

## 8. THE RELATION OF THE MISSIONARY CHURCH TO ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

### 8.1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the relation to God and to its mission, the third relationship of the missionary church is to its religio-cultural context. The word 'contextualization' was first used by Shoki Coe in 1972 to describe the task of theological education in various cultural contexts. Since that time it has rapidly gained in popularity to describe varying models of understanding the relationship between the Christian community and its message to its total religio-cultural context (Upkong 1987:161, 163). Newbigin began to employ the term contextualization soon after it was coined.

Newbigin's understanding of gospel, church, and culture offers a unique model of contextualization. Stephen Bevans has sketched five models of contextualization (1992). He recognized at the end of his work that Newbigin's way of approaching the question of gospel, church and culture did not fit any of the five models. He outlined a sixth model calling it the 'counter-cultural model.'

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this chapter examines Newbigin's understanding of contextualization and will consist of five sections. The first section sketches the development of the concept in contextualization as the setting in which Newbigin's understanding is developed. Section two explains Newbigin's model of cross-cultural communication. Understanding Newbigin's notion of cross-cultural communication of the gospel is critical for grasping his model of contextualization. He elaborates the model of cross-cultural communication into a way of understanding of the whole relationship between gospel, church and culture. The third part describes the relationship of the missionary church to its culture in light of this model. Few models of contextualization place the church so firmly in the middle of the relationship between gospel and culture. The next section lays out the elements involved in the faithful contextualization of the church's witness. Central to this understanding are the notions 'challenging relevance' borrowed from Alfred Hogg and 'subversive fulfillment' taken from Hendrik Kraemer. A final section examines the notion of a missionary encounter as the normal way in which the church relates to its cultural context. This is a key notion in Newbigin's understanding of contextualization; all the threads of his discussion draw together here.

### 8.2. FROM CONTEXT TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

The gospel has always taken shape in the social, lingual, and cultural context of those who received it. The initial incarnation of the gospel by the church was in the Jewish milieu, embodying and proclaiming the gospel in Hebrew categories and social institutions. Yet the young Jewish church found itself in the midst of the Roman empire and its missionary expansion required that the gospel be translated into the Hellenistic context. Already in the canon of the New Testament this process of translation had begun to take place. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the central category that Jesus

employs in the announcement of the gospel is the kingdom of God. It is not surprising that Jesus takes hold of the image of the kingdom; it had become a dominant image in the Jewish culture in which Jesus carried out his ministry. While the prophets used a plethora of images to announce the end-time salvation that would be ushered in by the Messiah, the image of the reign of God became increasingly popular over the inter-testamental period. By the time Jesus opens his ministry it is the central image that fuelled Jewish eschatological expectation.

When one reads John, however, the image of the kingdom of God virtually drops out of sight. Instead, all kinds of concepts that were quite common in classical philosophy and had made their way into classical culture—light/darkness, life/death, heaven/earth, body/soul—become the categories of choice for the proclamation of the good news. We do not hear that the kingdom of God has arrived but rather that “In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:4). On the surface the translation appears to be so starkly different that some New Testament scholars have argued that the gospel was syncretistically absorbed into Hellenistic thought (Bultmann 1951:168; 1956:163f.) The gospel in the synoptics is defined by Jewish categories and looks forward horizontally in time to the renewal of the creation in the kingdom of God. The gospel in John and Paul is defined by Greek categories and looks upward vertically in space to the salvation of individuals in heaven (cf. Ladd 1968:9-40).

This New Testament paradigm of translation continued during the New Testament period as the church spread to differing cultural contexts: Jewish, Greek, barbarian, Thracian, Egyptian, and Roman. In the post-apostolic period the same pattern is evident as the gospel is incarnated in many different cultural settings—Syriac, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Maronite (Bosch 1991:448). The norm was a plurality of cultural expressions of the gospel.

This all began to change in the fourth century. There were at least two reasons for this. First, the conversion of Constantine ultimately led to the establishment of the church as the official religion of the empire. With the close connection of the church with the Roman empire, the gospel was associated with *one* culture, which was considered the *dominant* and *superior* culture. Second, as the gospel was contextualized in the empire, the Greek spirit proved to be too strong for the church. Greek notions of truth as timeless, supracultural ideas reshaped the gospel in its mould. The aim of theological expression was to capture this single, suprahistorical truth in its theoretical articulations. As a result of this development, the plurality of expression found in the early church was lost. The theological articulation of the gospel, the liturgy, and Christian ethical behaviour was standardized. The rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the problem as it hemmed in Europe to the south and east. This isolated the gospel on the European peninsula from the other cultures of the world. Issues of contextualization and cultural plurality simply were not part of the Christian experience for many centuries as the gospel found a monocultural home.

The age of discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries opened new opportunities for missions to have contact with various cultures. A number of factors confronted missions with the problem of the gospel and cultures: the initial communication of the gospel in terms that were understandable to the people and faithful to the gospel; the translation of the Scriptures into the native tongues of the people; the ongoing question of the treatment of the indigenous cultures in their social, cultural, moral, and religious

practices; and the need to find forms of worship and churchmanship suited to the new setting.

Since the European powers that commissioned overseas voyages during the first wave of exploration were the Catholic nations of Portugal and Spain, the first missionaries to seize these new opportunities were Roman Catholic. Unfortunately, the growing recognition of the need for a new dialogue between the gospel and cultures by Jesuit foreign missionaries (Robert de Nobili, Pedro Paez, Alessandro Valignano, and Matthew Ricci, for example) coincided with the Counter-Reformation whose first priority was, in face of the Protestant threat, to safeguard Catholic unity by imposing a rigid theological and liturgical uniformity on the church (Shorter 1988:153, 162). Any hope that Roman Catholic missions would break the monocultural uniformity of the gospel in Latin culture was put to rest in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when Pope Clement IX and Pope Benedict XIV condemned Ricci's contextualizing experiments in China and recalled all Jesuit missionaries. The question of gospel and cultures was silenced for the moment (Shorter 1988:157-159; Bosch 1991:449).

Protestant missions rose to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This coincided with new competition within Europe precipitated by the industrial revolution. The rivalry resulted in fresh initiatives of exploration and colonization that encompassed vast areas of the earth. With missions following in the steps of the colonizers, there was a new encounter with the cultures of the world. This fresh contact of the gospel with the various cultures of the earth raised again, with new urgency and complexity, the questions that had been voiced by the Jesuits and subsequently suppressed by the Vatican. Unfortunately, the stranglehold of western culture on the gospel was not immediately broken. Colonialism seemed to demonstrate the superiority of European culture, and missions adopted this mindset. The scientific rationalism that now encompassed European society fostered the illusion that truth is ahistorical and uncontaminated by the taint of human culture. For missions this meant that western theology is objective and stands above the relativities of history and culture. Western ecclesiastical, social and theological practice were considered supracultural and universally valid. The mission of the church was to export these normative forms of the gospel to the rest of the world.

The strategy to expedite this process was called by various names: adaptation or accommodation in Roman Catholicism and indigenization in Protestantism. The process to which these words pointed did not yet comprehend the full implications of a true encounter between the gospel and culture. The following critiques can be made of this process (Bosch 1991:448-449). First, the western expression of the gospel was considered normative and the need was for *it* (i.e., western form of the gospel and not the gospel itself) to be accommodated to the various cultures. Second, adaptation was deemed to be a problem only for the younger churches and not for the western churches since the gospel was supposedly already faithfully expressed there. Third, accommodation was thought to be a once-for-all procedure that was accomplished at the point of the insertion of the gospel into a particular culture. In the West, this process was a *fait accompli*. Similarly, in the younger churches the process would be complete when they were furnished with all the accountments of the western church. Fourth, accommodation was a concession to the Third World churches. It was not something constitutive of the gospel, but merely a pragmatic tool, a pedagogical strategy to communicate the gospel and expand the church. Fifth, this process affected only certain

elements of culture that were not polluted by non-Christian religions. Adherents of accommodation and indigenization did not yet understand the indivisible unity of cultures in which every element is shaped by the underlying religious worldview.

A number of factors combined to challenge the accommodationist approach in missions. Paul Hiebert argues that the three primary factors were the breakdown of colonialism, new advances in the social sciences—especially anthropology, linguistics, and postmodern history and philosophy of science (1994:81-84). The demise of colonialism levelled the myth of western superiority; advances in anthropology and linguistics revealed the profound unity within and differences between various cultures; postmodern history and philosophy of science exploded the positivist myth of ahistorical knowledge. We may add another, and perhaps the most important, factor: the maturation and independence of younger churches. The growing contextualized theologies of the Third World churches demonstrated a faithfulness to Scripture and new insights into the Biblical story that challenged the self-sufficiency and universal validity of western theology.

These factors moved the church into a new realization that contextualization is essential for the missionary church. The following commitments characterize the new situation. First, contextualization is constitutive of the gospel. There is no such thing as a culturally disinfected gospel; it is always expressed and embodied in some cultural context. This is not something to be regretted but is given with the very nature of the gospel. Far from threatening the universal validity of the gospel, a contextualized communication of the gospel is already evident on the pages of the New Testament, as the gospel moves from its Hebrew home to the Greek setting. Faithfulness to the Christian message requires recognizing this characteristic of the gospel. Second, there can be varying cultural expressions of the gospel that are faithful to the gospel. Since the gospel is not an idea that stands above history but the announcement of universally valid events that have significance for all of history, this can be expressed with various mutually enriching and correcting images. There is no universal theology or embodiment that stands in judgement of various contextualizations of the gospel. The spectre of relativism is continually present but the resolution of this issue is not found in the absolutization of some local theology or particular incarnation of the gospel as universal adjudicator. Authentic contextualization will avoid both relativism and an ethnocentric absolutism. Third, contextualization is an on-going process. Since culture is constantly changing and since the gospel must be translated faithfully into every idiom, if the church is to live out of the gospel, the process of contextualization will never be a *fait accompli* but a continuous challenge intrinsic to the church's mission. Fourth, contextualization is a process that takes place in every cultural setting. Contextualization is as much an issue for the western church as it is for the younger churches of the Third World.

The development of these underlying convictions has not led to any kind of consensus on contextualization. Various authors have attempted to group together the varying models of contextualization that are present in the world church today (Bevans 1992, 1993, 1999; Dyrness 1990; Friedli 1997:220; Schreiter 1985:6-16; Upkong 1987:163-168; Waldenfels 1997:82-87). All of these models struggle with two fundamental questions: How can the church be *faithful* to the gospel and *relevant* to the particular culture without falling into syncretism? How can the church be faithful to *one*

*gospel* without falling into ethnocentrism and at the same time embrace *plural expressions* without falling into relativism? It is unnecessary in this context to review the various struggles toward formulating answers. However, it would be useful to place Newbigin within the context of some of these typologies.

Typologies differ, of course, depending on the precise nature of the organizing criteria. Friedli produces a typology on the basis of the relationship of salvation to the cultural context (1997). He identifies five different contextual approaches: fulfillment, wherein salvation provides the answer for the questions of the culture; judgement, wherein salvation judges culture; the offer of a salvation that transcends religions and history; the invitation for conversion; and solidarity in suffering (Friedli 1997:220). In this typology Newbigin would fit into the fourth category. He would reject fulfillment; all of culture has been corrupted by sin including even the questions asked by the culture. He would reject the judgement model because culture is not only corrupted by sin; it also reflects God's good creation. He would reject the third model since salvation is the renewal and restoration of God's creation. While he would affirm solidarity in suffering—the fifth model—he would argue that contextualization must move beyond that to offer a word of hope and acts of justice and mercy.

Dyrness groups contextualization in terms of geography and the specific problems faced by the world church in that particular location (1990). The African church faces the problem of cultural estrangement created by the suppression of their cultural memory and identity by European ethnocentrism during the colonial period (Dyrness 1990:36-41). Contextualization needs to focus on the recovery of traditional culture and the relationship of the gospel to it in the present-day African church. The Latin American church faces a context of widespread poverty and misery upheld by unjust social, economic, and political structures that are both national and international in scope (Dyrness 1990:71-75). Contextualization needs to focus on issues of cultural analysis and social change that will secure justice. The Asian church represents a small minority in the midst of the ancient and powerful religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Dyrness 1990:121-126). Contextualization must face the issue of religious pluralism and the relationship of the gospel to a culture pervasively shaped by these vigorous religions. To Dyrness' list we might add the situation of the church in western culture. The church in the West has a long history of a symbiotic relationship with its culture. One might say that the gospel has been overcontextualized in the West. Perhaps the largest issue facing the church in contextualization in the West is the need to recover the counter-cultural dimensions of the gospel. To place Newbigin in any of these typologies, it is necessary to be reminded of his geographical setting. Newbigin spent thirty-eight years as a missionary in India. His views of gospel and culture were developed in relationship to Hindu culture. The next section will demonstrate how that Asian paradigm affected his understanding of contextualization even as he brought it to bear on the western situation.

