

**OPEN CHURCH: INTERPRETING LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S MISSIOLOGY
IN INDIA TODAY**

by

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**submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

in the subject

MISSIOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF J N J KRITZINGER

FEBRUARY 2014

Summary

The central thesis of this study is that Newbigin's thought and writing can contribute to understanding the church as an integral part of Indian society, in terms of both her identity and role. Newbigin's writing, subsequent to his return to the West after more than three decades in India, often sought to address what he saw as the Western church's loss of confidence in its role and position in a post-enlightenment, post-Christendom society. This study tries to work with this material, as well as what was written during his time in India. The second chapter and the third chapter give consideration to the two central elements in Newbigin's understanding of the church's mission and identity: the eschatological renewal of the whole earth that will occur at the return of Christ and the connection of this end to Christ's death on the cross. As the third chapter will consider, while he locates the focus of the church's mission in relation to the end, the death of Christ indicates the way in which this mission will be carried out. The remainder of the third chapter will consider the implication of this for the church's mission in relation to the presence of poverty and marginalisation in Indian society and its movement towards a consumer economy. The fourth chapter will consider the place of the church in relation to India's long and rich culture, suggesting ways in which the church is to become an incultured community. The fifth chapter will address the issue of the relationship of the church to the followers of other faiths. Through interaction with some Indian theologians it will be shown how Newbigin gave attention to the church as both open to the movement of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of the church, while also emphasizing the church as central to our knowing Christ. The sixth chapter will draw out the ways in which Newbigin was consciously engaging with the post colonial context of the church, particularly in his interpretation of the relationship between the Spirit and the church.

Keywords: Lesslie Newbigin, Missiology, India, Ecclesiology, Indian Christian theology, Holy Spirit, History, Inculturation, Post-colonial context

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the guidance of my supervisor Professor K. Kritzinger and, in the latter stages, Professor W. Saayman. Their instruction and comments have been invaluable, not only in helping bring this work to completion, but also in developing my understanding of academic writing.

I am grateful to a colleague and good friend for suggesting, a number of years ago, a study of Lesslie Newbigin. This was good advice. Newbigin is a rich thinker and till the end of the study new aspects of his thought kept emerging, nearly all of which I have found very helpful.

My thanks are also due to Elizabeth, the college faculty members, and the centre staff, who kept the college running while I was away on an unexpected sabbatical semester. The time away allowed me to finally get this present work off the ground.

Finally, I am particularly thankful to my parents. Their unfailing support has extended even to my labour in this work. In a constantly changing world there are some things that don't change. I am also very grateful to a number of family members who have cheered me along, expressed interest, and accommodated me at different times in the process of writing. *Blood is thicker than water.*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

For more than a hundred years ecclesiology has been an important area of consideration by Indian thinkers and theologians, beginning with figures like Lal Behari Dey in the late nineteenth century.¹ During the twentieth century this reflection on ecclesiology has assumed greater urgency due to two different social and political factors. As the independence movement developed in the early decades of the twentieth century the church found itself forced to reflect on what it meant to be the church in India. But this cause of reflection has partially been supplanted in the latter half of the twentieth century by the rise of Hindu communalism. Hindu communalists are a small but vocal and powerful movement in India who insist that Indian identity is necessarily Hindu. This identification denies proper legitimacy and recognition to the distinct existence and identity of another religious group, as Lobo points out, “For the communalist all other social identities and distinctions are either denied or, if accepted in theory, negated in practice or subordinated to the religious identity.”² This attitude toward the other finds expression in part in the Hindu communalists opposition to conversion, which has “forced Christian theologians to re-think the idea of the church.”³ An example of this “re-think,” as Kim indicates, was M. M. Thomas’s suggestion in *Salvation and Humanisation* that it was possible to experience the *koinonia* of the church beyond the boundaries of the visible church in relationship with members of other faith communities. This was a modification of the church’s own self-understanding and, as it happens, one that Newbigin rejected, as

¹ L. Dey (1824-1894) promoted the idea of a United Church of Bengal. This is outlined in a speech he gave to the Bengal Christian Association, entitled, ‘The Desirableness and Practicability of Organizing a National Church in Bengal’ on 13 December 1869 (http://www.aecg.evtheol.lmu.de/cms/fileadmin/national/The_desirableness_and_practicability_of_organizing_a_National_Church_in_Bengal_%281869%29_v070716.pdf). In this lecture Dey, himself an ordained Free Church of Scotland minister and strongly committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, suggests the Apostles Creed alone as the church’s confessional position, on which basis “we should be in communion with every Church in Christendom” (p.11). Approximately half of this lecture is taken up with discussion of church government and administration.

² Lancy Lobo, ‘Communalism and Christian Response in India,’ *Vidya Jyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 59 (1995), 366.

³ Sebastian Kim, ‘The Identity and Mission of the Church in the Asian Contexts of Communal Conflict, Poverty and Injustice,’ 17. This is a paper commissioned by the Henry Martyn Center in Cambridge, U.K. (<http://henrymartyn.dnssystems.net/media/documents/Commissioned%20Papers/The%20Identity%20and%20Mission%20of%20the%20Church%20in%20the%20Asian%20Contexts%20of.pdf>, accessed 21 February 2014).

will be considered later. The ongoing impetus of Hindu communalism on ecclesiological reflection is indicated by a book recently published in 2013 by Professor Sahayadhas of Union Theological College, Bangalore, entitled *Hindu Nationalism and the Indian Church*.⁴

The importance of Hindu communalism for this study is that it is giving rise to debate within the church. The identity and role of the church is being contested from outside the church, naturally leading to some uncertainty and confusion, as well as a search for greater clarity. Lancy Lobo gives some expression to this tension when he states that, “In such a situation the dilemma before the Church will be either to continue with the softer options such as dialogue centres, relief after communal riots, individual heroism, imparting inter-religious knowledge and so-called liberal education, or be prophetic.”⁵

1.2 Rationale of this Study

One of the reasons for the study of Newbigin in the light of the problem statement above is that he gave quite considerable attention to a mission ecclesiology in his writing. His mission ecclesiology has been widely noted leading to several academic studies such as Michael Goheen’s “‘As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You.’” J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s *Missionary Ecclesiology*’ (2000).

A second reason for a consideration of Newbigin’s thought is that it was formed in the Indian context, where over a thirty five year period from 1939 he served in the Indian church, approximately twenty years of which was as a bishop in the Church of South India. Newbigin is well known for his contribution to missiology in the West, where his work has been extensively studied. Yet, the Indian situation was a key formative influence, and even after his return to the U.K. he continues to reference India in his writing. As a missiologist the Indian context is where many of his ideas were hammered out and given life.

Thirdly, Newbigin’s writing has received little attention within the church in India. In a book giving a series of brief surveys of the thought of some pioneers in Indian theology, Newbigin is described very briefly by M. M. Thomas as having “systematized from fundamentals the ecclesiology behind the Church of South India”

⁴ R. Sahayadhas, *Hindu Nationalism and the Indian Church: Towards an Ecclesiology in Conversation with Martin Luther* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2013).

⁵ L. Lobo, ‘Communalism and Christian Response in India,’ *Vidya Jyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 59 (1995), 374.

in two of his key early works on ecclesiology: *Reunion of the Church* and *The Household of God*.⁶ M. M. Thomas's description of Newbigin's thought is limited and doesn't acknowledge the much wider ramifications of his ecclesiology, and its connection to his eschatology and soteriology. There is little in M. M. Thomas's statement to indicate the potential fruitfulness of Newbigin's thought for missiology in India today, and it rather encourages a view of it as belonging to the past. Among other Indian thinkers a degree of misunderstanding about the writing of Newbigin can also be found. In a fairly recent review of K. P. Aleaz's book *Religion in Christian Theology* and his chapter on Newbigin,⁷ the reviewer states: "The gospel of God in Jesus, can evolve into something which is not the gospel through the hands of a conservative missionary theologian and the thought of Newbigin is a typical example of such an evolution."⁸ This kind of unbalanced assessment of Newbigin's writing sidelines any further consideration of his thought.

For these reasons I believe that Newbigin's thought can help contribute to the debate on the church's identity and mission in India today.

1.3 Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is that the visible church as a divinely instituted community with a divinely given purpose in the world has an integral place in Indian society today.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions are focused on drawing out the theological rationale for the church's distinct identity and mission. These particular questions reflect the questions and issues that Newbigin himself was interacting with in India, relating for example to the wider action of God in the world outside the church, and the role of the church in the world today.

⁶ M. M. Thomas, introduction to *Towards an Indian Christian Theology*, M. M Thomas and P. T. Thomas (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1998), 10. Newbigin's two works are: *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1960); and *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

⁷ K. P. Aleaz, *Religions in Christian Theology* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2001).

⁸ Bonita Aleaz, 'Review of *Religions in Christian Theology*,' *Indian Journal of Theology* 44, 1&2 (2002), 115. <http://biblicalstudies.org>.

- 1.4.1 How does Newbigin understand the action of God in the world? Where can God's action be found in regard to Hinduism and secular movements?
- 1.4.2 In what sense is God's action in the world salvific?
- 1.4.3 What is the relationship of the church in India to God's action in the world? Does the church have a unique role in the world and, if so, what is it?
- 1.4.4 What is the relationship and role of the church in India, as a minority community, to the state and wider society?
- 1.4.5 Does a coherent theological picture emerge in Newbigin's thought that can sustain missions?
- 1.4.6 Are there areas of Newbigin's thought that can be developed on in articulating the theological rationale for missions in India today?

1.5 Research Methodology

Reflection on these questions will be developed using Newbigin's thought as the point of reference, and through interaction with other thinkers. These thinkers are relevant for consideration for several reasons. Firstly, they are, largely, influential Indian thinkers roughly contemporary with the period during which much of Newbigin's writing was done: particularly Abhishiktananda (1910-1973), M. M. Thomas (1916-1996), Raymond Panikkar (1918-2010), Sebastian Kappen (1924-1993) and Samuel Rayan (b.1920). Although Dalit theology developed towards the end of Newbigin's life, the work of some of these theologians will also be considered because of the significance of their thought in evaluating Newbigin's work. Secondly, there is a reasonable degree of commonality between Newbigin and these theologians in that all were trying to respond to dimensions of the Indian context. Having served in India for such a long period of time Newbigin had interacted, either personally or in writing, with many of the issues they deal with (the advaita to which Abhishiktananda and Panikkar were attracted); the need for the gospel as addressed to the whole life of humanity to find clear historical expression (Kappen, Rayan).

An understanding of Newbigin's theology of mission will be derived from a large body of written work that stretches over a sixty year period, containing published books and numerous articles published in a wide range of journals. Interaction with some of the large volume of secondary material on Newbigin will help in this process of identifying the distinctive elements of his thought, although the lack of direct

reference of these to the Indian situation, potentially limits their value for the purposes of this study. The study will include critical description of Newbigin's thought. Although his work has received fairly extensive attention, as indicated in the literature review below, there are still aspects of his thought that require some attention, particularly in relation to the Indian context.

1.6 Research Limitations

A study of Newbigin in relation to India has certain limitations particularly in that he does not often write with direct reference to India. A cursory survey of his writing will indicate that there is little direct engagement with, or discussion of, Hinduism. Newbigin was not a scholar of Hinduism in the sense of conducting ethnographic studies of any aspect of their religious practices, and nor did he attempt anything but the most cursory of academic interactions with their texts. This is partly due to the fact that he was first and foremost a highly active church leader. With all the demands of a bishopric in India⁹ and the other administrative positions he held with the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the World Council of Churches,¹⁰ Newbigin had very little time to more fully develop his ideas. It was not, for example until he began teaching at the Selly Oak Colleges in 1974 that he had the time to develop the ideas which he had first articulated in 1963 in his booklet *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*.¹¹ Accordingly, much of his writing, particularly up until his return to the U.K. in 1974, was originally in the form of lectures or addresses.¹² There are limitations of depth and scholarly analysis to that format. Furthermore, he often deals with issues that are directly impacting the church itself rather than a detailed analysis of the social and religious context. This lack of interaction with the religious tradition was also partly due to his own sense in the 1950's and 1960's of religion as a diminishing force in public life.¹³ Yet while

⁹ Madurai diocese (1947-59); Madras diocese (1965-74).

¹⁰ General Secretary of the IMC (1959-61) and Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (1961-65) and Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (1961-65).

¹¹ L. Newbigin, Preface to the First Edition of *The Open Secret*, viii.

¹² *A South India Diary* (1951) is an expanded circular newsletter; *The Household of God* (1953) is the publication of the Kerr Lectures given in Trinity College, Glasgow in 1952; *A Faith for This One World?* (1961) was originally given as the William Belden Noble Lectures at Harvard University in 1958; *The Finality of Christ* (1969) originally given as the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University Divinity School in 1966; *The Good Shepherd* (1977) was a series of addresses to the clergy of the Church of South India in Madras in the early 1970's; *The Open Secret* (1978) is largely material developed for lectures Newbigin taught at Selly Oak Colleges.

¹³ i.e. L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 44.

believing this he did continue to recognize that there continues to be a place for discussion: “inter-religious discussion can never be irrelevant to the understanding of the Gospel.”¹⁴

1.7 Chapter Outline

The dissertation begins with a consideration of Newbigin’s theology of history on the basis that this pervades and influences the whole of his thought. The following three chapters take their title from some of the dimensions of mission considered by David Bosch as important to an emerging missionary paradigm.¹⁵ Bosch and Newbigin were roughly contemporaries, and both tried to articulate a theology of mission for a post-colonial world. Many of the elements of the Bosch’s emerging missionary paradigm are present in Newbigin’s reflections, but those selected as the title and subject of chapters 4-5 seemed to have a particular relevance for the Indian context. The structure of the chapters for this dissertation is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Newbigin’s Theology of History

Chapter 3: Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God

Chapter 4: Mission as Inculturation

Chapter 5: Mission as Witness to People of Living Faiths

Chapter 6: Mission in a Post Colonial Context

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Newbigin’s understanding of God’s action in history is the fundamental framework for the development of his mission paradigm. Within this framework he could work out what seemed to him a satisfactory understanding of the relationship of the church to the world and of the church’s action in the world. Newbigin’s theology of history is particularly weighted towards the eschatological in two ways: firstly, Jesus Christ as being the concluding point of history, in the sense that through his earthly presence, death and resurrection, God’s plan and purpose of redemption for the whole earth has been brought to fulfillment; and secondly, a final consummation of this with the return of Jesus Christ. The creation had little significance in Newbigin’s theology of history, partly because he viewed history, understood as

¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 45.

¹⁵ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), pp.377ff.

movement towards a goal, as happening on the basis of divine promise alone, and not on the basis of immanent forces.¹⁶ The third chapter's focus is on an aspect of Newbigin's thought that can be overlooked given his critique of liberation theology and concern for gospel proclamation. Yet, the liberative element of mission is an integral part of his own understanding of mission. His interpretation of the work of Christ is explained in the language of liberation as deliverance from destructive and dehumanizing powers. Following from this an aspect of the church's mission is action to bring this deliverance to fruition in relation to powers, expressed through social, political, cultural and religious structures, that continue to be active in the world today.

The subject of inculturation continues to be actively discussed in India today. The complexity of Indian culture, with its hundreds of languages and distinct caste communities, and the historical continuity of aspects of Indian culture over thousands of years, together with the minority status of the Indian church, are all reasons for this continuing discussion. Although Newbigin's writings do not give direct attention to this issue in relation to the Indian context, it can perhaps be assumed that this context was an important point of reference in his thought on the subject, given his thirty years of missionary experience in south India. The chapter will highlight the distinctives of his approach and its applicability to India today.

As with inculturation, the relationship between Christ and other religions continues to be an issue of importance in India. Newbigin's quite definite view of discontinuity between Christ and other religious systems sets him at odds with some prominent Indian thinkers and theologians. Newbigin had his own rationale for this approach, as will be considered, and his perspective was nuanced in ways that are not always recognized. At the heart of his approach is his conviction that in the historic Christ was God's complete and unique act of revelation of himself and his purpose; a revelation that is mediated to the world through the apostolic testimony and the witness of the church. The distinctiveness of this emphasis will be briefly considered in comparison with some prominent Indian thinkers on this subject.

The sixth and final chapter will attempt to argue that Newbigin's mission approach can be seen as a genuine attempt at a post-colonial missiology. Newbigin arrived in India in the last decade of British colonial rule and immediately found

¹⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1989), 103.

himself ill at ease with the legacy of that period, which sometimes included a degree of aloofness of the missionary from Indian leaders. He rapidly understood the significance of the shifts in political power and authority then taking place and tried to respond to this with a theology of mission relevant for the new situation. A particular emphasis on the Spirit characterized his approach as will be considered.

1.8 An Overview of Newbigin's Writing

Newbigin's writing can very broadly be categorized into three periods: 1937-1956 (ecclesiology); 1957-1982 (a new mission paradigm) and 1983-1998 (the gospel to the West).

1.8.1 Ecclesiology: 1937-1956

During the period from 1937-1956 the main area of interest in Newbigin's writing is on ecclesiology, of which the *Reunion of the Church* (1948) and *The Household of God* (1953) are the two outstanding instances, particularly the latter. This was a period of Newbigin's life in which his work compelled a degree of reflection on ecclesiology. He was one of the negotiators involved in the formation of the Church of South India in 1947, and as the bishop of Madurai diocese from that period forward he was heavily involved in the development and progress of the union. During this period he came to a much stronger sense of the centrality of the church to the whole life of the Christian. Reflecting on this he explained that by the time he came to write *Sin and Salvation* (1956) he came to a sense of the central place of the church in the mediation of the grace of Christ, where twenty years earlier he had considered this in terms of faith alone.¹⁷ The insights into the church which Newbigin developed during this period he retained throughout his life. He would largely agree with Marvin Hodges, the Pentecostal missiologist who pointed to the link between a strong sense of the church and mission: "A weak theology of the Church will produce a weak sense of mission."¹⁸

¹⁷ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 137.

¹⁸ Melvin Hodges, *A Theology of the Church and Its Mission: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1977), 10.

1.8.2 A New Mission Paradigm: 1957-1982

By 1957 there is a shift in his writing towards a preoccupation with the development of a missiology adequate for the world of his time. This coincided with, and was encouraged by, an increasing involvement with the International Missionary Council and World Council of Churches, culminating in his appointment as General Secretary of the IMC in 1959. Accordingly, this shift of focus in his writing first expressed itself in seed form in an address he gave to the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Switzerland, in 1957.¹⁹ He begins by pointing to the changes taking place in societies in the East, including the development of the modern democratic welfare state and a new expectation of rising living standards, and asks how this and changes in the West are to be understood. He suggests that this is an act of God in which there is a gathering up of all peoples, “into the history whose centre is the Cross and whose end is the final judgment and mercy of God.”²⁰ In harmony with his own convictions about the church, he ends the address, appropriately, by pointing to how this all underlines the necessity of visible church unity. The following year, 1958, Newbigin’s shift of focus is made even more explicit in a booklet, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, which emerged as a result of several addresses given to IMC staff. Here, Newbigin much more explicitly addresses the need for a new mission paradigm in the light of the breakdown of the old. Pointing to an increasing hesitancy and loss of confidence in missionary work, Newbigin suggests that what is needed is to “undertake the costly but exciting task of finding out what is the pattern for the Church’s mission in the new day in which God has been pleased to put us.”²¹ He points to how the breakdown of the old light-darkness dichotomy to categorize different areas of the world, and the loss of power of the old inspiration for missionary action as embodied in Livingstone’s description of the smoke of the fires of a thousand villages that had not heard the gospel and Mott’s call for “the evangelization of the world in this generation,” could no longer have the same appeal because they were out of touch with the realities of the contemporary world. He suggests an alternative possibility in “The whole Church, with one Gospel of reconciliation for the whole world,” as he explains: “The Christian

¹⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,’ in *The Missionary Church in East and West*, eds. Charles C. West and David M. Paton (London: SCM Press, 1959): 81-90.

²⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,’ 82.

²¹ L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: International Missionary Council, 1958), 11.

world mission holds the secret that can make mankind one family; this is its appeal to the youth of to-day.”²² Although he would later identify this as too ecclesio-centric, it is evidence of his search for an adequate mission theology.

From this point come a series of publications that return to this same issue of developing a new mission paradigm: *A Faith for This One World?* (1961); *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (1963). As indicated above, Newbigin was only able to give a more extensive and systematic treatment of this subject through lectures delivered largely at Selly Oak Colleges from 1974 onwards and published as *The Open Secret* (1978). One key element common to all these works is Newbigin trying to re-orientate the work of mission in a changing world. Whether this is successful or not is one of the proposed areas of study of this dissertation.

1.8.3 The Gospel and Western Culture: 1983-1998

On his return to the West in 1974, Newbigin found a loss of confidence in the gospel within the church and the absence of an articulate Christian response to the developments within society. During the period from 1983-1998 he was an instrumental figure in what became known as the Gospel and Our Culture movement, a movement that aimed to reenergize reflection on contemporary Western society. Some of the main works during this period that reflect this concern include: *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (1983); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989); and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991).

1.9 Secondary Works on Newbigin

There is a fairly large body of secondary material on Newbigin that has grown considerably since his death in 1998. The major academic works include the following:

1.9.1

- a) Newbigin’s ecclesiology has been the subject of several Ph.D. dissertations. The earliest was written by Antonio Bruggeman in 1965, ‘The Ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin’ of which only two chapters are available. Following this

²² L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, 12.

there have been: Michael Goheen's "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You;" J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's *Missionary Ecclesiology* (2000); Scott Sherman's 'Ut Omnes Unum Sint: The Case for Visible Church Reunion in the Ecclesiology of Bishop J.E. Lesslie Newbigin' (2009)

1.9.2

b) His work on the gospel and western culture has naturally attracted academic attention as the church in the West searches for a missiology adequate to respond to a secular, pluralistic and post Christian Europe and an increasingly post Christian north America. Major academic studies to have taken this approach include: George Hunsberger's *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (1998);²³ Paul Weston's doctoral dissertation 'Mission and Culture Change: A Critical Engagement with the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin' (2001); Nicholas Wood *Faiths and Faithfulness: Pluralism, Dialogue and Mission in the Work of Kenneth Cragg and Lesslie Newbigin* (2009), and Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen's forthcoming book *The Distinctive Identity of the Church*, based on his doctoral dissertation.

1.9.3

c) Studies focused on other aspects of Newbigin's thought including his eschatology and approach to inter-religious dialogue include: Joe Thomas's doctoral dissertation 'Lesslie Newbigin on the Centrality of Christ and Inter-Religious Dialogue' (1996); and Jurgen Schuster's *Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective* (2009).²⁴ Another major study of Newbigin is Mark Laing's, *From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission* (2012).²⁵ This is a consideration of Newbigin's theology of mission in relation to his involvement in the merger of the IMC with the WCC.

²³ Originally a Ph.D. dissertation, 'The Missionary Significance of the Biblical Doctrine of Election as a Foundation for a Theology of Cultural Plurality in the missiology of J. E. Lesslie Newbigin' (Princeton University, 1987).

²⁴ A publication of his Ph.D. dissertation, 'The Significance of the Kingdom of God in its Eschatological Tension for the Theology of Mission of Lesslie Newbigin' (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2006).

²⁵ Mark T. B. Laing, *From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012). This is a revision of his Ph.D. dissertation, "Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity": Bishop Lesslie Newbigin and the Integration of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches' (University of Edinburgh, 2010).

1.9.4

d) General studies include Geoffrey Wainwright's *A Theological Life* (2000).

Although there has been fairly extensive study of his thought, there are arguably still several aspects to his thought that have not been thoroughly articulated, particularly his understanding of God's action in history and eschatology. More relevantly, for the purposes of this study, is that there is negligible consideration of his thought in relation to the Indian context.

1.10 Brief Overview of Indian Theological Literature

Indian Christian theology and thought on an academic level has been preoccupied with the relationship of the gospel to the wider context. There are two distinct periods where firstly Hinduism and then social movements and the struggle for a new society had the primary attention. The first period can very roughly be measured from 1850 to 1947 and the second from 1947 onwards.

1.10.1 The Gospel and Hinduism: 1850-1947

The relationship of the gospel to Hinduism has dominated the writing of Indian theologians for much of the past one hundred and fifty years. The writing on this issue can be grouped into four categories.

1.10.1.1

a) Appreciation of the good elements within Hindu thought, but an overall rejection of Hinduism as mediating God's salvation. Nehemiah Goreh's (1825-1895) key work *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems* (1862) is an important example of this.²⁶ Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in Non-Christian World* (1938) is a notable example from the twentieth century that advocates this approach

1.10.1.2

b) Attempts to interpret Christ in continuity with elements of Hindu thought and Scriptures or in relation to Hindu religious practice. An example of this from the nineteenth century is Krishna Mohan Banerjee's

²⁶ This has been described by M. M. Thomas as: "the best Christian critique of Hindu Philosophy and apologetic for the Christian doctrine of the Triune God over against monism and pantheism and of sin and redemption over against ignorance and liberation through illumination." (*Towards an Indian Christian Theology*, 39).

(1813-1885) *The Arian Witness* (1875). J. N. Farquhar's (1861-1929), highly influential *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) is a seminal example of this from a Western missionary.

1.10.1.3

c) A conviction that Christ's life and presence are mediated through Hinduism. An influential text suggesting this approach is Chenchiah et al. *Rethinking Christianity in India* (1938). This idea is made explicit in Raymond Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964) and Abhishiktananda's *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point* (1966) and *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (1974).

1.10.1.4

d) An interpretation of Christ as one sign comparative to others within Hinduism and other religions. Stanley Samartha's (1920-2001) *One Christ – Many Religions* (1991) reflects this thinking.

Although most of these texts were written more than fifty years ago, they continue to influence thought on the relationship between Christ and the religions, and there has been relatively little significant development on their insights.

1.10.2 The Gospel and Society: 1947-

Following independence, the attention of the intelligentsia in general focused on the reconstruction and development of Indian society and the economy. The development of a socialist democratic government and politics under Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, considerably energized secular movements within Indian society. The thinking of the church has also been influenced by these political developments and can be categorized into three groups.

1.10.2.1

a) Attempt to give a Christological foundation for mission orientated towards social justice and community development. M. M. Thomas (1916-1996) is the key figure in this regard, issuing a stream of publications from the 1950's onwards. These include *Salvation and Humanisation* (1971); *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (1976); *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology* (1995). Thomas advocated partnership with people of all faiths in order to realize the new society. This

approach also involved an engagement with a renascent Hinduism that was trying to provide a theological basis for the reconstruction of society and life. Paul Devanandan published a number of works that involved a response to this, including: *The Gospel and Renascent Hinduism* (1959); *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (1961); *Preparation for Dialogue* (1964).

1.10.2.2

b) Liberation theologians who have given a more concentrated focus on politically liberative action and drew on a more Marxist influence than (a). A key exponent of this is Sebastian Kappen with texts such as *Jesus and Freedom* (1977); *Jesus and Cultural Revolution – An Asian Perspective* (1983).

1.10.2.3

c) Dalit theology is the most notable development within Indian theology during recent decades. An offshoot of liberation theology, Dalit theologians assert the distinctiveness of their approach as concentrated on the unique situation of the Dalit community in India. This has been developed in a number of different works including: A. P. Nirmal's *Heuristic Explorations* (1991); James Massey's *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation* (1995) and *Towards a Dalit Hermeneutics* (2001); S. Clarke's *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (1999); and Peniel Rajkumar's *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation* (2010).

1.11 Terminology

1.11.1 Mission and Missions

The distinction between mission and missions is an important one for Newbigin. Newbigin makes several points concerning the meaning of mission. Firstly, for Newbigin mission is multi-dimensional. He pointed to how the diverse language of the New Testament concerning the work and ministry of Christ indicates the “dimensions of the mission” that the church has received.²⁷ Newbigin's consistent emphasis in his writing on the mission of the laity in the world in their ordinary places

²⁷ L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World; The Christian Mission Today*, 18. It was only at the time of writing this towards the end of 1958 that Newbigin arrived at this understanding of mission as multi-dimensional. In a draft paper that he had written a few months earlier proposing the unification of IMC and the Division of Inter Church Aid (DICA), entitled, ‘The Organization of the Church, Mission to the World,’ Newbigin was still describing evangelism as the “central” component of the church's mission (M. Laing, *From Crisis to Creation*, 155).

of work underlines his multi dimensional understanding of mission. Secondly, these distinct dimensions of mission have their unity in, and originate from, the visible fellowship of the church: “These different acts [of service or preaching] have their relation to one another not in any logical scheme, but in the fact that they spring out of the one new reality.”²⁸ The one new reality is the fellowship of the church. The church fellowship is not only the integrating centre of the whole mission of the church, but that fellowship of shared love which gives credence and substance to all acts of mission. Thirdly the church fellowship is the visible sign that mission is above all God’s mission. Given that this fellowship of shared love is a work of the Spirit, Newbigin can describe this work of the Spirit as “the primary witness, anterior to all specific acts whether of service or of preaching. . . . All our missionary acts (whether of service or preaching) are subordinate to and logically posterior to this reality of God’s mission.”²⁹ One of the distinctives of Newbigin’s general approach, as seen here with the idea of ‘mission of God’, is that he locates and embodies theological ideas in the visible church.

For Newbigin missions, one of the dimensions of mission, are “those specific activities which are undertaken by human decision to bring the gospel to places or situations where it is not heard, to create a Christian presence in a place of situation where is no such presence or no effective presence.”³⁰ There are several points to note in this definition of missions. Firstly, the “specific activities” relate to the verbal declaration of the gospel in whatever forms this declaration may take. Secondly, Newbigin makes it clear that the goal of missions is the establishment of a local congregation of disciples of Jesus Christ, and that this is distinct from having large numerical conversion as the goal.³¹

Newbigin was a lifelong practitioner and advocate of missions. He persisted in his advocacy of missions during his tenure as Director of the WCC Division of World Mission and Evangelism, even although he found little receptivity for this among many of the senior staff other WCC for whom missions was “old-fashioned,” and out

²⁸ L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, 20.

²⁹ The creation of the church by the Spirit, and therefore its existence itself as a witness to God, is the basis for Newbigin’s identification of the “whole life of the church” having a “missionary *dimension*” (*One Body, One Gospel*, 21). As distinct from “missionary dimension” is “missionary intention” which are those specific acts of going to those “who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord with the intention of bringing them to faith in Him” (*One Body, One Gospel*, 44). At this point Newbigin, in the late 1950’s Newbigin did not use the language of mission as distinct from missions.

³⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1989), 121.

³¹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 121.

of step with the times.³² Newbigin described the wider church situation at that time in the 1960's as being one in which "it was far more important to get people involved in action for justice and development than to have them converted, baptized and brought into the Church."³³ Yet, Newbigin persisted in his commitment to missions, exemplified in his insistence "in the face of considerable opposition" that the WCC journal, *International Review of Missions*, should retain 'missions' as opposed to 'mission' in its title.³⁴

1.11.2 The Powers

The doctrine of 'the powers' had importance in Newbigin's understanding of mission. He directly acknowledged the influence of Hendrikus Berkhof and Walter Wink's *Naming the Powers* and *Unmasking the Powers*.³⁵ Newbigin found the doctrine of the powers to be a key theme running through the New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul. While various names are used in the New Testament by Paul, such as principalities, powers, dominions, thrones, angels, authorities (i.e. Col.1:16; Eph. 6:12) Newbigin prefers to use the name 'powers.' These powers are an invisible, spiritual reality, originally a part of the created structure of the world, which have lost their order and are characterized by an absolutizing of a power that was originally relative and dependent, "the powers, created in Christ and for Christ, become agents of tyranny." An example of this is the political order which can be identified as part of the created order, following Newbigin and Barth's shared understanding of the presence within the state of angelic powers, "created, but invisible, spiritual and heavenly powers."³⁶ The state is connected to the reconciliation in Christ on the grounds that it is created to "serve the Person and Work of Jesus Christ and therefore the justification of the sinner."³⁷ Yet, as with any created structure the state can attempt to reject its created purpose and its subservience to Christ. When this happens the state begins to assume an absolute power, becoming totalitarian and "demonic."

³² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 185f.

³³ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 187.

³⁴ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 189.

³⁵ L. Newbigin acknowledges Wink's influence in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, x.

³⁶ K. Barth, 'Church and State,' in *Community State and Church* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 115.

³⁷ K. Barth, 'Church and State,' 118.

For Newbigin the teaching on the powers enabled him to articulate the New Testament rationale and basis for a multi-dimensional mission that involved the redemption of the whole of society and life.³⁸ For Newbigin the church is confronted by a disordered and disorientated creational order, and has a calling through the Spirit to be involved in the restoration of these powers to their original created order. As will be considered in later chapters Newbigin pointed to the connection between the atonement and these powers, thereby rooting mission itself in Christ's life and death. It can be argued that from a missiological perspective this knowledge of the connection between the reconciliation in Christ and the created order has an important place for the church to properly understand the created order and be able to interact effectively with it.³⁹

The powers are virtually the only aspect of creation to which Newbigin attributed any real missiological significance. Generally in his writing, there is little interpretation of humanity and the world from the perspective of creation. An example of this that Goheen describes as "telling" of Newbigin's approach to creation is his narration of the Bible story in *The Open Secret* where he begins, not with creation, but with Abraham's election in the context of God's purpose for all nations.⁴⁰ Newbigin's reading of the Bible can be seen as partly typical of its time. For example, the influential O.T. scholar Gerhard von Rad stated, in 1936, that the doctrine of creation in "genuinely Yahwistic belief" was "subordinated, to soteriological considerations."⁴¹ Newbigin appears to have attributed little missiological significance to the fact of creation.

³⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 200.

³⁹ Karl Barth, with whom Newbigin had a similarity of understanding on many points, shows the importance of this. On the basis of his understanding of creation as the outer form of the covenant of reconciliation, Barth was "able to dismiss those claims of natural theology put forward to defend and justify the rise of such movements as the Third Reich, which appeal to the supposed orders of creation" (Paul Louis Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 105). There are limitations to Barth's understanding of creation, as Colin Gunton in the foreword to this book notes, but, as Gunton appears to state, it is not the inter-relationship between the covenant of reconciliation and creation that is the problem, as much as the need to "understand grace more adequately as the means of the created order's elevation" (C. Gunton, foreword to *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture*, xi).

⁴⁰ M. Goheen, "'As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You.'" J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology' (Ph.D. diss., University of Utrecht, 2000), 133.

⁴¹ Gerhard von Rad, 'The Theological Problem of the O.T. Doctrine of Creation,' in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (Philadelphia & London: Fortress and SPCK, 1984), 62 quoted in Martin Klingbeil, 'Creation in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament: An Intertextual Approach,' *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 20/1-2 (2009), 20.

1.11.3 West

Throughout the dissertation I use the term ‘West’ to refer generally to Europe and North America, rather than the now more commonly used vocabulary of North. The simple reason for doing this is that from an Indian perspective, as distinct from an African or South American perspective, the meaning of the designation ‘North’ can be confusing for geographic reasons. ‘The West’ remains a term still commonly used and accepted by Indian writers and thinkers.

1.12 Conclusion

I hope that this study of Newbigin will help identify reasons for the church to be confident in its distinct identity and role within Indian society, and to contribute towards her positive self-understanding as a community through whom blessing and transformation are to be distributed to the whole.

Chapter 2

Newbigin's Theology of History, 'From Beginning to End'

2.1 Introduction

From a relatively early period the eschatological horizon is one of the key elements in Newbigin's ecclesiology. In *The Household of God* (1953) he argues in one section that the "Church can be rightly understood only in eschatological perspective."⁴² In *The Household of God* can be found Newbigin's tri-partite identification of the church in relation to the kingdom, as the sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom of God.⁴³ This depiction of the church points to the missionary identity and calling of the church in the world, for "the implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience."⁴⁴ The way in which the church is a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom of God in the world today is a huge subject, and is in a sense the theme being developed throughout Newbigin's writing. His own writing can be seen as an ongoing consideration of the question, 'How is the church to be the sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom in the world today?' There is therefore a place at the beginning of this dissertation for giving an extended discussion of Newbigin's own understanding of the relationship between the eschatological kingdom of God and the present.

2.2 Newbigin's Theology of History in Context

Newbigin arrived in India in 1936 at a time of transition in India. India was moving towards independence and experiencing a growing secularization of public life. This expressed itself politically in India's determination to be a secular state which meant that the discourse and controlling ideas of public life would not be

⁴² L. Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 135.

⁴³ Although there is no single statement drawing together these aspects of the church in relation to the kingdom, there are a number of scattered references to the church as the "foretaste of the restoration of creation . . . of the new age. . . of the end. . . of the gathering together of all men of every tribe and tongue around the throne of God and of the Lamb" (p. 65, 90, 142, 143), and also to the church as the "sign and instrument of a universal and eschatological salvation" (p. 145). In *The Good Shepherd* (1977) Newbigin speaks of the church as the "first-fruit and sign and instrument of his new creation" (p.87) and as the "first-fruit, sign and instrument of God's reign in the world" (p.88).

⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 135.

religious.⁴⁵ Public discourse among educated Indians was increasingly governed by liberal principles and legislation was being passed against practices such as caste discrimination, which prevented the realisation of the equality of all peoples and their right to equality of opportunity.⁴⁶ Writing in the 1960's Newbigin recognized this as a substantial change of thought and social organization:

Questions are settled now, not by what is in the Sutras or in the Koran, not by reference to an ultimate religious belief, but by calculations, based on scientific research of what is most likely to be most effective in promoting the dissemination of specific benefits among the greatest number of citizens. A characteristic sentence of Jawaharlal Nehru expresses the spirit which animates this process, 'Whatever ultimate reality may be, and whether we can ever grasp it in whole or in part, there certainly appear to be vast possibilities of increasing human knowledge, even though this may be partly or largely subjective, and of applying this to the advancement and betterment of human living and social organization.' This is the characteristic language of the secular man at his best. It is not a closed dogmatic secularism. It reflects in the thinking of one man who has played an outstanding part in the process, *the way in which the ordinary educated Indian increasingly thinks*.⁴⁷ [emphasis mine]

While increasing communalism in Indian politics since the early 1990's has made religion a factor in politics and there are political movements trying to restore Hinduism as the central authority in public life, it remains true that religion does not control public discourse. However, the substantial presence in Indian politics of those demanding that India be a Hindu nation should indicate the limits to the changes in thinking that Newbigin noted in the 1960's.

There is also, in India, an ongoing process of affirming and strengthening existing traditions and cultural practices. Two important elements of Indian social life for centuries, namely the joint family and caste, are a persisting presence.⁴⁸ There is adaptation of traditional practices to the contemporary world, an example of which is the prevalent use of Indian conversational style, known as *adda*, in television news

⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 15.

⁴⁶ These liberal principles include the separation of state and religion, the rights of the individual to freedom and equality of opportunity, and a commitment to social progress. M. M. Thomas identified various secular ideologies which have been influential in India as: liberal nationalism, socialist humanism and Marxism-Leninism (*The Secular Ideologies of India and The Secular Meaning of Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1976)).

⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 16.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the persistence of the joint family in contemporary India see Patricia Uberoi, 'The Family in India,' in *Handbook of Indian Sociology*, ed. Veena Das (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 280ff.

programming and sports commentating.⁴⁹ One of the characteristics of this is lively and energetic discussion and argumentation that values the personal interaction as much as the actual subject under consideration as Mehta explains:

As competition intensified, however, the economic pressures of creating a national market for advertisers turned news producers into mediators of what they understood to be an 'Indian' identity. They tapped into Indian oral traditions and traditional patterns of social communication that historians as well as sociologists have long documented, and channeled them into television. The immense success of cricket programming is based on the fact that far from following Western models this genre has tapped into existing subaltern modes of communication and reproduced them on screen⁵⁰

Mehta's observation can be seen as indicating that participation in secular and democratic politics and governance, shaped by an understanding of justice, human dignity and equality shared with the West, doesn't necessarily lead to a flattening out of cultural difference but can actually provide the space for vibrant cultural growth and development.⁵¹

2.2.1 Newbigin's Response to Change in India

Newbigin was familiar with Hindu philosophical thought, and in his first years in India appears to have given this his attention,⁵² but he quickly turned his focus to engaging with India by interpreting the gospel in relation to this secular turn in Indian thought: he came to believe that "secular witness" was the "primary place where a missionary encounter takes place."⁵³ The change in public discourse that Newbigin found particularly significant was a "demand for certain fundamental human rights" and the demand and expectation of social and material progress.⁵⁴ For Newbigin this expectation of progress had been imported to India with the gospel: he contrasted the "linear" view of history in the Bible with the circular view of history that largely prevailed in the non-Semitic religions and thought of the ancient world (Persia being

⁴⁹ N. Mehta, *India on Television* (New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2008), 225.

⁵⁰ N. Mehta, *India on Television*, 198.

⁵¹ N. Mehta, *India on Television*, 229.

⁵² During his stay in Kanchipuram (1939-1946), Newbigin participated for a time in a weekly reflection with Hindu scholars on the Svetasvatara Upanishad and St John's Gospel at the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram.

⁵³ M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 44.

⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up of History into Christ,' 82.

an exception).⁵⁵ Throughout the period of his time in India, and beyond, Newbigin concentrated his attention on interpreting the gospel in relation to history and in encouraging the church to an active participation in mission that embraced the whole of life. The third chapter will give some consideration to how he related the atonement to history, while this chapter will give further consideration to his treatment of relationship of the kingdom of God to history.

2.2.2 Newbigin's Thought in the Context of Indian Theology

Newbigin's turn towards an historical eschatology, as early as 1941, shows him as something of a pioneer in Indian theology, although his contribution in this regard is overlooked.⁵⁶ During the 1940's and 1950's, with the notable exception of P. Chenchiah, history and eschatology were considered relatively insignificant categories for theological and missiological reflection.⁵⁷ In 1941 Newbigin spoke of being present at frequent discussions on the relationship between the Christian understanding of incarnation and the Hindu concept of the avatar, but "never" hearing any explanation of the "decisive difference" between the Christian and Hindu understanding of the relationship between spiritual truth and history.⁵⁸ Nearly all of his predecessors and contemporaries had simply overlooked this issue as a Hindu friend of his explained:⁵⁹

⁵⁵ L. Newbigin, 'The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' in *Signs Amid the Rubble*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 8f. This is a lecture originally delivered by Newbigin in Bangalore, India, in 1941. His most extended consideration of a Hindu view of history amounts to less than a page in 'The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' 9. Here he points to the periodic re-incarnation of Krishna to "re-establish virtue," as taught in the Bhagavad Gita. This is not however a decisive historical action, according to Newbigin, and what is considered important by the Hindu is the spiritual truth of divine intervention at times of need. The stories of Hinduism are described by Newbigin as generally valued as illustrations of "certain truths about God which would remain true even if these particular events had not happened" (L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 53). The story itself has no determinative or decisive role in leading to a goal for world history, in contrast to the story of Christ that does.

⁵⁶ An example of this is that while Massey, a Dalit thinker, points to Thomas and Devanandan as breaking with Indian theology's neglect of the historical, there is no mention of Newbigin (*Downtrodden*, 50).

⁵⁷ It should be noted that the Pentecostal movement, then still a relatively small community in India, did find in a premillennial eschatology and a sense of the imminence of the kingdom a strong motivation for missions.

⁵⁸ L. Newbigin, 'The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' 9.

⁵⁹ It should be noted that the missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in their practice and lives *did* embody a historical eschatology (postmillennialism), which was expressed in their dynamism and energy for the redemption of society, as expressed in the multitude of schools, colleges, children's homes, and hospitals which they established.

You have introduced it [the Bible] to us as though it were a book of religion – of which we have plenty in India already. It is not. It is, as I read it, a quite unique interpretation of universal history and, therefore, a unique interpretation of the human person.⁶⁰

One reason given for this inattention to history is that largely upper caste theologians allowed their agenda to be set by “classical Hinduism”, and followed its lack of concern for the historical.⁶¹ The lack of attention to historical eschatology in Indian theology started to change from the early 1950’s onwards with two theologians in particular: P. D. Devanandan (1901-62) and M. M. Thomas (1916-96). They jointly formed the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion in Society (CISRS) in 1957, with Devanandan, the older of the two, as Director and Thomas as Associate. A string of publications such as *Community Development in India’s Industrial Urban Areas* (1958); *Christian Participation in Nation Building* (1960); *The Changing Pattern of Family in India* (1960); and *Problems of Indian Democracy* (1962), clearly reflect attention with the political and social.⁶² While these publications indicate a theology that has engaged with history, and point to Christian life expressing itself in the struggle for the transformation of the society, they are also receptive to the presence of God in these movements.

Newbigin was involved in the development of an historical eschatology within the Indian church and also, to an extent, within the ecumenical movement. He was a member of the Advisory Commission set up by the Central Committee of the WCC to prepare a report on the subject of ‘Hope’ for the Evanston Assembly of the WCC in

⁶⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Our Missionary Responsibility in the Crisis of Western Culture,’ in *Mission and the Crisis of Western Culture: Recent Studies*, ed. Jock Stein (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1989). This was an address given in Germany to the annual conference of the German organisation Arbeitsgemeinschaft Missionarische Dienste.

⁶¹ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 50.

⁶² While Devanandan had this concern, working with an orthodox Christology, he also gave considerable attention to the need for engagement and dialogue with Hindu thought of the time. His independent works partially reflect this: *The Concept of Maya* (1951); *The Gospel and Renascent Hinduism* (1959); *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (1961). M. M. Thomas, on the other hand in his work from the early 1970’s till his death in 1996 gave an almost exclusive focus on engagement in the struggle for a new society which would embody justice and love. He may be seen as primarily a liberation theologian (Adrian Bird, ‘M. M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2008), 15f). Dalit thinkers tend to be dismissive of M. M. Thomas. Massey, for example recognizes that M. M. Thomas and Devanandan did break with previous Indian theologians in their attention to history (*Downtrodden*, 50). But he then dismisses both of them as continuing “like their predecessors, to operate within the ongoing traditions of Hinduism” (p.51). This could be argued in the case of Devanandan, but is an argument difficult to sustain in the light of M. M. Thomas’s output. Notably, Massey makes no mention of Newbigin although he should be categorized as an Indian theologian who did break with the existing trend.

1954. He chaired the second meeting of the Advisory Commission at Bossey in 1952 with the clear conviction that the eschatological horizon has immediate implications for the present, and ought not to be replaced with penultimate visions or hopes.⁶³ The Report was accepted by the Evanston Assembly, the significance of which Margull explains: “This step marks the breakthrough of eschatology in the ecumenical discussion, which was immediately followed by the breakthrough of the eschatological ground of missions.”⁶⁴ Newbigin’s theology of history merits some consideration.

2.2.2.1 Rejection of Individualistic Ideas of Salvation

Newbigin characterized the idea of the gospel story as primarily about the individual gaining eternal life in the world to come, as a “purely selfish hope” that prevailed throughout the Indian church.⁶⁵ He believed this was due to two reasons: firstly the fact that it corresponded “almost exactly with the Hindu idea of salvation as escape from the world of *maya*,” and secondly that it was a legacy of the Western missions movement.⁶⁶ An example of this latter point is the influence of American Pentecostal *spirituality* on the south Indian Pentecostal movement, particularly in terms of its holiness emphasis.⁶⁷ Pentecostalism was the “direct offspring” of the Holiness movement,⁶⁸ and one of the key characteristics of that movement was a conviction in the possibility of “entire sanctification” subsequent to conversion in which the Christian found a new experience of God and victory over personal sin. The experience and action of God was thus framed in terms of a very personal experience that led to the elimination of sin. There was sometimes an underlying grace/nature dichotomy, with the church perceived as the realm of grace, the place of God’s action, of which the world is largely bereft. The church alone is seen as the

⁶³ L. Newbigin, ‘The Nature of the Christian Hope,’ *The Ecumenical Review* 4, 3 (April 1952), 283.

⁶⁴ Hans Margull, *Hope in Action: The Church’s Task in the World*, trans. Eugene Peters (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 36.

⁶⁵ L. Newbigin, *Journey Into Joy* (Madras: Christain Literature Society, 1972), 59.

⁶⁶ L. Newbigin, *Journey Into Joy*, 59.

⁶⁷ M. Bergunder identifies the influence of American Pentecostalism in terms of spirituality, rather than in terms of ecclesiastical structure or control, in *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 127. He states that the influence was “considerable.”

⁶⁸ Allan Anderson, *Spreading Fires: The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 19. The Holiness movement was a largely American development of the nineteenth century. One central belief throughout much of the nineteenth century was in a second blessing of the Spirit that brought about the experience of “entire sanctification,” a higher level of Christian experience and victory over personal sin. By the end of the nineteenth century this second blessing was being seen by some (the most notable advocate being the Keswick Convention) as empowerment for service, specifically missions.

place of God's action in contrast to a world that is largely under the control of threatening and contaminating forces. Symptomatic of this is what Bergunder discovered in his study that the majority of those pastors he interviewed had distaste for any political involvement and "could not understand that a Christian in India could combine active involvement in politics and a holy life."⁶⁹ Salvation is thus understood largely in terms of personal redemption, and arguably an incomplete understanding of the Bible story. Newbigin's eschatology by contrast drew attention to the corporate nature of salvation and the implications of Christ's redemption for the whole of life.

Newbigin points to how the writers of the New Testament "attached immense importance" to testifying that the events actually happened but also to "placing them exactly in the continuum of secular history."⁷⁰ By "the continuum of secular history" Newbigin means that these particular events had a relationship to the *telos*, the consummation of God's redemptive purpose in the return of Christ, as he states: "In keeping with this realistic attitude to history, they believed that the events which they recorded concerned not just the personal situation of the individual believer, but the end of human and cosmic history as a whole."⁷¹ On this basis Newbigin rejects A. G. Hogg's contrasting distinction between the event and content of revelation, for the "occurrence is part of the content."⁷² The fact that these events are carefully set within their historical context, by the N.T. writers, points to their meaning as events that are connected to the restoration and renewal of all things.

Accordingly, Newbigin could describe Christianity as "fundamentally . . . an interpretation of world history."⁷³ One of the key implications which Newbigin drew from this is that Christianity was primarily concerned with a complete redemption of all things and not primarily with individual salvation. Christianity could therefore potentially be distinguished from other religions on these grounds. Newbigin stated for example that it could be argued that "Christianity has much more in common with

⁶⁹ Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans 2008), 190.

⁷⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 52.

⁷¹ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 52.

⁷² Newbigin refers to this distinction Hogg made between himself and Kraemer, with Kraemer emphasizing the uniqueness of the event of revelation and Hogg the content of the revelation. Newbigin also rejected the distinction popular in the mid 20th century between *historie* (the historical fact) and *geschichte* (the interpretation of the significance of the fact) (Richard N. Soulen & R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 80.

⁷³ L. Newbigin, 'The Place of Christianity in Religious Education,' (Unpublished address, 1989), 3.

Marxism than with Buddhism.”⁷⁴ By this Newbigin meant that Marxism’s secular eschatology, its concern for the transformation of the whole order of human life in the world, had some connection to the biblical vision of cosmic renewal, in contrast with Buddhism that was preoccupied, as he saw it, with personal salvation.

2.2.3 Newbigin’s Theology of History Developed in the West

The main framework of Newbigin’s theology of history developed very early on, largely under the influence of academic thought from, and personal experiences in, the West. During his three years of ministerial training at Westminster College, Cambridge (1933-36), Newbigin, by his own admission, developed a particular interest in a Christian interpretation of history: during his final year at Westminster he stated that the subject of ‘The Kingdom of God and History’ became “the focus of my most passionate theological interest.”⁷⁵ Further, Newbigin’s own capacity to perceive the changes in Indian society and his courage to respond to them can in part be attributed to the influence of J. H. Oldham.⁷⁶ The extent of Newbigin’s exposure to Oldham’s sense of the critical need for the church to engage with a secular Europe is indicated in Oldham’s attempt to persuade Newbigin, in 1936, to delay going to India and help prepare for the Oxford Conference on ‘Church, Community and State,’ in 1937.⁷⁷

Newbigin’s interpretation of the kingdom of God and history came to expression in a series of four lectures delivered at United Theological College in Bangalore, India, in 1941. These were entitled, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,’⁷⁸ and contained an interpretation of the relationship of the kingdom of God

⁷⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 46.

⁷⁵ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 29.

⁷⁶ Oldham (1874-1969) was a key organizer of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference and a leading figure in the formation of the International Missionary Council (1921), and from the 1930’s onwards in the development of thinking on the relationship of the church’s role and responsibility in society, in part through his involvement in the Life and Work movement. He was also a key figure at the 1937 Oxford Conference on ‘Church, Community and State.’

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 240. An indication of the nature and concern of Oldham’s thought can be seen in his description of the “essential theme” of the Oxford conference as “the life and death struggle between Christian faith and the secular and pagan tendencies of our time” (J. H. Oldham, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church Community and State* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937), 10). As Wainwright points out, in 1938, while back in the U.K. recovering from an accident in India, Newbigin was invited by Oldham to participate in a meeting of prominent intellectuals called ‘The Moot.’ This group, including figures like Middleton Murray and T.S. Eliot, focused on Christian reconstruction of British social and cultural life.

⁷⁸ Published in *Signs Amid the Rubble*, ed. G. Wainwright (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 1-55.

to history from which Newbigin never deviated throughout the rest of his life. There are several key points to note: firstly, the kingdom of God is realized on earth, as an act of God, with the literal return of Christ; secondly, the action of the church or world does not directly contribute to the final realization of the kingdom on earth and yet, thirdly, the eschaton is the horizon for all Christian living and acting today.⁷⁹ Between his arrival in India in 1936 and these lectures in 1941 Newbigin appears to have moved to this position of discontinuity between present history and the final realization of the kingdom. As Wainwright points out, in a short book written in 1936 on the ship out to India, Newbigin still seemed to see the possibility of the kingdom's progressive realization in present history.⁸⁰

There is little indication that Newbigin's first years in India contributed to this framework of his understanding of the relationship of the kingdom of God to history. Newbigin had been in India for only three years, two years having been spent in the U.K. recuperating from a broken leg sustained in a traffic accident. During these first years of his ministry in India, Newbigin appears to have distilled ideas and experiences received back in the West. This is suggested in his statement to Wainwright that his ideas on the relationships of Gospel to politics were "brought together and consolidated" by Reinhold Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the first part of which he personally heard in Edinburgh in 1939.⁸¹ Ten years after the Bangalore lectures Newbigin had a further opportunity for sustained reflection on the relationship between the kingdom of God and history, but again, this was in the West and not India. Newbigin was appointed to the theological group commissioned to produce reports on the subject of 'Christ the Hope of the World,' in preparation for the WCC Assembly at Evanston in 1954. Newbigin writes of being "delighted to be involved because it was a development of the concern that

⁷⁹ A key dialogue partner for Newbigin in these lectures is C.H. Dodd whom he directly refers to a number of times. He criticizes what he sees as Dodd's overemphasis on "realized eschatology," the present imminence of the kingdom, at the expense of what Newbigin calls a "futurist eschatology" (p.28). Futurist eschatology refers to the return of Christ and a final act of God at the end of history in which the kingdom will be realized on earth. Newbigin argues that Dodd has turned the second return of Christ into a symbolic event rather than a literal one (p.32f).

⁸⁰ G. Wainwright, ed., *Signs Amid the Rubble*, viii. Newbigin wrote in *Christian Freedom in the Modern World*, a critique of John Macmurray's *Freedom in the Modern World*, that there is a "Christian understanding of progress" which happens through an obedient response to God's calling (p.66). According to Newbigin this book came into the hands of M.M. Thomas, and had some influence in his early theological development (*Unfinished Agenda*, 38).

⁸¹ G. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*, 21. At this point Newbigin was living in Edinburgh, continuing to recuperate and working as Candidates's Secretary for the Church of Scotland.

had dominated my thinking earlier.”⁸² The key points, noted above, of Newbigin’s interpretation of the relationship of the kingdom of God to history remained intact throughout his time in India.

Yet, while the key features of the relationship of the kingdom of God to history did not change, Newbigin’s theological understanding of this relationship deepened. He found in the Trinity the theological foundation and framework for his interpretation of the kingdom of God.

2.3 Search for a New Mission Paradigm: Trinitarian Interpretation of the Reign of God

Changes, in the first half of the twentieth century, to the religious, political and social context of mission were putting increasing strain on the traditional mission paradigm, a paradigm that is described by Newbigin as “church-centric” and as tending towards an emphasis on the person and work of Christ to the exclusion of the Trinity. Newbigin was conscious of both the fruitfulness of this model in the history of mission movement in terms of the establishment and building of the church but also conscious that it was inadequate for the contemporary world, as he states:

Such phrases as ‘the Lordship of Christ over the Church and the World,’ and such images as that of the building up of the body of Christ, have had almost exclusive occupancy of the central places in ecumenical thinking about the nature of the mission of the Church. . . . But it may be that the time has come to ask whether it does not require some correction.⁸³

One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today (1958) was Newbigin’s first attempt to develop a new mission paradigm. At that point movement towards the integration of the IMC and the WCC was gaining momentum, and as the Secretary General designate of the IMC Newbigin would help oversee this process. Nevertheless, Newbigin believed that a reinterpretation and reassessment of mission should be the uppermost issue for consideration.⁸⁴ This first attempt by Newbigin, was by his own admission, “not adequate,” in that it did not involve any fundamental change in the model, just a readjustment, as he states: “it was too exclusively church-

⁸² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 124.

⁸³ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 34.

⁸⁴ L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, 7.

centered in its understanding of mission.”⁸⁵ The church-centric nature of the book’s missiology is evident from the central proposal of this work that “The Whole Church, with one Gospel of reconciliation for the whole world,” as the “outline of a symbol” for mission to replace the outdated symbols, such as that associated with Livingstone of the smoke of a thousand villages without Christ.⁸⁶ Newbigin suggested, with some justification, that this proposed symbol was suitable for a time in world history where there was consciousness of the divisions between humanity and some measure of desire for the experience of community. However, within a few years, at the WCC Assembly in Delhi (1961) Newbigin became conscious that a more profound change was required.

In *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* Newbigin briefly proposes a significant change of focus, which appears to be overlooked in studies of his work, perhaps because of the understated way in which he explains it. There is of course recognition of Newbigin’s attempt to locate mission in the Trinity, but the lasting significance for his work is the bringing together of the Trinity, the reign of God and history. The short chapter ‘Missions and the Shape of History,’ is particularly important in this regard. One of the purposes of Newbigin’s explanation of the Trinity in relationship to the kingdom of God is to provide a theology of mission for a period of conflict and uncertainty for the church, a period in which the church stood alone, disconnected from a powerful state and increasingly at odds with it. Newbigin looked at a world situation in which the church in the West was in decline, and the advances of the mission movement in the rest of the world appeared to have ran out of steam and were being pushed back by a resurgence of traditional religion and the adoption of secular ideologies as the framework for social development in the newly independent countries. Newbigin’s trinitarian interpretation of the kingdom is an attempt to provide a framework of interpretation of this more complex period of history, from the church’s perspective, while giving a justification and rationale for the continuation of its mission.

2.3.1 Jesus’ Death Reveals the Reign of God

Perhaps the central point arising from Newbigin’s trinitarian interpretation is that the death of Jesus is interpreted as the revelation of the reign of God in the world, as

⁸⁵ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 187.

⁸⁶ L. Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, 12.

he states: “The supreme parable, the supreme deed by which the reign of God is both *revealed* and hidden, is the cross. . . . the reign of God is *made known* under the form of weakness and foolishness” [emphasis mine].⁸⁷ There are several points to be considered here.

Firstly, Newbigin identifies God the Father as the one in control of history and Christ as submitting to the Father’s reign. The shift in focus to a trinitarian perspective here can be seen in his description in 1956, that the claim of the church is of the “absolute and unique sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all things in heaven and earth.”⁸⁸ In the chapter ‘Missions and the Shape of World History’ Newbigin repeatedly refers to the sovereignty of God the Father. He states for example that “God’s fatherly rule of all things is at the very heart of his [Christ’s teaching].”⁸⁹ Christ is interpreted in relation to this as the one who is obedient to the Father by submitting himself “wholly to the Father’s ordering of events.” This is an important point for it locates Christ *within* the movement of history and not as the one controlling history in contrast with Newbigin’s earlier statement noted above.

There are thus two distinct forms of the reign of God. There is the Father’s rule over history which can be described as the transcendent dimension of the kingdom and this is the form of the kingdom as power over all things. As distinct from this is the immanental presence of the kingdom of God, embodied in Jesus Christ, and this is the form of the kingdom as obedience and submission. These distinct forms of the kingdom can only be sustained on a trinitarian basis. It can be argued that the evolutionary, progressive, concept of the kingdom in history lacked any real distinction between the transcendent and immanent dimensions of the kingdom in that the immanent was simply the transcendent coming to expression in history. A theology of mission could be built on the assertion of Christ as the Lord of history.

For Newbigin these two aspects of the kingdom come together in the death of Jesus Christ. Through His act of submission to the Father in the cross, Jesus reveals that God’s reign over all things takes form in the world primarily in the suffering of His servants: “God is indeed active in history. But his action is hidden within what seems to be its opposite – suffering and tribulation for his people.”⁹⁰ Newbigin asks

⁸⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 35. . . . 37.

⁸⁸ L. Newbigin, ‘The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church,’ *National Christian Council Review* 76 (1956), 474.

⁸⁹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 39.

⁹⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 39.

the question, “In what way has the coming of Jesus brought the reign of God near?” Newbigin’s answer acknowledges that Christ does great works and that the “powers of the kingdom” are manifest in him, but “paradoxically his calling is the way of suffering, rejection and death – to the way of the cross.”⁹¹ Newbigin believes that the kingdom is present only secondarily in the great works and primarily in the suffering and death of Christ.

2.3.2 Interpreting God’s Reign in the Light of Christ’s Death

In the context of the 1960’s, and the discussion of God’s work in the world, Newbigin indicates the way in which God’s rule over all things is to be understood in the light of Christ’s death. He speaks of this in the traditional terms in which God’s providence is understood, as God’s preservation and maintenance of the created order, the distribution of political power, and giving direction to social, technological and cultural developments within history.⁹² Of significance for our present discussion is that, in the context of the spread of communism at the beginning of the 1960’s, Newbigin suggested in one address the possibility that “God has permitted Communism to gain a measure of world power and thereby to threaten our security, that is for His own good reasons.”⁹³ Significantly, the goal of God’s reign over all things is not the progressive realisation of the kingdom of God on earth, but rather to bring the world to a decision for or against Jesus Christ as Lord:

He [the Father] is not confined to the Church. He can and does use what and whom he will to serve him. But his working has a visible centre and point of reference. Jesus Christ, the God-Man, eternal and yet part of history, is the Omega. . . .

. . . . its [the divine governance of events] ultimate purpose is to lead men to the acceptance of their true destiny in Christ.⁹⁴

The most critical issue confronting the world is not the building of the kingdom on earth, but that of response to Christ in whom the kingdom is already present in history. As can be seen here, Newbigin’s trinitarian interpretation of the kingdom continues to have a clear focus on Jesus Christ. As Newbigin later explained, while

⁹¹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 35.

⁹² L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 52.

⁹³ L. Newbigin, ‘The Mission of the Church to All Nations,’ Unpublished Address at National Council of Churches General Assembly (San Francisco, December 8, 1960).

⁹⁴ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 53. . . . 54.

he recognized the validity of replacing what he called the “classical” mission paradigm, the centrality of Jesus Christ for history was “nonnegotiable.”⁹⁵ One of the implications of this is that Christ is to be identified and received as the Omega of history.

2.3.3 The Church and the Trinity

In *Trinitarian Doctrine* Newbigin describes the church as the locus of the action of Christ in the world: in its “missionary work” of witness, in the two forms of service and proclamation is Christ’s “continuing coming to men.”⁹⁶ Newbigin’s understanding of the relationship between church and kingdom had further developed by the time he wrote *The Open Secret*. This is clear in the chapter ‘Sharing the Life of the Son: Mission as Love in Action.’ Having briefly discussed the presence of the kingdom in Christ, Newbigin then raises what he describes as a “vitally important question”: ‘Does this presence of the kingdom end with the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry?’ . . . Or is the presence of the kingdom continued through history?’⁹⁷ For Newbigin the presence of the kingdom continues in the church: “In them the reign of God would not only be proclaimed: it would be present.”⁹⁸ The kingdom is present in that the church is that community which participates in the life of Jesus Christ.

If the church is the continuing presence of the kingdom in the world this is in the form that Jesus revealed, of obedience and submission to the Father. In this way the church becomes participants in the triune life of God. Newbigin’s interpretation of the Trinity and its implications for the church is echoed in parts of a recent study by John Flett.⁹⁹ Flett argues that our participation in God is through participation in Christ’s distinct ministry and service, as he states:

⁹⁵ L. Newbigin, ‘Reply to Konrad Raiser,’ *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18 (2) (April 1994), 51.

⁹⁶ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 53.

⁹⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 44.

⁹⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 47.

