
Ecumenical Theology: Part I

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Some useful books relating to the theology and history of the ecumenical movement have been published in recent months and the purpose of this article is to outline and review some of the more important publications which are of significance to our readers. I make no apology for beginning with **LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S** autobiography, **UNFINISHED AGENDA** (SPCK, 263pp, £7.50 paperback). Without doubt this was one of the most absorbing and stimulating autobiographies I have read in recent years; it throws light not only on British theology and church life from the late twenties but it also documents Newbigin's involvement in the preliminary discussions leading to the establishment of the church of South India then his more extensive and official involvement in the World Council of Churches. The book is excellent value for a mine of information is here provided in a most readable style and I was impressed by the author's obvious sincerity.

Born in Northumbria and blessed with loving, godly parents, Lesslie Newbigin was educated in a Quaker public school at Leighton Park, Reading. By the end of his schooldays he had rejected the faith of his family and embraced a generally deterministic philosophy of history. However, William James's essay **The Will to Believe** made him acknowledge that a reasonable case for belief was possible and this was confirmed by reading a lucid exposition of the Faith by a Presbyterian minister, Herbert Gray.

From Leighton Park School he then went to Queen's, Cambridge, in the autumn of 1928. In his first year much of his time was spent climbing, singing, debating and there was no need for him to work hard on his geography Tripos. He also attended the SCM meetings and here his faith was nurtured, for the movement still included at this time many converted people who were profoundly devoted to Christ. Visiting speakers to these meetings included men like John R. Mott, William Temple (Newbigin recalls one of his telling statements: "It is possible to be comparatively religious but there is no such thing as comparative religion") and Frank Buchman, the founder of Moral Rearmament.

At the end of this degree course Newbigin accepted an invitation to join the SCM staff based in Glasgow and here he met his wife who was also on the same staff. Feeling both a call to the ministry and a deep concern for India, he then did his theological training at Westminster College, Cambridge, under John Oman. His early months in Cambridge marked a turning point in his theological convictions. As he wrestled with the Greek text of Romans over several months, his liberalism was undermined and he began to recognise the centrality and objectivity of Christ's atonement accomplished at Calvary. "The decisive agent in this shift", he remarks, "was James Denney. His commen-

tary on Romans carried the day as far as I was concerned. Barth I found incomprehensible. C.H. Dodd seemed to have made the Epistle palatable by removing its toughest parts — the parts where I found strong meat. His ‘demythologizing’ of the wrath of God seemed to me effectively to remove the love of God for if ‘wrath’ was only an anthropomorphic way of describing the consequences of sin, then ‘love’ would have to be explained along the same lines. At the end of the exercise I was much more of an evangelical than a liberal ...” (p.31). His commitment to political and social issues continued but one weakness he noticed and lamented in the Reformed tradition of ministerial training was the lack of prayer and meditation; Herbert Farmer, however, who succeeded John Oman at this time, introduced a quiet day for meditation and prayer which greatly encouraged Newbigin. The Cambridge SCM at this time hosted church leaders like Mott, Temple, Weatherhead and Micklem but, adds Newbigin, “it was William Temple who most powerfully influenced the students of that generation”; Temple also discussed theological issues with Newbigin and unfolded his vision for the future of the Ecumenical Movement. “It was from him,” he adds, “that I heard of the plans for some kind of world organization of the churches to follow the Oxford and Edinburgh meetings of 1937” (p.33).

At the end of his theology course, Lesslie Newbigin was ordained by the Presbytery of Edinburgh in July 1936 and two months later sailed with his new bride for missionary work in India. A broken leg in a road accident interrupted his missionary work at an early period and he was compelled to return to Edinburgh for nearly two years. In this difficult period he saw God’s wise providence and learned “that even if I never managed to do a hand’s turn of missionary work, God is still my Saviour and I can give myself to Him and trust Him for everything” (p.46).

Newbigin eventually returned to India to work in the sacred Hindu city of Kanchipuram. The learning of Tamil, the visiting of local Hindu homes, teaching in the High School and preaching fully occupied him at first but he was concerned that word and deed should not be separated. “I do not think”, he writes, “that the street preaching of wandering strangers is likely to bear much fruit in a place like this: but when men have earned their right to be heard by their service to the city in a school or hospital, their public testimony will carry weight, especially with those who have themselves learned the story of Jesus in a mission school. Thus the institutional work gives weight to the preaching, and the preaching gives point to the institutional work” (p.56). Newbigin also at this time met with some local Hindu scholars and studied in typical Indian fashion on alternate weeks the Gospel of John and the *Svetasvara Upanishad* and one of these scholars belonging to the Hindu school of *Visishtadvaita* which has been called and expounded by Rudolf Otto as “India’s Religion of Grace” and Newbigin was impressed by its many close parallels with evangelical Christianity.

