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# CONFESSING CHRIST IN A MULTI-RELIGION SOCIETY

## LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The issue before us is witness in a multi-faith society. Obviously we must begin with the gospel itself. It always seems to me that one of the wonderful verses in the New Testament is the last verse of St Luke's gospel which says that after the Ascension the disciples came back to Jerusalem and were continually in the Temple praising God.

### **Mission as Praise**

The first response to the gospel is praise. The first thing in any kind of missiology must be praise. The gospel begins with an immense explosion of praise; if God has done this amazing thing, then everything else, so to speak, is swept away. There is one thing to do and that is to praise. Mission is surely essentially and primarily an overflow of praise. It seems to me one of the terrible signs of our fallen nature that we somehow so constantly convert it into a task or burden – something laid upon us. We constantly misquote the Great Commission, leaving out the essential first part. We repeat 'Go into all the world and make disciples' that looks like a command, an order, a burden laid upon us, but we forget the first part, 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me and therefore you can go and tell the world.' It is the fact of what God has done which is the starting point of it all and which must overflow in an outburst of praise – a kind of radio-active cloud which spreads into the whole world out of an immense explosion, but a radioactivity which is not lethal, but life-giving.

A further consequence of our distorted thinking is that we put in the centre the whole question how can I be saved and how can other people be saved. In other words the centre shifts from how shall this glorious God be glorified to the question how shall I be saved or how shall somebody else be saved. And this happens, of course, because we have allowed ourselves to be conned by the assumptions of our culture, which regards Christianity as one among a body of things called religions which are about personal opinions and personal experiences not about public facts.

### The Gospel as Fact

The word 'fact' has come to have a particular meaning in our post-Enlightenment culture.<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre says in one of his books that 'fact' has now become a folk concept which has an aristocratic ancestry, the ancestor being Lord Bacon who used the word 'fact' in the sense in which we now use it. But, of course, it is originally simply the Latin *factum*, something which has been done and, having been done, is there and cannot be changed. We may have different ways of understanding and interpreting it but the 'fact' remains, and the heart of all that we are on about in the Christian church is this tremendous 'fact' that God has done this astounding thing – that he has so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that the Word has been made flesh, that this ultimate reality which is beyond all our conceiving and understanding and which no human mind can ever grasp has yet become accessible to us – that which we have seen, that which we have heard, that which we have handled. It is a fact of history which is accessible to us and in which God has so acted to redeem us from our estrangement and bring us into his own.

In our culture, however, the Christian message is not seen as fact, but regarded as a matter of private opinion, whereas a couple of hundred years ago it was taught as a fact in school that 'man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'. That is not a fact now but a personal opinion, and glorifying God, at least in public worship, is included in the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at a conference on 'Confessing Christ in a Multi-Faith Society', organized by Rutherford House and the Scottish Lausanne Committee, held at Larbert in May 1994. The paper has been transcribed from the spoken address, and is presented virtually as it was orally delivered. After it was given, a member of the audience correctly pointed out to me that my argument about the gospel as 'fact' raised serious epistemological questions which I had not addressed. I realise that these questions need thorough treatment. If I had been addressing a company of people *not* committed to the Christian faith it would have been necessary to engage in a full discussion of the relation of what we call 'facts' to the interpretive framework which gives them this status. I was addressing Christians, and if one has committed oneself to the truth of the gospel, then one cannot coherently give it any other status than the one which we denote in popular speech by the word 'fact'.

abstract of statistics published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office now, if at all, among 'leisure pursuits'. Because of this, the attention centres on the question of the person – my experience and my salvation. Hence the position of my old friend John Hick. His theology has become almost orthodox, namely that religion is not a series of truth claims but a series of alternative ways of personal salvation. It is not to be understood as a series of beliefs about what is the case, about the actual realities, but a series of different answers to the question of personal salvation. And if the centre is put there, then of course we have this wonderful exercise of massaging various biblical texts in order to see if they can be slightly adjusted to open up some hope for other people to be saved. But that surely puts the whole emphasis in the wrong place.