⁹⁹ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010). Flett believes that much of the theology of the church has failed to identify the being of God and the work of Christ, and has consequently worked with a notional understanding of the Trinity. Flett suggests that the Council of Nicaea emphasized the divinity of Jesus but in terms of a doctrine of God derived from prevailing philosophical conceptions of divinity, rather than from a doctrine of God derived from the incarnation: “As divinity receded into eternity, so it did not include his actual movement into the world as necessary to a theological account of who God is in and for himself” (p.19). In a similar way Augustine also did not derive his doctrine of God from the work of God in Christ, but rather indicated that *through* this work we come to the knowledge of God: “He [Augustine] protects the divinity of the Son and Spirit by ascribing the economy only epistemological significance” (p.19). In other words we come to a knowledge of the

The completed fact of the incarnation establishes the formal relationship between God and humanity. *Human beings do participate in the being of God, but in a differentiated fellowship of action* established by the actuality of the incarnation. This participation is the material determination of the corresponding human missionary act.¹⁰⁰ [emphasis mine]

The “differentiated fellowship of action” for Newbigin is, in particular, the Father’s providential rule and Christ’s trust in the Father’s rule. Of some significance is the foundation that Flett gives to mission through this identification of participation in God with participation in Christ’s action: the work of mission “is the very nature of the living fellowship of the divine and the human.”¹⁰¹ Participation in Christ, in this age, must therefore take the form of “following his sending into the world proclaiming the coming and present kingdom of God.”¹⁰²

The Trinity is essential to Newbigin’s interpretation of the kingdom and history, and to the church’s mission. Has Newbigin been able to provide an adequate theology of mission in relation to his own evaluation of the world situation? Firstly, Newbigin has, arguably, been able to give a theological rationale for a worldwide political and social context that is disfavourable or even hostile to the church and its mission. Given that the kingdom is now realised in Christ and therefore the most pressing issue is not to build the kingdom, but rather to receive this reality, God, in His providence, may permit a social and political context that is ambivalent to the kingdom. The reason is that in this situation any decision for Christ will be deliberate and fully conscious, given the tension of this position in relation to the wider context. Secondly, and connected with this first point, there is a correspondence between God’s rule over history and the church’s mission, in that both are directed towards making a decision for Christ. The church works in harmony with God’s rule through its work of going out to the world in the form of service, and particularly in proclamation of Christ, by making clear the implications of a decision for Christ

God who lies behind this action. Flett points to the persistence of this approach in contemporary doctrines of God, as represented by Colin Gunton’s emphasis on the relational ontology of the Trinity, according to which each person has being in relation to the other (p.27). This approach, for Flett, fails to indicate that the movement of God into the world in the incarnation is also essential to the being of God.

¹⁰⁰ J. Flett, *The Witness of God*, 221.

¹⁰¹ J. Flett, *The Witness of God*, 222.

¹⁰² J. Flett, *The Witness of God*, 218. Flett references Barth’s statements establishing this point: “. . . this community is sent out and entrusted with the task of *mission* in the world, again with a *necessity* grounded in Himself” (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.II, 275). The content of this mission as proclamation of the gospel is limited to this age, but the form of human fellowship with the divine in the context of outgoing action and participation in God’s purposes is eternal.

within its particular social and political context. In this sense the church unveils and interprets the Father's sovereign rule. Thirdly, Newbigin has the theological rationale to interpret the weakness of the church, disassociated from the state, as a return to its true identity in the world as God's suffering servant, participating in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. From this perspective, the disassociation of church and state can be seen as a call to become more deeply rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2.4 Interpreting History in the Light of Christ's Death

For Newbigin history is to be interpreted in the light of Christ's death. The revelation of God's reign that has occurred in Christ's death becomes the clue to an understanding of all history. There are two key points that Newbigin makes in this regard: firstly, that the church has a unique role in interpreting history, and secondly, that history is a continuous process of conflict.

2.4.1 History Interpreted by the Church Community

History is knowable from the standpoint of participation in the church community, primarily because this is the community which is committed to the apostolic interpretation of the determinative significance of Christ and the events of his life for the whole of history:

To claim finality for Christ is to endorse the judgment of the apostles that in this life, death, and resurrection God himself was uniquely present and that therefore the meaning and origin and end of all things was disclosed. . . .

. . . . We know about it [the apostolic testimony] because we have been made part of a continuous tradition, carried by a community in which the writings of these apostles have been continuously treasured, reproduced, expounded, interpreted and applied to changing situations.¹⁰³

Yet, continual work, by the church, of interpreting the gospel in ever new contexts and situations, is critical to the mediation of the knowledge of Christ as the "meaning and origin and end of all things": "Only when the Church has the boldness to reinterpret the original testimony in the face of new human situations is it able to make place and effective the claim to finality."¹⁰⁴ History involves an interpretation of the significance of events that have happened, and this means that the significance

¹⁰³ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 76. . . . 77.

¹⁰⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 78.

of these events can only be known as they are interpreted in a way appropriate to any given context. That is why Newbigin describes the “work of re-interpretation” as “necessary.”

2.4.2 History as a Process of Conflict and Suffering

A key point for Newbigin is that history, until the end, is an ongoing process of conflict and suffering for the world, but particularly for the church. Reflecting his sense of the revelation of God’s reign in Christ’s death, Newbigin sees the New Testament as giving the clue to the interpretation of history, largely in terms of apocalyptic.¹⁰⁵ He saw the apocalyptic teaching of Christ in Mt. 24., Mk.13 & Lk.21.:5f, and the book of Revelation as giving a strong indication of the character of history till the return of Christ:

Parallel to the repeated assertion that the Son of Man *must* suffer is the assertion regarding the tribulation of history that “these things *must* take place” (Mark 13:7). The form of the cross is projected across the picture of world history. . . . The world itself will experience the messianic tribulations as a new world struggles to be born.¹⁰⁶

The sufferings of Christ are mirrored in the sufferings of the world at large. Elsewhere Newbigin repeats the same sentiment, calling “war, tumult, persecution and suffering, the appearing of false messiahs,” a “necessary part of the birth of the new order.”¹⁰⁷ A context of conflict and suffering is thus described by the Bible as the setting for the church’s witness, Newbigin pointing to what he sees as the “sustained and explicit N.T. statements of the relation between the mission of the Church and the events of world history.”¹⁰⁸

The generations of missionaries who preceded Newbigin tended to have a strong sense of the unity of world history, of secular and sacred history converged into one. This meant, as Newbigin explains, that in the execution of its missionary task the church believed it “was moving with the forces of world history, forward towards a better future.”¹⁰⁹ The missionaries of the second half of the nineteenth century understood that the sacred history of preaching the gospel, planting churches and

¹⁰⁵ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 41f.

¹⁰⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ L. Newbigin, *Mission of the Triune God*.

¹⁰⁸ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 41.

¹⁰⁹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 23.

social action was in harmony with developments, outside the church, all around the world. They had an evolutionary view of history that had predominated missions theology during much of the latter half of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, which presumed upon the “immanence of God,” God working in and through social, political and cultural developments to gradually bring His purpose to fruition.¹¹⁰ This appeared to make sense, for as Newbigin explained, prior to 1914 it “did seem that the movement of world history was in the same direction as the movement of the Christian mission – namely towards a more just, human and peaceful world order.”¹¹¹ This evolutionary view of history had a dominating influence on Western missions at this time, and effectively meant the sidelining of eschatology across the theological spectrum, whether liberal or conservative.¹¹² The first world war had a decisive influence in disintegrating this interpretation of history, but it made a return in the ecumenical movement in the 1960’s.¹¹³ As it developed in the 1960’s it found a new form, from which the traditional idea of missions was absent. Now, in the 1960’s sacred history was absorbed into secular history, in that there is now no separate, distinct act of the church in the world but the church joins the world in whatever positive social, political and cultural development may be happening at that time.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 513. This is to be distinguished from the postmillennialism that preceded it, as expressed in the work of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Edwards pointed to the progressive expansion of the church throughout the world, applying many of the Old Testament promises of the transformation of Israel to God’s purpose for the church in the present age. Yet this was realised not primarily by the effort of the church, nor through immanent forces, but through the Spirit bringing revival and renewal to the church and world (*An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer, For the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*). Carey imbibed this interpretation. Yet, in North America, during the nineteenth century the emphasis moved from God’s inbreaking act in revival and renewal through the Spirit, to an evolutionary concept of history, in which the emphasis was upon the immanence of God, as Bosch explains: “The primary assumption was the immanence of God – a conception derived from the influence of science, in particular Darwinian evolution theory, upon Protestant theology: the indwelling God was working out his purposes in the world of people, here and now” (*Transforming Mission*, 513). Bosch describes this as “optimistic in the extreme,” echoing Kraemer’s assessment fifty years earlier that the American missionary movement had an “optimistic, activist idealism” (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 48).

¹¹¹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 23.

¹¹² D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 513. Bosch, referencing Van T Hof’s *Op zoek naar het geheim van de zending : in dialoog met de Wereldzendingconferenties, 1910-1963*, p.48, points to Edinburgh 1910 as an example of this stating that, “Eschatological thinking . . . was hardly in evidence.”

¹¹³ The evolutionary view of history re-emerged together with a sense of the immanence of God: “After the devastation of two world wars, the optimism of the nineteenth century and of the Social Gospel had reemerged” (Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 334). Newbigin points out that at the WCC Assembly in Delhi (1961) some were of the view that Christ will be encountered in the world (*Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 25).

¹¹⁴ Bosch identifies this as ‘History as Salvation’ and as the sacralisation of world history. He explains this view “happens where one abandons any idea of the uniqueness of the church and concentrates,

Based on his own experiences Newbigin had an instinctive reaction to a unity of history based on the idea of God's immanence. As a young SCM secretary in 1932 he was part of a delegation to an Anglo-German conference in Germany. He was greatly impressed by the National Socialist students he met there whom he later described as "full of idealism, and of the conviction that God was at work in a new way in Germany."¹¹⁵ Following the trip Newbigin wrote in an article that within the "forces . . . moulding the destiny of Germany" were "big elements of crudity and violence" but also the "seeds of new life for western Europe."¹¹⁶ Newbigin appears to have been permanently marked by his own misreading of this situation, and it made him "inclined to be skeptical ever since, when I hear what looks like the new wave is 'God at work in the world.'"¹¹⁷ This was one important influence in the development of his thinking. The kingdom of God is not to be identified with visible victory, with "movements" that appear to be exerting a power to visibly transform life and the human condition.¹¹⁸ In other words, the reign of God is not located in the world's institutional centres of political, economic and social power and neither is it located in movements for political, economic and social change that are largely centered outside existing institutions and may be powerfully pressing for the reform of these institutions. Nor is the reign of God to be identified with a church that bears a powerful political and social influence within society.¹¹⁹ The power of God's reign is located in, and centered in "an event," the death of Jesus Christ.

Newbigin spoke of the "hidden" character of the reign of God in the world today. In 1952 in response to comments on the first report of the Advisory Commission on the Theme of the Second Assembly of the WCC he points to the need for the Commission to clarify what is meant by "Christ's present Lordship" and that the most pressing issue for the Commission to consider is the "hidden" as contrasted with the "visible character" of "Christ's present Lordship."¹²⁰ Newbigin wanted to ensure clarity on the continuity between the present and future aspects of Christ's rule, writing that it was "vital that the false dichotomy between present and future should

rather, on the uniqueness of what happens in the world outside the church" (*Transforming Mission*, 518).

¹¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 23.

¹¹⁶ L. Newbigin, 'The German Outlook Today,' in *The Student Movement* 35 (2) (Nov. 1932), 32.

¹¹⁷ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 24.

¹¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 37.

¹¹⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 38.

¹²⁰ L. Newbigin, 'The Nature of the Christian Hope,' 284.

be overcome.”¹²¹ There can be no dichotomy between present and future, because the future age is already present and confronting the world in the existing rule of Jesus Christ. The new age will not involve anything new, anything that is not already a present reality in Jesus Christ, but there will be a final act of unveiling, when the existing, present reality of Jesus Christ’s rule in the world will be disclosed in a complete form. Nearly forty years later, Newbigin continues to write in the same way. In his chapter entitled, ‘Christ, the Clue to History,’ in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he states that the rule of God in its present and future aspects, “is not the difference between the incomplete and the complete; it is the difference between the hidden and the manifest.”¹²² This unveiling of Christ’s rule, is “the exact meaning of apocalypse.” The strength of Newbigin’s emphasis on the hiddenness of Christ’s rule is important in maintaining a critical distance from social, religious, political and philosophical movements that become “manifest” within history: no manifest movement can be identified with Christ.

Newbigin has a strong sense of God’s sovereign rule over history and of his “disposition of events.”¹²³ Nevertheless, political developments within history are not simple manifestations of God’s immanent presence but are often in direct opposition to the realisation of God’s kingdom on earth:

The most sustained and explicit New Testament statements of the relation between the mission of the Church and events of world history are to be found in the apocalyptic sections of the first three Gospels and in the discourses at the end of the fourth Gospel. In both the synoptic and Johannine discourses certain notes are repeated – hatred of the world against the Church, the rejection of Christ by the world, the tribulation of the Church in the world, the presence of the Spirit who answers the accusations of the world, the victory of Christ.¹²⁴

In his later writing Newbigin expressed this resistance with greater clarity, using the language of the powers, outwardly manifested in “religious, cultural and political structures” which are “challenged” by Christ and “fight back.”¹²⁵ Writing in the early 1960’s Newbigin believes that social and political developments in the world manifest this opposition to Christ because they offer the possibility of a new social order, but

¹²¹ L. Newbigin, ‘The Nature of the Christian Hope,’ 284.

¹²² L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 104.

¹²³ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 41.

¹²⁴ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 41.

¹²⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 105.

apart from Christ: Newbigin identifies many of the social, political developments taking place around him as “post-Christian and anti-Christian” in that they derive their logic of progress and development from biblical eschatology but do not recognise Christ as the Lord and end of history.¹²⁶ Newbigin thus refers to a process of “polarization” going on within history, in which an increasingly conscious decision is made to find salvation and redemption for the world on other terms than Christ.

By making this assertion Newbigin is able to normalise the experience of the church in the twentieth century and beyond. The descent of Europe into two world wars, the rise of ideologies throughout the world opposed to the church and the gospel, and the revival and renewal of the world religions had dismayed the mission movement, leading to something of a crisis and a measure of disillusionment.¹²⁷

Newbigin, however, argues that these developments are not a sign of failure of the mission movement. These developments are in fact an inevitable response to the church’s mission work, and anticipated as such in the gospels: “war, tumult, persecution and suffering, the appearing of false messiahs and the manifesting of the antichrist with all his deceitful powers, are not evidence of defeat for the Christian cause, but are among the things which ‘must come to pass.’”¹²⁸ The necessity of this tribulation of church and world, indicated in the ‘must’, is paralleled for Newbigin in Christ own account of the necessity of his death.¹²⁹

2.4.3 Interpreting Social and Political Developments: Secularization

The test of the validity of Newbigin’s approach rests upon its application to contemporary social and political developments. The social and political development to which he devoted most attention in his writing, and that mainly in the

¹²⁶ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 45. Nevertheless, these movements also contain good within themselves, and in the context of God’s sovereign rule over history, and the conviction that “all good comes from him,” it is necessary to assert that “in some sense, he is at work in these movements, in the movements of national liberation, of scientific discovery, of cultural renaissance and – certainly – in the movements of rebirth and reform in the non-Christian religions” (Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 28).

¹²⁷ Kraemer identifies this optimistic evolutionary view of history as one of the “chief causes” for disillusionment with Christianity and missions, when this evolutionary process was disrupted by the events of the first decades of the twentieth century (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 48).

¹²⁸ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 27.

¹²⁹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 27. Newbigin may have received this interpretation through the German theologian Edmund Schlink (1903-84), who broke a deadlock in the initial discussions of the preparatory theological group for the WCC Assembly in Evanston, in 1951, in a morning meditation where he “drew the parallel between the Passion sayings and the warnings of the eschatological tribulation” (*Unfinished Agenda*, 124).

1960's, was secularization. Newbigin's evaluation of secularization will be considered in relation to three aspects of his interpretation outlined above: the providence of God permitting a socio-political context that is in a degree of tension with Christ; secondly the church witnessing to Christ in a way that makes clear the implications of discipleship within that unique context; and thirdly, the witness of the church from a position of weakness in dissociation from the power of the state, and in participation in the life of Christ.

This consideration will be based primarily on *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966), Newbigin's most extended treatment of secularization. In that work Newbigin defined secularization as the increasing independence and separation of large areas of life, action and thought from religion, and, positively, a growing confidence of science and technology to "handle human problems of every kind."¹³⁰ This is the definition of secularization that is assumed in the following discussion.

2.4.3.1 The Providence of God and Secularization

Newbigin attributes secularization to the providence of God. At the beginning of *Honest Religion* Newbigin describes the present world situation, of which secularization is one aspect, as the "world into which God has led us."¹³¹ Given the fact that God is the "Lord of history" the process of secularization is not to be attributed to fortune or fate, but has some purpose in God's hands, it "means" something.¹³² The meaning which it has, for Newbigin, is that it is "part of God's calling of mankind to maturity," to responsible action in the world.¹³³ This sense of the providence of God is implied in Newbigin's earlier language as used in an address in Bosesy, Switzerland, in 1957. In this address Newbigin appears to be unaware of the term "secularization," but referring to the changes taking place worldwide he repeatedly interprets this as humanity "being gathered up." There is a movement at work in the world, a "process by which more and more of the human race is being gathered up into the history whose centre is the Cross."¹³⁴ This language of gathering

¹³⁰ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 8. This is a revised version of the Firth Lectures he delivered at the University of Nottingham in 1964,

¹³¹ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 10.

¹³² L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 42.

¹³³ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 136.

¹³⁴ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,' 82, 88. Newbigin appears to have derived this language of the "center of history" from Tillich, a source he acknowledged in a 1941 lecture delivered in Bangalore at United Theological College entitled, 'The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' in Geoffrey Wainwright, ed., *Signs Amid the Rubble*, 43. In a footnote Wainwright points

up is to be understood as God's providential gathering of humanity, as Newbigin makes explicit in slightly different language: "world history is in the grip of Christ, is being propelled by him towards its ultimate issues."¹³⁵ Newbigin sets the process of secularization within the context of God's sovereign control of history as an act of his providence.

Newbigin maintains a clear distinction between God's transcendent control of history and secularization. While secularization can be attributed to God's providence, God is not immanent to the process, as Newbigin explains indirectly when he states that secularization is "certainly not the triumph of the kingdom of God" and does not contain "in itself the norms by which our belief and conduct" are "determined."¹³⁶ The process has a certain independence and distinction from God and "in itself" does not necessarily lead to God and his purpose. Secularization can only be properly understood and interacted with from the "starting-point" of "God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as this is testified in the Bible."¹³⁷ From this perspective secularization can be interpreted properly, and it becomes possible to discern the action and thought required of the church in the light of this development. Of importance for Newbigin's view of history is that secularization confronts the church and the world with a decision regarding the standpoint from which it will be understood.

Secularization generates a crisis, a situation in which a decision for or against Christ becomes compelling because of the immediate implications and consequences of that decision in the form of great blessing or of great loss:

It [the world-wide spread of the secular world-view which Christianity has brought to the birth] is part of the working out in human history of the results of the coming of Christ. It is part of the process by which the coming of the Light of the world places all men in a critical situation, a situation charged with the possibilities both of ultimate salvation and of ultimate loss.¹³⁸

Newbigin affirms secularization on three grounds as a child of biblical revelation: science and technology had its origins in a biblical view of the creation as God's work,

out that the source was probably Tillich's 1936 publication, *The Interpretation of History*, although he notes that where Newbigin points to Christ's death as the center of history, Tillich refers to Christ.

¹³⁵ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up of History into Christ,' 83. As indicated earlier, the place of sovereignty would be modified in later writing, from *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* onwards, to that of God the Father.

¹³⁶ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 29. . . . 42.

¹³⁷ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 42.

¹³⁸ L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?*, 22.

and therefore understandable, open to study and investigation;¹³⁹ the concern for progress towards a new social order with improvement of the conditions of life for all people is a “form of the biblical idea of the kingdom of God”; and thirdly, secularization breaks down a belief resisted in the biblical tradition that a particular political or social structure of society can be identified with the divine.¹⁴⁰ But against his affirmation of each of these three points, Newbigin raises a “question mark,” pointing to the darker side of secularization. Firstly, he indicates how scientific and technological advance is running hand in hand with a sense of “meaninglessness and even terror as man faces his future.” Newbigin points to nuclear energy as an example of this as a great scientific advance, but at the same time one that has generated the possibility of mass destruction.¹⁴¹ Secondly, he explains that the aspiration for a new social order can easily lead to ideological control, and the violation of democratic governance, as the only way to bring about this new social order in the absence of “the supernatural motives for mutual service which the biblical revelation evokes.”¹⁴² He writes this conscious of the “experience of Europe,” and the destructiveness of the ideologies of fascism and communism. These both harnessed a constellation of ideals, values, images - enforced and policed by the state - to a vision of progress and realization of an ideal state. Newbigin directs his warning to India, conscious of the recent death of Nehru, a political leader who had exerted considerable influence in maintaining “a truly secular spirit in Indian politics.” And, finally Newbigin points to how the breaking down of the millennia old identification of a social order with the divine can, in the absence of faith in God, lead to an ironical attitude to the whole of life, “a self-destructive nihilism.” For Newbigin the process of secularization contains within itself possibilities of great blessing, but only as long as it is set within the context of a humanity’s relationship with, and accountability to, God.

2.4.3.2 Mission in the Context of Secularization

Yet, far from seeing secularization as a threat, Newbigin saw it as that ordering of events in which the church’s witness is to be realised. The vital implication of understanding secularization as attributable to God’s sovereignty is that it is to be understood as something to which the church is called to respond, in fulfilment of her

¹³⁹ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 23f. Newbigin quotes the work of the German Physicist Weizsacker (*The Relevance of Science* (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 106-7) to help explain his point here that the “rise of modern science and technology was directly related to the beliefs about the created world and about man’s place in it which are distinctive of the Bible.”

¹⁴⁰ Newbigin draws this third point from van Leeuwen’s book *Christianity in World History* (1964).

¹⁴¹ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 31ff.

¹⁴² L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 34ff.

“calling to responsible participation in the events which are the key to world history.”¹⁴³ Responsible participation involves acting in relation to what God is bringing to pass in the world.

This participation begins with a readiness to reinterpret the gospel and the church’s action in the world. The changing social and political context which secularization was bringing to both East and West compelled the church to return to God’s revelation in Christ, to interpret and understand aspects of the gospel in sometimes new and fresh ways. The problem for Newbigin with part of the response from Western theologians to secularization is that it failed to begin the work of re-evaluation and reconsideration from God’s action in Christ, understood as of significance for all human history, as he states: “But the most influential attempts to restate the Christian gospel in terms supposed to be intelligible to modern secularized man have proceeded by using the concepts of existentialist philosophy.”¹⁴⁴ The restatement is needed, but only if it is centered in an understanding of Christ as the centre and telos of history. Given this as the starting point for an engagement with secularization, what does Newbigin envisage the church’s action to be?

Firstly, Newbigin pointed to the importance of the church acting as a guardian of the gains that secularization brought by bearing witness to the transcendence of God to the world in two distinct ways: resisting a return to an assertion of the immanence of God, of sacralising the world as given, and secondly by pointing to the accountability of the world to God. Secularization could be seen as a rejection of the idea of the immanence of God, in that through the disassociation of much of life from religion, space was generated to question and critique the world as given, as Newbigin states:

Secularization is a process in which men are set free from total envelopment in sacral forms of society – forms, that is to say, in which it is believed that the form of society fully represents and mediates the purpose of God for human life. Secularization sets men free to question, to experiment and to make independent decisions. It requires of the individual man a capacity to take decisions which, in traditional sacral societies, he would not have to take. It is a summons to greater personal freedom, and to the responsibility which freedom entails.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 44.

¹⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 44. Newbigin particularly has in mind here the thought of Bultmann. He quotes from *Keryma and Myth* and briefly critiques Bultmann for a de-historicized gospel.

¹⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 69. Newbigin acknowledges the influence of A.T. van Leeuwen’s *Christianity in World History*. The influence appears to be in van Leeuwen’s social

Newbigin considered this element of freedom to engage with the creation and the social order as a coming of age, an outworking in history of one aspect of what it means to be a child of God.¹⁴⁶ This freedom had to be preserved against the possibility of a reversal back into the old sacral form of society.¹⁴⁷ In the context of mission in Asia and Africa this involved standing “at the point where secularization is cutting into the ancient way of life, making clear by . . . word and manner of life the way in which a Christian can accept the offer of freedom which secularization brings.”¹⁴⁸ But perhaps of even greater importance, the church had to maintain a sense of distinction between God and its own action, in the consciousness of its own capacity for departure from the will of God. The church refuses to identify its “programme wholly with God’s will.”¹⁴⁹ Yet, for Newbigin, at that point, this was not the primary point of concern for the church.

The primary focus of the church’s witness in the context of secularization was to God as the one to whom the world is accountable. The potential danger in a social and political environment that stressed individual freedom was the abandonment of all sense of personal accountability to God. The church’s particular responsibility to society lay in testifying to freedom being exercised in the context of the reign of God, as he states: “Of a secular society as of a free society, it must be said that the price is constant vigilance. There must be men and women . . . who are ready to be witnesses, if necessary with their blood, to the reality of his rule.”¹⁵⁰ Yet, in an important and illuminating section of the book, ‘Ethics in a Secular Context,’ Newbigin explains that this accountability is not a return to the old bondages of a de-historicized legal code, to an “ethic of sheer blind submission to external standards of behaviour,” but is rather an accountability that takes form through personal encounter with Christ in the particular social and political conditions of today as “the religion of free worship and obedience in the Spirit.”¹⁵¹ The world’s calling to participation in Christ as children of God is to be maintained in the area of law, as elsewhere.

analysis of the ‘ontocratic society’ in which there is an identification of the social order with the cosmic, divine order. An example of this, of which Newbigin was well familiar, was the caste system, a social order traditionally given religious sanction.

¹⁴⁶ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 32.

¹⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 137.

¹⁴⁹ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 76.

¹⁵¹ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 142.

2.4.3.3 Providence, Historical Progress and the Church's Suffering

While Newbigin views increasing tension and conflict as a permanent feature of history until the return of Christ, he is not a pessimist, but holds open the possibility of genuine historical progress. Secularization as a “working out of God’s purpose,” as “part of God’s calling of mankind to maturity,”¹⁵² suggests God making possible, within history, the social and political conditions through which participation in Christ can have wider and wider expression. This was evident to Newbigin in the India of the 1960’s. Newbigin points to a new socio-political ideal of social progress and individual human rights that critiques and calls into question the beliefs and practices of traditional religious practice in India and elsewhere:

The ideas of human dignity, of social justice, of the significance of human history, which missionaries [in Asia and Africa] brought with them in their teaching of the Bible, have now become the property of those who claim no Christian allegiance, and the effect of these ideas is to discredit and disrupt much that was formally protected by traditional religion.¹⁵³

The disruption which Newbigin has in mind in India includes the “abolition of untouchability, of the dowry system, of temple prostitution, the spread of education and medical service.” From this perspective secularization is a positive process “accomplishing the kind of changes” for which missionaries “fought with such stubborn perseverance a century and a half ago.”¹⁵⁴ In this respect Newbigin affirms as correct the conviction of the nineteenth century missionaries, like Alexander Duff, that their work, in the longer term, would bring transformation and change.¹⁵⁵

However, as Newbigin indicates in his description, quoted in the previous paragraph, of the missionaries fighting “with stubborn perseverance” for change, a widening realization of the reign of God on earth occurs through the church’s struggle and suffering. This is to be distinguished from the idea of progress through forces immanent to social and political development. The church is the elect community called to action and responsibility in the world, but also called to suffer in its

¹⁵² L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 136.

¹⁵³ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 17.

¹⁵⁵ Hunsberger observes this point with reference to Duff stating that, “The gospel was having a more dramatic effect than had been imagined” (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 141).

participation in Christ. The missionaries were “agents of secularization,”¹⁵⁶ through the readiness of many of them to lay down their lives in service. Furthermore, the gains and development realised through their labour is preserved only through the church’s willingness to struggle and suffer in its resistance to the attempt by evil to occupy the space that has been created. In the same breath as he speaks of the “working out of God’s purpose” Newbigin points to the fact that not all will receive the gospel and a “deepening conflict between him who has come to set men free and the false messiahs who enslave men” in which the “Christian will see the struggle to make and keep society secular as part of his obedience to God who wills to preserve for men an area of freedom in which they may accept their calling in Christ.”¹⁵⁷ Although Newbigin doesn’t expressly make the point, it can be stated that the deepening conflict happens precisely because of a deepening opportunity for the experience of the implications of Christ for the whole of life.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Newbigin seems to identify the primary locus of this conflict being in the state. He envisaged the primary alternative to the redemption of all life in Christ arising from the state and political/economic ideologies that seem to offer a holistic salvation. He referred for instance with a cautionary note to the “development [in India] of a socialist democratic republic along the lines of a welfare state.”¹⁵⁹ History holds open the possibility of positive development but only as the church is willing to suffer in its witness of word and service.

2.4.4 Interpreting Social and Political Developments: Revival of Religion

There was a difference of interpretation between M.M. Thomas and Newbigin on religious developments in India. Thomas saw the “crisis,” generated by the wide aspiration for social and political development, as leading to a positive redevelopment

¹⁵⁶L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 18, 32. The broad range of work of these missionaries in preaching the gospel; planting churches; building schools, colleges and technical institutes; establishing medical clinics and hospital; were all involved in this process.

¹⁵⁷ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 136.

¹⁵⁸ There is a distinction here from an idea briefly expressed by Kraemer, when suggested that given the fact of religion as a “complex cultural, political and social entity,” an increased turning to Christ could only really arise through changes in the underlying social and political order (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 287).

¹⁵⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,’ 88. Newbigin’s thought along these lines would in part have been influenced by his participation in the Advisory Commission for the WCC Assembly at Evanston. The third section of the final Report of the Advisory Commission distinguished between Christ as the “historical center” of the world and other hopes such as “democratic humanism,” “scientific humanism” “Marxism,” “national and religious renaissance” (*Report of the Advisory Commission on the Main Theme of the Second Assembly* (New York: Harper, 1954), 71ff. in Margull, *Hope in Action*, 32).

of some of the fundamental assumptions of the religion.¹⁶⁰ Newbigin, however, saw these developments, within religions such as Hinduism, in a more ambivalent way. A process of hardening to Christ could be taking place even as the religious system was being influenced by ideas that derived from the teaching of Christ. Newbigin made a clear distinction between great admiration for Christ and being under the influence of his teaching and life, and yet a rejection of His Lordship. He pointed to how there are many in India, as elsewhere, who find inspiration in the teaching of Christ and are full of admiration for the love, service and self-sacrifice embodied in his life and death. But some of them find abhorrent the notion that Jesus is the Christ, the exalted Lord, to whom we give our undivided loyalty. Newbigin explains this point with clarity as he states:

Some intelligent people [writing with reference to the Nyogi report] are beginning to realize with a shock of horror that Christ presents them with an absolute decision. Over and over again the report prints in horrified italics the statement that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. . . . The terrible fact is beginning to be clear that in Christ you are presented with a claim to absolute kingship. This report is one of the most encouraging things that has taken place in India for a long time from the missionary point of view. It shows that the real claim of Christ is beginning to be heard. . . . One could look at the leaders of the Gandhian movement in India and one finds in them men very, very near to Christ and very, very far away at the same time. . . . Such men are trying to follow Christ with devotion and self-sacrifice, and yet rejecting the claim of Christ to exclusive Lordship.¹⁶¹

Recent developments would seem to support Newbigin's view of the leaders of the Gandhian movement, that while expressing admiration for Christ, they rejected his claim to "exclusive Lordship." There has been, in India, a consolidation of a specifically Hindu religious identity and practice. Although a large increase in the number of sacred places began four decades ago,¹⁶² this has continued in recent decades and increasing wealth has given greater freedom for the expression of religious devotion at these sites. Pilgrimages to sacred sites is an important part of tourism and leisure travel for the Indian domestic market, which has had a "culturally reinforcing and integrative" influence, explains Singh: "This has strengthened the

¹⁶⁰ See M. M. Thomas's discussion of Devanandan's evaluation of Radhakrishnan's "Neo-Advaita Vedantism" in *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 164ff.

¹⁶¹ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,' 87.

¹⁶² Yogendra Singh, *Culture Change in India: Identity and Globalization*, (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2000), 62.

festive and celebrative activities of various religious groups and communities and its diffusion effect has been strong.”¹⁶³ Reflecting this trend, several regional festivals have grown into national events, as for example Ganesh Chaturthi,¹⁶⁴ originally a festival of Maharashtra. The effect of these events is “religious homogenization and internal consolidation.”¹⁶⁵ This process has also involved a reassertion of more traditional social roles. The increased observance of festivals like Rakhsha Bandhan¹⁶⁶ or the practice of Karva Chauth¹⁶⁷ is seen, by Puniyani, as exemplary of a reassertion of patriarchy.¹⁶⁸ There is also some evidence of an affirmation of traditional Hindu religious practices, the highly popular television serials being particularly revealing of this trend: “The family priest has become the wisest counsel for the major decision of the family, astrology is glorified and blind faith is being promoted.”¹⁶⁹ The vigour of Hinduism and its adaptation to a changing India can be seen in the way that the middle classes have turned to the gurus and acharayas to help meet and address the demands of their modern, urban lives, leading Puniyani to describe them as “the nerve soother for the existential tensions of the middle classes.”

There is evidence of a rising encroachment of religion in the public space, indicated by how religious the non-English press has become, as Puniyani explains: “Most of the newspapers carry divine columns; the language press gives huge publicity to the priests and their sermons.”¹⁷⁰ He gives the statistic that, “ninety percent of Hindi papers have grown into Hindu papers.”¹⁷¹ Puniyani also points to the increasing Hindu bias of the curriculum content in the non-CBSE schools, and also an increase in the practice of puja in schools. There is a process of consolidation of religious identity going on in the public arena, an identity that is being successfully shaped to the changing environment.

¹⁶³ Y. Singh, *Culture Change in India*, 62.

¹⁶⁴ The celebration of the birthday of Ganesh, the elephant god, son of Shiva and Parvati.

¹⁶⁵ K. N. Panikkar, *An Agenda for Cultural Action and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2003), xii in Ram Puniyani, ‘Religious nationalism and changing profile of popular culture,’ in *Popular Culture in a Globalised India*, eds. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 101.

¹⁶⁶ A celebration of the relationship between brother and sister, the key element of which is the sister tying a *rakhi* or sacred thread around her brother’s wrist.

¹⁶⁷ A day of fasting by wives for the long life and prosperity of their husbands.

¹⁶⁸ R. Puniyani, ‘India: religious nationalism and changing profile of popular culture,’ in *Popular Culture in a Globalised India*, eds. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 101.

¹⁶⁹ Y. Singh, *Culture Change in India*, 103

¹⁷⁰ R. Puniyani, ‘Religious nationalism and changing profile of popular culture,’ 103.

¹⁷¹ B. Matthew, ‘Breaking Silence,’ 15 in *Media* (Delhi: Anhad, 2006) in R. Puniyani, ‘Religious nationalism and changing profile of popular culture,’ 104.

2.5 The Church and the Kingdom

During the early 1960's Newbigin felt it necessary to point to the presence of God's action within the social, religious and cultural developments taking place, particularly in the former colonies, writing for example of the need to "understand what God is doing to India and Hinduism."¹⁷² This expressed the sense of the world as the place of God's redemptive action in addition to the church. Newbigin quite quickly moved away from this idea to emphasize the church as the "central" place of God's action in the world.¹⁷³ This can be seen in his 1966 lectures delivered at Yale University Divinity School, and later published as *The Finality of Christ* (1969). In the chapter 'The Clue to History' he points to the gospel as the "clue to history" but goes on to explain that the gospel and church cannot be separated.¹⁷⁴ For Newbigin a key implication of God's reign being manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is that God's reign is present in the world today in the church.¹⁷⁵ This is because the church alone is the community that is rooted in Christ, the community that remembers, proclaims, and participates in the suffering of Christ.

Newbigin expressed this sense of the inseparability of gospel and church with his doctrine of election. The universal purposes of God for the whole world involved the calling of a particular people.¹⁷⁶ He gives the example of this from Romans 10:12-15 where Paul moves from a statement of God's universality that "leads straight into the assertion of the need for the missionary to go and preach." The church is the community through whom God has chosen to act redemptively in the world. This idea is implicit to his interpretation of the church in *The Household of God* (1953) as that community uniquely indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and as Hunsberger helps point out, there are several explicit and unequivocal statements about the church as the locus of God's redemptive action, in his writing in the 1950's:¹⁷⁷

The central theme of that book [the Bible] is God's choosing (election) of a people to be His own people, by whom He purposes to save the world One is related to God's saving acts not by any kind of direct, unmediated

¹⁷² L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 22ff.

¹⁷³ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 97.

¹⁷⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 65ff.

¹⁷⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 47ff.

¹⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 67.

¹⁷⁷ Hunsberger helpfully points to the presence, in Newbigin's writing in the late 1940's and 1950's, of this key point in works such as *The Household of God* (1953) (i.e. p.132), 'Why Study the Old Testament' (1954) and *A Faith For This One World?*, a publication in 1961 of lectures Newbigin delivered at Harvard University in 1958 (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 48ff).

spiritual experiences, however it may be formulated. One is related by becoming related to God's people . . .¹⁷⁸

For Newbigin election is an act of God's own mission that could be articulated as 'Mission as Election.' Newbigin does not see God's election in terms of a traditional Calvinist understanding of individuals chosen for salvation, but rather in terms of God choosing a people through whom His saving purposes for the whole world shall be worked out. God's choice of a people to accomplish His purpose for the whole world is central to the Bible story:

The Bible is not the story of ideas about God, but the story of the people of God. It is impossible to stress too much the importance of this fact. Men are not redeemed from sin by having right ideas about God. They are redeemed when they meet God in His judgment and mercy. But men can only meet God on this plane of history where they live. The Bible is the story of God's action in history, of His setting apart a people, one of the numerous branches of the human race, to be the bearers of His revelation, to be the means whereby humanity might be reconciled to God. . . . But it is fundamental to the teaching of the Bible throughout that God's purpose of redemption is wrought out through a people of His choice.¹⁷⁹

After a notable gap in his writing in the 1960's and into the 1970's, as identified by Hunsberger, Newbigin gives his interpretation of the doctrine of election a prominent position in *The Open Secret* (1978), his most systematic treatment of a theology of mission to that point.¹⁸⁰ A consideration of how, in this book, Newbigin applies this doctrine to an interpretation of the relationship between the kingdom of God and history should help illumine his contribution.¹⁸¹

Newbigin briefly, but quite explicitly, identifies the church as the locus of God's redemptive action in the world over against an understanding of God's redemptive action in the world. At the beginning of his focused discussion on election Newbigin appears to disavow a point he made in the early 1960's where he had written of God's action in the world outside the church. In *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*

¹⁷⁸ L. Newbigin, 'Why Study the Old Testament?' *National Christian Council Review* 74 (1954), 75. . . . *A Faith For This One World?* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 80.

¹⁷⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 27.

¹⁸⁰ George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 58ff.

¹⁸¹ Hunsberger's consideration of the doctrine of election is in the context of his consideration of what he describes as Newbigin's 'theology of cultural plurality,' a subject he identifies as "latent" to his thought (p.7). Accordingly he interprets the re-emergence and prominence of the doctrine of election in *The Open Secret* to a change in the wider social context from a focus on the unity of world history, secularization and one global community in the 1960's, to an emerging emphasis on religious and cultural plurality in the 1970's (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 69).

he wrote that a “missionary in industry must have some understanding of what . . . industry means in the purpose of God, what he is doing in it and how he would have us become fellow workers in it.”¹⁸² In *The Open Secret* he indicates that this idea of God’s work and presence in the factory and of the missionary’s role being “to learn what he is doing in the world which is already his” is an idea that fails to take account that God acts and speaks in “particular times and places.”¹⁸³ He implies that an emphasis on the redemptive action of God in the world outside the church is a wrong conclusion to draw from God’s universal rule and presence in the world. The clarity with which Newbigin is asserting this point over against much thinking within the ecumenical movement in the 1960’s may help to explain why he identified the 1970’s as the time when he began to give a missiological interpretation to the doctrine of election, despite references to this in his earlier writing.¹⁸⁴

2.5.1 The Church and the Future Kingdom

Central to Newbigin’s interpretation of history is the literal second return of Jesus Christ that would bring the renewal of all things.¹⁸⁵ He identified the “great emphasis” of the biblical promise, as expressed in the Old Testament prophecies of a renewed creation and the prophecy in Revelation of the descent of the heavenly city to earth, being on this return of Christ to the earth and the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth.¹⁸⁶ In this way, the kingdom of God is realised on earth as a final climactic and decisive act of God: in *Sin and Salvation*, in the final chapter entitled ‘The Consummation of Salvation,’ Newbigin sets his discussion of the end as envisioned in Revelation 20, under the sub-title ‘The kingdom of God.’

For nearly fifty years Newbigin persisted in emphasizing that while the eschatological reign of God determines and shapes our actions in the present, as the “proper horizon of all our actions here and now,” these present actions do not contribute to the realization of God’s reign in the present, as he states: “We act now (in the public realm as in our personal and domestic life) in ways which correspond to the reality which is to be the final reality. . . . These actions do not directly solve

¹⁸² L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 22.

¹⁸³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 67.

¹⁸⁴ L. Newbigin apparently told Hunsberger that he began to give consideration to the doctrine of election in the 1970’s (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 45, 68). Hunsberger attributes Newbigin’s amnesia on this point to its absence from his writing in the 1960’s (p.68).

¹⁸⁵ L. Newbigin, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress, Lecture III,’ 31ff.

¹⁸⁶ L. Newbigin, *Journey Into Joy*, 60.

the world's problems. They may fail. They will probably be forgotten after a few years or generations."¹⁸⁷ This largely pessimistic view of our present action is a very stark contrast with the understanding of mission held by many throughout the nineteenth century. This is perhaps best articulated in William Carey's sermon on May 30 1792, at the Friar Lane Baptist Chapel in Nottingham, which had as its main point, 'Expect great things, attempt great things.' Carey anticipated the reign of God being realized in history in connection with his action.

It can be argued that Newbigin's eschatology is in danger of what Gutierrez described as "replacing a Christianity of the Beyond with a Christianity of the Future" which means that while pointing to an historical realization of the kingdom in the future, this future is so distant as to be relatively meaningless in giving motivation or impetus to the present struggle for liberation.¹⁸⁸ Newbigin anticipated precisely this accusation. In his 1941 lecture he addresses this objection, which is given in the form of a quotation, and possibly represents an actual statement made to him:

The thrill of being part of a great movement of progress and of seeing its ends realized, is something necessary for social action. And if we are to accept your view, the end seems to be so disconnected from the beginning as quite to rob us of that sense. The end can hardly be said to be the *result* of the beginning at all, and therefore it does not satisfy the longing we have to take part in a real progressive movement and to see results.¹⁸⁹

Newbigin's dismissal of this objection as nothing more than a self-centered desire for success is not satisfactory. A philosopher may find motivation for action in Newbigin's vision of the relationship between the reign of God and the present, but it is inadequate to motivate the majority of people to action nor to provide a vision adequate to sustain the hard and difficult struggle that mission usually involves.

2.5.2 Interpreting Missions in the Light of the Future Kingdom

Newbigin's interpretation of the future kingdom contributed to his rather distinctive understanding of missions. This can be seen through a comparison with V.

¹⁸⁷ L. Newbigin, *Faith and Power*, 154.

¹⁸⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 124.

¹⁸⁹ L. Newbigin, 'The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' Lecture IV, 53.

S. Azariah, the famous Bishop of Dornakal diocese,¹⁹⁰ and a study of Newbigin's writing on the church growth movement as articulated by Donald McGavran.¹⁹¹ As a bishop Newbigin toured the villages constantly, stressed the importance of participation in the church fellowship, and involved himself in projects for the uplift of the poor as well as advocacy of their interests. Yet, one of the most notable differences between Newbigin and Azariah was Newbigin's different attitude to church growth. Azariah worked tirelessly for mass movements to Christ. Even during the mid 1930's at a time when conversion was becoming a tense political issue, and carried the stigma of being anti-national activity, Azariah "issued a 'Call to the Church' on behalf of the NCC [National Christian Council], urging Christians to redouble their missionary efforts . . .," in order to meet the opportunity for conversion on account of the increased social unrest and agitation among the Dalit communities across India.¹⁹² In order to support the mass movements to Christ, throughout his time as bishop in the 1920's and 1930's, he "often" participated in special appeals for funds in Britain.¹⁹³ In this way against a rising tide of resistance, Azariah actually stepped up his efforts.

Newbigin was not as strongly motivated by numerical church growth as Azariah, nor as some of his own missionary contemporaries in India, most notably McGavran, who served as a missionary from 1923-1954 in what is now Madhya Pradesh. Newbigin critiqued the church growth movement as initiated by McGavran on several points,¹⁹⁴ one being that it attached excessive value to the numerical increase of the church: the mission of the church could be considered achieved only in terms of a large ingathering of new believers into the confessing church community. Newbigin felt this idea lacked continuity with the approach of Paul who, Newbigin argued, considered his work in a region finished (Rom.15:19) when there were communities that acknowledged Christ as Lord, and not on the basis of all the people brought into

¹⁹⁰ Vedanayagam S. Azariah (1874-1945), was the first Indian bishop of the Anglican church, installed in 1912 as Bishop of Dornakal diocese in what is now Andhra Pradesh. He served in this position till his death in 1945. Azariah is one of the great figures of Indian church history, a saintly and highly able man, totally dedicated to the village churches of his diocese.

¹⁹¹ Donald McGavran (1897-1990) served as a missionary in India for over thirty years (1923-1954). Following his return to the USA he began an extensive teaching and writing ministry that gave birth to the Church Growth Movement. This movement emphasized the primacy of evangelism and church planting in the mission of the church. In 1965 he set up the world renowned School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary.

¹⁹² Susan Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 310.

¹⁹³ S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 230.

¹⁹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 121-159.

the church or having heard the gospel: “When this community exists, the missionary has done the work for which he was sent.”¹⁹⁵ Newbigin draws a distinction between a dynamic commitment to proclaim the gospel and plant churches, as exemplified by Paul, and a preoccupation with numbers:

... there is no evidence that the numerical growth of the church is a matter of primary concern. There is no shred of evidence in Paul’s letters to suggest that he judged the churches by the measure of their success in rapid numerical growth, nor is there anything comparable to the strident cries of some contemporary evangelists that the salvation of the world depends upon the multiplication of believers. There is an incomparable sense of seriousness and urgency as the apostle contemplates the fact that he and all people “must appear before the judgment seat of Christ and as he acknowledges the constraint of Jesus’ love and the ministry of reconciliation that he has received (II Cor. 5:10-21). But this nowhere appears as either an anxiety or an enthusiasm about the numerical growth of the church.”¹⁹⁶

More significantly, Newbigin’s position here is rooted in an almost unrivalled sense of God’s control of history.¹⁹⁷ The entire world and all peoples have been swept up into a movement that is carrying them, like a great river, towards the consummation of the ages. Accordingly, the preaching of the gospel comes as a revelation to people of this great movement that they are *already* a part of: “we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part.”¹⁹⁸ Newbigin draws inspiration for this vision from the great climactic vision of Romans 11, where the driving force of Paul’s mission is revealed as rooted in the “eschatological event” of the great ingathering of Israel and the “fullness” of the Gentiles.¹⁹⁹ In this vision the emphasis is totally on salvation, leading Newbigin to describe it as “Paul’s eschatological vision of salvation.”²⁰⁰ In the light of this event history is known and understood as the place of God’s action with a wisdom and rationality beyond our own comprehension, in which even the hardening of some will be seen to have had a contributing purpose. In the light of this eschatological event and the revelation of

¹⁹⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 128.

¹⁹⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 126.

¹⁹⁷ This was firstly clearly articulated in *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s World Mission* (1st ed., 1963), 26f, in very similar language to that which he was using forty years later, i.e.: “the whole history of these pagan nations is in the hands of God and is propelled by him towards the end which he has revealed to his own people.”

¹⁹⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 125. Nearly forty years earlier Newbigin had written in almost the same language

¹⁹⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 124.

²⁰⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 127.

God's mysterious wisdom at work in the world, hardening some and calling others, there is the clear implication that Newbigin recognizes that "those who die without faith in Christ are not necessarily lost" and "those who are baptized Christians are not necessarily saved."²⁰¹ In the resurrection of all and the consummation of history there will be an ingathering far beyond the boundaries of the confessing church community. The movement in which all peoples have been gathered up, that involved the hardening of some, leads ultimately to this great climactic vision of a humanity reconciled with God.

2.5.2.1 Eschatological Judgment of Secondary Significance for Missions

One of the few changes which took place in Newbigin's eschatology, and that can be perhaps attributed to his experience in India, was a declining emphasis on judgment. While at Westminster Newbigin had formed the conviction, partly through his reading of James Denny's commentary on Romans, that Christ's atoning work on the cross was, in part, a response to the wrath of God on sin.²⁰² In 1941 he could speak on this subject in the following way:

The full establishment of the Kingdom is first of all a day of judgment. The return of Christ is a return as judge. This idea of a day of judgment at which men will be judged according to their deeds and by which their admission or exclusion from the blessed Kingdom will be decided, is *quite vital* to the New Testament eschatology. [emphasis mine]²⁰³

In support of this Newbigin points to the teaching of Christ, and particularly to Romans which he identifies as "quite clearly" indicating a final judgment according to works. In the mid 1950's Newbigin continues to write in a similar way with regard to both the return of Christ and the cross of Christ, with Christ's return involving the consummation of the judgment revealed at the cross.²⁰⁴

However, consideration of a final discriminatory judgment on humanity largely disappears from Newbigin's writing, and appears to have little missiological significance. He consistently emphasizes eschatological renewal and recreation, stating in the mid 1960's, for instance, that the central vision of the New Testament is

²⁰¹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 126.

²⁰² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 29. He described the change in his thought at this time as his becoming "much more of an evangelical than a liberal." By this he appears to mean the evangelical recognition of God's wrath, as well as his love, and the centrality of the cross to the atonement.

²⁰³ L. Newbigin, 'Lecture II, The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,' 29.

²⁰⁴ L. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, 118.

“*dominated* by the great corporate and cosmic completion of God’s work in Christ, whereby all things will be restored to the unity for which they were created in Christ. [emphasis mine]”²⁰⁵ There is a slight shift here from describing judgment as “quite vital” to the N.T. eschatology. While Newbigin recognizes it is possible “to be lost,” he believes that eschatological judgment is of little missiological significance for the present. While the eschatological renewal of all things forms the horizon for action now, judgment does not. Newbigin suggests that Jesus did not encourage preoccupation with judgment: when asked whether only a few would be saved (Lk. 13:23) Jesus responded by advising those gathered to give attention not to others but to their own path (v.24, 25).²⁰⁶ For Newbigin eschatological judgment had significance primarily in relation to the church community, as the elect community responsible to God.²⁰⁷

Perhaps the key reason Newbigin didn’t emphasize eschatological judgment is because he felt the use of this doctrine in the past had contributed to a wrong missiological perspective. He critiqued a wrong categorization of the many who had never heard the gospel as “lost.”²⁰⁸ Newbigin implies that the correct standpoint for missiological reflection on the peoples of the world is in Christ as the omega of history. Understood from this standpoint, it becomes possible to see that those who have not heard the gospel are not “necessarily excluded from participation in God’s on-going and completed work.” The *telos* of all history encompasses the world, and generates the possibility of this participation.

2.6 A Critique of the Relationship of the Kingdom to History

One of the potential problems with Newbigin’s reading of history is that the apocalyptic texts are open to alternative readings from that suggested by Newbigin. The apocalyptic teaching of Christ has been interpreted by some commentators as referring primarily to the destruction of Jerusalem, an event of truly apocalyptic proportions.²⁰⁹ But, a more serious objection to Newbigin’s understanding of the relationship of the kingdom to history, is that, if, as Newbigin believes, there is no

²⁰⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61.

²⁰⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 62.

²⁰⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 79f.

²⁰⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61.

²⁰⁹ N. T. Wright is one of the most noted New Testament scholars who takes this position. He interprets Matthew 24:1-44 as having primary reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (*Matthew for Everyone, Part 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 111ff.

progressive realisation of the kingdom of God on earth and “history only has a goal in the sense that God has promised it,”²¹⁰ then what progression is there? In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s Newbigin suggests a possibility that he doesn’t really return to in later writing that developments in history are leading to a progressively clear decision for or against Christ as he states: “history is the increasingly sharp drawing of the contrast between the true Omega and the various mirages that draw men to their doom.”²¹¹ Writing several years later in *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* he makes the same point: “The whole of human history, after the coming of Christ, until his coming again, is the pressing of this choice to the final issue. . . . The process of polarization goes on to the end. The conflict grows more acute, the decisions become more urgent.”²¹² The end is realised in the classic pre-millennial terms of a final clear and decisive conflict in which opposition to Christ takes clear, visible form: an anti-Christ will take the form of a world-redeemer, a “figure who seems to offer the possibility of one world order in which there will be salvation for everyone.”²¹³ This figure appears to give unity and purpose to a fractious global order, as well as the blessings of prosperity and technological development. This will be a climactic point in history of rebellion against Christ, “the last and greatest efforts of the powers of this world.”²¹⁴ Newbigin suggests that Christ’s return will bring an end to this manifestation of evil.²¹⁵

Locating progressive movement on this sharpening conflict between Christ and the powers is hard to sustain, which may explain why Newbigin’s tends to drop this from his later treatment of the subject of history, as in the chapter ‘The Gospel and World History’ in *The Open Secret* (1978). His analysis made sense in the ‘secular decade’ of the 1960’s when social ideologies and religious renewal movements concentrated their attention on renewal of society and progress towards a new social utopia. These were offering a form of the kingdom of God but apart from Christ. The situation rapidly became blurred: the idea of development and progress remained strong but in a more pragmatic and less idealistic fashion. A second problem with this approach is that there are recurring periods throughout history when the decision for or against Christ is made with acute clarity. Newbigin’s idea of history as a process

²¹⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 103.

²¹¹ L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?*, 24.

²¹² L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 27. . . . 50.

²¹³ L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?*, 100.

²¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?*, 101.

²¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?*, 23f.

of sharpening conflict between Christ and anti-Christ can seem to overlook this recurring nature of conflict within history. The rise of Islam in the seventh century might be considered one such example. Islam offered a holistic answer for man's salvation, though perhaps not in the eschatological terms of modern secular ideologies, and presented itself very decisively as superceding the Christ of the New Testament and all religion that went before; and it did bring a more advanced social order than that realized in medieval Europe. Another example would be the Roman empire, which can be seen as bringing, for a time, an unprecedented measure of peace, order and prosperity to large stretches of Western Europe. Yet, the empire demanded a total allegiance that reached a crisis point for the early church. These very brief counter-examples would suggest that there is a recurrence within history of times in which a decision for Christ is pressed by the movements and developments of history with a greater degree of force than at other times. However, even if this is the case, Newbigin's teaching remains a fruitful way of critiquing the time in which we live: we may not be being driven more rapidly towards the eschaton, but we may well be in a period of rapidly developing crisis in which decision for or against Christ will be pressed with greater force and greater immediate consequences. Yet, it remains difficult to see the connection between this sharpening conflict as history's story and the goal of history as a great cosmic renewal; history is possible only if the events and actions taking place within it have a discernible connection to the end. Newbigin best reflects his own position when here when he describes the period between the coming of Christ and the final consummation of the kingdom as a "gap,"²¹⁶ language that suggests a parenthesis, that the present period of history is more of a stalling period than true history as such.

A more serious objection to Newbigin's approach is that the relationship of the eschatological kingdom to present action is unclear. This can be seen by considering firstly the impetus and energy that diverse millennial views gave to the mission movement of the 19th century.

²¹⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 106.

2.6.1 The Millennial Views of Newbigin's Missionary Predecessors

From William Carey's sermon in 1792 up until the first world war,²¹⁷ the mission movement was almost universally conscious of a vital connection between the reign of God and the church's action, which Bosch describes as "an intimate correlation between mission and millennial expectations."²¹⁸ The reign of God would be realized on earth, primarily through the church's engagement in mission. A clear example of this is William Carey who rooted the church's mission in the biblical prophecies of the kingdom of God on earth, as he states:

If the prophecies concerning the increase of Christ's kingdom be true, and if what has been advanced, concerning the commission given by him to his disciples being obligatory on us, be just, it must be inferred that all Christians ought heartily to concur with God in promoting his glorious designs, for *he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.*²¹⁹

God will act to fulfil His purposes for the world through the church's action. The hope of a global conversion that would follow the church's missionary labours, was preached at the formation of some of the leading missionary societies of the nineteenth century, including the London Missionary Society (1795), the New York Missionary Society (1797), and the Glasgow Missionary Society (1802).²²⁰ Alexander Duff (1806-1878), the Scottish missionary to India who helped pioneer English medium higher education and a figure of wide influence on missions in India,²²¹ in an address around 1839 stated that "the chief end" of the church is "the conversion of the world."²²² One of the characteristics of this millennial view is that there was, in the face of repeated disappointed and hardship, an expectation that in the

²¹⁷ Following Stephen Neill's periodization in *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1986) (2nd ed.), 222.

²¹⁸ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 321.

²¹⁹ W. Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792), 77. Carey interprets the prophecies of Isaiah concerning Israel's restoration and renewal as having an eschatological reference to all humanity. Thus, while Isaiah 60:9 may have an immediate reference to the gathering of the Israelites from exile, Carey interprets it eschatologically as a reference to the gathering of all peoples into the church (p.68). His argument on this particular point is that the spread of shipping and commerce around the world may serve the purpose of God: "This [Is. 60:9] seems to imply that in the time of the glorious increase of the church, in the latter days (of which the whole chapter is undoubtedly a prophecy) commerce shall subserve the spread of the gospel."

²²⁰ Ian Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 153,

²²¹ Following Duff's example, colleges were formed in the 1830's and 40's by missionaries in Bombay, Madras, Nagpur and Masulipatam (Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions*, 234).

²²² A. Duff, *Missions the Chief End of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1839), 8. This reference was found through Ian Murray's similar quotation from the same page (*The Puritan Hope*, 178)

longer term the work would bear fruit. This was shared by Duff and many others working in India.²²³ They believed that, while they may have little visible fruit, their work, in God's hand's would bring a very clear and visible realization of the kingdom of God on earth. This is in contrast with what Newbigin sometimes seems to suggest of the probable transience of any fruit resulting from the church's work.

The two millennial views of pre-millennialism and post-millennialism that emerged in the mid-19th century, as two key shaping influences on Protestant missiology,²²⁴ both continued to emphasize the connection between the realization of the kingdom of God and the church's mission. Pre-millennialism's greater emphasis on the imminent return of Christ, expressed itself primarily as "a motive for mission." A particularly important manifestation of this was the understanding that Christ's return was connected with the church's completion of its work in mission.²²⁵ Pre-millennialism does find in its eschatological vision a strong and clear motivation for missions: if Christ's return depends, in part, on the preaching of the gospel then this work carries a clear obligation and urgency. There is some similarity between Newbigin's thought and pre-millennialism's tendency to emphasize the absence of the kingdom's visible manifestation in the world,²²⁶ although this pre-millennial view draws a very clear connection between the church's present action and the end.

2.6.2 A Comparison with Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*

Newbigin's ecclesiology has some clear similarities with the ecclesiology of Gustavo Gutierrez in *A Theology of Liberation*. Gutierrez locates the church's mission in relation to the kingdom of God as a present reality but also in terms of its eschatological realization, as he states: "This liberating praxis endeavors to transform

²²³ I. Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 171.

²²⁴ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 322. The 'pre' and 'post' traditionally refer to whether Christ's millennial rule described in Revelations 20, occurs before, or after his return. These positions can be distinguished by pre-millennial's greater sense of the imminence of Christ's return and stress on verbal proclamation of the gospel and post-millennialism's greater emphasis on the whole of social and cultural life gradually being permeated by the values of the kingdom.

²²⁵ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 323. Bosch points to, among others, Grattan Guinness's Regions Beyond Missionary Union. Their training college, the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missions trained 1,400-1,500 missionaries between 1873 and its closure in 1915 (Brian Stanley, 'The Future in the Past: Eschatological Vision in British and American Protestant Missionary History,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 51.1 (2000), 105.

²²⁶ Stanley points out that Grattan Guinness, while being a premillennialist, did have the expectation of gospel values permeating some areas of social life, while simultaneously pointing to the growth of various manifestations of evil ('The Future in the Past,' 108).

history in the light of the reign of God.”²²⁷ The kingdom of God is the guide for action in the present: Gutierrez writes that “the attraction of “what is to come” is the driving force of history.”²²⁸ Yet the reign of God will “arrive in its fullness only at the end of times.” With language similar to Newbigin, Gutierrez writes that, “The church must be a sign of the kingdom within human history.”²²⁹ The similarity with Newbigin is particularly clear in his discussion of Vatican II’s “new ecclesiological perspective” in which the Church is viewed “as a sacrament.”²³⁰ This idea of the church as a sacrament, in Gutierrez’s interpretation, gathers up in one concept Newbigin’s identification of the church as sign, instrument and foretaste of the eschatological community of all people gathered into one in Christ, as he states:

The fulfillment and the manifestation of the will of the Father occur in a privileged fashion in Christ, who is called therefore the “mystery of God” For the same reason Sacred Scripture, the Church and the liturgical rites were designated by the first Christian generations by the term mystery, and by its Latin translation *sacrament*. In the sacrament the salvific plan is fulfilled and revealed; that is, it is made present among humans and for humans. But at the same time, it is through the sacrament that humans encounter God. . . . The sacrament is thus the efficacious revelation of the call to communion with God and to the unity of all humankind.²³¹

Like Newbigin, although with less eschatological emphasis, Gutierrez locates the identity and calling of the church in relation to God’s purpose of gathering all humanity into one in community and fellowship in Christ. Gutierrez quotes several times from *Lumen gentium* and this gives some credence to the assertion of one *periti* (leading theologians who participated in the council) to Newbigin that his Household of God had influenced the writing of *Lumen gentium*.²³²

Newbigin and Gutierrez part company in their respective interpretations of the relationship between eschatology and the present. This difference highlights

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²²⁷ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1988), xxx.

²²⁸ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 95.

²²⁹ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xli.

²³⁰ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 146. He describes this as “one of the most important and permanent contributions of the Council.”

²³¹ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 146. References to the church as a sign of humanity’s unity in Christ are scattered throughout the book, i.e.: “The promise of unity is at the heart of Christ’s work; in him human beings are sons and daughters for the Father and brothers and sisters to one another. The church, the community of those who confess Christ as their Lord, is a sign of unity within history (Constitution of the Church, 1)” (p.161).

²³² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 129.

Newbigin's pessimism about the present realization of the kingdom, and the gap between his eschatology and the present. Gutierrez uses the attractive term "eschatological promises" to point to the assurance of the in-breaking of eschatology in the present as "partial fulfillments through liberating historical events."²³³ There is a present realization of the eschaton, but one that simultaneously opens the horizon towards the future. Gutierrez gives motivation for the rigorous and difficult work of liberative action in the present, on the grounds of the assurance that the "gift" of the kingdom can be received, in part, in the present. Newbigin suggests that Gutierrez is over optimistic about the in-breaking of the kingdom in history, failing to adequately reflect the New Testament's apocalyptic interpretation of history, and also fails to understand that God's reign is present in history under the sign of the cross.²³⁴ He writes of the facts of life, namely death, in particular, and the apparent triumph of evil over good, as contradicting the idea of the present realization of the kingdom – a criticism that will be considered in a little more detail in the next chapter.²³⁵

They also part company in terms of understanding mission. Gutierrez gave greater emphasis to mission in the form of political action than Newbigin, as Gutierrez wrote: "The eschatological vision becomes operative, when . . . [it] gives rise to what has been called "political theology.""²³⁶ Newbigin agreed that political action *is* a responsibility of the church, as he states:

To work for the reformation of structures, to expose and attack unjust structures, and, when the point is reached at which all other means have failed, to work for the overthrow of an evil political and economic order is as much a part of the mission of the church as to care for the sick and to feed the hungry.²³⁷

The point of departure between Newbigin and Gutierrez in terms of mission is Gutierrez's emphasis on political action. This kind of activism, is for Newbigin, a part, "but not the whole" of the church's mission in the world.²³⁸ The mission of the church in relation to the realization of the kingdom of God on earth does not give priority to social and political activism. The role of the church as witness to the kingdom of God through the proclaimed word, as well as in its fellowship, is

²³³ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 96.

²³⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 101.

²³⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 103ff.

²³⁶ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 126.

²³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 109.

²³⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 109.

necessary and legitimate action in relation to the end: evangelism and discipleship is a part of the church's mission in the world in relation to the kingdom of God.

2.6.3 M. M. Thomas's Critique of Newbigin's Eschatology

M. M. Thomas critiqued Newbigin for failing to adequately relate the eschatological hope to the historical context.²³⁹ This critique came in response to Newbigin's statement in 'Which Way for "Faith and Order"?' that the goal of mission as "the development of the human community" was a "false eschatology" that failed to take into adequate consideration the facts of death and judgment (Newbigin's criticism had in view the general trend of the WCC Assembly in Uppsala (1968) and its interpretation of "humanization as the goal of mission"²⁴⁰).²⁴¹ Thomas questions Newbigin's lack of attention to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God into the present: "What does it [the kingdom of resurrection-life] mean to historical man?"²⁴² Shortly after raising this question Thomas states: "The glorified humanity of the Risen Christ is to be realised not after death but *within the historical process*, not by isolated individuals but by men in the corporateness of their relations in society and to the cosmos."²⁴³ Hunsberger attempts to rebut Thomas's criticism of Newbigin's eschatology primarily on the grounds that Thomas fails to appreciate Newbigin's sense of the presence of the kingdom as demonstrated in the fact that for Newbigin eschatology is "the revelation of the last things."²⁴⁴ This is not an adequate response to Thomas as Hunsberger half-consciously recognizes when he states that Newbigin's

²³⁹ George Hunsberger in *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* (131ff) points to how Thomas made this criticism of Newbigin's eschatology a number of times over the years, notably in *Salvation and Humanisation* (1971), and in his review of *The Other Side of 1984*, 'Mission and Modern Culture' (1984).