As to placing Newbigin in a typology, Robert Schreiter and Stephen Bevans present an interesting situation. Schreiter distinguishes between three models placed on a spectrum between gospel/ Christian tradition and cultural context. The translation model begins with the gospel and attempts to translate it into another culture by way of a two-step procedure of decontextualization and translation (Schreiter 1985:6-7). At the other end of the spectrum is the contextual model that "begins with the needs of people in a

concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith” (Schreiter 1985:13). The adaptation models stand between emphasizing the received faith more than the contextual model but paying closer attention to cultural context than the translation model. The underlying assumption appears to be that attention to cultural context requires one to make that context the starting point for contextualization. Contrariwise Newbigin is adamant that the process of contextualization must begin with the gospel and then move to the context (1989e:151). His approach differs significantly, however, from the translation model, both in his understanding of revelation and in his recognition of the profound shaping effect of culture on the gospel. Thus Newbigin defies classification within this typology. Bevens discovered a similar problem. As he completed his well-known book on various models of contextualization, he became aware that Newbigin did not fit the five models he had elaborated (Bevens 1993:5). He has subsequently begun to work on a sixth model—the counter-cultural model—in which he classifies Newbigin, among others (Bevens 1993, 1999; Muller 1997:201). Bevens’ description of Newbigin’s position will be taken up a little later in the chapter.

### 8.3. MODEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Newbigin’s writings begin to reflect on the problem of gospel and culture in a more focussed and systematic way in the 1970s after his return to Britain. He employs the understanding of contextualization he gained from his Indian situation to articulate his program for the gospel and western culture. It is precisely this process that must be understood to rightly assess Newbigin’s views. Newbigin’s understanding of contextualization developed during his missionary experience in India and is most fully elaborated in the situation of mission in the West. The close connection between Newbigin’s missionary experience and his views on gospel and culture have been examined in an earlier chapter (2.3.2.12.). In this section Newbigin’s model of cross-cultural communication is explored. Newbigin expanded the notion of cross-cultural communication to include a whole theory of relating gospel, church, and culture. This model becomes a pattern for his missionary encounter of the church with its culture (1986e:1-9).

Street preaching was a regular evangelistic activity for Newbigin in his early missionary days in India. The question that pressed itself on him was ‘how can one preach to a crowd of people who have never heard of Jesus?’ Cross-cultural communication of the gospel involves three things. First, the evangelist must use the language of the hearers (1986e:5). Yet that language uses terms that reflect a worldview by which the hearers make sense of their world. Each word is not a transparent medium that can simply be shaped at will to communicate what is in the mind of the evangelist. The Tamil language, for example, is a shared way of understanding the world. As such it expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. Therefore, there will be a clash of ultimate commitments between the gospel and Hindu culture. Thus, cross-cultural communication, secondly, will call into question the underlying worldview implicit in the language. The gospel calls for repentance and conversion, for understanding and living in the world according to the gospel rather than the Hindu worldview (1986e:6).

Newbigin illustrates these two dimensions of cross-cultural communication (1978a:1-3; 1978e:146-150). The problem that faces the missionary to India is which word in the native language can be effectively used to introduce Jesus. *Swamy* meaning Lord offers a possibility. The problem is that there are many lords—three hundred and thirty million of them according to one tradition—and if Jesus is just one more lord there are more important matters to attend to. *Avatar* seems like an obvious choice since it refers to the descent of God in a creaturely form to put down the power of evil and to establish the faltering rule of righteousness. The trouble here is that *avatar* was bound up in a cyclical worldview that cannot ascribe finality to any particular *avatar* the way finality ought to be ascribed to Christ if the gospel is to be proclaimed faithfully. Maybe one should just begin to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. But if one proceeds in this way Jesus is identified with the world of *maya*, the world of passing events which is simply an illusion in Hindu tradition. All other attempts—*kadavul*, supreme transcendent God; *satguru*, a teacher who initiates his disciple into the experience of realization; *adipurushan*, the primal man who is the beginning of all creation; *chit*, the intelligence and will which constitute the second member of the triad of ultimate reality—eventually founder on the same problem. “What all these answers have in common is that they necessarily describe Jesus in terms of a model which embodies an interpretation of experience significantly different from the interpretation which arises when Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely” (1978a:2f.). However, there is no escape from the necessity of this tension if evangelists wish to communicate the gospel to their hearers. The language of the hearers must be used but used in such a way that the gospel is communicated faithfully.

This is the problem of the missionary in relationship to the religio-cultural setting: the missionary must be *both* faithful to the gospel and relevant to the culture. The missionary must be faithful to the gospel as it has been transmitted in the tradition of the church and at the same time must make the gospel relevant to the cultural situation. The first danger is faithfulness without relevance. Jurgen Moltmann calls this fossil theology—the present remnant of something that was once alive but is now dead. The second danger is relevance without faithfulness. Moltmann calls this a chameleon theology—something that takes on the colour of its surroundings to such an extent that it cannot be distinguished from it (Moltmann 1975:3).

Newbigin solves the tension with the notion of ‘challenging relevance’ or ‘subversive fulfillment.’ Both of these terms point to the same process. Hindu terms and categories are used but they are ‘burst open’ by the power of the gospel. Since Hindu categories are used, the proclamation of the gospel is *relevant*. The gospel *challenges* the Hindu understanding of the world by calling for repentance and conversion. The proclamation of the gospel *fulfills* the religious longing of the Hindu heart as expressed in their terminology. However, the gospel also *subverts* the Hindu understanding at its roots. Newbigin finds in the gospel of John a model for this kind of missionary communication (1995j:336). Of the gospel of John, Newbigin writes:

I suppose that the boldest and most brilliant essay in the communication of the gospel to a particular culture in all Christian history is the gospel according to John. Here the language and thought-forms of that Hellenistic world are so employed that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them. And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and

human culture stated with more terrible clarity (1986e:53).

The only way missionary communication can take place and the Hindu or Gnostic begin to see things in a different way is by a radical conversion that is the work of God (1986e:6). This is the third aspect of missionary communication.

Yet there is more to the cross-cultural missionary communication of the gospel. The issue is distorted if it is considered simply as the missionary's attempt to communicate a culture-free gospel into a pagan environment. The communication process enabled Newbigin to recognize how deeply his own understanding of the gospel was shaped by the culture from which he had come (1978e:146-147). As a new missionary, he was unaware of the formative power of western culture on his own understanding of the gospel.

My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous Western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply 'how things are'. It is 'modern scientific world view'. It is the corpus of axioms which are accepted as such by those who have received a modern Western style education. No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are (1978b:3).

Cross-cultural missionary communication makes it clear that western languages, like Tamil, also embody a worldview. Western languages express foundational assumptions about the world that are incompatible with the gospel. Indeed, being unaware of this reality set up Newbigin for a syncretistic alliance between the gospel and his western worldview (1978a:5). The gospel is always culturally embodied and all cultures are incompatible with the gospel. The recognition of the cultural embodiment of the gospel in both cultures—that of the missionary and of the hearer—sets up a three-cornered dialogue between the gospel, the missionary's culture, and the target culture (1978e:147-149).

This description of the missionary experiences elicits the following observations. They are listed here briefly and expanded on throughout the remainder of this section.

First, Newbigin approaches the relation of gospel to culture from a missionary standpoint. He does not attempt to start at a scientific, neutral description of the relationship between the two but from the standpoint of one who is charged to faithfully communicate and embody a message.

Second, the missionary encounter involves a confrontation between ultimate beliefs or foundational assumptions. Two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world meet. The concern of the evangelist is to communicate the gospel to people and call them to believe the good news. It quickly becomes apparent that each 'individual' is part of a community or social network that shares a way of life. "The idea that the gospel is addressed only to the individual and that it is only indirectly addressed to societies, nations, and cultures is simply an illusion of our individualistic post-Enlightenment Western culture" (1989e:199). That person shares a whole range of beliefs, customs, symbols, and institutions. The evangelist sees that at the heart of this social network is a formative core of fundamental religious beliefs that shape each part

of society. Each custom, symbol, and institution embodies these core assumptions. These foundational beliefs are not neutral but religious and stand in some degree of opposition to the gospel.

Third, the gospel is not a timeless message quarantined from all cultural ‘contamination.’ Rather, the gospel is always embodied in the life and words of a particular culture.

Fourth, the religious shape of culture and the necessary cultural embodiment of the gospel combine to produce a tension in the attempt to faithfully communicate the gospel. On the one hand, the gospel must be translated into the language and culture of the hearers if it is to be relevant. On the other hand, the communication of the gospel must be faithful to the tradition given in Scripture and not reshaped by the faith commitments of the culture into which the gospel is translated.

Fifth, the resolution of this tension begins as an internal dialogue between the gospel as expressed in the story of the Bible and the target culture. With the deepening recognition of the cultural assumptions of the missionary, this internal dialogue becomes a conversation between three partners: Scripture, the missionary’s culture, and the target culture.

Sixth, conversion is necessary. There is no straight line from the fundamental assumptions of any culture to an understanding of the gospel. The gospel calls for conversion and repentance—a turn from idols to Christ to see all of life from a new set of foundational beliefs. Conversion will, of course, be a process for both hearer and missionary. Conversion is a work of God opening one’s eyes to the truth of the gospel.

These six observations form the foundation of Newbigin’s understanding of the relation between gospel and culture. The remainder of the chapter will deepen the significance of these themes.

#### 8.4. THE MISSIONARY CHURCH AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

Newbigin’s model has significance beyond the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. He opens *Foolishness to the Greeks* by asking what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and modern western culture (1986e:1). In western culture, the relationship between gospel and culture has been dealt with primarily by those who have not experienced crossing a cultural frontier, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) and Paul Tillich (1959). Newbigin believes that the question of a missionary encounter between gospel and culture can best be understood from the vantage point of the cross-cultural missionary. He begins by describing what is involved in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel (1986e:4). This model of cross-cultural missionary encounter becomes a foundational approach for his understanding of a missionary engagement with culture. Thus contextualization is not just an issue for the cross-cultural missionary, nor is it a peripheral issue for the missionary church: contextualization is constitutive of faithfulness to the missionary task in any cultural setting. The present section probes the relationship between the missionary church and its cultural context.

##### 8.4.1. *Mediating the Good News to Each Cultural Setting*

The church is defined, on the one hand, by the call of God to communicate the good news and, on the other, by its relationship to its particular location. In relationship to its cultural context, Newbigin speaks of the church as being *for* the local context in which it is situated.

... a local congregation will be a congregation in which everyone who belongs to that place will be able to recognize the call of Christ addressed to him or her in words, deeds, and patterns of life and worship which he can understand and receive as being truly the call of his own Maker, Saviour and Friend. The whole existence of the congregation must be such as to mediate to the people of that place the call of Christ which speaks to them as they are but calls them from what they are in order that—in Christ—they may become God's new creation (1977g:120).

To be for the cultural context means to mediate the good news to that place. If the church is to faithfully mediate the call of Christ to people in their cultural context, the communication in life, word, and deed must be both familiar and understandable on the one hand, and challenging and critical on the other. Newbigin articulates this Christologically. The relationship of the church to its cultural environment is to be understood in terms of the threefold relation of Christ to the world (1977g:118-119). Since Christ is the creator and sustainer of the world the church is to “love and cherish all of its created goodness” (1977g:119). Since Christ is the consummator of all things and one in whom reconciliation takes place, the church will be a sign of the true end for which that particular culture exists. Since Christ is the one who has died and risen to take away the sins of the world, the church will stand opposed to the evil of each culture. Thus the church must assume a threefold relationship: “It must communicate in the idiom of that culture both the divine good that sustains it and the divine purpose that judges it and summons it to become what it is not yet” (1978e:150). The church is to be a sign, instrument and foretaste for the context in which it is set. “In order that the Church may truly be sign, foretaste and instrument of God's purpose to consummate all things in Christ, it must in each place be credible as such a sign, foretaste and instrument *in relation to the secular realities of that place*” (*ibid*). The call of God to the church to embody the good news of the kingdom is not a general call to a standardized form of faithfulness, but the summons to be, do, and speak good news *in a particular cultural context*. The importance to Newbigin of this local cultural context to the missionary witness of the church is evident when he continues: “This must be so if the Church is to be true to its proper nature. When the Church, on the other hand, tries to order its life simply in relation to its own concerns and for the purpose of its own continued existence, it is untrue to its proper nature” (*ibid*). A *contextualized* witness belongs to the proper nature of the church.