The Christian faith, Christianity, which is an ambivalent, changing, questionable phenomenon (some awful things have been done, and still are done in the name of Christianity, as we all know), is the fallible and often horrible attempt that we make to come to terms with this fact of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Surely all our attention has to be fixed there. If it true that God has done this, then of course it has to be the thing that controls everything else. It cannot be regarded as one of a series of interesting facts which can be slotted away in our encyclopaedias, but has to be that which shapes, determines, evaluates everything. If the fact is what we do celebrate – that God has done this great amazing thing, then the first thing surely that has to be said, the essential thing, is that this overwhelming, amazing generosity of God must be reflected in the life of every congregation. It must be a place where the love of God flows out to everybody and therefore a place where the stranger is loved and embraced and welcomed. God forgive us, for we know that our congregations are very different from that. How introverted they become and how unwilling to embrace the stranger. How often we become a company of people who enjoy one another's company because we are all like each other. Therefore, the first thrust surely is absolutely right – that the very heart of the gospel must lead us to that loving, warm, welcoming embrace to every human being, whatever their race, whatever their creed, whatever their sins, whatever they be. This surely must be the very first priority.

When we state that we are talking about a fact – not about how am I going to be saved but about what is the case, we are of course first of all in a world where other factual claims are made. Islam, for example, flatly contradicts the central affirmation of the gospel. It is not the case that God died for our sins on Calvary. It is blasphemy to say so. For Hinduism, the alleged historical facts about Jesus may be inspiring and interesting, but they belong to a world which does not touch ultimate reality. They belong to this shifting world of maya where you do not find ultimate truth. It may be a good story to tell, illustrating a certain way of understanding ultimate reality, but it is not itself a clue to that ultimate reality. Or we may take the overwhelmingly dominant culture in our society, which is not a Christian culture, but one that derives from the Enlightenment and now participates in the collapse of the Enlightenment vision of eternal, indubitable truths and for which therefore the Christian claim about Jesus can only be a personal opinion. It cannot be public truth. It is in that situation that we have to witness to the gospel. And I would want to suggest several implications of that.

### **Implications**

The first and probably the obvious is this: if it is factually true that God has done this thing which we affirm in the Christian creeds, then it cannot be one among a number of different points of view. It has to be the point from which everything else is assessed. It has to be the point by which everything else is judged and everything else understood. We do not in the end understand anything in its full depth except when we look at it from that standpoint that is given to us in the fact of Jesus Christ.

The second implication, therefore, is that all human beings, wherever they are, are embraced in that love of God. All human beings are made in the image of God. All are illuminated by the light who is Jesus Christ – the light that lightens every person. There is no human being – I am sure that this is absolutely fundamental – there is no human being in whom there is not evidence of the grace of God, of the mercy of God, of the kindness of God. I do not feel very comfortable with the language of ‘common grace’ and ‘saving grace’. I know it has a long history in the Reformed tradition, but I cannot help feeling that it smacks of the old Catholic idea

of grace as a kind of commodity which God may dispense in various strengths. I find that a very unbiblical idea. It seems to me that the witness of the Bible is that God's tender mercies are over all his works and that the grace of God is not, as it were, a commodity. It is the graciousness of God. It is that tender, gracious, loving care of God which surrounds every human being.

Therefore, that means that in our approach to people of other faiths our first concern, our first delight must be to search out, to acknowledge, to rejoice in all signs of the goodness of God that we find in our fellow human beings, be they secularist, humanist, Buddhist, Marxist, Muslim or whatever. You know that form of evangelism which Bonhoeffer harshly criticises when he talks about trying to winkle out the hidden sins in people so that we may then present the gospel. If this person is a Muslim or a Hindu or whatever there must be something wrong. There must be a sin somewhere which we can winkle out and then present the gospel. Bonhoeffer calls that Methodism, which I think is not very fair to our Methodist friends. I think that it is tremendously important that we put this first, that we acknowledge, and welcome, and thank God for, and cherish, and admire, and reverence all the signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths, including secularists and very devoted atheists and the like. All of them at some point will be heard to say 'God help me'.