²⁴⁰ This phrase is from the North American Working Group report prepared for the Assembly and published in *The Church for Others and The Church for the World*. Quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392. Bosch states that, "By and large, the Uppsala assembly endorsed this theology." It should perhaps be noted that the idea of "humanization" in itself is not really one that Newbigin appears to have had a problem with (Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 219), which isn't surprising given that humanization referred originally to the new humanity in Jesus Christ. This may explain why he doesn't use the term in his critique of ideas coming out of Uppsala. Rather, he took issue with the way that humanization as the goal of mission was interpreted to mean that mission should be concentrated on the "development of the human community" through participation in the wider struggle for social, economic and political justice.

²⁴¹ L. Newbigin, 'Which Way for "Faith and Order"?' in *What Unity Implies: Six Essays After Uppsala*, ed. Reinhard Groscurth (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1969), 119.

²⁴² It is worth pointing out that Thomas doesn't respond to Newbigin's point about a true eschatology incorporating judgment and concentrates on the other aspect of Newbigin's "true" eschatology, namely the renewal of all things,

²⁴³ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Critical Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras: Christian Literature Service for CISRS, 1971), 9, 10.

²⁴⁴ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 133.

“restrained view of the importance of an actual Christian community as witness to that reign contributes to this difference in eschatological perspective.”²⁴⁵ As Hunsberger partially indicates here, Thomas’s frustration with Newbigin’s thought is explained in that for Newbigin realization of the eschatological age happens primarily within the church. This is borne out by Newbigin’s concluding discussion in ‘Which Way for “Faith and Order”?’ Newbigin rightly points to the fact that the unity of humanity in Jesus Christ takes visible form in the visible unity of the church, as he states:

The true service which the Church can render to the unity of mankind is its own living witness to the reality of a restored and shared sonship manifested in the existence of a reconciled family embracing all men of every description – manifested in its life and interpreted by its preaching of Jesus Christ.²⁴⁶

While the church’s structures had to be brought into question and developed in response to the Spirit, Newbigin remained consistent in his emphasis that the place of any positive realization of the eschaton was in a visibly unified church, unified in its fellowship and unified in its openness and invitation to the world to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ.

2.6.4 The Lack of Appeal in an Indian Context

The shortcomings in Newbigin’s interpretation of the relationship between the reign of God and the present can be seen in its possible lack of appeal to the Indian sensibility. There are no critiques of Newbigin’s interpretation of the kingdom by Indian theologians, so it is necessary to consider this point in relation to P. Chenchiah’s critique of Kraemer’s, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. While Kraemer and Newbigin cannot be identified there are sufficient parallels between them to justify this comparison, and Chenchiah’s criticisms of Kraemer focus primarily on the absence of a note of realisation in his writing.

Chenchiah reviewed Kraemer’s book in an extensive essay that occupies more than sixty pages of *Rethinking Christianity in India*.²⁴⁷ This is a valuable reflection from on an Indian perception of Kraemer’s book and ideas, and in him, of one

²⁴⁵ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 133.

²⁴⁶ L. Newbigin, ‘Which Way for “Faith and Order”?’ 130.

²⁴⁷ Pandipeddi Chenchiah, ‘The Christian Message in a Non Christian World,’ in *Rethinking Christianity in India*, eds. D. M. Devasahayam & A. N. Sudarisanam (Madras: A. N. Sudarisanam, 1939), 143-196. This is not a term that Kraemer uses of God. Chenchiah is using it to express what he perceives as the abstraction that Kraemer has turned God into.

important strain of Western theological thought. Chenchiah's central, and most pointed criticism is of Kraemer's emphasis on God's transcendence and otherness to the world, which Chenchiah identifies as a vision of God as "absolute."²⁴⁸ While Chenchiah does at times seem to be reading too much of his perception of Barth into Kraemer, his criticism has some justification. Kraemer's key concept of "biblical realism" is intended to point to the otherness of God to man, "that God is God, that He is the Absolute Sovereign and the only rightful Lord. . . . In this point consist the originality and uniqueness of the Bible."²⁴⁹ This concept of "biblical realism" reflected a concern within the European branch, in particular, of the Western missionary movement to avoid any confusion between Christ and other religions. Chenchiah's criticism of Kraemer, which discloses what can be seen as Kraemer's polemical purpose, is that the true starting point for our conception of God is Christological. Starting from this position God cannot be conceived as other, but is to be known as immediate, present, as he states: "Our Lord is the measure of the true criticism of the absolute. In his presence we feel the 'relation' of God to us – his nearness and intimacy Jesus is not God, the absolute, but God as standing in relation to man – not God who operates vertically and in crisis."²⁵⁰ Even the key text, of God at Mount Sinai, sometimes used to point to the otherness of God actually shows God as "human, sometimes emotional and has very little of the absolute." For Chenchiah the whole logic of the incarnation is of God becoming immanent, present to the world, "The Incarnation has its spear head towards creation."²⁵¹ There is in this sense an element of harmony and continuity between God and the life of humanity. Conscious of Kraemer's intention to distinguish Christ and the religions, Chenchiah briefly indicates how beginning from the incarnation can serve this purpose: God in Christ, and through the Spirit, permanently dwells on earth as distinct from Hinduism where this is periodic, to fulfill a purpose; that in Him is the realization "for the first time in history" of human identity with the divine.²⁵² One of the great strengths of Chenchiah's critique is that it shows the contextual nature of theology: while for Newbigin Kramer's book was "liberating," resolving particular problems and pressures, from the quite different perspective of an Indian theologian it is

²⁴⁸ P. Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non Christian World,' 158ff.

²⁴⁹ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 3rd ed. (London: James Clark & Co., Ltd., 1956), 63.

²⁵⁰ P. Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non Christian World,' 159.

²⁵¹ P. Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non Christian World,' 168.

²⁵² P. Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non Christian World,' 159, 168.

unconvincing. Chenchiah briefly indicates the legitimacy of an Indian interpretation that points to the experience of Christ in terms of harmony, immediateness, presence, and realisation.

Chenchiah, with direct relevance for our consideration of Newbigin, critiques Kraemer's vision of the kingdom of God for the lack of any note of the realisation of the kingdom within history. He points, as evidence of this, to Kraemer's description of the kingdom as a "transcendental, supra-historical order of life" that "can never be realized in any social, economic, political or cultural order."²⁵³ Chenchiah again points to the absence of any note of realisation as a great weakness in the presentation of the gospel in that it provides no adequate reason for a Hindu to become a disciple of Christ:

What is it you are going to preach to the Hindu and for what purpose are we going to ask him to renounce his faith? . . . For chasing after a Kingdom of God which can never be realised? For aspiring after a Jesus who though born as we are of human mother can never be attained by us? . . . Realisation has been the heart and soul of the Indian view of spiritual life.²⁵⁴

Chenchiah's criticism again points to the contextual nature of theology. The background to Kraemer's position lay partially in his response to the American Social Gospel movement²⁵⁵ which under the banner of terms such as "realization of the Kingdom of God," had advocated social reform as the heart of the mission enterprise.²⁵⁶ Kraemer justifiably accused this movement of a false optimism and made the same point that Newbigin would repeatedly return to that the responsibility of the church is to be a witness to the kingdom, and not to bring the kingdom to realization in the world.²⁵⁷ As valid as these points may be, Kraemer's stress, like

²⁵³ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 93 in Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World,' 172. Kraemer makes the point even more forcefully on the following page when he describes the preoccupation of the New Testament writers as being the building up of the church and their lack of any real interest "with the world and its great spheres of life," and of their "real concern" being "other-worldly, the transcendental Kingdom of God."

²⁵⁴ P Chenchiah, 'The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World,' 172.

²⁵⁵ The American Social Gospel movement was a blend of theological/biblical ideas and insights from the social sciences mixed with American optimism: the kingdom was interpreted as a "present ethical reality" that would be progressively realized within history and society; this realization depended primarily on the transformation of the social and economic environment and only secondarily on deliverance from indwelling sin (Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 328ff). The Social Gospel movement developed during the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

²⁵⁶ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 47.

²⁵⁷ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 49. Kraemer writes of the church as a "messenger," and as having an "apostolic obligation towards God and the world" (p.49).

Newbiggin's, on the absence of a real, visible manifestation of the kingdom in history may have strength and weight in a Western context, but can be interpreted in an Indian context as a gospel without real content.

2.6.5 A Strength in the Indian Context

A strength of Newbiggin's eschatology is that it created adequate room for a critique of the present. The understanding that the kingdom is not realized through gradual progress, but rather through the climactic act of God, engenders a needed cautious approach to historical developments. Vinay Lal,²⁵⁸ a historian of Indian origin, gives a word of warning about an eschatology that becomes confused with history. Reflecting on the growing interest in Indian history, particularly among the second generation Indians in north America, and the way that Indian historians have pioneered subaltern history, Lal writes that this focus on history is in discontinuity with Indian tradition in which "ahistoricism is one of the defining features of Indian civilization."²⁵⁹ The Indian intellectual tradition, including both Hindu and Muslim communities, has given little priority to historical writing and a historical consciousness. Lal points to the unique effort of Bankimcandra Chatterji (1838-94), who driven in part by the belief that a historical consciousness was a necessity for a strong sense of national identity and community became a writer of historical novels, and in so doing became the "the first practitioner anywhere in India of that genre."²⁶⁰ Chatterji pursued this project in a more directly academic manner with "numerous essays" and a "trilogy of historical, philosophical and theological treatises." But as Lal explains a concern for history is at odds with Hindu thought at very fundamental point. Western thought, influenced by the Bible story, retains a strong sense of progress in history towards a better future, "from original sin to final redemption," whereas Hindu thought rejects the idea of progress in this present age so that, "History cannot then be considered as the ascent of man but rather his continuing

²⁵⁸ Vinay Lal is currently Associate Professor in the History Department at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and has written widely on Indian cultural and social issues.

²⁵⁹ Vinay Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

²⁶⁰ V. Lal, *The History of History*, 41.

degeneration.”²⁶¹ Lal affirms this aspect of Hindu thought as “one of its greatest attractions,”²⁶² and rejects the Western sense of history as “servitude.”

Lal rejected the idea of a single historical narrative (which he saw as implicit to Islam, Judaism and Christianity), on the grounds that in practice it meant being controlled by another, as he states: “The acceptance of history is nothing but the narrowing of man’s options, the submission of a people to the reigning ideas of the time”²⁶³ Although Christianity may speak of a Savior, in practice what happened is that a Christian interpretation of history could all too easily slip into giving theological justification to a current historical movement, and therefore preclude critique and search for alternatives leading to, “the submission of a people to the reigning ideas of the time. It is easy to see how history could become “servitude”. Lal believes that freedom from a sense of history has far more positive implications for humanity, which he finds exemplified in Gandhi. Gandhi’s own application of the methods of non-violent resistance on a national scale was “unprecedented,” lacking any kind of historical continuity.²⁶⁴ By contrast with Gandhi, Lal points to one of Bankim’s motivations for historical writing being the establishment of the military traditions and prowess of India, particularly his native Bengal. The implication is that Gandhi’s lack of concern for history freed him to find creative and new paths of action whereas an excessive regard for history leads into predictable and potentially destructive action.

As already mentioned, Lal’s point helps indicate one of the strengths of Newbigin’s thought. Newbigin did not believe that history as such is leading towards the kingdom of God on earth, and he emphasized that it didn’t contain any alternative way of salvation. But, in contrast with Lal, he believed that we have to live in continuity with the historical life, death and resurrection of Christ, something that is arguably seen in Gandhi. Gandhi’s application of non-violence on a national was not “unprecedented” but was in historical continuity with Christ’s own way, as Gandhi

²⁶¹ V. Lal, *The History of History*, 55.

²⁶² As Lal points out Indian historiography began to develop only in the nineteenth century, and even a figure as significant for Indian history as Mahmud of Ghazni, only began to come to consciousness around this time, and that with the encouragement of the British. Lal, *The History of History*, 29.

²⁶³ V. Lal, *The History of History*, 60. Lal also rejects the idea of “multiple eschatologies” here, a point that seems far less understandable.

²⁶⁴ V. Lal, *The History of History*, 61. Lal points out that Gandhi was an exception among leading Hindu nationalists in rejecting the historicity of texts like the Mahabharata (“hopeless as history”) and figures like Krishna, and instead focusing on their treatment of what he described as “eternal verities” (quotations from ‘My Jail Experiences-XI,’ *Young India*, 4 Sep. 1924.

himself was aware. The failures of history do not lead us to a rejection of all history, but rather serve to underline the need for a reorientation and effort to live in continuity with the rewritten history that is in Christ, as Newbigin states: “the clue to the meaning of history is found in the events recorded in the New Testament.” Christ is therefore the historical precedent that should be guiding our life in the present, and in whom we can critique the ongoing movement of history.

2.7 Eschatology and the Religions

From his comparative silence on the relationship between eschatology and religion, it can probably be assumed that Newbigin believed in the relative insignificance of this issue. This was not, however, the perspective of some Indian theologians, particularly Catholic, who from the 1960’s onwards have found in eschatology a foundation for a form of fulfilment theory of religion.²⁶⁵ According to this the religions would find their fulfilment at the eschaton, and that it was therefore possible to see a joint movement by the religions towards the eschaton as expressed in this statement by the Catholic church in India: “history will culminate in a new form of Existence wherein the meaning and significance of each religion will be revealed and all will find their fulfilment in the ultimate vision of the Divine Mystery when God will be everything to everyone (1 Cor 15:28).”²⁶⁶ Following this logic a Catholic consultation at Patna, India, said in its statement that the church “moves on with them [the non-Christian] toward the consummation of all things in Christ.”²⁶⁷ There are parallels between this and Newbigin’s interpretation of history being “gathered up” by Christ into one history. It is certainly a position that could be derived from Newbigin: if there is a convergence of the histories of nations and peoples into the history of Christ, then it could follow that religion, which continues to be an important part of the life of the people of India, has also been “gathered up” in this movement.

It seems Newbigin did believe in the possibility of an eschatological fulfilment of religion, although he is very cautious of this approach.²⁶⁸ Identifying religion as one

²⁶⁵ Bob Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2004), 217f.

²⁶⁶ Dialogue Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Second Revised ed., (Delhi, 1989), 112, quoted in B. Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, 218.

²⁶⁷ The Declaration of the ‘All-India Consultation on Evangelization,’ Patna, 3-8 October, 1973, quoted in B. Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, 218.

²⁶⁸ L. Newbigin, ‘Review of *No Other Gospel: Christianity Among the World Religions* by Carl E. Braaten’, in *First Things*, No.24 June/July 1992: 57f.

of the “principalities and powers” (Col.1:16), Newbigin applies to it Paul’s teaching that it has been created for Christ and redeemed by Christ, being restored to its proper relationship to Him through a stripping away of its “totalitarian claims.”²⁶⁹ In other words, Christ has brought religion subservient to Himself, but clearly the religious system continues to press its independence and assert its own authority. The potential implication of this for religion is that it can find its fulfilment in Christ, but only by passing through conversion:

If this is applied to the matter of a Christian theology of the religions . . . [it would mean] that Christ is the true eschatological fulfillment of the religions. But it would mean as well that this fulfillment comes only through the missionary encounter and through conversion. There is no unbroken line from the religions (including Christianity as a developing historical movement) to the End. Jesus said, “I came not to destroy but to fulfill,” and Paul the Christian could affirm this (Rom. 3:31), but only after a radical conversion to the one whom he had seen as subverter of the law.²⁷⁰

Newbigin’s understanding of Christ as the “eschatological fulfillment of the religions” is to be distinguished from some of the Catholic thinkers noted above, in that for Newbigin the religions don’t all continue on separate lines, finally converging in the eschaton. There is a point of convergence prior to the eschaton that happens “through the missionary encounter and through conversion.” He seems to be suggesting here Christ centered fellowships that have developed within the different religions, and which have some form of connection within the wider church community. We shall return to a consideration of this idea in chapter five.

In the context of a socialist democratic government and movement in India, Newbigin appears to have seen religion as a force of diminishing significance in India’s life. Although he felt that matters of the secular were becoming the center of attention so that “the question of the finality of Jesus Christ is posed not so much with respect to his relation to the religious values of the non-Christian religions, as with respect to his meaning for the secular history of mankind,”²⁷¹ reality does not support this view. Religious belief and religious practices remain intermingled in people’s consciousness and there is a need to address those issues, while also drawing attention to eschatology. As Hiebert so famously pointed out with reference to villagers in south India, if the religious beliefs and practices of a people are overlooked the issues

²⁶⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘Review of *No Other Gospel*,’ 57.

²⁷⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Review of *No Other Gospel*,’ 58.

²⁷¹ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 45.

these may address, such as how to find healing, remains unaddressed.²⁷² This can lead eventually to a dual religious system in which elements of the old religion are practiced even while Christian identity and practice remains “primary.” Panikkar also rejects this idea for similar reasons that it fails to appreciate the extent to which the religious is a part of the person.²⁷³ He rejects for instance as inadequate, C.F. Andrew’s statement that, “I do not preach the gospel to Hindus, I preach the Gospel to men.”²⁷⁴ In order to effectively communicate Christ’s significance in terms of history and eschatology, there does seem need for an interaction with religious thought and practices.

Panikkar’s sense of the irrelevance of eschatology to theology,²⁷⁵ and indeed its problematic nature, should be noted as a stream of thought in Indian theology that is at odds with Newbigin on this point. Furthermore, a brief consideration of Panikkar’s approach can help to expose potential deficiencies in Newbigin’s emphasis on eschatology. A reason for Newbigin’s lack of interaction with religion is a presupposition that their lack of historical and eschatological focus renders largely redundant the questions they might ask as he states: “The perfect goal is not a timeless reality hidden now behind the multiplicity and change which we experience; it is yet to be achieved; it lies at the end of the road.”²⁷⁶ As can be seen here Newbigin largely turns away from the significance of an immediate “timeless reality,” an approach which Panikkar believes reduces and devalues present human experience as provisional and lacking in reality, as Panikkar explains:

[not dreaming] of a denouement in a horizontal future that nobody will ever see, but rather to envision a transhistorical present that neither denies the temporal nor drowns in it. . . . Human freedom is possible and real, not merely for our successors, or in *another* life; but now, in the tempiternal present, the deepest core of the *humanum*.²⁷⁷

²⁷² Paul Hiebert, ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,’ *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. X, No. 1 (January, 1982), 35-47.

²⁷³ Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1964), 56.

²⁷⁴ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 56, n2.

²⁷⁵ One of four “fundamental theses” of Panikkar’s work identified by Joseph Prabhu in his foreword to *The Rhythm of Being* (2010), Panikkar’s final book, is that “time is not to be conceived as linear, moving toward an eschatological end but “tempiternity,” the temporal and the eternal co-existing with each other.” As summarized by Peter Phan, ‘Review of *The Rhythm of Being*,’ *Catholic Books Review*, accessed 22 October 2011, <http://www.catholicbooksreview.org/2011/panikkar.htm>.

²⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 66.

²⁷⁷ Raymond Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 172.

Panikkar developed this point through reflection on the myth of Sunahsepa.²⁷⁸ In brief, Sunahsepa is a young Brahmin who has been led, through no fault of his own, into an inescapable situation where he has to be ritually sacrificed. At the point of death Sunahsepa prays to the gods, in what is a large section of the myth, and is rewarded for this by deliverance from death and instatement as the son of the leading Brahmin priest officiating the ritual. One of the key facets of this myth, according to Panikkar concerns the realization of freedom within the present. Fundamental to the nature of man, argues Panikkar, is a “transcendental desire,” which is the yearning for the realization of the eternal in our lives: “a life that escapes the banal, a life where we go beyond the limits of time and space that seem to so imprison human existence.”²⁷⁹ Time and space are seen as oppressive realities on one level and are identified by Panikkar with *samsara*, the perpetual cycle of life, death and rebirth. The prayers of Sunahsepa at the point of death are prayers of desperation, a plea for intervention in an utterly hopeless situation, in which the laws of cause and effect have caught and are crushing Sunahsepa. The answer to his prayer and Sunahsepa’s restoration is to a new life, one that has realized *moksha*, liberation from *samsara* the relentless control of the laws of time and space. This all points to a life in the world now that is interpenetrated with that which is beyond time and space, the “tempiternal,” as Panikkar explains: “. . . we must not wait an ‘other’ life or a ‘beyond’ to this life, but that we can realize it here and now, once we have been liberated like Sunahsepa on the altar of sacrifice.”²⁸⁰ Like Lal, Panikkar points to the absence of eschatology within Hindu mythology and thought as a strength, which is for Panikkar that we are focused on the realization of true and authentic life in the present.

While Panikkar’s rejection of eschatology is partially bound up with a sense of the plurality of truth, and an under emphasis on the person of Christ and his historical reality,²⁸¹ he does make an important point for a thinker like Newbigin. Newbigin’s thought at times does appear to need a counter balancing emphasis on the immediacy of Christ, and the presence of the kingdom of God.

²⁷⁸ Contained in the Aitareya Brahmana.

²⁷⁹ R. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 160.

²⁸⁰ R. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Heremeneutics*, 162.

²⁸¹ Panikkar believes that eschatology is oppressive in that it is dogmatic and binding, closing the door to a plurality of truth: “the absence of eschatology entitles the myth to claim to be acceptable to several metaphysics and cosmologies,” *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 169.

2.8 Conclusion

One of the key points that Bosch highlights for eschatology is that it should give significant impetus to present action, as he states: “The vision of that coming reign of God translates itself into a *radical* concern for the “penultimate” [emphasis mine] This [that the “already” outweighs the “not yet”] is what the post-modern paradigm proclaims in respect to eschatology.”²⁸² To what extent does Newbigin’s eschatology give significant impetus and direction to the church’s mission in the present? One of the strengths of Newbigin’s eschatology is that he makes comprehensible the great gap that exists between the vision of a renewed earth in Christ, and the actual realities of the world today. He makes possible a “radical concern” for the present, a present in which the church often finds itself marginalized and silenced whether by Hindu or Islamic extremism or other forces, by firmly connecting the eschatological vision to the cross of Christ. The present experience of the kingdom of God and progress towards its realisation occurs through participation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. This means that a “radical concern for the penultimate” entails suffering and struggle, a struggle that can only be sustained through the church’s spiritual resources as it indwells Christ. The cross of Christ is unavoidable both as the way forward, but also as the place where the church is strengthened and enabled for its task in the world today. This will now be considered in further detail in the following chapter with reference to India’s social structure.

²⁸² D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 521. Bosch states that, while “there is today widespread agreement that eschatology determines the horizon of all Christian understanding . . . we are still groping for its precise meaning.”

Chapter 3

Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God

3.1 Introduction

Newbigin's interpretation of the atonement has received surprisingly little recognition, with the exception of M. Goheen.²⁸³ Goheen points to how "in the last three decades of Newbigin's life it is the eschatological context that dominates his understanding of the atonement,"²⁸⁴ and explains that one reason why such a fundamental part of Newbigin's thought has been sometimes overlooked is due to how different it is from a traditional Protestant interpretation of the atonement:²⁸⁵

To begin, when one compares Newbigin's understanding of the atonement with classical theories it is clear that he has moved some of the familiar landmarks that make recognition immediately clear. An individual notion has been replaced by a corporate and cosmic understanding; a legal framework has been replaced by an eschatological and historical setting; the cross is the starting point for discussion and not simply a part of a larger system.²⁸⁶

As Newbigin's attention moved from the issues raised by the formation of the Church of South India in 1947 to a more considered reflection on the theological rationale for mission from the late 1950's onwards, he emphasized different aspects of the atonement. From the late 1950's he gave particular emphasis to the conflict-victory aspect of the cross of Christ, and frequently located the church's mission in

²⁸³ M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 150. However, Goheen sees the conflict-victory theme as having lesser prominence than Newbigin's identification of Christ as the representative man, the one who "represents all humanity in his death and resurrection" (p.149). Connected with this he explains is Newbigin's "frequent reference to the cross as the ultimate act of identification or solidarity with the world." I would suggest that Christ as the representative man is an aspect of the conflict-victory theme: Christ overcomes the powers in the place of humanity, and it is in participation in Christ that we can experience His victory over these same powers.

²⁸⁴ M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 149.

²⁸⁵ i.e. the Westminster Confession of Faith. The traditional interpretation of the atonement within the Protestant tradition, at the point when Newbigin was writing, emphasized the justification aspect of atonement, where justification is understood as the individual declared and considered righteous before God. This act of justification presupposed distributive justice as the dominant concept of justice (a merit based justice: the reward of good, and the punishment of evil) according to which in the death of Christ, Christ was punished in our place, thereby satisfying the justice of the Father, and allowing a verdict of innocent to be passed on man. In this interpretation the cross of Christ is the key event and the resurrection could be seen as the sign that the justice of God had been satisfied.

²⁸⁶ M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 152.

the world today in relation to this. This is helpful for understanding the church's mission in India today in relation to the current social structures.

3.2 Newbigin's Interpretation of the Atonement

Newbigin's emphasis on the corporate aspects of the atonement became evident in two early works, *The Reunion of the Church* and *The Household of God*. Here Newbigin took a position on justification that has some similarities with the interpretation of justification currently being advocated by the renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright.²⁸⁷ In *The Reunion of the Church* Newbigin argued that justification is to be understood in relation to the community of God's people, and not only in relation to the individual, as traditionally the case in Reformed theology.²⁸⁸ Justification is identified as that declaration that establishes God's community. In *The Household of God* Newbigin sees justification as the ground for giving full recognition to the visible church, with all its faults, as being the community of God.²⁸⁹ In the context of the unification movement towards the formation of the Church of South India in 1947, Newbigin found in the doctrine of justification the theological basis for a sufficiently robust ecclesiology to accommodate this process. By pointing to how the "being of the Church . . . rest[s] not upon the conformity of the Church to God's will, but upon the grace of God who justifies the ungodly" Newbigin was able to point to how elements of the ecclesiastical tradition, such as episcopal ordination, could not be seen as essential to the being and constitution of the church.²⁹⁰ Following this early, and arguably significant, treatment of justification Newbigin appears to have largely dropped the subject. *Sin and Salvation* written in 1956 a few years after both *The Reunion of the Church* and *The Household of God* appears to go back to an individualistic interpretation of justification.²⁹¹

Newbigin's early interpretation of justification in relation to the church as the community of God's people found direct expression in his preaching in his earlier

²⁸⁷ See N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). Wright understands justification as a declaration of righteousness where righteousness is to be understood in covenantal terms, as referring to being given a place in the the community of God's people.

²⁸⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, xv. The sixth chapter (pp.84-103) is focused on the doctrine of justification by faith and is Newbigin's most extended treatment of the subject.

²⁸⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 29.

²⁹⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, xxxiii.

²⁹¹ L. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, 104-110.

years, at least. This can be seen in his brief references to his evangelistic work in the villages around Kanchipuram, and later in the villages of Madurai diocese. Here Newbigin's evangelistic address frequently seems to have taken place in the context of a church meeting in the village in a public place, often because there was no building, or the building was too small to accommodate the audience. These times offered the opportunity to address the Hindu and Muslim villagers who would gather in that place. He writes of his desire to preach Christ and His cross "so that all of them, Hindus and Christians equally, may understand and believe."²⁹² He begins his address by speaking about the union that had then taken place to form the CSI and of Christ's death to "draw all the children of God into one" and of God's healing work in reuniting a divided church. In the statement "all the children of God" we see Newbigin's sense of the implication of Christ's work as a gathering of all peoples into one great community and fellowship. Although Newbigin never used the term "justification," his understanding of its meaning is implicit to his interpretation of the unification of humanity in the eschaton: that great gathering of all humanity into one in Christ is rooted in the justification of all that took place in Jesus Christ.

Yet, the key development in Newbigin's interpretation of the atonement took place from the late 1950's onwards when his attention shifted from a preoccupation with ecclesiology to a consideration of the theological basis for mission. He started consistently interpreting the atonement in relation to the reign of God, as an act of victory over corrupted powers.

3.2.1 Christ as Christus Victor

The fundamental problem in the world, that the atonement addresses, is a world and human life enslaved to principalities and powers that have assumed an absolute status that belongs only to the kingdom of God. For Newbigin the Bible story is the story of the liberation of the world from the control of these powers so that all things may be brought into harmony with the reign of God over the earth. In the context of a discussion of secularization in the mid-1960's, Newbigin described "liberation history" as the "central theme of the Bible". His description of how secularization is a "continuation" of this liberation-history shows that by liberation Newbigin has in mind the deliverance of the life of humanity from the control of powers - in this case

²⁹² L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 32.

powers that prevent proper stewardship of the creation and powers that are dehumanizing:

In so far as it rests upon the freedom of man to exercise a delegated authority over the natural world without fear of any ‘powers’ other than the Creator himself; in so far as it seeks the freedom, dignity and welfare of man as man and challenges all authorities which deny this common human dignity; in so far as it brings all mankind into a growingly interdependent unity of life.²⁹³

Newbigin doesn’t give an overview of the Bible story to support his assertion of “liberation history” as “the Bible’s central theme.” He has for instance no account of the fall of Adam and Eve that interprets the fall in relation to the powers, and there is no explanation of how the long history of Israel is to be interpreted in this light. Nevertheless, Newbigin does explain the central events of the Bible story - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - as an action of liberation. The death of Jesus Christ is explained as a victory over all the principalities and powers that are ranged against humanity: “As all things were created through Christ, so all things are to be brought to their consummation through Him, who by His death has conquered all hostile powers, and by His resurrection has inaugurated the new creation.”²⁹⁴ The death of Christ is centrally concerned with the life of humanity in this world, and the realization of a life in this world where humanity is at liberty to participate in the fullness of God’s purpose for the world.

Newbigin’s interpretation of the atonement has clear similarities with Gustav Allen’s description of the “Classic” Model of the atonement, which he identifies as the model of the atonement of the early centuries of the church. Allen explains that the “central theme” is the “Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ - Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”²⁹⁵ Allen identifies this understanding of the atonement as clearly articulated by Irenaeus of Lyons, of whom he states that the “Divine victory . . . forms the central element in the *recapitulatio*, the restoring and the perfecting of the creation.”²⁹⁶ As with Newbigin, for Irenaeus the death of

²⁹³ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 38.

²⁹⁴ L. Newbigin, ‘Bible Studies Given at the National Christian Council Triennial Assembly, Shillong, October 1967,’ *National Christian Council Review* 88 (January, February, March, April 1968), 182.

²⁹⁵ G. Allen, *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1931), 20.

²⁹⁶ G. Allen, *Christus Victor*, 37.

Christ is the “final and decisive battle” in this divine victory over the powers that enslave man.²⁹⁷ While Newbigin doesn’t use Irenaeus’ concept of ransom and Newbigin’s understanding of the powers is explained in more social and political terms in contrast with Irenaeus terms of sin, death and the devil, this interpretation of the atonement as conflict-victory remains the same.

Newbigin’s interpretation of the atonement has more connection with church of the first centuries than with the dominant Western models that since Anselm have tended to a preoccupation with the individual and legal dimensions of the atonement.²⁹⁸ Karl Barth, points to how the inclusion of eschatology in the atonement is a departure from the Protestant theological tradition, in which the atonement was considered in terms of justification and sanctification alone.²⁹⁹ Although Barth incorporated the eschatological under the title “calling” as one of the three “elements of the work of reconciliation,³⁰⁰ he doesn’t appear to give prominence to the conflict-victory dimension and there is an arguable lack of clarity to the relationship between the atonement and the eschaton.³⁰¹

3.2.2 Newbigin’s *Christus Victor* Theme and Other Theologians

As suggested in the reference to Barth, in the late 1950’s and 1960’s Newbigin was not the only thinker working out a reinterpretation of the atonement in broader terms of the kingdom of God and its eschatological consummation on earth, but he was one of few to emphasize the conflict-victory dimension of the atonement. This can be seen in comparison with J. Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*, translated into English in 1964, which is itself partially drawing on the writing of the German New Testament scholar Ernst Kasemann (1906-98), and the German Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad (1901-71). The similarity is indicated by Newbigin’s statement that after delivering the lectures that were published as *The Finality of*

²⁹⁷ G. Allen, *Christus Victor*, 46.

²⁹⁸ G. Allen, *Christus Victor*, 17ff.

²⁹⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 108. He identified justification, sanctification and calling as the three different parts to the work of atonement (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 147).

³⁰⁰ These three are fundamental to the structure of his discussion of the Doctrine of Reconciliation and initially explained with reference to the church (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, pp. 93-122). Barth describes each as “elements” of the work of reconciliation, but with justification having a place of particular importance as the “basis” for the other two (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 101ff., 527). He described justification as having a “special function” (p.520).

³⁰¹ Barth explains the connection in terms of the new humanity created in Christ’s death and resurrection as being a “beginning,” rooted in the fact that, “the being of man in Jesus Christ is . . . a being under and with the promise” (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 109).

Christ he was given a copy of Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* and explains that if he had received this prior to the preparation of the lectures, "the whole argument of the lectures would have been immeasurably strengthened."³⁰² The influence of Moltmann's focus on the resurrection is perhaps evident in an address Newbigin gave one later in 1967 when he spoke of the resurrection as the inauguration of the new creation.³⁰³ In *The Finality of Christ*, Newbigin spoke of the relationship between the death and resurrection of Christ and eschatology, stating for instance that:

The New Testament picture is dominated by the great corporate and cosmic completion of God's work in Christ, whereby all things will be restored to the unity for which they were created in Christ, and God will be all in all. . . .
 To claim finality for Christ is to endorse the judgment of the apostles that in this life, death and resurrection God himself was uniquely present and that therefore the meaning and origin and end of all things was disclosed"³⁰⁴

Newbigin indicates here that the whole life, death and resurrection of Christ is the ground and foundation of eschatology and the consummation of God's purpose for the world. The difference between Newbigin and Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* becomes apparent at this point. Moltmann places great emphasis on the resurrection as the great eschatological event, with very little corresponding explanation of the relationship of the death of Christ to eschatology, stating for example that "One could say that Christian eschatology is the study of the tendency of the resurrection and future of Christ."³⁰⁵ Moltmann is clearly conscious of the world as a site of conflict, writing for example of the "contradiction inherent in this unredeemed world,"³⁰⁶ and shared Newbigin's rejection of the idea that the kingdom would be the fruit of immanent process, writing that it is "impossible to conceive the kingdom of God in deistic terms of salvation history, as a result of world history, or of a divine plan for the

³⁰² L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 8.

³⁰³ L. Newbigin, 'Bible Studies Given at the National Christian Council Triennial Assembly, Shillong, October 1967,' *National Christian Council Review* 88 (January, February, March, April 1968): 9-14, 73-77, 125-131, 177-185. See J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, pp. 197-229.

³⁰⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61. . . . 76.

³⁰⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 195. Carl Braaten points to how *A Theology of Hope* had "no penetrating analysis of the relevance of the cross to a theology of history, a critical theory of society, and a liberating praxis in real life" ('A Trinitarian Theology of the Cross,' *The Journal of Religion*, 56 (1), (Jan. 1976), 113.

³⁰⁶ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 195.

world.”³⁰⁷ However, he doesn’t explain the connection of the death of Christ to eschatology. The critical point for Newbigin, that eschatology has been inaugurated in Christ in his conflict and victory over the powers, and of the world as an ongoing site of conflict is missing from *Theology of Hope*.

Of all the Indian theologians, Newbigin’s interpretation of the atonement is closest to M. M. Thomas, one of the most notable figures of Indian theology in the latter half of the twentieth century. There is agreement between M. M. Thomas and Newbigin in their understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ, and its relationship to the consummation of creation.³⁰⁸ Thomas’s theology has been described in terms very similar with Newbigin, as operating within a “creation-fall-redemption-consummation paradigm” that is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Christ:

The theology of M.M. Thomas cannot be understood apart from his Christology, for he views the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the guarantee of God’s redemptive purpose for humanity. Christ thus becomes the central focus of the creation-fall-redemption-consummation paradigm.³⁰⁹

More notably for our present discussion, Thomas shares with Newbigin an understanding of the cross as victory over the powers of sin and death ranged against man, leading Bird to comment that the, “image of Christ as *Christus Victor*” is “central to Thomas’s theology.”³¹⁰ For Thomas the resurrection is, as with Newbigin, the event that marks the inauguration of the new creation, and establishes its reality and the surety of its consummation: “the resurrection message becomes significant as the source of hope for the transformation of society and human relations within the contemporary world.”³¹¹

3.2.3 Christ as *Christus Victor* and the Suffering Church

The conflict-victory dimension of the atonement became for Newbigin the primary hermeneutic in understanding the church’s mission in the world in relation to

³⁰⁷ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 221.

³⁰⁸ Newbigin and Thomas may be described as friends and colleagues, who occasionally worked together, such as in the early days of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society.

³⁰⁹ A. Bird, ‘M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2008), 83.

³¹⁰ A. Bird, ‘M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,’ 87.

³¹¹ A. Bird, ‘M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,’ 91.

the eschaton. Although it is the case that in some of his earlier writing Newbigin pointed to the church only being properly understood in relation to the eschaton, it is more difficult to see from his writing as a whole that the “eschatological hermeneutic is the key to understanding the different aspects of Newbigin’s ecclesiology,”³¹² if this is understood in terms of the future consummation alone. Newbigin’s later ecclesiology was firmly rooted in the conflict and victory of the cross.

Newbigin envisaged the church as a community that can be liberative for the wider society precisely through participation in Christ’s suffering at the hand of the corrupted powers that are still operative in the world. The community that lives in faithfulness to Jesus Christ will experience the hostility of the world, and this experience of suffering and rejection is precisely what forms the basis of a true missionary encounter with the world, because it forms the “occasion” for the Spirit to bear witness.³¹³ Newbigin stresses that the Spirit’s witness occurs in the context of the church’s suffering: “The words, the works, and – above all – the sufferings of the community will be the means by which the witness is borne, but the actual agent will be the Spirit.”³¹⁴ The presence of the church in its testimony, life and practice exposes the gap that exists between the ideals and practice of the society and the reign of God and this brings opposition. The way towards the realization of the kingdom of God on earth, towards the unification of all things in Christ, is through this process of conflict and rejection that is experienced by the church.³¹⁵

On this basis there is a sense then in which history can be said to begin in the opening up of the resistance and opposition that the church’s presence begins, because this is the starting point of movement towards the kingdom of God on earth. There is some similarity here between Newbigin and Barth. For Barth, through the action of the Holy Spirit the community of Christians is formed and “a new history begins within world-history.”³¹⁶ The rest of humanity is trapped in a position of historical hopelessness, in the sense that there is no fundamental change to his existence through history: “In spite of all the movement in historical forms and activities, man himself is

³¹² Paul Weston, ‘Ecclesiology in Eschatological Perspective: Newbigin’s Understanding of the Missionary Church,’ in *Theology in Missionary Perspective*, eds. Mark T. B. Laing and Paul Weston (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 72. Weston refers to some of Newbigin’s statements in *The Household of God* (1953).

³¹³ L. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press Ltd, 1982), 206f.

³¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 207.

³¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 230.

³¹⁶ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 151.

not progressive.”³¹⁷ History itself can be read in this light as a process of conflict-liberation beginning in the cross and continuing in the period up to the eschaton with the church as the primary locus in this process. It is perhaps in this way that we are to understand Newbigin’s rather enigmatic description of Christ as the “clue” to history. Through participation in the suffering of Christ the church can make clear the conflict between good and evil, between Christ and anti-Christ that is taking place within history. Although Newbigin doesn’t often explain this in such stark terms this appears to be what he means by the church in its suffering being a “witness” to “the true meaning” of the events unfolding in history.³¹⁸

The way of the cross is the way in which the mission of the church is to be carried on. In the Spirit, by participating in this suffering, one comes “in touch with the very being of God himself.”³¹⁹ As Goheen points out the “image of the suffering servant,” is perhaps “the most characteristic feature of N.’s Christology.”³²⁰ In the context of discussing the role of priesthood Newbigin points to how Christ fully entered into the human experience of suffering and strain (Heb. 5:7), and on this basis is our priest:³²¹

His revelation of God’s grace is not given in thunders from heaven, or in ten legions of angels sent to deliver us; it is *given* in cries and tears like our cries and tears, alongside of us, on this earth. This is the emphasis of the letter of Hebrews from first to last; Jesus is our true high priest because he completely shares our situation.”³²²

At the cross Christ’s witness to the kingdom took place in enduring suffering: “He bears witness to the presence of the reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil, but by taking their full weight upon himself.”³²³ The witness at the cross involved an unveiling of the power dynamics at work within the state and the religious tradition, as Newbigin points out.³²⁴ The virtuous appearance afforded by political and religious language and explanations was torn away to reveal the fundamental self-interest and self centeredness in operation in both systems. The

³¹⁷ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 507. Newbigin’s statement that there “is no gradual ascent to a perfect world” is very similar to Barth’s understanding of the general absence of historical progress.

³¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, p.45.

³¹⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 26.

³²⁰ M. Goheen, ‘As The Father Has Sent Me,’ 151.

³²¹ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 44.

³²² L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 45.

³²³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 35.

³²⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 50.

execution of the just and righteous man demonstrated this. Furthermore, Christ's refusal to compromise with either system was the crisis moment, "the crisis of all cosmic history"³²⁵ in which the kingdom, the just and righteous rule of God among men became established on earth.

In the context of a discussion on evangelism Newbigin suggests that evangelism involves far more than simply speaking the word, it also involves following the pattern of Christ in the incarnation which means to become "really involved with the people."³²⁶ The pastor is to "listen, share and bear" the sufferings of others, and in doing so participate in Christ's own priesthood. This is not only true of the pastor but also of the church as a whole, who all have a calling "to bring mankind into the presence of God and into peace with God."³²⁷ Newbigin points to the danger of what he describes as "a pagan idea of religion" as providing an easy answer to the problems of the world. As he points out we cannot think of ourselves as "wise and holy men who know the answers to the world's sorrows,"³²⁸ but rather understand that any answer requires costly action, and an action that as the church we have a particular responsibility for. Writing in 1989, shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, Newbigin wrote of how both the USA and the Soviet Union were both convinced of the need for one world,³²⁹ and in the process were bringing suffering to various parts of the world. In contrast with this the mission of the church is not carried on through wielding executive power, but rather through bearing the suffering that being a witness involves.

While other voices within the church in India have also pointed to the suffering church,³³⁰ Newbigin suggests that there is a failure by the church in south India to understand how deeply Christ participated in the human experience,³³¹ which involves a lack of consciousness of the reality of Christ's suffering past and present; and in that suffering the depth of His engagement with the human situation.

Newbigin's interpretation of the atonement as conflict-victory in relation to the powers contributed to his sense of mission as liberative action directed towards the

³²⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 50.

³²⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 60.

³²⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 43.

³²⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 45.

³²⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, 2 (April 1989), 50.

³³⁰ As P. Solomon Raj shows, Devdas saw in the daughter of Jephthah and her suffering a pattern of the church (*A Christian Folk Religion in India*, 85).

³³¹ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 44.

whole of a social life. This would ultimately prove liberative for the individual, as will now be considered.

3.3 Mission as Liberative Action: Engaging The Powers

Newbigin's interpretation of mission as liberative action is given its most sophisticated treatment in a brief chapter in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, entitled 'Principalities, Powers, and People.' Here, Newbigin acknowledged the influence of Walter Wink's *Naming the Powers* and *Unmasking the Powers*; both works that arose through Wink's own first hand encounter in South America with the victims of structural injustice. Central to Newbigin's analysis of political, social and economic structures is that they are indwelt by "powers." As stated in the introduction, these powers are an invisible, spiritual reality, originally a part of the created structure of the world, which have lost their order and are characterized by an absolutizing of a power that was originally relative and dependent: "the powers, created in Christ and for Christ, become agents of tyranny." Using the example of South Africa, Newbigin points to "race" as an "element in the structuring of human life." He points to the "good intention" of the missionaries in South Africa to allow the African Christians to develop their own worship services, but when this "was given absolute status as part of the order of creation, not subject to Christ, it became the power of *apartheid*."³³² As indicated here the powers become demonic when the sense of their relative authority is lost.

For Newbigin effective political liberation is realized, not through a change of leadership, but when the "powers" that indwell the structures of control are brought into subservience to Christ.³³³ In his very brief treatment of this important subject, Newbigin consciously gives relatively little significance to direct political action. He holds up the martyrs of the early church as a model, who, far from trying to seize political power, "knelt down in the Colosseum and prayed in the name of Jesus for the Emperor."³³⁴ Through this action, the "entire mystique of the Empire" was "disarmed."³³⁵ With this Newbigin is returning to his recurring theme of the kingdom being present under the sign of the cross, in that there is the sense here that through the suffering witness of the martyrs the reality of the kingdom manifested itself, but

³³² L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 207.

³³³ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 209.

³³⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 210.

³³⁵ There is a suggestion here that the powers exercise control through illusion and false metaphor.

primarily in a negative way, of exposing the illusion and falsehood of the empire's claims.

3.3.1 Patient Action

Newbigin agreed with liberation theologians such as Gutierrez more than he disagreed with them. He agreed, for example, with the need for some form of political activism for the reform of unjust structures, and that the vision of the new creation had defining significance for the church. But he considered the church's engagement with the powers to be a complicated and ambiguous process in which visible victory and reform would continually remain questionable. He argued that in *Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez suggests "a picture of human history that is more optimistic and much less ambiguous than the picture suggested in the New Testament."³³⁶ Newbigin sees Gutierrez as returning to an "evolutionary" view of history in which the church's labour and struggle leads in a relatively straight and rapid movement to the realisation of the kingdom on earth. Newbigin fully affirms the destiny of the world, as envisioned by a theologian like Gutierrez, but he argues that the realities of sin in society and death, demand a more robust interpretation of the connection between our action today and the final goal.

Newbigin's long experience as an evangelist and pastor of Dalit communities starts to emerge in his critique of Gutierrez. In his very brief critique of Gutierrez in *The Open Secret* he focuses on the relationship between the individual person and the corporate hope of the gospel of the kingdom. At first glance it is difficult to see why this concern for the individual should be so prominent. But it makes sense when we remember that Newbigin, for many years, was bringing the implications of the gospel of the kingdom to bear on poor Dalit villagers, who experienced oppression on many levels. A question that, based on his writing, we can assume he must repeatedly have considered is: 'What does the good news of the kingdom mean for these poor villagers, many of whom live and die with relatively little improvement in their condition?' In *The Open Secret*, without any reference to India, Newbigin points to two alternative responses to this problem of a person's limited experience of the kingdom and the real hope, for the individual, of its future realisation on earth: the first response is simply to abandon the hope of the kingdom for an individualistic

³³⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 101.

hope of eternal life; and the second is for the individual person to retain a corporate hope but at the cost of diminishing the own significance of their own life.³³⁷

The key issue at stake, that can be formulated as a question, is: ‘How, in the face of the repeated reversion of society to unjust and ungodly ways of living, and the seeming failures of the church’s work, can the hope of the kingdom motivate and direct the life, work, faith and practice of the church congregation today?’ The answer for Newbigin is rooted primarily in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the resurrection is the assurance that, despite apparent failure, God will cause the individual person’s life and work to contribute towards its final consummation: “. . . though I cannot create the city, God can raise up both me and my works, purged in the fire of judgment, to take a place in the life of the city.”³³⁸ This means that the struggle for liberation and engagement with the powers, will be carried on in an attitude of trust in God and with patience, knowing that the time of realisation of the kingdom is ultimately in God’s hands, and also knowing that our work today is connected to that final day.

3.3.2 Mission as Liberative Action: Maintaining a Tolerant Society

Mission as liberative action has an additional dimension to liberation of society from structures of injustice and oppression. Mission as liberative action involves the maintenance of tolerance within society, keeping open a public space for disagreement and dissent.

Newbigin argues that a tolerant society, in which differing, or even false, beliefs and ideas can have their place, has a theological foundation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³³⁹ This is because the visible manifestation of the reign of God in Jesus, a reign that was hidden in the cross, remained hidden to the public, being revealed only to some of the disciples of Christ.³⁴⁰ The hiddenness of the resurrection creates the divinely given “time and space for repentance and faith.” Newbigin uses unequivocal language when he states that “God has ordained a space in which disbelief can have the freedom to flourish.”³⁴¹ Apart from an adequate theological foundation, Newbigin argues that there is no foundation for tolerance, and

³³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 103f.

³³⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 106.

³³⁹ L. Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh & Jenny Taylor, *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in ‘Secular’ Britain* (London: SPCK, 1998), 142.

³⁴⁰ L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 142.

³⁴¹ L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 159.

eventually society collapses into intolerance of minority views and opinions.³⁴² A tolerance built upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is what Newbigin describes as “the very heart of what is involved in the idea of a Christian society.”³⁴³ God’s action in the death and resurrection is the ground for the right of every individual to be free from coercion in the matter of religion.

As with mission as liberation to society’s unjust structures, this dimension of mission as liberation involves spiritual liberation from the powers that are constantly in danger of taking control of the “great institutions and movements of public life.”³⁴⁴ Newbigin applies Paul’s discourse on putting on the armour of God (Eph. 6:10-18) to those engaged in this particular area of mission.

3.4 Newbigin’s Liberative Mission in India

Newbigin believed that working to liberate people from unjust structures is a “part of the mission of the church.”³⁴⁵ In an early lecture in 1941 he indicated that the vision of the kingdom of God as the “perfect fellowship” of all peoples on earth makes “political action obligatory.”³⁴⁶ At Willingen in 1952 he spoke of the “long and perhaps bitter political struggle that will be needed if the wealthy nations of the West are to bear and share the burden of the hungry millions of Asia.”³⁴⁷ Newbigin had some appreciation of a Marxist analysis of society in exposing how the wealth of the few is achieved through the labour and relative poverty of the many. His experience in the villages of Tamil Nadu made him conscious of the structure and inequity of the global economy. Echoing a Marxist critique he saw the wealth of the West as being “built” upon the labour “of the inarticulate and exploited millions,”³⁴⁸ of countries like India. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Newbigin distanced himself from aspects of the liberation theology that developed in Latin America during the 1950’s and 1960’s and came to the consciousness of the West from the early 1970’s onwards.

³⁴² L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 140.

³⁴³ L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 142.

³⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 164.

³⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 109.

³⁴⁶ L. Newbigin, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress, Lecture IV’ in *Signs Amid the Rubble*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright, 53f.

³⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, ‘The Christian Hope,’ in *Missions Under the Cross*, 115.

³⁴⁸ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography*, 58.

3.4.1 Preferential Option for the Poor in India

Throughout the 1940's and 1950's Newbigin practiced what is today called a "preferential option for the poor." This phrase, which originated with Catholic theologians in Latin America in the 1970's,³⁴⁹ and has since been given endorsement by Protestant thinkers like Bosch,³⁵⁰ points to mission taking its starting point from a position of identification, or "solidarity" with the poor.³⁵¹ Newbigin expressed this solidarity with the poor by his physical presence with them, at some cost to himself. As both a pastor and bishop he was dedicated to personally visiting the village churches and communities under his care. E. H. Johnson, General Secretary of the Student Volunteer Movement for Christian Mission in 1951, summarizes Newbigin's solidarity with the marginalized as follows:

Here [among the outcasts, dispossessed and poor] is where Newbigin *begins*. [emphasis mine] He spends much of his time with the poor, for his task is to identify himself with them.... His mission is to be one with these who are struggling out of poverty, injustice, and filth.... He considers his primary task so to identify himself with those in trouble that they might feel that he is one of them, sympathetic with their needs and determined to help them. When the poor find their wells dry, he tries to help them get water. When a farmer is hurt, he goes to serve him. When a mother is deserted, he is there to find ways of support. He writes, "Surely it is of immense significance that the Church has become rooted here and among the lowest strata in society."³⁵²

As a district missionary in Kanchipuram from 1939 – 1946 Newbigin deliberately chose to return to the practice of an earlier generation of missionaries, although with far less comfort, of staying overnight in the villages to which he went.³⁵³ He continued this practice as a bishop of Madurai diocese (1947-59), spending three days each week among some of the seven hundred congregations in the diocese. He

³⁴⁹ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxvi. Gutierrez points out that this "formula" was then used by the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, and thereby given their endorsement.

³⁵⁰ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 445ff. It is a pleasant coincidence that Bosch begins his discussion of this with a partial quote from Newbigin concerning the wealth enjoyed at that time by millions. He uses Newbigin to finish his sentence by pointing to the growing "gulf between the rich minority and the abjectly poor majority" (*Foolishness to the Greeks*, 110).

³⁵¹ Gutierrez states that preference is being used in the sense of the poor being the ones with whom the church should "first . . . be in solidarity" (*A Theology of Liberation*, xxvi).

³⁵² E. Johnson, prologue to *That All May Be One: A South India Diary - The Story of an Experiment in Christian Unity*, by L. Newbigin (New York: Association Press, 1952). This is an American edition of *A South India Diary*.

³⁵³ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 57. Newbigin points out that the village churches in the area were the fruit of this earlier missionary practice of camping in the rural areas.

described this as being like the “old days in the villages around Kanchipuram except that it was on a much bigger scale.”³⁵⁴ Newbigin mentions the problems of transportation and the requirement of walking on foot, sometimes in the heat of the Tamil Nadu day, and of the sense of despair this work also involved: “There would be many long tramps in the dark, many village visits and many hours of talking which produced nothing at all.”³⁵⁵ One of the discomforts which he doesn’t mention is his living arrangements in the village. While some of the congregations lived by the sea and Newbigin, the bishop, could “take my bedding roll down to the shore and go to sleep on the beach with the sound of the surf in my ears and the jagged outline of the palm trees etched against the spangled beauty of the night sky,” this would not have been typical of a stay in many villages where he would be staying in the poorest quarter of the village. The church of the villages was largely a church of the outcastes, and the outcaste quarters of the village were frequently places of the worst squalor, crowding and lack of sanitation in the whole village. Newbigin describes the joy of seeing a “lovely little church” in “the midst of the appalling squalor of the leatherworkers’ quarter of the village.”³⁵⁶ In the context of discussing his efforts to develop a market for baskets made in the village he writes of the “deplorable squalor of a village which had been completely Christian for half a century,” and yet produced beautiful baskets.³⁵⁷ He wrote, in 1943, from first hand experience of “the problems [caused by the war] of hunger and pestilence in the villages.”³⁵⁸ And again he describes one “squalid slum” as “Christ’s outpost” in the village.³⁵⁹

3.4.1.1 Newbigin’s Epistemology and the Poor

One of the ways in which a preferential option for the poor has been developed is to suggest that solidarity with the poor is a starting point for theology, theology’s “new hermeneutical locus.”³⁶⁰ Newbigin did acknowledge inter-relationship between theology and action, describing liberation theology’s insistence on this as one of its “strong points.”³⁶¹ Nevertheless, he rejected taking the starting point for theology as

³⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 96.

³⁵⁵ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 59.

³⁵⁶ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 77.

³⁵⁷ L. Newbigin, *A South Indian Diary*, 120.

³⁵⁸ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 74.

³⁵⁹ L. Newbigin, *A South Indian Diary*, 90.

³⁶⁰ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 446.

³⁶¹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 114.

solidarity with the poor in liberative action, on the grounds firstly that this is to move theology into the framework of Marxist analysis. He rejects the idea that “there is no locus of truth outside of proletarian praxis.”³⁶² But secondly, and more significantly, the true action required as a starting point for theology is indwelling the bible story through obedience to Christ from within the fellowship of the church, as he states: “The ultimate model, in terms of which I am to understand what is the case and what has to be done, is furnished by the biblical story.”³⁶³ A commitment to Christ is to be kept distinct from a commitment to the poor, although the two may come very close together.

Newbigin understood God’s concern for the poor in the Bible story and in his own thought the position of the poor was an important point of reference and orientation. He writes, for example, of his reflection on the relationship between the village and the wider world, as he states: “Sitting on a string cot in a village street, watching a big crowd listening to the Gospel, I often find myself mentally trying to picture this scene in a whole picture of the world.”³⁶⁴ In this instance he writes of the village as the world’s labour force, doing the “hard and monotonous work of the world.” A more telling piece of evidence that the village formed a persisting reference point in his thought is that he can describe his work as chairman of the WCC Committee of Twenty Five, and his ministry in the villages of Tamil Nadu, as “intimately linked.” Newbigin believed that a proper interpretation of the relationship of the eschatological “hope” to the present, a key issue of discussion within the committee, was also of particular importance for the village churches in his diocese.³⁶⁵ The village churches were a key reference point in the development of his own thinking on the subject, and, through him, even in that of the committee itself, as he states:

Several times I passed within a few days from these village visits to the ecumenical discussions and back again and I tried to link them together, bringing the vivid experiences of the ‘bottom of the heap’ in India to Bossey, and bringing them back from our discussions there something for the village congregations.³⁶⁶

³⁶² L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 118.

³⁶³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 117.

³⁶⁴ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 44.

³⁶⁵ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 136.

³⁶⁶ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 136.

As indicated here, during these first two decades of his ministry Newbigin straddled two very different worlds: the rural villages of Tamil Nadu and the elite academic theologians and church leaders of the ecumenical movement. His description of his furlough in 1946 is typical of this in which he writes of spending a week in Iona at a conference led by Hendrik Kraemer, among others, and of spending part of the return journey to India in preparing a paper for the WCC Assembly in Amsterdam.³⁶⁷ Newbigin's familiarity and engagement with the wider theological community and his interest in the village is brought together in a revealing way in his statement about his anticipation of moving to Kanchipuram and seeing first hand how the "direct evangelism" of the Oxford Group "could happen among outcaste villagers – a milieu so remote from that in which the Groups had their birth."³⁶⁸ Oxford and the Indian village were very "remote" from each other but Newbigin had intimate familiarity with both.

3.4.2 The Dalit Community

Any theology in India is compelled to take into consideration the fact that the majority of church members in India, particularly in the north, are from the Dalit community. They have historically experienced the most extreme rejection, marginalization and discrimination by the wider society, a problem that has continued within the church in India. The church of the Indian villages frequented by Newbigin was, as suggested above, frequently located among the Dalits, a marginalized community traditionally considered to be outside the Hindu caste system.

Dalit Christians, during the last thirty to forty years have been assertively pointing to the gap between Indian theology and the church. However, evidence of this rift surfaced long before that. Most significant of all was a statement by Dalit Christians addressed to the upcoming IMC conference at Tambaram in 1938, in which they made a plea for the realization of equality and dignity in the Indian church and "strongly accused the church of caste discrimination."³⁶⁹ At the same time the Madras Rethinking Group, prior to and at this conference, pressed for the need for a greater Indian expression of the gospel in the church. The Madras Rethinking Group

³⁶⁷ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 88.

³⁶⁸ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 42.

³⁶⁹ S. C. H. Kim 'The Kingdom of God versus the Church: the Debate at the Conference of the International Missionary Council, Tambaram, 1938', in *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities*, eds. Ogbu Kalu and Alaine Low (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 146.

was largely composed of Christians from a high caste Hindu background who wanted a greater engagement with their religious and cultural heritage. But, for the Dalit community in the church, the indigenous expression of Christianity they were seeking was elimination of caste prejudice: “The problem seen by these Christians was not the Western form of the church, but that the Christian community tolerated the Indian problem of caste discrimination. . . . The solution to the problem, for them, did not lie in creating an Indian church separate from wider Christian traditions. . . .”³⁷⁰ There was a clear divergence of concern between these two groups.

The emergence of Dalit theology in the past forty years is symptomatic of the failure of the church in several ways. Firstly, it is a sign of a failure to eliminate caste discrimination within the church.³⁷¹ While caste discrimination is a problem that has affected the south Indian church more than the north,³⁷² its influence can be felt throughout the Indian church.³⁷³ The particular strength of this in south India is attributed to the influence of the Syrian Christian community in the south, particularly Kerala. For centuries the Syrian Christian community was recognized within Hindu society as having the status of a high caste group. This community exerted considerable influence on churches in the south, including the Pentecostal movement which had initially been a Dalit movement.³⁷⁴ Within the Pentecostal movement Dalit Christians point to the persistence of the Syrian Christian caste mentality in invisible ways, such as reservation of leadership positions for Syrian Christians, and a tacit prohibition of inter-marriage with Dalit Christians.³⁷⁵ An absence of fellowship among caste and Dalit Christians is one of the ways in which this discrimination manifests itself, something brought out very strongly in Shiri’s study in the 1990’s of Dalit Christians belonging to the Church of South India from 44 villages in two districts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. He found that three quarters of these Dalit Christians had never interacted with non-Dalit Christians, while the other quarter claimed that the discrimination they experienced at the hands of non-Dalit Christians

³⁷⁰ S. C. H. Kim, ‘The Kingdom of God versus the Church,’ 146.

³⁷¹ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), 25.

³⁷² Donald McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Padadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 19.

³⁷³ Godwin Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation for CISRS, 1979), 18.

³⁷⁴ Y. Das, ‘An Evaluation of the History of Pentecostal Dalits in Kerala’ (Th. M. diss., SAICS, Bangalore, 2001), 91.

³⁷⁵ Y. Das, ‘An Evaluation of the History of Pentecostal Dalits in Kerala,’ 97f.

was the same as that from caste Hindus.³⁷⁶ This manifested itself in the absence of social fellowship and interaction, a particularly telling example of which was a church sponsored programme for *all* believers in the district of Karnataka under study. Those attending were nearly all from the Madiga community, a Dalit group, and the caste Christians largely boycotted the event.³⁷⁷ This manifestation of the caste problem is exacerbated and compounded by the greater economic and social advancement of the higher castes, who are in a better position to benefit from the country's economic growth. The persistence of various forms of social exclusion within the church is perhaps the most painful aspect of caste.

A second reason for the emergence of Dalit theology is the failure of the church's thinkers, theologians and preachers to engage with the Dalit experience of struggle in any meaningful way. Dalit thinkers criticize some well known Indian theologians for the abstraction of their theology, and its unrelatedness to the realities they experience. For example, M. M. Thomas's key concept of 'humanization' has been described as "abstract and grandiose."³⁷⁸ While the concept of humanization is laudable in itself, suggesting equality and dignity of all peoples, it fails to engage with the Dalit experience of rejection and marginalization, and doesn't give any suggestion of action to overcome the enormous difficulties of that situation.

There has also, arguably, been a failure to build on the theology and message that first appealed to the Dalit community. As with any community the contextual demands and issues within the Dalit community changed. As Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon,³⁷⁹ has pointed out, the message which first came to the Dalit community of the good news of God's love and purpose for them gripped their heart with a sense of dignity and self-worth before God.³⁸⁰ Bishop J. Waskom Pickett explains that the preaching of the cross "proved to be the power of God" for the Dalit community:

³⁷⁶ G. Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study*, 225.

³⁷⁷ G. Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study*, 226. Shiri points to how this discrimination also works among Dalit groups, citing the example of the Begaru's avoidance of social contact with the Madiga (p.227).

³⁷⁸ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 37.

³⁷⁹ Monica Melanchthon is Head of Old Testament at Gurukul Lutheran Theological Seminary. Gurukul has had a central place in the development of Dalit thinking. In 1987 Gurukul established a Dalit Theology department, under the leadership of A.P. Nirmal, one of the pioneers in Dalit theology.

³⁸⁰ M. Melanchthon, 'Dalits, Bible, and Method,' *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited Oct 2005] (<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=459>, accessed 11 October 2011).

The assurances that Christ offers salvation to them on exactly the same terms as to the Brahman or the American, that God is not against them for their sins but is for them against their sins, and that, instead of being a despised, worthless people, they become, by virtue of their acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior, the pioneers of a new social order, work radical changes in their outlook on life.³⁸¹

However, with independence and India's awakening to a new future and the promise held out by the socialist ideology of the day for renewal and change, the old message of God's love and eternal hope failed to address the aspiration for social change and participation in a bright new India, as M. Melanchthon explains:

As the Dalit movement gained momentum and became political, striving towards social change and political participation, it soon realized that there was no Christian theological commitment to political change at either the national or the local level. For Dalits, the good news was still presented in terms of a new self-image; a new community, granting Dalits greater equality, respect, and caring, and a new hope, defined primarily in terms of enhanced opportunities for individual and family mobility, was still a distant dream. Social transformation was confined to social reform, and Christian theology therefore obviously failed to come to terms with Dalit political aspirations in the mid-1900s.³⁸²

Melanchthon is indicating that the Dalit Christian community has simply been overlooked and forgotten in the church's academic theology, but much more seriously, it suggests a gap between the preaching and teaching ministry of the pastors and church leaders and the actual experience and situation of their congregations.

3.4.2.1 The Dalit Christian Criticism of Indian Liberation Theologians

That Newbigin's concern for the historical had contextual significance in India is affirmed by the development of Dalit theology in the last forty years. A neglect of the category of history in theological reflection is identified with oppressive social ideologies by Dalit thinkers³⁸³ (nevertheless, as will be considered in the following chapter, a significant strain within Indian theology has continued to give little consideration to the historical, and engaged more with the mystical tradition of

³⁸¹ J. Waskom Pickett, 'The Untouchables,' in *Moving Millions: The Pageant of Modern India* (Boston: The Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1938), 60.

³⁸² M. Melanchthon, 'Dalits, Bible and Method.'

³⁸³ J. Massey, *Downtrodden*, 55.