If the church is to be faithful in contextualizing the witness of the gospel, there are two stances toward culture that are necessary: affirmation and rejection, solidarity and separation. The absence of either of these will muffle the call of Christ. The absence of solidarity will mean that the summons is not heard in understandable terms. The absence of separation means that the call of the gospel will not lead to true conversion (1977g:118, 120). The double event of the cross and resurrection is the clue that enables us to see that we are called “neither to a simple affirmation of human culture nor to a simple rejection of it.” On the one hand, the resurrection is God's ‘yes’ to culture and

so we cherish culture as a gift of God's good creation. On the other hand, the cross is God's 'no' to culture and so we stand in opposition to that "whole seamless texture of human culture" which is in rebellion against God. "We have to say both 'God accepts human culture' and also 'God judges human culture'" (1989e:195). Accordingly the church's posture toward its cultural context will similarly be identification and discrimination.

#### 8.4.2. *A Missiological Analysis of Culture*

Two dangers accompany the call to both solidarity and separation. Concern for affirmation and solidarity may lead to uncritical identification, whereas concern for rejection and separation may lead to polemical confrontation (1977g:118). To avoid these twin dangers, it is necessary to have a profound understanding of the culture in which the gospel is preached and embodied. If the model of cross-cultural communication holds true for the missionary encounter between the gospel and culture, then a missiological analysis of culture is essential. A missionary who shoulders the responsibility of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel is well-advised to make a careful study of the culture to which he or she is going, and so is the missionary church (1994k:100; cf. Hendrick 1993:64, 65).

Foundational to any analysis of a particular culture is a significant measure of understanding of the nature of culture. Newbigin nowhere engages in a theoretical analysis of the nature of culture. In fact, when he gives preliminary definitions of gospel and culture, his description of culture is a brief paragraph based on a simple dictionary definition. Below the surface of his analysis of western culture, however, a number of implicit assumptions about the nature of culture are evident. There are two that are especially relevant for the consideration of contextualization: the organic unity of culture and the comprehensive, socially embodied, and religious nature of the culture's underlying convictions.

First, culture is a unified network of institutions, systems, symbols, and customs that order human life in community. Newbigin starts with a dictionary definition of culture: "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another" (1978a:9). Culture is a human construction produced by a community that enables it to share its life together. It consists of the sum total of a vast array of human patterns of life: science, art, agriculture, economic and judicial systems, and so forth. "It includes all of that which constitutes man's public life in society.... we are speaking about humanity in its public, social, and historical aspect" (1978a:9). This societal network hangs together and constantly changes (1978e:144).

Second, a deeper religious worldview shapes this vast network of cultural elements. There is a distinction between the surface or peripheral level of culture and the depth level or core of foundational beliefs that shape the culture. Newbigin speaks of committed beliefs (1978e:146), basic assumptions and commitments (1980c:155), dogma that controls public life (1994k:150), ideologies, myths, worldviews (1989e:221), idols (1994k:150), even "gods" (1989e:220; 1994k:150) that function as a formative core at the centre of human society. This core is made up of "a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. I am

speaking, obviously, about religion” (1986e:3). In a discussion of Romans 12:2, where Paul exhorts the church ‘not to be conformed to this world’, Newbigin clarifies the distinction between a periphery of cultural organization and its formative centre or core. When Paul commands the Romans not to be conformed to the *world* (Romans 12:2), he is referring to culture “which does not mean just art, literature, and music, but the whole way that our world is organised. It means our language, our thought-patterns, our customs, our traditions, our public systems of political, economic, judicial, and administrative order—the whole mass of things which we simply take for granted and never question.” While this word ‘world’ can be used in a positive sense to speak of God’s good creation, it can also be used in a negative sense to refer to “a world organised around another centre than the creator’s” (1983f:4). Human culture is created to find its centre in the Creator but with human sin the Creator is replaced by idols which then integrate and shape every part of the culture.

Newbigin challenges the assumption, widespread in western culture, that religion is an activity separate from the rest of cultural life. He comments:

Neither in practice nor in thought is religion separate from the rest of life. In practice all the life of society is permeated by beliefs which western Europeans would call religious, and in thought what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience. The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture (1989e:172).

Newbigin’s understanding of culture is similar to that of Harvie Conn and Johann H. Bavinck. Conn begins by affirming the view that culture forms a fundamental unity as found in the writings of Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert (Kraft 1977; cf. 1979; Hiebert 1976; cf. 1985; 1994). Running through all of these views is the common theme of culture as an integrating and organizing force that patterns our ways of seeing reality. “Within this cultural structure, forms, functions, meaning, and usage remain distinctive but interrelated. Every cultural form serves particular functions, conveys meaning to the participants of a culture and... is dependent for its meaning and function on how active human agents use it in their cultural framework” (Conn 1980:148). However, these definitions do not give the proper place to religion. Conn draws on the views of Bavinck to do justice to the fundamental dimension of religion. No cultural forms are neutral because “their ties with the functions, meaning, and usage given to them by the culture never leave them absolutely neutral” (Conn 1980:149). He quotes Bavinck:

All elements have their secret ties with the religious faith of the people as a whole. Nothing is to be found anywhere that can be called a ‘no-man’s land.’ Culture is religion made visible; it is religion actualized in the innumerable relations of daily life (Bavinck 1949:57).

This formulation challenges the functionalist conceptions of culture which include religion as one part of culture. Following Bavinck, Conn wants to stress “the core place of religion in the structuring of culture’s meaning and usage.” Religion “is not an area of life, one among many, but primarily a *direction* of life... Religion, then becomes the heart of culture’s integrity, its central dynamic as an organism, the totalistic, radical

response of man-in-covenant to the revelation of God” (Conn 1980:149-150). The world’s cultures and religions are “powerful life-controlling entities, indivisible structures, each element cohering with all others and receiving its meaning from the total structure” as it is shaped by the fundamental religious assumptions of the people (Conn 1980:150; Bavinck 1960:172-173).

Culture is built on a certain anthropology. Human beings are religious creatures and the direction of their heart shapes every part of their being—rational, lingual, social, economic, etc. Culture is the shape given to their corporate existence. As Newbigin puts it, culture is “humanity in its public, social, and historical aspect” (1978a:9). Since human beings are political they form political orders in their life in community; since they are economic creatures they create economic systems to govern their production, buying, and selling; since they are lingual creatures they form a language in common to communicate; and so forth. Humanity also shares their religious lives in community; they share their fundamental religious convictions that lie at the heart of their communal lives together. Thus the whole of cultural formation is shaped by central religious commitments that underlie, integrate, and shape the whole.

While Newbigin’s views of culture move in the direction of Conn and Bavinck, he is not as clear and consistent as either of them about the religious direction of culture. Newbigin often speaks of presuppositions, fundamental or basic assumptions, worldviews, rationality traditions, fiduciary frameworks, and plausibility structures that lie at the heart of culture, without calling them religious commitments. Occasionally he seems to place language in the central place because language becomes the way that the foundational or central assumptions are expressed and transmitted (1978e:146; 1983d:5; 1986e:3). This focus on language is understandable considering his missionary experience. It was at the point of language that it became most clear to him that the underlying religious worldview of India was incompatible with the gospel: “... language provides the framework in which experience is placed, the spectacles through which one ‘sees’” (1983d:5). However, Newbigin does not distinguish clearly between language as one of the social forms and functions and the underlying religious convictions that are expressed and transmitted by that language. Newbigin’s later writings on the gospel and western culture show a deepening awareness that the core of culture is “faith-based” (1994k:107); culture is formed around central idolatrous faith commitments (1989e:220; 1994k:150). He speaks of the “central shrine” of culture being filled with idols: “Human nature abhors a vacuum. The shrine does not remain empty. If the one true image, Jesus Christ, is not there, an idol will take its place” (1986e:115). Newbigin comes closest to what Bavinck and Conn mean by religion when he speaks of religion as “ultimate commitment.” He rejects a narrow definition of religion that refers to “beliefs and practices concerning God and the immortal soul” and defines religion as “the final authority for a believer or society, both in the sense that it determines one’s scale of values and in the sense that it provides the models, the basic patterns through which the believer grasps and organizes his or her experience” (1978e:161; cf. 1989e:172f.). This includes traditional tribal myths and ideologies—including the modern scientific worldview—as well as recognized world religions. In a telling observation he distinguishes between a person’s *professed* and *real* religion. He notes that a person’s ‘religion’ may in fact be something quite other than what he or she professes. A people’s real religion is that which is “the ultimately authoritative factor in their

thinking and acting.” For example, if the church limits the operation of its Christian commitment to a restricted area of life and allows the more ultimate commitment of the modern scientific worldview to shape their understanding of life as a whole, then their real religion is the modern scientific worldview. As Newbiggin comments: “In this case the commitment to Christ will be conditioned by the person’s commitment to the overriding ‘myth,’ and the latter will be his or her real religion” (*ibid*).

Beyond their religious nature, these foundational assumptions have two other characteristics. On the one hand, they are comprehensive; they shape every part of human life and society. On the other hand, they are communally held; they are not the fruit of individual insight but the product of human life in community. Each person does not hold a different set of beliefs, but shares them with others. They are expressed and transmitted in a common language.

A missionary encounter is the clash between the gospel and the fundamental convictions of a culture, “a clash between ultimate faith-commitments” (1978e:154), expressed in the various institutions, systems, symbols, and customs of a culture. The call of the gospel is to conversion and repentance; the call to shape all of culture life with the formative core of the gospel rather than the idolatrous faith commitments.

#### 8.4.3. *Identification with the World: The Church For Culture*

To mediate the call of Christ faithfully, the church will assume a twofold stance toward the different faith commitments of its cultural environment. First, the church will identify with its culture, living in solidarity with it while mediating the call in terms that speak with familiarity and authenticity. Second, the church will be separate from and not be conformed to the culture, lest the gospel become simply the echo or reflection of the particular context (1977g:120). The starting point for this proper relationship to culture is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1989e:195).<sup>1</sup> These events must form the pattern for the missionary church (1970a:203ff.). The missionary church must be recognizable as the church *for* its particular context. That *for* must be defined in terms of the way Christ is *for* the world. The atonement is where we see most clearly the way Christ is for the world: in the cross, Christ is, on the one hand, totally identified with the world; at the same time, Christ is totally separated from the world (1994k:54). “The Cross is in one sense an act of total identification with the world. But in another sense it is an act of radical separation. It is both of these at the same time” (1974b:98). Following its Lord, the church will be for and against the world: “We must always, it seems to me, in every situation, be wrestling with both sides of this reality: that the Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city, that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point” (1994k:54). While the church is to reject a culture shaped by idolatry, it is to affirm that same culture as God’s good creation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sometimes Newbiggin speaks of the cross and resurrection together as the starting point for his thinking about the relationship of the church to culture and at other times he simply refers to the cross. When he refers only to the cross, it is an interpretation of the significance of the crucifixion *in the light of the resurrection*. So even when he speaks only of the death of Jesus, it is both the crucifixion and the resurrection that form the lens.

A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standards of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the Cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection (1970d:6).

It is important to note that Newbigin *begins* with affirmation: the church is *for* the world (1994k:53-54). It is precisely because it is for the world that it must stand against the sin and idolatry that oppose the abundant life of the good creation. Jesus loved the world and his cross was an act of judgement on the sin that corrupted his good creation. The church follows Jesus in standing against the fundamental beliefs of the culture that have a detrimental impact on the life of its people. But, again, the starting point is God's affirmation, love, solidarity, and identification with his creation and this must be the starting point of the followers of Jesus. It will be observed in the next section that Newbigin speaks more often in terms of separation and dissent from culture. This has led to the classification of Newbigin's contextualization theory as 'counter' or 'against' culture. Yet this emphasis is misunderstood if it is not placed in the context of Newbigin's concern that the church be *for* the culture in which it is placed.

There are two reasons that the missionary church must take a stance of affirmation. First, this affirmation arises from the confession that the creation is good: "The world itself is not evil, but is under an evil power" (1967a:12). Newbigin clearly distinguishes between the good creation and the evil power that corrupts and distorts it (1977g:119). Since culture gives expression to God's good creation, the church must affirm culture; since it is polluted by sin the church must oppose culture. The call of the gospel is to *radical* discontinuity but not to *total* discontinuity. The gospel demands a break with, and conversion from, a wisdom and a pattern of life based on experience other than the gospel. Yet there is also continuity with pre-conversion experience: after conversion the convert recognizes that it is the same Creator God that was dealing with him or her all along (1972f:59f.). There is radical discontinuity because of the pervasive scope of sin; there is not total discontinuity because God is creator, ruler and redeemer.

Various examples of this could be adduced but only one is offered here: Newbigin's approach to the problem of power (1973f:51). At Bangkok there were many attacks on first world churches which hold overwhelming economic, political, cultural, and ecclesiastical power. The whole issue of power and powerlessness was central to the discussion. He observes "a naive sort of philosophic anarchism" that lay behind much of what was being said. Anarchism is a Gnostic rejection of power as evil. Newbigin does not believe that power is evil, just corrupted by sin: it is the abuse of power that must be condemned (1986e:126). The need of the hour was "help for those entrusted with power to learn how to use it" (*ibid*). Power is creationally good; abusive power is that creational gift distorted by sin. Abusive power is to be rejected; power itself is to be affirmed as a creational gift. Anarchism wrongly locates sin in power itself rather than in its misuse. To treat all power as evil is to fall into the heresy of Manichaeism which does not distinguish between the good creation and sinful corruption (1986e:102). While this distinction clearly underlies Newbigin's wrestlings with culture, it is unfortunate that he did not make this differentiation clearer and more central to his formulations.

