpret as humility (they may not see our 'humility' as humility!).

(II) Servanthood: The Process

Openness: the ability to welcome people and make them feel safe. The open arms of the Cross are the best symbol of this. Hospitality means extending grace to strangers or those who are different in a way that brings healing. Receiving kindness/hospitality from others is a way of honouring them – not always seeking to give (47). Skills required here: Suspending judgment, avoiding negative attribution, until we see more clearly. Often we see negatively what God sees as difference. Tolerance of ambiguity – we work hard to avoid the unexpected and live ordered lives. Thinking grey – not good or bad, black or white, friend or foe. Positive attribution – assuming the best, without being naïve. Not casting a person aside through one error.

Acceptance: the ability to communicate value and worth to another. Part of western modernity is a culture of rejection. Acceptance does not equal approval. Rather, to bless and tell God/others how important they are to us (seeing God's face in the face of others - 63). We can't honour God and treat others in a manipulative way. We shouldn't judge people by the way they live, but by the image of God in them. Factors limiting our acceptance: language (not learning this is a mark of rejection); impatience (find ways of dealing with life's frustrations); ethnocentrism; category width (narrow categorizers are more ethnocentric, reactionary – seeking less information before forming judgments); dogmatism (seeing difference as wrong, anti-dialogue, win-lose mentality, confrontational, clear-cut distinctions, evaluative language, culture cloning vs. helping others to be more like Christ, not like us).

Trust: the ability to build confidence in a relationship so that both parties believe the other will not intentionally hurt them, but act in their best interests. It takes time, involves risk (e.g. apologising, admitting wrong, forgiving), and has to be built from other person's perspective, because it occurs differently in each culture. For example, being late not a sign of rudeness; hand-holding with same sex. Trust is fragile; when broken, it takes a long time to heal. Forgiveness may involve a mediator, not necessarily confrontational or one-to-one (85). Forgiveness in the West is verbal, but attitudinal/behavioural in other cultures – often celebrated with meal.

Learning. The 'virus' of the educated westerner who speaks on most subjects with authority/finality, so that others find it hard to discuss (ouch!!). The more educated we are, the less inclined we are to listen, inquire, probe and learn from others (91). We see them as inferior and believe we can 'help' them by showing them how we do things. Learning means the ability to glean relevant information about, from and with other people.

Learning About: usually occurs before going to a place of service. Such learning is secondhand; the danger is that we think we know enough about the people and their culture. We cease learning and no longer need to learn from, listen to them. We don't get close to our hosts or share experiences with them, but just get on with task. We turn others into objects – who need our wisdom, presence and resources. We create dependent relationships, so that others rely on us for their goals, directions, nurture and status (robbing them of dignity). We form stereotypes without engaging the culture.

A study on effectiveness in overseas development work came up with three key measures: a) learning that focuses on mere knowledge and competence overlooks the ability to initiate and sustain interpersonal relationships with local people; b) the need for a strong sense of self-identity, which allowed people to be real with each other and avoid pretence; c) positive and realistic pre-departure expectations – ie. capacity to anticipate the 'bumps' in working in another culture, which decreases disappointment and frustration. Technical competency was only ranked fourth!

Learning From: we bestow honour on others when we learn from them ('I can't do this on my own but need you to teach me'). They will then tell us what we need to know, engage in dialogue with us (vs. monologue). Even doing language school for a short term can be abusive and utilitarian, where the teacher is a means to an end, and getting our job done more important than understanding local realities or learning from them. Successful people overseas value people first. The task emerges out of interpersonal connectedness. We must cultivate the learner role permanently (100) – isn't this what being a disciple means?

Learning With: a mutuality where neither side is above or beneath, leads to true partnership, where each probes deeply the heart and mind of the other, bringing interdependent growth and culturally sensitive ministry. 'We-they' categories are replaced by 'us' ones.

Learning – Public Foundations for Change. We must resist the urge to jump into conversations, correct information and tell people what to do (departing field with sense of

success - 110). Missionaries who have personalities that are duty-bound and anxious to conserve resources are twice as numerous among the missionary, as among the US population. Such people are more interested in transmitting rather than receiving information, are anxious that their message is heard. They get things done, but are less sensitive, less likely to understand the situation of the hearers, and less concerned to integrate into the host culture. Stories are among the most effective tools for teaching information; listening, one of the most effective expressions of love (121f). Carl Rogers speaks of five different responses to people in conversation: 1. evaluative (closing or diverting the conversation); 2. probing (questions that go deeper); 3. interpretation (saying back what we heard); 4. support (empathy); 5. understanding (asking for clarification, illustration, detail). The last four contribute to true dialogue where our own opinions are held tentatively (123).

