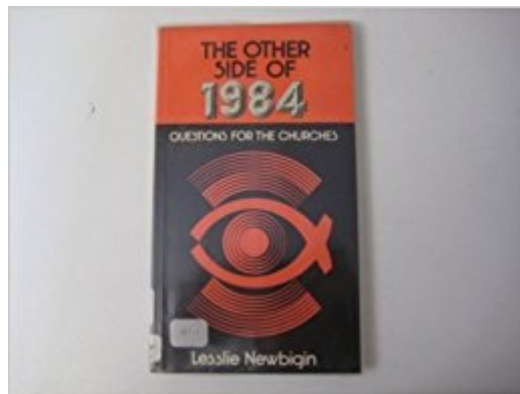




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The Other Side Of 1984: Questions For The Churches-#18 (Risk Book Series)



Synopsis

Book by Newbigin, Lesslie

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Book by Newbigin, Lesslie

Science has helped us but it doesn't solve all our problems and it now threatens us. People feel life is meaningless. The Enlightenment has resulted in a utopianism expressed either in liberal capitalism, pursuing happiness &c. or in Marxism, in building a heavenly city on earth. True, we have achieved a lot but the happiness promised has only been achieved by the rich while the 3rd world waits – the agenda of the Enlightenment is unfinished business but when/if it is complete there are more pressing questions to be solved. Beliefs have been reduced to the status of subjectivity. Medieval Christianity embraced public and private society but modern society pushes belief into the sphere of private morality – "how can Christ be Lord in this situation? In Augustine's day Western Civilisation was collapsing and he urged a framework of faith in contrast to the surrounding doubt. To return to the same faith and to the 'Constantinian trap' is not possible nor is it desirable but every society needs an orthodoxy, especially science. The Church needs its 'fiduciary framework' in order to encounter and challenge contemporary Western culture. Jesus didn't seek the kingdom through political action like the Zealots did, nor by pietism like the Essenes but by embodying his faith and suffering. The church needs to model its life on Christ, not to be

involved in politics in a programmatic way (thus Constantine, Calvinism and Stalinism) nor should it keep in the private sphere. The corporate church can witness in political terms, mainly on ethical matters but it needs primarily to conscientize its individual members so that they may witness in their spheres of influence "at work etc. The church should mediate the tradition of scripture so that man sits in judgement under it (not man sitting in judgement OVER the scripture as Western theology now does, nor quoting of individual texts out of context). Where society seeks autonomy, the church stresses community, where society pursues happiness, the church reminds it that 'development' will lead to energy crisis and consumerism will leave a yawning gap, giving goods but not peace. While thinking that this little book is a brilliant summary of the way in which society's malaise has come about and offers good suggestions for dialogue and change, it can easily have its message subverted into one that seeks a return to theocracy (cf. Iran) in which case life in a secular society is infinitely preferable. Also, his mistrust of post-Enlightenment 'objective' education is suspicious. True, people think truth is a commodity you choose from a supermarket display of value systems but that does not mean one has to condemn the pluralism I have stood for and work for. Truth is ultimately bigger than Christianity. Christianity must become aware of that but not sink back into a loss of nerve and say nothing but must voice its dogma in the belief that if all sides voice their dogmas, rather than a cacophony of conflicting truth claims bombarding the individual and making him stop listening (because their voice won't be that strident) a recovery of wholeness, of catholicity, will follow. This book is so out of touch. I once heard the remark: "Just go up to the man on the Clapham omnibus and ask 'What is your fiduciary framework?'"

Western European culture is one which arose out of decadent Christianity and grew to dominate the world. It has a particular view of reality, one which while giving freedom to individuals to follow and practice their own religious faith, effectively and publicly (if not always explicitly) rejects faith as a framework to understand life. In this book Lesslie Newbigin discusses the difficulties involved in confronting this culture with the revelation of reality that is given to us in the bible. This is not about condemning culture, but witnessing to it, as a mission activity. Newbigin discusses modernism's principles - doubt as a way to knowledge and rejection of faith, the public-private divide, Enlightenment utopianism, etc - and concludes that we must speak. Not just speak of God's revelation in Christ, but on political and social issues, yet always in the context of what God is doing in Christ. Therefore, we need to understand culture and know its history. For example, to understand how economics became detached from ethics, with absolutely disastrous consequences

for the world. The book also recognizes the problem that much of Christianity is so embedded in cultural thought processes that it has lost the ability to distinguish between what is modernism and what is revealed truth. To address this, Newbigin squarely faces Christian approaches to scripture. He exposes the weaknesses of a theological liberalism which thinks it can come to scripture from a neutral position. "The scholar examines the text, but is not himself examined. His neutrality is already a decision against the faith which the text intends to invoke." Newbigin also addresses a fundamentalism which would treat scripture as a scientific and objective account of things. This is as much a product of modernism as liberalism. Newbigin provides a positive way forward, bypassing these corrupted approaches to scripture. This book is as relevant today as when it was written. What the author has to say on these matters here and elsewhere is critically important. For example, see also *Â Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* and *Â The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

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