From Kanchipuram, the young missionary spent increasingly more of his time in the villages for preaching and pastoral work when “the Gospel was doing what it has always done, making it possible for those who were formerly ‘no

people' to become 'God's people' " (p.63). Then there was the added responsibility of teaching and advising the village catechists and teachers who met with him for two days a month to learn Old and New Testaments, Christian Doctrine, etc. besides preparing for many of their meetings. During the following months, Newbigin recognised the wrong dependence of these nationals upon a missionary thus hindering any 'spontaneous expansion of the Church' which we see in the New Testament "because it was assumed that a congregation required a teacher, a teacher required a salary and a salary had to come from a committee in Scotland which had firmly declined to sanction increases in the budget." The 'Great Commission' then had to be suspended pro tem! He saw the need to localise the church and train gifted men to teach and pastor as "the key to future expansion". Frustrations, however, quickly set in for this busy missionary. Administrative duties were demanding by now and, rightly he felt it was not his job "to sit at a desk and organize the work of Indian pastors and evangelists. I thought that he ought to be himself a pastor and evangelist sharing their joys and sorrows as a colleague" (p.70). But Newbigin's approach was not approved by his superiors and he became more distressed over the way in which in the life of third world churches the assumption that the work of preaching the Gospel ... and building up the Body of Christ, is regarded as a relatively unimportant occupation compared to the work of administering a large organization. In words which are relevant to busy pastors in Britain, he goes on to declare, "it has caused thousands of pastors to speak of their workplace as an office rather than a study, to cherish a drawer full of files as the symbol of a status higher than that denoted by a shelf full of books, and to see the office desk as the place-of real power."

Newbigin then moved to Madras City and then gradually over the following months and years he was involved in discussions about the famous 'South India Scheme' of church unity. Feelings were divided and in the early 1940's the whole unity movement had reached an impasse after talking which had stretched over nearly quarter of a century! His own written contribution to this problem was entitled **The Church and the Gospel** and later expanded into **The Reunion of the Church**. Newbigin himself had serious difficulties about accepting the 'historic episcopate' as a necessary element in a united church, a church — he insisted — which "was constituted by the Gospel, communicated in word and sacrament and evoking the response of faith. Ministerial order was therefore secondary ..." However, his views were changed after reading Michael Ramsey's **The Gospel and the Catholic Church** in which he thought — wrongly, I think — he had found a doctrine of the ministry compatible with both the Gospel and the Church. It was not easy resolving some of these issues and the implied but practical problem of reordination for non-Anglicans raised acute problems for many people on both sides. In September 1946 events began to move more quickly when the five Anglican bishops in South India agreed "that all who have the status of Presbyters in the United Church are capable of performing all the functions assigned to Presbyters in the United Church by the Constitution of that Church in every congregation of the United Church" (p.87). There was an immediate and positive response to this new initiative during the following year

and eventually Newbigin himself was elected a Bishop in the newly formed Church of South India at Madurai in 1947.

His work was far from easy and involved the uniting of India Presbyterian congregations of Scottish and American origins, missionaries and now the Anglicans! Once again he saw his role primarily as that of an evangelist and pastor rather than an administrator and for the next twelve years threw himself vigorously into this work. There were many fears and problems. Some feared that the Church would "slide into Anglicanism" and that "episcopacy would corrupt the pure practice of congregationalism". Newbigin was clear. "The future lay not in the prestigious institutions but in the small village congregations under local leadership" (p.123) and he developed and gave priority to this local church ministry. The small theological seminary, where catechists and others were trained, was directed also to train leaders in the villages and then, along with others, Newbigin felt the need for a study-centre capable of stimulating and preparing men to meet contemporary challenges and eventually the **Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society** was established in Bangalore.