Understanding – Seeing Through the Other’s Eyes. No matter how adept an exegete a theologian is, it amounts to nothing if she doesn’t understand her contemporary audience (125). Understanding is the ability to see patterns of behaviour and values that reveal the integrity of a people. Learning how to form the message so that it is understood requires commitment to culture learning. Otherwise, we are nothing more than grammatically correct fools – ‘clanging cymbals’. Each culture can make a significant contribution to our understanding of who God is and how he works in the world. When we seek to understand and learn from other cultures, we honour God (131). ‘Perspectivism’ is seeing as the local people see – having double vision (seeing through yours and their culture lenses at same time). Always asking ‘why?’ keeps our mind open to receiving new information.

Unchecked ethnocentrism turns people into objects to be manipulated (P. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, NY, Continuum, 1973, p.38) – not to exchange ideas but dictate them, not to debate or discuss themes, but to give lectures, not to work with but on a student, imposing an order which he has to accommodate. By giving the student formulas to receive and store, we have not offered him the means for authentic thought (142). Having this posture, says Hiebert (*Anthrop Insights*, 185-91) equals ‘uncritical contextualisation’ or paternalism (205).

Serving – Becoming Like Christ to Others. Serving – the ability to relate to people in such a way that their dignity as human beings is affirmed and they are more empowered to live God-glorifying lives (146) – treating others, not as equals (contra Elmer), but as better than ourselves (Paul).

(III) Servanthood: The Challenges

The Servant and Leadership. The biblical priority is on service, not leadership. It says there are good and bad leaders. Being trained in Scriptures doesn’t guarantee good leadership (156). God alone appoints and gifts people he wants to lead (Rom 12.6ff, 1 Cor 12.4-11). People lead according to their personality, history, role models, etc., but all types of leadership must be guided by biblical principles. Western leadership may not necessarily be a good model for other cultures. It is disturbing when leaders isolate themselves in their study for most of the week, spending little time with people, and then delivering

exegetically correct, rhetorically powerful but irrelevant sermons (164). Question: what kind of leadership might a missionary exhibit that doesn't violate cultural patterns?

The Servant and Power. Westerners entering a new culture have power – finances, education, resources, technology, relational networks and a passport (171). The way most of us serve keeps us in control; Jesus calls us to give up this right, become available/vulnerable, thus experiencing freedom.

The Servant and Mystery. God is trustworthy even when we can't see, feel or hear him. He guides us in decisions and promises never to leave us, even when his guidance takes us into the fog, mystery and suffering. He's there in the fog. Our role is to trust him – even if it takes ten years (184). Some causes of interpersonal missionary stress – differences of:

- Personality (e.g. extrovert-introvert)
- Philosophy (home schooling, lifestyle)
- Generation (worship styles, evangelism vs relationships)
- Proximity (geographical – can't choose who to work with)
- Culture (language learning, new driving patterns, food, schooling)

Joseph – Servant Model. Forced to live cross-culturally and suffered great injustices, attaining enormous power, but choosing the towel rather than the robe. Learnt the language and culture of Egypt. Displayed openness, acceptance, trust, learning, understanding and service – without compromising his faith (197).

[A helpful and challenging book, which raises the question of selection, preparation and in-service training practices for Australian missionaries and their organisational leaders. How do you insert self-emptying, weakness, servanthood and humility into the curriculum or strategic plan?]

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Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West.

Reviewd by our missionary in the Middle East

Author: Lamin Sanneh

Publisher: Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Published: 2003

No. pages: 130

As with Escobar's book (*A Time For Mission*), our view of God's work in the world is challenged and enhanced by writers of non-western origin. The book is short, but the taut elegance of prose and argument defies superficial reading. Sanneh has written this book in what he calls the 'interview approach'. He has taken criticisms of his subject matter, invited in both discussion and writing, and made them an integral part of his presentation. In taking these criticisms seriously, right into his own exposition, he not only enables us to follow and participate in the development of the topic, but more importantly points the way forwards for us in our own interaction with people whose world views challenge ours. He gently challenges us not to be afraid of disagreement: "People fight because they want the same thing, or make peace because they embrace difference." (p.6)

In Chapter 1, Part 1 Sanneh puts before us the facts of the astonishing growth of Christianity in Africa, against all predictions, and at the same time Western skepticism and deafness to what has been happening. Part II takes us into the interview approach, a hard-hitting discussion of both the facts and how they are interpreted. The ethno/western-centric attitudes of some of the questions both shock us, but also force us to examine our own deep prejudices. The relationship between faith and culture, between church and state power, are incisively examined, and the role of Bible translation and the use of indigenous names for God highlighted. In these discussions, and his reflection on what Europeans have to learn from a non-post-Enlightenment Africa's theological encounter with Christianity, there is an implicit caution against too much attachment to particular versions of Christian practice, especially for those of us who presume to live and work cross-culturally. After a far-ranging, fast-moving debate, Part III is a welcome summary of where the discussion has taken us to.

