

EDITORIAL

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IN A CONVERSATION WITH BISHOP LESSLIE NEWBIGIN A FEW MONTHS BEFORE HE DIED, I ASKED HIM WHAT HE THOUGHT MIGHT BECOME THE SIGNIFICANT MISSIONARY AGENDA FOR THE EARLY PART OF THE 21ST CENTURY.

With characteristic clarity of thought and prophetic insight he answered, “Colin, I think the first decade of the next century will be marked by a major conflagration between militant Islam and the globalising tendencies of free market capitalism”. I have to admit that at that time I had only the vaguest idea of what he might be referring to! But then it is no coincidence that Lesslie Newbigin is mentioned several times in this edition of *TransMission* because now all of us who remember with fondness and admiration that great missionary statesman know only too well exactly what he could see coming over the political and international horizon of our times.

The terrible events of September 11, 2001 were not only a vivid testimony to the violent nature of that conflagration, but were an equally powerful reminder of those tumultuous clashes of culture and civilisation to which the Bible continually bears witness. The book of Jonah might be a comical satire directed at the Israelites’ lack of appreciation of the multi-faith, multi-cultural reality of their world, but then some might add, Jonah had every right to show hesitation given the fearsome Assyrians’ uncomfortable habit of wallpapering their houses with the skins of their defeated opponents! Then, as it is in our time, it can be a difficult and daunting task to witness to the nations that “Salvation comes from the Lord” (Jonah 2.9).

We are now being told the world has changed since the exact nature of militant Islam’s argument with the West has become clear. An obvious response should be in just what ways has that change manifested itself? This issue of *TransMission* endeavours to provide some answers to that contentious question.

First, it should be clear to all of us that the terms multi-cultural and multi-faith do not refer to some obvious universal good that somehow makes our world different from that of previous generations. Peter Fleetwood reminds us that both terms are often bandied about in a loose and generalised sense that often disguises rather than illuminates what Jenny Taylor describes as the dark side of both multi-faith and multi-cultural propaganda. The demolition of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, the recent religiously motivated race riots in Northern England and the continuing pitiless hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians reveals the often deep-seated ideological conflict that makes any notion of a real multi-cultural society nothing more than a designer label on the latest fashion accessory.

Second, in honour of the memory and ministry of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, we would do well to remember that he,

more than most, reminded us that the dominant discourse of Western capitalism was that of secular liberal humanism. As Stephen Holmes illustrates, this discourse is often traced to the political philosophy of John Locke and is supposed to enshrine a right and proper ethic of tolerance. In fact, what that tradition often manifestly demonstrates is an altogether illiberal intolerance to those of any faith who believe that religious faith and practice should intrude into the public realm. If we want to say no to this particular piece of secular ideology and accept the gospel as public truth then, as Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali contends, we can do no better than return to Jesus’ notion of love of God and neighbour as the fulfilment of the law, which is a core belief common to Christianity and Islam.

Third, whatever the respective merits of the policy of “planned segregation” taken by successive British governments to the multi-faith, multi-race agenda, it can now be seen to have manifestly failed. Ann Widdecombe recognises that only a vibrant and strong civil religion, which in Britain and America traces its roots to the Bible, can both remain open to the important truths and lively spirituality of other faiths and at the same time protect the right of any Christian to witness to the truth of the gospel. Similarly, when we try to suppress the universal claims of the Christian gospel then, as Ram Gidoomal maintains, we can neither divest ourselves of our own particular version of cultural blindness nor convince those of other faiths or none that we have anything worth talking about.

Finally, we are often painfully aware that cultural change is now advancing at a prodigious rate, to which some forms of contemporary Christian faith seem completely oblivious. Is then the continuing cycle of decline and reduced social significance the only possible outcome? Both Nigel Wright and Stanley Jackson draw our attention to the extraordinary opportunities open to all in Christian ministry who are willing and able to rethink our way into the challenges of what has become known as cross-cultural mission. Jesus in conversation with the Roman Centurion or the Samaritan woman, Peter in dialogue with Cornelius, Paul witnessing to the truth of the gospel in Corinth, Ephesus, or on Mars Hill – all demonstrated an ability to deal creatively with cultural diversity. The overwhelming reality and richness of the diversity found in most of our cities calls for a new paradigm of Christian witness and ministry, one which is only now coming into focus. So it is my firm belief and hope that in terms of a possible renaissance of a credible and intelligently informed Christian public witness it may be the case that “we ain’t seen nothing yet”! ■