Closely allied with the affirmation of the goodness of creation is the second reason the Christian community must affirm and live in solidarity with their culture: the confession of the cultural task of humankind. This theme arises at two points in Newbigin's writing: in connection with the calling of the church in nation-building in the Third World, and in the challenge to the western church not to privatize the gospel but take responsibility for the public life of the nation. He summarizes this commitment: "... the church today cannot without guilt absolve itself from the responsibility, where it sees the possibility, of seeking to shape the public life of nations and the global ordering of industry and commerce in light of the Christian faith" (1986e:129). Once again while this commitment underlies Newbigin's thought, he does not make this as clear as it should be. Newbigin rarely even acknowledges the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 yet its thrust remains important in his thought.

This twofold affirmation of the creational good of culture will undergird a full identification and solidarity of the church with its culture. It will adopt its language, customs, symbols, institutions, and systems. The good news then may be communicated in understandable and familiar patterns (1989e:141).

#### *8.4.4. Separation from the World: The Church Against Culture*

While Newbigin affirms the creational structure of culture, he also recognizes that an idolatrous foundational worldview shapes every part of culture. Since the gospel is comprehensive it calls for a discipleship that embodies all of life. The gospel cannot be fitted into the cultural story: "It is totally impossible to fit the story of a crucified and risen Lord into any view of the world except the one of which it is the starting point. From any other point of view it is either scandalous or meaningless, as Paul knew well" (1978j:5).

It is easy for us... to forget how strange, and even repelling, the Gospel is to the ordinary common sense of the world. You will have seen the reproduction of the famous graffito from the 1<sup>st</sup> century which shows a man worshipping the figure of a crucified ass, with the words scrawled below: "Anexamenos worships his god". In a world which longed for personal salvation, and which was full of gods and lords claiming to meet that need, how utterly absurd and indeed revolting to claim that a Jew from a notoriously troublesome province of the Empire who has been condemned as a blasphemer and executed as a traitor was the Saviour of the world! How on earth could anyone believe that? Nineteen hundred years later, after so many centuries of Gospel preaching, the claim is still as offensive to ordinary common sense (1978c:301).

Accordingly the preaching and embodiment of the gospel must challenge the worldview of the hearer, making it clear that the public vision that shapes society is not only radically different from the gospel but also false (1986e:132). This means that there will be an encounter at every point between various faith commitments; the missionary church will take a stance of radical dissent from culture (1970d:6). Throughout his writings, Newbigin stresses this aspect of contextualization most frequently. While contextualization involves both separation and solidarity, judgement and grace, rejection and affirmation, it is the first of these pairs that receives primary attention in Newbigin's writings.

During the 1960s, Newbigin observed the two different stances taken toward culture

by the ecumenical and evangelical traditions. The evangelical tradition, rightly concerned to protect the truth of the gospel, ended in a sterile and repellant sectarianism that shunned culture; theirs was a separation without solidarity. The ecumenical tradition, motivated by a genuine concern to sympathize and identify with the struggles of humankind, attempted to be relevant to the needs of the world and meet the world on its own terms; theirs was a solidarity without separation that ended “near or at the point of apostasy” (1967a:12). Again the cross provides the clue for a third way: the cross both identifies with the sorrow and suffering of humankind yet exposes and destroys the sin that was the root of it all (1974b:98).

Since Newbigin’s primary context was the ecumenical tradition, it is not surprising to find that he stressed the importance of a radical dissent from culture over against the pervasive “chameleon theology” of the WCC. He emphasizes the “dissenting otherworldliness of those whose citizenship is in another world” (1968b:26). He speaks of the church as discriminating non-conformists (1968b:26), radical dissenters (1970d:6), radical critics and misfits (1968b:26) with a relationship of conflict (1968b:26) and radical discontinuity with the world (1972f:59-60). “There is a stark contrast between the faith by which the Church lives and the mind of the world” (1968c:13). While Newbigin’s emphasis on radical dissent never becomes a Gnostic rejection of culture, this does remain his primary emphasis.

In response to the advanced state of syncretism in which he found the church in western culture Newbigin increasingly emphasized this dimension of contextualization. Western culture is a pagan society and the western church has “in general failed to realize how radical is the contradiction between the Christian vision and the assumptions that we breathe in from every part of our shared existence” (1987b:4). It is because of this accommodation of the church in the West that the word ‘challenge’ becomes so frequent in Newbigin’s writings that call for a missionary encounter with western culture (1989e:140, 220).

The Christian church is a minority in its culture. That means “questioning the things that no one ever questions” whether that be the church in India that questions the laws of *karma* and *samsara* or the church in the West that questions the fact/value dichotomy and the consumerist way of life. The church stands against its cultural story by offering another story—the true story—which is a more rational and comprehensive way of understanding and living in the world. Thus the church is an alternative community embodying a different story to their culture.

And when we offer a different fiduciary framework, an alternative to the one that is dominant in our culture, we are calling for *conversion*, for a radical shift in perspective. We need the boldness of the foreign missionary who dares to challenge the accepted framework, even though the words he uses must inevitably sound absurd to those who dwell in that framework (1994k:112).

It is at this point that Newbigin’s emphasis on suffering in mission comes clearly into view. Speaking of the cross, Newbigin states: “The cross is, on the one hand, the ultimate act of solidarity with the world; it is, at the same time and *necessarily*, the ultimate act of rejection *by* the world” (1970a:202; emphasis mine). The world cannot understand the secret of how the church lives; this means rejection by the world. This fundamental paradox—solidarity with and rejection by our culture—“belongs to the

essence of the Church's life in the world" (*ibid*). This pattern also is founded on following Jesus. He lived in solidarity with the world yet stood in antithetical opposition to the world corrupted by sin. This led to suffering. "His ministry entailed the calling of individual men and women to personal and 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" (1989e:220).

Suffering as a mode of mission is a frequent motif in Newbigin's writings but it is especially clear when he addresses the issue of church and culture. He explains why suffering is unavoidable in a missionary encounter with culture.

No human societies cohere except on the basis of some kind of common beliefs and customs. No society can permit these beliefs and practices to be threatened beyond a certain point without reacting in self-defense. The idea that we ought to be able to expect some kind of neutral secular political order, which presupposes no religious or ideological beliefs, and which holds the ring impartially for a plurality of religions to compete with one another, has no adequate foundation. The New Testament makes it plain that Christ's followers must expect suffering as the normal badge of their discipleship, and also as one of the characteristic forms of their witness (1964g:42).

When ultimate beliefs clash, the dominant worldview strives to become the exclusive worldview. It exerts tremendous pressure for dissenting communities to abandon their uniqueness and conform to the dominant community. They must either opt for accommodation or live out the comprehensive call of the gospel faithfully and pay the price for their dissent with suffering.

#### *8.4.5. An Anticultural Model of Contextualization?*

Newbigin's emphasis on the antithetical side of the contextualization process has led a number of analysts to characterize his model of contextualization as anti-cultural. In a critique of 'The Gospel and Our Culture' movement in Britain, Elaine Graham and Heather Walton remark that Newbigin's position "might more adequately be described as 'Gospel Against our Culture' movement" (Graham and Walton 1991:2). They base their analysis of Newbigin on their own syncretistic accommodation to postmodernity, as Newbigin points out in his response (1992c:1-10). Analyses of Stephen Bevans and Sander Griffioen make a similar point albeit in a more sympathetic and nuanced way.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Bevans groups Newbigin together with Protestants Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Roman Catholics Avery Dulles, Mary Jo Leddy, and John Coleman under 'The Counter-Cultural Model' of contextualization. Bevans articulates this model as one that is primarily found among theologians who do theology in the

---

<sup>2</sup>Bevans writes: "All of these models are valid as such, and all could be valid in the context of contemporary North America. However, I would suggest that serious consideration should be given to what I have called the 'counter-cultural model' for carrying out the church's mission in this context" (1999:153). Griffioen is similarly appreciative referring to his model of contextualization as "inspiring" and "brilliant" (1996:1).

deeply secularized context of the West (1993:6).<sup>3</sup> There are two things that Bevans highlights about this model. First, “culture is regarded with utmost suspicion,” almost as “utterly corrupt and resistant to the gospel” (Bevans 1993:6, 14). He rightly observes that Newbigin believes that the gospel is not to be read in the light of the culture but the culture in the light of the gospel and that ‘counter-cultural’ means that “the biblical worldview provides a vision that runs deeply at odds with what has developed in the West” (Bevans 1993:6). Second, Bevans notes that the gospel has primarily a critical function in relation to culture. “The first task of theology according to the counter-cultural model is to expose those pagan, anti-gospel assumptions as false and ideological. This is done by a re-reading of the gospel over against these cultural assumptions...” (Bevans 1993:12). In both cases, Bevans highlights the negative side: the sinful corruption of culture (and not the creational goodness) and the critical function of Scripture (and not the renewing function). In an article published six years later, Bevans more carefully nuances his position. He recognizes that various adherents of this model exhibit a spectrum: while Hauerwas and Willimon would approach more of an anti-cultural position, Newbigin takes more seriously the cultural responsibility of believers. In other words, Bevans acknowledges Newbigin’s emphasis on the positive side of the relationship of the church to its culture (1999:151-152).

Sander Griffioen wrestles in a similar way with Newbigin’s model of contextualization. He recognizes that Newbigin’s position cannot simply be defined by its critique of culture. Analyzing *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he observes that the first half of the book is primarily concerned with critique and the second with the more positive role of cultural development. He comments: “The question which arises is how these two anthropological conceptions—that of the critic of culture and that of the manager of the world—are related to each other. Does Newbigin intend to say that these are two sides of the same coin, or must we conclude that they are incompatible?” (Griffioen 1996:11). Griffioen believes that in the church’s cultural calling the struggle against idolatry and the task of managing creation belong together and are only distinguishable theoretically. While Newbigin never really works out his own position, Griffioen sees “some indication” of an incipient tension between these two. Griffioen illustrates the problem by reference to Martien E. Brinkman’s book *De Theologie van Karl Barth* (1983). Brinkman discusses a controversy between the Barthian theologian Kornelis H. Miskotte and the neo-Calvinist theologian Klaas Schilder. Schilder emphasized Christ as the renewer of culture who restores his people to pursue their cultural task. Miskotte believed that Schilder was lacking in prophetic and critical spirit:

---

<sup>3</sup>In Bevans later article he speaks not only of ‘models of contextual theology’ but ‘contextual models for a missional church’ (1999:148-154). The models hold not only for doing theology but also for the church’s engagement of its context in mission.

“... the prophetic light of the church has been almost completely extinguished” (Griffioen 1996:12). Schilder emphasized the developmental task of the church’s cultural responsibility and lost the critical dimension, while Miskotte stressed the prophetic task of the church in culture and failed to find a place for cultural development. Griffioen believes that the neo-Calvinists Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd have been able to state more positively the relationship by speaking of the “inner reformation” of culture. The gospel renews culture; this means that development and critique are two sides of the same coin. The Barthian Miskotte is not able to move beyond an “impersonal relationship” of the gospel to culture and thus critique and affirmation are not unified. Griffioen sees in Newbigin some of this tension. He comments: “I find it striking that in his discussion of contextualization he pays virtually no attention to the gospel as an agent of inner reformation or cultural renewal. All the emphasis is on the critical and judging function of the Word” (Griffioen 1996:12). Yet Griffioen immediately adds that this is not the whole picture. In his treatment of the various public domains of western culture (politics, science) Newbigin gives consideration to faith as an agent of cultural reformation (Griffioen 1996:13).