Chapter 2 follows a similar model of an initial brief presentation by Sanneh, then an dialogue about his presentation and its implications. This chapter is on Bible translation, and offers an impressive vindication of that work over so many continents and languages. He also includes a look at Islam, whose Book is by definition non-translatable, and at both jihad and the crusades. Sanneh acknowledges mistakes and misguided motives by missionaries, but looks beyond to the effect of the Christian message as it is taken up by local cultures.

This book is useful in understanding contemporary world Christianity and for its insights on anthropology, linguistics or literacy. Its analysis of the growth of Christianity precisely in those places where there are weak political forces is helpful in understanding claims of a current 'clash of civilisations', based on Huntingdon's book of that name. It is disturbing, challenging, exciting but well worth reading.

Our thanks to [Ridley College Bookshop](#) for providing us with review copies. Ph 9387 1449

GLOBAL MISSIOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Reviewed by Thomas Scarborough

This is a weighty tome. It also has a weighty price. However, it would be a book well worth having. It emerges from the Iguassu Missiological Consultation, held in Brazil in October 1999 - a conference attended by 160 delegates from all over the world. The Consultation was called together by the World Evangelical Fellowship (now Association) Missions Commission, to "pause at this historical hinge", and to reflect on the state of missions today.

The book is packed with information, and with much engaging reflection. This includes the Iguassu Affirmation - a joint statement hammered out at the Consultation - and nearly 40 papers by leading missiologists. These papers either formed the basis of discussion at the Consultation (plenary papers), or arose directly out of it. The real strength of the book lies in these papers.

WHAT ARE THE EMPHASES AND HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BOOK?

In the course of the book, there are several broad themes to which contributors return again and again.

There is broad consensus among contributors that the "locus" of the Church has shifted from the Western to the Two-Thirds world (alternatively, from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere). There is a sense, almost throughout, that the Church in North America has lost the spiritual initiative with a "domesticated Christianity" which is unable even to "engage its own culture". Much the same applies to the rest of the Western world, and mainland Europe is virtually sidelined from the book. There is discussion throughout the book concerning the all-pervasive postmodern worldview. And there was a plea, throughout the book, for theology. In fact this plea was incorporated into the Iguassu Affirmation itself, and takes up the major part of it.

The book has many highlights. Besides being a treasure trove of well researched information on the state of world missions today, the following are some of the papers which stood out for me in particular.

Samuel Escobar was masterful in his summary of world missions today, as well as the spiritual condition of missions. He demonstrated a vast command of "the global scenario at the turn of the century". Chris Wright, with great insight and clarity, entered into major theological and worldview issues facing missions today. Ajith Fernando contributed four chapters on trinitarianism, which were deeply grounded in Scripture, and included some strong observations on the state of the Church today. Yusufu Turaki gave an impressive description of past missions in Africa. Joshua Daimoi wrote a humorous and engaging account of missions in the Pacific - as only a Pacific islander could do. And finally, David Greenlee wrote a heartening report of the Church in the Middle East, which, he writes, should not be thought of merely as "a few fossils from the ancient past".

DO CONTRIBUTORS REVEAL ANY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WESTERN AND TWO-THIRDS WORLDS?

Contributors to the book are more or less equally divided between what is referred to as "the Western world" on the one hand, and "the Two-Thirds world" on the other, there being 18 or 19 contributions from each. There are clear differences between these two worlds in the book itself, and perhaps it is no accident that each is referred to as a "world". However, there are exceptions - among them Paul Hiebert's paper on spiritual warfare, which clearly goes against what he refers to as the "Indo-European worldview" from which he comes.

One of the more illuminating examples of the difference is the contrast between an introductory paper by Samuel Escobar (a South American), and the response of Jonathan Bonk (a North American). Escobar highlights eleven major themes - then Bonk follows up with professed agreement on all. However, in the very process of agreeing, he demonstrates just how far he is from Escobar - without, apparently, being aware of it.