Hinduism, of which the two most significant examples are Abhishiktananda (1929-73) and R. Panikkar (1918-2010).³⁸⁴

Yet, a concern for the historical is not sufficient in the eyes of Dalit thinkers for exposing dominant interests, and Indian liberation theologians, like M. M. Thomas, have been accused of developing a “class-based discourse” that failed to unmask the “caste Hindu agenda.”³⁸⁵ Dalit theologians distinguish themselves as a liberation theology, but one that is distinct from the other forms of liberation theology, in that Dalit theology is specific to the unique history and experience of the Dalit community.³⁸⁶ The Dalit criticism of a theologian like Thomas is that he has failed to engage with the Dalit experience. M. Azariah, for example, writes with reference not only to Devanandan, Panikkar but also Thomas, that their concern for interaction with people of other faiths and ideologies, “cannot and does not involve or benefit as many as 75% of the Indian Christian community.”³⁸⁷ This critique of Devanandan has some justification. Devanandan did take history seriously as a site for theological reflection, but he tried to interact with a renascent Hinduism that was trying to reinterpret the philosophical tradition to bring it into continuity with social ideals such as social progress, the dignity of the individual, and equality.³⁸⁸ The critique of Thomas is due to the fact that his idea of struggle for justice involves partnership with the more dominant elements of the Indian community. Consequently, it is a programme for action but with little to say to a community surviving on the margins of society.

The criticism of M. M. Thomas could also be applied to the Jesuit priest, Sebastian Kappen (1924-1993), one of India’s leading liberation theologians. He is given little acknowledgment from Dalit thinkers. Like Dalit thinkers, Kappen is very critical of Indian theologians who have neglected the corporate and social nature of the gospel and too quickly seen continuity with the Hindu tradition and ended up

³⁸⁴ Abhishiktananda’s concerned himself with the experiential element of the Vedanta, while Panikkar’s understanding of time and history was described by Joseph Prabhu in the foreword to this last book, *The Rhythm of Being*, as “tempiternity”, a fusion of the temporal and the eternal that lacked a clear eschatological horizon.

³⁸⁵ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40.

³⁸⁶ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 62f.

³⁸⁷ M. Azariah, ‘Doing Theology in India Today,’ in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, eds., R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 40.

³⁸⁸ S. Radhakrishnan is an example of a thinker labouring in this direction, unsatisfactorily in the opinion of Devanandan (P.D. Devanandan, *The Concept of Maya* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), 229).

“singing hymns to the notorious religious individualism of the Hindu,” or taken the “equally misleading” path of approaching “the Indian reality from the standpoint of so-called ‘mystical Christ’ . . .”³⁸⁹ He affirms the idea that the Hindu tradition doesn’t provide any resource or ground for a liberation theology, as he states:

The [brahmanical] Scriptures do contain a theology of liberation (*mukti*). But, at best, what they envisage is the liberation of the *individual*. They know nothing of the liberation of the human community, much less of nature and history. . . . In the Hindu Scriptures there is no mention of liberation from social sin in the form of unjust structures and institutions. As to the manner of liberating oneself Since structural sin is not recognized, there is no recognition either of collective human striving, let alone struggle, as a valid liberative practice.³⁹⁰

Kappen does, however, find a resource within the “dissenting traditions” of India, one of which is Buddhism, a creation of India but one that is totally overlooked in Indian theological writing (an oversight that is surprising given the role it played in recent history with the conversion of Ambedkar and nearly four hundred thousand Dalits to Buddhism shortly before his death in 1956). He envisages this dissenting tradition, and Marxism, as being the primary points of dialogue for a truly Indian theology: “the Jesus tradition must merge with the radical currents in the Indian religious tradition and with the positive insights of Marxism.”³⁹¹ Yet, Kappen’s eschatological vision was rooted in Christ, however he may have applied insights from Marxism to his social critique. He railed against the way Christ had been abstracted into theological categories and concepts³⁹² to the neglect of Christ’s significance for history: Christ the prophet announced the future reign of God which was already present in him and in all who laboured for the kingdom of God.³⁹³

But, as with the work of M. M. Thomas, Kappen’s approach is relevant for only a very small minority within the church – the strong and wealthy. His primary concern appears to be that the church follow Christ’s protest and resistance to oppressive social structures and participate in protest and action “for the radical restructuring of

³⁸⁹ S. Kappen, ‘Toward an Indian Theology of Liberation,’ in *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 154.

³⁹⁰ S. Kappen, ‘Toward an Indian Theology of Liberation,’ 156.

³⁹¹ S. Kappen, ‘Toward an Indian Theology of Liberation,’ 157.

³⁹² S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 21.

³⁹³ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 60f. Kappen uses the terms ‘New Age’ and ‘New Humanity’ to refer to the Kingdom of God.

society”.³⁹⁴ The church will generate a wider hope in the kingdom of God by participating in the daily “struggles of the people.”³⁹⁵ Repentance within the church will take the form in a response of “restructuring of the entire social and cultural system” which will inevitably lead to tension within the church community itself by those resistant to change.³⁹⁶ There is a clear sense here that the audience he has in mind within the church is not the Dalit community, but what we may call the elite within the church: the Dalit community is *already* living in a situation of tension with the wider community by virtue of its marginalization and for many life is *already* a struggle to physically exist. The continued existence of the Dalit community and its self assertion is itself a form of protest and resistance to an oppressive social structure, as Clarke has indicated in his work *Dalits and Christianity*.³⁹⁷

The critique of liberation theology by Dalit thinkers should indicate the sensitivity of approach that is required in dealing with eschatology and the kingdom of God in relation to the Indian church. Nevertheless, liberation theology has paved the way for Dalit theology. Those who identify themselves as Dalit thinkers and theologians have turned for inspiration to the tradition of liberation theology in other parts of the world such as Latin America, to what Massey has called the “older sisters” of Dalit theology.³⁹⁸

Sensitivity and carefulness of thought in interpreting the relation of the eschatological kingdom to the present Indian church, is particularly needed in relation to the matter of community formation in the church. The church, for Newbigin, is called to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the ingathering and reconciliation of all peoples to each other in the future kingdom. A consideration of the extent to which Newbigin’s theology can inspire, sustain and envision community formation in the Indian church will be the subject of the following section.

3.4.3 Community Formation in the Indian Church

The challenges to community formation in the Indian church are hinted at in Sathianathan Clarke’s *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, a study of the symbolic world of a Dalit community with which

³⁹⁴ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 168f.

³⁹⁵ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 156.

³⁹⁶ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 62.

³⁹⁷ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁹⁸ J. Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits*, 51.

Newbiggin had familiarity, more than forty years earlier.³⁹⁹ Clarke's study is of the Paraiyar, in Chingelput, an area close to Kanchipuram and is, in part, an ethnographic study of the role of the drum in their religious and social life.⁴⁰⁰ One of the most interesting features of this study is the way that the Dalit community develop and maintain their own community identity in distinction from, and, at times, in opposition to the dominant community.

While there is an element of inter-relationship between the Dalit and dominant castes, the Dalit community is compelled to orientate itself around quite different symbols from those of the dominant caste community, and these symbols mediate meanings that are quite specific to the Dalit community. The Paraiyar have traditionally been an excluded community, symbolized in the physical separation of their living place from the wider community. The drum has a particularly important place in the community's negotiation of this exclusion: "the drum is their unique, creative and constructive text of resistive and emancipatory theography."⁴⁰¹ The creativeness of the Dalit resistance to the dominant castes can be seen in the fact that they have taken the drum, an instrument believed to be polluting by the caste Hindu, and made it a central religious symbol. Clarke describes it as "a central religious symbol in communicating with the divine."⁴⁰² This is a visible act of defiance of caste definitions of pollution, as well as ensuring that they retain control over their own religious world.⁴⁰³ The emancipatory dimension of the drum is seen, in that this largely rejected symbol of the caste Hindu, is a central part of their ritual interaction

³⁹⁹ Newbiggin possibly refers to the Paraiyar when he briefly alludes to members of the church of one "leather workers community" performing drumming for the festivals of the caste communities (*A South India Diary*, 89). However, in the Paraiyar community that Clarke studied the drummers were only called out by the caste community on the occasion of funerals (p. 67).

⁴⁰⁰ Clarke's aim is to take the resistive and emancipatory aspect of Dalit religion, as focused in the symbol of the drum, as the starting point for interpretation of Christ. He writes that the aim of his book is "to interpret Jesus and his impact on the early Christian community (the constrictive pole) in terms of the trajectories of the Christ dynamic as expressed by a Dalit community (the expansive pole) through the symbol of the drum." For Clarke the form (here, the Dalit symbol of the drum) and content (Christ's presence) become fused together. Accordingly, the Dalit symbol can be seen as: "a symbolic manifestation of the Christ dynamic. Thus, the so called 'form' is, in fact, also the 'content' of theology" (p. 184). Clarke believes that this is the methodology of liberation theology in which, "the starting point of christology is the context of marginalized people's experience to which reflections on Jesus Christ become accountable" (p.184). Some of the conclusions that Clarke draws from this approach are, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Christology ought to be more concerned with soteriology than with Christ's identity, "a move away from preoccupations about the nature of Jesus to concerns about his praxis" (p. 198f). Secondly, interpretation of Jesus in terms of a pluralistic model that is "accepting of ambiguities" and, thirdly, seeing Jesus as "deviant" in the sense of being present among the marginalized, and subversive of unjust systems for the purpose of redemption (199f, 202-6).

⁴⁰¹ S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 3.

⁴⁰² S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 109.

⁴⁰³ S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 109.

with the divine. The drum has multiple roles in this regard: used in various ceremonial situations like a wedding to help bring blessing from their god; in religious ceremonies to bring the presence and attention of their god; to drive away demons as at times of funerals.⁴⁰⁴ The drum is thus a “means of mediation between the Divine and human beings.”⁴⁰⁵ That which is not (the drum) comes to be, and the people who are not (the Dalit) come to be. The drum therefore has a clear role to play in giving the Paraiyar a sense of their own identity and humanity: excluded from the worship and temples and religious texts of the wider Hindu community, their own ritual life, of which the drum is a part, includes them within the divine.

Although not an implication that he draws out, Clarke’s study indicates the depth of the division and separation between the Dalit community and that of the dominant castes. This particular Dalit community orientates itself around symbols, such as the drum, that are rejected by the dominant community. A deep division, physically and psychically, separates one community from the other, although experienced very differently by each. Whereas for the Dalit this division is a part of lived experience, for the dominant castes this division is present as a largely invisible and unconscious element of their psyche.

In such a context how helpful is Newbigin’s approach? Newbigin’s conflict-victory interpretation of the atonement can be seen as helpful at this point, firstly, in relation to the Dalit struggle for justice in relation to local power structures, and secondly, in relation to the formation of community within the church.

3.4.3.1 Atonement as Conflict-Victory and the Dalit Struggle

At first glance, it might appear that Newbigin will be unable to avoid the accusation leveled against M.M. Thomas of being “brahminical” by Dalit thinkers such as Bishop M. Azariah, A. P. Nirmal and Bishop Devasahayam.⁴⁰⁶ This is because, firstly, much of Newbigin’s writing was addressing a largely Western, highly educated audience. It is significant in this regard that the lectures which were printed as *The Finality of Christ*, which were discussed above, were delivered to the Yale University Divinity School and also to the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge University,

⁴⁰⁴ S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 114f.

⁴⁰⁵ S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 146.

⁴⁰⁶ A. Bird, ‘M. M. Thomas – Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology’, 14. Bishop V. Devasahayam (b.1949) is currently Bishop of the Church of South India’s Chennai Diocese, and his predecessor was Bishop M. Azariah.

two of the world's most elite universities. Another example of this is *A Faith for this One World?*, originally a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1958, another of the world's elite universities. The audience for Newbigin's writing, with the particular exception of *Sin and Salvation*,⁴⁰⁷ was frequently an elite educated community. The point of objection raised by Dalit thinkers is that this is exactly the problem: so much theology within the Indian church has been done in engagement with the elite community and its particular perplexities and struggles to understand the faith of Christ for today's world, to the neglect of articulating a Christology in relation to the deep existential struggles of the Dalit community. A second related reason to doubt the suitability of Newbigin's approach was that, in his writing, he did not locate the conflict-victory dimension of the atonement and the church's mission in relation to the Dalit community. This can be seen as a weakness in the actual application of his thought to concrete historical realities. He was almost silent on the issue of caste which he appears to have justified on the grounds that it would involve a foreign imposition of law on the church, and should therefore be left to the church itself.⁴⁰⁸ This seems a rather weak argument for a man appointed as bishop by the national church. The criticism that Gutierrez made of Moltmann's work that it fails to adequately connect the "human concrete historical experience, in an oppressed and exploited present" to the reality of hope,⁴⁰⁹ is one that the Dalit theologian could also apply to Newbigin.

Yet, it is his strong sense of conflict-victory as essential to the church's mission that may point to the potential fruitfulness of Newbigin's approach. Firstly, the Dalit community can receive strength in their own experience and struggle with the dominant social structures through seeing in this an aspect of the suffering and conflict of Christ against the powers. Secondly, this struggle bears in it the promise of victory in Jesus Christ. There is the hope of God's decisive action and intervention, bringing about a renewal and restoration of life which is impossible for them to realize alone. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized, because by underlining how salvation is above all an act of God, it gives those who are largely powerless and incapable of action a genuine hope and confidence for the future.

⁴⁰⁷ Originally written in Tamil for the churches of his diocese.

⁴⁰⁸ L. Newbigin, 'The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Asian Churches,' in *A Decisive Hour for the Christian Mission: The East Asia Christian Conference 1959 and the John R. Mott Memorial Lectures* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961), 29. Newbigin argues that the precedent for this is Paul's insistence that "the law was not to be imposed upon the Gentile churches."

⁴⁰⁹ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 124.

Although Kappen does insist on the necessity of the kingdom coming through God's action⁴¹⁰ his emphasis on political activism, revolution and progressive development, has the effect of depersonalizing hope, by taking away the sense of God acting directly in the life of the local church and the individuals within it. Furthermore, hope is rooted more in the action of men than in God: God acts through and in the action of men, but there is relatively little sense of the miraculous in-breaking of God into that history in ways we may not expect or anticipate. Newbigin points to surrender into the hands of God the Father as the way to victory when it is combined with action:

Jesus challenged the power of evil consistently right to the end. At the very end, when the limit was reached, he surrendered, not to the power of evil, but into the hands of the Father. This final surrender is not defeat but victory. It is not opium, but is the victory by which the slain Lamb rules the cosmos. The church is enabled by the presence of the Spirit to share in that victory as it gives itself continually to be offered up in and through the Son to the Father. In this life the church is enabled to share in the victorious passion of the triune God.⁴¹¹

There is thus a dynamic interplay of resistance and surrender in the life and death of Christ. His teaching, healing and actions demonstrated resistance to evil in all its forms, and an intense zeal for the realization of God's kingdom on earth. But this was continually interplaying with, and indeed fuelled by passivity towards God the Father; a surrender of himself into the Father's hands which found its most visible expression at the cross: "The power given to the church to meet the power of evil is just the power to follow Jesus on the road that leads through suffering, through total surrender to the Father, to the gift of new life and a new world."⁴¹² For a Dalit community that is constantly meeting the evil of discrimination, marginalization and victimization there is a power in Christ, revealed in his life, death and resurrection, to encounter that evil in a constructive way.

Thirdly, the conflict-victory aspect of the church's mission can mobilize the wider church to see participation in the Dalit struggle as an essential part of the church's mission and participation in Christ. This struggle is not for the politically minded or the social activist alone but for the church as the body of Christ. Fourthly, Newbigin's approach can help liberate the Dalit struggle from narrow self-interest and

⁴¹⁰ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 61.

⁴¹¹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 108.

⁴¹² L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 108.

see its struggle in relation to the liberation of society as a whole from the powers that bind the whole into an unjust and dehumanizing system.

These four points above have all considered the relation of the conflict-victory aspect of the atonement to a Dalit action and struggle against injustice. There is a further point to be made regarding community formation, in relation to the conflict-victory aspect of the atonement, which has some bearing on the church as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the eschatological ingathering of all peoples into one.

3.4.3.2 Christ's Conflict-Victory as the Basis of the New Community

Newbigin's interpretation of the death of Christ as the moment of ultimate encounter with, and victory over, the dehumanizing and enslaving powers in the world can be seen as a helpful basis for the formation of a kingdom community in India, that is to say, a church community that is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the reconciliation of all peoples to each other in one fellowship. For Newbigin it is essential that the death of Jesus Christ is recognized as the moment of encounter and victory over all manifestations of corrupted power, an act of conflict and victory undertaken on behalf of all people, rich-poor, oppressor-oppressed: "His cross is not for some and against others. It is the place where all are guilty and all are forgiven."⁴¹³ Although Newbigin doesn't appear to emphasize the point, the cross can be seen as a moment of encounter with powers that divide the human community, and the basis from which a new human community can be formed.

The practical implication of this for the church, again one that Newbigin doesn't really explicitly draw out, is that the cross of Christ is to be preached as an action intended for the reconciliation of peoples towards one another, and that the eucharist is received as a meal of reconciliation with God and of peoples to one another. Newbigin suggests that the church's self-understanding begins from this point of mutual reconciliation in Jesus Christ. He is critical of the idea that he associates with liberation theology, that the starting point for the church's self-understanding should be its awareness of oppression, and separation from the other. Summarizing the position of liberation theology he states that: "Both theology and ecclesiology must be done "from below." . . . All theology, and all biblical interpretation is done from a

⁴¹³ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 151.

specific historical situation.”⁴¹⁴ He rejects this idea of what he describes as the “epistemological privilege” of the oppressed on the grounds that its interpretation of “the human situation in terms of the model of oppression” is derived from sources other than Scripture. The true “starting point” for theology is participation in the full life of the church community and an indwelling of the story. It is this indwelling of the story that makes authentic mission possible, becoming “the voice and hands of Jesus for our time and place.”⁴¹⁵

There are some recent voices within Dalit theology that, like Newbigin, recognize the limitations of taking the oppressor-oppressed model as a starting point. While “much” Dalit theology has worked with the oppressor-oppressed model, recently some Dalit thinkers and theologians have pointed to the problematic nature of understanding the Dalit community’s position in society in terms of the oppressor-oppressed concept, and suggested the need of a model free from divisive boundaries.⁴¹⁶ One of these theologians is Peniel Rajkumar. He recognizes that while “binarism” could be seen as useful for mobilizing social activism and protest, it is critically weak on several levels: it makes invisible both the “points of intersection between the Dalits and caste-Hindus” and the ways in which Dalits act as oppressors; and also has the potential to bring the Dalit to adopt the attitude of the oppressor.⁴¹⁷ As Rajkumar states it is highly simplistic to categorize the whole Dalit community as oppressed and to ignore the disparities of wealth and opportunity among Dalits as a whole, and the well known fact that Dalits who gain a degree of influence and prosperity can in turn become oppressive to other members of the community⁴¹⁸ and act in the interests of the dominant castes. However, the binary model does not only give rise to simplistic and naïve analysis, but, more seriously, it hinders the formation of the new community by entrenching a divisive mentality:

The problem with this hermeneutics [of binarism and homogeneity] is that it is antithetical to the *one important dimension of the purpose of Dalit theology, which is the breaking down of structural boundaries*. Moreover,

⁴¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 149.

⁴¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 151.

⁴¹⁶ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation* (Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 168ff.

⁴¹⁷ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 169-171.

⁴¹⁸ On the day of writing (Monday 10th October, 2011) *Mail Today*, an Indian newspaper, reported that a Dalit woman from U.P. had been paraded naked through a village by a wealthy Dalit family with political links, on suspicion that she helped their divorced daughter to elope with a young man from the village.

the consequences of such hermeneutics can be further estrangement rather than the constructive possibility of engagement. We can even argue that Dalit theology through its ideology of binarism has the potential to replicate-in-reverse the attitudes it seeks to subvert. Its potential to *curtail dialogical interaction and mutual interdependence between various communities* implies that it is not the way forward to a society marked by the cessation of hostility and hatred.⁴¹⁹ [emphasis mine]

As Rajkumar suggests, in his statement that Dalit theology has an important purpose in “breaking down of structural boundaries,” a theology for the Indian church needs to be a theology robust enough to support community formation in the face of the great challenges and difficulties which this faces.

There are two points, in particular, that point to the suitability of the kind of approach Newbigin takes. Firstly, Newbigin’s stress on the conflict-victory aspect of the atonement takes seriously the severity of the problem and the strength of existing prejudices and divisions. There is a power aspect to social division that cannot be easily overcome. Secondly, Newbigin’s interpretation of the church’s participation in Christ’s suffering indicates that the formation of the new community will be realised only through costly and painful struggle. Thirdly, Newbigin’s eschatological perspective can provide resources for patient action. The healing, in the church fellowship, of a divided human community and full reconciliation is likely to take time. Newbigin eschatological perspective allows for patient and hopeful action during that process.

Peniel Rajkumar has provided a helpful study that identifies Christ as a figure directly involved in community formation, through a study of the synoptic gospels. He highlights the element of conflict involved in Christ’s community formation and the way Christ reconfigured relationships towards the other.

3.4.3.2.1 The Synoptic Healing Narratives and Community Formation

Rajkumar believes that the healing narratives of the synoptic gospels provide “an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology,” which will reorientate and reconstruct Dalit theology in a way to increase its “practical efficacy.”⁴²⁰ I shall briefly consider his work, beginning with the subject of Christ’s subversion of a socio-religious order that devalues and marginalizes people, in the healing of the leper

⁴¹⁹ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 171.

⁴²⁰ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 22.

(Mk.1:40-45; Mt.8:1-4 & Luke 5:12-16). This subversion is expressed in three ways: firstly he touches the leper, a man ritually unclean according to the ceremonial law, and then declares this man clean, a prerogative of the priests. Rajkumar's point on the next two ways requires a re-reading of the traditional translations, for which he gives persuasive evidence.⁴²¹ Secondly then, Christ's instruction to the man to go to the priests and offer the sacrifices required in the law for a person healed of leprosy (Lev. 15) is seen as for the purpose of challenging the system of which they are the guardians. Accordingly the leper is seen as making the sacrifices as a "witness against them" rather than as a "witness to them": "The leper stands as a confrontational witness in defiance to the priestly prerogative of cleansing leprosy." Thirdly, Christ is interpreted as moved with anger in his response to the plea of the leper, an anger that carries through in his manner of sending the man to the priest. This anger is "against the system which victimized him [the leper]"⁴²² by making him an outcaste. Christ is thus portrayed as consciously and deliberately challenging the injustice in this socio-religious order by a direct act of resistance and rebellion focused on the guardians of the system, as Rajkumar states:

Jesus' praxis takes the form of ideological confrontation, which threatens the very foundation on which the existing social order is based. This was a symbolic order whereby the physically 'un-whole' were relegated to second-class citizenship. . . . The healing was affected by Jesus' refusal to accept the ritual uncleanness and social ostracism associated with the disease. Analysing this healing against the background of the body politic, the praxis of Jesus can be interpreted as quite deliberately impugning the rights and prerogatives of society's boundary keepers and controllers.⁴²³

In this way Christ, not only gives sanction to, but encourages the church to active challenging of the leaders and systems that perpetuate social injustice.

The second chapter interacts with the healing of the demoniac in the land of the Gadarenes (Mt. 8:28-33; Mark 5:1-20 & :Luke 8:26-39). Working with an understanding of demonic possession as a manifestation of resistance to dominating powers (an urge that in the case of this man which, because of its suppression, had led to "alienation and self-destruction") Rajkumar interprets Christ's exorcism of the demon as an act that relocates the man's resistance away from an isolated and self-destructive resistance to corporate resistance in the context of the community:

⁴²¹ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 119.

⁴²² P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 119.

⁴²³ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 121.

“Reinstating the man into the community is a subversive act which counters the strategy of alienation. It is a deliberate strategy which liberates the man – the icon of resistance – from alienation and helps him to recognize community as the proper sphere of resistive activity.”⁴²⁴ This narrative is also a challenge to the Indian church, which Rajkumar identifies with the people of the town who come out to Jesus and ask him to leave the area. Like the townspeople, the church, in interests of avoiding costly suffering, doesn’t want to have a resistance movement in its midst and by its inaction and silence has simply colluded with the existing unjust system.⁴²⁵ This healing function is a challenge to the church to participate in decisive action for real change: “to translate the arbitrariness of the manifestation of the Dalit liberative urge into concrete engagement with structural manifestation.”⁴²⁶

The third chapter interacts with the healing of the woman’s daughter from the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30), primarily as a paradigm for relating to the other. The woman is largely seen as having a marginal status, due to her impure Gentile ethnicity and also her femininity. But the woman crosses these boundaries and refuses to “conform to her labeled status as ‘inferior.’”⁴²⁷ But Christ is also interpreted as having moved towards ‘the other’, this “impure” gentile woman, through this encounter. This provides room for Rajkumar to see in this narrative implications for both the Dalit and the non-Dalit Christian. The non-Dalit Christian is challenged to learn from Christ and suffer the “disrupting influence” of “welcoming the other,” as well as ready to learn from the “challenges posed by the Dalit academia.”⁴²⁸ But this process of openness to the other also works the other way, requiring an openness from the Dalit to the non-Dalit that includes a willingness to learn from non-Dalit theology.⁴²⁹ Rajkumar also sees here sanction for partnership across religious and caste boundaries in this mission of securing justice for the Dalit.

Rajkumar shows that Christ exposed and challenged the boundaries that divided and separated the people of Christ’s day. In the address known as the Nazareth manifesto, delivered in a synagogue at the beginning of Christ’s ministry, he identified his ministry in terms of “freedom for the prisoners . . . recovery of sight for the blind release [of] the oppressed” (Luke 4:18) (an interpretation on a binary

⁴²⁴ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 135.

⁴²⁵ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 141f.

⁴²⁶ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 143.

⁴²⁷ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 156.

⁴²⁸ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 160f.

⁴²⁹ P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 172f.

model, is itself suggested by Christ's own teaching here: prisoner-captor; blind-seeing; oppressed-oppressor)). An example of this point can be seen in relation to the story of the healed leper. Whether the leper is instructed to go to the priests "as a witness against them" or a "witness to them" (both legitimate readings of the text), the purpose is primarily as a witness to Christ who has healed him. But, as Rajkumar indicates, this witness is not devoid of social implications: in the light of Christ the priests have to recognize a reconfiguration of society in which the boundaries of pure-impure break down.

The complicated and difficult nature, for the Dalit Christians in particular, of the realities of community formation in the church and being a sign, in Indian society, of the eschatological ingathering of all peoples into one, is suggested by V.S. Azariah's approach to the national political situation.

3.4.3.3 Community Formation in Political Context: V.S. Azariah

Bishop V. S. Azariah, himself a Dalit Christian, was one of the leading figures in the Indian church between the two world wars, serving as Bishop of Dornakal diocese of the Anglican Church from 1912-1945.⁴³⁰ One of Azariah's very few involvements in national level politics demonstrated his understanding that the church existed for the benefit of the whole nation and not only to serve the interests of the poor and the Dalit community.⁴³¹ As part of the ongoing political reforms introduced in India by the British government from 1919 to devolve power to elected Indian officials the 1932 Communal Award divided the electorate up into different groups, one of which was the Indian Christian community. The intention of this was that minority groups, like the Muslims in particular, would be assured political representation and a political voice. From such a position the Dalit Christian community could potentially

⁴³⁰ The following discussion of Azariah is indebted to Susan Harper's *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000). Harper has exerted considerable labour over many years in tracing sources and material of a largely forgotten leader of the Indian church. There are several non-academic works on Azariah, of which the most significant is *Azariah of Dornakal*, a biography, written by Carol Graham, a missionary co-worker of Azariah. During the years of Azariah's episcopate (1912-1945) the church grew rapidly (as did other denominations in the area) from 56,681 in 1912 to 225,080 in 1941, nearly all converts from among the Dalit communities (S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 184). At a very rough estimate only 5-10% of the new converts did not belong to the Dalit communities, and they came from some of the Sudra castes.

⁴³¹ The use of the singular 'community' can mistakenly create the sense of a united Dalit community. The Dalit community was itself fragmented: the Mala and Madiga, two of the main Dalit groups who converted to Christ, practiced segregation among themselves (S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 186).

stand to gain by having, for the first time in centuries, some measure of political power. Yet, Azariah was resolutely opposed to this on the grounds that this could encourage the church to “become a separate communal body with self-centered, inward-focused ambitions.”⁴³² This Communal Award violated the nature of the church as a body that incorporates all peoples, not only one section of the population: “The religion of Christ . . . refuses to be confined to any one race, class or caste. . . . The inclusion of Christians in ‘a communal award’ is a *direct blow to the nature of the Church of Christ.*” [italics mine]⁴³³ Azariah saw it as more important that the church sacrifice political security, and with that a degree of hope of material improvement, in order to remain true to its character as a public assembly to which all people were called. Azariah clearly expected the Dalit church, as much as they had experienced suffering at the hands of the dominant castes, to be ready to sacrifice for the sake of Christ and His kingdom.

Nevertheless, Azariah was very active in doing all that he could to alleviate their suffering of the Dalit community and fearlessly represented their interests against the powerful figures in the villages. He was apparently still remembered forty years after his death for his advocacy of the rights of the villagers to the extent that one lady recalled that, ‘Even the dorai zamindars [big landholders] used to fear Azariah, his pastors and evangelists.’⁴³⁴ At the same time as advocating their rights, Azariah also exerted considerable effort among the village churches to encourage tithing and giving, to the extent that he would regularly discuss this issue “far into the night” with church elders, helping them to see how they might manage to give, and how much.⁴³⁵ Although the church was poor and oppressed Azariah wanted them to see themselves, not as victims, but as a people with a great responsibility before God for the purposes of the kingdom.

3.5 Engaging Capitalism

For the last twenty years of his life Newbiggin persisted in a critique of capitalism and repeatedly insisted that a missionary encounter with capitalism was the most

⁴³² S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 303.

⁴³³ V. S. Azariah, ‘The Communal Award,’ *Guardian*, X, 31 (8 Sept. 1932), 368, quoted in S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 304.

⁴³⁴ Interview with Mrs. S. David, 4 April 1986, Beerole, in S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 349.

⁴³⁵ Carol Graham, *Between Two Worlds*, privately published in England, n.d., 29, quoted in S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 200.

urgent task facing the church.⁴³⁶ He believed that capitalism had taken control of the public space, which Newbigin explained and accounted for in terms of the New Testament description of “principalities and powers.”⁴³⁷ Describing the ideology of the free market as having “deep roots in the human soul”⁴³⁸ Newbigin sensed, without giving any hard evidence, that capitalism was a dominating and controlling system, influencing the sense of self and human relationships at a very profound level. He attributed the sense of meaningless and despair, the rise of violent crime and the disintegration of the family in the “affluent” West to the capitalist system.⁴³⁹ He also pointed to other global consequences of capitalism, including, a process of “polarization” worldwide between the increasingly affluent and the increasingly deprived and ecological devastation.⁴⁴⁰

The central point of Newbigin’s brief analysis of capitalism, and one that determines his interpretation of the whole system, is that the foundational belief of capitalist economics is of “self-interest” as an immanent force for good in the world.⁴⁴¹ This belief in the good of pursuing self-interest finds expression in the science of capitalist economics in a preoccupation with mechanisms and systems for increasing production in the conviction that with sufficient production distribution will “take care of itself.”⁴⁴² A popular expression of this dynamic of capitalism is the notion of the ‘trickle down effect,’ the idea that if the market is allowed its way and production can be maximized (unfettered by state interference for the purpose of distribution) then benefit will eventually and naturally accrue to the whole society. Newbigin sharply critiqued the foundational belief of the capitalist economic system in the good of self-interest in biblical prophetic terms as the enthronement of “covetousness”:

Traditional Christian ethics had attacked covetousness as a deadly sin, and Paul had equated it with idolatry: the putting of something that is not God in the place belonging to God (Col. 3:5). The eighteenth century, by a remarkable inversion,

⁴³⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 95; ‘A Reply to Konrad Raiser,’ 94.

⁴³⁷ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gospel as Public Truth: Swanwick Opening Statement,’ 11 July, 1992. This was an address at a conference in Swanwick jointly organized by the British and Foreign Bible Society and The Gospel and Our Culture network.

⁴³⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 95.

⁴³⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘The End of History,’ *Gospel and Our Culture*, 13 (Summer 1992), 2.

⁴⁴⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gospel as Public Truth: Swanwick Opening Statement.’ 11 July 1992.

⁴⁴¹ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 109.

⁴⁴² L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 110.

found in covetousness not only a law of nature but the engine of progress by which the purpose of nature and nature's God was to out.⁴⁴³

Newbigin's analysis of capitalist economics as rooted in the belief of the good of self-interest is what permits his identification of this economic system as idolatry. God is replaced as the envisioning, guiding and determining influence on economic life, by a morally corrupt law. Several years earlier from the above quotation Newbigin had referred to "the *ideology* of the free market" as a "form of idolatry" [emphasis mine].⁴⁴⁴

3.5.1 Newbigin's Critique and Capitalism in India

The India that Newbigin encountered, during the decades of the 1940's, 50's and 60's, was a unique period in Indian history when the country was flush with idealism and anticipation of the changes that democratic socialism could bring to the country. The figure who dominated and influenced India throughout this period, more than any other, was Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Nehru was one of the leaders of the independence movement, and Prime Minister of India from independence in 1947 till his death in 1964. Newbigin refers warmly to Nehru as "one of the noblest examples of the secular spirit at its best," attributing to his influence the maintenance of a public space that made possible genuine political debate and discussion about the future of India.⁴⁴⁵ Nehru oversaw the creation of India as a socialist democratic republic and committed the country to a state controlled economy. Unsurprisingly, given colonial history, Nehru had a suspicion that the free market would be used to work against Indian interests. However, the decades that followed Nehru's death did not lead to the hoped for development and prosperity and by the beginning of the 1990's India was virtually bankrupt and on the verge of defaulting on its international payments. The economic reforms subsequently initiated in 1991 began movement towards a free market economy: the state began to loosen its control of industry and business and foreign investment began to enter the country. The degree of liberalization of the economy over the past two decades is debated, given that state owned companies have 41% of the total market share, companies owned by family dynasties another 41%,

⁴⁴³ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 109.

⁴⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 95.

⁴⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 35.

and institutional ownership and subsidiaries of foreign companies another 18%.⁴⁴⁶ While the form that capitalism has taken in India may be unique, it has brought changes to India that are familiar to capitalism throughout the world.

Newbigin's critique raises the following question for India: 'Has the pursuit of self-interest as a good in itself become the dominant ideology?' There are some indications that this is the case. In her study of the upper middle class in Delhi, India, Christiane Brosius points to the bringing together of capitalism and a sense of national responsibility. By participating in the new consumer society and the pursuit of personal well-being and satisfaction there is a sense within the middle class that this is not a selfish pursuit, but one that contributes to the uplift of the nation as a whole:

While capitalism was previously identified with lack of patriotism, members of the new middle classes now consider themselves as motors of a new national revitalization, both in terms of economy and moral values. . . . William Mazzarella has defined this as a shift of concepts from the duty of progress to progress through the pleasure of consumption.⁴⁴⁷

This shift of concept from "the duty of progress" of Nehru's socialism, to the idea of "progress through the pleasure of consumption" is the manifestation of Newbigin's description of the core belief of capitalism as the pursuit of self-interest being of benefit for all. An executive director of a venture capital firm in India articulates this well when he states that the "cure" for poverty in India and the gulf between the two Indias is the pervasive spread of the free market throughout the economy: "Only markets can connect the two Indias and transform the poorer India into a prosperous India, not government largesse."⁴⁴⁸ Brosius points to how some scholars indicate that a new form of national identity has been created with "the shift from dutiful nation-citizen to consumer citizen."⁴⁴⁹ In addition to this sense of acting in the public good, other positive qualities are also attributed to the pursuit of self-interest, such as it being a natural and normal care of self: "Conspicuous consumption is not only valued

⁴⁴⁶ Patrick Foulis, 'Adventures in Capitalism,' *The Economist*, October 22, 2011 (<http://www.economist.com/node/21532448>, accessed 9 July 2013). Foulis points to the difficulty of properly identifying the form capitalism has taken in India describing it as an unusual "mix of Sao Paulo, Seoul and Shanghai."

⁴⁴⁷ Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 11.

⁴⁴⁸ R. Mantri, 26 November 2010, <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Adventure-Capitalist/entry/connecting-the-two-indias>.

⁴⁴⁹ C. Brosius, *India's Middle Class*, 11.

as investment in a better lifestyle but as a sign of one caring for oneself.”⁴⁵⁰ Other studies affirm the changes in thinking and behavior taking place in India. Gallup conducted a survey of 2000 Indian consumers in 1996 and another in 2006 and found a clear change in the traditional emphasis on saving with more attention to immediate satisfaction: “Although long-term plans remain a high priority, life’s pleasures in the here and now have gained importance over the past decade.”⁴⁵¹ The change in attitudes, but also of the dominant ideology in India, may be a process particularly located within the upper middle class who can be considered the key consumer group in India, but the concepts and ideals associated with this reaches down through the whole society, primarily through the media.⁴⁵²

Newbigin believed that the capitalist ideology of the pursuit of self-interest as good for all was destructive of relationships. While traditional family values in India show every indication of remaining intact, it can be argued that relationships within the wider society are placed under strain in a growing lack of consciousness of the plight of the poor and marginalized. This can be seen in film and television particularly. From the time of independence up until the early 1990’s the dominance of Nehru’s socialism helped minimize aspiration for wealth within the society, as Raghavendra explains with regard to the portrayal of wealth in Hindi cinema:

Until the early part of the 1990s, ‘Nehruvian socialism’ was India’s official ideology and this finds correspondence in class/social conflict of various kinds in Hindi cinema, the poor being morally favoured over the rich. This continues until 1992-93.⁴⁵³

Participation in the global economy opened the door to new sources of apparently legitimate wealth. Wealth in a largely rural India had often been associated with the rapacious and oppressive landlord, so that to have wealth had dubious moral associations. Gandhi’s own apparent repudiation of wealth and identification with the poor also significantly contributed to this perception. However, following economic liberalization, in the early 1990’s, wealth became available through flows of money from the global economy. The lifestyle of the urban rich rapidly became represented

⁴⁵⁰ C. Brosius, *India’s Middle Class*, 23.

⁴⁵¹ Ashok Gopal and Rajesh Srinivasan, ‘The New Indian Consumer,’ *Harvard Business Review*, October 2006, 22.

⁴⁵² C. Brosius, *India’s Middle Class*, 3.

⁴⁵³ M. K. Raghavendra, ‘Local Resistance to Global Bangalore: Reading minority Indian cinema,’ in *Popular Culture in a Globalized India*, eds. K. M. Gokulsung and Wimal Dissanayake (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008), 16.

as something of an ideal in Hindi cinema, such that Bollywood, the source of Hindi cinema today, “more or less” endorses globalization.⁴⁵⁴ This has had the effect of marginalizing or at least lessening the perceived importance of other values. Raghavendra points to an example of this in the discomfort that regional language cinema sometimes shows in its representations of current Indian society. He uses the example of *Duniya* which frequently references *Sakshatkara*, a 1971 film that “powerfully identified a set of virtues that long defined the self-image of Kannadigas – aristocratic, noble, trusting, generous and tolerant.” *Duniya* represents this people as a diminished force and refers to the film “as a lament on how such a class of people could be so reduced.”⁴⁵⁵ As Tharoor points out the “new consumer culture” has generated a “competitive ferment,”⁴⁵⁶ and such a ferment hardly supports community virtues of generosity and trust.

The television channels, which are largely dependent on advertising for their survival, are orientated particularly towards the urban upper middle classes, which is reflected in their content and also advertising. As Mehta points out, the T.V. schedule is driven by ratings among the urban middle classes, the main target group for the companies on whose advertising they depend:

India’s entire rural population, consisting of an estimated 145 million households, is totally ignored. Even within the urban areas, only towns with a population of more than one lakh are measured (presentation shown to Mehta by Atul Phadnis, based on NRS surveys). The others are not considered important enough to measure. Thirdly until at least 2005, vast areas like all the north-east states, Bihar and Kashmir were not represented. Fourth the TAM system has always been skewed towards higher income householders. Until January 2007, it reserved 25 per cent of its meters outright for SEC A householders, defined as the highest earning socio-economic category.⁴⁵⁷

Consequently, the images and advertised products are frequently totally beyond the income of the majority of those watching. Furthermore, the content of the programming is also reflective of a focus on the urban middle classes, the channels naturally being eager to win their viewing. Rural issues and peripheral states tend to be largely ignored in T.V. programming such as television news. Mehta gives an

⁴⁵⁴ M. K. Raghavendra, ‘Local Resistance to Global Bangalore,’ 15.

⁴⁵⁵ M. K. Raghavendra, ‘Local Resistance to Global Bangalore,’ 22.

⁴⁵⁶ Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2007), 324.

⁴⁵⁷ N. Mehta, *India on Television*, 181.

example of this with the presence of 500 television accredited journalists present at a week long fashion festival, in contrast to only one television journalist covering the crisis in rural India which was “experiencing the worst spate of farmer suicides in decades.”⁴⁵⁸ Nothing could give a starker illustration of indifference to the plight of the poor.

The poor have become invisible, yet India remains, as some of her leaders acknowledge, a poor country. In a country where it is accepted that approximately 40% of children under the age of five are severely malnourished this is a conclusion that is hard to avoid. An equally large proportion of the population remain excluded from the most basic of healthcare and educational opportunity. Their life has changed relatively little from that of their forebears - a daily struggle on a small patch of land to eke out a living. This story, in terms of film and television, is largely hidden from the dominant society.

3.6 Conclusion

The conflict-victory dimension of the cross, as considered in this chapter, has direct application for the church’s life and mission in relation to two aspects of Indian society today: the ongoing Dalit experience of marginalisation and the spread of capitalist ideology. The way in which the conflict-victory aspect of the cross can relate to the Dalit experience is perhaps more obvious than in relation to capitalism. As considered above, the capitalist ideology that the pursuit of self-interest will eventually lead to a new society for all, is fundamentally at odds with an eschatology rooted in the cross. The church, arguably, has a role to play today in Indian society by challenging this logic through a life of participation in Christ’s suffering and victory. In this way the church will demonstrate and embody an alternative logic for a renewed Indian society. Yet, a renewed Indian society not only involves liberation from dehumanizing ideology but also an appropriate orientation and integration of the culture as a whole, as will now be considered.

⁴⁵⁸ N. Mehta, *India on Television*, 185.

Chapter 4

Mission as Inculturation

4.1 Introduction

Given Newbigin's locating the church's mission in relation to the eschatological reign of God on earth it is appropriate to ask about his understanding of the relationship of inculturation to this reign.⁴⁵⁹ What does it mean for the church to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom of God in a particular culture? More specifically, what does it mean for the church to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom of God in the culture and cultures that belong to India? Newbigin could write warmly of how the "glory and honour of India" will be brought into the new city at the end of the ages.⁴⁶⁰ What does this mean for the church's faith, life and practice today?

4.1.1 The Context of the Church in India

One of the characteristics of Indian theology is a long history of wrestling with the relationship between Christ and culture. In a country that has birthed two world religions, with a cultural legacy that shows a comparatively high degree of continuity over a three thousand year period, and where the church is a minority, a pressing sense of need to articulate and understand the relationship between Christ and culture is not surprising. The church in north India is perceived by the majority as having little connection with the wider society.

The perception of the church as foreign to north India can be attributed to three facts: its numerical minority status; its origins in the Western missions movement of the nineteenth century; and that the church in India as a whole is physically located on the periphery of the Hindi speaking majority of north India. The most obvious fact about the church in north India in relationship to the wider society is its minority status, numbering 5.33 million, or 0.69% of the total north Indian population.⁴⁶¹ This

⁴⁵⁹ Newbigin very rarely uses the term 'inculturation' but, as the following discussion hopefully indicates, inculturation is an aspect of his thought. By inculturation I mean the life, practice and theology of the church being rooted and formed from within its local culture by the primary agency of the local church under the guidance of the Spirit.

⁴⁶⁰ Newbigin, 'Bible Study,' 184.

⁴⁶¹ The total population of north India, as defined here, at the time of the 2001 census was approximately 764 million from a total Indian population of 1028.6 million. The figures for this and

minority status is compounded by the fact that of this number approximately half are among the tribal peoples of the ‘Tribal Belt’ of Chotanagpur,⁴⁶² a people largely isolated from the mainstream of north Indian society and life. Furthermore, the main centers of Christian population in India are south India (12.5 million) and north-east India (6.3 million), both regions whose linguistic roots are entirely different and which are perceived to be culturally distinct from the north. As a result, “this instantly pushes Indian Christianity out of the cultural mainstream.”⁴⁶³ So although overall there is a significant Christian presence in India, Christianity is in a very marginal position in relation to the dominant community of north India, and still perceived as alien, as Oommen and Mabry explain:

The carriers of Indian Christianity are the peripheral nationalities of south India and the subaltern nationalities of tribal India. This creates a deep wedge between the dominant nationalities of India (those who inhabit the Indo-Gangatic belt and are speakers of Indo-Aryan languages⁴⁶⁴) and Indian Christians.⁴⁶⁵

Oommen and Mabry’s point here that there is a “deep wedge” between north India and Indian Christians needs to be borne in mind in any consideration of Christianity in north India. The fact of a Christian presence in India for millennia and the statistics that indicate many millions of Christians in India should not obscure the fact that in north India Christianity is perceived as an intrusion belonging to a tiny “fringe” minority. This perception of the church by the majority should not obscure the fact that Christianity has an Indian expression throughout India, including in the north.

the Christian population are available from a Government of India website: www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm. The 2001 census figures for Christians are disputed by some church leaders who argue that the Christian population is higher, than this, possibly even double this figure.

⁴⁶² 28 districts spread across the four states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. This estimate is based on Oommen & Mabry’s analysis of the 1981 census of the Christian population of these districts. At that time the total was 1.7 million, 10.6% of the total Christian population in India (*The Christian Clergy in India*, 56). The tribal peoples are ethnically and linguistically distinct from the majority of the north Indian population. Their migration into the Indian landmass took place millennia before the Indo-Aryan migrations, but they have always lived on the physical and social margins of the dominant Indo-Aryan community. Their traditional relationship to Hindu society as ‘outcaste’ clearly indicates their position.

⁴⁶³T. K. Oommen & H. P. Mabry, *The Christian Clergy in India*, Vol. 1, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 56. Oommen is a highly respected and awarded Indian sociologist, and Mabry a Professor at United Theological College, Bangalore.

⁴⁶⁴ Of which of course Hindi is the most dominant, but including others such as Gujarati, Punjabi, and Bengali.

⁴⁶⁵ T. K. Oommen & H. P. Mabry, *The Christian Clergy in India*, 56.

4.2 Inculturation and the Kingdom of God

A consideration of Newbigin's understanding of inculturation will be aided with reference to Stephen Bevans revised and expanded edition of *Models of Contextual Theology*. Stephen Bevans added a sixth model, to the five of the earlier edition, 'The Countercultural Model.'⁴⁶⁶ Bevans identifies Newbigin as one of the major, and one of the most articulate, practitioners of this model,⁴⁶⁷ as advocating an encounter with culture that involves a challenge to cultural presuppositions, beliefs, patterns of behavior etc. Bevans uses Hogg's phrase 'challenging relevance' as a fitting description of the countercultural model, but his description of this model stresses the 'challenging' aspect, with less corresponding consideration of the 'relevance.' Bevans' critique of Newbigin reflects only one side of Newbigin's approach, the more negative aspect, and as Goheen suggests does not reflect the positive aspects of Newbigin's approach to culture.⁴⁶⁸ Goheen makes two helpful points in relation to this: firstly, that for Newbigin the starting point of the church's approach to culture is affirmative - the church is for the world – and secondly, that the church "lives in solidarity with its community in the cultural task of humankind."⁴⁶⁹ Although Newbigin doesn't refer to the cultural mandate of Genesis 1 & 2, which Goheen is alluding to here, he does in places in his writing indicate a positive view of creation as retaining its own inherent unity and rationality.⁴⁷⁰

There are three key ways that the relationship of inculturation to the kingdom of God is expressed in various places in Newbigin's writing. Firstly, culture is to be re-interpreted from within the church community: in a sense the church, in its relationship to the kingdom of God, has a position of epistemological privilege. For Newbigin from the perspective of the unconverted person there is a very clear distinction between the gospel and culture in that acceptance of the gospel cannot happen from within culture, but can only happen by a radical change of position into the church community. Newbigin maintained, as Bevans states, that culture "can form no firm basis for an authentic acceptance of Christian truth."⁴⁷¹ Newbigin emphasized the need for conversion, for baptism and participation in the church

⁴⁶⁶ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 119.

⁴⁶⁷ S. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 120ff.

⁴⁶⁸ Michael W. Goheen, 'Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?' *Mission Studies* 19, 2 (2002), <http://newbigin.net>, accessed 21 June, 2012.

⁴⁶⁹ Michael W. Goheen, 'Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?'

⁴⁷⁰ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 89.

⁴⁷¹ S. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 120.

community in order to indwell the story of Christ. Rightly then, Bevans points to the importance of the church in this model, stating that the engagement with context takes place through a church community where the gospel story is being indwelt and lived out.⁴⁷² Bevans also rightly identifies the point, that Newbigin does make, that it is from the perspective of participation in this community that it becomes possible to “interpret, engage, unmask and challenge the experience of the present.” Indwelling the gospel story through the church community is the starting point of all true knowledge, as distinct from a position within the local culture. Newbigin’s Church Missionary Society Annual Sermon, with his text taken from 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, reflects this position. Newbigin rejected the idea of a contextual communication that begins with a felt need, “a problem or a cluster of problems.”⁴⁷³ Although he saw this approach as “pervasive” he believed it was deeply flawed.

Secondly, inculturation is an authentic task in the light of the eschaton. Hunsberger has pointed out that Newbigin finds an affirmation of cultural diversity in the early chapters of Genesis.⁴⁷⁴ Newbigin reads the diversity of the nations recorded in Genesis 10 as part of God’s “primal covenant of blessing.” Hunsberger identifies this as a ‘theology of cultural plurality,’ and sets this in eschatological perspective as a “diversity on the way to unified diversity.”⁴⁷⁵ While Newbigin’s reading of Genesis 10 in this light is given only isolated treatment in his writing the eschatological perspective, as Hunsberger indicates, is important. This eschatological vision of unity in cultural diversity gives the work of inculturation a clear connection to the end, and indicates how the church, precisely as an incultured community, is sign, instrument and foretaste of the end.

Thirdly, a full knowledge of the meaning of Christ’s Lordship emerges through a gathered confession of Christ by churches who have done Christology from within their cultures, a confession of Jesus Christ “within the varied cultures,” and also in dialogue with the church of other cultures.⁴⁷⁶ Newbigin added a further “condition” for doing Christology today which is dialogue with other religious and secular cultural systems.⁴⁷⁷ So, a complete knowledge of the meaning of Christ’s Lordship will

⁴⁷² S. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 122.

⁴⁷³ L. Newbigin, ‘Context and Conversion,’ (St. Andrew’s Church, London: 4 December 1978).

⁴⁷⁴ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 252f with reference to Newbigin, ‘What is a ‘Local Church Truly United’?, *The Ecumenical Review*, 29.

⁴⁷⁵ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 253.

⁴⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the Cultures,’ 19.

⁴⁷⁷ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the Cultures,’ 21.

“finally be made manifest *only* when every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” [emphasis mine].⁴⁷⁸ This means that the work of theologizing from within cultures has a connection to the end, and so this aspect of inculturation indicates another form of the church as a sign, witness and foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Newbigin gave greater emphasis to the first point noted here, than to the second and third points, which both have rather limited and brief treatment in his writing. This first point requires a little further consideration.

4.2.1 Reinterpreting Culture from Within the Church

As indicated above, Newbigin gives a central place to the church in his interpretation of the relationship between Christ and culture, as Goheen indicates: “Few models of contextualization place the church so firmly in the middle of the relationship between gospel and culture.”⁴⁷⁹ This does not mean there is no connection between Christ and the wider culture, but this connection, for Newbigin, can only be perceived and comprehended through indwelling the gospel story in word and action as a part of the church community.

The reinterpretation of culture from within the church can be seen with particular clarity in *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Some of the countercultural elements identified by Bevans are visible, particularly in Newbigin’s implication that the starting point of theology, the starting point for understanding Jesus Christ, can only be conversion and participation in the church, and that from within any particular culture there is an “incomprehensibility” to the message.⁴⁸⁰ There is no “hermeneutical circle” between Christ and humanity prior to a position of repentance and faith. On this basis Bevans is clearly justified in his identification of Newbigin as countercultural. Yet, it should be pointed out that this is countercultural from the perspective of the person in culture, apart from repentance and faith in Christ and does not reflect Newbigin’s Christology. For Newbigin there are many points of connection between Christ and culture, but this is only perceptible from the position of faith, as he states: “The new understanding of the converted person might make it possible to find a place for the truth that was embodied in the former vision and yet at the same time offer a *wider*

⁴⁷⁸ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the Cultures,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 31 (1), 22.

⁴⁷⁹ M. Goheen, ‘As the Father Has Sent Me,’ 331.

⁴⁸⁰ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 51ff.

and more inclusive rationality than the older one could” [emphasis mine].⁴⁸¹

Newbigin points to Paul as an example of this: from within his culture, without faith in Christ, he saw Christ as against a critically important part of his culture, the law. Yet, from the standpoint of conversion Paul could see the connection and relationship between Christ and the law. Christ, to use the familiar descriptive terms employed by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*, from the perspective of Saul, is the ‘Christ Against Culture,’ but from the perspective of Paul is the ‘Christ of Culture.’ In his reading of John’s gospel Newbigin points to “the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture” traced in the first twelve chapters and brought to conclusion in “the absolute rejection of Jesus as a blasphemous sinner.” Yet in chapters 13 to 17 is “an entirely different world, a world in which Jesus himself is the radiating center of light and love.” From this “side” Jesus is the “center and source of all truth.”⁴⁸² From this perspective Christ can be seen as the Christ of and for culture, and according to Newbigin it “is perfectly possible to acknowledge and cherish the insights of our culture.”⁴⁸³ Christ can be understood as what Jyoti Sahi calls “a lamp, a way of seeing the reality of the world, a means towards darshana which is a central Indian concept meaning to vision the divine present in the world.”⁴⁸⁴ Newbigin’s model of inculturation can be seen as conversionist in the sense that it is an affirmation of much that is within the culture, but only as the elements and dimensions of culture find their true position and identity in relation to Jesus Christ, largely through the church’s agency.

Although Newbigin believed that aspects of culture find their true position and identity in Christ he did not practice an active implementation of this idea. An active outworking of the position Newbigin held of the Christ-culture relationship can be seen as practiced in the early church fathers: “. . . Christological discourse arose not in dogmatics but apologetics. . . . But early Christological thinking, following that composed by the authors of the New Testament, developed extra-ecclesially and with conscious reference to the cultural situation in which and to which it spoke.”⁴⁸⁵ The purpose of this was for more than simply making Christ appear appealing, but in itself it had a mission purpose, of reorientating the culture and all its ideas itself towards

⁴⁸¹ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53.

⁴⁸² L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53.

⁴⁸³ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 63.

⁴⁸⁴ Jyoti Sahi, *Holy Ground: A New Approach to the Mission of the Church in India* (Auckland: Pace Publishing, 1998), 22.

⁴⁸⁵ Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 15. . . . 16.

Christ: “While the early Church Apologists sought to persuade, they also sought to critique and to justify – *to tell the story of what is* in a better, more coherent, way. In particular their critique concerned idolatry” [emphasis mine].⁴⁸⁶ The approach of early church apologists like Irenaeus and Clement, according to Ward, was to interpret the whole of reality as understood by a particular culture from the perspective of Christ as the center of truth.⁴⁸⁷ Newbigin shared this perspective, but is perhaps misunderstood on this point because he did not actively pursue the outworking of this idea.

Newbigin believes that Christ and culture cannot be separated from one another, as he states: “The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite separate things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life.”⁴⁸⁸ There is a sense that Newbigin would agree with Graham Ward’s criticism of Niebuhr and his famous proposal of the three models (Christ against culture; Christ of culture; and Christ the transformer of culture) on the grounds that there is an implicit sense that Christ can in some way be known ‘above’ culture: “they tend to operate on a governing binary: there is Christ and there is culture, and how the two relate. The difficulty here is that Christ is already a cultural event. We have no access to a Christ who has not already been encultured.”⁴⁸⁹ For Newbigin Christ is already “encultured,” in two senses: firstly in the sense noted above of Christ as the “center and source of all truth”; and secondly in that Christ is known to us not as a “disembodied message” but through the encultured witness of the apostles and a local church community with its own particular culture.

4.3 Method of Inculturation

For Newbigin the Scriptures have a central place in inculturation. Writing in the 1970’s, in the immediate post-colonial era, he pointed to the liberating influence of the Bible in the hands of the local church as it allowed the church to see itself and its own past in a way differently from that of the missionaries.⁴⁹⁰ He wrote with approval of a “triangular relationship between the local culture, invading culture [of

⁴⁸⁶ G. Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 17.

⁴⁸⁷ Ward gives the examples of how “Irenaeus borrowed technical terms from Greek rhetoric; Clement describes Christ as a new Orpheus and was not adverse to using material from either the Gnostics or Merkabah mysticism” (G. Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 16).

⁴⁸⁸ L. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 188.

⁴⁸⁹ G. Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 22.

⁴⁹⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the Cultures,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31,1 (1978), 4ff.

the missionary], and the Bible,” in which the Bible in the hands of the new believers becomes a tool for *them* to critique the interpretation of the gospel originally given to them, as well as to critique their own culture. Following David Barrett’s analysis in *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (1968) Newbigin identifies this process of the development of “new models of thought and action” as happening in the African independent church movement. Newbigin points to how these church communities discovered biblical precedent for some of their beliefs and institutions that had been heavily criticized by the missionaries regarding land (veneration of), family structure (polygamy), and leadership.

Newbigin directly applied this method to his own ministry in the church in India. Following the act of union of the Church of South India a great deal of committee work had to be done concerning organizational principles and procedures of the diocese. At one of these meetings Newbigin “put a large Bible on the table and pointed out that our constitution was already there, and we were only making local rules.” He expresses his intention to make this a part of every meeting “as a reminder.”⁴⁹¹ He understood that the Scripture had to be interpreted anew with reference to a continually changing world that gave rise to new issues, of which previous generations were unaware. The Scriptures had to be searched for new light and a fresh understanding on any situation. This is evident from his description of the inauguration service of the Church of South India held at St. George’s Cathedral in Madras on September 27th, 1947. During this ceremony a representative from each of the three churches forming the CSI laid a copy of the Scheme of Union on the Holy Table, which had been signed by all the ministers of the denomination. Newbigin comments: “Now the three volumes lie side by side on the Table. There lie our separate selves. We have been proud of them, these great names, great principles, secure traditions of faith and worship, beloved patterns of holiness. We shall sometimes look back, because the flesh is weak. But ‘pearls for pearls’ is the law of God’s Kingdom.”⁴⁹² In the immediate post-colonial context Newbigin is, in effect, pointing to the need for critique of, and movement forward from, the interpretation of the gospel handed down to the church by the missionaries.

⁴⁹¹ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 52.

⁴⁹² L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 22.

Newbigin's triangular system for the development of indigenous Christology of Bible – ecumenical fellowship of Christians from other cultures – local culture⁴⁹³ has some similarities with Schreiter's later and more well known triangular system of gospel-church-culture for the development of "local theologies."⁴⁹⁴ The primary difference between these two is that Schreiter uses the term "gospel" to include the Bible but also to go "beyond" it to refer to the presence of Christ in the church and also within the wider culture. Like Newbigin, Schreiter understands these three elements involved in the development of a local theology, as being in a dialectical relationship with each other, by which he means a process of constant movement in reflection and thought from one to the other.⁴⁹⁵ The significance of Schreiter for our present consideration is that Schreiter's book is a detailed consideration of the methodology suitable for the production of a local theology. He explains that the subject of his book is the problem of "how" the gospel, church and culture can be brought together into a fruitful and constructive dialectical relationship.⁴⁹⁶ The methodology involved in this dialectic is not particularly simple. Schreiter believes, for instance that semiotics, the study of a culture's sign systems, is suitable for reflecting on culture in the process of developing a local theology.⁴⁹⁷ One of the reasons he gives for this, which echoes Newbigin's own understanding of religious systems as structures with their own rationality to be understood on their own terms, is that "the culture is allowed to emerge in its own configuration."⁴⁹⁸ Schreiter argues that reflection on the wider church tradition (Newbigin's "invading culture"/"ecumenical fellowship of churches in other cultures") can only be done without a "naïve" or "paternalistic" experience of the tradition through finding ways of expressing thought that is meaningful to the culture.⁴⁹⁹ As a passing thought he suggests the possibility of the use of the sutra and commentary in South Asia.⁵⁰⁰

For Newbigin, the bearer of the gospel to another culture avoids a "paternalistic" attitude to the other culture by avoiding prescribing the ethical implications of

⁴⁹³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 153. He uses the term "invading culture" in 'Christ and the Cultures.'

⁴⁹⁴ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 20f.

⁴⁹⁵ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.

⁴⁹⁶ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, xi.

⁴⁹⁷ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 52.

⁴⁹⁸ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 52.

⁴⁹⁹ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 78.

⁵⁰⁰ The sutra is a terse, frequently opaque statement, that was the form of philosophical reflection on the Vedas.

conversion. The essential characteristic of the gospel as God's offer in Christ of salvation that is not of our creation, must remain clear. To prescribe the actions that have to be taken in salvation is to blur the distinction between grace and works: "we are in the realm of the Law and not of the Gospel. Our Christian contribution to the situation is then to lay a burden on men's conscience . . ." ⁵⁰¹ Newbigin's statement here should be seen in the context of what he understood as an emphasis on the need for social and economic justice. In 1978 he is speaking against the backdrop of the explosion of liberation theology into the wider consciousness of the church.

4.3.1 The Spirit Filled Local Church

Inculturation happens under the agency and direction of the Spirit. The local church, as a community filled with the Spirit, becomes competent to discern the form and shape for the church in that place. An example of this can be seen in Samuel Rayan's *Breath of Fire* where he lays considerable emphasis on the indwelling Holy Spirit as the one who directly communicates and reveals God to the believer. ⁵⁰² For, example he describes having the Spirit "speak to us" as "the basic experience of being a Christian." ⁵⁰³ He states that this experience of the Spirit's direct communication has been "obscured for centuries." ⁵⁰⁴ Rayan perhaps alludes to the colonial experience of the church in India when he states that authoritative teaching of the church external to the local church, "the magisterium," "can become a real problem" by obstructing the direct knowledge and experience of God that is given in the New Covenant. ⁵⁰⁵

Rayan points to how this focus on the Spirit is liberating in that it generates the sense of a person as one with full responsibility to act and think in the particular time and place in which they find themselves, as he states: "To be free in this manner [with reference to Jn. 3:8] is to be resourceful and to live imaginatively; it is to be responsible for one's decisions and options and to be able to respond to the surprises of the Spirit and history." ⁵⁰⁶ A church focused on the Spirit is a church liberated to act effectively in the world manifested in a heightened "sensitivity" to the needs of

⁵⁰¹ L. Newbigin, 'Context and Conversion,' 2.

⁵⁰² Samuel Rayan (b.1920) is an Indian Jesuit liberation theologian. He served as Dean of Vidya Jyothi Theological College from 1972.

⁵⁰³ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 84.

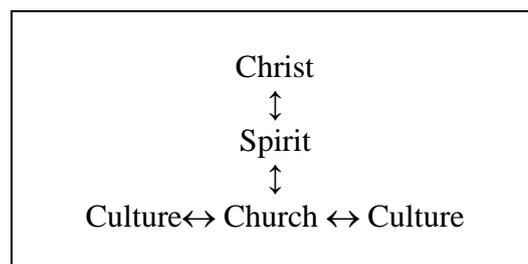
⁵⁰⁴ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 86.

⁵⁰⁵ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 79f.

⁵⁰⁶ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 89.

people and a heightened “capability for responding to them.”⁵⁰⁷ In other words, the tremendous complexity and diversity of life situations can be responded to with the Spirit’s wisdom. This is a vision of the church empowered to be the church in its particular place and context.

It is this direct relationship between Christ and the church that is expressed in Newbigin’s freedom to recognize a person who might be uneducated, or “even illiterate,” as the leader of a church fellowship⁵⁰⁸ and enable the possibility of a young church almost from the beginning to be under local lay leadership. Newbigin directly acknowledged the influence of Roland Allen in his thinking on this point. In the foreword to a 1962 edition of *Missionary Methods: St Paul’s or Ours?* he wrote of having been “compelled, reluctantly, to face his question.”⁵⁰⁹ One of Allen’s central points is that Paul quickly gave local leadership and autonomy to the new churches out of a confidence that the Holy Spirit in these new converts would lead and guide them into the truth, as Allen stated: “The moment they are baptized they are the Temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost is power. They are not so incapable as we suppose.”⁵¹⁰ Newbigin shared this sense of the local church’s competence to know and discern the mind of Christ in a particular place. Accordingly, the starting point for the church’s engagement with culture is the indwelling Christ. Christ as the one in whom is found a “wider and more inclusive rationality” than that of the local culture enables an adequate relationship to the local culture. This can be expressed in a diagram:



There are several points that can be made here. Firstly, the church is inter-related with its own culture, as indicated by the double arrow. But this relationship between

⁵⁰⁷ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 89.

⁵⁰⁸ L. Newbigin, ‘Ministry and Laity,’ *National Christian Council Review* 85, (1965), 483.

⁵⁰⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘Foreword’ in Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), ii.