An evaluation of Griffioen’s and Bevens’s analyses is needed. First, the affirmation of the creation’s goodness and of humankind’s calling to cultural development are not given the explicit attention in Newbigin’s writings that the Biblical record warrants. It is not surprising that Bevens and Griffioen represent two traditions, Roman Catholic and Dutch neo-Calvinist, that have paid close attention to Scripture’s teaching on creation. While a careful reading of Newbigin’s entire corpus of writings fixes in one’s mind his implicit assumption of these dimensions of Biblical thought, his discussions of contextualization do not make this theme explicit. His starting point in the cross and resurrection does not open up into a full doctrine of creation and this draws the critique of Bevens and Griffioen. However, it must be stated that an implicit understanding of creation and humanity’s role in its development underlies so much of his writing that Newbigin cannot be read as one who entertains *only* a deep suspicion of culture (1986e:65-123). Here Newbigin must be distinguished from Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, and Douglas John Hall.<sup>4</sup> Bevens is correct in saying that Newbigin is concerned for transformation; Newbigin is also concerned to identify and embrace the good within culture (1977g:119). George Vandervelde notes that Newbigin’s idea of a ‘missionary encounter’ includes both a ‘positive relation’ to *and* a ‘critical appraisal’ of culture: “Newbigin calls for an encounter that entails a positive relation to culture by way of a critical approach” (1996:6). Vandervelde critiques others who have been so fearful of Christendom that they advocate a strictly counter-cultural stance. In fact “being simply counter-cultural is impossible” (:7). Vandervelde rightly contrasts Newbigin to this model: “For Newbigin, however, the Christian community is properly *counter-cultural* only to the extent that it is *engaged in culture*; conversely, the church is properly engaged in culture only to the extent that it is counter-cultural” (:6).

Second, the particular settings for Newbigin’s writings must be taken into account.

---

<sup>4</sup>About the same time that Newbigin delivered the paper *Can a Modern Society Be Christian?* (1995c), offering his agenda for the church’s pursuit of this goal, Douglas John Hall made the comment at the 1996 Gospel and Culture Conference that it is wicked to seek a Christian society (cf. 1999:73). For Hall, cultural power was one of the problems of Christendom; for Newbigin Christendom cannot be judged so easily.

His missionary experience in a climate where an ancient religion stood opposed to the gospel; his ecumenical experience where he met a syncretistic accommodation to the currents of the day; and his return to Britain where he found a timid and deeply compromised church—all these moved him to emphasize the antithetical side of contextualization. It is especially the British context that must be highlighted. The majority of his writings on the issue appeared after 1974, when he returned to Britain. In those speeches and articles Newbigin is primarily concerned to work out a model of contextualization that is appropriate to western culture. For a church that has lived long in its environment developing a symbiotic relationship, the need of the hour is the call for counterculture, so that the church may be freed from its syncretistic accommodation. In a situation where the church is in an advanced state of syncretism, Newbigin stresses the antithetical side of the contextualization dynamic. Miskotte's comment about the extinguishing of the prophetic light of the church is telling. While Schilder would speak of both cultural development and antithesis, it appears that development has swallowed up the antithesis. It is difficult to hold these two together, even when they are seen as two sides of the same coin. While Griffioen's critique of Newbigin is valid, Newbigin's prophetic response to a situation where the antithetical side of the cultural task has been eclipsed must be taken into account.

There is a similarity here between Newbigin's and Hendrik Kraemer's critics in their analyses. Most commentators label Kraemer with the term 'discontinuity.' A careful reading of Kraemer, however, shows a fine integration of continuity and discontinuity within the concept of 'subversive fulfillment.' Yet in the situation of the day, where the majority of writers were stressing continuity, there was a need for the emphasis that was missing. Kraemer says: "In fact, therefore, the only reason we have to side so resolutely with 'discontinuity' and argue for it, is that the 'continuity' standpoint has so many able advocates, and that it is evidently so seductive" (Kraemer 1956:352). Marc Spindler's comment about Kraemer is also to the point: "... the idea of 'discontinuity' was misunderstood as being totally negative, whereas it must be interpreted in the dialectical framework of the pascal [sic] mystery of death and resurrection, judgement and grace" (Spindler 1988:12). Both Kraemer and Newbigin stress emphases that have been neglected.

Third, Newbigin's understanding of challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment are very similar to the ideas of inner reformation held by Griffioen and others in Dutch neo-Calvinism. Both reject a revolutionary sweeping away of cultural institutions as well as a conservative acceptance of the status quo. Both affirm that the whole is distorted by sin and must be reformed or subverted. Both distinguish between cultural form or structure and the underlying faith commitments that shape it. The missionary encounter is at the level of ultimate faith commitments that shape the culture and not at the level of cultural structures *per se*. The language and emphases between Newbigin and Dutch neo-Calvinism differ; but there is a fundamental agreement.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>There is a difference in focus between Newbigin on the one hand and Griffioen and other neo-Calvinists on the other. Newbigin's concerns are *kerygmatic*; he is concerned for the preaching of the gospel. Griffioen's concerns are *philosophical*; he is concerned to reflect on the implications of the gospel for a philosophical description of the world. Nevertheless, the fundamental agreement remains; both are concerned for a right relationship between gospel and culture.

## 8.5. FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALIZATION

The more deeply the church senses the contradiction between the gospel and the cultural assumptions shaped by a different vision, the more the unbearable tension of living between two different worldviews is felt. As Newbigin moved to Britain and engaged western culture, he stressed the public doctrine of the West as a story. Both the gospel and the worldview of western culture are in the form of a story—an interpretation of universal history (1989e:89-102). The missionary church finds itself at the crossroads between two stories.

This unbearable tension of living at the crossroads arises from three factors. First, the church is part of a society that embodies a cultural story. That cultural story is rooted in an idolatrous religious faith, determinative of every part of human life and culture, and embodied by a community. The church is part of the community that embodies this pattern of social life. Second, the church finds its identity in a different story, one that is also rooted in faith, equally comprehensive, and also embodied. The gospel is not a disembodied message, “an ethereal something disinfected of all human cultural ingredients”, but is always incarnated in a community (1989e:188). Third, the unbearable tension emerges because of ‘two embodiments’ in the life of the church. As a member of the cultural community, the church is shaped by the cultural story. As a member of the new humankind, it is shaped by the Biblical story. Therefore, the embodiment of the gospel will always be culturally embodied: “there is not and cannot be a gospel which is not culturally embodied” (1989e:189). The tension arises because the gospel and the cultural story are at odds and yet “meet” in the life of the church. Contextualization is not the meeting of a disembodied message and a rationally articulated understanding of a culture; to pose the issue in that way is both abstract and dualistic (1989e:188-189). The encounter between gospel and culture happens in the life of the community called to live in the story of the Bible. The church incarnates the intersection of gospel and culture; the incompatibility of the two stories, even radical contradiction (1987b:4), produces an unbearable tension.

Newbigin refers to this tension as the ‘secular-apostolic dilemma’<sup>6</sup> (1972h). In a paper on education in India, he grapples with the question of how Christians can be involved in the Indian school systems when there are two fundamentally different understandings of education, based on two different understandings of the purpose and goal of human life. The ‘secular’ state mandates education for its own purposes and is willing to support Christian schools if they fall in line with that purpose. The apostolic gospel, however, envisions an entirely different purpose and goal for human life and therefore education plays a different role. From the standpoint of the state, the gospel nurtures children in a way that is destructive of national unity. How can Christians

---

<sup>6</sup>The ‘secular-apostolic dilemma’ is similar to what Moltmann refers to as the ‘identity-involvement dilemma.’ How does the Christian remain faithful to his or her Christian (apostolic) identity while becoming involved in the ‘secular’ affairs of public life of culture when it is shaped by a fundamentally different story (Moltmann 1975:1-4). It is noteworthy also that, while Newbigin stresses the tension, he does not yet consider it unbearable—as he will in his later years when he is not as enamoured of processes of secularization. In fact, respondents to his paper wondered if he downplays the tension (Gasimir 1972; Soares 1972).

participate in ‘nation-building’ and remain faithful to the gospel in their educational endeavours? (1972h; cf. 1973e).

Authentic contextualization is the resolution of this tension in the life of the community. Newbigin refers to this as ‘true’ and ‘faithful’ contextualization (1978a:10; 1989e:141-154). Such contextualization requires both faithfulness to the gospel and relevance to its culture. Only in this way is the good news mediated in patterns of life, words, and deeds that are familiar and challenging. According to Newbigin, faithful contextualization involves three things: faithfulness to Scripture, a dialogue with the local culture that avoids syncretism and irrelevance, and a dialogue with the ecumenical fellowship that avoids ethnocentrism and relativism. The next three sub-sections will treat each of these.

### *8.5.1. Faithfulness to Scripture*

The starting point for contextualization is the primacy of the gospel: the affirmation that the church begins by attending to the story of Scripture as its ultimate commitment. This starting point stands in contrast to the majority of current contextualization models. Newbigin critiques the liberation theology model for locating its starting point in the needs of the people (1989e:149-151; 1978e:113-120; cf. Bevans 1999:150). Schreier distinguishes the contextual models from the translation and indigenization models on the basis that culture is the starting point for the contextualization process (1985:12). In Bevans’s five models only the translation model, primarily endorsed by conservative evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics, takes its starting point in Scripture (1992; 1999:146-147). Newbigin’s understanding of Scripture and culture differs significantly from the translation model. Yet, like them, he believes that the contextualization process must begin by attending to Scripture: “It [authentic Christian thought and action] 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 to the real needs of people...” (1989e:151). For Newbigin, primary attention to Scripture means at least three things: an understanding of Scripture as a narrative of universal history; an indwelling of the Biblical story by the ecclesial community; and an understanding of the gospel’s ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to culture.

For faithful contextualization it is necessary to properly understand the nature of Scriptural revelation. The emphasis in Newbigin’s work in the last twenty-five years of his life on the contextualization of the gospel in the West coincided with a heightened interest in the authority of Scripture (3.7.2.4.; 1986e:42-64). In a virgin missionary situation the process of contextualization takes place as the new community begins to wrestle with the newly translated Biblical story in relationship to its cultural life. The problem in the West is that this book has been a part of this culture for so long that it has been absorbed into and accommodated to western culture. If a missionary encounter is to take place and there is to be a faithful contextualization of the gospel, the Bible must be the starting point—but the Scriptural authority must be understood in the proper way. A full discussion of Newbigin’s understanding of Scriptural authority and

contextualization is beyond the scope of this section.<sup>7</sup> It will suffice to call attention to two aspects that are centrally significant: Scripture must be understood as a single narrative; Scripture tells the story of the mighty deeds of God.

The Bible displays the form of universal history and therefore must be understood as a canonical whole (1989e:89). When the process of contextualization proceeds by selecting particular aspects of Scripture that are most compatible with the patterns of various religions and cultures, Scripture will be interpreted in light of the culture rather than the culture in light of Scripture. When the Bible is broken up into little bits—historical-critical, devotional, systematic-theological—they are easily accommodated to the cultural story; there is no challenge to that story. Syncretism rather than missionary challenge is the end result. If the Bible is to be the controlling reality, the fundamental authority that shapes the life of the missionary church, it must be embraced as a story of universal history and understood in terms of its canonical wholeness (1994k:163-165).

The Bible is not a book of religious ideas, but rather tells the story of the deeds of God that culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (1989e:152). The central events of the gospel of Jesus reveal and accomplish the end of history. It gives the community an understanding of the meaning of history, the place of humankind in that history, and the enablement to begin to live in that story as a foretaste of the kingdom. The temptation is to turn the Bible into timeless statements (1989e:12-13). When this happens a particular local theology is absolutized and the life-changing power of the gospel to enable the church to be good news for its particular place is swallowed up in irrelevancy.

---

<sup>7</sup>In two lengthy discussions of contextualization, Newbigin grapples with a number of questions that have arisen in the West surrounding Scriptural authority (1978a:15-22; 1978e:153-159). For the purpose of this section it is not necessary to reproduce those discussions. The three issues he addresses are: the cultural embodiment of the New Testament itself; the variety of images of Christ found in the New Testament; the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

In emphasizing Scripture as the mighty act of God and in its canonical whole, Newbigin follows Willem A. Visser 't Hooft (1992g; Visser 't Hooft 1967).<sup>8</sup> Visser 't Hooft asks the question: "Can the characteristics of... accommodation which respects the authority of the canon be spelled out? To do so adequately would be to formulate a complete biblical theology. We can however mention some criteria which are of primary importance" (1967:11). His first two criteria are: "Does this new presentation of the gospel interpret it in the light of the Bible as a whole?" and "Does the new presentation 'tell the great deeds of God?'" (1967:12).

Moreover to make Scripture the starting point in contextualization means that the believing community must "indwell" the story of Scripture. Newbigin employs two images to make this point: visual and tactile. In terms of the visual image, Newbigin frequently insists that one must view the culture through the lens of Scripture. He asks: "Do you try to understand the gospel through the spectacles provided by your culture, or do you try to understand your culture through the spectacles provided by the gospel?" (1994k:99). The responsibility of those charged with bearing the gospel to a culture requires the church to embrace the latter. Newbigin also employs a tactile image that he borrows from Michael Polanyi. He speaks of the use of Scripture by the missionary community as analogous to the use of a probe by a surgeon. When a surgeon uses a probe to explore a patient's body, he or she does not focus on the probe but rather on the lumps, cavities, and hollows of the patient's body. The surgeon is tacitly aware of the probe he or she is using but focally aware of the body that is being explored. The probe becomes the means by which the surgeon understands the patient's body. The surgeon indwells the probe for the purpose of understanding the patient's body: it almost becomes an extension of the body for the purpose of examination. This analogy neatly exposes to view the way a story functions tacitly to enable us to understand our world. Since Scripture is the true story about the world and the church is called to make known that story in life, word, and deed, the task of the church is to indwell the story of Scripture as the most real story of their lives (1989e:34-38).