Escobar emphasises the need for "spiritual power and disciplines" among Christians. Bonk responds that Christians find power in "values, orientations". Escobar writes about "commitment to the authority of God's Word". Bonk refers to the Word of God as "a handbook" for the journey. Escobar states the need for "a spirituality of the cross, readiness for suffering". Bonk interprets the way of the cross as "love for enemies, the way of forgiveness". Escobar refers many times to the Holy Spirit, writing of the "presence and power of the Holy Spirit", and of the Church of Christ as "the work of the Holy Spirit". Bonk, in response, does not refer to the Holy Spirit even once.

While Bonk, throughout his paper, lauds Escobar, he would appear to bypass his core themes almost completely. In short, there is a characteristic Two-Thirds world radicalism about Escobar, erudite as he is, that is absent from Bonk. Much the same could be noted about other contributors to the book. Both Bonk's negation of Escobar, and his lack of awareness of this, would seem to typify the situation in the world (or two worlds) today.

WHAT INSIGHTS DOES THE BOOK REVEAL WITH REGARD TO MISSIONS TO MUSLIMS?

Islam has up to 2 billion adherents in the world today. Yet strangely, this did not receive a great deal of attention in the book. Editor William D. Taylor comments that "a weakness of the Iguassu program was the absence of any serious analysis of the Islamic reality around the world".

David Greenlee places an interesting quote in his paper: "Historically the way the church has approached Islam has not been a successful one". Neither wars of the past, nor ignoring or bypassing Islam, nor the tendency of the Church to appease Islam has met with any significant success. Muslims "are fiercely antagonistic toward any attempts to evangelize them". He proposes a new way - or should we say, an old way. He states that "some issues of contextualization are being pushed too far," and that "we need to share the love of Christ openly."

Ian Prescott, on the other hand, notes an anomalous approach to Islam in his paper. St. Eulogius, who lived in the early 9th Century A.D., appears to be the only example in the book of challenging "the bases" of Islam. St. Eulogius led a "martyr's movement", through which "at least 50 Christians were beheaded over a decade" (perhaps half a dozen annually). Finally, the local emir threatened to put to death all Christians in his realm if St. Eulogius' followers did not desist from this method. As a result, more moderate Christians pressured the more radical Christians to silence.

This raises the question: Would this episode seem to prove that St. Eulogius was just a crazy fool? Or might the emir's reaction demonstrate that St. Eulogius was essentially correct, in that he touched the real nerve-centre of Islam? Given a repeated emphasis of missiologists in this book on attacking the roots of false worldviews that stand in the way of the acceptance of Christ, there seemed to be an obvious gap in this regard in the discussion of Islam.

SYNTHESIS

The Iguassu Affirmation itself has a number of distinctive features. Besides its affirmation of core evangelical beliefs in an age of religious pluralism, it places a special emphasis on suffering, godliness, spiritual conflict, and a holistic gospel. This further finds its outworking in the papers. A curious feature of the Affirmation is a statement of repentance by the delegates, without any broader application of repentance to the world - and a more obvious omission is any reference to eternal destinies, a subject which clearly was an issue among the delegates.

This having been said, the Iguassu Dialogue (the subtitle of the book), which finds expression in the published papers, is most informative, interesting, and enlightening. Nor has the dialogue been finally completed. An important aspect of the consultation, and of the book, is to invest in an ongoing process of global missiology. If you should wish to know about the state of evangelical missions in the world today, there may be no book to equal this.

CITATION OF REFERENCES

Taylor, William D. (Editor). *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000. ISBN 0-8010-2259-2. Publisher Price U.S.\$40.

Thomas Scarborough is a minister in central Cape Town, in an Evangelical Congregational Church. He is currently studying for a Master's degree through Fuller Theological Seminary. In the course of his studies, he needs to report on some 100 prescribed books - hence this review!

Signs amid the rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History - Lesslie Newbigin

Reviewed by Bishop John Harrower

“God” made an uncharacteristic appearance during the recent Australian election. Of course, protagonists frequently attempt to co-opt God in support of their particular human purposes. If we disagree with co-opting God, should God then be excluded from public issues? Senator Amanda Vanstone certainly stated so in the debate concerning stem cell research, “Your religion is your own business and no-one else’s”.

Does Christian faith have any role in public life? Is public life a sphere of mission?

“To forswear politics means surrendering control of 75 percent of life to forces over which neither the Christian, nor anyone else, has any control. That cannot be called a serious attempt to implement the requirements of God’s rule.”

Lesslie Newbigin gave the above answer to a class of theology students in Bangalore in 1941 at the age of 31. He would continue to pursue this theme and its profound implications for the life of the church during the next 50 years of his life.