⁵¹⁰ R. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 146.

the church and culture is sustained on the basis of the church's direct relationship to Christ in the preached word, the eucharist and fellowship of the church. Newbigin's sense of the life giving power of Christ present directly to the church found expression in an emphasis on the Word *and* the eucharist. He advocated the weekly celebration of the eucharist, something that he felt had been lost within the Protestant church.⁵¹¹ Newbigin believed that Allen shared this emphasis on the role of the visible fellowship, "visibly united in the sacramental life" in his understanding of the church as constituted by the Spirit.⁵¹² So the church finds continual inspiration to take shape and form in its own culture through the life of Christ mediated in its fellowship and sacramental life. Secondly, as indicated in the arrow of movement from the church towards the culture, Newbigin believes inculturation has to do with the process of illuminating and revealing the connection between Christ and *all* things, for the purpose of an obedient response, or, in Newbigin's words, to see that "God's word" is communicated with reference to "the total context in which people are now living and in which they now have to make their decisions."⁵¹³ Inculturation is not primarily about giving the gospel a culturally appropriate clothing, but more radically has to do with the orientation of the whole of life and being towards Christ in a way that is continually guiding action in the present. Newbigin gives an illustration of what he means by this from the example of Ronald Wynne a missionary to an unreached group in Botswana who, after living among the people for eight years, asked them "as a community" to accept Christ as Lord. Newbigin expands on this to state:

In other words, the gospel was seen from the beginning as something which would affect the entire life of the community and all their customs and traditions. A decision for Christ would be a decision that put the whole of their shared life, their culture, into *a new setting*. The result was a profound change in the whole corporate life of the community.[emphasis mine]⁵¹⁴

The discussion around inculturation has not always been carried on in this way due to an understanding of the gospel as largely confined to the area of personal

⁵¹¹ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 33f. Newbigin gives a brief and general overview of the "Reformer's" intention to distribute the eucharist, each Sunday, to all who were present in the church congregation. However, due to the ingrained habits of the church people they couldn't follow through with this, leading gradually to a situation in which the people "went to church to listen to a clergyman offering prayers and preaching."

⁵¹² L. Newbigin, 'Foreword,' in R. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, iii.

⁵¹³ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 142.

⁵¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 189.

salvation. Accordingly, issues of culturally appropriate forms of worship and liturgy, and theology have sometimes tended to dominate the discussion of the relationship between gospel and culture. This is clearly an important issue, but as Newbigin points out the gospel brings the imperative that the whole of life becomes orientated and related to Christ. We might say that inculturation is becoming a reality when the whole of a society's life is in the process of being related to Christ.

Thirdly, the process of inculturation is to be understood as one that begins with God. Inculturation as one dimension of the *missio dei* is pointed to by Newbigin's conviction that the church is always in transition, continually being moved by Christ, "the great revolutionary," to express its life through new forms and structures, as he states: "The old wine-skins have to be thrown away – old forms, old methods, old words – even though they were precious and adequate in their day. God has new wine to pour into our lives in each generation."⁵¹⁵ The initiative begins with God and the church's response to God's initiative is to find more suitable and appropriate forms in which her relationship to God comes to expression.

Fourthly, as indicated by the arrow from the culture to the church and from the church to the Spirit, the church brings the best of the culture of her society to the feet of Christ, as her offering, the offering she makes for that society and people: "an offering on behalf of the whole of mankind."⁵¹⁶ In this sense the church acts as the representative to God of its culture. This harmonizes with Newbigin's theology of culture, briefly discussed above, in which God has divinely purposed humanity to live in a "unified diversity" of different cultures.

4.3.2 An Example of Local Theology in India from Panikkar

For examples of inculturation of the church in India it is necessary to look beyond Newbigin, as this is not a focus in his writing. Perhaps one of the most notable examples of doing theology in relation to the philosophical texts of Hinduism, that is roughly contemporaneous with Newbigin's own time in India, can be found in the main chapter of Raymond Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, entitled 'God and the World According to Brahma-Sutra I, I, 2.'⁵¹⁷ Newbigin acknowledged this chapter as a "brilliant exposition of a sloga of the Brahma Sutra," but didn't gave

⁵¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 21.

⁵¹⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 30f.

⁵¹⁷ Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1964), pp.65-131. This is the first English edition.

any indication of his sense of its usefulness to the church in India, and instead focused his brief consideration of this book on the preceding chapter in which Panikkar emphasizes the connection between Christ and Hinduism.⁵¹⁸ Yet, Panikkar's study can give some indication of what it might mean to do theology in relation to the Hindu philosophical tradition.⁵¹⁹ Panikkar's main point of reflection is on the Brahma sutra, 'Whence the origin etc. of this,' which Panikkar paraphrases as 'Brahman is that whence the origination, sustentation and transformation of this world comes.'⁵²⁰

Panikkar points out that Hindu thought has never been able to resolve the tension between god as absolute and the world as contingent. The divine figure of Isvara has been posited within Hindu thought as the point of connection between the Absolute Brahman, and the contingent world, "the two apparently irreconcilable poles: the absolute and the relative."⁵²¹ Yet, it has proven impossible to adequately maintain the tension between the two in Isvara, leading either to an overemphasis on the relative character of Isvara that makes it hard to see the absolute (Sankara), or to collapsing the tension in Isvara between the absolute and the relative (Ramanuja), and making the relative continuous with Brahman: "the one complete Brahman."⁵²² Panikkar sees the answer to this tension in classical Nicene and Chalcedonian Christology according to which Christ holds in His own person the absolute nature of God and the relative of human nature yet without any intermingling of the two natures: "he [Christ] fulfils the requirements of the text [the sutra] and gives an answer to all the antinomies that the history of Indian philosophy has found in this mediator between Brahman and the world."⁵²³ This leads Panikkar to identify Christ as "our Isvara."

Panikkar's arguments for this approach of speaking of Christ as Isvara are persuasive. He points to the communicative power of identifying Christ as Isvara, in that it can serve as a beginning for making Christ "intelligible" to Indian

⁵¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 41ff.

⁵¹⁹ In the course of the chapter Panikkar deals with various issues such as whether knowledge of the world as contingent has priority to the knowledge of God, and the role of revelation in our knowledge of God. He explains the difference of Indian epistemology from a Western post Cartesian epistemology in terms of an emphasis on non-rational elements: the desire to know that is engendered by reading the Scripture; the inter-relationship between faith and reason; the place of the moral and spiritual life; and the fact of God as the beginning of knowledge (*The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 84f, 96f, 99f).

⁵²⁰ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 75. The Brahma Sutras are a commentary on the Upanishads, attributed to Badarayana, a philosopher who is considered to have lived around the 2nd century A.D.

⁵²¹ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 120.

⁵²² R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 128.

⁵²³ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 130.

Philosophy.⁵²⁴ He points to the authoritative precedent for this approach with Thomas Aquinas who used the philosophical framework of Aristotle in order to effectively communicate Christ: “he was performing a theological mission of assimilation and of explaining the Christian truths . . .”⁵²⁵ This sense of theological mission associates Panikkar’s approach not only with Aquinas, but also with the pre-Nicene church fathers such as Clement and Tertullian. Panikkar gives a suggestive interpretation of the implications of this that Christ is “more than a mediator” and rather the one through whom God will be “all in all and nothing else beyond, or behind or besides.”⁵²⁶ A second related point that Panikkar refers to in this regard is that in taking this approach, one objective is bringing all things into obedience to Christ, or to quote his reference to Ephesians 1:10, “gathering up of all things in Christ.”⁵²⁷

There appears to be some continuity between Panikkar’s approach and Newbigin’s sense of reinterpreting the various aspects of culture in the light of Christ in that Panikkar is, in effect, reading elements of Indian philosophy in the light of Christ as the God-man. Panikkar points to the importance of beginning Christology, in the Indian context, with Christ as the Word made flesh. He suggests that in terms of the Indian philosophical tradition it is necessary to begin Christology with the fact of the Word made flesh, rather than with the historical Christ. The reason which is implied, is that Christian philosophy and understanding of the historical Christ, and of history itself, began with an apprehension that Christ is the eternal Word incarnate, and accordingly this should also be the starting place in discussion with someone working within the Indian philosophical tradition.⁵²⁸ Panikkar believes that taking this as a starting point would greatly improve communication and clear up many misunderstandings.

Panikkar’s study points to the need for clarification about what it means to reinterpret aspects of culture in the light of Christ. For Panikkar, at this point in his writing, Christ is the light as completing, or fulfilling, unresolved aspects of Indian philosophy. But for Newbigin, Christ as the light may involve a fundamental reordering, bringing into centre stage and giving priority to issues such as social justice, that have been considered peripheral to the dominant tradition. There is an

⁵²⁴ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 133.

⁵²⁵ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 135.

⁵²⁶ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 129.

⁵²⁷ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 136.

⁵²⁸ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 133.

element of disturbance involved. There is the possibility that, in the light of Christ, marginal aspects of culture are given a place of prominence and importance.

An early text, in which there can be found brief suggestions of this reorientation, was J. N. Farquhar's *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913). This is a seminal text in the fulfilment approach to other religions, and as a study of the social and religious practices of Hinduism it has something of the character of an ethnographic study. Farquhar tries to explain the rationale for various practices in order to develop a more sympathetic understanding of them. For example, although Farquhar clearly repudiates the use of idols he points to how "the making of images is a response to the eager human desire to know God's nature and character," and that it is symptomatic of a desire for proximity to god in our daily affairs.⁵²⁹ He also distinguishes between the underlying desire or need and the practice to which it is attached. So, again with reference to idolatry he states that, "It is thus evident that idolatry ministers to some of the most powerful and most valuable of our religious instincts." The missiological significance of this is that Christ is then to be shown as the one who "satisfies" these underlying needs and instincts.⁵³⁰ Of significance for our present discussion is that Farquhar considers Hinduism in relation to Christ's teaching on a just society. Farquhar pointed to the sacredness to traditional Hindu thought of a social order based on caste which had a legitimacy, not as an end in itself, but in terms of the achievement of the transmigration of the soul.⁵³¹ Having articulated the rationale for caste, Farquhar rejected this as at odds with a Christian social order. But Farquhar points to the aspiration, then present within elements of Indian society, for a just and equitable social order, which Farquhar attributed to the influence of the gospel and not something that had arisen from within the religion itself.⁵³² The presence within the culture of aspiration for a just society is rightly given prominence and significance by Farquhar, although it may not be particularly significant within the wider cultural tradition and may even be a cultural import.

4.3.3 The CSI Eucharist and the Bombay Eucharist Liturgies

The eucharist is one important site of inculturation in the church's corporate life. The celebration of this sacrament is at the heart of the faith and it is therefore

⁵²⁹ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 340f.

⁵³⁰ J. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 343.

⁵³¹ J. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 207.

⁵³² J. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 190f.

appropriate that it should take adequate form in relation to the local culture. Newbigin had some involvement in the development of the liturgy for the eucharist in the newly formed Church of South India. He was a member of the Synod Liturgy Committee, which, in 1949, “prepared a draft of an order of service for the Lord’s Supper.”⁵³³ This draft came into final published form in 1950 and became the standard liturgy used throughout the CSI. Newbigin appears to have been satisfied with its final form.⁵³⁴ While it is difficult to identify Newbigin’s individual contribution, Wainwright argues that there are a “number of touches characteristic of him in the final product.”⁵³⁵ There are two theologically significant points to note, as identified by Wainwright: firstly the summary of creation-fall-redemption-new creation, in the “common preface.”⁵³⁶ Wainwright points out this as “unusual” in Western liturgy and suggests Newbigin’s influence, pointing to the overview of the gospel story found in ‘A Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church,’ which follows this structure.⁵³⁷ Secondly, Wainwright points to the eucharist prayer’s identification of Christ as the “one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world,” as expressive of the centrality of the atonement in Newbigin.

The extent to which this CSI eucharist is adequately incultured has been questioned. One of the members of the liturgy committee acknowledged that the Indian content to the “wording and structure” of the CSI eucharist, as well as the revised Anglican one of north India and the Lutheran, was “very small.”⁵³⁸ This eucharist liturgy was not the first attempt to write a more incultured form.

From the early twentieth century there had been some effort to adapt a eucharistic liturgy suitable for use in the Indian church. One of the earlier suggestions did not involve a rewriting of the liturgy which would be “presumptuous,”⁵³⁹ but an adaptation and greatly shortened version of the eucharist of the Indian Syrian Orthodox church. This was first published in 1920 and became known as the Bombay

⁵³³ Newbigin in letter to friends, November 1, 1949, quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 273.

⁵³⁴ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 88.

⁵³⁵ G. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 274.

⁵³⁶ G. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 274f.

⁵³⁷ Newbigin prepared the final draft of this statement, made at the 1952 IMC Willingen Conference (Normal Goodall, ed., *Missions Under the Cross*, 188ff).

⁵³⁸ T. S. Garrett, ‘The South Indian Church at Worship,’ *Indian Journal of Theology* 7.4 (Oct. – Sep. 1958), 129.

⁵³⁹ Edwin James, Preface, *The Eucharist in India* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920), xxv.

Liturgy.⁵⁴⁰ Winslow, one of the four compilers of this eucharist, in an essay published with the liturgy points to various ways in which this liturgy is particularly suitable for the Indian context. He first points to the content of the prayers. Prior to the breaking of the bread and wine and its distribution to the people, the people are prostrate before the elements and the priest makes the Invocation of the Holy Spirit for the elements to become to the people the body and blood of Christ. This is then followed by a lengthy petition for: the leaders of the church, travelers and those who are suffering, for the church people, for rulers and officials who are Christian, for a good and prosperous harvest etc. This is explained as being suitable for India as it gives satisfaction to mystical aspiration, but at the same time unites this with a concern for society:

We lie prostrate in adoring contemplation of the Mystery in which the Holy Spirit moves upon our Sacrament to make it the means of our participation in the Divine Life; and then, with hearts and minds still lifted up to heaven, we plead in the Great Intercession for the common practical needs of the Church and of all men. The combination of these various elements gives us the true worship of Christian mysticism.⁵⁴¹

With a similar logic, in the prayers prior to the Invocation there are repeated references to the incarnation, the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ: a recitation of the apostle's creed by the priest and the people together;⁵⁴² and then just prior to the people prostrating themselves before the elements they confess Christ's death, resurrection and the second coming,⁵⁴³ which is followed by the priest again confessing the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father. The reason which is given for all this is of the need to counteract the tendency for the significance of the historical in Indian religious thought to be undervalued and forgotten by emphasizing the historical reality of Christ's life and ministry.⁵⁴⁴ A third contextually appropriate element Winslow points to is the repeated statement by the priest of the congregation gathering to worship God with martyrs, apostles and saints.⁵⁴⁵ In the Indian context, both Muslims and Hindus have a particular reverence

⁵⁴⁰ J. C. Winslow, J.E.G. Festing, D.R. Athavale, E.C. Ratcliffe, *The Eucharist in India* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.).

⁵⁴¹ J. C. Winslow, 'The Need of a Liturgy for the Indian Church,' in J.C. Winslow et al., *The Eucharist in India*, 12.

⁵⁴² J. C. Winslow et al., *The Eucharist in India*, 83.

⁵⁴³ J. C. Winslow et al., *The Eucharist in India*, 88.

⁵⁴⁴ J. C. Winslow, 'The Need of a Liturgy for the Indian Church,' 12.

⁵⁴⁵ J. C. Winslow et al., *The Eucharist in India*, 86.

for saints, and this reference here, to those saints who have died in Christ, appeals to that aspect of the religious consciousness.⁵⁴⁶ A fourth contextual element is the pervasive presence of the language of sacrifice, which Winslow believes is very appropriate in a context where the idea of sacrifice is pervasive although most commonly in the form of flowers, fruit or grain rather than in the infrequent form of the actual life of an animal. He sees in the form this takes in India a sense of a rupture in the relationship between the world and God, and the sense of the need of a substitute to make amends for this. In this way there is some correspondence with the reality of the sacrifice accomplished in Christ, although requiring clarification.⁵⁴⁷ Another element is an emphasis on the ceremonial, with the priest and attendants richly clothed and processing towards the sanctuary at the beginning of the service, followed by censuring the congregation. In a situation where the ceremonial is a vital part of popular religion, Winslow believes that some element of this in the liturgy engages the religious aspiration of the people:⁵⁴⁸

The present writer has had many instances in his experience of how an ornate and dignified service does appeal deeply to Indian Christians. They tell us often that it gives them the sense of true bhakti, devotion. I have been present at services of the severe and unadorned type in the Church of the American (Congregationalist) Mission at Ahmadnagar; and I know that my friends in that Mission will not mind my saying that it all seemed to me too redolent of old-world Puritanism, too cold and unemotional for India. . . . and Sadhu Sunder Singh, the well-known Christian Sannyasi, declared that he had found at last his ideal house of prayer, when he visited the great church of the Cowley Fathers at Poona.⁵⁴⁹

This last reference here to Sadhu Sundar Singh is particularly noteworthy in that it is an authoritative affirmation of the appeal of the ceremonial and the higher church form of worship to an Indian religious sensitivity.

Although this eucharist liturgy became commonly known as ‘The Bombay Liturgy’ it never received wide use within the churches in India. In 1922 this liturgy (with a few small changes) was authorized for use in the Bombay Diocese, and in

⁵⁴⁶ A further contextual element, Winslow believes, are prayers for departed souls.

⁵⁴⁷ J. C. Winslow, ‘The Need of a Liturgy for the Indian Church,’ 14f.

⁵⁴⁸ J. C. Winslow, ‘The Need of a Liturgy for the Indian Church,’ 20f.

⁵⁴⁹ J. C. Winslow, ‘The Need of a Liturgy for the Indian Church,’ 24. The Cowley Fathers is a name for the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an order of the Anglican church, and so called because it was founded in Cowley, England. This order was one manifestation of the Anglo-Catholic revival in the Church of England, an influence which is apparent in the conception of the eucharist being considered above. The church referenced here is ‘The Church of the Holy Name’ built by the Cowley Fathers, and completed in 1885.

1933 for use throughout India, subject to the approval of the Diocesan Bishop. The liturgy was subject to a much fuller revision, resulting in the publication of a new edition in 1948. This new edition did not alter the content in any way to affect the principles under which the first edition was written in 1920, as discussed above. The main changes are around the initial entrance of the priest and the censuring the people, and secondly to the section immediately prior to the administration of the eucharist. These changes are largely a matter of style to do with improving the flow of the service, and do not affect the content. In the foreword to the 1948 edition the Bishop of Chota Nagpur notes with some disappointment that the liturgy has continued to be used on a regular basis in only two churches: those of the ashrams to which Winslow and his fellow compilers originally belonged.⁵⁵⁰ He does suggest that it may be used in churches attached to seminaries on the grounds that it would be a “valuable training in the principles of Eucharistic worship and might prepare the way for liturgical advance in the Church of India.”⁵⁵¹ In his preface to this same edition the Bishop of Bombay expresses a similar desire that this should be used more widely and he notes that it “may help to provide a point of departure for liturgical experiments in the Church of South India.” This was a reference to the work of the newly formed Church of South India (1947) in the process of development of its liturgy.

4.3.3.1 The Bombay Liturgy and the CSI Eucharist Liturgy Compared

The CSI eucharist lacks the warmth and sense of the intimacy with Christ that the Bombay Liturgy appears to convey so beautifully. The following two prayers from the anaphora of both liturgies illustrate this point.⁵⁵²

⁵⁵⁰ As the liturgy of an Anglo Catholic community, the Bombay Liturgy does have a number of aspects that are not acceptable to the wider church community, such as censuring the congregation, prostration before the sacrament etc. Perhaps it is these elements that have prevented a closer consideration of its content by the wider Protestant community.

⁵⁵¹ Referenced online at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/India/Bombay.html>, accessed 20 September, 2011.

⁵⁵² The anaphora is the part of the service that involves the consecration of the elements.

CSI Liturgy	Bombay Liturgy
<p>Lift up your hearts; We lift them up unto the Lord. Let us give thanks unto our Lord God; It is meet and right so to do.</p>	<p>Your hearts be with Christ on high. Our hearts are with the Lord.</p>
<p>Truly holy, truly blessed art thou, O heavenly Father, who of thy tender love towards mankind didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to take our nature upon him and to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again: Who, in the same night that he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me. Likewise after supper he took the cup, and, when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of this; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins: do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me.</p>	<p>HOLY in truth art thou, O Father Almighty, Eternal King, and in thine every gift and work dost thou reveal thy holiness unto men. Holy is thine only-begotten Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ; and holy thine ever-blessed Spirit, who searcheth out thy secret things.</p> <p>Even as in truth thou art holy, O Lord, so also that he might dwell in holiness before thee, didst thou create man in thine own image; whom, when he transgressed thy commandments and fell, thou didst not abandon nor despise, but didst chasten him as a merciful Father, speaking unto him by thy priests and by thy prophets ; and, when the fullness of time was come, thou spakest unto us also by thine only-begotten Son, whom thou didst send into the world to take our nature upon him, that he might become man like as we are, and might renew thine image within us; Who, in the same night that he gave himself to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption, took bread into his holy and spotless hands, and, looking heavenward unto thee . . .</p>

In the CSI Liturgy the priest exhorts the people to lift up their hearts, language of invitation, whereas the Bombay Liturgy expresses this in the warm and devotional language of being with Christ. Where the CSI Liturgy uses the legal language of “redemption . . . a sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction” the Bombay Liturgy draws attention to our fall from relationship with God and of Christ coming to renew us to that fellowship. Even the terms in which the Bombay Liturgy expresses Christ breaking the bread by looking up to heaven draws attention to the intimacy and fellowship of Christ with the Father. There is a spirit of warm devotion breathing through the Bombay Liturgy that is, arguably, lacking in the CSI Liturgy. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the CSI Liturgy is overconcerned with doctrinal correctness. The suggestion has been raised that one of the reasons for the lack of use of the

Bombay Liturgy is that it may be due to excessive intellectualism,⁵⁵³ yet the reverse is closer to the truth: the Bombay Liturgy has a real emotional appeal.

Newbigin's apparent satisfaction with the CSI eucharist liturgy, in the 1950's, is perhaps suggestive of an over-emphasis on the written word, on relatively abstract concepts that had a largely foreign origin. A context in which elements of oral culture were important, if not dominant, even where literacy was strong,⁵⁵⁴ required an approach that gave greater attention to the use of symbols, music, dance, and the simple language of devotion. In the Indian context a focus on a warm devotional spirit would probably speak more to the religious sensibility of the people. Where elements of orality persist there is less receptivity to precision of the sort reflected in carefully crafted theological wording and a higher level of comfort with variation and imprecision. This suggests a religious sensibility that will respond to liturgical expression that is not so dependent on conceptual theological language.

In later reflection on the CSI eucharist, as it was being used in the churches, and on the church form of worship in general, Newbigin did urge the need for reform and change. In a series of addresses he delivered while Bishop of Madras diocese to a monthly gathering of CSI clergy in the early 1970's he was at times very critical of the failure of the church to modernize.⁵⁵⁵ Although not particularly old, being in his early sixties, he was nevertheless coming to the end of ministry in a church to which he had devoted his life, but is here unmistakably advising these clergy that a tradition precious to both him and them, the old wineskins, had to be "thrown away." He suggested the need for liturgical reform, to bring in language meaningful for the church: he pointed to the effort of the Roman Catholic church being made at the time of his address to reform their worship, in contrast to what he describes as the lifeless worship of the CSI that had been "reduced to a meaningless repetition of unintelligible formulae."⁵⁵⁶ He also suggested that the congregation should be made more active participants through some form of congregational response in the liturgy, of which the congregation has been fully taught the meaning, involvement in the Scripture readings and intercessory prayers, and assisting with the preparation and

⁵⁵³ Paul Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India* (Adlershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 49.

⁵⁵⁴ S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 149.

⁵⁵⁵ Published as *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1977).

⁵⁵⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 35.

administration of the eucharist.⁵⁵⁷ He criticized a “slovenly” approach as typical of many churches and contrasts the reality of much that happens as “dull, flat and joyless” with what the service should be: “a true foretaste of heaven and preparation for its joys.”⁵⁵⁸ Both attitude and actual practice required change.

4.4 Identifying an Incultured Church Community

Following Newbigin’s lead regarding the local church’s direct relationship to the Spirit and the process of inculturation taking place from within the local church, it may be helpful to ask ‘What are the criteria that can identify a church healthily related to its culture?’ This is a pertinent question in the Indian context. There is still some discomfort within parts of the church regarding the relationship of the church to Indian culture, prompting Oommen and Mabry to point out that the way in some quarters discussion of the need for an Indian expression of the gospel is still continuing, may be seen as a “contradiction in terms” in that it implies Christianity has yet to make an appearance.⁵⁵⁹ The distinction that some writers on the Indian church have made between the “indigenous” churches and the mainline churches is again particularly reflective of uncertainty regarding what constitutes an incultured church.⁵⁶⁰ Roger Hedlund, one of the key writers advocating this distinction, states the following:

Indianization, contextualization and indigenization are expressions of the effort towards change/relevance made by a non-indigenous church (one of alien origin and pattern) – in an attempt to give it an Indian face. . . . Church union efforts in the Protestant fold have created two non-indigenous amalgamations – Church of North India and Church of South India – by a rearrangement of the several European traditions involved.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 35.

⁵⁵⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 28f.

⁵⁵⁹ T. K. Oommen & H. P. Mabry, *The Christian Clergy in India*, 58.

⁵⁶⁰ Prominent in this regard is the Mylapore Institute for Indigenous Studies in Bangalore, led by Roger Hedlund, under whose auspices several publications on the “indigenous” church have been produced: Roger Hedlund, ed., *Quest for Identity: Church’s of Indigenous Origins* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000); Roger Hedlund, ed., *Christianity is Indian: The Emergence of an Indigenous Community* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000). O. L. Snaitung, *Churches of Indigenous Origins in Northeast India* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000); P. Solomon Raj, *New Wineskins: The Story of the Indigenous Missions in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, India* (New Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2003).

⁵⁶¹ Roger Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*, 2. Although the St Thomas church community is one of “alien origin” and has some aspects that are also alien in “pattern” it is identified as “indigenous”.

As indicated here, the “indigenous” church is defined positively as one that is begun by Indians and on an Indian “pattern” in contrast to the non-indigenous church which is “one of alien origin and pattern.” It is defined negatively as a church that is not one of the mainline church denominations, such as the Church of North India and the Church of South India, Newbigin’s own denomination.⁵⁶² In practice the “indigenous” churches identified by Hedlund are largely Pentecostal in doctrine and practice. Although Hedlund does not specifically identify these indigenous churches as Pentecostal there is recognition of a Pentecostal origin: he explains that this movement which he calls the ‘Little Tradition’ is “largely (not exclusively) of Pentecostal, Charismatic, or Evangelical origin.”⁵⁶³ Other researchers of the church in India, most notably Michael Bergunder, have used the name Pentecostal for this same church movement.⁵⁶⁴ This name would not, however, be accepted by all of the newer “Charismatic” churches in that in some cases they want to distance themselves from the “classical” Pentecostal denominations.⁵⁶⁵ Yet, as Lukose indicates, there remains substantial continuity with classic Pentecostalism. The classical Pentecostals who hold to the necessity of adult baptism, speaking in tongues, and a fairly fundamentalist view of holiness, are reluctant to have too much to do with the newer churches who do not hold so strictly to these doctrines.⁵⁶⁶

As Hedlund indicates, the Pentecostal churches were often started by Indian Christians. For instance, referring to the awakening in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu in 1860, which Lukose describes as the “oldest revival in India with Pentecostal characteristics,” Lukose states that it “received no influence from western

⁵⁶² The mainline churches would also include the Catholic church and the Protestant denominations with their roots in the missions movement of the nineteenth centuries. Examples of these Protestant denominations include the Church of North India (CNI), the Church of South India (CSI), the Methodist Church in India (MCI), the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of India (UELCI). They were, and are, the carriers of many of the educational, medical and welfare institutions established during that period.

⁵⁶³ R. Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*, 3.

⁵⁶⁴ Other ways of naming are problematic for purposes of analysis. ‘Independent church movement’ is one title that stresses the independence of the church from both mainline church control and also Western influence. But this name blurs the way in which for these churches, in India at least, ongoing relationships with the Western church remain important, more so than for the mainline churches. A more satisfactory term is P. Solomon Raj’s ‘folk Christian church’ which highlights the distinctive approach of the Pentecostal movement towards issues that the mainline churches certainly have tended to ignore (S. Raj, *A Christian Folk Religion in India*, ix f).

⁵⁶⁵ W. Lukose, *A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit: A Study of Pentecostalism in Rajasthan, India*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2009), 236. An example of this is the Bible Mission of Devadas, which would reject the title ‘Pentecostal,’ even although their teaching and language may have “many similarities to Pentecostal teaching” (S. Raj, *A Christian Folk Religion in India*, 69).

⁵⁶⁶ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 131. Lukose states that “many” south Indian Pentecostals in Rajasthan can be identified as classical in this sense.

missionaries.”⁵⁶⁷ Lukose refers to G. B. McGee who states that from the outset “the revival took an indigenous course.”⁵⁶⁸ He also points to the evangelistic impetus on the part of Indian believers which these revivals generated. While western Pentecostal missionaries helped inspire their other western counterparts and the existing churches, it was the Indian believers who were “involved in the evangelization of the local population.”⁵⁶⁹ For Hedlund this non-foreign origin is one important characteristic in identifying an indigenous church, in that it implies not only a local beginning but also development and growth in a local, indigenous form.

One problem with Hedlund’s way of identifying an indigenous church is that it seems to overlook the fact that there were, as Bergunder shows in his history of south Indian Pentecostalism, some significant points of contact between Indian Pentecostalism and the American church in the twentieth century.⁵⁷⁰ This is a continuing influence. Raj points out that, of the 73 missions which he has studied “many of them get money from the West and depend on foreign leadership from time to time.”⁵⁷¹ There is no clearly visible line of completely independent development from foreign influences. Hedlund’s logic betrays what Oommen and Mabry refer to as the “persisting tendency to identify permanently specific cultural items – be it religion, secular ideology or technology – with the locus of their perceived geographic origin.”⁵⁷² Applied to this situation the “permanently specific items”, Christianity, remains identified with her “perceived geographic origin,” i.e. the West. A second related problem of Hedlund’s identification of the Pentecostal church as indigenous is that this is not necessarily true of the Pentecostal church in north India. North Indian Pentecostalism is largely the creation of south Indian Christians working in the north and continues to be dominated by them. The situation in Rajasthan is typical of this, where according to Lukose, ten of the twelve major Pentecostal organizations in the state have south Indians in the key leadership positions.⁵⁷³ Lukose gives a more expansive assessment when he states that this situation of south Indians dominating leadership positions is

⁵⁶⁷ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 76.

⁵⁶⁸ G. B. McGee, ‘Pentecostal Phenomena and Revivals in India: Implications for Indigenous Church Leadership,’ *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 3 (1996), 113 quoted in W. Lukose, *A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit*, 77.

⁵⁶⁹ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 88.

⁵⁷⁰ M. Bergunder, *South Indian Pentecostal Movement*, 23-119.

⁵⁷¹ P. Solomon Raj, *The New Wineskins: The Story of the Indigenous Missions in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, India* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 6.

⁵⁷² T. K. Oommen & H. P. Mabry, *The Christian Clergy in India*, 58.

⁵⁷³ W. Lukose, *Contextual Missiology of the Spirit*, 230.

“the picture of almost all Pentecostal churches.” Although some of these denominations such as Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC) have been working in the north for over fifty years, south Indian leadership persists.

The problematic nature of identifying a local origin church as “indigenous” is also evident in that it creates the impression of a complete contextualization with the Indian context. However, there is a high level of suspicion on the part of the Pentecostal movement towards the Indian religious tradition, including the festivals and literature of popular Hinduism, which leads Raj to state that, “there is still a wide gap between these missions and the Hindu masses.”⁵⁷⁴ This is in contrast with efforts of the mainline churches, evidenced in a constant stream of publications over the last twenty to thirty years on issues of contextualization and inter-faith relationships.

If using the origin of a church movement, as one criteria in identifying whether it has an appropriate level of inculturation is problematic, then the question still remains as to the criteria that can help guide the process of inculturation in India. Gandhi’s advice, to E. Stanley Jones query regarding how to make the Indian church more Indian, was that the church should love. For Newbigin also there is a sense that love is the dominating, controlling factor, expressed firstly in the idea of the church as a visible fellowship.

4.4.1 Church as a Visible Fellowship

The movement towards unification of the churches in India has received some recognition as an Indian response to the gospel. Sahu, for instance, suggests that a “consciousness of being Indian” was a key factor behind the development of the Church in North India (CNI), together with a commitment to mission.⁵⁷⁵ The unification movement was perceived as a movement away from the Western inheritance of multiple denominations towards a properly indigenous church form. This may be the reason for an affirmation of the CNI as a church which “has become an indigenous church,” by an Indian Pentecostal thinker.⁵⁷⁶ Notable early advocates

⁵⁷⁴ P. Solomon Raj, *The New Wine-Skins*, 16. S. Raj identifies three characteristics of the indigenous churches, which relate to their theology: “Non-compromising ethics; a non-negotiable authority of the Bible; only Christ makes the difference between heaven and hell” (p.3).

⁵⁷⁵ Dharendra. K. Sahu, *The Church of North India: A Historical and Systematic Theological Inquiry into an Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), 6. Sahu does not appear to go into any further analysis of how this consciousness of being Indian may or may not have been reflected in the development of the church’s liturgy, theology, and organizational structures.

⁵⁷⁶ W. Lukose, *A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit*, 101.

of church unification were Lal Behari Dey in Bengal,⁵⁷⁷ who also influenced the formation of the National Church of India in Madras 1886.⁵⁷⁸ Although neither of these efforts took deep root, they nevertheless indicate the sense that a united church is a proper Indian expression of the church.

A key characteristic of Newbigin's sense of the church is visible unity, an issue to which he repeatedly returns in his writing during the 1950's and 1960's in the context of his ministry in India. The church must be one because that is the expression of the Father's purpose for the entire earth, to bring all peoples into one in Christ Jesus, and the church is a "sign and firstfruit and instrument of that unity."⁵⁷⁹ He believed that while the "only real hermeneutic of the Gospel is a community of people who believe it, celebrate it and live by it,"⁵⁸⁰ this meant above all a visible unified fellowship and gathering together of God's people in the form of "a visible fellowship."⁵⁸¹ This unified church fellowship involved a real reconstituting of relationships that affected all church people and involved them in the painful but ultimately liberating process of being one visible fellowship.⁵⁸²

Newbigin had something of a paradigm shift in soteriology, in which salvation is realized in the context of relationships with the community, as he states: "salvation must be an action that binds us together and restores for us the true mutual relation to each other."⁵⁸³ As far as Newbigin understood, this reconciliation of humanity is a fundamental part of the gospel, so that he could state that, "the church's unity in Christ is of its very essence. . . ."⁵⁸⁴, and describe the church as "simply humanity reconstituted by its redemption and regeneration in Christ."⁵⁸⁵ An example that he gives of this is from the Church in South India, which had its roots in the principle of

⁵⁷⁷ L. Dey (1824-1894) promoted the idea of a United Church of Bengal. This is outlined in a speech he gave in his speech to the Bengal Christian Association, entitled, 'The Desirableness and Practicability of Organizing a National Church in Bengal' on 13 December 1869 (http://www.aecg.evtheol.lmu.de/cms/fileadmin/national/The_desirableness_and_practicability_of_organizing_a_National_Church_in_Bengal_%281869%29_v070716.pdf). In this lecture Dey, himself an ordained Free Church of Scotland minister and strongly committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, suggests the Apostles Creed alone as the church's confessional position, on which basis "we should be in communion with every Church in Christendom" (p.11). Approximately half of this lecture is taken up with discussion of church government and administration.

⁵⁷⁸ D. K. Sahu, *The Church of North India*, 96.

⁵⁷⁹ L. Newbigin, 'The Basis and Forms of Unity: Second Peter Ainslie Lecture,' *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 23 (January, 1985), 5.

⁵⁸⁰ L. Newbigin, 'Episcopacy and Authority,' 1990, *Churchman* 104, 4: 339.

⁵⁸¹ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 21.

⁵⁸² L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 22.

⁵⁸³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70.

⁵⁸⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 24.

⁵⁸⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 16.

comity. This principle was an act of cooperation among the missionary agencies, according to which they divided regions up into areas in which there would be only one church responsible for that area. One of the consequences of this was that the church became a genuine bringing together of a socially diverse group of people as Newbigin explains:

. . . the Church in South India has clung stubbornly to the conviction that to have Christ in common is enough. It has refused to accept the necessity to cater for varieties of tradition, caste and class by setting up a variety of congregations in each place. The principle of comity has meant this, that the typical congregation in a South Indian country town consists of men and women who have nothing in common save their redemption in Christ.⁵⁸⁶

Further, there is an incarnational logic to this understanding of the church, occasionally expressed by Newbigin. The incarnation indicates that the relationship of God to the world has a physical and concrete form and this “concrete relationship to Jesus” today takes the form of relationship with the church:

The name of Jesus is a stumbling block in a situation such as in India, because it is concrete and refers to a human being who cannot be dissolved away. People find it easier to use the word Christ, because that can be detached from particularity and made into a general idea. But our message is: ‘Jesus come in the flesh’. Our relationship with him is through that sacramentally-centred fellowship which stems from him.⁵⁸⁷

Newbigin’s emphasis on participation in a unified visible church fellowship is a vital contextual approach in India for several reasons. Firstly, Indian society is divided and there is a longing for social unity and harmony, undivided by the hatreds and prejudices of caste, religion, and money, as Newbigin wrote: “To the multitude in India, weary of everlasting division and distrust and turning longing eyes to the Church as the place where men of all castes and classes can be made one. . . .”⁵⁸⁸ He understood that this need for unity and oneness was a greatly felt need, as much as the perceived need for reconciliation with God. Typically, the evangelist brings all the attention onto reconciliation with God. But not Newbigin: he spoke of Christ as the reconciler of man with God but also man with man. In India the existence of a church community formed from many divided groups is a powerful expression of the reality

⁵⁸⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 13.

⁵⁸⁷ L. Newbigin, ‘The Gathering Up of History Into Christ,’ 89.

⁵⁸⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 21.

of reconciliation with God, a demonstration of faith from works. A fragmented and divided church community testifies that whatever we may have in Christ is little different from anyone else, and that we are instead simply a very human organization.⁵⁸⁹

Secondly, an emphasis on the visible church fellowship is an effective contextual approach in terms of pointing to the uniqueness of Christ. During Newbigin's time in India and continuing to this day, a dominant concern of theologians has been articulating the relationship of Christ and the religions. Newbigin was more concerned to focus on what we may describe as the sociological uniqueness of Christ. Given the highly syncretistic nature of Hinduism, and also the breadth and range of its literature (in which a parallel to almost any religious theme can be found), an issue for communicators of the gospel has always been how to assert the distinctiveness of Christ. But, however this is stated, this distinctiveness is spoken of at the level of ideas and concepts, and can be absorbed within the extremely flexible conceptual system. Quite different from this is Newbigin's approach, which doesn't really try to articulate the difference between Christ and the religious system. Yet, his insistence on faith in Christ taking physical form in oneness of relationship with the believing community makes the distinctiveness of Christ absolutely transparent in a way that nothing else can. This demand and invitation to follow Christ and be joined to his people which requires a total and complete allegiance that takes precedence over all other relationships and loyalties, is an unmistakable testimony to the distinctiveness and uniqueness of Christ. A proclamation of Christ that does not also involve the call to be joined to the church opens the door to the multiple loyalties that is characteristic of popular Hinduism with its thousands of deities.

Thirdly, in a context where the preoccupation of Indian thinkers and theologians has been the concepts and ideas of the philosophical traditions, Newbigin's ecclesiology is something of a counterpoint. Although the Hindu renewal movements since the early nineteenth century have brought a degree of attention to social ethics, the historical focus of Hinduism was with the spiritual as distinct from the physical and social: "Hinduism has taught meditation, individual perfection, communion with the divine, but it has never emphasized the virtues of good citizenship, harmonious

⁵⁸⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 17.

community living, the art of having fellowship with our friends and neighbors.”⁵⁹⁰ Tiwari’s statement needs some qualification in that within related groups in Indian society there can be a considerable sense of community. As much as Hinduism involves rites and beliefs, its defining characteristic is as a social phenomenon, of which caste is an integral part. As even the most cursory survey of Hinduism will indicate, it encompasses divergent and contrasting beliefs within its scope, but what binds and identifies a Hindu as much to do with social connection as anything else.⁵⁹¹ However, this sense of community often doesn’t extend to the wider society as a whole, as Tharoor explains:

... it [India] is a welfare society in which people constantly help each other out, provided they feel a connection that justifies their help.

Unfortunately, our sense of community largely stops there. Very few Indians have a broader sense of community than that circumscribed by ties of blood, caste affiliation, or village. We take care of those we consider near and dear, and remain largely indifferent to the rest.”⁵⁹²

The church, working from the logic of the incarnation, requires expression in a visible fellowship and sense of community that transcends every form of division. The lack of attention to the church as a distinct fellowship does indicate the weakness of a contextual Christology that is concentrated only with engagement with the existing religious concepts or movements, of which Panikkar is an example of the former, and M. M. Thomas of the latter.

How is the church in India, at a local level in its corporate worship and practice, to give expression to the visible fellowship of the church? Newbigin briefly touches on this in his writing, and some further observations can be made from the Pentecostal churches in the north of India which have shown some effectiveness in this regard.

4.4.1.1 Worship as Corporate Act in a Village Church

In *A South India Diary* (1951) Newbigin gives a brief description of the worship service in a village church in Tamil Nadu that indicates his own pleasure at the

⁵⁹⁰ Yesu Das Tiwari, ‘From Vedic Dharma to the Christian Faith,’ *Religion and Society* 10, 3 (Sept. 1963), <http://ravitiwari.in/1007.pdf> (accessed 22 November, 2011). This was prepared as an address for the Conference of Converts from Hinduism to the Christian Faith, Bangalore, May 1963. Y. D. Tiwari (1911-1997) was a noted Indian theological educator, who led a Bible Society of India initiative to produce a modern translation of the New Testament in Hindi.

⁵⁹¹ V. S. Azariah, ‘India and Christ,’ *International Review of Mission* 17 (January 1928), 155 in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 78.

⁵⁹² S. Tharoor, *India*, 289.

“corporate” nature of the worship.⁵⁹³ The service itself involves the use of a prayer book despite the fact that some are illiterate. Newbigin states that the liturgical prayer has a place in giving a “solid framework” to the service and, importantly, facilitates participation by everyone, illiterate or otherwise.⁵⁹⁴ Newbigin’s sermon style on this occasion (a Saturday service before a communion service the next morning) is not just a monologue but involves interaction with the audience and question and answer all of which “sustains the sense of a common act which has pervaded the whole service.”

Newbigin’s approval of the incorporation of some aspects of village culture into the worship service, such as the folk dancing and song, is an affirmation of the people and their particular gifts. He describes being met at a village by a band that included trumpets, drums and a type of bagpipe that is common to Tamil Nadu and a “high pitched warbling cry” from the women and, once the procession reached the village center, by a “beautiful display of kummi folk-dancing” from the children.⁵⁹⁵ He writes approvingly of the way that a compilation of these folk dances, which incorporate dance and song, have been gathered into “a book of Christian Kummies” for the purpose of teaching Bible stories.⁵⁹⁶

4.4.1.2 Pentecostal Practice of the Visible Fellowship

Pentecostal ecclesiology in India has been described by Lukose as shaped by a ‘Theology of Involvement.’⁵⁹⁷ The laity, both men and women, are made active participants in the service. Frequently in Pentecostal churches there is a time for sharing and testimony set aside in which church members can come forward and share their experience of God’s action and blessing in their life. In the smaller churches, in particular, congregational members will be asked to lead a song or to lead a prayer, both men and women, and often the church members will all pray out loud together. The order of service itself is relatively simple and free of written liturgy, which makes it very accessible. In ways like this the Church “is a symbol of acceptance and participation.” This has appeal for all people, particularly those who experience social and economic oppression. Consequently, much of the growth in these churches is taking place from among Dalit and Tribal communities. Lukose, writing with regard to Rajasthan and the Pentecostal church there, states that “Pentecostalism in Rajasthan is a movement of

⁵⁹³ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 35.

⁵⁹⁴ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 36.

⁵⁹⁵ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 30f.

⁵⁹⁶ L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 63.

⁵⁹⁷ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 142.

the poor and the marginalized segments of the society, particularly tribals.”⁵⁹⁸ Dalit movements to the church remain a key part of its growth. Women in particular find in the church a space where they can experience social freedom, dignity and recognition, which they are sometimes otherwise denied. This is the reason Lukose gives for church attendance in “most” churches being more than 60% female.⁵⁹⁹

Another example of the church as inclusive is an openness of the Pentecostal movement towards the global church community. According to Bergunder Pentecostalism in India generally maintains a positive approach to relationships with Western Christianity, and there appears to be a surprising absence of hang ups about the colonial past:

. . . the western origin and international relations are often strongly emphasized. One leader of the South Indian Assemblies of God, for example, in an interview expressly emphasized the attraction that the American origin of his church exercised on many Indians. A similar point is to be made about the numerous western guest preachers. They are not, it seems, an irritating foreign body but make an important contribution to missionary success, because they indicate that Pentecostal spirituality is firmly set in western culture and so might serve as a gateway to the scientific-technical age with western culture as its guarantor.⁶⁰⁰

Some studies of the Pentecostal movement in India give the impression that they are operating entirely independently from the West, and indeed consciously rejecting Western influence, but Bergunder’s research indicates the dual relationship, of proximity to local needs but at the same time openness to the wider world community. This is confirmed by Lukose who states that, “Pentecostalism in Rajasthan is connected to global Pentecostalism in many ways.”⁶⁰¹ He points to how two of the largest and fastest growing urban churches in the state, “look like many other mega-Pentecostal churches in the world,” and of how young people in particular appear to be attracted by a “global Pentecostalism,” which includes a Western influenced worship style, and even the use of English. The reason for this is partly due to the peripheral status of these Christians from a tribal background. Lacking a sense of connection with a culture and society that has traditionally ostracized them, and doubly so now because of their Christian faith, an identification with global

⁵⁹⁸ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 126.

⁵⁹⁹ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 142.

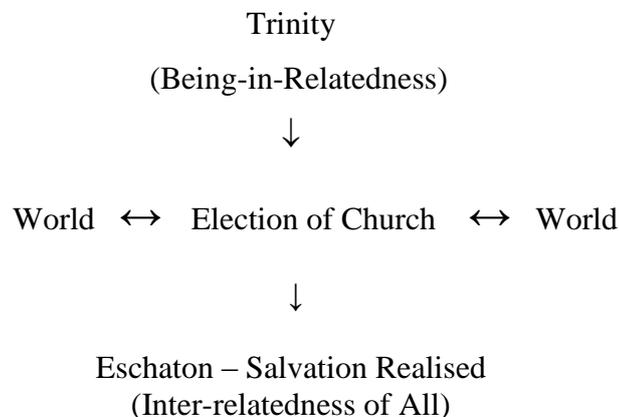
⁶⁰⁰ M. Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement*, 129.

⁶⁰¹ W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 244.

Pentecostalism gives a much needed sense of identity and belonging. Illustrating this, Lukose gives the very significant testimony of an “illiterate tribal lady” who lost her home because of her faith. She said, “I am not alone, but a part of a big family.”⁶⁰² Yet, the appeal of Pentecostalism as a movement that is open to a global network of relationships is not only for marginalized tribal communities, it also is attractive to a wider section of the Indian community.

4.5 Trinitarian Rationale of Inculturation

The identification of the church as an elect community may seem rather out of place in a consideration of inculturation given that the idea of an elect community can have connotations of separation, exclusiveness and sectarianism. However, for Newbigin, relationality and mutuality is at the core of the meaning of the church as an elect community. As noted, the importance of this for inculturation can be seen in Gandhi’s answer to E. Stanley Jones’ question, ‘How can the church be more Indian?’ Gandhi replied, ‘Love.’ The implication of mission as *missio dei* has some clarity in Newbigin’s understanding of the church as elect. The “being-in-relatedness” of the triune God comes to expression in the election of the church in that relationship to God cannot be separated from our relationships to each other within the community he has chosen, as Newbigin states: “Salvation must be an action that binds us together and restores for us the true mutual relation to each other.”⁶⁰³ As God’s being is “being-in-relatedness,” so also the true being of humanity is “being-in-relatedness.” The election of the church is therefore a part of God’s economy of salvation in restoring this mutual relatedness. This can be expressed in a diagram:



⁶⁰² W. Lukose, ‘A Contextual Missiology of the Spirit,’ 260.

⁶⁰³ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70.

This teaching on election is a key part to Newbigin's trinitarian missiology.⁶⁰⁴ Election of the church, according to Newbigin, is a missionary movement into the world that is rooted in the Triune life of God on the basis that it leads to "mutual relatedness" within humanity, giving expression to the "interpersonal relatedness" which is at the heart of the being of God.⁶⁰⁵ This mutual relatedness is not only of the world to the church, but of the church to the world: the world is called to enter into relationship with the church, but the church is also called to enter into relationship with the world, as indicated in the diagram. With some justification Newbigin points to Paul's argument in Romans 9-11 as expressing this principle. Paul refers to the rejection of Israel and election of the Gentiles, but this election of the Gentiles is for the salvation of all, Jew and Gentile (11:25,26). Election is a necessity to the realisation of reconciliation of humanity with God and to one another:

There is no salvation except in a mutual relatedness that reflects that eternal relatedness-in-love which is the being of the triune God. Therefore salvation can only be the way of election: one must be chosen and called and sent with the word of salvation to the other. But therefore also the elect can receive the gift of salvation only through those who are not the elect.⁶⁰⁶

The Trinity means God who reaches towards the other, in His own being, in a constant act of relationship, and this establishes the ground for the church as one who relates itself to the other.

Newbigin reiterates his persistent teaching of salvation as something that is collective and corporate rather than individual: "I am never permitted to think of my own salvation apart from that of God's whole family and God's whole world."⁶⁰⁷ In other words salvation is not something that I possess, or have a claim to, but something that is realized only in the eschaton when there will be a profound inter-relatedness within the whole human family, between humanity and creation, and

⁶⁰⁴ George Hunsberger notes this when he states, with reference to *The Open Secret* that, "The 'Trinitarian basis for mission' that Newbigin had long espoused has now become virtually 'an exposition of election'" (G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 67). Although Hunsberger's statement is inaccurate, given the way that Newbigin explains the relationship of the kingdom to history in terms of the triune life of God, it does point to the importance of election in Newbigin's thought. According to Hunsberger, Newbigin pointed to the mid-1970's as the time when the doctrine of election became an important part of his mission theology (p. 68). He attributes the reason for Newbigin giving prominence to election from the mid-1970's onwards, as being a response to religious pluralism in the West and also as a development to his own thinking on world history in the 1960's (G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 69ff).

⁶⁰⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70.

⁶⁰⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 77.

⁶⁰⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 80.

ultimately between humanity and God. Salvation is that state of existence towards which we are moving and progressing.

In the face of this understanding of salvation the dichotomy of saved-lost to distinguish the church and the world has to be broken down, because just as there is no salvation for the world without the church, there is no salvation for the church without the world. Election means that salvation will be found by both the world *and* the church together through this dual interaction. Newbigin points to this as the logic of Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11, where the elect people of God, Israel, find salvation only by receiving back from the world they had dismissed as "lost," as he explains:

It is here in this argument of Romans 9-11 that the inner consistency of the biblical doctrine of election becomes most clear. There is no salvation except in a mutual relatedness that reflects that eternal relatedness-in-love which is the being of the triune God. Therefore salvation can only be the way of election: one must be chosen and called and sent with the word of salvation to the other. But therefore also the elect can receive the gift of salvation only through those who are not the elect. The purpose of God's action for salvation in Christ is nothing other than the completing of his purpose of creation in Christ. It has in view not "the soul" conceived as independent monad detached from other souls and from the created world, but the human person knit together with other persons in a shared participation in and responsibility for God's created world.⁶⁰⁸

The church is a "bearer of blessing" but this blessing is one only realized in relationship with the world. Newbigin emphatically underlines that the election of the church is not an election to privilege or blessing, but an election to responsibility. A maintenance of the dichotomy between saved-lost is precisely what brought Israel into judgment and will bring the church into judgment. The church with the idea of being saved over against the lost peoples of other faiths is standing in the same place of danger as Israel, and has fallen into the temptation of believing itself "the proprietor" of the gospel.⁶⁰⁹

Newbigin realizes that faith has been used to maintain this dichotomy, and he rejects faith as a guarantee of any kind of blessing or participation in salvation. Faith is not a channel of God's blessing, since God's blessing is also given to those without faith, but it is to be seen as more of a knowledge of God's will and purpose for the

⁶⁰⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 77.

⁶⁰⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 189.

world, an understanding that the world does not have and which the church can therefore declare to it:⁶¹⁰

Must we not say, then, that the blessings of the covenant are for those who have faith and that consequently those who do not have faith are excluded from the covenant? Are we not, therefore, back again with the idea of a privileged elite who can expect from God a blessing that the unbeliever cannot claim? Has not the doctrine of election led us inexorably back again into this morally intolerable cul-de-sac? And what are good Christians to think when they see the unbeliever, or the people of other faiths, showing evidence of the blessing of God as impressive as that to be seen in Christendom?⁶¹¹

This gives meaning to Cyprian's identification of the Church as mother,⁶¹² in that for Newbigin the church is mother in her fullest sense, including not only the administration of the Word and sacraments but also the fellowship of the church. The being in progress, of the church corporately and the individuals within it, towards final redemption and salvation happens in the context of relationships within the church, but also relationship to the world. This underlines more clearly the eschatological character of the church and its sacraments, as Newbigin seems to indicate here, in language that is evocative of the sacrament of baptism:⁶¹³

. . . if the truly human is the shared reality of mutual and collective responsibility that the Bible envisages, then salvation must be *an action that binds us together* and restores for us the true mutual relation to each other and the true shared relation to the world of nature. . . . The blessing is intended for all. But the blessing itself would be negated if it were not given and received in a way that *binds each to the other*.⁶¹⁴ [emphasis mine]

Newbigin's language here of salvation as "*an action that binds together*" alludes to Christ's atonement and the overcoming of the divisions that separate man (Eph. 2:14-16). In the context of his earlier work the language of binding "each to the other" suggests the sacrament of baptism in which there is a binding into the fellowship of the church. But he is also here pointing to the eschatological binding together, when all things shall finally be made one, and it is this final binding together

⁶¹⁰ L. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 125.

⁶¹¹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 75.

⁶¹² Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*. Cyprian (d.258 A.D.) was elected Bishop of Carthage in 248 A.D., and martyred in 258 A.D.

⁶¹³ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 99.

⁶¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70. . . . 71.

of which baptism is the sign. At the point of baptism the “blessing” of the gift of the Holy Spirit is received and the Spirit simultaneously joins us to the fellowship of the church, which explains the otherwise confusing language of “blessing received in a way that binds each to the other.”

The implication for mission as inculturation is that it is a fundamental re-ordering of relationships since being in Christ is understood as inextricably connected with being in relationship with all, including the least and marginalized. There is recognition in India of the importance of inculturation taking expression in adequate relationships with all classes of people. Sahu, for example, points out that the CNI cannot claim to any easy identification of being an effective Indian church simply because the leadership are all Indian, but only if it is engaging with people of all walks of life, as he states: “What makes a church indigenous or local is its active identification with the people at the grass roots.”⁶¹⁵ As Sahu indicates, the focus of the church has to first be with the local congregation and its experience. He also points to the need to develop and encourage openness to the wider community: “The concern for indigenization is also a concern for all humanity.”⁶¹⁶ Newbigin’s doctrine of election roots this aspect of inculturation in the *missio dei* and it has implications for the church-world relationship in India that will now be briefly considered.

4.5.1 A Radical Inculturation

Hunsberger rightly points out that Newbigin’s interpretation of election developed within the Indian context, and particularly in relation to the offense of the gospel.⁶¹⁷ But the offense of the gospel for Newbigin in the villages of Tamil Nadu was not only the “particularity of the gospel” in relation to Jesus Christ, but also the particularity of his church, which in Tamil Nadu was that of the “outcaste” community. The gospel came to the caste Hindu and Muslim primarily in the particularity of this despised and downtrodden group, and this was a very deep offense to their caste and religious sensibilities. But this offense was in itself God’s way of redemption for the caste Hindu and Muslim, as Newbigin explains:

What is needed to break through the pride which is the fundamental form of sin is something that comes to us from outside . . . Thus it is that God’s approach

⁶¹⁵ D. K. Sahu, *The Church of North India*, 207.

⁶¹⁶ D. K. Sahu, *The Church of North India*, 201.

⁶¹⁷ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 52.

to us is through the concrete fact or person outside us, the beggar in the street, the actual concrete organization of the Church, the concrete, unique, unrepeatable fact of a Jewish Messiah.⁶¹⁸

The caste Hindu and Muslim would be brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ in the context of relationship with the outcaste community. And so, God came to the whole community in this way and not in a way of its own choosing, acceptable to its own sensibilities. At the time of Newbigin going to India in the mid 1930's a real and vital turning of caste Hindus to Christ was taking place in some areas of south India, which involved the abandonment of caste and entrance into a new relationship with the outcaste believers.⁶¹⁹

Newbigin's approach is a clear divergence from Sadhu Singh's often invoked teaching about giving the "Water of Life" in an Indian cup.⁶²⁰ Sadhu Singh told the story of a Brahmin collapsing at a train station due to the excessive heat. Water was brought to him in a cup by an Anglo-Indian station master, but the Brahmin refused it because it would have meant breaking caste. Sadhu Singh continues: "But when water was brought to him in his own brass vessel he drank it eagerly. When it was brought to him in his own way he did not object. It is the same with the Water of Life." There is of course an important truth here that the gospel should not be encased in Western forms and be communicated appropriate to the culture, but Newbigin's point is that the gospel does *not* come to us in our "own way" and cannot be drunk from our own cup – it is in the cup God presents to us, which is the church. This *is* objectionable and to drink from this cup we have to come broken of all pride, including caste or class pride, unlike the Brahmin in this story. In what can be taken as a parallel to Sadhu Singh's story, Newbigin alluded to the story of Naaman and his incensed reaction at being told to bathe in the Jordan river, a river he viewed as contemptible compared with the great rivers of his own country.⁶²¹

This is one important way in which Newbigin's model of inculturation can be seen as counter-cultural. But as can be seen here it is not counter-cultural in the sense of isolation from the surrounding culture, but is expansive, an example of the "wider

⁶¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, 29.

⁶¹⁹ In *Christ in the Indian Villages* H. Whitehead and V.S. Azariah describe this movement then happening in Telegu areas (pp59-79) (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1930). They attribute the "stagnation" of previous caste movements primarily to the persistence of caste feeling after conversion.

⁶²⁰ A. J. Appasamy & B. H. Streeter, *The Sadhu: A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1921), 228.

⁶²¹ L. Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, 28.

rationality” that he argued was realised in Christ: in this case a “wider rationality” of what constitutes community. The actualization of this “wider rationality” in the thought of the Indian church has, arguably, never been realized.

4.5.2 Hindrances to the Church’s Inculturation

There is very significant precedent of the church in India failing to fulfil this calling in the early St. Thomas church, through losing the counter-cultural element of a reorientation of culture to be centered in Christ. Although since 1665 the church has fragmented into eight different denominations, and been influenced by Western Christianity, Fr. Thonippara argues that prior to the Western influence (from the sixteenth century onwards) the St. Thomas church had an “indigenous nature.”⁶²² While the liturgy of the St. Thomas church was in Syriac, the Christian community was socially and culturally only marginally distinguishable from the surrounding community, leading it to be defined as “Indian in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship.”⁶²³ Some of the indigenous elements identified by Fr. Thonippara include: substantial participation of the laity in church governance; church architecture resembled Hindu temples; training of the priesthood according to the Indian Gurukala system⁶²⁴; similarity of appearance between the church and temple processions; and Christianization of the Hindu rites associated with death. But, more controversially for many, the church also came to be identified as a Brahmin caste and adopted some Brahmin customs relating to childbirth, childhood and marriage, and the observance of untouchability of what is today known as the Dalit community. With this the church in effect made its peace with the prevailing social and religious structure, and its calling to the whole world became a relatively marginal issue. This may explain the otherwise surprising fact that through its long history this church produced very little theological writing or reflection, and appears to have lain dormant for centuries in any kind of outreach to the world.

There are several factors in the situation of the north Indian church today that are acting against the church fulfilling its calling in the world. The first is that the Christian community in north India is a tiny minority. The church as a minority

⁶²² Francis Thonippara, ‘St. Thomas Christians, the First Indigenous Church of India,’ in *Quest for Identity*, ed. Hedlund, 59-76.

⁶²³ P. J. Podipara quoted in Fr. Thonippara, ‘St. Thomas Christians,’ 63.

⁶²⁴ According to this system the student is trained in the context of a very close relationship with the teacher, thereby being trained not only in cognitive knowledge but also in character and personality.

community is in a far more precarious position than has perhaps been recognized. In his discussion of H. Richard Niebuhr's book, *The Church Against the World*, Goheen refers to Niebuhr's idea of the self-consciousness of the freshly established minority church as distinct from the world and with a sense of calling to engage with that world and culture in missions and evangelism. According to Niebuhr as the society is changed the church loses its sense of a distinct identity and "begins to live at peace in the culture".⁶²⁵ And with this its sense of missionary calling also dissipates. However, the assumption here of the minority church as having a strong sense of its missionary role is not an accurate representation of the minority church. The minority church is under constant pressure to assimilate and accommodate its beliefs and lifestyle to the dominant culture; to "live at peace in the culture." Newbigin was well aware of the danger the church in India faced of becoming a ghetto community as he states: "Here the danger, as their leaders have often pointed out is 'ghettoism' – a practical withdrawal into the position of a tolerated and static minority, a cultural and religious enclave within the majority community."⁶²⁶ The church in this situation retains a distinct confessional position and practice of worship, but it operates with only a very small sense of its mission and responsibility towards the world. Rather than being concerned with serving the gospel in the wider community, the focus is on preserving their own identity and advancing their own welfare. In uncharacteristically stern terms Newbigin critiques the Indian church for this as being, "a self-centered community only faintly concerned that God's will should be done in the life of the world . . . but passionately devoted to our own protection and advancement as a community. . .".⁶²⁷ While as a minority it is particularly difficult for the church to fulfil her calling to the world, the failure to do so has disastrous spiritual and moral consequences.

A second factor is that the religious and spiritual climate of India is orientated towards a more private spirituality. This may be seen from a consideration of C.J. Fuller's highly considered study of puja. Puja, the ritual worship of the deity, is, as

⁶²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck & Francis Miller, *The Church Against the World* (Chicago and New York: Willet, Clark and Co., 1935), 123 in M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 3.

⁶²⁶ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 29.

⁶²⁷ L. Newbigin, *Journey Into Joy*, 74.

Fuller points out, “the core ritual of popular theistic Hinduism.”⁶²⁸ While stating that the “principal purpose” of puja as it is carried out daily throughout homes across India has the very material purpose of protecting the household, he goes on to describe puja involving a movement towards oneness between the deity and worshipper. This is symbolized at the climax of puja by waving a camphor flame:

God has become man, and a person, transformed, has become god; they have been merged and their identity is then reinforced when the worshipper cups his hands over the camphor flame, before touching the fingertips to the eyes.⁶²⁹

The experience of God at the deepest level is realised apart from the community and in the context of a ritual act of worship, rather than outgoing action. Significantly this “core ritual of popular theistic Hinduism” is usually carried out by individuals in the privacy of their own homes. This private spirituality is indicated by Sashi Tharoor’s description of his father. Tharoor explains that while his father daily recited his mantras in the home prayer room he never compelled his son to join him, and in this, “exemplified the Hindu idea that religion is an intensely personal matter, that prayer is between you and whatever image of your maker you choose to worship.”⁶³⁰ The emphasis falls on the personal aspect of religious experience.

The development of a wider rationality rooted in Christ that embraces and accommodates diverse aspects of culture perhaps requires a very deliberate and purposeful approach.

4.6 Conclusion

On account of the great cultural diversity in India, the church in India is perhaps in a unique position worldwide to show what it means for the church to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of a reign of God that incorporates cultural diversity. As seen in this chapter, one of the important factors in this is found in the actual fact of visible unity. But one of the challenges for the church is incorporating diverse cultural expression within that unity. As has been indicated in the previous chapter, this mission of inculturation will go forward in the way of the cross, facing

⁶²⁸ C. J. Fuller, ‘Hindu Worship,’ in T. N. Madan., ed., *India’s Religions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107. Fuller describes this understanding of puja “as one of the most important and distinctively Hindu aspects.”

⁶²⁹ C. J. Fuller, ‘Hindu Worship,’ 123.

⁶³⁰ S. Tharoor, *India*, 56.

opposition, rejection and misunderstanding. This dimension of mission is of importance for Indian society as a whole, as Indian society continues to struggle with what it means to be one nation while holding within herself great diversity. One of the key elements of this diversity is religion.

Chapter 5

Mission as Witness to People of Other Living Faiths

5.1 Introduction

In his discussion of witness in relation to the other religions, Bosch concludes with a question that I think is partially illuminating of the tension present in Newbigin's writing on the subject: "How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical? How do we combine faith in God as revealed uniquely in Jesus with the confession that God has not left himself without a witness?"⁶³¹ However, Newbigin's sense of the tension implicit in witness to people of other living faiths was more explicitly rooted in our ecclesiology than Bosch's question perhaps allows. For Newbigin the tension lies in recognising God's freedom to give a witness to Himself among all the peoples in the world, while at the same time believing that our faith in Christ becomes embodied in participation in the church fellowship. The question that Newbigin might ask, and which shall be considered in this chapter, is 'How do we combine God's presence and witness beyond the boundary of the church with the call for all to faith in Jesus Christ as members of the church community?'

5.2 Elements in Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder's proposal of 'Prophetic Dialogue,' which can be seen as both an attitude and way of doing mission,⁶³² can help to understand

⁶³¹ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 500.