The third thing to say is that the coming of Jesus is at the same time the coming of judgement. He was in the world and the world knew him not. He came to his own and his own received him not. The coming of the light which lightens everyone is at the same time the showing up of all that is not the light. And we cannot evade that very, very sharp element of judgement which is present in the New Testament.

### **Love, Judgement and Surprise**

I always find it astonishing that people talk as if the God of the Old Testament was the God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is the God of love. Some of the most moving expressions of the love of God are to be found in, for example, Hosea, and, on the other hand, there is nothing in the Old Testament to match the terrible severity of some of the words that our Lord speaks about the possibility of being lost.

But surely the point to remember about these words is above all that they are primarily addressed to those who think they are saved, who think they are all right. Over and over again, the words of our Lord, these terribly, terribly stern words of our Lord are addressed those who are confident that they are inside. It is not the brambles growing round the vine that are to be pulled up and burned but the branches of the vine which do not bear fruit.

The second point to note is the great emphasis in the teaching of our Lord about the last things is the element of surprise – the first will be last and the last will be first. One cannot escape the fact that almost all the words of Jesus about the last things are about the element of surprise. Some people take the parable of the sheep and goats as the final word on the subject of the last judgement and are confident that their good works will see them through. But it is worth pointing out that those on the right hand were astonished to learn that they had done those things. Once again surprise is at the very heart of that parable of the last things. When someone in the crowd asked Jesus, 'Are there few that be saved?', remember that Jesus said, 'You try to get in by the narrow door, for many go down the broad way that leads to destruction'. It is not a question that we ask about other people but one that we ask about ourselves. There are enormously inclusive passages in the New Testament, as we know, for example in Romans 5, or even more strikingly in the great argument of Romans 9-11 which begins with the unbelief of the Jews to whom everything has been given, but which ends with the vision of the time when the fullness of the gentiles will be gathered in and all Israel will be saved.

We are called upon to live, it seems to me, within this tension between the love of God and the wrath of God. The Christian life is not one in which we have everything sewn up but one in which we live in a tension between a godly confidence and a godly fear. The same Paul who said, 'Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ' could also write, 'I buffet my body and keep it under lest having preached to others I shall be a castaway.' So I think that the concentration on the question 'Can a Muslim or a Hindu be saved?' is a mistaken interpretation of Jesus. It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgement and of the possibility of

being finally lost. That is an element of the gospel which we cannot ignore. But I am sure that the central teaching of our Lord would steer us away from anxious debates about who can or cannot under what circumstances be saved. 'Strive to enter in by the narrow door'. The real question – to come back again to the beginning, to the point where missiology has so often been skewed – is not how shall I be saved, but how shall God be glorified? That is the response to the gospel. It is praise and glory, and the mission of the church is the spilling over of that tremendous praise.

### **Friendship and Reverence**

What would be the practical consequences of that way of looking at the gospel? I want to suggest a few. The first is just ordinary human friendship, the ordinary ways in which we reach out in friendship to other people. Why is it that we make such a song and dance about it when it is somebody of another faith? We do not do so when the person is a secular humanist – which is a totally different faith from the Christian faith and in some ways much more remote from the Christian faith than some of the so-called non-Christian religions. But we do not have a great church conference about having a conversation with a secular humanist who lives in the next-door house. To reach out in ordinary friendship is surely the very first and simplest thing to say. That will of course included the sharing of hospitality. One of the things which we learn when we get to know especially our Asian neighbours is the tremendous warmth of their hospitality, which often puts us to shame. To be able to share hospitality with one another and to enjoy the hospitality of one another is surely an enormously, humanly enriching thing and ought to be at the very heart of our normal life when we are living in this kind of multi-cultural and multi-religious community.

A word must be said also about invitations to others' places of worship, to mosques and temples and so forth. I think that if such an invitation is given it is right to accept it. I am sure we cannot, but in the words of that great Scottish missionary, Nicol McNico!, 'We can reverence their reverence.' We can sit there quietly with respect and reverence their reverence even though we cannot ourselves be part of the worship that they offer. That is, of course, made very clear when one goes

to a mosque. Sometimes it is less clear when one is in a Hindu temple or a Sikh gurdwara.