Newbigin was first and foremost committed to God’s mission. For Newbigin the Christian’s active participation in all aspects of life, including politics, was the very stuff of our entering into God’s purposes for human history.

If you want to be a spectator rather than a player in God’s plans, do not discomfort yourself by reading Lesslie Newbigin’s writings!

The beauty of this collection of talks; from India in 1941 to Cambridge in 1986 and to his final public addresses in Brazil in 1996, is his deep and abiding passion for God’s people to engage with God’s world to bring in God’s kingdom.

This is a book for Newbigin buffs and an introduction to his thinking.

Newbigin paints on a broad canvas.

Thus his application of Christian principles in India engaged ideas of progress and development: “I propose for these four lectures . . . an attempt to disentangle and criticize from a Christian point of view one of the seminal ideas of European civilization, the idea of progress.”

“Every faithful act of service, every honest labor to make the world a better place, which seemed to have been forever lost and forgotten in the rubble of history, will be seen on that day to have contributed to the perfect fellowship of God’s Kingdom.” Hence his book’s title: ‘Signs amid the Rubble’.

Returning to England Newbigin wrote about the decline of western culture and the demands of the gospel on the West. Coincidentally, I have recently read Australian

sociologist, John Carroll's, "The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited", which gives a broad based critique of the failings of the West. A Christian explanation of these failings are Newbiggin's gift to us, brilliantly set out in his Cambridge addresses. He knew that Christian mission was essential to the well-being of his homeland, and pulled no punches in saying so.

A little over a year before he died, Newbiggin (1909- 1998) spoke in Brazil on his passion to engage our culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Does our culture determine our understanding of the gospel, or does the gospel determine our culture?

In commenting on western culture he notes that the secular model of society "has claimed to provide freedom but it cannot sustain that claim". What then underpins a truly free society? "The Christian gospel affirms that, not in spite of but because of our faith, we are required to provide space for disobedience, for dissent, for disbelief, in the faith that God in His own way and in His own time will manifest His rule. Only that faith in the long run can sustain a truly free society."

The address is short but captures his heart, a heart for mission; its dedication and its joy.

In the final words of his address and of the book: "It seems to me, the resurrection of Jesus was a kind of nuclear explosion which sent out a radioactive cloud, not lethal but life-giving, and that the mission of the church is simply the continuing communication of that joy – joy in the Lord".

This is published by Eerdmans, Cambridge, 2003.

Our thanks to [Ridley College Bookshop](#) for providing us with review copies. Ph 9387 1449

Who Can Be Saved – Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World religions. Terrance L. Tiessen

Reviewed by Peter Adam

Can people can be saved apart from conscious faith in Christ and membership of Christ's Church?

This was the subject of vigorous debate at the recent Melbourne Synod.

This book is a splendid overview of different aspects of the topic, and an introduction to recent thought and writing on the subject.

This is a vitally relevant contemporary issue. The focus of the book is particularly on what is the state of members of other religions.

However the fundamental issue is broader than that.

Here are some questions that any of us may be asked anytime. What is the eternal destiny of babies who die before they are born? What happens to children who die before reaching an age where they can understand the gospel of Christ? What about those who are not able because of mental impairment to understand the gospel? What happened to those who lived before the incarnation of Christ? What should we make of the existence of other religions?

It also concerns those who hear the proclamation of Christ but whose minds are so filled with the atrocities committed by Christians in the past that they are unable to hear the good news.

These must be issues of concern for us today, as we care for friends and neighbours, want to welcome refugees to Australia, want to give Christ the honour that he deserves, and want people to receive eternal life from him.

Tiessen gives a fair overview of the various options:

- Ecclesiocentrism, which is that the possibility of salvation is co-extensive with the presence of the church, and that only those that hear the gospel can be saved.
- Agnosticism, those who claim that the scriptures do not teach clearly on what happens to people who haven't heard or cannot hear and whether or not they are saved.
- Accessibilism, which is the belief that we can be hopeful about the possibility of salvation for those that don't hear the gospel.
- Religious instrumentalism, which asserts that God saves people through non-Christian religions
- Relativism, which is that salvation is universally accessible through various religions that are part of the divine program.

Tiessen's own view cannot be summarised in one sentence, because it is carefully nuanced, carefully argued, and pastorally sensitive. He states it in thirty theses, which are found on pages 22-30 of the book. He is carefully Biblical, and does justice to the teaching of the Scriptures without asserting idea beyond what they teach.