The newly installed bishop of Madurai was also quickly involved in the wider ecumenical scene. He was invited to be a 'consultant' at the Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 where the World Council of Churches was to be formally constituted. On his way there he attended the Lambeth Conference but was disappointed over its unclear voice concerning supplemental ordination. "It was", he writes, "one of those fateful turning-points in human affairs, for if the Lambeth Conference of 1948 had been able to give a cordial welcome to what had been done in South India, I am sure that the whole worldwide movement for unity among the churches would have gone forward. That opportunity was lost, and is not likely to come again" (p.114). The W.C.C. Assembly provided him with the opportunity of meeting theologians like Barth, Brunner and Niebuhr. Incidentally, the opening sessions of the W.C.C. were addressed by Karl Barth and C.H. Dodd on the theme, 'Man's Disorder and God's Design'. He was again in Europe in July 1951, this time in Geneva when he was one of the twenty-five theologians entrusted with the task of preparing the churches for the consideration of 'Christ the Hope of the World' which was to be the theme of the Second Assembly. This proved a stormy conference for the theologians for "Barth was at his most polemical ... Barth vented his wrath on Baillie ... Niebuhr had almost made up his mind to leave" while the other Continentals and the Americans disagreed strongly on the interpretation of the Assembly's theme! Some months later Newbigin was involved again in ecumenical discussions, this time on the famous 'Toronto Statement' which sought to allay the fears of churches that W.C.C. membership would involve compromising their own ecclesiologies. Newbigin felt strongly that the Council should face, as a matter of urgency, the question: 'What is the nature of the unity which is God's intention for the Church?' During furlough in 1952 he delivered the Kerr lectures which were then published as **The Household of God**; in this work he sought to undergird the Ecumenical movement with an adequate doctrine of the Church and to avoid the Catholic-Protestant impasse experienced earlier in Amsterdam. As he

studied the Scripture, he reveals, "I became more and more convinced that this two-fold approach did not reach the heart of the matter, and that these two traditions would only accept each other's truth if there was brought into the debate a third element — that which lays stress on the immediate experience of divine grace and power" (p.136) and he called this the Pentecostal element.

During this furlough he also attended a conference of the International Missionary Council on the missionary obligation of the Church in which a restatement of the biblical basis of mission and contemporary priorities was attempted. Newbigin was in the theological group within the conference and alongside theologians like Lehmann and Hoekendijk who attempted, reports Newbigin candidly, "to swing missionary thinking away from the church-centred model ... and to speak more of God's work in the secular world, in the political, cultural and scientific movements of the time. The report which the group prepared spoke of discerning by faith God's action of judgement and redemption in the revolutionary movements of our time" (p.138). Early in 1958 Bishop Newbigin was invited to become the General Secretary of the International Missionary Council and thus to integrate it into the proposed Division of World Mission and Evangelism within the W.C.C. Despite his great love of the Tamil people and the importance of his pastoral work in the Madurai diocese he felt he should accept the invitation on condition that his church seconded him as a Bishop for a period of five years. This was agreed and the new post was effective from 1st July 1959 and in addition to his diocesan duties over the following months he travelled extensively on lecturing tours, W.C.C. committee work and he also wrote two significant books at this time, namely **One Body, One Gospel, One World** and **A Faith For This One World?**, the latter being an attempt to "state the case for the missionary calling in the context of proposals for the unity of all the religions" (p.165).

Chapters 15 and 16 describe in detail Newbigin's work in the I.M.C. and then in the W.C.C. at Geneva. The sixties proved to be the decade of the secular and "the world, not the church was the place where God was at work. It was far more important to get people involved in action for justice and development than to have them converted, baptised and brought into the church" and Newbigin disagreed radically with this new secularity (p.198). He regarded, for example, Robinson's **Honest To God** as "an attack on the very centre of the Christian Faith" and Newbigin contributed to the debate under the title **Honest Religion For Secular Man**.

In October 1965 Newbigin returned to India but this time as Bishop of Madras where he was to work for a period of nine years; after which he retired to teach Mission and Ecumenical studies at the Selly Oak College in Birmingham for five years and he was admitted into the United Reformed Church before pastoring a small church.

I have given extensive coverage to the contents of this book because it covers and comments upon significant developments within Christendom over the past four decades. Undoubtedly the autobiographer is a courageous Christian who has embraced the true gospel but the reviewer for one regards him also as

having blind-spots, for example, concerning the nature of the Church and Christian unity. But this is a book which deserves to be read and read thoughtfully.