I shall suggest that the Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look *at*, but for us to look *through*. Using Polanyi's terminology, I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.... this calls for a more radical kind of conversion than has often been thought, a conversion not only of the will but of the mind, a transformation by the renewing of the mind so as not be conformed to this world, not

---

<sup>8</sup>Harvie Conn also emphasizes the importance of these two aspects of Scriptural revelation for contextual theology. He identifies 'biblical-theology as the first criterion for doing contextual theology (Conn 1984:225-229).

to see things as our culture sees them, but—with new lenses—to see things in a radically different way (1989e:38).

Finally faithful contextualization requires a church that discerns the word of grace and the word of judgement that the gospel pronounces on our culture. “True contextualization accords the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and to speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgement and grace” (1989e:152). Or as he puts in another place: “... this story, with its centre in the cross and resurrection of the eternal Word, will always provide both a critique of every culture and also the resources of divine grace to sustain the human enterprise of culture” (1993b:100).

Interpreting the way Newbigin understands this ‘yes’ and ‘no’ is not easy. Bevans believes that, for Newbigin, this means that “God’s Revelation in the Gospel of Jesus represents a ‘Yes’ to humanity by saying a ‘No’ to any and all human cultural constructs” (1993:8). By this interpretation, the ‘no’ drowns out the ‘yes’ and cultural resistance and protest become the primary posture of the missionary community. However, we do not find this distinction between humanity and cultural constructs in Newbigin’s thought. The ‘yes’ and ‘no’ of the gospel are pronounced on the cultural constructs themselves. A better way to interpret this grace and judgement is in terms of creation and sin. God’s ‘yes’ is pronounced on the goodness of creation as that comes to expression in cultural constructs, and his ‘no’ stands against a sinful distortion evident in cultural constructs. Every cultural product displays something of God’s good creation and at the same time a sinful twisting. Political tyranny embodies both the creational goodness of political power and the sinful distortion of tyrannical abuse. Newbigin’s frequent return to the question of power supports this interpretation. Power is creationally good; its abuse is the result of human sin (1994k:143-144). The missionary church will support neither anarchy nor the status quo. Again, even though the distinction between the good structure of creation and the evil twisting of human sin underlies his formulations, Newbigin did not make this distinction clearly.

### *8.5.2. Dialogue with Cultures: Avoiding Syncretism and Irrelevance*

Faithful contextualization will involve a dialogue with the various cultures of the world that avoids the twin problems of syncretism and irrelevance. The issue that arises at this point is *how* all of culture can be both affirmed and rejected. Failure in contextualization within a particular culture takes place when either of these ‘words’ of the gospel are suppressed. When God’s word of judgement is not applied, syncretism will be the result. The culture is simply affirmed and the gospel is domesticated into the plausibility structure of the culture. Alternately, when God’s word of grace is not present, irrelevance will be the result. The culture is rejected and, since cultural embodiment is inevitable, the church will attempt to embody a cultural form of the gospel from another time or place and will, thus, be irrelevant to its culture.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>This central contrast of syncretism and irrelevance in Newbigin is helpful in many ways. However, in practice irrelevance and withdrawal is ultimately impossible. We are cultural creatures by our very constitution. Some parts of the embodiment of the gospel may be irrelevant—e.g., theological formulations—but without a serious engagement with contemporary culture, syncretism will also be the result in much of life. I think, for example, of some conservative Christians who cling to past theological

---

formulations yet whose lives are shaped by the reigning economic system of North America. Paul Hiebert is more aware of this in his model of critical contextualization. The attempt to simply deny culture—rejection of contextualization—will push pagan cultural ways underground resulting in syncretism (1985:184, 188).

Newbiggin finds a solution to the issue of affirmation and rejection in two phrases—challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment. The first, the one used most often, he borrows from Alfred G. Hogg (1945:9-26)<sup>10</sup> and the second from Kraemer (1939:4). The way ‘subversive fulfillment’ is employed in Newbiggin’s notion of contextualization, however, is clearly indebted to Visser ’t Hooft (1967:13-14; cf. 1992g:80; 1994k:163).

Hogg invites his readers to consider the challenge of the foreign missionary sent to proclaim the gospel in a region where Hinduism prevails. How will this missionary make a relevant and sympathetic approach? The question that has shaped the Hindu mind for centuries is: “How shall I escape from being born again and again, in an endless succession of lives, some of them happier, some more miserable, but all of them unsatisfying, all of them held in the shackles of unreality and illusion?” (Hogg 1945:14). The missionary begins to preach that salvation has been wrought for humankind through Jesus Christ. Soon, however, both missionary and hearer will be aware that the word salvation has different meanings depending on the belief structure of each. When the Hindu realizes that the missionary is not talking about a way of escape from endless reincarnation, he or she may lose religious interest and the message will not connect with their deepest religious longings. Disputation and argument will not resolve the proper understanding of salvation. This approach “amounts to an effort to make the Hindu minds travel the distance to the preacher’s mind, instead of making his mind travel the distance to theirs” (Hogg 1945:14-15). How can the proclamation of the gospel be relevant and yet avoid domestication in the Hindu worldview? Hogg turns to the approach of Jesus—the “Master-Missionary” (Hogg 1945:15). Jesus opens his ministry with the proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God. He chose the image of kingdom of God “for the sake of its challenging relevancy” (Hogg 1945:17). This was a well-known category that raised hope in the heart of the Jews. The plethora of interpretations of the kingdom at that time, however, were far from what Jesus proclaimed. Into this expectant longing for the kingdom Jesus came with an announcement of its arrival. Yet the understanding of Jesus was not reshaped by the popular notions of the day. The “current popular beliefs” were “bent to His purpose” (Hogg 1945:19). The kingdom had relevance because it responded to the people’s dearest hopes and so commanded an enquiring attention. Jesus’ message, however, challenged the popular notions, calling for repentance.

In the Hindu setting the missionary who rejects the Hindu notion of salvation will not be heard; the missionary who simply employs methods used in the homeland will, likewise, not be heard. Yet taking the starting point of the Hindu may lead to “a Christianizing of Hinduism instead of an Indian way of expressing Christianity” (Hogg 1945:23). The only way forward is to employ the familiar images of Hinduism which express the religious longing of the Hindu and burst them open, giving them new

---

<sup>10</sup>Newbiggin appears to attribute the term ‘challenging relevance’ to Hogg’s *Karma and Redemption* (1909) (1978a:11-12). The term does not appear in that volume, however, but in his later work *The Christian Message to the Hindu* (1945).

meaning with the fact of the gospel. Choosing a familiar category is inevitable yet challenging it is necessary because there is no straight line from Hinduism to the gospel. Hogg expresses this in terms of his missionary experience:

In the early years of my missionary life I used to dream that there might be found some superlatively apt line of approach. Might there not exist, I asked myself, some one theological issue where Christian and Hindu thought not only meet one and the same soul-problem with divergent solutions, but meet it with solutions the divergency of which is determinative of all their other divergencies? If such an issue could be found, it should light the preacher's road to a discovery of supremely relevant lines of sympathetic approach. With the passing of the years, however, that dream of mine has faded (Hogg 1945:26).

Familiar categories must be employed but given new content. Hogg sets out to achieve this with the concept of *karma* in the remainder of the book.

Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment is quite similar. He, too, recognizes that there is no straight line from the religions of humankind to the gospel. The gospel cannot simply be fulfillment; the religious pilgrimage of humankind is not a preparation that is fulfilled in Christ (1939:2; 1938:351-352). Christ can "in a certain sense be called the fulfillment of some deep and persistent longings and apprehensions that everywhere in history manifest themselves" yet this cannot be the perfecting of what has gone before (1939:3). The wisdom of Christ stands in contradiction to the power and wisdom of humankind. Therefore, the gospel is a contradictive or subversive fulfillment of the longings of humankind (1939:4). With his understanding of general revelation, Kraemer sets his understanding on a firmer theological base than Hogg, Newbigin, or Visser 't Hooft. Religious longing arises in the heart of humankind because of the continuing revelation of God in the creation.

Visser 't Hooft utilizes Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment in the context of cultural adaptation. He writes:

Key-words from other religions when taken over by the Christian Church are like displaced persons, uprooted and unassimilated until they are truly naturalised. The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to re-interpret traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. Kraemer uses the term "subversive fulfillment" and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts (Visser 't Hooft 1967:13).

Newbigin employs the notion of subversive fulfillment to solve the dilemma of contextualization within a particular culture. Like Visser 't Hooft, he utilizes the model of missionary communication that John offers in his gospel (1986e:6; 1995j:336). John freely uses the language and thought forms of classical religion and culture that form the world of his hearers. Yet John uses this language and these thought-forms in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. He begins with the announcement "In the beginning was the *logos*." As he continues it becomes apparent that *logos* is not the impersonal law of rationality that permeated the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. John begins by identifying with

the classical longing for the source of order but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world (1982c:1-3). In this way John is both relevant and faithful. Speaking of the Hindu situation Newbigin writes: “The formulation of the theologian must be seen to be relevant: it must work with the models which the Hindu is accustomed to use. It must also be challenging, not accepting these models as of ultimate authority but introducing by their means the new fact of Jesus whose authority relativises whatever authority they have” (1978a:12). There are two questions that must be asked to determine whether our proclamation and embodiment of the gospel is faithful:

Does it enable the inhabitant of this particular culture to see Jesus in terms of the models with which he is familiar, or does it require him as a pre-condition of seeing Jesus to emigrate from his own-thought world into another—perhaps from the past?... Does the Jesus who is so introduced judge and determine the models used, or is he judged and determined by them in such wise that only those elements in the portrait are allowed which are acceptable to the contemporary culture?” (*ibid*).

The notion of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance is applicable not only to language and verbal missionary communication. It is the process by which the church interacts with the various institutions and customs of its culture. Referring to these institutions and customs as powers,<sup>11</sup> Newbigin notes that they have been created in Christ and yet have revolted against Christ. Since they are part of the good creation, they are not to be destroyed; since they are twisted by rebellion, they are not to remain as they are. When referring to the task of the church in the public square, Newbigin turns the image of subversive fulfillment to that of subversive agent. He writes:

---

<sup>11</sup>Following the publishing of Hendrik Berkhof’s *Christ and the Powers* (E.T. 1962), we find Newbigin increasingly utilizing the notion of powers to speak of the structures of society (e.g. 1989e:198-210). Al Wolters has offered a sympathetic, yet penetrating critique of Newbigin’s understanding of the powers on exegetical, conceptual, and perspectival grounds (1996). He believes the essential insights that Newbigin makes with his notion of the powers can be better articulated with a Biblical understanding of creation (1996:15-21). I have attempted to deepen that understanding of creation for mission in the public square (Goheen 1996). Wolters’ critique led Newbigin to remark: “One of the papers contributed at Leeds is the one from Al Wolters about my treatment of the principalities and powers. Here I must say that his criticisms have a great deal of weight in them. I think he is right in pointing out the weaknesses of my treatment, both as regards the exegesis of scripture and as regards the internal coherence of my arguments. I have to confess that I ought to do some real rethinking” (1996c:6-7). He goes on to say, though, that “there is more to my argument than Wolters grants” (:7).

If I understand the teaching of the New Testament on this matter, I understand the role of the Christian as that of being neither a conservative nor an anarchist, but a subversive agent. When Paul says that Christ has disarmed the powers (not destroyed them), and when he speaks of the powers as being created in Christ and for Christ, and when he says that the Church is to make known the wisdom of God to the powers, I take it that this means that a Christian neither accepts them as some sort of eternal order which cannot be changed, nor seeks to destroy them because of the evil they do, but seeks to subvert them from within and thereby to bring them back under the allegiance of their true Lord (1991h:82).

Newbigin draws on the Biblical example of the runaway slave Onesimus. The command is for slaves to obey their earthly masters because they serve the Lord in the process. He sends Onesimus back as a slave but with a new status. “The structure is not to be simply smashed—as so much popular rhetoric advocates; it is to be subverted from within” (*ibid*). This is the way that the tension between antithesis and solidarity can be resolved.

Newbigin advocates involvement in the public life of the nation and solidarity in the task of cultural development based on this understanding. An analysis of the way he approaches education, politics, science, and other areas of public life shows that subversive fulfillment is the operative contextualization principle that underlies his endeavours (1991h:83). The gospel speaks a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ to each cultural institution and custom. The believer is called to discern what subversive solidarity means in each situation.