As an example of his careful thought, he explores the question of God's 'common grace' in other religions, without losing any conviction about the unique role of Christ's atoning death. So he has a positive view of dialogue with people of other religions, but still recognises our responsibility to engage in evangelism. His own view is of carefully nuanced Accessibilism.

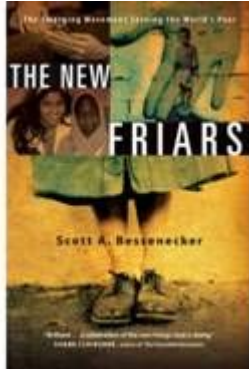
The book is warmly commended by John Stackhouse, Chris Wright [and Peter Adam].

Our thanks to [Ridley College Bookshop](#) for providing us with review copies. Ph 9387 1449

THE NEW FRIARS: THE EMERGING MOVEMENT SERVING THE WORLD'S POOR

Scott A. Bessenecker

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006



Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

In 1999-2000 I met some of the hundreds-of-thousands of people who were homeless and displaced because of religious/ethnic violence in the Maluku islands of Indonesia. A friend and I were visiting an island off South-East Sulawesi that many of them had fled to. They came to the island because they or their ancestors had migrated from there, but they had little in the way of assets and resources, local infrastructure was stretched beyond capacity and many came with the grief and recent memories of friends and close family members being killed. Hearing their stories and seeing their displacement left me with more questions than I had answers to. They asked us to send help, but I knew that sending dollars and recruiting visiting experts in an effort to lift them up would not be as effective as placing ourselves among them to help them rise up from their poverty. Reading *The New Friars* reinforced this lesson for me and reminded me of the needs in that part of the world which are repeated in too many places around the globe.

Back in Australia, the example of workers with Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH) in Melbourne and Bangkok has prompted me over the last year to open my eyes to those who are challenged with poverty and marginalization in my own suburb. Early in 2006 when the Australian government was offending British censorship guidelines with the 'Where the bloody hell are you?' tourism commercials, UNOH and their asylum seeker friends reminded me that a warm welcome is not offered to everyone who wants to come to Australia! Many missionary organizations are grappling to connect Generation-X and Generation-Y with a vision for global mission; UNOH are speaking to thousands in churches and conferences and successfully recruiting a new generation of urban missionaries eager to serve at or below the poverty line. They are also empowering a larger team of volunteers and associates whose imagination has been captured by UNOH's work.

Scott Bessenecker delves into the small but potent and growing movement of which UNOH is a part. InnerCHANGE, Servant Partners, Servants to Asia's Urban Poor and Word Made Flesh (WMF) are some of the other incarnational mission groups that represent what he calls 'the new friars'. Like the Franciscan ideal, they take seriously the call to downward

mobility, turn their backs on conspicuous consumption and pursue lives of simplicity and compassion to society's rejects. As director of Global Projects with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bessenecker takes groups of students to work in slums around the world and has seen them up close. As he describes in different chapters, they are incarnational in living the gospel among people; devotional in pursuing intimacy with Jesus through spiritual disciplines; communal in depending on one another and sharing wealth; missional in pursuing the Kingdom and ministering to the poor; and content to be marginal in churches and society in order to connect with people on the edges.

The New Friars paints an evocative picture of Jesus' incarnation that sent him into the stench of human poverty, and the mission he sent his disciples on without the insulating power of money, food and extra clothes. I found particular inspiration from its stories of other movements through history – Francis and Clare of Assisi, St Patrick and the Celts, the Jesuits, Nestorians and Moravians, and the new monasticism and the 24-7 prayer movement. New missional orders today hold in common with those movements a willingness to embrace the condition of the least and the lost.

Bessenecker helps us imagine what it is like to live like one of the billion slum dwellers in the world. His exploration of the causes of poverty, the effects of sin, and the corporate and political injustice and crumbling infrastructure slum dwellers face is insightful. The figures of child slavery, genocide and ever-widening global inequality is almost unbelievable from the comfort of my suburb. But I appreciated his practical suggestions for simple living from where I am. And for potential incarnational mission workers, he wrestles with issues of lifestyle, family opposition, sharing resources and inevitable grief, and pathways to short-term and long-term service among the world's poor.