⁶³² Stephen Bevans & Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 284f. 'Prophetic Dialogue' has been variously understood. Originally, Bevans & Schroeder described it as a "model" of mission or even as a "theology" of mission (p.284). Both 'model' and 'theology' suggest that 'prophetic dialogue' is more than just an aspect or dimension of mission but that which embraces and incorporates every dimension of mission. This meaning of 'prophetic dialogue' is clear in their identification of different aspects of mission as prophetic dialogue, i.e. 'Witness and Proclamation as Prophetic Dialogue. . . . Liturgy, Prayer and Contemplation as Prophetic Dialogue' etc. (p.352. . . . 361). However, Bevans & Schroeder revised this earlier understanding of 'prophetic dialogue' as an "overarching umbrella" and came to see that "prophetic dialogue functions much more as a spirituality than a strategy," similar to Bosch's "bold humility" (S. Bevans & R. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 2). Accordingly, Klippies Krizinger proposes that 'mission in prophetic dialogue' [emphasis mine] expresses their intention "as a description of the *ethos* of mission, to distinguish it from the *dimensions* of mission such as "Mission as evangelism"' ('Mission in Prophetic Dialogue' in *Missiology* 41, 1 (January, 2013), 35). This parallels Bosch's 'mission in bold humility'. Nevertheless, 'Mission as Prophetic Dialogue' remains a useful term to use in that it points to how a mission approach incorporates elements of dialogue and prophesy. The origins of this term reflects this, coming about in

the approach to people of other religions that Newbigin pointed to in his writing from the 1970's onwards. For Newbigin, the dialogical aspect of witness to people of other faiths was rooted in two related factors: the church's provisional and limited understanding of Christ, and the epistemological dependence on the other. By this second factor is meant that knowledge and understanding of Christ requires the other, as a member of the human race, irregardless of membership of the church. Newbigin laments the absence of true dialogue and true debate in present inter-faith relations in pluralist societies, in which there is the possibility of "mutual challenge."⁶³³ He affirms the vigorous debate present in "most areas of culture" as vital to the health of the culture, "the very oxygen which keeps culture alive and fruitful." The church develops in its own understanding of the truth as it engages in this process of debate and dialogue.

The Western contact with the great religions and cultures of the world, which was one factor in challenging the West's sense of the final authority of the Christian faith in Christ, could, in this light, be seen as an opportunity for a deepening knowledge of Christ, as Newbigin states: "Christology has to be done in dialogue with these [the great religious cultures of the East] as with the other cultures of mankind."⁶³⁴ One "outstanding example" of this, held up by Newbigin as a model for the kind of study he envisaged, is A. G. Hogg's *Karma and Redemption* (1905). Newbigin describes this work as "an example of Christology done in faithful dialogue with another culture." The increasing contact across the world between peoples of different faiths and cultures is an opportunity for a Christology to emerge through the process of dialogue that can lead to greater depth of insight, and to a Christology appropriate for the world today. An appropriate contextual theology at a global and local level can be realised through this process of dialogue.

While Newbigin himself may have done little work, directly, to develop Christology in this direction, he did take some practical steps to provide a format for

the context of a disagreement within the Society of the Divine Word about how to describe "the way" they participated in mission (S. Bevans & R. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 59). The Asians had suggested that "we speak of doing mission simply as "dialogue" but the Latin Americans rejected this because for them "mission was closer to engaging in prophecy." 'Prophetic dialogue' was suggested as a compromise that was accepted by everyone. Bevans and Schroeder themselves seem to point to 'prophetic dialogue' as a way of doing mission when they write that, "Mission needs to be done both as dialogue and as prophecy. . . . We need boldly to proclaim the "beautiful news" of God's story in Jesus and God's vision for our world, but we need to do it in the way God does it: with patience, with respect, in dialogue" (S. Bevans & R. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 61).

⁶³³ L. Newbigin, L. Sanneh & J. Taylor, *Faith and Power*, 152.

⁶³⁴ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the Cultures,' 11.

others to be able to engage in this kind of work, particularly in terms of theological education in Tamil Nadu. In a review of David Read's *Communication of the Gospel*, with an admirable frankness, Newbigin expressed his own sense of shame at the book's "burning passion to reach men where they are" in contrast with the lack of effort within his own church to find a genuine Tamil expression of the gospel.⁶³⁵ In later years Newbigin was able to help rectify this problem in assisting in the founding of Tamil Nadu Theological College, a college committed to ministerial training in Tamil. Newbigin served as chairperson, for a time, of the governing council of the College.⁶³⁶

The anthropology underlying Newbigin's approach here is significant. Unfortunately, he doesn't discuss this but in taking this approach Newbigin is tacitly acknowledging the significance and dignity of dimensions of the human within the life of the religious other. If the church depends on the "mutual challenge" of the other, then this is rooted in the shared human experience, and the deeply rooted inter-relationality of human life. For Newbigin dialogue is more than a methodology, but an action that is in harmony with what it means to be human.

Yet, Newbigin stressed the prophetic element of interaction with other religions to a greater extent than the dialogical. The rationale for his emphasis on the prophetic will now be considered.

5.2.1 Christ's Death as Hermeneutic of Religion

For Newbigin the death of Jesus Christ is the "burning center" of God's revelation.⁶³⁷ The cross revealed God's love but also exposed the world's sin and ungodliness in every aspect of life, including the religious. There are several parts to Newbigin's interpretation of religion in the light of the cross.

Firstly, he interprets the cross as a rejection of the world's self-confidence, the way the various structures of life, including religion, remain closed to God, as he states: "It is "the word of the Cross" that the apostle has to bring, and before this all human confidence, whether of the religious man or the philosopher is shattered."⁶³⁸ Throughout his life Newbigin repeatedly turned to this description of the cross as the

⁶³⁵ L. Newbigin, 'A Review of "The Communication of the Gospel"' by David H. C. Read,' *The International Review of Mission* 41 (1952), 528.

⁶³⁶ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 136,

⁶³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

⁶³⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 45.

place of God's exposure of the unrighteousness of the world's religious, ethical and political systems,⁶³⁹ in their tendency to become self-referential, self-confident, "self-sufficient": "[The Cross] is the final 'No' to every human order that claims to be perfect and self-sufficient."⁶⁴⁰ To the extent that religion becomes "self-referential" and closed to that which comes to it from outside, it comes under the censure of the cross.

Interpreting the unveiling of the unrighteousness within religion as the claim to "be perfect and self-sufficient" leaves open the door to an affirmative approach to various aspects of religion and culture. So, Newbigin points out that while Kraemer's writing may have brought an end to inter-faith dialogue within the Protestant churches during the 1940's and 1950's (although as Newbigin points out inter-faith dialogue "had been common in the first four decades of the century"⁶⁴¹), it was not Kraemer's intention to shut down inter-faith dialogue.⁶⁴² Newbigin's interpretation of the cross makes dialogue possible in that it points to the importance of openness to the other, of openness to that which comes to us from outside our own experience and boundaries. The Christian partner in the dialogue is compelled to recognize himself not as one who has, but as a sinner, equally in need of redemption as the person with whom he or she is in meeting.

Secondly, Newbigin interprets Christ's death as showing the discontinuity between the gospel and religion as an attempt to answer human need. The cross as "antagonistic to all human religious aspirations and ends,"⁶⁴³ points to how Newbigin considered there to be no continuity between Christ and religion that began with and developed from human need or "religious aspirations."

Thirdly, Newbigin interprets Christ's death as the censure of religion as a system supervised, protected and propagated by recognized leaders. Newbigin identifies "the established religious and cultural and political structures" as the "outward form" of the powers that are in conflict with the gospel.⁶⁴⁴ The "established religious structures" have a clearly defined hierarchy of leadership and control. For Newbigin it is the exercise of authority and leadership within the religious system that is particularly problematic, as he explains when he states that those who condemned

⁶³⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 176.

⁶⁴⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 21.

⁶⁴¹ L. Newbigin, 'Recent Thinking on Christian Beliefs: viii. Mission and Missions,' *Expository Times* 88 (June 1977): 265.

⁶⁴² L. Newbigin, 'Recent Thinking on Christian Beliefs,' 265.

⁶⁴³ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 123.

⁶⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 105.

Christ were not society's criminals, "but the revered leaders in church, state and culture."⁶⁴⁵ Religion, in terms of its Scriptures and practices, can be distinguished from religion as an organized structure with clearly defined roles and positions of leadership.

5.2.2 Pre-Christian Encounter with Christ

Newbigin made an important point that he believes is missing from Kraemer in that he attempts to give an explanation of how God encounters humanity, in Christ, in the world's pre-Christian experience.⁶⁴⁶ Newbigin explains that Christ does encounter people prior to their conscious knowledge of him, and this encounter manifests itself in an openness and eagerness "for a reality beyond what now is." As the light of the world Christ does not give illumination and revelation but rather brings "all under judgment," a judgment that exposes the emptiness and corruption present in what now is, but also generates a hunger for a world in which true righteousness is found.⁶⁴⁷

These [texts] – especially the letter to the Hebrews, but also the references to the men of Nineveh and the queen of Sheba⁶⁴⁸ – suggest that it is the men and women of faith, those who looked for that which is not yet seen, who are to share in the final victory. It is not those who are satisfied with what they have but those who with unquenchable thirst seek "the city whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10) who will be rewarded. . . . But this hungering and seeking is not (as Hogg rightly insisted) simply man's work. It is indeed the evidence of God's work: "You would not seek me if I had not already found you." It is the sign that God has not abandoned his estranged children.

. . . . When we say that Jesus is the life of the world, we are not identifying him with anything within this world-on-the-way-to-death, whether it be religious or secular. We are saying that he is the source of the world's life – the source, therefore of that hunger which can only be fully satisfied when he is received as Lord and Saviour. If we ask how he is present in the world apart from that acceptance, part at least of that answer must be that he is present in that faith – whether religious or secular – which is *open and eager for a reality beyond what now is*. Just as physical hunger is a sign of life, so the hunger and thirst for righteousness to which Jesus

⁶⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

⁶⁴⁶ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 28f.

⁶⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 28f.

⁶⁴⁸ Heb. 11:1ff. The significance of this is that faith is shown by pre-Abrahamic figures like Abel, Enoch and Noah, which suggests "the line of pre-Christian faithful . . . involves in principle the whole human race" ('Christ and the World of Religions,' 27). The reference to the men of Nineveh and Sheba is from Mt.12:41,42.

promises satisfaction is itself the sign of the active presence of him who is the source of the world's life. [emphasis mine]⁶⁴⁹

There are a number of points that can be noted here. Firstly, Newbigin brings his futurist eschatology to bear on the discussion of religion by positively identifying the aspiration for something other than the world as it is, as connected with that world which will be realised only in the eschaton, "in the city whose builder and maker is God." Secondly, this aspiration may be in terms of the "religious or secular," a longing for a fuller realisation of God or of more just and equitable relationships on the earth. Thirdly, although Newbigin didn't advocate this idea, his position holds the door open to the idea that an identifiable religious system may help to foster or generate this thirst and hunger for "reality beyond what now is." Fourthly, and in contrast with the third point, this idea of aspiration for "reality beyond what now is," is subversive of all religious systems, suggesting their inadequacy.

Fifthly, there is an implication for inter-faith dialogue in that Newbigin has established a potential point of contact between the Christian and the dialogue partner of another faith. A challenge to both the Christian and the partner in inter-faith dialogue is of remaining open to that which comes to us in Jesus Christ. Newbigin expresses this idea in a discussion on inter-religious dialogue in *The Open Secret*.⁶⁵⁰ To "sum up" his consideration of the basis of inter-religious dialogue, Newbigin uses the diagram of the cross with a staircase leading upwards from the base of the cross on both sides which represents the path of humanity's religious, ethical and moral achievements. The point of contact between the church and people of other faiths takes place not at the top of the staircase but at the bottom, which means "a *kenosis*": "Christians do not meet their partners in dialogue as those who possess the truth and holiness of God." All humanity, church and world, finds itself united in an awareness of its lack of possession and in aspiration for something other.

5.2.2.1 A Criticism of Newbigin

The primary problem for Newbigin's sense of Christ's encounter with all people is that it seems to contradict his own repeated rejection of the idea of an individual, independent relationship with God ("atomistic spirituality") apart from the church

⁶⁴⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 29.

⁶⁵⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 181.

community. Newbigin's position concerning Christ and pre-Christian religious experience has been criticized in a brief review of *The Gospel in A Pluralist Society*, by John Corrie. Corrie states that Newbigin's language suggests Rahner's idea of 'anonymous' Christians.⁶⁵¹ Corrie points out that this raises a number of unanswered questions, some relating to soteriology such as, "In what sense is the gracious work of God in all human lives salvific?"⁶⁵² However, for Newbigin God's gracious work is salvific in all lives only in a very limited sense of generating a dissatisfaction with what now is and there remains a lack of any realisation, or foretaste, of salvation in the experience of those who have no conscious knowledge of Christ. This is quite specifically not the Logos from whom fulfilment is received through mystical religious experience (Panikkar), but rather the Logos whose presence stirs up discontent with the present human situation and longing for that better world which is not visible and can only be perceived through faith. Newbigin clearly suggests that this faith is incomplete and provisional and only meets with its satisfaction through receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior, in other words through the presence of the church and becoming joined with the fellowship of God's people.

5.2.3 A Largely Negative Appraisal of Pre-Christian Religious Experience

Newbigin has the sense of man's natural condition being one of resistance and opposition to God, as is expressed in the following statement he makes regarding conversion:

At the same moment that every foothold of virtue to which he has ever clung slips from under him and he knows himself a lost soul fit only for perdition, he finds himself gripped by the Hand which he has wounded, held fast in the love of Christ. For the first time he becomes what he was created to be, a creature knowing that he owes everything to God's grace. In that moment the "natural" man, that most unnatural self-contradiction, a creature made for God yet resisting God, is done away. . . . *Across all that constitutes the natural man is written "Murderer of the Son of God."* But a new man is born. . . [emphasis mine]⁶⁵³

Newbigin sees religious systems in a similar light, not as expressing sympathy for God and devotion to him, but as almost a locus of rebellion and resistance to God, a concretization of humanity's opposition to God. Yet, with some similarity to his

⁶⁵¹ John Corrie, 'Building Bridges for the Gospel,' *Third Way*, 14,5 (June 1991), 26. Newbigin discusses this possibility very briefly in *The Finality of Christ*, 113.

⁶⁵² J. Corrie, 'Building Bridges for the Gospel,' 26.

⁶⁵³ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 47.

interpretation of culture, Newbigin points to an element of continuity between Christ and pre-Christian religious experience. Newbigin emphasizes that the implications of Christ's death for our experience, "especially religious experience," is a "radical" but "not a total" discontinuity.⁶⁵⁴ The radical discontinuity is a "radical repentance and conversion from all pre-Christian religious experience," rooted in this idea of the cross as the exposure of man's religious and secular wisdom as in "radical hostility to the truth of God."⁶⁵⁵ The element of continuity is explained as rooted in the fact that God is present to the person before conversion, although as a presence that is disruptive, compelling them towards Christ.⁶⁵⁶ Newbigin points to examples of this with Paul's pre-conversion experience and in Paul's recognition of the Athenians search for the living God. He points out that "many" who have come to Christ from other religions become aware, that "it was the living and true God who was dealing with them in the days of their pre-Christian wrestlings."⁶⁵⁷

Yet, Newbigin's affirmation of aspects of pre-Christian experience is not to any concrete aspect of the religion, but rather a 'yes' to God's approach to people, which expresses itself only in humanity's hunger and thirst for a greater reality than is now present in the world.⁶⁵⁸ Newbigin specifically rejected what he saw as A. G. Hogg's idea that the faith of an adherent of another religion, although distorted, is a "real response to a real divine communication."⁶⁵⁹ The problem for Newbigin with Hogg, which is obscured by his description of Hogg's position as "real response," is that Hogg believes that there is a "finding" in pre-Christian religious faith, a real experience of Christ's grace and fellowship with God.⁶⁶⁰ For Newbigin, pre-Christian religious experience does not involve the experience of finding. In one of his arguments against Hogg, Newbigin returns again to what he takes as a hermeneutic for all religion, namely that it was precisely the faith of the Jewish leaders that

⁶⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 59.

⁶⁵⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 57f.

⁶⁵⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 59.

⁶⁵⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 59.

⁶⁵⁸ There is a sense in which Newbigin goes beyond Kraemer in that Kraemer would appear to affirm some aspects of religion. Newbigin describes Kraemer's approach as "dialectical" in the sense of being a negation and affirmation in which the affirmation, the "yes," "is the reflection of the fact that, even when the world rebelled against him, "God did not let it go, but held it fast in his new initiative of reconciliation"" (Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 19. The quotation is from Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 104).

⁶⁵⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 21ff.

⁶⁶⁰ A. G. Hogg, 'The Christian Attitude to Non-Christian Faith,' in *The Authority of the Faith* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1939), 94.

brought them into opposition with Christ.⁶⁶¹ Newbigin rejects the idea that religion is the place of response to God, stating that there is “little ground in the gospels for seeing religion as the primary sphere of God's gracious dealing with men, *or men's response*” [emphasis mine].⁶⁶² For Newbigin there is little, if any, realisation of Christ's life in religion.

This puts Newbigin out of step with one influential line of interpretation of religion by Indian thinkers that has been a popular approach of Indian theology for more than one hundred years. P. Chenchiah (1886-1959) is an earlier example of this. He points to how the “powerful religions” of India have been “the consolation and solace of millions, and which have highly developed philosophies of life and institutional worship.”⁶⁶³ This fact, as Chenchiah sees it, of the power and efficacy of India's religious life can only be accounted for in relation to Christ's presence in that history. In view of this he suggests the need to develop a history of “God's early dealings with Indians rather than with the Jews”, and so articulate a “vital and direct contact with Christ” by India.⁶⁶⁴ He writes of being able to discern within the developments taking place in Hindu thought and social life, “the mighty influences that are proceeding from him [Christ].”⁶⁶⁵ Chenchiah rejects the idea of God's action in the world in the way of election. Christ is envisaged as being in direct contact with India past and present, and in one sense much the same way as He was present to Israel and is present to the church today.

Panikkar in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* takes this approach in the first part of the book where he outlines his understanding of the relationship between Hinduism and Christ. One of the key premises of his work is that, due to there being only one divine reality, the religious sign of the different religious traditions points to the same reality. He gives the example of two people praying and of how what they pray to “must be ultimately the same – that is, the divine reality – unless we presuppose a polytheistic world.”⁶⁶⁶ Furthermore, Christ is the reality mediated through the word and sacraments of Hinduism.⁶⁶⁷ There is an element of election involved in this

⁶⁶¹ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the World of Religions,’ 22.

⁶⁶² L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the World of Religions,’ 23.

⁶⁶³ P. Chenchiah, ‘Present Tendencies in Indian Religions,’ 72 in Milton Stauffer, ed., *An Indian Approach to India* (New York: Mission Educational Movement of the United States and Canada, 1927).

⁶⁶⁴ P. Chenchiah, ‘Present Tendencies in Indian Religions,’ 73.

⁶⁶⁵ P. Chenchiah, ‘Present Tendencies in Indian Religions,’ 75.

⁶⁶⁶ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 69.

⁶⁶⁷ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 54.

process, in that Panikkar acknowledges that a sacrament mediates the grace of God, “by virtue of divine institution,” but also because this reflects the social nature of humanity and God’s dealing with us as a people and not just as individuals.⁶⁶⁸ As far as Panikkar is concerned, the grace of Christ crucified is the source of salvation for every “good and *bona fide*” Hindu. The “good Hindu” is the one who is open to receive the grace of Christ through the word and sacraments of Hinduism, and who walks by that light.

Newbigin’s response to Panikkar’s suggestion of the mediation of Christ through Hinduism is a rejection, in rather strong terms, of the idea of religion being a site of connection between God and man.⁶⁶⁹ Newbigin’s emphasis on the discontinuity between Christ and other religions is a contrast with some of India’s most famous thinkers and theologians.

5.2.3.1 The Basis of a More Open Approach

Arguably, Newbigin’s largely negative appraisal of religion can be held together with a slightly more open approach to religion. Newbigin’s position regarding Christ being present to people, a presence manifested in a discontent with what now is, can be developed to give some room for developing an affirmative perspective to some aspects of religions, namely those aspects of religion that express a dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and express a longing for that which is yet to be. On this basis could the self and world denial of the Indian sadhu, or the withdrawal of the Buddhist monk from the desires of the world, be considered a form of “pre-Christian wrestling”? It is not easy to see that there is any substantial difference between this and Luther’s agonizing search for God through devout obedience to the law, before the consciousness of Christ’s complete and finished atonement came to dominate his thinking.

Keshub Chander Sen suggests the possibility that Hinduism has helped maintain a hunger and aspiration for that which is outside the system. There is the possibility, as in all religions, of an element of self-satisfaction and closure to the beyond: “Hindu pantheism in its worst form is proud, being based upon the belief that man is God.”⁶⁷⁰ But at the same time Sen explains that India has been longing for an, as yet

⁶⁶⁸ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 53f.

⁶⁶⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 43.

⁶⁷⁰ K. C. Sen, ‘Asia’s Message to Europe,’ 103.

unrealized, experience of communion with the divine, as he states: “He [Christ] comes to fulfil and perfect that religion of communion for which India has been panting, as the hart panteth after the waterbrooks. Yes, after long centuries shall this communion be perfected, through Christ. For Christ is a true Yogi, and he will surely help us to realize our national ideal of a Yogi.”⁶⁷¹ Sen points to the possibility of the closure of religious practioners to anything beyond the system, but at the same time the significant presence of an aspiration for something as yet unrealized.

What is Newbigin’s rationale for his generally negative interpretation of religion? There are four factors in particular that may be identified: his early study of Hinduism; his experience as a missionary and observation of the experience of other missionaries; his understanding of God’s revelation in Christ as a unique and unrepeated act in history; and fourthly the influence of Hendrik Kraemer.

5.2.3.2 Newbigin’s Experience in India and Understanding of Revelation

A primary influence that brought Newbigin to his largely negative appraisal of religion arose through his own contact with Hinduism in south India, an opportunity particularly afforded by his time in Kanchipuram, one of the seven holy cities of Hinduism, from 1939-1946. Newbigin appears to have begun his interaction with India’s religions with a very open mind and his own movement towards seeing a discontinuous relationship between Christ and religion is one that he himself found surprising. He explains this clearly in his autobiography, where he states that after hours of teaching from a leading teacher of Vishishtadvaita,⁶⁷² “he had to confess (*contrary to my expectations*) that Hendrik Kraemer’s criticism of Otto’s assessment was justified” [emphasis mine].⁶⁷³ Although Kraemer doesn’t really critique Otto’s work *India’s Religion of Grace and Christianity*, describing it as an “excellent introduction,” Kraemer does point out the differences (as well as some similarities) between Vishishtadvaita and Christianity.⁶⁷⁴ Newbigin concurs with what he

⁶⁷¹ K. C. Sen, ‘Asia’s Message to Europe,’ in *Keshub Chunder Sen’s Lectures in India* (London: Cassel and Company Ltd., 1904), 103. By ‘yogi’ Sen means the person seeking the realization of union with Brahman.

⁶⁷² This has its origins in the theologian Ramanuja, who reacted against the extreme monism of Sankara. Ramanuja emphasized a distinction between God and the world, and pointed to the centrality of personal relationship with the divine.

⁶⁷³ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 54.

⁶⁷⁴ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 168ff. He describes Vishishtadvaita as essentially monistic, despite its intentions to be otherwise, in its understanding of the relationship between God and creation. He also points to a fundamental difference in the place of faith in that in

accurately sees as Kraemer's assessment that the starting point of the religion, its "roots," were in the "human need for salvation, not in a divine act of redemption within the real history of which this human life is a part."⁶⁷⁵ As he reflected on his interaction with Hindu thinkers and theologians he found himself increasingly moving away from a sense of connection between Christ and religion as he states:

I am bound to say that as I reflected on these long discussions on religious subjects with gracious and helpful Hindu friends, I became more and more sure that the 'point of contact' for the Gospel is rather in the ordinary secular experiences of human life than in the sphere of religion. I had not then read Karl Barth and did not know that 'religion is unbelief', but I was certainly beginning to see that religion can be a way of protecting oneself from reality.⁶⁷⁶

The frequent response of hostility, that Newbigin encountered in his first years of street preaching in Kanchipuram,⁶⁷⁷ can also be seen as a factor in his sense of religion as something that closes the heart to Christ. In the context of his discussion of Hogg and Kraemer in 'Christ and the World of Religions,' his point that "the experience of missionaries and evangelists does not support" a stress on the continuity of religious faith with the gospel of Christ, can be seen as partly reflecting his own experience as a missionary and evangelist in Tamil Nadu.

A third reason for Newbigin's approach is that he believed the act of revelation in Christ, God's self-communication, as recorded in the Bible, was totally unique and something which, contra Hogg, is not repeated throughout history.⁶⁷⁸ This revelation, and the gift of the Spirit, which accompanies it is through the witness and testimony of the church to this unique act of revelation. Related to this was Newbigin's sense that God's self-communication in Christ also involved a unique revelation of the religious disposition of humanity towards Christ. He considered the total rejection of Christ, including by his disciples that occurred at the end of Christ's life, as pointing to the animosity and indifference of the world to Christ. Openness to Christ is an impossibility that can happen, not because people chose God, but because God chooses them: "Christianity was born because certain people were chosen and called

Vishishtadvaita faith expresses itself in the appropriation of salvation, whereas in Christianity it is a coming to recognize what man is in the light of the revelation in Christ.

⁶⁷⁵ Kraemer expresses this idea in his description of the difference in the place of faith in both systems, stating that, "Grace, forgiveness, even Ishvara Himself, are in the bhakti religion essentially means to satisfy the need of the soul for salvation" (p.170).

⁶⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 55.

⁶⁷⁷ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 52.

⁶⁷⁸ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions,' 23.

to be the witnesses of a revelation which was otherwise no revelation at all, but rather a scandal or a nonsense.”⁶⁷⁹ Applying this perspective to the world today meant a profound skepticism toward religious faith.

A fourth enduring influence on Newbigin’s approach was Hendrik Kraemer. In ‘Christ and the World of Religions’ Newbigin attempts to “build on Kraemer’s foundations” by developing on some points of weakness in his approach.⁶⁸⁰

Kraemer’s approach will now be briefly considered.

5.2.3.3 The Influence of Kraemer

Newbigin’s interpretation of the relationship between Christ and religion was, arguably, influenced by Hendrik Kraemer, particularly his *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.⁶⁸¹ The impact of this book on Newbigin is indicated by his description of its message as “sheer liberation.”⁶⁸² The book helped Newbigin to understand that the gospel is transcendent to all cultures. This means that the church’s primary duty is one of witness to the gospel rather than identifying the outworking of the gospel with any particular movement, as he states: “The gospel is, strictly, *sui generis*, unique. Therefore we have no business trying to domesticate it within our cultures, our national projects and programmes . . . The gospel is unique, sovereign, unbound. Our business is to bear witness to it.”⁶⁸³ Newbigin describes the failure of the European church to hold to the transcendence of the gospel as “the betrayal [of the gospel] that had led to two world wars.” With the loss of the transcendence of the gospel, the churches lost the ground to critique their own cultures and became “domestic chaplains to the nations, rather than bearers of the word of God to the nations.”⁶⁸⁴ The significance of Kraemer’s message is that he enabled the missionary, Newbigin included, to be a witness.

There are four key elements of Kraemer’s thought in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* that are recurrent in the writing of Newbigin: his interpretation

⁶⁷⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the World of Religions,’ 23.

⁶⁸⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Christ and the World of Religions,’ 24ff.

⁶⁸¹ In a personal visit to Newbigin in 1994 Michael Goheen says Newbigin had two pictures in the room – one of Barth and the other of Kraemer. Newbigin pointed to Kraemer’s picture and then “proceeded to talk at length about Kraemer’s shaping influence on him” (‘As the Father Has Sent Me,’ 15).

⁶⁸² L. Newbigin, ‘A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Conference,’ *International Review of Mission* 77 (1988), 327.

⁶⁸³ L. Newbigin, ‘A Sermon Preached at Tambaram,’ 327.

⁶⁸⁴ L. Newbigin, ‘A Sermon Preached at Tambaram,’ 327.

of the non-Christian religions; his interpretation of the uniqueness of biblical revelation; his revised natural theology and his emphasis on the social dimension of religion. Each of these aspects of Kraemer's thought will be worth considering in order to develop a fuller picture of Newbigin's own position.

Kraemer's interpretation of the non-Christian religions was indebted to the phenomenological interpretation of religion of W. Brede Kristensen, his former teacher at the University of Leiden.⁶⁸⁵ This shaping influence can be seen in two connected ways: firstly, that the religion, as a religious system, can only be properly understood on its own terms,⁶⁸⁶ and secondly, that each religion is a totalizing system in the sense of rationalizing and ordering the whole of human life and experience. Kristensen's phenomenology of religion begins its study of religion from the perspective of the believer, as he states: "The starting point of Phenomenology is therefore the viewpoint of the believer . . ."⁶⁸⁷ Kristensen makes this point in the discussion of, what he perceives as, Rudolph Otto's methodological error in *The Idea of the Holy* of starting from a preconceived understanding of the "essence" of the holy: "Like Hegel, Otto believes that in the essence the germ of all phenomena is contained . . ."⁶⁸⁸ Secondly, and related to this first point, is that Kristensen perceives religion as a system with its own inherent rationality and structure. Both of these points come together in the following statement:

We should not take the concept "holiness" as our starting point, asking, for example, how the numinous is revealed in natural phenomena. On the contrary, we should ask how the believer conceives the phenomena he calls "holy". . . . The Ancients' perception of nature was different from ours, and it is *their* feelings and conceptions which we must try to understand. Then we shall recognize that the believers were right in holding such a view, and that this view is not primitive, as

⁶⁸⁵Tim Scott Perry, *Radical Difference: A Defence of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 45f. This is a revision of Perry's Ph.D. thesis at the University of Durham. Kristensen held the Chair of History and Phenomenology of Religions at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, from 1901 till 1937. He was little known outside the Netherlands during his lifetime but played a key role in the development of Phenomenology of Religion. *The Meaning of Religion*, the main English translation of his work, was translated into English at the prompting of Kraemer (Kraemer wrote the Introduction). Kraemer studied under Kristensen from 1910 and 1920 and eventually succeeded him, in 1937, in the Chair of History and Phenomenology of Religions, at Kristensen's personal request.

⁶⁸⁶ Kraemer explains that Kristensen's unique approach that "pervades his whole phenomenology" is "to understand every religion in its own, inherent, characteristic value and meaning."

⁶⁸⁷ W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. John Carman (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1960), 18,

⁶⁸⁸ W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, 16. He explains that if history were a process of continuous growth and development, then Otto's view might be tenable, but states Kristensen "in human history, regular growth in a definite direction is entirely absent" (p.17).

Otto maintains. If we come to understand them well, we shall see the truth of their ideas, the truth that natural phenomena are sacred or "holy." The starting point of Phenomenology is therefore the viewpoint of the believer, and not the concept "holiness" in its elements or moments.⁶⁸⁹

By beginning from the perspective of the worshipper of the religion, it becomes possible to discern the inherent logic of their thought, and "we shall recognize that the believers were right in holding such a view." They may not have been "right" in an objective sense, but "right" according to the rationality of their own religious system. Kraemer directly acknowledges that he adopted this interpretation when he writes that he found this "thesis" of Kristensen as "exceedingly helpful for congenial understanding of wholly alien worlds and for recognizing the essential incompatibility of the inner sanctum of the different religions."⁶⁹⁰ In other words, this approach enabled a positive and sympathetic approach to the religion of the other, while simultaneously disclosing its distinct otherness and difference.

Kraemer's interpretation of Hinduism is an example of an attempt to interpret the religion according to its own internal logic. Kraemer locates the inner definitive core of Hinduism (together with Taoism) in the sense of "totality," of the "primeval unity" of all things.⁶⁹¹ Kraemer believes that this "monism," this sense of the "primeval unity" of all things, has its roots in the conviction that man is merged with nature, "man in his whole being and possibilities is a part of nature"⁶⁹² Accordingly he uses the term "naturalistic monism" for Hinduism. This then is the fundamental viewpoint from which to understand the diverse phenomenon of Hinduism, for it is the "naturalist-monistic spirit by which Hinduism in all its manifestations is ultimately animated or affected."⁶⁹³ For instance, from this position it becomes possible to see: the logic of Hinduism's embrace of a huge breadth of doctrine, worship and experience; that the fundamental similarity between humanity and the gods in terms of their subjection to karma is "in the sphere of naturalistic monism . . . *wholly logical*" [italics mine]; and also helps understand why a relativistic approach to truth

⁶⁸⁹ W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, 18.

⁶⁹⁰ H. Kraemer, 'Introduction,' in *The Meaning of Religion*, xxiii. This "thesis" to use the language of Kraemer, following Kristensen, is the "absolute absoluteness of every religion for its serious believers, and their relative absoluteness on the plane of History."

⁶⁹¹ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 152.

⁶⁹² H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 155.

⁶⁹³ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 160.

is felt as a “symptom of delightful richness.”⁶⁹⁴ Kraemer’s approach here is helpful in seeing the inherent rationality of Hinduism.

A second element in Kraemer’s thought that can be found in Newbigin is his sense of the uniqueness of biblical revelation, in which there are similarities with Barth. Kraemer describes Christianity as “the religion of revelation.”⁶⁹⁵ With echoes of Barth, Kraemer writes of this revelation as unique in that it is a revelation of the Lordship of God that brings man into crisis, in that man is called and summoned to relate himself to this God, as he states:

: “. . . the Bible is radically theocentric. God, His holy Will, His acts, His love, His judgment, is the beginning and the end of all. Man and the world are brought in direct, immediate relation to this God, who always takes the initiative. . . . it [the Bible] challenges man in his *total* being to confront himself with these realities and accordingly take decisions.”⁶⁹⁶

Kraemer uses the term “Biblical realism” to describe this position. Kraemer suggests taking this “biblical realism” as the “starting point” of our thought, and indicates that this can potentially resolve old problems, such as the “problem of creation.” From the perspective of “biblical realism” the doctrine of creation is to be understood as a call to understand God as the one to whom all things are related: “Man, the world, nature, history are products and objects of God’s Will.”⁶⁹⁷ Biblical revelation is unique precisely because it is *not* the revelation of an interpretive system to understand and comprehend the whole of reality, in contrast with the non-Christian religions.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁴ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 160ff.

⁶⁹⁵ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 62. Kraemer defines revelation as that which “is by its nature inaccessible and *remains so, even when it is revealed*” (p.69). The embodiment of this is that God “was truly revealed in Jesus Christ, but at the same time He hid and disguised Himself in the man Jesus Christ. Neither flesh nor blood can reveal it, only God Himself.” The implication of this is of humanity’s complete dependence on God’s direct act of revelation.

⁶⁹⁶ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 63. . . . 65. Kraemer acknowledges the influence of Barth (i.e. p.115f, 119f), evident in the emphasis on revelation as God’s action which brings the world into an situation of crisis before God (Kraemer sometimes uses the Barthian vocabulary of “crisis” to articulate the effect of divine revelation (p.115)). Kraemer writes that Barth’s “great service” to the world is that “he reminds us of the real meaning of revelation. Revelation is an act of God, an act of divine grace . . . and which, just because it is revelation, remains hidden except to the eye of *faith*, and even then remains an incomprehensible miracle” (p.118).

⁶⁹⁷ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 68.

⁶⁹⁸ Kraemer accuses Aquinas of sacrificing this conception of revelation in his eagerness to produce an integrative system for the whole of reality, what Kraemer describes as “all-inclusive harmonistic thinking” (p.114f). Kraemer describes the non-Christian religions as, “. . . all-inclusive systems of life, rooted in a religious basis, and therefore at the same time embrace a system of culture and civilization and a definite structure of society and state. . . . the various efforts of man to apprehend the

A third element of Kraemer's thought also present in Newbigin is that having made this distinction between biblical revelation and the systems of truth and meaning of the non-Christian religions, Kraemer consciously moves beyond Barth in order to find a way of positive engagement with these religions through a revised natural theology.⁶⁹⁹ The appropriate attitude to the non-Christian religions is one of critique but also "*essentially a positive attitude*, because the world remains the domain of God who created it" [emphasis mine].⁷⁰⁰ Kraemer advocates the need for a revised natural theology in the light of the Barthian exposition of revelation. There are two key points to this revised natural theology. Firstly, this natural theology develops from the theological foundation of God continually summoning the world to obedience to Himself.⁷⁰¹ Secondly, this natural theology has a "dialectical attitude," dialectic being used here in a Barthian way to refer to a response of both affirmation and rejection. Thus the religion is to be interpreted as simultaneously the work of humanity's religious striving but also "God's wrestling with him." While Kraemer recognizes the difficulties and limitations to interpreting the religion in this light, he is clearly opening the door to a positive attitude to the other: "The eye is also opened [in addition to the iniquity that may be present] for the deep aspirations and longings and magnificent embodiments of these longings and aspirations."⁷⁰² This finds expression in the missionary in an "untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions – in short, in the whole range of life of the people among whom one works, for Christ's sake and for the sake of those people."⁷⁰³ While Newbigin, arguably, took a more negative approach to religion than Kraemer, he shared Kraemer's sense of a positive approach to the life of the other.

A fourth element of Kraemer's thought, where a connection in Newbigin's writing may be discerned, relates to understanding religion as a social phenomenon as much as a set of beliefs.⁷⁰⁴ He wrote that the mission approach should take into

totality of existence theology, as for example, Moslem theology, or Ramanuja's bhakti-theology, is an effort to reflect in a system of coherent thinking the religious apprehension of existence. This universal effort towards the apprehension of the totality of existence" (p.102. . . . 111).

⁶⁹⁹ He suggests that Barth is in danger of "sterile intellectualism" and even of limiting the freedom of God's revelatory action in his refusal to discuss natural theology, even although in principle he recognizes its possibility (p.120).

⁷⁰⁰ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 104.

⁷⁰¹ Yet this revelation of God, which Kraemer describes as "general revelation" is only known to faith (p.125).

⁷⁰² H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 129.

⁷⁰³ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 140.

⁷⁰⁴ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 286f.

account, “the solid but never duly realized fact that these great non-Christian religions are to be understood in the first place as complex civilizations and social structures.”⁷⁰⁵ He doesn’t give much analysis to his point but does at least suggest the complexity of the relationships in which a person is implicated: “religion is a complex cultural, political and social entity, and the word “religious” therefore has primarily a social connotation.”⁷⁰⁶ The strength and influence of the social setting dominates all other influences, religious or otherwise. The strength of this influence is so great that Kraemer is very critical of the idea that the influence of certain ideas or ideals from Christianity on Indian society is indicative of a movement towards Christ. As evidence to support this he points to Gandhi as an example of someone who had great admiration for Christ and yet refused to accept Christ as Lord, the one to whom total and complete allegiance is due.⁷⁰⁷ A person who belongs to a religion is first and foremost a part of a dynamic and strong social system:

Religions all over the world are not pondering philosophers, who try disinterestedly to make out where truth lies; they are huge social bodies (comprising life-patterns, ideas, attitudes, volitions and strong emotions), that, as in the case of all social bodies, instinctively strive for self-assertion and self-perpetuation.⁷⁰⁸

There are other Indian thinkers who have made similar points. Bishop V. S. Azariah⁷⁰⁹ pointed to the social dimension of Hinduism as the point at which Hinduism stiffens in resistance to Christ, as M. M. Thomas summarizes: “The conflict between Christianity and Hinduism arises not primarily at the level of doctrines, but precisely as between rival ‘schemes of life in society.’”⁷¹⁰ Azariah had personal experience of the intolerance of Hinduism towards Christianity at this level through his own experience of the mass movements into the church in his own diocese.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁵ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 286.

⁷⁰⁶ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 287.

⁷⁰⁷ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 289f.

⁷⁰⁸ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non Christian World*, 291.

⁷⁰⁹ V. S. Azariah (1874-1945) became “an ordained Anglican missionary of Indian Missionary Society” (which he helped establish) in 1909 to Dornakal in what is now Andhra Pradesh. In 1912 he became the first Indian Anglican Bishop when he was appointed Bishop of the newly formed Dornakal diocese. He oversaw a large mass movement of outcaste, tribal and low caste Hindu communities into the church.

⁷¹⁰ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 78.

⁷¹¹ Gandhi opposed conversion from Hinduism to Christianity and made public accusations against Azariah such as that he used incentives to win converts (‘Letter to Amrit Kaur,’ 17 March 1937, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, LXV, 4, in Susan Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 317).

Newbigin's sense of religion as a social system may have encouraged his insistence on the necessity of participation in the church community for acceptance of Christ.

5.2.3.3.1 Difference between Kraemer and Newbigin

Newbigin's reading of Kraemer is not entirely accurate. Newbigin identifies the transcendence of the gospel to culture in the historicity of the events, beginning with the call of Abraham in the Old Testament to the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. He believes that Kraemer shared this emphasis in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. However, Kraemer's own emphasis on God's transcendence of culture begins from the uniqueness of the Bible being a "radically theocentric book" in that in it God is revealed as having an absolute claim on the whole world: "He is the Absolute Sovereign In this point consist the originality and uniqueness of the Bible Real contact with the Bible means a constantly recurring process of conversion of our "normal" thinking and judgment."⁷¹² For Kraemer, God is the "Absolute Sovereign," transcending the world and calling the world to obedience as "the sovereign Creator of the world and of man" and as the "Lord of history."⁷¹³ Here Kraemer is specifically dealing with the relationship of God to the world as a whole, rather than giving a specific emphasis to the historical events of the Bible story. Newbigin locates the transcendence of the Bible story not in the otherness of God above the world, but in these events, the divine actions, beginning with His election and calling of Abraham.

5.2.4 A Point of Meeting on the Road to the Eschaton

On the one hand Newbigin tried to minimize discussion of the relationship between Christ and the religions on the basis of religious experience or belief. One reason for this, as seen, is that he tended to see discontinuity between Christ and religion, describing religion as the "primary area of darkness,"⁷¹⁴ evidenced by the lack of receptivity to Christ by learned practitioners of other religions.

But, at the same time Newbigin believed in a meeting point that was related to the eschatological kingdom. He believed the biblical and eschatological vision of salvation as the renewal of the whole world provided the framework for a constructive

⁷¹² H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 63.

⁷¹³ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 67.

⁷¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173.

relationship across faith communities, through shared action in the struggle for “justice and for freedom,” as he states:

It is precisely in this kind of shared commitment to the business of the world that the context for true dialogue is provided. . . . It is not just a sharing of religious experience, though it may include this. *At heart it will be a dialogue about the meaning and goal of the human story.* If we are doing what we ought to be doing as Christians, the dialogue will be initiated by our partners, not by ourselves. [emphasis mine]⁷¹⁵

This eschatological framework is a different approach than that taken by some Indian thinkers in the consideration of the relationship between Christ and the religions. Indian theology, as expressed in thinkers such as Sen, Panikkar, Abhishiktananda and Aleaz, has tended to be concentrated on explaining present realities, present forms and experiences in relationship to Christ. Newbigin appears to have considered this approach unproductive, preferring instead to encourage the church to act, to “do what we ought to be doing as Christians,” and in the context of this action allowing dialogue to naturally emerge. For Newbigin, characteristic with his general approach, the church’s primary concern must be to indwell the bible story and let other issues, inter-religious dialogue included, emerge from that commitment.

This sense of dialogue emerging in the context of shared action for the humanization of society can, in part, be explained by Newbigin’s sense, for much of his time in India, that the search for a just society had become a more significant factor than the religious search for God. He appears to have partially agreed with Thomas’s idea that the struggle and search for the humanization of life within Indian society as a whole had become the dominant issue for the society, where once it had been the search for God.⁷¹⁶ Murdoch Mackenzie, who worked with Newbigin in Madras from the mid-1960’s, gives expression to this aspect of Newbigin’s thought. Mackenzie explains that in preparation for coming to India he wanted to study Hinduism, but Newbigin advised him that he “would be better to study Marxism.”⁷¹⁷ In relation to this search for a new society Thomas advised that this was the church’s point of meeting with the world, as he states:

⁷¹⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182.

⁷¹⁶ M. M. Thomas, ‘The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel,’ in *Renewal for Mission*, eds. David Lyon & Albert Manuel (Madras: CLS, 1968), 98 in A Bird, ‘M. M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,’ 189.

⁷¹⁷ Murdoch Mackenzie, ‘The Other Side of Lesslie Newbigin,’ <http://www.fost.org.uk/pages/The%20Other%20Side%20of%20Lesslie%20Newbigin.pdf>, accessed 27 February 2014.

The secular strivings for fuller human life should be placed and interpreted in their real relation to the ultimate meaning and fulfilment of human life revealed in the divine humanity of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. They should be seen as the means to acknowledge and witness to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as the only God worthy of man's ultimate worship and obedience. It is then that men and their strivings are truly saved and made human, and become a sacrament and foretaste of the ultimate Salvation freely offered by God in Christ to all mankind. Herein lies the mission of the Church: to participate in the movements of human liberation in our time in such a way as to witness to Jesus Christ as the Source, the Judge and the Redeemer of the human spirituality and its orientation which are at work in these movements, and therefore as the Saviour of man today.⁷¹⁸

In this way the church could break out of the communalism that was threatening to reduce it to a self-centered preoccupation with its own rights and needs, and participate in a genuine act of service to the wider community. Although Newbigin did not give as much emphasis to this kind of joint action with people of other faiths as Thomas did, he did recognize the legitimacy of it, and particularly the need for direct action for the realization of justice within society.

As we have seen, Newbigin did maintain a degree of openness toward the other as the adherent and practitioner of another religion. To what extent did this translate into his understanding of the form of the church in India's pluralist society? This is the subject that will now be considered.

5.3 The Form of the Church in a Pluralist Society

Nearly forty years ago, in a survey of ecclesiological thought in India, one of the emphases identified was the idea of the church as an "open community."⁷¹⁹ Philip pointed to M. M. Thomas and Samuel Rayan as two exponents of this view of the church, particularly in their contributions to a National Christian Council of India sponsored publication entitled, *The Church: A People's Movement*. This openness had particular reference to the fact of the Indian church being located in a pluralist society, among practitioners of religions, whose religion had been a presence in India

⁷¹⁸ M. M. Thomas, 'The Meaning of Salvation Today,' in T. Jacob Thomas, ed., *M. M. Thomas Reader* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2002), 87. This was originally given in an opening address of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism Conference in Bangkok, December 1972.

⁷¹⁹ T. V. Philip, 'Ecclesiological Discussions in India During the Last Twenty Five Years,' *Indian Journal of Theology*, 25.3-4 (1976), 179.

for thousands of years. The understanding of what this openness actually entailed will be considered below.

Newbigin's understanding of the form of the church in a pluralist society had two elements: firstly, openness to the possibility of a Christ-centered fellowship forming within another religious community. Newbigin's understanding of the presence of the Spirit as the central reality that constitutes the church as church is important in this regard. Newbigin's interpretation of the church in 1953, in *The Household of God* identifies the following characteristics as fundamental to the existence of the church: administration of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist; the presence of the Scripture (both emphases of the Reformation church); a visible, continuing, fellowship of God's people; the presence of the Holy Spirit; participation in mission that has an eschatological horizon; and finally, a fellowship sustained by the mercy of God.⁷²⁰ While all of these elements are vital, he singles out the presence of the Holy Spirit as essential to the constitution of the church. Just as a church, which has all the elements noted above, but does not have the Spirit is dead, so a church that has these elements in an impaired form, "lack in some manner and measure the fullness of the Church's true order and teaching," but has the Spirit, has to be recognized as the church.⁷²¹ Accordingly, he describes Pentecost as the "birthday of the new Israel", because this is the moment when it "becomes the community indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, having communion at all times and in all places with the Father through the Son in the Spirit."⁷²² The election of the church is made manifest in the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church, and to the church alone.⁷²³

The second element in Newbigin's understanding of the form of the church in a pluralist society was an affirmation of the importance of the idea of "succession," of the church existing as a fellowship in continuity with the church through all the ages since the time of Christ and the apostles.⁷²⁴ This latter point is particularly important for understanding Newbigin's approach. Goheen points out that Newbigin was

⁷²⁰ With this final point Newbigin reminds us that ultimately the church can be perceived as the people of God only through faith: "Every attempt to define it by marks ascertainable by simple observation and apart from faith, violates the law of its being" (*Household of God*, 133).

⁷²¹ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 96.

⁷²² L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 31. As his description of the church as the 'new Israel' indicates, there is a strong element of continuity between the church and Israel: "Jesus does not found a new people of God, a new society" (p.30).

⁷²³ L. Newbigin, 'Witnessing to Jesus Christ' in *Presenting Christ to India Today* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1956), 59. This is a sermon delivered in south India on 12th January, 1956.

⁷²⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 77ff.

convinced that “a body existing in unbroken continuity through history was central to a proper understanding of the church.”⁷²⁵ It is of the essence of the church that she should exist and be in continuity with the church across the world and in all past ages by a direct human connection, as he states:

We conclude that just as it belongs to the heart of the biblical doctrine of the Church that our incorporation in Christ is by faith, so it is no less central to this doctrine that our incorporation in baptism into a visible fellowship which is the body of Christ in Corinth, in Rome, in the world; and that our participation in the life of the body is maintained by our sharing in the one loaf and the one cup in one undivided fellowship. The Church, in other words, is not constituted by a series of disconnected human responses to the supernatural acts of divine grace which grows by addition of new members but is itself *essentially* continuous and indivisible. [emphasis mine]⁷²⁶

This continuity involves a “succession” of authority. For Newbigin the fact of breaks in this authority giving rise to the situation today of churches which “can claim no uninterrupted ministerial succession from the apostles,” does not invalidate the fact this is an important element of the church’s nature. The persistence of the church through these divisions and schisms points to the fact that the church is established by the grace and mercy of God,⁷²⁷ but it should also be recognised that the divisions within the churches worldwide has meant that they “have lacked something which is proper to the Church.”⁷²⁸ This idea, that continuity and succession “belongs to the essence of the Church,” is an important part of Newbigin’s understanding of the form of the church in a pluralist society, and a point of difference between him and some other Indian theologians, such as M. M. Thomas.

Newbigin’s interpretation of the form of the church in a pluralist society came to the fore in his engagement with ideas associated with Kaj Baago in the mid 1960’s, and then slightly later with M. M. Thomas, in the early 1970’s, over Thomas’s idea of a fellowship in Christ that existed outside the church, as shall now be considered.

⁷²⁵ M. Goheen. ‘As the Father Has Sent Me,’ 38.

⁷²⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 77.

⁷²⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 79.

⁷²⁸ L. Newbigin, ‘Episcopacy and the Quest for Unity.’ This is a collection of unpublished notes of Newbigin’s contribution to a discussion in a conference in Swanwick, 1978.

5.3.1 Newbigin and Non-Traditional Forms of the Church

The questions being asked about the form of the church in India's pluralist society, and particularly in a society focused on nation building and development, found cogent expression by Newbigin in an address delivered at the National Consultation on the Mission of the Church in Contemporary India, held at Nasrapur, Maharashtra, in 1966.⁷²⁹ Newbigin summarized the questions that were being asked at that time as follows:

... does fidelity to Christ require us also to try to draw men into the fellowship of the visible Church? Is not God also active – and savingly active – in the world outside the Church? Does the Bible itself not make this plain? Is it not, therefore, much more important for us to co-operate with men of all faiths in doing the work of God in the world, than to try to draw men out of the world into the Church? Is there not here a clear choice for Christians between unselfish commitment to serving God in the world and a selfish desire to build up the Church as a separate body apart from the world?⁷³⁰

One response to these kind of questions that *had* marginalized the place of the church had come from Kaj Baago,⁷³¹ in a widely read article published in 1966 entitled 'The Post Colonial Crisis in Mission.'⁷³² In his address at the Nasrapur gathering, Newbigin acknowledges that one of the issues Baago was quite legitimately trying to interpret was God's action in the world, and his freedom to call those beyond the boundaries of the church into an obedient response of faith, something for which there was a clear parallel in God's calling the gentiles at the time of the early church:

This text [Rom. 10:20] therefore raises the question that is at the centre of our debate - the relation of conversion and faith to the visible structure of the

⁷²⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' *National Christian Council Review* 86, (1966): 309-323. Newbigin incorporated much of this address into the lectures he delivered at Yale University Divinity School one month later in April, 1966. These were published as *The Finality of Christ* and the material appears largely in the lecture entitled 'Conversion,' pp.88-110.

⁷³⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 101.

⁷³¹ Kaj Baago (1926-1987) was a Dane who served as Professor of Church History at United Theological College, Bangalore, from 1960-1968. Towards the end of this time he resigned from the Danish Missionary Agency which had sent him to UTC and then left theological education and the church ministry. From 1973-84 he served as deputy head and then head of the Danish International Development Agency's Asia Division and then head of the Danish International Development Agency (Jonas Jorgenson, 'Among the Ruins – Kaj Baago's Theological Challenge Revisited,' *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 33,1 (<http://www.religiononline>, accessed 25 Oct. 2011)).

⁷³² Kaj Baago, 'The Post-Colonial Crises of Mission,' *International Review of Missions*, LV, 219 (1966): 322-332.

Church. The question has been put by Dr Baago in the following brief form: Does a Hindu have to become a Christian in order to belong to Christ?⁷³³

Newbigin's response to this is firstly, to affirm the possibility of alternative church structures to the existing institutional church. He points to the freedom of God's action in the world to call into being a church where He chooses ("God is not a prisoner of the church") and secondly, connected with this, he points to the action of the Holy Spirit giving birth to a church fellowship beyond the boundaries of the recognized church.⁷³⁴ The paradigmatic example of this which he points to, in his address at Nasrapur, is the early church being compelled to recognize the gentile Cornelius and his family as the people of God on the basis of the coming of the Holy Spirit.⁷³⁵ Here he returns to the same point that was so important to his whole discussion of the church in *The Household of God*.⁷³⁶ In that book he had described the Holy Spirit as "the fact from which argument can begin" in a discussion of the church,⁷³⁷ and this is the approach that he follows at Nasrapur. The importance of this for the contemporary church in India is that just as the giving of the Spirit to the gentiles forced the early church to reconsider its "existing structure,"⁷³⁸ so the action of the Holy Spirit in the world today presses the issue of the form of the church.

Newbigin also points out that this new form of the church among the gentiles did become connected with the existing institutional church of Judaeen Christianity through the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist and the ministry of the Word: "This [firm connection] is first of all established by the fact that they are baptized. There is no question anywhere about that. Secondly, they are called to share in the Lord's table. And thirdly they are linked with the Judean church through the ministry of the apostle and his colleagues."⁷³⁹ So, Newbigin insists that while there may be discontinuity with our existing church forms in the free action of the Spirit, the work of the Spirit is in continuity with incorporation into the visible church fellowship through baptism and participation in the eucharist and the ministry of the word:

We are confused about the answer to the question 'Should we try to make Hindus Christian' because we have loaded the word 'Christian' with wrong

⁷³³ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' 316.

⁷³⁴ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' 316f.

⁷³⁵ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' 317.

⁷³⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 88.

⁷³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 89.

⁷³⁸ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' 318.

⁷³⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Conversion,' 318.

meanings. At this moment I am thinking of two groups of villagers whom I met the other day. The Holy Spirit has been doing a marvelous work among them and they want to become Christians. I cannot say to them: continue to live and worship as Hindus. Nor, on the other hand, do I want to take them into our ecclesiastical structures in such a way that they are simply moulded into replicas of ourselves. I want to say to them: Be baptized into Christ; come to the Holy Supper; study the Scriptures with us and teach us all that the Holy Spirit has taught you so that we may become different because of what He has done with you.⁷⁴⁰

This understanding of the free action of the Holy Spirit in the world, and a distinction between the true features of the church and its actual structure, or form, meant that Newbigin could recognize the presence of the church in movements that had arisen relatively spontaneously and lacked any clear connection with the established church community. The example that he speaks affirmingly of in this regard is the church founded by Robert di Nobili, who separated himself from the visible church and became immersed in the upper caste world of Madurai.⁷⁴¹ This example is not without problems in that it was a caste church and di Nobili accepted the maintenance of caste rules.⁷⁴² Nevertheless, the point should indicate the degree of freedom from institutional forms that Newbigin considered possible. It also indicates the point of which Newbigin was well aware, that this understanding of the presence of the Spirit as the mark of the church had “dangerously revolutionary implications.”⁷⁴³

A further important implication of recognizing the free action of the Spirit in the world is that the position of the church is relativized, as the fellowship which follows the Spirit.⁷⁴⁴ This avoids the danger that is inherent in Newbigin’s emphasis on the church as the community constituted by the Spirit, of coming to see the church as the sole repository of God’s grace and power in the world. By extension this would mean that where the church goes salvation follows, which Newbigin clearly rejects: “Mission is not simply the self-propagation of the church by putting forth of the

⁷⁴⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Conversion,’ 322.

⁷⁴¹ L. Newbigin, ‘Conversion,’ 317.

⁷⁴² On the one hand Newbigin rejects this maintenance of caste, describing it as a “sort of apartheid” (*The Finality of Christ*, 105), yet, on the other hand, in his review of M.M. Thomas’s *Salvation and Humanisation*, he seems to affirm how this church “remained sociologically part of the surrounding Hindu community, continuing to observe caste, to wear the thread and to carry on many traditional practices.”

⁷⁴³ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 96.

⁷⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

power that inheres in its life.”⁷⁴⁵ Mission is first and foremost the work of the Holy Spirit, drawing humanity to Christ, and the role of the church comes in the context of this action.

5.3.1.1 Inter-Religious Fellowship in Humanising Movements: M. M. Thomas and Newbigin

The gap between church and society in both north and south India, together with the socialist framework of post-Independence India, encouraged a theologian like M. M. Thomas to expand the understanding of the church to accommodate movements in the wider society that appeared to have some relationship to Christ. Accordingly M. M. Thomas suggested that the *koinonia* of the New Testament includes the “human fellowship in secular society” which has little specifically religious orientation but is orientated towards the realisation of a full life for all people in society: “[*koinonia*] does not refer primarily to the Church or the quality of life within the Church, but that it is the manifestation of the new reality of the kingdom at work in the world of men in world history.”⁷⁴⁶ Thomas identifies this fellowship as occurring not in the practice of religion as such, but among those who, although outside the church, are acting in harmony with God’s purposes for the world, and experiencing the suffering that is involved in the service of humanity.⁷⁴⁷

Thomas collapses the church-world distinction to a greater extent than Newbigin. Thomas saw *koinonia* as something experienced largely beyond the boundary of the church in the world, a “general human reality symbolized by the church.”⁷⁴⁸ His own understanding of this *koinonia* would be explained more clearly in later writing. He quotes affirmingly the following statement: “Koinonia is not primarily about the church. It is the gift of God’s own life that God offers to the whole of humanity.”⁷⁴⁹ In other words, the church is not the primary place of God’s meeting with the world, and the Word, sacraments and fellowship of the church are not the primary means of God’s grace. These are simply to be seen as a visible sign of the reality that is being

⁷⁴⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

⁷⁴⁶ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation* (Madras: Christian Literature Service for CISRS, 1971), 19. Also, M. M. Thomas, *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology* (Tirvulla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1995), 13f.

⁷⁴⁷ M. M. Thomas, *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology*, 82.

⁷⁴⁸ M. M. Thomas, *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology*, 13.

⁷⁴⁹ Mary Tanner, in *Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation – Costly Unity* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 57, quoted in M. M. Thomas, *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology*, 13.

mediated to the whole world. Thomas's distinction between the church as the "structured nucleus of the people of Christ" and the "larger, unstructured stream of *koinonia*-in Christ or communion in the Messiah in human history, which is spiritually continuous and discontinuous with it,"⁷⁵⁰ indicates this, suggesting an experience of Christ in the world equivalent to that of the church.

Samuel Rayan, an Indian theologian writing around the same time as Thomas, has a similar view, although expressed differently with more emphasis on the Spirit. Rayan emphasizes the Spirit's leadership in a mission of liberation, of building "the human community."⁷⁵¹ Rayan sees the Holy Spirit as active in the world, as "new-creatively present in the lives of followers of other faiths as well as in secular movements and struggles for justice, freedom, and unity, and the creation of the beautiful."⁷⁵² This means a joint experience of the Spirit, between the church and those engaged in the struggle for liberation, in that both the church and world can be described as "charismatic in structure."

Newbigin took exception to Thomas's interpretation of *koinonia*, pointing out that the New Testament use of the word limited it to the fellowship within the worshipping church community alone.⁷⁵³ He had, however, earlier acknowledged that it is possible that those outside the confessing community are more positively engaged with the real struggles of life than those in the church itself.⁷⁵⁴ Yet, Newbigin appears to have recognised some element of truth in Thomas's position as he later wrote of sharing a "common life" in Christ with some who do not acknowledge Christ as Lord.⁷⁵⁵ Newbigin writes, like Thomas, of this fellowship with Christ and one

⁷⁵⁰ M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1987) in T. Jacob Thomas, ed., *M. M. Thomas Reader*, 145.

⁷⁵¹ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 103.

⁷⁵² S. Rayan, 'A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context,' Section 16b.

⁷⁵³ L. Newbigin, 'Letter to M. M. Thomas (17 November 1971)' in *Some Theological Dialogues* (Christian Literature Service: Madras, 1971), 117f.

⁷⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 111. Newbigin implies that this is normative because the church is "constantly guilty of turning its back on God's purposes for the creation" (*The Finality of Christ*, 111). Those who act where the church has failed will "be the instruments of God's judgment upon the Church, as the Bible in many passages teaches us" (*The Finality of Christ*, 111).

⁷⁵⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 175; M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*, in T. Jacob Thomas, ed., *M. M. Thomas Reader*, 146. There is a lack of clarity here on what Newbigin envisages by this sharing in a common life. From the discussion it appears that he is referring to scattered individuals rather than organized groups, as he writes vaguely of "men and women. . . . non-Christian neighbors." If he is referring to scattered individuals then he has moved towards M. M. Thomas's position, which he rejected a few years earlier. Then, he rejected M.M Thomas's idea of "new humanity," which H. L Richards explains as "Christ-influenced individuals who do not actually profess faith in Christ" (H. L. Richard, 'Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of "Church,"' 191).

another taking place in relation to the “common human enterprise of living and building up a common life.”⁷⁵⁶ For both of them fellowship with Christ and one another can be realized, to some degree, through service in and to the world.

5.3.1.2 Christ-Centered Fellowships in Hinduism: Newbigin and Thomas

M. M. Thomas was open to the idea of Christ-centered fellowships developing within Hindu society, pointing to Keshub Chunder Sen’s Church of the New Dispensation and the Subba Rao movement as examples.⁷⁵⁷ The rationale for Thomas’s approach lay in his understanding that the historical situation was pressing the issue of Christ on all peoples, generating a “spiritual ferment” and “crisis” in all religions:

One of the significant features of the present world situation is that all religions have been brought into the framework of a single historical dynamic and a single responsibility for rebuilding society on the new foundation of the unity of mankind. No doubt this framework is largely the result of technology and its secular culture. But it has brought about a spiritual ferment in all religions oriented to a rethinking of the nature and destiny of man and society. . . . One of the most potent sources of this crisis is their grappling on their own with the meaning of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of Divine Forgiveness in him. St. Paul found to his great wonder that God in Jesus Christ abolished the highest wall of religious partition of his time between Jew and Gentile, uniting them in Divine Forgiveness, without the law. It is possible that we are witnessing another time in which Christ is abolishing, or at least lowering the walls of religious exclusiveness in a common response of all religions to the New Humanity in Christ.⁷⁵⁸

Newbigin agreed with M. M. Thomas on the possibility of a Christ-centered fellowship taking form within the Hindu community, apart from the institutional church, although he insisted that there had to be elements of Hindu religious practice that could not be carried into the church, and on the movement of that fellowship

Thomas, referring to the discussion between Newbigin and himself in the early 1970’s, points to how Newbigin had objected to the idea of *koinonia* outside the church (*A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology*, 13). Newbigin did reject some aspects of Thomas’s idea of *koinonia* at that time, but not all as we have seen, and his writing in *The Open Secret* suggests he broadened his understanding of the extent of participation in Christ outside the church to include individuals and not just an organized fellowship.

⁷⁵⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 175. Here he stressed the importance of recognizing and not trying to “belittle the manifest presence of the light in the lives of men and women who do not acknowledge him.”

⁷⁵⁷ M. M. Thomas, ‘Letter to Bishop Newbigin (21 October 1971)’ in *Some Theological Dialogues*, 115.

⁷⁵⁸ M. M. Thomas, ‘The Divine Forgiveness,’ (London: CMS, 1974) in T. Jacob Thomas, ed., *M. M. Thomas Reader* 149.

towards visible solidarity with the wider church community.⁷⁵⁹ Newbigin suggests the possibility of what McGavran refers to as “indigenous churches,” that is a fellowship which has developed in response to Christ outside the established church.⁷⁶⁰ Newbigin’s readiness to accept Subba Rao’s movement into the World Council of Churches is indicative of his approach.⁷⁶¹ Subba Rao’s movement was largely centered in devotion to Christ, although rejecting the sacrament of baptism, continued to practice caste, and remained aloof from the wider church. Although this was all problematic for Newbigin, in addition to other elements within the movement that appeared heterodox,⁷⁶² he was willing to recognize this movement with incorporation into the WCC, although he insisted on the presence of the Word and sacraments in the fellowship. In his exchange with Thomas in the early 1970’s, following Thomas’s publication of *Salvation and Humanisation*, Newbigin pointed to the fact that this fellowship beyond the institutional church had to take form, as di Nobili’s did, through being rooted in the Word and sacraments.⁷⁶³

Newbigin’s suggestion that it is possible to form a church that remains “sociologically part of the Hindu community,” effectively means that he was willing to recognize a church that practiced caste. This idea stands ill at ease with Newbigin’s emphasis on the fellowship in the experience of salvation: the exclusion of some from participation cuts right across the fellowship of which the church is a sign, inclusive of all peoples, and seems to preclude the mediation of Christ’s life in the Word and sacraments, so greatly does it stand at odds with the kingdom. This

⁷⁵⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘Letter to M. M. Thomas (17 November 1971)’ in *Some Theological Dialogues* (Christian Literature Service: Madras, 1971), 122. Similarity between M. M. Thomas and Newbigin on this point is largely unrecognized, with the exception of H. L. Richard, ‘Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of “Church,”’ *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 24,4 (Winter 2007): 185-94. With reference to the exchange between Thomas and Newbigin in the early 1970’s following Thomas’s publication of *Salvation and Humanisation*, Richard points out that while there is a lack of clarity in Newbigin’s position it can be said that, “his [Newbigin’s] published teaching in relation to the M. M. Thomas debate is not opposed to new patterns of corporate discipleship within Hindu cultures and communities. Thus, the standard postulate of a disagreement between Newbigin and Thomas in this area is not valid” (‘Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of “Church,”’ 193).