We should also invite people of other religions to come to our places of worship and to be with us when we worship. It seems to me only right that it should be reciprocal. If we are going to do this (this perhaps is a minor point, but an important one), we ought to make sure that we have available the kind of literature that will help them to understand our faith. I would think it would simply be obligatory for any Christian congregation which is in an area where there are many Muslims or Hindus to have a stock of gospel portions in the relevant language. I hope that they are easily available, perhaps from the Bible Society, in all the relevant Asian languages, and also other material that we can put unto the hands of our friends from other religions to help them to understand and enter into and to learn about Jesus.

### **Types of Dialogue**

It is also very important and often very relevant that we join with our neighbours of other faiths in common tasks, civic responsibilities, actions for political or social change and so forth. There is an immense area of work where we can share together in common objectives. It is often one of the best ways of opening up relationships. During my career as a missionary in India I was involved in two kinds of what you might call inter-faith dialogue. (I am very allergic to this word dialogue because it seems to me that we use it when we cannot have an ordinary conversation. When we talk with our neighbour over the fence who may or may not be a Christian we do not talk about a dialogue – we have a conversation. The very use of the word dialogue often indicates that in fact ordinary conversation has broken down or not even started.) I used to spend every Wednesday evening in the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission where we sat cross-legged on the floor and we studied the Upanishads and the Gospels. That kind of dialogue for me was very helpful, and certainly on both sides it did a great deal to help us to understand one another's deepest convictions. Certainly it did so for me and I believe for many Hindu participants. But in that sort of dialogue, we are, so to speak, shooting from prepared positions and it goes only so far.

When I was in Madras, where we were trying to face the colossal problems of a big metropolis growing at a fantastic rate, we had meetings of people of many different faiths, including Marxists and Ghandians and others, to talk about how our faith commitments helped us in illuminating and tackling the common problems that we had as citizens of Madras. That in some ways was a more fruitful exercise because there were no prepared positions. There is nothing in the Bible about some of the problems that Madras was facing. It had to be our living faith. It had to be the faith as it is actually operating now that was at work. This kind of sharing in common tasks which concern the whole community is one of the most fruitful things that we can do.

We must also remember, and this has been referred to, the position of our Christian friends from Asia, many of whom have themselves come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background. In my own experience in Birmingham I have found that many have felt very, very bitter because even Christian congregations have shown so little interest in them and in fact have shown more interest in a Hindu than in an Indian Christian. The testimony that our Christian brothers and sisters who come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background bear is a very important part of all our participation in the mission of the church in Britain.

Let me say one word more about dialogue. Formal inter-faith dialogue is a very valuable exercise. It is a distinct thing. It is not part of evangelism, in my opinion. I know that when I was engaged in those discussions in the Hindu monastery I was not trying to convert those men. They knew that I was constantly preaching in the streets and proclaiming the gospel to the pilgrims coming to the Hindu temple. They knew perfectly well where I stood. But at that moment I was not trying to evangelise, but to achieve mutual understanding as a necessary basis for a true evangelism. So participation in this kind of dialogue has a very limited but a significant place. It needs to be done by people who thoroughly know their own faith. We sell our partners short if we do not present the fullness of the Christian faith in all its integrity – if we try, as it were, to massage it down so that it is a little bit easier to swallow. We are not playing fair.

So we have to recognise that dialogue has only limited possibilities. The Socratic conception of dialogue which

involves the mutual criticism of each other's positions so as to lead on to a fuller truth rests upon the assumption that there are fundamental agreements already on the basis of which both parties can argue. But that is not the case in the matter of inter-faith dialogue, because (and here I come back to my first point) if the gospel is true, if Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word made flesh, then there is no other basis from which we can work except the recognition of Jesus as Lord. So there are strict limits to the possibilities of dialogue.