'To really dig deeply into the wound of poverty will require thousands of healthy "blood cells" who will take on the entrenched viruses of culture, personal sin and spiritual forces: devoted, focused and radical men and women who are not afraid to link their destinies with the destinies of these poor communities, people who are willing to live with Jesus among the "least of these." And the "least of these" have never needed advocates more than they do now.' (p.57)

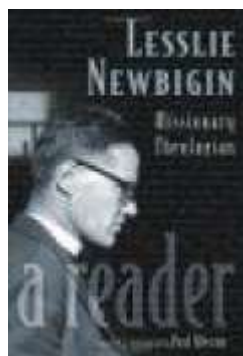
The New Friars offers an informed overview of a passionate movement that is committed to one of the biggest and most overlooked challenges of global mission today.

Darren Cronshaw is a research student at Whitley College and serves with Forge Mission Training Network www.forge.org.au. As a UNOH writer himself (Credible Witness, 2006), Darren encourages readers when they are finished The New Friars to check out related books by Melbourne writers at www.unoh.org especially Ashley Barker's biblical and autobiographical challenges in 'Make Poverty Personal', 'Finding Life' and 'Surrender All'.

Review posted December 7 2006

ON NOT LEAVING THEOLOGY TO THE PROFESSIONALS

Review by Peter Edman



Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader, compiled and introduced by Paul Weston (Eerdmans/SPCK, 2006, ISBN 0802829821); 264 pages plus notes, bibliography, and index.

Since *Implications* is directed at business and professional leaders you may wonder why our first formal book review is about theology. The reason is that all of us, consciously or not, are theologians, and as Andrzej Turkanik said at a recent emerging leaders forum, the question is, what kind of theologians are we?

Most of us tend to leave the deep thinking to the “professionals,” and as Lesslie Newbigin says, “Theology has been largely the preserve of clergy and academics.” He said this as a challenge to the average follower of Jesus, reminding us that we have a deeper responsibility than we sometimes wish to acknowledge. We must not be satisfied with a superficial understanding and there are significant dangers when you leave everything to the professionals. We thus start with this collection of writings of the great missionary bishop and theologian who died in 1998, for it offers a framework for the type of approach we will often take.

Biography informs theology

This collection is prefaced appropriately with a brief biography of Newbigin, whose life is intertwined with the history of the church and the theological conversations of the twentieth century. Theology, in Newbigin’s understanding, is not primarily about a quest for universal axioms, like some schools of philosophy. It is about the ways human beings, in human bodies, talk and think and work together, empowered by Jesus and his resurrection life and guided by the Spirit he sends, to realize in history God’s plans for the world.

I find it comforting to think about it this way: A too-tidy theology may be a warning sign. Beyond the great ordering narrative of the Christian story, a Christian understanding of life leads us to expect a certain necessary messiness—and no little humor. I had not realized before coming to Weston’s *Reader* that Newbigin was actually Reformed by training, and ended his life as a minister in the United Kingdom’s United Reformed Church (which is largely presbyterian in governance). The fact that his great unifying work in the formation of the Church of South India led directly to his becoming a bishop leads, one might say, to worthwhile theological speculation about God’s sense of humor.

This is not to say that Newbigin was uninterested in philosophical questions. Some of his most important contributions to theology flow from his appreciation, explanation, and application of the work of scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi in the area of knowledge (notably the question of public truth). He uses this background to help us wrestle with questions of modernity, postmodernity, and pluralism—increasingly urgent in light of the demands of Islam and the collapse of “enlightened” Western self-confidence (it is no coincidence that one of his final books is titled *Proper Confidence*). His discussions on these topics give us a practical and theoretical framework by which we can do so.

Although the primary audience for this book is committed Christian believers, thoughtful seekers will find it decidedly appealing because of the honest and demanding take on Christian faith, thankfully low on jargon and technical terms. Editor Paul Weston assembles many of Newbigin’s previously uncollected occasional pieces along with key excerpts from his most important books. He sets each piece in context, here and there summarizing important themes. This, combined with the shorter nature of most of the pieces, makes an excellent introduction to Newbigin and a surprisingly approachable way into the deeper waters of theology for those who are not professionals in the field.

This is not to say that it is an easy read, but there are built-in opportunities to breathe, as it were, and the book’s difficulty is more due to the depth, seriousness, and radical nature of its questions than any issues with its prose.

Public truth for public life

Weston notes that Newbigin often returned to themes, so in coming to terms with his thought we have the assistance of an occasional repetition of ideas from different angles. The brief quote above is from a 1994 essay, “The Cultural Captivity of Western Christianity as a Challenge to a Missionary Church.” Citing another passage from that piece calls out some of these themes, most of which badly need our attention:

If what I have been saying is true, there is need for what I would call a declericalizing of theology. . . . What is needed is the cooperative work of Christian laymen and women in specific sectors of public life: industry, politics, medicine, education, local government, welfare, administration, the media, literature, drama, and the arts. In each of these and other sectors of public life there is a need to examine the accepted axioms and assumptions that underlie the contemporary practice, to examine them in the light of the gospel. That will not happen as long as theology is the preserve of the clergy or, what is equally dangerous, simply an enclave within a secular academic community. There is an immense intellectual and pastoral task in which the experience of the foreign missionary movement could, I believe, be of great help to the Churches in making this move towards a more truly missionary relationship with our culture.