⁷⁶⁰ D. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India*, 210ff. Some characteristics of the indigenous church, according to McGavran are: the presence of non-orthodox teaching and practices, sometimes carried over from the previous religion, and frequently a charismatic leader who has “often . . . elevated himself to a semidivine status.” (p.214).

⁷⁶¹ L. Newbigin, ‘Letter to M. M. Thomas (17 November 1971),’ 124.

⁷⁶² The movement was not entirely orthodox in that some of the liturgy developed by Subba Rao rejected worship of Christ, but in the actual practice of the movement worship of Christ is “central to every service of the Subba Rao *sampradaya*” (Richard Hivner, ‘Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ: The Life and Work of K. Subba Rao of Andhra Pradesh, South India, with Special Reference to His Songs’ (M.A. diss., University of South Africa, 2004), 65ff).

⁷⁶³ L. Newbigin, ‘Review of Humanisation and Salvation,’ in *Religion and Society* 18,1 (1971), 75f, referenced in H. L. Richard, ‘Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of “Church,”’ 191.

may explain why, as Richard states, Newbigin's position on "Christ-centered fellowships within the Hindu world" is "not easy to determine" and also why his apparent acceptance of the idea in principle is "not an altogether happy acceptance."⁷⁶⁴ The difficulty of determining Newbigin's position is also partly due to the brevity of his discussion of the issue, amounting only to a few scattered pages, and, as this indicates, his response to this issue is not a highly considered one. Yet, Newbigin creates the room for recognizing as the church a caste based fellowship like Subba Rao's and di Nobili's if it is moving towards fellowship and integration with the wider church.

The difference between Newbigin and Thomas emerges at this point. Newbigin's sense of the importance of continuity and succession in the church compels him to see the need for movements like Subba Rao's to develop some form of connection and relationship with the wider church.⁷⁶⁵ Newbigin felt that Thomas's ecclesiology lacked this sense of the importance of continuity and he suggested that it tended towards the "docetic," that is to say it appealed to a reality beyond physical form and structure.⁷⁶⁶ This "docetic" understanding of the church can be seen in Thomas's suggestion, in the quotation above, that just as the barrier between Jew and Gentile was dissolved and a union realized between them "without the law," so Hindu and Christian were being bound together in spirit, beyond the particulars of religious practice or belief. Newbigin felt that Thomas was perhaps, without warrant, identifying the Christ centered fellowships outside the church as God's normative way of acting in the world. Newbigin retained the sense of the visible church as the primary place where God gives grace to the world.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁴ H. L. Richard, 'Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of "Church,"' 192.

⁷⁶⁵ L. Newbigin, 'Letter to M. M. Thomas' (17th November 1971), 124.

⁷⁶⁶ L. Newbigin, 'Letter to M. M. Thomas (17 November 1971), 122.

⁷⁶⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 79. As indicated above, the given-ness of God's life in world, is, for Newbigin, found primarily in the evangelistic action of the Spirit, stirring up the world to a reception of the church's message and coming: "... the active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God" (*The Open Secret*, 56). Reflecting the influence of Rolland Allen in works like *Missionary Method's: St. Paul's or Ours*, Newbigin saw the Spirit as the central dynamic of the life of the congregation, and argued for a restoration of dependence on the Spirit in the work of church growth and church planting (Newbigin, 'The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Asian Churches,' in *A Decisive Hour for the Christian Mission: The East Asia Christian Conference 1959 and the John R. Mott Memorial Lectures* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961): 24-33).

5.4 Revelation and the Church

An important link that Newbigin made in his writing was between revelation and the church,⁷⁶⁸ and this has particular bearing for his understanding of the church in a pluralist society. There are several key points to Newbigin's understanding of God's revelation in relation to the church.

Firstly, for Newbigin God's revelation has happened in and through the particular historical events of the life and earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, as anticipated in the Old Testament, and as recorded in the New. Above all, it is at the cross that the "universal and unbounded grace of God" is disclosed to the world, "at one place in the world and at one point in history."⁷⁶⁹ Newbigin refers to this understanding of revelation as the "scandal of particularity," and acknowledges this sense of scandal is greatest in India with "its incomparably rich and venerable history of religious experience and exploration."⁷⁷⁰ For Newbigin the fact that the "concrete historic figure of Jesus Christ" is at the "centre of the Christian faith" has historically steered the church away from attributing significance to the idea of God's revelatory presence in diverse sites, as he states:

[Christianity has] been in contact with, and influenced by pantheistic religion and by the kind of mysticism which flourishes in a pantheistic environment. Nevertheless the basic structure of the Christian Scriptures, creeds and liturgies is such as to make it impossible for this kind of mysticism ever to have central place. Nothing can displace the concrete historic figure of Jesus Christ from the centre of the Christian religion.⁷⁷¹

God's revelation is an event that happened at a particular time and place in the life of Jesus Christ, as distinct from an ongoing happening communicated through personal experience.

Secondly, for Newbigin, the revelation in the historic Christ is first entrusted to the apostles and is then transmitted to the world by a thread of human contact that extends back to the apostolic witness. In other words, revelation has the character of

⁷⁶⁸ While Krishna Kandiah's statement that Newbigin's "entire theological project finds its gathering point in his doctrine of revelation" is debatable, given the place of the kingdom of God in Newbigin's thought, it does at least rightly point to the significance of revelation in his work, a point that is sometimes overlooked ("Towards a Theology of Evangelism for Late Modern Cultures – a critical dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin's doctrine of revelation" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2005), 30).

⁷⁶⁹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86.

⁷⁷⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 72.

⁷⁷¹ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 68.

continuity and transmission from person to person that is “proper” to the church. God’s revelation in the particular events of Christ’s life is mediated to the world through the witness and testimony of the church, the community that God has chosen for this purpose. The reception of God’s revelation happens through receiving the messenger that God sends, and becoming a part of the community, in continuity with the whole, and not through any direct and unmediated means.⁷⁷²

Thirdly, for Newbigin, the epistemological rationale for this understanding of the relationship between the church and revelation, is that knowing is only possible in the context of a community. His sense of the importance of understanding this in a pluralist society is indicated in the fact that he devotes much of the first six chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* to the issue of epistemology. While his focus on the Western context determines his discussion, such as the extended discussion of the nature of reason, there are points of relevance to our present discussion. With references to the work of Michael Polanyi, Newbigin points to how the knowing of the scientist happens through his participation in a community of people who have a shared body of knowledge and skills that have been acquired over generations.⁷⁷³ Of importance to our discussion here is that the scientist’s own personal knowing happens through first receiving from the other: “The scientist, from the pupil just beginning to study physics, to the pioneer on the frontiers of research, accepts the authority of the tradition not to replace personal grasp of the truth but as the necessary precondition for gaining this grasp.”⁷⁷⁴ Newbigin applies this to the matter of God’s revelation in Christ by pointing to the “role of an authoritative tradition in Christian believing.” The parallel between the scientist’s knowing and the individual’s knowledge of Christ is that the individual’s personal knowledge of Christ develops through what he describes as indwelling “the tradition.”⁷⁷⁵ This tradition is a term for the whole community of the church whose focus is on interpreting the Scripture and in living in accordance with its story.⁷⁷⁶ This means that in order to come to a personal knowledge of Christ it is necessary to engage with the Scripture and with the life and thought of others within the community who have been striving to understand and apply this to life. With this explanation of how we know Christ, Newbigin is

⁷⁷² L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 83ff.

⁷⁷³ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 46.

⁷⁷⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 48.

⁷⁷⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 49.

⁷⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53.

showing one dimension of what it means for continuity and succession to be a part of the church's nature.

Newbigin's sense of the relationship between revelation and the church, as outlined here, is one that is at odds with the approach taken by some Indian theologians and thinkers. It can be argued that they have separated God's revelation and the church leading to quite different outcomes and understanding of Christ as shall now be considered in relation to the identification of Jesus as the Son of God.

5.4.1 The Apostolic Witness and Preaching Christ in India

As considered above, Newbigin understood revelation as an event that occurred in the historic Christ, that this revelation was mediated through the apostolic witness, recorded in the Scripture, and then interpreted and transmitted by the church through the centuries. In this way the church stands in the apostolic succession as a witness of Jesus Christ to the world. Care is therefore to be taken in preaching Christ precisely in the terms in which He is made known in the Bible. What form did this take in Newbigin's own preaching in India?

As Newbigin engaged with the thought world of India in his preaching he found it important to identify Jesus as the Son of God. Preaching in the villages of Tamil Nadu where Christ was barely known, he was compelled to begin by identifying Christ as the Son: "His revelation of God is the revelation of "an only begotten from the Father," and you cannot preach Him without speaking of the Father and the Son."⁷⁷⁷ Newbigin is clearly working with the tradition of Scripture in order to come to this conclusion. He found this starting point in the Gospel of Mark, which begins by identifying Jesus as the Son of God, and "implicit" to Mark though "not yet fully thought out," is the triune being of God.⁷⁷⁸

The importance to Newbigin, of a precise identification of Christ as 'Son of God' is indicated by his critique of the Ceylon statement of faith.⁷⁷⁹ Newbigin criticized the lack of reference to faith in the triune God through the identification of Jesus by the sole title of "redeemer of the world," which he explains does not sufficiently

⁷⁷⁷ L. Newbigin, 'Mission of the Triune God,' 1962, Section 4.

⁷⁷⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 25. Newbigin acknowledged Christ's lack of reference to himself as 'Son of God' in the synoptic gospels but points to the way that this identity is implicit to Christ's actions and teaching in those Gospels which indicate that Christ "is the judge and the Lord of all" (L. Newbigin, *Christ our Eternal Contemporary*, 29).

⁷⁷⁹ A proposed statement of faith for a unifying movement of churches in Sri Lanka, as Ceylon is now known.

distinguish Christ from other religious figures.⁷⁸⁰ To remedy the latter he references the CSI statement of faith which identifies Jesus as “the incarnate Son of God and Redeemer of the world,” and underlines the exclusive nature of salvation through Christ, by adding the word “alone” to the statement, “by whom we are saved by grace.”

Does this strong sense of need to stand firmly in the apostolic witness lead to a message that is foreign and alien, given that the apostolic witness is rooted in Jewish faith, life and practice? Firstly, Newbigin recognizes the possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication that could arise in India from speaking of Jesus as ‘Son of God’: ‘Son of God’ would not be interpreted in terms of deity but, “as a man who had been brought into an exceptionally or even uniquely close relationship with the One – in Indian terms, a *jeevanmukti*.”⁷⁸¹ Yet, secondly, Newbigin pointed to the early church’s positive impact on the surrounding culture through its preaching of Christ in trinitarian terms. It had led, he suggested, to the healing of dichotomies in the Greco-Roman thought world between the real and ideal, historical and a-historical, absolute being and man: “. . . the dichotomy between the sensible and the intelligible worlds is healed, for God himself has actually been made flesh.”⁷⁸² A trinitarian christology brought transformation and healing to the culture. Thirdly, Newbigin briefly suggested that a trinitarian Christology actually facilitated contextual preaching: the gospel could be made known “*in terms of Graeco-Roman culture* without thereby compromising its central affirmation” [emphasis mine].⁷⁸³

Newbigin’s position here is predated by Keshub Chunder Sen who argued that the proclamation of Christ’s identity in terms of the Trinity was contextually appropriate for India.⁷⁸⁴ Sen believed that the interpretation of Christ as the Son of God was particularly critical both in terms of a correct understanding of Christ and

⁷⁸⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, xix.

⁷⁸¹ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 25.

⁷⁸² L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 26.

⁷⁸³ L. Newbigin, ‘Mission of the Triune God,’ 1962, Section 4.

⁷⁸⁴ K. C. Sen (1838-1884) was a member of the Brahma Samaj under the leadership of Debendranath Tagore. The Brahma Samaj under Tagore can be seen as a Hindu revivalist movement that repudiated idolatry and called for a return to the pure worship of Brahman alone. A split with Tagore led Sen to form his own Brahma Samaj in 1866. At various times, such as 1866 in a lecture entitled, ‘Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia,’ he expressed a sense of Christ’s moral and spiritual superiority to others, without recognizing the divinity of Christ. Sen had a wide influence during his lifetime and, following his death, on some Christian theologians like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907). An example of this is Upadhyay following Sen’s use of the Sanskrit term *sat-chit-ananda* (a term used to describe Brahman by those who have experienced enlightenment) to speak of the Trinity (Sen, ‘That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity’ (1882) in *Keshub Chunder Sen’s Lectures in India* (London: Cassel and Company Ltd., 1904), 17.

also in terms of understanding what Christ has accomplished. He believed that an emphasis on Christ as the Son of God incarnate avoided confusion in a Hindu religious context among a people very familiar with the concept of incarnation. Christ, as the Son incarnate, and not the Father incarnate distinguished His incarnation from the incarnations of Vishnu, one of the three supreme gods of Hinduism. In this sense he insists that Christ is “not a new avatar.” He emphasizes the discontinuity with the long line of avatars in Hindu thought. But this emphasis on Christ as the Son of God was vital not only to avoid confusion, but because Sen believed that becoming a son of God was a key part of what Christ has brought to us:

In the Christ of the Gospel we have true Sonship, an example and a blessing unto the world. . . . Only the Son can show what the son ought to be. In vain do I go to the Vedas or to Judaism to learn sonship. That I learn at the feet of my sweet Christ, my Father’s beloved Son. I go to my God to learn all about the Godhead. I go to my Christ to learn what a son ought to be. God teaches me Divinity. Christ teaches me humanity.⁷⁸⁵

Sen’s position is of some interest because he tried to hold onto the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Christ but separated this revelation from the historic life of Christ and the witness and Scriptures of the visible church. This led to his formation of a pluralist religious fellowship.

5.4.2 Keshub Chunder Sen’s Sense of Christ’s Partial Revelation in Religions

Keshub Chunder Sen took the Logos doctrine as the theological basis for Christ’s partial revelation in all religions, as he states:

Jesus welcomes all the chiefs of all sects, for they dwelt in him, the eternal Logos, and with him they again fraternize. Verily in Socrates was Christ, as the early Fathers held; and in Confucius too was Christ, and in Buddha, and in Nanak and in Chaitanya, and in Paul, and in Luther was he. In him they are all reconciled, and their broken lights unite to form the perfect Logos, the Word of God.⁷⁸⁶

There are several aspects to this understanding of revelation. Firstly, for Sen, a real, if incomplete and “broken” revelation of Christ has occurred within many religions and philosophical systems, from Greece to China: Sen rejects the idea of God’s revelation in Christ being limited to one particular time and place, but suggests that this revelation has occurred in many places and times. From 1879, in a series of

⁷⁸⁵ K. C. Sen, ‘That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity,’ 25.

⁷⁸⁶ K. C. Sen, ‘Asia’s Message to Europe,’ in *Lectures in India*, 96.

lectures,⁷⁸⁷ Sen points to what he saw as a more expansive Christology, than that being proclaimed by the missionaries, with Christ connected to the histories of all peoples, as he stated: “the true Christ whom I can see everywhere, in all lands and in all times, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in America, in ancient and modern times.”⁷⁸⁸ He describes this Christ as the “all inclusive, the all comprehending Christ,”⁷⁸⁹ to be distinguished from the “little Christ of little Christian sects.” Newbigin’s assertion of the complete revelation of Christ occurring only in the events of his life and then mediated to the world through the church would certainly be interpreted by Sen as the “little Christ of little Christian sects.” As implied in the quotation above and the reference to Paul, Sen suggests that there is no one privileged place of revelation but this revelation has been spread across many sites. It is as though the light of Christ’s revelation has been refracted and the different parts of the spectrum shone into different religions. This, for Sen is the basis of a form of the fulfillment model in his understanding of the relationship of the person of Christ to the religion.⁷⁹⁰

Sen’s understanding of the revelation of Christ being located in diverse sites was made particularly clear during the last decade of his life when he was heavily influenced by Ramakrishna.⁷⁹¹ Sen brought his christology, to what could perhaps be seen as its logical conclusion, in his initiation of a new movement that he called ‘The Church of the New Dispensation.’⁷⁹² A new symbol was unveiled that incorporated the cross, the Hindu trident, and the Muslim crescent, and the Scriptures of

⁷⁸⁷ ‘India Asks Who is Christ?’ (1879); ‘God Vision in the Nineteenth Century’ (1880); ‘That Marvellous Mystery - The Trinity’ (1881); ‘Asia’s Message to Europe’ (1883).

⁷⁸⁸ K. C. Sen, ‘That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity,’ 32.

⁷⁸⁹ K. C. Sen, ‘That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity’, 31.

⁷⁹⁰ K. C. Sen, ‘Asia’s Message to Europe,’ 103. Sen saw, for example, the coming together in Christ of Advaita Vedanta and the *bhakti* tradition of Vaishnavism, which emphasizes devotion to a personal god, as he states: “The future of India’s regeneration must lie through Christ, for he combines in his teachings the spirit of the Rishi which lay in communion, and the spirit of Chaitanya, which lay in the service, loving and devout of the Lord” (K. C. Sen, in *Indian Mirror* (Easter Week, 1879) quoted in M. C. Parekh, *Brahmarshi Keshub Chunder Sen* (Rajkot: Oriental Christ House, 1926), 92). He thus interprets in Christ a bringing together of oneness with God and a conscious love of God, the ideals of both the philosophical tradition of Advaita and the devotional tradition of Bhaktism. Sen’s interpretation of Christ was sometimes criticized. In commenting on the lecture, ‘India Asks, Who is Christ?’, Parekh recognizes it as “great,” but makes several criticisms of it: of Sen’s attempt to present a Christ in terms of relevance only to the Hindu; of a failure to adequately demonstrate the deity of Christ, presenting an image of Christ as “little more than an inspired prophet or rather philosopher;” and that Sen fell between both the Christian and the Hindu community in that for the former he went too far towards mysticism, whereas for the latter this “high view of Christ was . . . itself unwelcome to Hindus” (M. Parekh, *Brahmarishi Keshub Chunder Sen*, 106. . . . 109).

⁷⁹¹ J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), 57.

⁷⁹² This was a new group formed under Sen’s leadership after a further split in the Brahma Samaj in the late 1870’s due to Sen’s marrying his under age daughter to a prince from Bihar, in a ceremony conducted using idolatrous rites.

Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism were laid out together on a table.⁷⁹³

Within this movement all of the religions would have their place. While Sen emphasized the figure of Jesus Christ, his understanding of God's revelation in Christ taking place in a diverse range of places led to a form of religious fellowship quite distinct from the church.

Sen brings into very clear relief the interconnection of ecclesiology and the doctrine of revelation. If God's revelation is not uniquely located in the historic life of Jesus Christ, then the concept of the church is to be broadened to include all religious fellowships. The issue here is, arguably, not one of Christology, in that Sen had what we might describe as a high Christology. Rather, it was his reluctance to identify the historic life of Christ as the unique event of revelation that ultimately led him to a very distinct form of religious fellowship.

Several more recent Indian theologians have taken Sen's understanding of revelation a step further, to see the Advaita Vedanta of Hinduism as providing an appropriate framework from within which to understand Christ. In this interpretation Christ's identity in terms of the Trinity is replaced by understanding his identity in relation to Brahman.

5.4.3 Interpreting Christ in Relation to Brahman

Advaita Vedanta is the most prominent school of Vedanta.⁷⁹⁴ Badarayana's systematization of the Vedanta in the *Brahma Sutras*, possibly around the time of Christ, is the authoritative text for this school of philosophy. The most revered teacher of this system is the south Indian Sankara (788 – 820 A.D.). One of the points of Sankara's interpretation that is relevant to our present discussion is that the highest god, "the highest Self," is without any kind of form or delimitation, but "manifests himself" in the world in various identifiable forms:

. . . there is only one highest Lord ever unchanging, whose substance is cognition, and who, by means of Nescience, manifests himself in various ways, just as a thaumaturg appears in different shapes by means of his magical power. Besides that Lord there is no other substance of cognition. . .

⁷⁹³ J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, 56.

⁷⁹⁴ Vedanta is one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy based on the Upanisads, and arguably the most influential school of philosophy in India's recent religious history.

. the highest Self which is eternally pure, intelligent and free, which is never changing, one only, not in contact with anything, devoid of form. . . .⁷⁹⁵

A tradition of identifying Christ in relation to Brahman rather than the Trinity stretches back at least as far as the Hindu spiritual leader Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), a very influential figure who shaped the life and thought of Vivekananda, among others.⁷⁹⁶ According to Ramakrishna, Brahman may assume multiple forms in his relationship to the world, forms which can include figures like Christ or Buddha among many others:⁷⁹⁷

The Sat-chit-ananda (the Absolute Existence-Intelligence-Bliss) likewise has many forms. . . .

. . . . It is true that He [God] manifests Himself in infinite forms to fulfil the desires of devotees. It is also true that He is formless Indivisible Existence-Intelligence-Bliss Absolute. The Vedas have described Him to be both personal, with form and attributes, and impersonal, beyond all form and attributes.⁷⁹⁸

Ramakrishna explains this in terms of the picture of the formation of ice in the ocean. Just as a block of ice may form in the ocean so too through “intense devotion” the devotee may cause “Divinity” to “appear in different forms.”⁷⁹⁹ Developing the analogy further, of the “sun of wisdom” causing the ice to melt Ramakrishna seems to suggest that the forms are relative and penultimate. But he qualifies his position by saying that for a “certain class of Bhaktas He is eternally personal and always with form. There are places where ice never melts, it becomes crystallized.” Despite this qualification there is a sense here of the superiority of the *nirguna* Brahman, the formless Brahman, represented by the ocean.⁸⁰⁰ Ramakrishna makes other statements

⁷⁹⁵ Sankara, *The Vedanta Sutras With Commentary*, trans. George Thibaut, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 34 (1890), 190, <http://www.sacred-texts.com>. Sankara’s text was found through a reference in P.

D. Devanandan, *The Concept of Maya* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), 98.

⁷⁹⁶ Ramakrishna (1836-1886), a Bengali, came to prominence as a religious teacher and spiritual guide in India and the West through figures like Max Mueller. His approach to religion was eclectic and at different times in his life he practiced a diverse range of the Hindu ways to God realization, including the Tantra, Bhakti and Advaita Vedanta traditions.

⁷⁹⁷ Swami Abhedananda, ed., *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, (New York: The Vedanta Society, 1907), 26. This book is an edited volume of notes made by, and translated from Bengali, by a disciple of Ramakrishna, Babu Mahendra Nath, a professor of English literature in Calcutta University (p.33). According to Abhedananda, Nath “recorded verbatim” the words of Ramakrishna (p. vii).

⁷⁹⁸ Swami Abhedananda, ed., *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, 30. . . . 31.

⁷⁹⁹ Swami Abhedananda, ed., *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, 31.

⁸⁰⁰ Advaita Vedanta distinguishes *nirguna* Brahman, Brahman without any qualities or attributes and *saguna* Brahman, Brahman with qualities and attributes. Nirguna Brahman is beyond conceptualization and language.

which seem to also suggest the ultimate reality of the formless Brahman, and the provisional nature of all forms:

In Vedanta it is said, the absolute Existence-Intelligence-Bliss pervades the universe and manifests itself through all forms. What harm is done by worshipping the Absolute through images and symbols? We see little girls with their dolls. How long do they play with them? So long as they are not married. After marriage they put away those dolls. Similarly, one needs images and symbols so long as God is not realized in His true form. It is God Himself who has provided these various forms of worship.⁸⁰¹

Whether Ramakrishna did consistently see the “true form” of God as nirguna may be questioned,⁸⁰² but this is the approach that was taken by his most notable disciple, Swami Vivekananda.⁸⁰³ For Vivekananda, a figure like Christ was to be interpreted simply as a one form, behind which lay the real reality, as he states of Christ’s life: “. . . nor does it even matter how much of that life is true. But there is something behind it, something we want to imitate.”⁸⁰⁴ This is an expression of the rationale of Advaita Vedanta: Christ is to be seen as a “shape” or form of Brahman, and the distinct personhood of Christ is of no particular importance. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan⁸⁰⁵ is another influential and prominent figure who adopted this same approach. For Radhakrishnan the relationship between all religious forms and concepts are provisional and relative to nirguna Brahman, as he states: “In the supreme vision which Arjuna has [in the *Bhagavadgita*], he sees the different deities within the boundless form of the Supreme.”⁸⁰⁶ Accordingly, for Radhakrishnan, the idea of Jesus Christ as the unique Son of God can be attributed to Christianity inheriting underdeveloped perceptions of God as the ‘jealous God’ of the Old Testament: “Christian religion inherited the Semitic creed of the ‘jealous God’ in the view of

⁸⁰¹ Swami Abhedananda, ed., *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, 64.

⁸⁰² M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 113.

⁸⁰³ Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was an influential figure in India and the West. In India he gave voice to a cogent reassertion of the place of the Hindu philosophical tradition in the modern world, a message that he also brought to the West, most notably at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in September 1893. In India he helped give a renewed confidence in the strength of their religious heritage, and in the West contributed to question marks over the idea of Christianity as the only way.

⁸⁰⁴ Swami Vivekananda, in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. IV (Almora: 1931), 142, quoted in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 121.

⁸⁰⁵ S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was one of India’s leading philosophers of the twentieth century, particularly known for his reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta in relation to a modern understanding of the world with its sense of the significance of history, society and the individual. He served as President of India from 1962-1967.

⁸⁰⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (London: 1939), 310 quoted in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 151.

Christ as the only 'begotten Son of God,' and so could not brook any rival near the throne."⁸⁰⁷ Through these key interpreters of Advaita Vedanta we can see a shared view of Christ as a manifestation of Brahman.

An interpretation of Christ in relation to Brahman is suggested by some thinkers within the Indian church, most notably Dr. K. P. Aleaz, Professor of Religions in Bishops College, Kolkatta.

5.4.3.1 Aleaz's Interpretation of Jesus from the Perspective of Advaita Vedanta

Aleaz suggests that from the perspective of Advaita Jesus should be understood not as a distinct person, the Son of God, but as a manifestation and expression of Brahman within the limitations of the human. His identification of Jesus as the "extrinsic denominator" (*upadhi*), the "reflection" (*abhasa*), the "delimitation" (*ghatakasa*), the "name and form" (*namarupa*) and "effect" (*karya*) of Brahman indicate different aspects of Jesus as the manifestation of Brahman.⁸⁰⁸ Jesus as the "extrinsic denominator" of Brahman, refers to Jesus as Brahman delimited to body, intellect, mind and sense.⁸⁰⁹ Jesus is Brahman delimited to the human body: "The difference in Self as Jesus is a creation of the extrinsic denominators (*upadhinimitta evayamatabhedah*) in His/Her own essence the Self is one Self alone (*svatastvaikatmyameva*)."⁸¹⁰ The fact that there is "one Self alone" clearly implies that the language of personhood is inadequate, and even misleading to interpret the relation between Brahman and Jesus. The relation between Jesus and Brahman is explained by Aleaz using Sankara's analogy of pot space and cosmic space. A pot or jar is the "extrinsic denominator" of cosmic space, delimiting it and leading to its identification as pot space, yet when free of the jar pot space can once again be seen as cosmic space. Similarly Jesus is the identification of Brahman delimited to the human: "As the space within pots etc., when perceived as free from the limitations of the pots etc., are but the cosmic space; similarly Jesus is not logically different from the Supreme Self."⁸¹¹ As this analogy of pot space and cosmic space suggest sonship is not a suitable way to identify the relationship between Jesus and Brahman, in that it

⁸⁰⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, 324 in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 160.

⁸⁰⁸ K. P. Aleaz, 'An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,' *Indian Journal of Theology*, 38.2 (1996), 34ff.

⁸⁰⁹ K. P. Aleaz, 'An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,' 34.

⁸¹⁰ K. P. Aleaz, 'An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,' 35.

⁸¹¹ K. P. Aleaz, 'An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,' 36.

“cannot express the depth of the relation.”⁸¹² Aleaz suggests that a more appropriate form of identification is of Jesus as *namarupa*, the name and form of Brahman.

For Aleaz, Jesus, when seen from the perspective of Sankara’s teaching, is a figure of considerable standing within humanity, “the representative of the whole humanity,” in the sense that Jesus knew his identity in Brahman and the unreality of distinct personhood or being: “The person of Jesus proclaims that if we identify any aspect of his person as Brahman, we are in ignorance; but if we identify in *every aspect of his person Brahman and Brahman alone*, we have come to the experience of *who he truly is*” [emphasis mine].⁸¹³ For Aleaz the traditional teaching of the church concerning the Trinity and the three distinct persons of Father, Son and Spirit is an inadequate interpretation of Jesus.

The key point of difference between thinkers like Aleaz and Newbigin that ultimately leads them to a different position concerning the person of Christ is their understanding of the relationship of revelation and the church. For a thinker like Aleaz, Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta can legitimately be considered the framework for interpreting and understanding Christ because this is the “culmination of God’s self-disclosure to Indians.”⁸¹⁴ Stanley Samartha is another prominent figure who makes the same point.⁸¹⁵ He believes that the title ‘Son of God’ carries no essential meaning, but is simply one way of configuring the divine that reflects cultural conditioning: the Hindu term of *sat-chit-ananda* for Brahman and the Trinitarian Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are both on a par as “two responses to the same Mystery in two cultural settings” and neither are exclusively revelatory of the divine being.⁸¹⁶

When Aleaz (and Samartha’s) position is considered from an ecclesiological perspective one key problem becomes apparent, namely that it leads to fragmentation and division of the church. There are separate communities of knowing: there is no one tradition that all members of the community assent to and through which they come to their own personal knowledge of Christ. Aleaz is suggesting that the church in India can come to a knowledge of Christ, experience “who he truly is” by working

⁸¹² K. P. Aleaz, ‘An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,’ 37.

⁸¹³ K. P. Aleaz, ‘An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,’ 40.

⁸¹⁴ K. P. Aleaz, ‘An Indian Jesus from Advaita Vedanta,’ 29.

⁸¹⁵ Stanley Samartha (1920-2001) was a well known theological educator and academic in the Protestant church community in India. A noted advocate of inter-religious dialogue, he served for nearly ten years, from 1971, as Director of the World Council of Church’s Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies.

⁸¹⁶ Stanley Samartha, ‘Cross and Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture,’ in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 107.

from the Advaita philosophical tradition. This knowledge of Christ requires becoming immersed in that particular philosophical tradition and way of life, as distinct from the Scripture and the church's interpretation of Scripture over the centuries. Where does this lead? Even within India there are multiple traditions and forms of religious practice, and if all of these can be legitimately indwelt to know Christ then, following Newbigin's reasoning, we have multiple communities. There is also the problem of communication. There have been a number of suggestions of suitable ways of identifying Christ in India using titles from within the Hindu tradition, as for example: *Om*, *Prajapati*, *Shakti*, *Jivanmukti*.⁸¹⁷ But, if one of these terms was used it would be incomprehensible to the rest of the church community. Is it possible to speak of this as the church? To return to Newbigin's discussion of knowing in the scientific community, it is like there being separate scientific communities, working with different bodies of knowledge, and therefore in separation from each other. This would undoubtedly weaken the scientific enterprise worldwide. From this perspective it might be possible to appreciate Newbigin's point that the church only ever acted with transformative power where it had actively laboured to reform its own social and religious practices solely in the light of Christ, and not in accommodation to its context.⁸¹⁸

5.4.3.2 Abhishiktananda and Interpreting the Advaitic Experience⁸¹⁹

In his earlier writing Abhishiktananda tended to give an interpretation of the advaitic experience that is rooted in the New Testament Scriptures, and in his later writing from a position of regarding the advaitic experience as a separate site of revelation.

Abhishiktananda believed in a direct contact with Christ in the experience of the practitioners of Advaita Vedanta, those who had withdrawn from society to enter into

⁸¹⁷ B. Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, 266. *Om* represents the underlying unity of all things; *Prajapati* is a name for the creator; *Shakti* is the divine energy of the universe; *Jivanmukti* is one who has obtained liberation or salvation.

⁸¹⁸ Newbigin refers at this point to Glover's *Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* and Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* as giving evidence that those many Christian movements that tried to "combine allegiance to Christ with maintenance of the general framework of Graeco-Roman religious thought and life" were largely bereft of any transformative power ('Letter to M. M. Thomas (17 November 1971)' in *Some Theological Dialogues*, 123).

⁸¹⁹ Abhishiktananda (1910-1973) was a French Benedictine monk who left France for India at the age of 38 in 1948 and remained in India till his death in 1973. His birth name is Henri Le Saux. The advaitic experience means the realization of the individual self as immersed in the Self, Brahman. According to Advaita this enlightenment can only come as the end result of a long process of meditation and withdrawal.

a life of solitude, self denial and meditation, as he states: “Deep in his heart, the Indian seer heard with rapture the same ‘I AM’ that Moses heard on Mount Horeb.”⁸²⁰ Through knowledge of the self one comes simultaneously into contact with the ultimate: “The Real at the heart of the universe is reflected in the infinite depths of the soul.”⁸²¹ The inner self is the point of direct connection with God:

. . . it is just there [at “the deepest centre of his being”] that the essential meeting with God is supremely realized, in view of which he has been called to exist. . . . *the experience of the self*, as India calls it, is the greatest of human acts, and without it no human development can be regarded as complete.⁸²²

In two works published in the latter half of the 1960’s, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*⁸²³ and *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, Abhishiktananda identifies the Trinity as the source of this advaitic experience. He believed that the advaitic experience of oneness, with what was believed to be Brahman by the Hindu sage, was in fact a partial realization of the oneness of relationship between the Father and Son. In other words, the ontological foundation for *ekatvam* is the Father-Son relationship.⁸²⁴ The true advaitic experience is highly inter-personal, rooted in the Son’s experience of the Father, as he explains: “the ultimate experience of God must be an experience of the mystery of the eternal generation of the Son in the depths of the Godhead, and of the inexpressible “non-duality” of the Father and Son.”⁸²⁵ A knowledge of Christ leads to a more profound realization of union. Writing of the *jnani*⁸²⁶ who hears and recognizes Jesus, he writes that:

⁸²⁰ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 94. Abhishiktananda describes the search for identity that has been carried out within the tradition of the Upanishads as “the fundamental question: Who am I” (Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, 56).

⁸²¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 1994), 49.

⁸²² Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, 73.

⁸²³ The original work in French was published in 1965, and the English translation in 1974.

⁸²⁴ *Ekatvam* is the Sanskrit word used to refer to the non duality of reality, the fundamental unity of all things in the divine. The appeal of the Trinity to Hindu thought is also indicated by Keshub Chunder Sen’s emphasis on the Father-Son relationship in his later lectures.

⁸²⁵ Abhishiktananda, *The Church in India* (CLS, 1969), p.18, quoted in Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 289. As Friessen explains in ‘Abhishiktananda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,’ in the Trinity Abhishiktananda found a foundation for non duality without collapsing into monism, or in other words maintaining a real unity of identity with the ultimate while retaining distinction of consciousness of some degree.

⁸²⁶ One who has attained realization of unity with Brahman.

His experience of the Father and of the *ekatvam* of the Spirit will be contained in the “Thou” of the Son – the “Thou” which the Son hears and with which he responds to the Father. He will be entirely “lost” in the Son – more completely than he ever was within his Vedantic immersion in being – and yet he will be totally and inalienably himself in his essential truth, because now he has found himself at the very heart of God.⁸²⁷

Through participation in Christ’s own union with the Father, the Hindu sage is enabled to realize a higher and more profound realization of union with God. As seen here, during this period in his writing Abhishiktananda clearly rooted the advaitic experience in Christ, who is seen as its origin and one who perfects this experience in his own person and mediates it to the world. Abhishiktananda distinguishes the experience of Christ of the Father as entirely unique and distinct from the *advaita* of the Vedanta.⁸²⁸ Christ alone reveals that “Being is not a bare monad, but communion” and we are brought into his experience: “The divine eyes of him whose nature is eternally to gaze upon the Father were required if man also was to become able to recognize the face of the Father in the dazzling light of the Self”⁸²⁹ A part of the value of Abhishiktananda’s writing is that he tries to deal with a neglected area of theology, namely our participation in the Father-Son relationship through Christ.

5.4.3.2.1 Abhishiktananda’s Movement Away from the Revelation in Christ

While Abhishiktananda may, at times, have worked with God’s revelation in Christ in the church he was not always comfortable with this and moved away from it, particularly towards the end of his life. He sometimes placed little emphasis on a mediated revelation through the church community, and instead pointed to the direct and unmediated operation of the Spirit: “. . . the mission of the Spirit does not involve communication at the level of sensation or thought, but aims at opening up the innermost centre of the heart.”⁸³⁰ Abhishiktananda’s sense of the power of this inner illumination through the Spirit may have contributed to a persistent strain in his thought of attributing secondary significance to God’s revelation in the historic Christ.

⁸²⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, 103.

⁸²⁸ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 81. . . 82.

⁸²⁹ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 85.

⁸³⁰ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 99.

This can be seen in a letter he wrote in 1954 six years after his arrival in India in which he disparages Monchanin's 'failure' to leave behind the conceptual.⁸³¹

But I think he is too 'Greek' to go to the depths. India presses relentlessly beyond concepts, beyond the '*manas*' [mind]; how will the Greek, even if a follower of Plotinus, ever make the sacrifice of his '*nous*' [mind]? And yet, neither the Self, nor therefore India, will ever be reached through concepts.⁸³²

Monchanin's attitude to the direction of Abhishiktananda's thought, written more than a year later, is instructive:

I react in a contrary direction; never have I felt myself intellectually more *Christian* and also, I must say, more *Greek*. I experience a growing horror at the forms of muddled thinking in this 'beyond thought' which most often proves to be only a 'falling short of thought, in which everything gets drowned.'⁸³³

This movement of supposed penetration 'beyond thought,' also involved the interpretation and revelation of God borne witness to by the apostles and recorded in Scripture as Beltramini indicates: "He understood that to reach the core of this solitude, he had to surrender the self absolutely to non-duality. He must let go of all expectations. He must disengage from work and go beyond faith, beyond human formulations, beyond doctrines to reach the Absolute, the Alone."⁸³⁴ The process of disengagement with the "human formulations" and doctrines of the church appears to have been an erratic and inconsistent one for Abhishiktandanda. But by the end of his life Abhishiktananda had moved towards a clear sense of the supremacy of the advaitic experience to the point of understanding the language of Scripture and the formulations of the councils

⁸³¹ For an insightful description of the relationship between the advaitic experience and the conceptual see Friessen, 'Abhishiktananda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,' 248-86. Friessen points to Abhishiktananda's understanding of the advaitic experience as beyond the conceptual. While the advaitic experience was beyond all forms it led, for Abhishiktananda, to a re-engagement with the world. Through the advaitic experience we are able to act effectively and selflessly in the world where before our action was self-centered (Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, 63). Abhishiktananda argues that it is a corruption of Advaita in both India and the West to use it as an excuse for neglect of earthly reality, which he identifies as the sin of the Pharisee (Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, 63).

⁸³² James Stuart, ed., *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 72 quoted in John Friessen, 'Abhishiktananda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,' (D.Litt et Phil dissertation, University of South Africa, 2001), 62.

⁸³³ J. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 87 quoted in Friessen, 'Abhishiktananda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,' 61. The contrast here between Greek and Hindu thought should at least give some pause for thought in terms of the easy parallel that is made between the early church fathers use of Greek philosophical language as the precedent for the use of Hindu philosophical terms.

⁸³⁴ Enrico Beltramini, 'The Church of Abhishiktananda,' (M.Phil dissertation, University of Stirling, 2009), 131.

of the church as inferior to, and relative to, the primacy of this experience of the real. Even the Trinity is subordinated to the unnameable, unspeakable ultimate, as belonging to the provisional world of signs, as Friessen explains, stating that by 1973, Abhishiktananda, believed that an attempt to interpret the advaitic experience in terms of the Trinity “would be to remain enchanted in the world of myths and logos. It would be replacing *Theos* by *theo-logia*. He says that awakening to the mystery has nothing to do with the dogmas of the Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption”⁸³⁵ In other words Abhishiktananda, like his friend Panikkar, had come to see Christianity as simply one symbolic possibility among many.⁸³⁶ He had moved from the Christology of the church confessions, in which Christ is confessed fully human and fully God, to seeing Christ’s significance in the light of the “I AM” statement of John 8:58 as one among others who has realized identity with Brahman.⁸³⁷

The doctrine of revelation implicit to the writing of the later Abhishiktananda and Aleaz is one that sees revelation relocated away from the historic life of Christ as mediated by the apostolic witness through the church community. Revelation is seen as also occurring through the community of practitioners of advaitic philosophy and witnessed to through their conceptual system. The result is a Christology that is quite distinct from that advocated by Newbigin, who is working with a doctrine of revelation centered in the historic life of Christ. The result is also to bring into question the concept of the church in India.

5.5 Conclusion

The ecclesiology that Newbigin develops to hold together the freedom of God’s witness and also his sense of the necessity of participation in the church fellowship can be described as both an open ecclesiology and also a revelation ecclesiology. As considered in this chapter, the church is to remain open to the action of the Spirit of God in creating fellowships of faith within the wider society. However, this doesn’t lead to a divided ecclesiology but rather to an openness toward the other fellowship expressed in establishing mutual relationships. The aspect of revelation ecclesiology points to the necessity of participation in the church, and this includes the wider church communion, in order to come to a personal knowledge of Christ as a part of the community that is centered in the revelation in Him. It is important to note that

⁸³⁵ J. Friessen, ‘Abhishiktananda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,’ 364.

⁸³⁶ J. Friessen, ‘Abhishiktananda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,’ 364.

⁸³⁷ J. Friessen, ‘Abhishiktananda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience,’ 421.

for Newbigin the 'revelation' aspect of ecclesiology is closely connected to the 'open' aspect in that the church's knowledge of Christ is always provisional and is in a process of "growing up" into Him.

Chapter 6

Mission in a Post-Colonial Context

6.1 Introduction

An important issue that has been overlooked in studies of Newbigin is his critique of colonialism and his thought as, in part, a response to the post-colonial context of mission. Joerg Rieger, for example, points to how in *A Scandalous Prophet: the Way of Mission after Newbigin*, a collection of essays intended to critique and build on Newbigin's thought from a variety of different perspectives, there is virtually no consideration of "the colonial/neocolonial background of missions."⁸³⁸ Rieger's reference to the focus of the essays being "postmodernity and the end of modernity" tends to be a characteristic of the wider scholarship on Newbigin. This, however, is not surprising for two reasons. Firstly, Newbigin himself, in his writing after his return to the West, is frequently engaging with issues arising from the end of modernity and the enlightenment project, and this naturally attracts attention for missiological reflection in the West. Secondly, the focus of this scholarship also reflects the fact that virtually all of the published or available research on Newbigin has been done by Western thinkers from the standpoint of issues they consider to be important for the church in the West today, such as the place of the gospel in Western society. There is little sense of the ways in which the colonial era is having ongoing reverberations for the church in the West's own sense of itself, as Rieger states, "Now, however, that colonialism is officially over, there is a sense – whether the language of post-colonialism is used or not – that we do not have to worry about these problems anymore."⁸³⁹ Yet, as this chapter will consider the post-colonial context did, arguably, have an influence on Newbigin's ecclesiology.

⁸³⁸ Joerg Rieger, 'Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism,' *Mission Studies* 21.2 (2004), 207 n.10. Rieger uses these essays as an example of how constructive reflection on mission is done without any consideration of the colonial element within the missionary tradition.

⁸³⁹ J. Rieger, 'Theology and Mission,' 207. Rieger argues that Bosch's great work *Transforming Mission* "embodies the problem" by confining the discussion of mission and colonialism to missions in the Enlightenment period, and assuming that "the problems of modernity," of which colonialism is one, "appear to be fading away as we move into postmodernity."

6.1.1 Newbigin and the Post-Colonial Context

Newbigin explicitly referred to the need for reflection on the colonial past: he described his first extended discussion of mission theology, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958), as an attempt to disassociate the whole work of mission from “the stench of colonialism.”⁸⁴⁰

There is some significance to the fact that in the summer of 1958, as Newbigin began the transition from his work as Bishop of Madurai diocese to the position of General Secretary of the IMC (which he took up in July 1959), the most prominent missiological issue on his mind concerned the problem of colonialism. He described the statement of one person to him in 1958 that, “I don’t believe in giving responsibility to natives, do you?” as not an isolated incident, but revelatory of the “extent to which missions were still tied up with the psychology of colonialism.”⁸⁴¹ Newbigin pointed to the association of this colonial mentality with missions as one key factor in a reinterpretation of mission: disillusionment with missions and the acceptance of service to the church and world as the core content of mission:

It was not surprising that the very idea of missions was being rejected by younger people in both older and younger churches, that the word ‘missionary’ was being dropped in favour of ‘fraternal worker’, and that inter-church aid under the umbrella of the World Council was seen as a very acceptable replacement for the discredited enterprise of missions.⁸⁴²

The causes of this general disparagement of missions are perhaps several, but it is significant that Newbigin identifies the colonialism implicit to the missionary enterprise as a key reason. The rejection of missions is perhaps the most significant impact of the post-colonial context on mission, and it is one to which Newbigin attempted a response.

6.2 Multi-Dimensional Mission

Newbigin’s first extended treatment of a multi-dimensional mission was in *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, which he later recognized was a “challenge” to the “classical paradigm of missions” that focused on the church and

⁸⁴⁰ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 155.

⁸⁴¹ L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 155.

⁸⁴² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 155.

church growth.⁸⁴³ Newbigin's multi-dimensional view of mission is clear from his critique of the church growth movement. The evangelical movement had always emphasized church growth, and by the 1960's the church growth movement led by McGavran had strengthened this aspect of the evangelical approach. Newbigin alluded to the more conservative element among the evangelicals, if not the whole movement, as "pietists."⁸⁴⁴ McGavran would certainly qualify in Newbigin's eyes as one of the more "pietist." In contrast with John Stott, who did identify social action as a part of the church's mission, McGavran insisted that mission should be understood in terms of evangelism alone. At the International World Congress on Evangelism in Lausanne (1974) McGavran saw social action as "a desirable result and the consequence of evangelism, but it should not have been included as an intentional part of the mission of the church in the world."⁸⁴⁵ The position of someone like McGavran reflected, to Newbigin's mind, an individualistic and ahistorical understanding of both humanity and salvation, which he had persistently rejected. In his discussion of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, in Bangkok in 1973, Newbigin praised M.M. Thomas's opening statement for portraying the mission of the Church as "concerned with the salvation of human spirituality, not in an individualistic isolation, but in relation to all the realities of life in our time."⁸⁴⁶ Newbigin pointed to the importance of this statement in helping prevent a polarization of the conference into 'radicals' and 'pietists'.

Multi-dimensional mission involves a mission of church growth but also involves an intentional effort to think, reflect and act in a Christ-centered way in relation to the whole of human life, action and knowledge. It is thus a constructive and transformative engagement with the whole of life, "the public world of science, education, politics, economics, medicine, the media . . .",⁸⁴⁷ in order to bring it into obedience to Christ. This is, in effect, a labour for the conversion of "the mind," the

⁸⁴³ L. Newbigin, 'Reply to Konrad Raiser,' *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18 (2) (April, 1994), 51.

⁸⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, 'A Taste of Salvation at Bangkok,' *Indian Journal of Theology* 22 (1), 1973, 49. For a discussion of Newbigin in relation to developments in the WCC and the wider church in the decade from the mid-1960's see Goheen, 88-93. It could be argued that the difference between McGavran and Newbigin lies in the fact that McGavran left India in the early 1950's with a strong memory of the mass movements that had occurred in India and just prior to the post-independence changes and focus on development started to take hold in India. For these reasons it could be argued that he retained a model of mission that was outdated, as far as the Indian context was concerned.

⁸⁴⁵ Daniel Salinas, *Latin American Evangelical Theology in the 1970's* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), 126.

⁸⁴⁶ L. Newbigin, 'A Taste of Salvation at Bangkok,' 49.

⁸⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, 'Episcopacy and Authority,' 1990, *Churchman* 104 (4), 337.

rationality, logic, laws, ideas and concepts that govern these various parts of life. Newbigin, in the 1960's, criticized the failure of the church to have a broader understanding of mission that reflected God's purposes for the whole of human life:

It must be confessed that in some of our thinking about the task of missions we have taken a wholly unbiblical view of the world. We have spoken as though the affairs of secular history concerned us only when they either assisted or impeded the work of the Church. We have often made it appear as though we believed God to be interested only in religious questions. Thereby we have repelled from the Gospel the artist and the scientist and the lover of men, because we appeared to be insensitive to the beauty, the truth and the goodness that they found everywhere about them; because it appeared that we tried to assert the uniqueness of Christ by denying the splendour of God's work in creation and in the spirit of men. We have made it appear that we have regarded the man who gives himself to the service of God and men in politics or social service or research as having a less central part in God's purpose than the man who gives full-time service to the Church. In the operations of missions we have made it appear that we regard a doctor in a mission hospital as doing 'God's work' in a sense in which a doctor in a government hospital was not.⁸⁴⁸

For Newbigin there is no hierarchy of importance in the various dimensions of mission, but all are related and interconnected.

6.2.1 Contextually Appropriate in India

Arguably, Newbigin developed this interpretation of mission with the post-colonial Indian situation in mind. The traditional understanding of mission that had emphasized personal conversion and church growth had been an effective model throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, although it had been re-energized by the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 with its sense of increasing numbers of people being gathered into the church, developments around the world were leading to a breakdown of its efficacy.⁸⁴⁹ Although conspicuously wrong about the implications for church growth of the closure of China to the world, Newbigin points to the domination of governments opposed to the gospel, who did stem the growth of the church, and to the fact that, "Even where Christian expansion continues, it does not keep pace with the growth of population."⁸⁵⁰ This point was, and is, particularly valid to the church in India, particularly north India. Despite the

⁸⁴⁸ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 27.

⁸⁴⁹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 30.

⁸⁵⁰ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 31.

massive labour of missionaries up until the time of independence, the church is still a tiny minority, in some places barely holding on to the legacy that it inherited.

Furthermore, from the time of independence onwards, some of the ruling administrations in the various Indian states have been opposed to the church's growth.

Newbigin's model of a multi-dimensional mission is contextually appropriate as it corrects a tendency of the church in India to withdraw into being simply another private religious organization and lose its sense of public engagement. A restored sense of mission along the lines Newbigin is speaking of, would enable her to "break out" of this isolation and enter "into dialogue with men of other faiths who are wrestling with the problems of the modern world and who are seeking resources to meet its demands."⁸⁵¹ In other words, the church community could live their public lives with a sense of mission and purpose.

Newbigin believed that a changing world situation made this mission of the church a necessity. He saw an increasing gap between the political, social and economic realities of the world and a Christ centered framework of knowledge capable of meeting this reality in a constructive way.⁸⁵² The church's knowledge was simply out of date and not keeping up. While in the past this gap may not have existed, as the twentieth century progressed it was becoming more apparent, making a multi-dimensional mission a necessity.

6.2.2 The Spirit and Multi-Dimensional Mission

Newbigin's emphasis on mission as the Spirit's mission is essential for multi-dimensional mission in a postcolonial context where acting without political, economic and social power is a normative situation for the church and also, as in India, the church is less and less able to serve society through Christian institutions, but must work increasingly in institutions and systems completely separated from the church. Accordingly, Newbigin wrote in the early 1960's that, "The call of this hour is to understand in depth the relation of the mission of the Church to the structures of social existence, such as state, industry, economic life and culture, and to draw the necessary consequences for practical action."⁸⁵³ The focus comes onto the laity who will be the primary participants in this mission in their respective areas of service in

⁸⁵¹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 29.

⁸⁵² L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 31.

⁸⁵³ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 63.

the world. Central to this mission is an attempt to engage and struggle with the problems and issues that arise in their work from the confessional position of Christ's authority. This is a rather overwhelming task for several reasons: firstly, the complexity of the situations faced in regular employment; secondly, that in these situations people of all faiths are working together and the disciple of Christ will almost always be in a minority; and, thirdly, in terms of the power dynamics involved in institutions and systems of employment where power may frequently not be sympathetic to actions made in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Newbigin gives an example of both the situation and his understanding of mission. Speaking of the development of the school curriculum across India, Newbigin comments that it was being developed according to a Gandhian philosophy that accepts certain elements about human dignity and rights, but excludes the possibility of any religion making an exclusive claim.⁸⁵⁴ He suggests that rather than simply accept this state of affairs the church ought to engage with the educational system. There is an element of stepping out in faith in so doing, but with the assurance that it is in the world that we shall meet with Christ, and this is also one form of our witness to the world.⁸⁵⁵

Appropriately therefore, Newbigin rooted this mission in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of this mission is the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit will lead to "specific acts" that will challenge the autonomy and independence of these systems from Christ; the Spirit enables this kind of dynamic witness through participation and communion with the Spirit, "sharing in the life of the Spirit"; and through giving gifts appropriate to the calling.⁸⁵⁶ So the Spirit is the one who, firstly, gives the wisdom and understanding that leads to appropriate action in highly complex situations: this mission is above all the Spirit's mission and the church is called to faithfully follow the leading of the Spirit. Secondly, the Spirit is also the one who gives the necessary power and enabling for the church to fulfill her role. Thirdly, as considered in the previous chapter, the Spirit may also create new forms of the church. Newbigin applied his understanding of the freedom of the Spirit to this multi-dimensional mission in a post-colonial context. The Spirit will develop "new forms

⁸⁵⁴ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up,' 88.

⁸⁵⁵ L. Newbigin, 'The Gathering Up,' 89.

⁸⁵⁶ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 62-62.

of fellowship” in order to bring this mission to realisation.⁸⁵⁷ For Newbigin, clearly, this new mission field may require what has been described as “structural flexibility” from the church.⁸⁵⁸

6.2.3 Multi-Dimensional Mission and Institutions

Multi-dimensional mission require institutions, as Newbigin recognized when he stated that to fulfil this mission the “Church needs the University.”⁸⁵⁹ In India, where scarcity of resources is still an issue for many, mission in areas such as health and education will certainly require institutions, together with the finance and personnel they require. As will be indicated later in the chapter, Newbigin had a certain ambivalence about receiving foreign funding, but institutional development probably requires external funding.

While Newbigin did not outrightly reject institutional development there are others who have tended to perceive institutional development as belonging to an outdated colonial model of mission. As Dana Roberts, a well regarded mission thinker, explains, there is “an anti-institutional movement in missions” that is expressed in teaching that “the mission station approach is wrong, schools and hospitals are too top heavy and they are not helpful.” This anti-institutional bias has been a formative influence in mission thinking: “A lot of people in the evangelical world have been formed with that bias against institutions.”⁸⁶⁰ Yet, as Robert, points out there is clearly a demand within the church in the majority world for educational and medical institutions, which have an important role to play in “in depth” growth in the church. Within the Indian church there remains the need for training and educational institutions. Often the church community coming from the lower socio-economic groups is unable to take advantage of the existing opportunities due to an inadequate or incomplete secondary schooling, and also a lack of support and encouragement.

⁸⁵⁷ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 67. This point about the freedom of the Spirit to create new forms of the church was first articulated by Newbigin in *The Household of God*, a decade earlier. This should underline the centrality of the Spirit to Newbigin's ecclesiology, or at least question the suggestion that the Holy Spirit has no integral place to his ecclesiology (M. Goheen, 'As the Father has Sent Me,' 329).

⁸⁵⁸ M. Goheen, 'As the Father has Sent Me,' 430.

⁸⁵⁹ L. Newbigin, 'Episcopacy and Authority,' 338.

⁸⁶⁰ Dana Roberts, 'Missions and the Importance of Institution Building,' Address, (27 Sep. 2010), <http://www.youtube.com/user/FaithandLeadership#p/a/u/1/Bp7A-V0tayc> (accessed 21 Dec. 2011).

One of the reasons for a negative view of institutions within the current mission movement was the post-colonial experience in which the state took over many of the institutions established by the missionaries. A second reason is that these institutions did not contribute significantly to the growth of the church. Nevertheless, they did significantly contribute to the humanization of society around the world: the mission movement of the nineteenth century was a key movement, often overlooked today by secular histories and development theorists, in the distribution of education, science, and healthcare around the planet, a foundation upon which the modern state in the majority world has built upon.⁸⁶¹ A third reason is that, as in Newbigin's description of the Spirit's ministry, there is the sense of the purity and spirituality of a mission movement free from external personnel and finance. This is potentially undermining of institutional development. Institutions that genuinely benefit the economically weaker members of society and the church are often unable to be self-supporting and require external finance, together with the fundraising and administration associated with that.

6.3 Newbigin's Post-Colonial Ecclesiology

The counter-cultural aspect to Newbigin's ecclesiology, in a post-colonial context, is evident in his sense of the church as a unique community, whose existence has an authoritative basis in the will and calling of God. One of the ways in which Newbigin identified the church was as the *ecclesia tou theou*. For Newbigin the *ecclesia tou theou* means that the church is a gathering called by God in which all in society are summoned to participate.⁸⁶² One implication of this is that the church, even when it is a "tiny minority" has the "duty to address the governing authority of the civil community."⁸⁶³ The civil authority is to be "reminded" of its accountability to God.⁸⁶⁴ The church is thus to be seen as a community that exists on the basis of divine authority, and has a divinely given authority to address even the state.

Newbigin seems conscious that this discussion of power is uncomfortable in a post-colonial world, made conscious of the abuses of power. This is apparent in his recognition of the appropriateness of the emphasis on the church as servant that had come as a "necessary reaction" to excessive claims for the church's power and

⁸⁶¹ L. Newbigin, 'Mission in Christ's Way,' 8.

⁸⁶² L. Newbigin, 'The Basis and Forms of Unity,' 7.

⁸⁶³ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 129.

⁸⁶⁴ L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 129.

authority.⁸⁶⁵ Newbigin doesn't clarify when these excessive claims were made, or by who, but his characterization of this with the image of the church as "God's viceroy on earth, a triumphalist church" does seem to suggest the church of the colonial era. Yet, he states that as "necessary" as the servant emphasis was, it should not obscure the fact that Jesus exercised sovereign authority, as expressed in the fact that his actions were not determined solely by the other, but he exercised choice and discrimination in his actions, "He chose the times, place, and manner of his acts." Referring to how Jesus fed the five thousand but then alienated the same crowd with his teaching about heavenly bread (Jn.6), Newbigin asks how these two dimensions of Christ, both his compassion and also his authority over the whole of life, are to be brought to expression within the church: "How can the Church be fully open to the needs of the world and yet have its eyes fixed always on God?"⁸⁶⁶ The servant nature of the church is to be held in tension with the authority dimension of her existence.

A further implication of the church as *ecclesia tou theou* is that the church is a gathering called together for the benefit of the wider society. This is not a point that Newbigin explicitly draws out but it is one pointed to by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, as he explains:

Because of course the point of having a citizen's assembly or *ekklesia*, a Church, is so that responsible citizens can argue about what's good for the community. The Church, then, from that point of view, is a community where we argue about *what's good for the human race*.⁸⁶⁷

A third related implication is that the church's authority to address the wider society rests on the fact that it is not only a place of discussion, but is seeking to embody the politics of God's reign in its corporate life. Newbigin doesn't appear to have used the word *polis* to talk about the church but he would probably be comfortable with Rowan Williams' description of the church as *polis*, not as a rival to the state, or as separate from the state, but as an "imagined community,"⁸⁶⁸ showing forth a possibility of a certain structure of social life to the wider society. The

⁸⁶⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 225.

⁸⁶⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 226.

⁸⁶⁷ Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, 'Relations between the Church and state today: what is the role of the Christian citizen?' Speech at Manchester University, 1 March, 2011 (<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2009/relations-between-the-church-and-state-today-what-is-the-role-of-the-christian-citizen#sthash.u8dtOurN.dpuf>, accessed 26 February 2014).

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, " .

understanding of the church as *polis* has in recent years been particularly advanced by the American theologian John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), whose work Stone describes as an “ongoing project . . . to clarify the sense in which the church is itself a politics.”⁸⁶⁹ A consideration of Yoder’s thought is far beyond the purpose of this dissertation, but it is perhaps helpful to note a contrast that has been made between Yoder and Newbigin. In his forthcoming book *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder*, Nikolajsen underlines that while both Newbigin and Yoder affirm the distinctive identity of the church, he distinguishes Newbigin’s intention to underline the “missional identity of the church, whereas, for Yoder, it is decisive to re-envisage the distinctive identity of the church.”⁸⁷⁰ This difference between Newbigin and Yoder that is being indicated in this statement, is helpful in terms of understanding Newbigin’s sense of the relationship between the church and state in which the politics of the church informs the politics of the state. The church exists as a sign to the state of what the whole political order should embody. In this sense the church is radically for the world. This understanding of the church is expressed in Newbigin’s interpretation of the church’s transformative mission in society.

If the church is the *ecclesia tou theou* with this relationship to society, then it raises a question for a minority church community, particularly related to the issue of power and authority. Newbigin asks a question of Christ that has bearing on the church, “How is it possible that the one who was nailed helpless to a cross should be seen by society as the ultimate source of power?”⁸⁷¹ Or, in other words, how can the crucified Christ become recognized as the one who is Lord, whose life and person is authoritative for the wider society and the way we order our relationships and social life?

The answer to this question, for Newbigin, was the local church. Throughout Newbigin’s ministry the local church had a central place of emphasis.⁸⁷² His strenuous efforts to personally visit and minister to hundreds of small Indian village church communities is indicative of the strength of this emphasis. Although his consideration of the wider historical context in some of his writing in the 1960’s could

⁸⁶⁹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 21.

⁸⁷⁰ Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church* (forthcoming), 189.

⁸⁷¹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 224.

⁸⁷² I am using the term ‘local church’ as equivalent to Newbigin’s term ‘congregation.’

lead some to suggest that he came to a stronger focus on the local congregation as the primary unit of mission after his return to the U.K.,⁸⁷³ this is not accurate. As a bishop Newbigin took great pains to ensure his participation in the life of the local congregation and his writing with regard to history and the place of the church in the 1960's, set the context for church life at all levels, including and perhaps particularly for the local church.

6.3.1 The Local Church as Site of God's Hidden Kingdom

Newbigin's emphasis on the local church can be seen as giving ecclesiological roots to his emphasis on the hiddenness of the kingdom of God. Throughout his time in India Newbigin was keenly aware of the hiddenness of the Kingdom, in obscure villages where he saw exemplary instances of faithfulness to Christ and devotion in the midst of trying circumstances. His experience in these villages in India is one likely source of his identification of the kingdom as "hidden." He drew attention to the significance and importance of the struggle of unknown and unvoiced millions who faithfully followed Christ. He pointed to this by speaking of the kingdom of God being "both revealed and hidden"; hidden in the sense of being "present under the form not of power, but of weakness."⁸⁷⁴ The kingdom is present not only where it appears most evident and visible (and sometimes not there), but also and perhaps more frequently in places that are invisible to the wider church community, and hidden from the public gaze, places of apparent weakness and insignificance. A strength of Newbigin's emphasis on the local church is that it properly democratizes the church community, in the sense, firstly, of giving a place of only relative significance to centers of power and the elite communities associated with them, in relation to the gospel.

Newbigin stresses that it is "only" through the local church that it becomes comprehensible as to how the reign of God expressed and made visible in extreme limitation and apparent defeat of the crucifixion is a reign that embraces the whole world:

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe

⁸⁷³ M. Goheen, 'As the Father Has Sent Me,' 111.

⁸⁷⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 35.

that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?⁸⁷⁵

In Newbigin's answer as to how the local church gives expression to the reality of the reign of God he points to the church's liturgy, confession, hope, service in the community, embodiment of justice in relationships within the church community, and lay people acting in harmony with the reign of God in their respective places of work.⁸⁷⁶ All of these elements require a considered local application, particularly service in the community, embodiment of justice in relationships within the church community and the ministry of the laity in the world. This is on account of the very different social and political contexts in which the church finds itself worldwide.

Given the reality of what the local church can sometimes be in India, as a gathering of God's people on the margins of society, Newbigin points to how the apparent powerlessness and marginality of the congregation should not obscure the reality of the presence of the kingdom in that gathering. The gap between the present reality of the local church and the liberating vision of the reign of God has been given as the reason why Dalit theologians and thinkers moved away from reflection on the church in their theologizing.⁸⁷⁷ In early explorations in Dalit theology there was consciousness of the need to reaffirm the community nature of the church. So M. E. Prabhakar stated that, "The dalit situation would emphasize the essential community nature of the Church, the *Koinonia*,"⁸⁷⁸ and Arvind P. Nirmal held that, "In our search for a Dalit theology it is well worth remembering that what we are looking for is community-identity, community-roots and community consciousness."⁸⁷⁹ However, in spite of these early explorations in the meaning of a Dalit ecclesiology, there was little further development in this area as the focus moved to developing "distinctively Christian visions" to facilitate and enable effective participation in the wider struggle of the Dalit community as a whole.⁸⁸⁰ Perhaps Newbigin's emphasis on the hiddenness of God's kingdom in the powerlessness and weakness of God's people can be helpful in relation to this discussion.