### **Other Agendas for Society**

The last point that I want to make, and it is a very important one, is to recognise that our other partners (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus) have also their agenda. It is particularly important to say that because Islam has a very definite agenda. I do not know whether any of you have seen the document which was produced by the Islamic Foundation in Leicester about ten years ago called, 'The Islamic Movement and the West'. It is a very substantial document which lays out a total strategy for converting western Europe into an Islamic society. The strategy involves methods of getting into places of power, particularly in the educational system, and securing the ultimate goal, which a faithful Muslim must follow, that society should be totally Islamic, governed by the Shariah law. Our Muslim friends are perfectly clear about that. They have this agenda and they are working very vigorously to secure it. It is worth mentioning that the extreme militant *Hisb-ut-Tahrir* which is banned in all Arab countries operates freely in this country and is recruiting vigorously in the universities. So we ought not to be naive, nor should we be paranoiac. But we should know that our friends of other faiths also have their own agenda.

In the background of all our thinking we have to ask the question, 'What kind of society do we want Scotland to be?' Since the collapse of Marxism there is no strong contender against the kind of society that we already have, namely a secular society which marginalises the Christian faith into a leisure activity and which believes that economics govern everything in human life and that the only end worthy of a nation's pursuit is economic growth. That is the ideology which controls our society. Islam has a different vision of human society. In some way we have to be thankful to the

Muslims for challenging us at this point because they see very clearly what our society is. They see also an increasing number of members of this society who are attracted to Islam and become Muslims because of the clear, definite spiritual message that Islam brings.

I do not believe that there is any future for the idea of a secular society. It is breaking down everywhere. It is obvious that in all those parts of the world where the agenda of secularisation has been pursued the result has been the rise of religious fundamentalism, which has now become one of the major factors in international politics. I believe that what we have to work for is a Christian society. By this I mean a society in which a sufficiently large proportion of the population are believing Christians to ensure that the laws and the public policy of the nation are congruous with the Christian faith. Because the cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith and because, therefore, unlike Islam, we do not believe that the truth of God can be finally identified with any political order – because the death of Jesus, in flat contradiction to the central teaching of Islam, is at the centre of our faith – we can never think of a kind of Christian society in the Christendom model which persecutes, which coerces belief. It has to be a society in which freedom of faith remains sure. But only a Christian society can achieve that. I do not believe that in the long run a secular society can do so. Throughout this area of inter-religious relationships we have to hold steadily in our mind the ultimate question, ‘What kind of society do we hope to have?’

At this point I think I will come back to the point that I started with. I said we have to avoid both naivety and paranoia. It is easy to become, in certain situations, paranoiac about the threat of Islam. I know situations where very tough, strong-arm, militant tactics are being used to get Christian governors off the governing bodies of schools and to try to ensure that the schools become entirely Islamic. One has to be realistic about that, but also not be paranoiac. We have to come back to the very heart of the matter. I quote again the Great Commission, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus does reign over all things and, therefore, we have no need to be frightened or anxious or paranoiac. We can be open, confident, generous, embracing all our fellow citizens

of whatever faith with the same love with which God has embraced us. I want to come to that starting point. I hope that I am not being simplistic or unfair, but I do think that this concentration on the question can a Hindu be saved or a Muslim be saved is totally wrong. That is God's business. We are not supposed to be settling those questions.

If we are overwhelmed, as we must be, by the marvel of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, if it is true that Almighty God has done this for us, then there is a kind of uncalculating generosity at the very heart of God which must be reflected in the life of our churches. Overwhelmingly, it seems to me, with all the sorts of reservations and safeguards and so forth that I have suggested, overwhelmingly the message surely must be that when we give to people of other faiths the impression that they are not welcome we are really contradicting the gospel. Every Christian congregation, and this is of course the place where the real thing happens – the local congregation, which believes the faith, which celebrates it, which rejoices in it, which lives by it, which lives it out in the life of the community, is the place where the Holy Spirit is present to give his own witness and to draw people in his own way – often by very strange and mysterious ways – to faith in Christ. When that is present I think we have the answers to the questions with which we are struggling today.