My ears perked up on reading this; The Trinity Forum is in part an attempt to help Christians do this. Note in particular the bit about public life—a central component to Newbigin’s thinking, and critically important for followers of Jesus. For as Newbigin reminds us, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a public gospel, addressed to the public world. And the “missionary calling [is] to claim the whole of public life for Christ and his kingdom.” It is critical to highlight the fact that this perspective comes from a man who

spent the bulk of his career as a missionary and churchman in India, a leading candidate for the planet's most relativistic and syncretistic society. Speaking as someone who became an outsider to his own culture, he reminds us that privatized religion is not a faithful option—it is only a preemptive surrender to the dying Enlightenment world.

Also notable is his call to question the “axioms and assumptions” of contemporary disciplines. This is the role of applied ethics, which in a Christian context must be fitted into an overall narrative of God's work in the world and his overall purposes. But how many of us in various public sectors are able to articulate those purposes? If you are not one of them, you will find this essay and similar passages invaluable. A more focused study or primer, and worth more than this mention in passing, is N. T. Wright's new *Simply Christian* (2006), which does set out that larger narrative for us in a way that Newbigin would, I think, also affirm.

Newbigin is not comforting reading if you are looking for easy reassurance. He admits that the implications of his thinking frighten even himself. But there is a deeper confidence underlying his questions—demanding them—grounded in the ultimate purposes of God for creation and new creation. In this sense, we can count ourselves fortunate—if that's the right word in this context—to be living at a time of a wider return to a more holistic and biblical appreciation of God's purposes in history, and what will come after history, in the work of thinkers like Newbigin and Wright and Dallas Willard.

We must contrast this perspective with that of a wide swathe of popular theology which in effect teaches that our responsibility is to make one right decision and then wait quietly for the end, when everything will be destroyed and we all go to heaven. This devalues God's created world, making for a functionally gnostic way of life—disconnected personal morality, aimless work, shoddy architecture. It is no response to secular nihilism and despair. But Newbigin takes the Christian scriptures more seriously, grounding our work, ethics, and relationships in eternal significance by pointing us to a “meaningful future,” for our destiny is not heaven but a renewed earth.

Another part of Newbigin's response worth noting here—again, discomfiting in a bracing way—is his insistence that we reconsider the question of the church. His discussion of church raises questions that we all need to deal with, not least many of us involved with the Trinity Forum. Some of my friends are loathe even to use the term “Christian,” given its historical and sociological taints. But it seems that if we are to be “followers of Christ,” we need to take seriously Jesus' claim to be the head of a body of believers, the church. The historicity of Jesus and his resurrection is rightly a nonnegotiable for Newbigin, and he was careful to say that Jesus' church has two millennia of history that cannot be overlooked or undone.

The Christian church is what Jesus gave us to work with. And as Newbigin reminds us, it is how he chooses to change the world, to manifest his kingdom. Trying to go back to some primitive pre-church era is a dangerous nostalgia. Talk around it all we want, the church is not going away and it needs to be taken more seriously than Western Christians have in the past century.

Proper confidence

The collection is also timely in light of the recent illuminating controversy over the Regensburg lecture of Pope Benedict XVI. Like the Pope, Newbiggin was fully aware of the weakness of "the liberal, secular democratic state" in the face of attacks from "powerful new religious fanaticisms." These attacks, he says in an excerpt from *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*,

are possible only because its own internal weaknesses have become so clear: the disintegration of family life, the growth of mindless violence, the vandalism which finds satisfaction in destroying whatever is comely and useful, the growing destruction of the environment by limitless consumption fueled by ceaseless propaganda, the threat of nuclear war, and—as the deepest root of it all—the loss of any sense of a meaningful future. Weakened from within, secular democratic societies are at a loss to respond to religious fanaticism without denying their own principles.

And then he poses the deep question that needs to be asked afresh:

What could it mean for the Church to make once again the claim which it made in its earliest centuries, the claim to provide the public truth by which society can be given coherence and direction?

I imagine some hackles are rising. It is not a comfortable question. All the more reason to read on.

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