⁸⁷⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

⁸⁷⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229ff.

⁸⁷⁷ John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 3rd Ed. (ISPCK: Delhi, 2009), 300.

⁸⁷⁸ M. E. Prabhakar, 'The Search for a Dalit Theology,' in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Institute, 2007), 48. Originally published in *Towards a Dalit Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988).

⁸⁷⁹ A. P. Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, 60. Originally published in *NCCI Review* (Feb. 1988).

⁸⁸⁰ J. C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 300.

Following on from this, Newbigin considered the local church to be, in Bosch's words, "the primary agent of mission."⁸⁸¹ Newbigin's stress on the local church as "the primary agent of mission" is particularly clear in his identification of it as the primary place through which God's reign becomes a whole society's framework for understanding the world. Given the scale of this particular aspect of mission, it would seem logical that the major contribution to this mission would come through a cooperative effort of outstanding lay people from all areas of public life, as J.H. Oldham appears to have believed.⁸⁸² Newbigin distinguished himself from Oldham in locating this dimension of mission in the local church. This mission of the local church can be identified as a mission from below in that it acts for the benefit of the wider society at a local level. The precedent for this which Newbigin refers, without wanting to replicate the model of church-state relations that followed, is Europe of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. when with the collapse of the "old classical worldview" the church became the "integrating power for a new social order."⁸⁸³ The framework of thought and public discourse of the whole society became heavily informed by the church.

6.3.1.1 The Local Church as a Chosen People

Newbigin's interpretation of election as God's choice of a people to be a bearer of blessing to the world may have a particular resonance in relation to the church in India. In his doctoral dissertation Vincent Packianathan, a Christian Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu, briefly makes a point of some significance in the light of Newbigin's view of election, although without further examining it in detail, when he draws out the implication of Dalit theologians arguing that 'Dalits are called to struggle for transformation':

This statement suggests that Dalits are similar to the chosen Israelites, and that they are called to struggle. Chosen people are used by God for bringing change, and therefore Dalits in the Indian context are the chosen people who are to suffer to bring change to the world.⁸⁸⁴

⁸⁸¹ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

⁸⁸² L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 226. Newbigin identifies Oldham as something of a pioneer in this dimension of mission.

⁸⁸³ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 223.

⁸⁸⁴ Vincent M. J. Packianathan, 'Towards a Practical Dalit Theology: A Study on the Status and Relevance of Dalit Theology among Grass Roots Dalit Christians in their Struggle against Caste Oppression' (Ph.D. diss.: University of Birmingham, 2012), 189.

While there is an ambivalence in Packianathan's statement regarding who is the elect community – an issue I will return to below – it points to a way of understanding India's Dalit church. On the one hand the mass movements of Dalit communities into the church in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was a decision rooted within these communities and not the result of missionary policy;⁸⁸⁵ the missionaries themselves appear to have been highly ambivalent about this movement.⁸⁸⁶ On the other hand, this movement can be interpreted as God's election of the church in India to be a Dalit church (the fact that it would be resisted by the missionaries underlines that mission is *missio dei*, originating in God and led by God in ways that are transformative of both the missionary and the 'missionized'). In Newbigin's terms, this Dalit church is God's way of bringing salvation to the whole society. This harmonizes, to an extent, with the understanding of Dalit theologians that the struggle of Dalit Christians for their own liberation from an oppressive caste structure will liberate the whole society that is damaged by a caste system.⁸⁸⁷ As Newbigin explained salvation involves a restoration of fellowship that comes through receiving from the other. In an Indian context the primary other is the Dalit, and salvation to a caste divided society can only be realized when the despised and rejected Dalit is recognized as a brother or sister. The election of a Dalit church in an Indian context can therefore be seen as God's act of salvation for the whole.

The identification of the church as the elect community in these terms can have some effect on the church's own self image. Nirmal's above quoted statement about Dalit theology being a search for "community-identity, community roots and community consciousness" perhaps reflects a sense of the need for a clear interpretation of identity within the Dalit church. The problematic nature of Dalit identity for the Dalit community as a whole is indicated by Dalit theologians, as in Massey's strong statement that even those who have escaped economic deprivation have "an attitude towards their own self [that] is not fully human."⁸⁸⁸ Some of the very few psychological studies of Dalits, at least prior to 1990, showed contradictory findings regarding Dalit self-image.⁸⁸⁹ But in a broader survey of 175 urban and rural Dalit Christians from the Madras area Webster found a problematic self-image in that

⁸⁸⁵ J. C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 46.

⁸⁸⁶ J. Massey, *Downtrodden*, 71.

⁸⁸⁷ V. M. J. Packianathan, 'Towards a Practical Dalit Theology,' 110.

⁸⁸⁸ J. Massey, *Downtrodden*, 56.

⁸⁸⁹ J. C. B. Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, 39.

while more than 80% were proud to be Dalit, the majority felt constrained to some degree in disclosure of their Dalit identity, practicing what Webster identified as a “modified openness (“only when asked”).⁸⁹⁰ Less than 50% had at least a moderate sense of comfort with their Dalit identity as Webster states: “Only 70 or 45.1% of the entire sample of 175 respondents were proud to be Dalits, believed openness was either desirable or necessary, and actually were at least moderately {“only when asked”) open, if not completely open, in practice.”⁸⁹¹ This study explains why it is possible to have contradictory findings about Dalit self-image in that there are contradictions. On the one hand there is a healthy sense of self-esteem but in relations with the wider society hesitation and uncertainty. This sets up a very disruptive inner tension as Webster concludes: “It is this uncertainty, tension, and inconsistency around Dalit identity issues which points to the deep wound in what could otherwise be a generally healthy, even robust, collective psyche.” The interpretation of the church as God’s chosen bearer of salvation and liberation for the whole society has the potential to make a contribution to the resolution of this problem.

6.3.2 The Local Church as For Others

This idea of the church as bearer of salvation for the whole society has been expressed as ‘the church for the other.’ Newbigin uses the phrase “the Church for others for society . . . ,” in places in his writing.⁸⁹² The picture of this identification of the local church developed for Newbigin, arguably, in the context of his ministry in largely Dalit village churches. Reflecting on his tenure as Bishop of Madurai diocese (1947-59), he wrote that as “a largely rural diocese” half of the churches had no building and every kind of service would be conducted in the “open street” observed by many village people, Hindu and Muslim included. This was a formative experience, shaping his understanding of the church, as he himself later acknowledged: “My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind So you get the sense of the Church not as something drawn out of the

⁸⁹⁰ J. C. B. Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, 80.

⁸⁹¹ J. C.B. Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, 82.

⁸⁹² i.e. ‘Reflections on an Indian Ministry,’ *Frontier* 18 (Spring 1975), 25; ‘The Basis and The Forms of Unity,’ *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 23 (January 1984), 11. Also, as pointed out by Hunsberger, we can find this idea in several places in his writing in the 1960’s: for example, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (1966), 87 (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 167). See also ‘On Being the Church for the World’ in Giles Ecclestone, ed., *The Parish Church? Explorations in the Relationship of Church and World* (London: Mowbray, 1988): 25-42.

world into a building, but the Church sent out into the world.”⁸⁹³ The village experience provided Newbigin with a “picture of the Church,” an image of the church as for the other.

As in Newbigin’s picture of the village people gathered around the church, the local church as God’s bearer of salvation to the whole society through the realization of fellowship, positions Dalit Christian identity at the heart of society. This gives some substance in the Indian context to the idea of ‘Mission as the Church with Others,’⁸⁹⁴ as distinct from ‘for the other.’ The idea of the “church with others” expresses the idea of “coexistence,”⁸⁹⁵ and that the “church exists only as an organic and integral part of the human community” rather than something detached and “completely separate.”⁸⁹⁶ An ecclesiology that identifies the church over against the world may reinforce a Dalit sense of exclusion, whereas the sense of the “church with others” points to the Dalit Christian being brought into a relational position with the other. Nevertheless, there are limitations to this model. The notion of the “church with others” may have had some meaning more than two decades ago in the West, but it does not fit with the realities of the Indian context in which a Dalit church can easily be in a situation of conflict and tension.

A more appropriate identification of a church in a context of conflict and tension is ‘the church for others.’ While, as Bosch points out, this idea of the church has been criticized for being rooted in a patronizing Western attitude,⁸⁹⁷ it does not necessarily have this implication in an Indian context from the position of a marginalized church. The idea of ‘the church for others’ has the advantage of pointing to a relational connection with the other, even in the context of conflict and rejection in that relationship: the church can be “for” the other and orientated toward the other, even although the other may respond with hostility and outright rejection. It is perhaps no accident that Bonhoeffer, whom Bosch credits with this understanding of the church, wrote about the church in this way from a prison cell. Newbigin’s own articulation of the historical context of mission in the twentieth century and beyond as a context of

⁸⁹³ L. Newbigin, ‘On Being the Church for the World,’ in *The Parish Church? Explorations in the Relationship of the Church and World*, ed. Giles Ecclestone (London & Oxford, 1988) quoted in David Wright, ‘What Kind of Theology for the Twenty-First Century?’

⁸⁹⁴ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 377.

⁸⁹⁵ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 384.

⁸⁹⁶ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 397.

⁸⁹⁷ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 384.

context and tension, is perhaps also involved in his sense of the church as for the other.

6.3.3 The Local Church as Chosen in Christ

Newbigin's description of the church as for the other, that can be found in places in his writing in the 1960's, comes to expression from 1973 onwards in his definition of the church as "the provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ."⁸⁹⁸ Newbigin's definition requires careful reading and is open to various interpretations. Hunsberger expresses discomfort with Newbigin's use of this definition because it suggests all humanity is representatively included in Christ through the church, an idea that doesn't convey Newbigin's own sense of the need for conversion.⁸⁹⁹ However, Bryan Stone indicates that Newbigin is using the word "provisional" with an eschatological frame of reference in mind in that the church is provisional in two senses: "provisional in the sense that not all humankind is so incorporated; and provisional in the sense that those who are so incorporated are not yet fully conformed to the image of Christ."⁹⁰⁰ In this respect Newbigin's definition is fully consistent with his own sense that God's purpose embraces the whole world, and also with his clear awareness of the church as a community under the cross.

However, while the term "provisional" does point to the eschatological horizon, Newbigin's definition appears to be emphasizing the "incorporation of all humankind into Christ" and is rooted in his understanding of the church as the *ecclesia tou theou*. This is brought out in a lecture, 'The Basis and Forms of Unity,' where Newbigin uses the phrase, as he states: "In contrast to what is said of the denominations, it is claimed that *all members of society* should be incorporated into this gathering. The Church is in fact simply the provisional incorporation of *all humankind* into the new humanity of Jesus [emphasis mine]."⁹⁰¹ Having made this point he reinforces it by pointing to the early church's sense of the church as the *ecclesia tou theou*, a gathering to which God called all people. Newbigin then goes on to argue that given this identity of the church it must assume a form that is accessible to all people in any given place: "the Church has to be the Church for the village, for the city, for the

⁸⁹⁸ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 166.

⁸⁹⁹ G. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 167.

⁹⁰⁰ Bryan Stone, *A Reader in Ecclesiology* (Farnham, England / Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 177.

⁹⁰¹ L. Newbigin, 'The Basis and Forms of Unity: Second Peter Ainslie Lecture,' *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 23 (January 1984), 7.

nation, for the community.”⁹⁰² In other words the church must be fully localized, not only being physically present in place, but present in a form that is appropriate for that place.

One important implication of Newbigin’s identification of the church as “the provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ” is that it makes ecclesial participation in Jesus Christ. The ecclesial way of participation in Christ is expressed well in a statement by Bryan Stone in his discussion of the central importance of the church in the purpose of God: “Christian salvation *is* ecclesial – that its very shape in the world *is* a participation in Christ *through* [emphasis mine] the worship, shared practices, disciplines, loyalties and social patterns of his body, the church.”⁹⁰³ This is precisely what is implied by Newbigin’s definition of the church, that participation in Christ is realized in and through participation in the fellowship of the church community.

6.3.4 The Local Church as Temple

Newbigin rarely uses religious imagery to describe the church which perhaps reflects his overall orientation to reflect theologically and ecclesiologically in relation to social and political movements. Yet, in a context where religion is a vital part of a people’s experience, the church being local in that place may involve some understanding of the church in religious terms. The idea of the local church as temple, which is found in scattered references in Newbigin’s writing is one such term.⁹⁰⁴ This has particular currency in India where temples are highly localized, in that they can be found scattered throughout many residential communities in the town and city.

This very brief discussion of the church as temple in the New Testament is particularly indebted to Hogeterp’s helpful and insightful doctoral dissertation, ‘Paul and God’s Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence.’ The understanding of the church as temple has not had a particularly wide currency.⁹⁰⁵ An example of this is that while within the past decade

⁹⁰² L. Newbigin, ‘The Basis and Forms of Unity,’ 10.

⁹⁰³ B. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 15.

⁹⁰⁴ The work in which the church is identified as temple most frequently is *The Reunion of the Church*, where there are only a scattering of references, and the idea is not developed in any way. It is not coincidental that his emphasis in that book is on the indwelling of the Spirit in the church.

⁹⁰⁵ For example, with reference to 1 Corinthians Hogeterp states that “marginal attention has been paid to the temple imagery to the extent that Paul’s image of the Temple appears almost arbitrary as a term

a Temple Christology has come to be seen as a central aspect of John's Gospel, there has been very little analysis of the relationship of John's Temple christology to the church.⁹⁰⁶ While throughout the Pauline letters there are a relatively small number of references to the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.3:16, 17; 1 Cor.6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph.2:21, 22), the more frequent references to the temple cult in Paul's writing indicates that this idea has some significance for Paul.⁹⁰⁷ Through his use of this temple imagery Paul was trying to develop the self-understanding of the new church community, and did so in several ways that are relevant for the present discussion.

Firstly, Paul sought to develop the Corinthian church's understanding of themselves as a holy community, expected to maintain the highest standards of personal and collective living, and uses "the metaphor of the Temple . . . to address moral issues concerning the congregation at large."⁹⁰⁸ This idea of the church as the Temple contributes to holy living in relation to the background primarily of the Jewish tradition in which the holiness of the temple was rigorously enforced and thus provided a "strong theological model for the appeal to holiness and unity."⁹⁰⁹ The exclusion of all but the officiating priests from the temple proper, and the highly restricted access to the inner sanctum except by the high priest on the Day of Atonement, together with the multitude of ritual laws to uphold the purity of the temple clearly underlined the holiness of God and of the temple itself as the place of his presence. Furthermore, the holiness of the temple required the holy living of the community in whose midst the temple was placed, underlining the strong interconnection between the holiness of the people and the holiness of God's Temple.⁹¹⁰ Accordingly, one of the implications of the church as temple is the maintenance of pure-impure, holy-unholy boundaries with the church as a community

for the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit ('Paul and God's Temple,' 242). It is Hogeterp's thesis that Paul's cultic language in the Corinthian letters, which includes wider references to the temple service as well as direct references to the temple, is an essential part of Paul's message (p. 240).

⁹⁰⁶ Scott W. Hahn, 'Temple, Sign and Sacrament: Towards a New Perspective on the Gospel of John,' *Letter & Spirit* 4 (2008), 107.

⁹⁰⁷ Albert Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence,' (Ph.D. diss., University of Groningen, 2004), 1.

⁹⁰⁸ A. Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple,' 227.

⁹⁰⁹ A. Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple,' 262. Paul does appear to depend heavily on the Jewish tradition of the temple, rather than the functioning of the temple in the religious background of the Graeco-Roman world in developing this emphasis on the holiness and sanctity of the temple.

⁹¹⁰ A. Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple,' 257. Hogeterp refers to Lev. 19:1-8, 20:1-8, 26. Hogeterp points out that the clarity of this interconnection is a distinctive of the O.T. tradition, in contrast with the idol worship of the surrounding peoples in which the "sanctity of the cultic domain and a communal holy way of life outside this domain is far less demonstrable."

in which morality is upheld. According to Paul's understanding, the maintenance and realisation of holiness within the community required the recognition of this boundary.

Paul recognized that the church could behave worse than the world (1 Cor. 5:2), but the answer to this lay in a rigorous affirmation of morality rather than accepting an equivalence between church and world. Newbigin's understanding of the relationship between justification and the church helps resolve the immediate problems that arise in identifying the church as temple and therefore as sacred, as he states: "The being of the Church . . . rest(s) not upon the conformity of the Church to God's will, but upon the grace of God who justifies the ungodly."⁹¹¹ The church is a gathering of people who are not the temple, and yet on the basis of the justification of the community in the death and resurrection of Christ, become the temple of God through the indwelling Spirit.

Secondly, it establishes the distinctiveness of the church in her relationship with the Holy Spirit. This is again a needed affirmation, with the pressure of the environment and its sense of the immanent spirit leading towards a loss of consciousness of this distinctive aspect to the church. Rayan, for example completely collapses the church-world boundary in relation to the gift of the Holy Spirit, for example writing of the Spirit poured out "on all humankind . . . upon all who are open to God whether they know him or not."⁹¹² As Newbigin indicates, it is necessary to be open to this possibility, but it is questionable whether this can be understood in any way as the normative action of the Spirit in the world. Unless the accounts of the giving of the Spirit in Acts are interpreted as metaphoric, there does appear to be some connection between the visible church and the giving of this gift.

Thirdly, the idea of the temple is used by Paul to point to the necessity for unity within the church. As Hogeterp points out the temple reference in 1 Cor. 3:16, 17 comes in the context of addressing the serious problem of division within the church (3:1-4).⁹¹³ The identification of the church as temple lifts the eyes of the church away from that which divides them to the much greater reality of which they are a part, in the light of which the significance of different teachers or schools of thought becomes relatively insignificant. Furthermore, the seriousness of causing division within the

⁹¹¹ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, xxxiii.

⁹¹² Samuel Rayan, *Breath of Fire – The Holy Spirit: Heart of the Christian Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), 67.

⁹¹³ A. Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple,' 247ff.

church becomes clearer, being equated with destroying God's temple (1 Cor.3:17). Here again Paul uses the idea of the church as temple to indicate the necessity of exemplary individual and corporate behavior. Paul also uses the temple image as an "inclusive concept" to indicate that all peoples, irregardless of their social classification, have been made participants in the temple (i.e. Eph.2:19-22).⁹¹⁴

Fourthly, the distinct calling of the church in the world is given clarity. Beale's interpretation of Solomon's temple provides a particularly helpful way of understanding the church as temple. He interprets the temple as representative of the cosmos, and signifying the purpose of God for the cosmos to be filled with the presence of God.⁹¹⁵ Understood in this way, the temple in the midst of Israel served as a "reminder" of God's purpose, but also "as a motivation to Israel to be faithful witnesses to the world of God's glorious presence and truth, which was to expand outwards from their temple."⁹¹⁶ The temple indicated the calling of Israel to accomplish the original command given to Adam to extend, what Beale describes as, the "Eden Temple" into the whole earth. As the temple of the Spirit the church has inherited this calling to work for the filling of heaven and earth with the presence of God.⁹¹⁷

6.3.5 Local Church Leadership

Newbigin criticized the failure of the Western missions movement to develop strong local church leadership, evidence of which was the financial and spiritual dependence on the West of the new churches.⁹¹⁸ The financial dependence had been created, largely, by the habitual practice of the mission agencies to give financial support to an individual to be the leader of some of the new churches.⁹¹⁹ Responsibility for the support of the local church leader was thus entirely removed from the local church. A dependent spiritual relationship had been generated by a reluctance to give full ministerial leadership of the churches to the local church members on the basis that the local leadership lacked an adequate level of literacy and

⁹¹⁴ A. Hogeterp, 'Paul and God's Temple,' 263.

⁹¹⁵ G. K. Beale, 'Eden, The Temple and the Church's Mission in the New Creation,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/1 (March 2005), 15f.

⁹¹⁶ G. K. Beale, 'Eden, The Temple and the Church's Mission in the New Creation,' 19.

⁹¹⁷ G. K. Beale, 'Eden, The Temple and the Church's Mission in the New Creation,' 26.

⁹¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 68.

⁹¹⁹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 69.

education.⁹²⁰ For Newbigin this overall system obstructed missions work, the work of preaching and planting churches, because the dependence on external funds and on well educated clergy meant that sometimes the resources were not available for expansion of the church, as he explains:

New areas could not, therefore, be occupied. Teachers could not be offered to new villages. Enquirers who came to ask for a teacher to be sent to their village had regretfully to be turned away. Only if some fresh resources came from 'home' could the mission become a mission again. As it was, it was plain that any talk of 'winning India for Christ' was not serious. I was compelled to ask myself whether it is really true that the Church's obedience to the Great Commission is intended to be contingent upon the accident of budgetary surplus."⁹²¹

For Newbigin the answer to this situation was a return to a recognition of the Holy Spirit as the agent of mission. He considered the "sovereignty of the Spirit as the true agent of mission" to be the essential point for distancing the church from any form of colonial mentality and methodology.⁹²² As noted in chapter four, Newbigin was influenced by Roland Allen's insistence that we recognize the centrality of the Spirit as the empowerer, instructor and enabler of the local church. Newbigin, and Allen's, emphasis on the Spirit was driven by a concern for missions, to see mature church growth and "spontaneous expansion" of the church. Newbigin drew support for this from what seems to have been his own application of this method in a way that bore real fruit, as he states: "In an area almost entirely pagan, the number of Christian congregations rose from thirteen to fifty-five in twelve years."⁹²³ The lesson that Newbigin drew from this is that this dependence on the Spirit brings real growth, and that without external personnel and finance.

One of the important ways in which this understanding of the Spirit-church relationship should manifest itself was a willingness to give full recognition to the new local church and its leadership from its beginning, on the basis of the presence of the Spirit within the church, which means that the church has the "essential resources for witness and growth."⁹²⁴ Newbigin believed that Paul embodied this approach and was a model of the relationship between the missionary and the churches in which the churches from the beginning were treated as "responsible adults," without any

⁹²⁰ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 75.

⁹²¹ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 75.

⁹²² L. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 156.

⁹²³ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 77.

⁹²⁴ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 70.

dependence upon the founder, financial or spiritual.⁹²⁵ The Galatian church could be seen as an example of the failure of this method, given how close they appear to come to apostasy, but Newbigin points out that Paul's whole argument in the letter is not to draw them back under his control, but to bring them back to the Spirit as "the source of their life as Christians."⁹²⁶ As Newbigin understood, if the church is not treated as the church from the start, wrong patterns of dependence become immediately engrained. The use of money to directly support the new pastor or lay leader in this regard is particularly sensitive as it can create an "infantile" dependency on the donor and spiritual immaturity as it discouraged dependence upon God.⁹²⁷ This led Newbigin to confess that at times he was tempted to pray for foreign aid to be cut off, so that "the Church was compelled to learn what it means to depend on God alone."⁹²⁸

It should perhaps be noted that a different approach to external funding was taken by Bishop Azariah, who was ministering at the end of the colonial era in India. Azariah, working in the midst of mass movements and conversions into the church, experienced the problem of funding and shortage of manpower. Azariah's answer to this problem appears to have been increased staffing of the diocese with paid local pastors. To this end, he "campaign[ed] vigorously" in the West for additional financial support, as well as trained helpers.⁹²⁹ Azariah does not seem to have shared Newbigin's reluctance to use foreign funding.

Rather than appeal for additional funding Newbigin decided to ordain local church leaders after a three year period of part time training.⁹³⁰ These newly ordained leaders would be different from the local pastor in that they were unpaid and their ordination was valid only in a limited area.⁹³¹ Yet, within that area they would be able to attend to the whole life of the church, including administering the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. Newbigin was only able to put this plan into effect in a limited way. Through an evaluation of the experience of the three local leaders who did eventually become ordained in this way, Wingate points to a number of problems

⁹²⁵ L. Newbigin, 'The Pattern of Partnership,' *A Decisive Hour for the Christian Mission: The East Asia Christian Conference 1959 and the John R Mott Memorial Lectures* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961), 39.

⁹²⁶ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 72.

⁹²⁷ L. Newbigin, 'The Pattern of Partnership,' 38.

⁹²⁸ L. Newbigin, 'The Pattern of Partnership,' 38.

⁹²⁹ S. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 309.

⁹³⁰ Andrew Wingate, 'Non-stipendiary Ministry in India,' in James Francis & Lesslie J. Francis, eds., *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-Supporting Ministry* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, 1998), 103.

⁹³¹ A. Wingate, 'Non-stipendiary ministry in India,' 103.

that appear to suggest this system didn't work well. Several of the larger problems included: a reluctance on the part of one leader to engage in manual labour, having been ordained, which brought himself and his family into financial difficulties; and also the perception of the local church that they were somehow disconnected from the wider church on account of being led by a man whose formal school only extended up to the four or fifth grade.⁹³² In fairness to Newbigin this system was not really allowed to fully develop, as the Bishop who succeeded him discontinued it, so a fuller picture could not emerge.

6.3.6 The Spirit and the Conversion of the Church

Newbigin's understanding of the church's uniquely authoritative basis, together with his sense of the unique relationship of the Spirit to the church, could, where the church is strong, lead back into attitudes for which the church was criticized during the colonial era. Yet, one of the safeguards in Newbigin's ecclesiology that can help prevent this, is his sense of the church itself being changed and converted as it engages in mission. The presence of the Spirit leads the church into inter-dependence with all peoples.

Following the leading of the Spirit, the church had to be prepared to reshape its own structures. The paradigmatic example of this, for Newbigin, is the outpouring of the Spirit on the household of Cornelius, and the implications which this had for the apostle's understanding of the church. There is a clear point of agreement here between Rayan and Newbigin in that Rayan, like Newbigin, wants to break down a hierarchical relationship between the one who goes in mission and the one who receives. He points instead to the interdependence of sender and receiver. Mission is a two way exchange in which the sender-receiver distinction is broken down and both receive from one another:

God's varied gifts are so distributed that creatures need not only God but each other within an intricate web of cosmic interdependence, of give and receive, of mission and ministry. . . .

. . . . God sends each to its neighbor to learn its own name. For no religion is meant to be an island, separate and self-sufficient. All the religious and spiritual traditions need each other's word or revelation, reassurance⁹³³

⁹³² A. Wingate, 'Non-stipendiary ministry in India,' 104.

⁹³³ S. Rayan, 'A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context,' Section 11. . . . 12.

Newbigin would affirm this “cosmic interdependence,” as considered in the previous chapter, with regard to the mutual need of church and world in order to experience salvation. Using the example of Peter’s experience of the household of Cornelius receiving the Spirit, Newbigin points to the changes this brought to the existing church through it becoming a society that incorporated Jew and Gentile and which had become “open to embrace all the nations” of the earth.⁹³⁴ Mission therefore involves the “conversion of the church” as well as the conversion of the world.⁹³⁵ Newbigin wrote of how Peter’s experience “shattered” his “deeply cherished image of himself as an obedient member of the household of God.”⁹³⁶ The conversion of the church arises on the basis of the Holy Spirit acting in the world in ways that are discontinuous with the church’s own understanding of God, and His action in the world. So, in the light of the action of the Holy Spirit the church is brought to a change of mind and will before God.

Newbigin also affirmed the element of receiving in the context of meeting with those of other faiths.⁹³⁷ The point of difference is that as Rayan interprets it, this means that mission is not the rightful preserve of any one religion, but involves a going forth of all religions towards the other, through inter-religious dialogue, in a great exchange for the blessing and benefit of all. One of the fruits envisaged from this exchange is a greater cooperation in the work of transforming the world.⁹³⁸

6.4 The Church as the Body of Christ

An image of the church that draws together some of the various strands in Newbigin’s ecclesiology is of the church as the body of Christ. There are numerous references to the church as ‘the body of Christ’ in Newbigin’s main ecclesiological work, *The Household of God*. But, the church as the body of Christ expresses the idea present throughout Newbigin’s writing of Christ as uniquely present to the world in the church.

This drawing together of christology and ecclesiology is a very significant break from the approach taken by the generation of missionaries who preceded Newbigin.

⁹³⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 60.

⁹³⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 59.

⁹³⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 182.

⁹³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 183.

⁹³⁸ S. Rayan, ‘A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context,’ Section 16c.

During the final decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, thinkers and theologians of the indigenous churches, and the wider society, became increasingly vocal in their criticism of the shaping influence of Western culture and thought on the churches and their theology, as well as critical of moral and social failings within Western civilization itself. One of the responses to his critique was to make a distinction between the person of Jesus Christ and Christianity. By Christianity was usually meant the response that had been to Christ by humanity and taken shape in the church's life and also expressed in its liturgy and theology. With this distinction, the person of Christ could be distanced from all the problematic aspects to the response to Him, or lack of response, that had happened within the church. E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973), one of the most influential and well known missionaries and evangelists in India during the first half of the nineteenth century consistently affirmed this distinction. His seminal book, *Christ of the Indian Road* (1925), repeatedly returns to this distinction between Christ and Christianity. One of the primary, and important, implications of this distinction for Jones and his audience was to clarify the distinction between Christ and Western civilization, as one "Hindu lawyer" said to him in one of his meetings around 1917: "Do you mean that your message is Christ without any implications that we must accept Western civilization?"⁹³⁹ This distinction was of great importance for the whole missions movement in India and beyond. By Jones own admission it helped re-energize evangelistic work across India, "given us all new vitalizing of our work in India," in a situation of growing criticism of the West. However, this distinction also distinguished Christ and the church: christology and ecclesiology were gently separated from each other. In *Christ of the Indian Road*, Jones doesn't assert this but there are suggestions of a legitimate bypassing of the church community.⁹⁴⁰

⁹³⁹ E. S. Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1996), 6. Jones described the moral and social failings of Western civilization, such as its materialism and racial prejudice, as 'The Great Hindrance' to the gospel (p.86ff).

⁹⁴⁰ E. S. Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road*, 50f, 89f. In reference to an assertion, by a "Hindu college principal" of a "Christ-cult" developing in India Jones explains that this did not mean an organized fellowship, there was no "gathering of this scattered thought into an organisation called the Christ-cult" (p.51). Continuing his explanation of the significance of this "Christ-cult" Jones suggests that an organized community fellowship is not the way through which change happens in India: "Things are not propagated in India by blocked-off organisation as we carry them on in the West. The method of propagation has been by ideas catching from life to life and thus silently leavening the whole. . . . The Christ-cult has become more like an atmosphere than an organisation." Jones also suggests the possibility that if the church is unable to be responsive to the positive developments of this turning to Christ then some of those who receive Christ as Lord may "live their Christian lives apart from the Christian Church."

Newbigin is conscious that he is breaking with a tradition of missionary thinking that had been given a “resounding” affirmation at Tambaram in 1938.⁹⁴¹ He draws the explicit conclusion to his argument that “there cannot, therefore, be a total disjunction between the Gospel and ‘Christianity.’ The gospel is interpreted and meaningfully articulated within the context of the community of people committed to Jesus Christ as Lord. There is no point of uninterpreted, direct access to an understanding of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ for the world.

This understanding of the church as the body of Christ has several key implications: firstly, the church is a suffering community, bearing the marks of suffering imprinted on Christ’s own body; secondly, the church is a united visible fellowship, “one body”;⁹⁴² thirdly, Christ is present to the world in the church, “Those who seek Him must find Him there [in the church],”⁹⁴³ with, fourthly, the implication that discipleship of Christ and obedience to the Spirit will find expression in participation in the church community, “life in the Spirit is life in the body of Christ.”⁹⁴⁴ These third and fourth points will now be considered in connection with the interpretation of the Spirit advocated in some Indian theologies.

6.4.1 Christology-Ecclesiology Connection

In recent decades a consideration of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Christ, by theologians from around the world, has given rise to a stream of theological thinking known as Spirit Christology. The central characteristic of Spirit Christology is an awareness of the action of the Spirit in Christ in the work of redemption, as Peppiatt explains:

A focus on the mutual and coinherent but distinct missions of the Son and the Spirit leads us to assert that the Spirit saves with Christ throughout. Rather than understanding salvation in a strictly two-stage bifurcated manner of justification as a work of the Son and sanctification as a work of the Spirit, we understand the Spirit as working in all the salvific events associated with Christ: the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost and the parousia.⁹⁴⁵

⁹⁴¹ L. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 74.

⁹⁴² “Paul’s use of the phrase ‘the body of Christ’ involves a conception of our membership in Christ which is essentially membership in one undivided visible fellowship” (L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 72).

⁹⁴³ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 79.

⁹⁴⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 104.

⁹⁴⁵ L. Peppiatt, ‘Spirit Christology and Mission’ (Ph.D. diss, University of Otago, 2010), 254. Some of the other characteristics of Spirit Christology that Peppiatt points to include: an interpretation of the

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of Spirit Christology is the way it affirms the humanity of Christ, in that during his life on earth His actions were “carried out through his human nature” by the enabling and empowering of the Holy Spirit, and not through the direct operation of His divine power and nature on his humanity.⁹⁴⁶ Spirit Christology moves the focus towards the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christ, as distinct from the attention of Logos Christology to Christ as God incarnate, as O’Byrne explains: “For Spirit Christology, the idea of ‘anointing’ often occupies a place analogous to, though not identical with, that of ‘Incarnation’ in *Logos* Christology.”⁹⁴⁷ Spirit Christology has sometimes been interpreted in such a way as to give a non-traditional interpretation of the sending of Christ, in which Christ is sent not only by the Father but also by the Spirit: the Spirit is thus “one who also sends.”⁹⁴⁸ Christ’s sending by the Spirit can be located in particular to Christ’s baptism and the descent of the Spirit from heaven, an event that marked the beginning of his public ministry (Lk. 3:23).

An understanding of Christ in terms of His relationship with the Spirit is an approach to Christology that can be viewed as liberating for the church in a post-colonial context. This is primarily because the focus of Christology is moved away from the creeds, theological concepts and formulations associated with the logos Christology⁹⁴⁹ of the Western church. This theological inheritance can sometimes appear burdensome and restrictive, and a difficult basis from which to develop an incultured theology.

Trinity that is rooted in Scripture; and a reinterpretation of the inter-Trinitarian relationships particularly in terms of the sending of the Spirit (p.21).

⁹⁴⁶ M. Habets, ‘Spirit Christology: Seeing in Stereo,’ *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11.2, http://carey.academia.edu/MykHabets/Papers/1086285/Spirit_Christology_Seeing_in_Stereo, accessed November 3, 2011, pp. 217-19. Habet points to the Puritan divine, John Owen, as one of the pioneers of this line of thought, calling it a “crucial insight in the formulation of a Spirit-Christology.”

⁹⁴⁷ Declan O’Byrne, *Spirit Christology and Trinity in the Theology of David Coffey* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 35. Expanding on this point O’Byrne explains that, “[since] Spirit Christology is said to find its biblical ground in the synoptic gospels, especially in texts such as the baptism accounts, it is often thought of as a scripturally based alternative to Johanine *Logos* Christologies.”

⁹⁴⁸ Lucy Peppiatt, ‘Spirit Christology and Mission,’ 136. Peppiatt doesn’t give any further exposition of this point, although it does appear to have real significance for missiology.

⁹⁴⁹ Logos Christology refers to Jesus Christ as God incarnate and, as used here, refers to the relationship between the human and the divine that was definitively articulated in the Council of Chalcedon’s (451 A.D.) doctrine of hypostatic union according to which the human and divine nature are present without intermixing in the one person, Jesus. Logos Christology can also be used to refer to the Christological approach of thinkers in the church of the second and third centuries who emphasized Christ as the Word incarnate in order to assert the uniqueness of Christ in a pluralistic context (James Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996 (Original work published 1980)), 213.

In the Indian context Spirit Christology provides an attractive alternative way of doing Christology because the emphasis on the Spirit connects well with an emphasis on spirit that is prevalent in Hindu philosophical thought and religious experience.⁹⁵⁰ In her book *Spirit Christology: An Indian Christian Perspective* Christine Manohar explains one aim of her work is “to make Christology more meaningful to Indian Christians,” as well as to a “Hindu audience,” through a consideration of the relationship of Christ and the Spirit.⁹⁵¹ Manohar sees in Spirit Christology the possibility of a more appropriate contextual Christology than Logos Christology. She argues that while the methodology of Logos Christology, which she identifies as beginning with the divinity of Christ, was an appropriate contextual approach in the Graeco-Roman world it is a less suitable approach within the Indian context.⁹⁵² She appears to have three main reasons in support of this argument that Spirit Christology is a contextual approach in relation to Hinduism. Firstly, that the historicity of Christ, and the humanity of Christ is in danger of being undermined in an Indian context by an approach that concentrates on His deity, which is expressed in problems such as docetism and dualism.⁹⁵³ Many thinkers, including Newbigin, have pointed to the danger of the humanity of Christ being neglected in a context that is so familiar with the idea of the avatar, which is only a temporary manifestation of the divine (Vishnu) in human form.⁹⁵⁴ Manohar points to the particularly notable example of Upadhyay who translated the idea of Jesus as logos into the Sanskrit term *Cit*, used with reference to an aspect of Brahman in Hindu thought, and states that while “Christ’s divinity is stated very clearly . . . his humanity does not find an adequate emphasis.”⁹⁵⁵ Her second reason is that Spirit Christology responds to the Hindu

⁹⁵⁰ Christine Manohar, *Spirit Christology: An Indian Christian Perspective* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2009), 34f. Manohar states that “It is to the Spirit that most Upanisadic texts point.” This book was originally a Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Gloucestershire, UK.

⁹⁵¹ C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 37. Manohar wants to distance herself from the idea of working towards a fulfilment theology and instead see her work as constructive and contributing to our understanding of Christ (p. 37). She states for example with regard to Chenchiah and Abhishiktananda that their work is not a “mere translation, it is more than that, for it brings new aspects that are so far unnoticed or ignored” (p. 227). In order to do this she uses the vocabulary and concepts of the spirit within Hinduism, and attempts to build on the work of other Christian thinkers.

⁹⁵² C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 32ff.

⁹⁵³ C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 33f.

⁹⁵⁴ Newbigin pointed to docetism as a serious problem within the Indian church, at least in Tamil Nadu, as he states: “The characteristic heresy of the Church as I know it in Tamil Nadu is to deny the humanity of Jesus. None of us questions his divinity. But I fear there are very many Christians who do not really believe in the full humanity of Jesus. They think of him after the manner of a Hindu *avatar*, a god who plays the part of a man just like an actor playing a part on the stage, but who is really a god pretending to be man (*The Good Shepherd*, 44).

⁹⁵⁵ C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 33.

concern with both the spirit, and the realization of the divine within, through the emphasis in Spirit Christology on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christ, the Spirit as “indweller and inspirer.”⁹⁵⁶ A third reason for Spirit Christology as a contextual Christology, as distinct from logos Christology, is that Spirit Christology will relate more adequately to the liberation issues of Indian society. The rationale for this is related to the way that the key texts in a Spirit Christology are found in the synoptic gospels where there is a clearly expressed concern for the poor and dispossessed.

6.4.1.1 Samuel Rayan

One example of Spirit Christology by an Indian theologian can be found, briefly, in Samuel Rayan’s *Breath of Fire*. His interpretation of Christ is largely from the perspective of Christ’s relationship with the Spirit. There is, firstly, an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Rayan points to the action of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the human in Christ at the time of his conception, drawing a parallel between the language of the angel’s annunciation to Mary (Lk. 1:35) and that of the creation of the earth (Gen.1:2).⁹⁵⁷ The atonement is interpreted in this light as Christ’s perfect realisation of the Spirit, as Rayan indicates when he defines the resurrection as “a full and final experience of the Spirit.”⁹⁵⁸ The action of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection is highlighted, as the one who raises Christ from the dead.⁹⁵⁹ Secondly, Christ is the one who gives the Spirit. Rayan states that Jesus is “preeminently the man of the Holy Spirit, the giver of the Spirit.”⁹⁶⁰ Rayan sets the atonement in the context of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, as he states that at Pentecost the “whole meaning and significance of Jesus for human history and human destiny are revealed.”⁹⁶¹ The life, death and resurrection of Christ are interpreted as in some way leading up to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh,⁹⁶² to the extent that the giving of the Spirit is the constitutive element of the gospel as Rayan states: “This, then, is the Christian gospel:

⁹⁵⁶ C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 35.

⁹⁵⁷ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 6.

⁹⁵⁸ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 36.

⁹⁵⁹ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 36f., 67, 75f, 128f.

⁹⁶⁰ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 31.

⁹⁶¹ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 106.

⁹⁶² S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 31f. Rayan doesn’t clearly explain how: this book is written in more of a meditational format than as a discursive theological work.

that our life and world stand bathed in the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁶³ As this quote lightly suggests the relationship of the Spirit to the church as distinct from the relationship of the Spirit to the world is not clearly defined.

6.4.1.2 Separation of the Spirit and the Church

The Hindu concept of *Antharyamin*, the divine indwelling the heart of all people, is one aspect of the Hindu tradition that has shaped and influenced the thinking of some Indian theologians and writers on the Holy Spirit.⁹⁶⁴ Vandana, a Catholic nun, who describes the *Antharyamin* as a “constantly found theme in Indian spiritual tradition,” writes that, “the heart is the place where man meets God.”⁹⁶⁵ This sense of the heart as the place of meeting with God is implicit to Abhishiktananda’s theology, as briefly discussed in the previous chapter.⁹⁶⁶

Yet, interpreting the Spirit as the *Antharyamin* can lead away from an ecclesiology of the visible church as the body of Christ, and therefore the primary place of encounter with God. The marginalization of the visible church is only lightly alluded to by Vandana⁹⁶⁷ but this is made more explicit, albeit briefly, in the work of Chenchiah. Chenchiah embraces the idea of *Antharyamin* as a suitable vehicle for speaking of the Holy Spirit and explaining the presence of Christ to the world. He identifies Jesus through the Holy Spirit, as the *Antharyamin*:

India wants a universal Spirit, who is present everywhere and whom she could appropriate wherever she is for her salvation. . . . The Holy Spirit is the universal Jesus. Jesus was limited to time and space, and His teaching adapted to the age in which, and the people among whom, He lived. But He as the Holy Spirit transcends historic limitations and becomes *Paramapurusha* and *Antharyamin*, the Universal dweller in the human heart, whom men could invoke. . . .”⁹⁶⁸

⁹⁶³ S. Rayan, *Breath of Fire*, 2.

⁹⁶⁴ *Antharyamin* is a term that can be found in the Upanishads, such as Brihad Aranyaka Upanisad III 7.3.

⁹⁶⁵ Vandana, *Waters of Fire* (New York: Amity House, 1988), 132. In this book Vandana attempts to relate the theme of water in John’s gospel to the Hindu Scriptures. It is possible to see this work as an attempt to synthesize Christ’s action and teaching with an advaitic emphasis on the Atman-atman, or Brahman-atman. She makes repeated references that equate the Spirit and Atman/Brahman i.e. 16f., 57, 87.

⁹⁶⁶ Abhishiktananda actually inspired her to leave her position with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart and begin an exploration of ashramic spirituality and living from the early 1970’s onwards (Kirsteen Kim, *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 82.

⁹⁶⁷ i.e. *Waters of Fire*, 56, 58.

⁹⁶⁸ P. Chenchiah, ‘Christianity and Hinduism,’ *Pamphlet*, 1928 as reprinted in D. A. Thangasamy, *The Theology of Chenchian with Selections from His Writings* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1966), 216. . . . 217. Chenchiah’s interpretation of the philosophical tradition follows that of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), a

For Chenchiah this means that the church is not the primary site of encounter with Christ, but to be seen as one of the “historic limitations” transcended by the Spirit. Rather than encourage a “change of environment,” church membership and participation in the local church fellowship, the church’s role is to draw people, through its witness, to the universal presence of the Spirit.⁹⁶⁹ In other words the Spirit of Christ will be met, not in the fellowship of the church, but through individual awakening to the Spirit.

While there is the possibility for *Antharyamin* to be used to identify the Spirit as the one who indwells Christ,⁹⁷⁰ there are difficulties with this given that *Antharyamin* is connected with the divine indwelling of all people. From the perspective of Newbigin’s thought we might see the need for a reinterpretation of *Antharyamin* in terms of the church as the body of Christ, indwelt by the Spirit.

Newbigin specifically rejected the idea of a mystical work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all people and instead pointed to the Spirit indwelling the church community, as he states:

In its extreme form this has led into some sort of non-historical mysticism in which the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart is regarded as practically independent of Christ’s work in the flesh, the Scriptures, and the sacraments. . . . The truth is of course that the N.T. everywhere teaches, that God’s gift of the Holy Spirit is inseparably linked by the double bond of word and sacrament to His work of redemption in Christ.⁹⁷¹ [emphasis mine]

He believed that the full authority of Scripture, “the massive central witness of the New Testament” was in support of this. Presumably here he was referring, at least partially, to the experience in Acts of the Spirit clearly begin given through receiving the gospel of Christ and being baptized. Newbigin believed that this experience was normative. Newbigin would not break down the church-world distinction to the extent where the enabling and indwelling action of the Spirit is in both church and world.

leading Hindu thinker who tried to reinterpret traditional Hindu philosophy in terms that would give substance and reality to history and the struggle for a new society. M. M. Thomas explains that the “creative evolutionary movement towards a new human being, society and cosmos” formed the “framework of Chenchiah’s thought” (M. M. Thomas & P. T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology*, 174). For Chenchiah the Spirit is the primary agency in the new creation, the *visvakarma* of a new world, a term translated by M. M. Thomas as “the universal builder” (p.174).

⁹⁶⁹ P. Chenchiah, ‘Christianity and Hinduism,’ 218.

⁹⁷⁰ C. Manohar, *Spirit Christology*, 239.

⁹⁷¹ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 98.

6.4.1.2.1 Christ as Guru – the Spirit Outside the Church

The Spirit and church can become separated when Christ is figured as the giver of the Spirit apart from the fellowship of the church. The image of Christ as guru can lead in this direction given the personalized and individualistic nature of the guru-disciple relationship. One of Newbigin's very few references to the idea of guru suggests this idea of the guru as an individualistic form of discipleship detached from the church, as he states critically of the experience of the church in south India of, "Christian gurus who appear one after another inviting men and women to find salvation by detaching themselves from the organized Church and attaching themselves to the saviour-guru."⁹⁷² This detachment from the church can perhaps be seen in Vandana's *Waters of Fire* where, arguably, Christ is figured as a guru.⁹⁷³

Jesus is identified as the one who has perfectly realised the Spirit and who gives the Spirit. Drawing a comparison with the stone vessels that Jesus filled with wine, Vandana describes Jesus as "'filled to the brim' with divinity,"⁹⁷⁴ and Christ is the one who will "truly give what the law merely promised [the Spirit]."⁹⁷⁵ Vandana asserts that Christ's giving is unique, belonging to Him alone, as she states with regard to Christ's engagement with the woman of Samaria at the well (Jn. 4): "What Jesus has to offer this woman is quite unparalleled in history."⁹⁷⁶ Vandana interprets Christ's giving of the Spirit in advaitic terms. Christ's baptism with the Spirit and address by the Father, is interpreted as Christ's awakening to the *Atman*. She sees Christ fulfilling the realization of Brahman that is described in the Upanishads.⁹⁷⁷ With reference to the Chandogya Upanishad's teaching about the one who has realised Atman finding joy and freedom⁹⁷⁸ Vandana writes of Christ mediating this to the world.⁹⁷⁹

⁹⁷² L. Newbigin, 'Salvation, the New Humanity and Cultural-Communal Solidarity,' *Bangalore Theological Form* 5 (2) (1973), 7.

⁹⁷³ Kim points to the centrality of the idea of Christ as guru to *Waters of Fire*, describing Sahi's painting "of Jesus Christ as Guru" as "central" to the book (*Mission in the Spirit*, 105). In an analysis of some of her later writing, Kim points out how Vandana embraced the idea of Christ as guru as the most appropriate Indian understanding of Christ. As Kim states Vandana recognized that "her reading of Jesus as an Asian guru makes him redundant when the Inner Guru, the True Self, the *Atman*, has been encountered" (*Mission in the Spirit*, 106).

⁹⁷⁴ Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, 25.

⁹⁷⁵ Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, 55.

⁹⁷⁶ Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, 56.

⁹⁷⁷ She refers to Katha Upanishad 3.14 which speaks of the attainment of Brahman, which she appears to interpret in terms of Purusha, the true Self that indwells all things, and which is referred to in 3.17 as the "inner Self."

⁹⁷⁸ Chandogya Upanishad 8.7-12.

⁹⁷⁹ Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, 59.

While there is this vivid sense of Christ as the giver of the Spirit, however the Spirit is to be understood here, there is little sense of the role of the community in receiving from Christ. In a discussion of a painting by Jyoti Sahi,⁹⁸⁰ Vandana identifies Christ's giving life to the woman with that of other "monks, *sannyasis*, contemplatives" who are the "real life-savers and life-givers."⁹⁸¹ As suggested here, Christ is imaged as a figure apart from the community, from whom the disciple may directly receive life apart from the fellowship of the community.

6.4.1.3 The Spirit-Church Relationship in Newbigin

As suggested throughout the dissertation Newbigin maintained that the church had a unique relationship with the Spirit. He wrote, for example that, "the life of the visible Church is the reality within which alone the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is to be understood."⁹⁸² Accordingly, Newbigin articulated a very high view of the sacrament of baptism in *The Household of God* as that which mediates the indwelling of the Spirit in the believer: "Paul takes it for granted that the seal of the Spirit, received in faith, is sacramentally mediated in baptism."⁹⁸³ Paul's references to being baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3,4; Gal. 3:26-28) are interpreted as referring to the sacrament of baptism.⁹⁸⁴ Paul's view, according to Newbigin, is that of all the New Testament writers who take it "for granted that baptism is that by which we were made members of the body of Christ and participants in the Spirit."⁹⁸⁵ Noting the exceptions to this in the New Testament where the Spirit is received apart from baptism he writes:

[Cornelius household] who received the gift of the Spirit prior before they were baptised and of those in Samaria who were baptised but had not received the Spirit. These seem to me to show that there is no absolute and mechanical uniformity of the Spirit's working in these matters. But they do not weaken the massive central witness of the New Testament to the truth that the gift of the Holy Spirit is bound to the finished work of Christ by the twin bonds of hearing and believing the message and being baptised into the fellowship of His death and resurrection.⁹⁸⁶

⁹⁸⁰ This is a painting of the scene of Christ at the well with the woman of Samaria. Christ is apparently represented in the lotus position of meditation with the waters of life flowing from his heart.

⁹⁸¹ Vandana, *Waters of Life*, 61.

⁹⁸² L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 103.

⁹⁸³ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 38.

⁹⁸⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 66f.

⁹⁸⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 66.

⁹⁸⁶ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 99.

For Newbigin the Spirit is the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God, and this, for Newbigin is located in the church, “the locus of the mission.”⁹⁸⁷ The church as sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s reign derives from the presence and work of the Spirit, as Newbigin explains: “It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power.”⁹⁸⁸ The presence of the Spirit in the church is identified as the “foretaste” of the kingdom, emphasizing the element of realisation within the church community, partial as it is, of God and His purpose for the world. Newbigin was pointing to this realisation in the Spirit, using the language of “having and hoping,” over at least several decades.⁹⁸⁹ The church’s activity as sign and instrument of the kingdom is rooted in this partial realisation of the kingdom in the presence of the Spirit.

Significantly, Newbigin appears to see the Spirit as foretaste, as anterior to the other aspects of the Spirit’s work as sign and instrument of reign of God. So he can state that the foretaste of the reign of God is that “which constitutes the Church as witness.”⁹⁹⁰ Here Newbigin suggests that this emphasis on the presence of the Spirit as constituting the basis of the church’s witness is the reason for Paul’s lack of exhortation to mission in his letters, but repeated exhortations to be faithful to Christ.⁹⁹¹ What Newbigin appears to mean here is that when the church is focused on Christ she will be lead into a way of living, relating and acting that is living, relating and acting in the Spirit.

⁹⁸⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 118f.

⁹⁸⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

⁹⁸⁹ L. Newbigin, *Christ our Eternal Contemporary*, 61f. This is a collection of addresses given at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, in July 1966.

⁹⁹⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 120.

⁹⁹¹ Newbigin’s explanation for this is rather unique. This apparent silence in Paul’s epistles about the church’s responsibility for mission and church growth has led in recent decades to questioning whether Paul intended them to be missionary churches at all (Robert Plummer, ‘Imitation of Paul and the Church’s Missionary Role in 1 Corinthians,’ *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 44/2 (June 2001), 219). One explanation typically given is that Paul’s silence cannot be taken for a lack of interest in this but is normal in a context where “missionizing fervor” was a norm of the “earliest Christian communities as depicted in Acts” (James Ware, “‘Holding For the Word of Life: Paul and the Mission of the Church in the Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Second Temple Judaism,’” (Ph.D. diss., Yale, 1996), 327 in Robert Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 34). Paul simply intended the churches to continue the work of preaching the gospel where he had left off and it is assumed this was ongoing, as Ware states: “[Paul] understood himself as the founder of new mediatorial communities through which his own preaching would be extended through the independent missionizing activities of his converts” (J. Ware, “‘Holding for the Word of Life,’” 328). So, although Paul had completed what he saw as his God given task in founding a confessing Christian community, he now believed that that fellowship would be dedicated to bringing the gospel to their neighbors.

6.4.2 Encountering the Spirit in the Church's Confession

As noted above, one of the attractions of Spirit Christology, in a post-colonial context, is the space that it appears to give for developing an incultured theology. Yet when this is developed into an emphasis on the Spirit as universally present, as Christ universalized, this can lead to marginalizing the relationship between the Spirit and the church.

The relationship of the Spirit and the church can become perceptible when the Spirit is understood as witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This view of the Spirit as witness to Jesus Christ, shared by Newbigin, is explained by Barth with particular clarity. For Barth the work of the Holy Spirit is manifested above all in faith, in the awakening to the reality of what has been accomplished in Christ.⁹⁹² Christians know Jesus Christ and the completed work of atonement in Him, and this is predicated on, or “means” “the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁹³ In other words, the presence of the Spirit is expressed and manifested in the church's faith in Christ, as Barth explains: “It is the work of the Holy Spirit that the eternal presence of the reconciliation in Jesus Christ has in us this temporal form, the form of faith which believes this truth.”⁹⁹⁴ This role of the Spirit as witness is also identified by some of those working with a Spirit Christology approach.⁹⁹⁵

⁹⁹² K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.I, 158.

⁹⁹³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 148. Barth states of this that, “. . . they do now know their justification, sanctification and calling as they have already taken place in Jesus Christ.”

⁹⁹⁴ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.I, 159. Barth emphasized the presence of the Spirit to the church as distinct from the world. He writes that the Holy Spirit is “*lacking* in the world at large” [emphasis mine] (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.I, 148 (reference taken from J. Flett, *The Witness of God*, 148)). Barth's reluctance to discuss the work of the Spirit in the world has been characterized as christomonism. For Barth the world which does not know this reality in Jesus Christ is characterised by the absence of the Holy Spirit. Barth points to the presence of the Spirit in the world only in terms of the Spirit's awakening and enlightening activity of humanity to a conscious knowledge of Jesus Christ.

⁹⁹⁵ Other thinkers working from the perspective of Spirit Missiology affirm the primary identification of the Spirit as witness. Lucy Peppiatt in her work that aims to provide a Spirit Christology missiology, points to Pentecostal reading of Luke-Acts in the past two decades that “argues for a specific view of the Spirit's work in Luke as being one who inspires prophetic speech, which is at the heart of the role of witness to Jesus Christ” (L. Peppiatt, ‘Spirit Christology and Mission,’ 159). She refers here to Robert P Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); James B. Shelton, *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991); and Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004). Stronstad, for instance, points to how “Luke often explicitly relates the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit to vocation as the spirit of prophecy” (p. 10). One of the interesting aspects of Stronstad's approach is that he reads the giving of the Spirit in terms of the missionary calling of the community. An example of this is his identification of the giving of the Spirit to the household of Cornelius, as a parallel to the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, with the same focus on proclamation. Here he describes the Spirit as the “gift of the Spirit of prophecy” (p. 11). This is in distinction from a more common reading of this event as soteriological, having to do with the mediation of salvation to the household.

Importantly for our present discussion, the Spirit bears witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ in and through the community that confesses Jesus Christ in accordance with the Scripture. As Newbigin repeatedly points out, the church is that community which holds at its centre the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scripture, as transmitted through the centuries by the church. Thus, the Spirit is to be encountered by responding in faith to the testimony about Jesus Christ, but also by participating in the witness of the Spirit to Jesus Christ that happens in and through the church.

6.5 Conclusion

In a post-colonial context where the church is a marginal community Newbigin's ecclesiology can be helpful in fruitfully understanding the tensions inherent for the church in such a context. On the one hand the local church has a vision of the redemption of the whole earth, and yet on the other hand there is a vast gap between this and the actual experience of the church struggling with the difficult issues of economic and social marginality. Newbigin had direct experience of the church in such a post-colonial context in India and can be seen as someone who interpreted the calling and identity of a church that lives in this tension. The marginality of the church is addressed in the understanding of the hiddenness of the kingdom, but at the same time this marginality can become the very place of the revelation of the kingdom, through the power of the Spirit that is present to the local church and working within it. As considered in this chapter the Spirit has been pointed to by some Indian theologians in terms of his universal presence. Arguably, Newbigin's identification of the church as the locus of the Spirit is helpful in delivering the church from a sense of marginality, and centering it within society, as the community whom God has chosen and empowered to address the whole.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The search for a strong collective identity and spirit in India is described by S. Tharoor, a former diplomat and cabinet minister, as “the central challenge of India” in this century, namely, that of “accommodating the aspirations of different groups in the national dream.”⁹⁹⁶ The idea that in India there has been a “tremendous impress of oneness”⁹⁹⁷ is partially a philosophical abstraction that waves a hand over crippling divisions of religion, caste, and ethnicity. Tharoor states that to date the Indian state has “failed to create a single Indian community.”⁹⁹⁸ He is largely referring to the Hindu-Muslim religious divide, and the fraught history of that relationship following partition.⁹⁹⁹ But the lack of a single Indian community runs much deeper than religion, for within Hinduism are multiple groups and castes, differentiated from one another and with little sense of a collective spirit uniting these groups together, as Tharoor recognizes when he states about India:

. . . it is a welfare society in which people constantly help each other out, provided they feel a connection that justifies their help.

Unfortunately, our sense of community largely stops there. Very few Indians have a broader sense of community than that circumscribed by ties of blood, caste affiliation, or village. We take care of those we consider near and dear, and remain largely indifferent to the rest.”¹⁰⁰⁰

The absence of strong national unity is most clearly shown by the appeal of the right wing Hindu movements. Tharoor writing in *India* recognizes that a lack of collective identity is the reason for the rise of Hindutva (the creation of a Hindu nation). One of the elements that this involves has been towards a more clearly defined practice and confession of Hinduism, which he describes as an effort to “Semitize” the Hindu faith.¹⁰⁰¹ The historian Lal likewise identifies a similar trend in Hinduism of those who are “homogenizing the faith, divesting it of the diverse, and

⁹⁹⁶ S. Tharoor, *India*, 78.

⁹⁹⁷ J. Nehru, quoted in S. Tharoor, *India*, 128.

⁹⁹⁸ S. Tharoor, *India*, 123.

⁹⁹⁹ The wounds of partition have been reopened with the increase of communal violence in the past twenty years since the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. This mosque was torn down by thousands of militant Hindu activists, acting on the belief that this mosque had been built by the Mughal Babar over a temple marking the birthplace of Ram.

¹⁰⁰⁰ S. Tharoor, *India*, 289.

¹⁰⁰¹ S. Tharoor, *India*, 117.

often contradictory, strands of worship, conduct, belief and thought.”¹⁰⁰² An example of this to which he points is the rejection of the multiple versions of the Ramayana for one standard text.¹⁰⁰³ The response from the “proponents of Hindutva” to this is to state that this lack of collective identity will lead to the stagnation and decline of the faith. However much a person may dislike the politics of Hindutva their position is understandable in that a strong society does exist on the basis of shared values and beliefs. The difference between ethnic groups was not only eliminated but also some of the division between the different social classes. Although Tharoor is far from being an advocate for Hindutva, he does indicate the rationale of a consolidated Hindu identity for India among those Hindu nationalists who long for a strong and assertive India.

In this context in what ways can we see the church as a distinct community with her mission as having an integral place in Indian society? Does she not simply exacerbate the problems of division as the advocates of Hindutva suggest? Fifty years ago at the beginning of *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* Newbigin stated that one of the most pressing critiques of missions was its failure to contribute to the “healing of the divisions of mankind.”¹⁰⁰⁴ The form in which this critique is made today is considerably sharper, namely that the church by continuing as a distinct community with a distinct mission is actually creating division and communal tension, and making itself the enemy of society and the public good.

There are five key points that we can see in Newbigin’s thought that may help us respond to the question and see the ways the church as a distinct community with a distinct mission has an integral place in Indian society today. Firstly, and more negatively, Newbigin points to the fact that until the final consummation of history the church will always be in a position of confronting opposition. She will always be in a situation where there are voices trying to eliminate or marginalize her presence to the periphery of society. Opposition from the powers that are manifested in political, religious and cultural systems of authority is a normative situation for the church until the final return of Christ. An element of tension with the power structures of the surrounding society (at a local and national level) is, and always will be, a feature of

¹⁰⁰² V. Lal, *History of History*, 122.

¹⁰⁰³ The Ramayana is one of the two great epics of Indian literature, the other being the Mahabharata. It tells the story of Ram’s recovery of his wife, Sita from Ravana. Ram is generally considered to be the ideal king, and an incarnation of Vishnu.

¹⁰⁰⁴ L. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 16.

its missionary existence until the return of Christ. The church is therefore called to understand that a part of her calling is to participate in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the church's verbal witness to Jesus Christ and call to faith in him and the participation in the church community which follows from this, is located in relation to the kingdom of God, as the way in which we becoming centered in God's purpose for the whole world in Jesus Christ. Baptism and membership of the church may involve a degree of separation from society, but a wider purpose becomes realized of joining in an action and movement that is for the benefit of all humanity.¹⁰⁰⁵ Church membership is in one sense a stepping apart from the world, but a stepping apart in order to be liberated to serve the whole. This tension cannot be eliminated, and is for Newbigin essential to a true eschatology as he states: "With it [a true eschatology] the tension remains between the concern to build up the Church and the concern to leave the Church for the sake of the world."¹⁰⁰⁶ Throughout the post-colonial era there have been voices in the Indian church arguing against missions and the church's self-understanding as a community into which all are called to participate. M. M. Thomas equivocates that it is not possible to "absolutize Christian religion or Christian society", suggesting that church membership and baptism cannot be insisted upon. He believes that in the tension between the eschatological and the historical dogmatism is not possible.¹⁰⁰⁷ Stanley Samartha rejects the idea that in a pluralistic context other peoples should be incorporated into church membership stating that, "In a religiously plural world the mission of the church is not to make other people Christians but to invite people to enter the kingdom of God."¹⁰⁰⁸ In contrast to these voices Newbigin indicates the close inter-relationship between the church and the kingdom. Entrance into the church community has in view a going out to service in the whole.

Thirdly, the church's existence as a distinct community within society is to be understood not in communal terms, but rather as a vital element in maintaining a healthy and vibrant democratic society. This happens in two ways. The church has a calling to image to the world the politics of God's kingdom in her own life and relationships both within the church and outside. In his essay 'Which Way for "Faith and Order"?' Newbigin supports the resolution of the Committee on Faith and Order

¹⁰⁰⁵ L. Newbigin, 'Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,' 54.

¹⁰⁰⁶ L. Newbigin, 'Which Way for "Faith and Order"?', 120.

¹⁰⁰⁷ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 80.

¹⁰⁰⁸ S. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions*, 174.

of the Uppsala Assembly (1968) that the primary issue for Faith and Order should be the visible unity of the church, and further that this consideration of the unity of the church should be within the framework of “the concern for the unity of mankind.” God’s kingdom is a community sustained by love and respect for the other and not by autocratic control of the few over the many.¹⁰⁰⁹ The second way in which the church helps maintain a healthy and vibrant democratic society is through her responsibility to “remind” the state of her responsibility to God so that the state is controlled in her actions and policies by this sense of accountability.

Fourthly, the church is to be seen as a site of salvation in the world precisely because it is that place in which it becomes possible to experience the restoration of fellowship within the whole human family, and the creation of global fellowship. Newbigin criticizes Samartha’s rejection of missions and conversion on the grounds of it being a movement from one community to another on the basis that Samartha has adopted an “atomistic spirituality”: “God’s action for the salvation of the whole human family cannot be a series of private transactions within a multitude of individual souls; it is something wrought out in public history.”¹⁰¹⁰ The church is the primary site of healing the world’s broken relationships precisely because membership of the church requires becoming related to the whole.

Fifthly, the church as a distinct community with a distinct mission in the world has an integral place in Indian society only as a community led by the Spirit. The church’s place in society does not consist in holding power at the centre, but through a constant openness to the Spirit and the Spirit’s transformative power. Newbigin interprets the Holy Spirit as the agent of a multi-dimensional mission action in the world in which missions finds its place.

In conclusion, while this portrayal of the church may seem idealistic in relation to the realities of the church as we know her, it hopefully also holds out the possibility of what the church can be as we learn together to be the church, the gathering, that God has called us to be.

¹⁰⁰⁹ L. Newbigin, ‘Which Way for “Faith and Order”?’ 118.

¹⁰¹⁰ L. Newbigin, ‘Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,’ 54.

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