The process of discernment of God’s word of grace and word of judgement on culture will continue by way of an internal dialogue in the heart of each Christian and a communal dialogue in the church that has both local and ecumenical dimensions. The believer learns to live so fully in both the Scriptural and the cultural story that the debate between their competing understandings of the world is internalized. The Christian’s ultimate loyalty is to the story of Scripture. The believer seeks to indwell Scripture in such a way that its models and story become the means by which he or she makes sense of the world. Yet the believer is also part of a community that embodies the cultural story. Thus the debate between these two different ways of looking at the world is internalized. The commitment to Scripture shapes the debate: the cultural story is constantly brought under the scrutiny of the Biblical story (1989e:65). It is clear that if this debate is to take place, a knowledge of both the story of Scripture and of the religious-worldview currents of culture is essential. This internal dialogue can never be simply an individual affair. The believer is part of a community that seeks to embody the story of the gospel. Contextualization takes place in the life of a congregation that rehearses and remembers the story the Bible tells in its proclamation and sacraments (1989e:147; cf. Hiebert 1985:186-187) and then proceeds to bring the Biblical story to bear on its culture.

Newbigin has developed a profound sense of the importance of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance in a faithful embodiment of the gospel. At the same time, however, Newbigin has not provided a solid theological foundation for this notion. There are two areas in which both Kraemer and Bavinck<sup>12</sup> have provided a sounder

---

<sup>12</sup>Bavinck does not use the term ‘subversive fulfillment.’ Rather he speaks of ‘*possessio*.’ He writes: “We would... prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take possession... Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely

basis for this concept. First, both Kraemer and Bavinck have provided a better foundation for subversive fulfillment in their twofold analysis of culture. On the one hand, the entire culture is a unified whole: “We regard them [pagan religions and cultures] as powerful, life-controlling entities, as complete indivisible structures, because each element coheres with all the others and receives its meaning from the total structures” (Bavinck 1960:173; cf. Kraemer 1938:135). On the other hand, each aspect of culture is shaped by the idolatrous religious core: “The entire culture, in all its manifestations, is a structural totality, in which everything hangs together, *and in which religion occupies a central position*” (Bavinck *ibid.*; emphasis mine). Above we have noted that both of these elements of culture are implicit in Newbigin’s thought but insufficiently developed. Affirming these two dimensions of culture by itself would lead to a pessimistic analysis of culture which could only provide a basis for rejection but not for subversive fulfillment. Therefore, the second theological observation is equally significant: God’s creational revelation or common grace continues to uphold his creation and does not permit human idolatry to run its gamut. “[W]e must remember that although man has fallen from God, and that the results of this fall are in evidence in his every thought and deed, nevertheless, thanks to God’s common grace,<sup>13</sup> man is safeguarded against complete deterioration” (Bavinck *ibid.* cf. Kraemer 1956:340-352; ). It precisely a recognition of both of these factors—the idolatrous shaping of all culture and the powerful creation revelation of God—that provides a foundation for subversive fulfillment. Every custom, institution, and practice of culture is corrupted by sin; yet the creational structure remains because of God’s faithfulness to His creation. While Newbigin’s work clearly moves in this direction, he never provides the explicit analysis that is found in Kraemer and Bavinck.

### 8.5.3. *Ecumenical Fellowship: Avoiding Ethnocentrism and Relativism*

---

different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come... [Christ] fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it new direction. Such is neither ‘adaptation,’ nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth” (1960:178f.).

<sup>13</sup>This term is often misunderstood. Bavinck does not stop to explain this term but his understanding is the same as G.C. Berkouwer who writes: “Life on this earth does not yet disclose the full consequences of sin. Calvin speaks of ‘common grace’ and, in this connection, he discusses virtues to be seen also in the lives of unbelievers. He did not wish to ascribe these phenomena to a left-over goodness in nature—as if apostasy from God were not so serious—but rather he discerned here the power of God in revelation and in grace preserving life from total destruction” (1959:20f.; cf. Berkouwer 1955:137-230).

Faithful contextualization requires a dialogue that moves beyond cultural boundaries. This dialogue must be “open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of that place and enabled to represent to that place the universality, the catholicity of God’s purpose of grace and judgment for all humanity” (1989e:152). There is a danger that any one local contextualization will be absorbed into the culture of that place; if it is to be challengingly relevant then a dialogue must take place among all believers from every culture. This dialogue will involve both mutual correction and mutual enrichment (1978a:13; 1989e:196). It will involve mutual learning since each cultural contextualization opens up new insights into the gospel. It will involve mutual criticism because each cultural contextualization has blind spots.

The history of contextualization has shown the twin problems of ethnocentrism and relativism. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the problem was ethnocentrism: the western shape of the gospel was considered to be normative. In the middle of this century there was a shift toward relativism: there are no criteria to judge a faithful contextualization of the gospel. Only through a continual ecumenical dialogue can we be saved from either of these dangers. Referring to the devastating effects of the ethnocentric reduction of the gospel to its western form, Newbigin writes: “The 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.... the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretation 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” (1989e:196). It is only as the gospel is contextualized in other cultures that this kind of dialogue can take place. However, not all contextualizations are faithful. It is the *gospel* that must be contextualized.

... the gospel is not an empty form into which everyone is free to pour his or her own content. Scripture, it has been wittily said, is not a picnic where the authors bring the words and the readers bring the meaning. The content of the gospel is Jesus Christ in the fullness of his ministry, death, and resurrection. The gospel is this and not anything else. Jesus is who he is, and though our perceptions of him will be shaped by our own situation and the mental formation we have received from our culture, our need is to see him as he truly is. This is why we have to listen to the witness of the whole Church of all places and ages (1989e:153).

Newbigin notes three problems that face the ecumenical church if it is to pursue this kind of ecumenical dialogue. First, the constantly changing relationships of the churches to their cultures makes ecumenical fellowship difficult (1978a:13-14). Churches at various points in their histories stand in polemical or affirmative relationships to their cultural setting. Ecumenical dialogue between the European church that is critical of western culture and sympathetic to Indian culture, on the one hand, and the Indian church that is critical of Indian culture and sympathetic toward the West, on the other, would be extremely difficult. The fact that there could be found churches in India that are affirmative of Indian culture and anti-West and churches in the West who are similarly sympathetic to their cultural setting and antithetical to Indian culture complicates the picture. In fact, mutual sympathy might be expressed on the basis of a

concealed contradiction. The culture-critic (radical) and the culture-affirmer (conservative) might find themselves in agreement about the goodness of Indian culture. The Indian church is conservative, affirming the status quo while the western church is radical standing in opposition to the status quo in their situation. Their reasons for affirming Indian culture are mutually contradictory.

Real mutual understanding, learning, and criticism have to go on in the midst of these extremely complex and constantly changing patterns of relationship between Church and culture. This calls for qualities of discernment and sensitivity, but this is the very heart of the ecumenical task, and it is one of the conditions of the Church's faithfulness to its mission (1978a:14).

A second barrier faces the process of ecumenical dialogue. At present, the dialogue takes place in the context of "one of the tribal cultures of humankind" (1978e:152). The dialogue proceeds in the context of only one cultural tradition of the church—the West (1986e:9): "All of its [i.e. the ecumenical church's] work is conducted in the languages of western Europe. Only those who have had long training in the methods of thinking, of study and research, and of argument that have been developed in western Europe can share in its work" (1978e:151). For people in the West who have never had another cultural experience it sometimes appears as if the modern scientific worldview is the only way in which systematic and rigorous thinking and dialogue can be done. Newbiggin's own experience with Tamil lyrical poetry challenges this narrow assumption. The reduction to western patterns limits ecumenical dialogue: "Because of the dominance of one set of cultural patterns, the whole ecumenical movement is severely limited, and Christians who inhabit this cultural world do not receive from Christians of other cultures the correction that they need" (1978e:152). Even third-world theologies are written in the language and patterns of Europe; the real power of Asian and African Christianity does not lie in these theologies. Thus the western church is not challenged by the potency of the third-world churches.

Because of the total dominance of European culture in the ecumenical movement, there has seldom been any awareness among Western theologians of the extent to which their own theologies have been the result of a failure to challenge the assumptions of their own culture; and because theologians of the younger churches have been compelled to adopt this culture as the precondition of participation in the ecumenical movement, they have not been in a position to present the really sharp challenge that should be addressed to the theologies of the western churches (1978e:152-153).

The third hurdle the church must face if ecumenical dialogue is to move forward is the forum in which the conversation is to take place. On the one hand, Newbiggin notes that the WCC has been the primary forum in which the dialogue has occurred. Newbiggin places the rise of the WCC in 1948 in the context of a need for ecumenical dialogue. He asks: "Where do I find a stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of the Bible when my reading of the Bible is itself so much shaped by the person that I am, formed by my culture?" (1989e:196). A look at the experience of the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century helps give an answer to this question. Almost all the churches on both sides of the First World War totally identified the cause of Christ with their own national cause. This scandal enabled many to see a fatal syncretism of their Christianity

with nationalism and the need for a fresh listening to the Bible. Out of this fresh encounter with the Scriptures grew the ecumenical developments of the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, in the Second World War the identification of gospel with nation was not repeated on the same scale. Through the war the churches maintained spiritual bonds and quickly after the end of the war met together to work and pray for a new Christian presence in Europe. This ecumenical fellowship made the churches more aware that they could not succumb to the role of domestic chaplains to the nations. There was a need for a “supranational entity which could in some measure embody and express the supranational 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” (1989e:196). Thus the rise of the WCC can be attributed, in part, to the need for mutual correction. The WCC has remained the primary forum for this kind of dialogue.

At the same time Newbigin raises a twofold problem about the future of the WCC as the primary place where dialogue can take place: the dominant pluralist presence and “wider ecumenism” threaten an authentic and faithful dialogue that centres in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (1994k:119, 125); many of the thriving evangelical and pentecostal churches of the world church remain outside this fellowship (1995f:9).

Newbigin does point to another possibility for ecumenical dialogue. The cross-cultural missionary will always be a necessity for the faithful church precisely because this ecumenical correction takes place in his or her person. Newbigin describes his own experience.

My Christianity was syncretistic, but so was theirs. Yet neither of us could discover that without the challenge of the other. Such is the situation in cross-cultural mission. The gospel comes to the Hindu embodied in the form given to it by the culture of the missionary.... [A]s second and third and later generations of Christians make their own explorations in Scripture, they will begin to test the Christianity of the missionaries in the light of their own reading of the Scripture. So the missionary, if he is at all awake, finds himself, as I did, in a new situation. He becomes, as a bearer of the gospel, a critic of his own culture. He finds there the Archimedean point.<sup>14</sup> He sees his own culture with the Christian eyes of a foreigner, and the foreigner can see what the native cannot see (1994k:68).

The missionary has the gift of new eyes; but he or she also has the knowledge of the sending culture that enables him or her to be able to translate that insight for the church (Sanneh 1993:162-164). It is for this reason that “the foreign missionary is an enduring necessity in the life of the universal Church.” The reflexive action of the missionary is crucial “so that the gospel comes back to us in the idiom of other cultures with power to question our understanding of it” (1994k:115). Newbigin himself is an outstanding

---

<sup>14</sup> The significance of ecumenical dialogue for faithfulness to the gospel within a certain culture is evident when noting the use of this image of Archimedean point. When Newbigin returned to Britain he was consumed with the question: “How can one find a perspective on one’s own culture. I had asked for a Christian approach to contemporary Western liberal capitalism, in fact to the culture of which I was a part and by which I had been formed. Could there be an Archimedean point, so to speak, from which one could look critically at one’s own intellectual and spiritual formation?” (1993h:250f.).

example of this dynamic in action. Perhaps it is this “medium” of ecumenical fellowship that needs to be stressed in light of the problems that Newbigin raises about the WCC, although that kind of mutual fellowship must never be removed from the missionary church’s agenda.

#### *8.5.4. A Myriad of Unpredictable Faithful Embodiments*

Contextualization concerns the question of how the gospel can come ‘alive’ in particular contexts. This ‘coming alive’ of the gospel in a particular settings, Newbigin insists, cannot be predicted; it is a work of the sovereign Spirit in a community that seeks to live faithfully by the gospel and to identify with people in their particular need. When this happens the richness of gospel is expressed in numerous ways. “The history of the Church, and missionary experiences, certainly show that this ‘coming alive’ happens in a myriad of different and unpredictable ways.... It happens over and over again that the gospel ‘comes alive’ in a way that the evangelist never anticipated” (1989e:152).

#### *8.5.5. A Missionary Encounter with Culture*

A faithful contextualization of the gospel will lead to a missionary encounter between gospel and culture (cf. Jongeneel 1997:339-340).<sup>15</sup> This is the normal relation of the church to its culture. A missionary encounter occurs when the church embodies the gospel as an alternative way of life to the culture in which it is set and thereby challenges the culture’s fundamental assumptions. While Newbigin developed this notion in the context of a missionary encounter with western culture, this is the normal way any church relates to its cultural context.