Let me now ask you to ponder these descriptions and assessments of another Christian leader in the earlier decades of the twentieth century:-

“an ecumenical and evangelical giant”;

“the leading ecumenical statesman of the Protestant world throughout the first half of the twentieth century”;

“the ablest ecclesiastical statesman and world Christian of his time ... the ecumenical movement would not have been ready for Pope XXIII if it had not been for his vision and work ...”

“the greatest missionary statesman and ecumenical architect in modern times ...”

Can you identify this person? Do you know anything about the man’s formative influence upon the World Council of Churches? Probably many readers will have to acknowledge their ignorance both of the person’s name and contribution. Well, let me put you out of your agony. His name is **John R. Mott** whose life spanned the long but crucial period of 1865-1955. I am mentioning this ‘ecumenical giant’ because of a recent and detailed biography which has been published, entitled: **JOHN R. MOTT, 1865-1955: A BIOGRAPHY**, C. Howard Hopkins, (Eerdmans 1979, £19.95, 816 pp., hard-back).

Converted at the age of thirteen through the preaching of a Quaker evangelist, Mott was soon determined to live ‘an open, active, religious life’. Later in Cornell College at the age of twenty, he felt God might be calling him into the ministry and he was greatly helped by the visit of C.T. Studd to his college who advised Mott to “look Christ-ward” and to the Bible. Within his Methodist Holiness Church context, he claimed the ‘higher ground’ of ‘entire sanctification’ and then went as a college representative to D.L. Moody’s first **College Students Summer School** which, later at the age of 85, Mott described as one of the “most creative experiences” of his life. The biographer pin-points some of the lessons of this Summer School as being “far-reaching and formative”; for example, here he learned the “subordination of abstract doctrines to the compelling central Christian thrust towards action” (p.29) and the “interdenominational flavour of the Summer School (an ‘ecumenical example’) “may well have been the most important lesson” he learnt there.

After completing his college studies, Mott accepted an invitation in 1888 to become travelling secretary, then senior student-secretary of the national YMCA and under Mott the work advanced in spectacular ways. “From the perspective of the last quarter of the twentieth century when the student Christian movement for which Mott laboured has all but disappeared”, writes his biographer, “it is difficult to realise that in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first four of the twentieth, it made one of the most important contributions of American Protestantism to world Christianity. A major source of the ecumenical movement, this youth movement was on the threshold of its greatest development when, in 1890, Mott became the most

dynamic force within it. A direct line runs from the Mount Hermon Summer School of 1886 to the World Council of Churches of 1948, by way of the American-Canadian student YMCA, the Student Volunteer Movement, their parent Associations, and the World's Student Christian Federation" (p.83). The latter organisation, declared John Mott, "will ... inevitably unite in spirit as never before the students of the world. And in doing this it will be achieving a yet more significant result — the hastening of the answer of the prayer of our Lord 'that they may all be one' " (p.119).

Another significant step in preparation for the establishment eventually of the WCC in 1948 was the great 'Ecumenical Missionary Conference' held in New York in 1900. This Conference, remarks Howard Hopkins, "added the word ecumenical to the twentieth-century Protestant vocabulary, epitomized the expansionist sentiment, the growing missionary fervour and the thrust toward interdenominational co-operation that characterised the last decades before World War I" (p.225).

During the opening years of the twentieth century, the social gospel and Progressivism began to influence the movements under Mott's leadership where there was a gradual shift of emphasis both in teaching and in activities.

The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was more than a conference: it was in Mott's estimate, "the most notable gathering in the interest of the worldwide expansion of Christianity ever held, not only in missionary annals but in all Christian annals" (p.342). Others have described Edinburgh 1910 as 'one of the great landmarks in the history of the Church' and a 'watershed in missionary discussion'. Mott was actively involved in preparing for the Conference and it was this Edinburgh Conference that "established Mott's commanding position throughout the Christian world and opened a new chapter in his life. As Conference chairman he exercised his authority firmly. The opening speaker was Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his presence at the Conference was regarded as 'the dawn of a new era of ecumenism' ". One important decision at Edinburgh was that of establishing a 'Continuation Committee' to explore and implement the vision concerning 'co-operation and the promotion of unity'.

(To be continued in next issue)

Another book to be reviewed on this theme in the next issue will include a theological assessment of ecumenism under the title **The Ecumenical Movement: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church** (Geoffrey Wainwright, Eerdmans, £7.95, 263pp, paperback).