To express the notion of a missionary encounter, Newbigin employs the language of sociology of knowledge: the church is an alternative plausibility structure to the one that exists in western society.

... the gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel. The Church, therefore, as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures without exception (1989e:9).

---

<sup>15</sup>Jongeneel heads this section with an apt quote that summarizes the importance of missionary encounter for Newbigin: “The confrontation of Christianity with non-Christian faiths and ways of life is not only an academic question, but a matter of life and death to the church. What is at stake is the nature and purpose of the gospel” (Myklebust 1995:I, 29; quoted in Jongeneel 1997:339).

Later in his reflection on the church he says: “The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another” (1989e:228). ‘Plausibility structure’ is a term used by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to describe social structures that make certain beliefs plausible (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 154-163; cf. Berger 1967). Berger and Luckmann speak of the “social construction of reality” (1966). There are three moments in this social construction of reality: “*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:61; emphasis theirs). First, there is externalization which is an outpouring of human social and cultural activity that expresses the fundamental beliefs of the people. Second, there is an institutionalization wherein the social and cultural products of this human activity attain an objective status external to the human producers. Third, there is internalization when these objectivized products are reappropriated along with the fundamental beliefs that are embodied in them. The process of socialization takes place as one subjectively appropriates the fundamental beliefs that are embedded in the social constructs and institutions. This humanly constructed social world must be maintained; explanations given to maintain the status quo are legitimations. These legitimations go beyond simply verbal explanations; the social base and structure concretely legitimate and maintain the social world and its fundamental beliefs. These social structures and institutions that embody and transmit the beliefs of a society are called plausibility structures (Sanks 1992:27-30). All cultures exhibit a plausibility structure that embody and transmit the fundamental beliefs of its inhabitants. Those fundamental beliefs stand in opposition to the gospel and if there is to be a missionary encounter, the church itself must be a community that embodies an alternative set of foundational beliefs. The church itself is the social structure that makes the gospel plausible as a total vision of life that is radically different from the one that controls the public life of culture. Thus an essential clue to understanding Newbigin’s call for a missionary encounter is his missionary ecclesiology; as one commentator has put it: the church must become “a living incarnation of an alternative plausibility structure” (Weston 1999:58).

Insofar as the church is faithful to the gospel, there will be three aspects to this missionary encounter. First, the foundational beliefs shared by a cultural community will be challenged. A missionary encounter requires the church to live fully in the Biblical story and to challenge the reigning idolatrous assumptions of the culture. The culture must be understood and encountered in the light of the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to be absorbed into the fundamental assumptions of the culture. Only in this way is the culture challenged at its roots. Second, the church will offer the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its culture. “No amount of brilliant argument can make it [the gospel] sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it” (1989e:232). Third, there will be a call for radical conversion, an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel. As Newbigin expresses it, the church that embodies the gospel

... must necessarily clash with contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole ‘fiduciary framework’ within which our culture operates. It must call unequivocally for radical conversion, a conversion of the mind so that things are seen differently, and a conversion of the will so that things are done differently. It must decline altogether

the futile attempt to commend the biblical vision of how things are by seeking to adjust it to the assumptions of our culture (1983d:53).

This notion of a ‘missionary encounter’ highlights the antithetical side of cultural involvement; the positive side of cultural involvement—although clearly present in Newbigin’s thought—does not receive the attention it deserves. Griffioen’s critique of Newbigin can be applied here.

## 8.6. CONCLUSION

Newbigin did not address the topic of gospel, church, and culture in any substantial way until the last three decades of his life. By that time, a wealth of missionary experience enabled him to make an important contribution to contextualization studies. His understanding of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel is widened into a model of contextualization for the missionary church.

Contextualization is an umbrella term that is employed in missiology to group together studies that examine the relationship of the gospel to culture. The burning issues in contextualization are captured in the questions: How can the church be both faithful to the gospel and relevant to the particular culture without falling into syncretism? How can the church be faithful to one gospel without falling into ethnocentrism and at the same time embrace plural expressions without falling into relativism? A number of models have emerged that grapple with these questions. Stephen Bevans has given the most complete survey of the current models (Bevans 1992). It is significant that when Bevans had finished his book, he recognized that Newbigin offered a unique alternative (Bevans 1993). A number of important elements in Newbigin’s model of contextualization converge in his notion of a missionary encounter.

In the first place, Newbigin highlights the religious nature of the formative worldview that lies at the heart of a culture. Beneath the network of elements that form a culture lie foundational religious commitments and assumptions that function as a formative core for the whole structure of culture. These idolatrous beliefs function like a tectonic plate that gives shape to the observable patterns of life in a human community. Newbigin emphasizes two elements of these formative beliefs: their religious nature, and their comprehensive scope. It is common in contextualization studies to place religion as simply one more cultural form alongside others. By contrast, like Bavinck and Conn, Newbigin emphasizes the central role of religion in shaping the functions and meanings of the various cultural forms. For Newbigin religion is more than a cultural form; it is more than an institution that embodies beliefs and practices concerning God and the destiny of the soul. It is a set of ultimate commitments about the nature of the world that gives shape, direction, and meaning to life and demands final loyalty. The modern scientific worldview also expresses ultimate faith commitments (1989e:172-173; 1986e:3). Rather than religion being a cultural institution it is the directing dynamic at the heart of culture. If that religious core is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, then an idol will fill the void (1986e:115). In stressing the religious core of culture Newbigin has moved beyond culture theorists like Hiebert and Kraft. Moreover, Newbigin highlights a second aspect of culture: These religious faith

commitments are also comprehensive in scope and therefore shape every aspect of culture. There are no neutral cultural forms; all are shaped by the formative set of ultimate beliefs.

A second aspect of Newbigin's model of contextualization is his understanding of revelation. Bevans highlights this element in each of the contextualization models he discusses; one's understanding of revelation significantly shapes the particular contextual model. For Newbigin, Scripture is not a set of religious doctrines or timeless ideas about God and salvation; rather it is the story of God's mighty acts in history to redeem His creation. This narrative culminates in Christ who reveals and accomplishes the end of history. The Bible is universal history; it is the true story about the destiny of the world. In this light one can see why Newbigin contends that culture must be read in the light of Scripture and not the other way round. If it is the true story of the world then everything else must be understood in its light. In this insistence Newbigin finds himself in company with the contextual models of Willem Visser 't Hooft and Harvie Conn.

There is a third aspect of Newbigin's model of contextualization that provides the foundation for his notion of a missionary encounter: both the Scriptural story and the culture's foundational beliefs are socially embodied. Newbigin's comment on the normal approach to gospel and culture makes this point:

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.... The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite different things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life (1989e:188).

For Newbigin, there is no disembodied gospel: the gospel is always given communal form and shape within a cultural context (1989e:144). Furthermore, culture is a comprehensive way of understanding and ordering the life of a community on the basis of shared foundational commitments. The story of the Bible is centred in Jesus Christ; the culture story finds its core in idols. These two ways of understanding and living in the world are equally comprehensive and at the same time mutually incompatible. Newbigin speaks of a unbearable tension in the life of the believing community, one that results from the attempt to live faithfully in the Biblical story while at the same time participating in a community that shares a different story. For Newbigin, contextualization takes place with the meeting of gospel and culture *within the life of the church*; the church lives at the cross-roads between two ways of understanding and living in the world. More specifically, contextualization is the encounter of two all-embracing and competing understandings of the world shaped by two different stories—the story of the gospel and the reigning story of the culture—within the life of the Christian community.

Newbigin does not resolve this tension by either isolation or absorption. The church cannot withdraw from the world; it bears responsibility to participate in its cultural development. Neither can the church simply accommodate itself to the culture; this would mean to be conformed to the world's idolatrous patterns. Newbigin resolves this unbearable tension with the notion of 'challenging relevance' or 'subversive fulfillment.' Challenging relevance, the term most often used by Newbigin, is a concept

taken from Hogg. Subversive fulfillment is borrowed from Kraemer and Visser 't Hooft. Both expressions point to a similar understanding of the relation of gospel and culture. If the church is to be relevant it must embody the forms of its culture fulfilling the religious longings of the people; however, if the church is to be faithful it must challenge and subvert those forms from within, giving them new content in keeping with the story of the gospel. Thus the church takes a position both *for* and *against* its culture. On the one hand, the church identifies with the forms of its host culture; on the other hand, the church challenges the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to those forms. The church develops a faithful and relevant embodiment through an internal dialogue that constantly tests the culture by the gospel, and through a communal dialogue that is both local and ecumenical.

If the church is faithful, there will be a missionary encounter. The foundational beliefs of the culture will be challenged by an alternative way of life shaped by the gospel. The church will stand as a witness to the kingdom in forms familiar to its cultural contemporaries.

Few contextualization models give the church such a central place. Newbigin stresses the communal embodiment of the gospel and the cultural story as well as the resulting clash between those two stories within the life of the church. This model has contributed significantly to our understanding of the role of the church in the encounter between gospel and culture.

Yet there are a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies; this chapter has uncovered three inconsistencies at a theoretical level. First, Newbigin's theoretical articulation of culture is inadequate. His model of contextualization assumes a view of culture in which both the organic unity of the "surface" elements of culture and the religious direction at a "depth" level are stressed. While these elements of culture find expression in his writings, both are articulated weakly. Moreover, the articulation of the religious core of culture is not consistently elaborated. Although this notion is foundational to his contextual model and understanding of a missionary encounter, he is not as clear and consistent as Conn and Bavinck in depicting this aspect of culture. The latter authors have rooted their understanding of the religious direction of culture in a certain anthropology and a well-formulated theory of culture. They consistently and explicitly develop an understanding of culture that distinguishes between the various forms, symbols, and institutions of culture and the underlying religious direction. Newbigin is not as explicit nor is he consistent. An example of this inconsistency is found in the way Newbigin often places language at the centre of culture. In his missionary experience it was language that first revealed the underlying religious commitments. He does not distinguish between language as one of the cultural forms and the religious core that shapes the language.

A second weakness is found in his failure to provide a Biblical foundation or theoretical articulation of the positive task of the church in culture. The critiques of Griffioen and Bevans reveal this weakness. Both Griffioen and Bevans recognize that the notion of cultural development is not absent from Newbigin's writings; in fact, his missionary encounter with western culture, especially in the callings of believers in the world, is dependent upon such a notion. However, both have rightly pointed to a problem. Bevans believes Newbigin's model of contextualization overemphasizes the critical side of the church's encounter with culture. Accordingly Bevans describes

Newbigin's contextualization model as "counter-cultural." He fears that a church which follows this path can become anti-cultural (Bevans 1993:18). Likewise Griffioen believes that the church's cultural task involves both development and antithesis, management and critique as two sides of one coin. Newbigin's contextualization discussions emphasize the second of these pairs. Newbigin's discussions of a missionary encounter with culture assumes and elaborates in the concrete spheres of society the church's responsibility for development; yet in his formulation of the encounter between gospel and culture in the church's life and mission, he does not give sufficient attention to this positive side. Any discussion of the creation mandate, for example, is absent. The particular settings in which Newbigin has formulated his understanding of gospel and culture, and especially his concern over the syncretistic western church, has led him to overemphasize the critical and judging side of church's calling in culture. Yet the plausibility of his whole understanding of a missionary encounter with culture would seem to call for a more nuanced and consistent discussion of the church's responsibility for and participation in the development of culture.

Finally, Newbigin does not distinguish clearly between the creational structure and the religious direction of cultural forms; yet his understanding of subversive fulfillment and challenging relevance depends on such a distinction. Bavinck's concept of *possessio* and Kraemer's notion of *subversive fulfillment* are very similar to Newbigin's understanding. Both Kraemer and Bavinck have provided a much more solid foundation for their formulations. Kraemer's discussions elaborate in detail an understanding of creation revelation; Bavinck recognizes the importance of common grace in the forms and structures of culture. Kraemer and especially Bavinck explicate the religious direction of culture. Newbigin's notion of challenging relevance, Kraemer's concept of subversive fulfillment, and Bavinck's understanding of *possessio* all assume that each cultural entity has a creational structure preserved by God as well as an idolatrous twisting of that structure. In Newbigin's thought we find this distinction implicitly, and occasionally explicitly in concrete examples. Yet Newbigin's weak articulation of creation revelation does not enable him to express this crucial distinction clearly.

Newbigin's missionary experience, his profound entry into the Hindu worldview, his commitment to communicating the gospel, and his knowledge of missiological discussions have enabled him to articulate a model of contextualization that offers rich insight into the relation between gospel, church, and culture. Few authors on contextualization make the church so central to their understanding. Nevertheless a deepened appropriation of Scripture's teaching on creation and the religious heart of culture, evident in the writings of missiologists whose understanding of contextualization is similar to Newbigin (Bavinck, Kraemer, and Conn), would supplement weaknesses that remain evident in Newbigin's formulations.