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# The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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## EDITORIAL

Baptists, like other religious groups, have long been familiar with that kind of *apologia* for their distinctive beliefs and practices which seeks to show the historical benefits they have bequeathed to society at large. Look, the argument runs, at so many of the values which we cherish in our civilization today - and note how many of them were first seen from afar by our pioneering forbears. What we now take for granted is the fruit of their struggle and suffering, and in some cases marked by their blood. So, as nonconformists we are bidden to witness to the part played by our spiritual ancestors in the struggle for religious liberty and the rights of individual conscience, from Thomas Helwys onwards. That, it is pointed out, constitutes one of the seed-beds of modern liberal democracy. Equally, it may be observed, the dissenters' reaction to their ex-

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clusion from the universities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generated a movement for higher education in the 'academies' which heralded the ideals of both liberal and scientific education which mean so much today. In turn, increasing attention is now being paid to the roles of dissenting communities and individuals in scientific research and technological innovation in the eighteenth century, out of which the new industrial age was born.

The historical connexions in such instances may well be soundly traced. But when harnessed to the wagon of denominational testimony (or propaganda) certain presuppositions have also been drawn in. Chief among these is the value and permanent significance of the contemporary culture and social structure, which thus constitute the justification for the earlier historical developments. Closely allied to this, of course, is the belief in progress, still virtually axiomatic today. The root assumption is that our western, liberal, scientific-ly based culture is the most definitive realization (yet) of all that sound and sane people may aspire towards. Of course the journey is not yet finished, but the route is clear. So long as this assumption remains firm, then there is an assured future for historically-based apologetics. In essence all that has to be done is to identify and agree upon the benefits of modern life, and then locate the origins of at least some of them in our particular tradition.

But what if these assumptions about contemporary culture begin to crumble? What if the development of the last two hundred years is increasingly felt to be, not the dawn of the great age of man, but the last spectacular spasm of a dying west? And what if some of the features on which we have most prided ourselves were to emerge as direct influences in that decline? Would we be so anxious to trace the connexions then?

Such reflections are prompted by the recent small book from the pen of Bishop Leslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984. Questions for the Churches* (WCC Risk Series 1984, available from British Council of Churches). In brief, his thesis is that the western churches have allowed *post-Enlightenment* thinking to dominate their own perceptions of reality and the nature of truth and knowledge. Enlightenment presuppositions about individual autonomy and 'scientific' objectivity have become axiomatic to the extent that the gospel has been progressively accommodated to the culture, instead of challenging and changing it. Christians have set themselves the task of providing means to realizing western expectations, when it is in fact those very expectations which need questioning.

Some may feel that this is good (or bad!) conservative fare, reversing the secularising trend of recent Protestant theology. But Newbigin does not wish to keep tame and otherworldly company. One of his main targets is precisely the privatized piety of modern Protestantism, the restriction of faith to the inward and purely personal. 'The Church has lived so long as a permitted and even privileged minority, accepting relegation to the private sphere in a culture whose public life is controlled by a totally different vision of reality, that it has

almost lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision and therefore to "modern civilisation" as a whole'.

How Christianity can effectively re-enter the *public* sphere in a non-dominating way is a problem which Newbiggin sees clearly without fully solving. One thing he is certain of, is that Christianity needs to challenge the 'scientific' west at the heart of one of its most cherished assumptions - that knowledge begins with doubt. Understanding begins with faith; the acceptance of what is other than us yet real to us. It is the lack of this which Newbiggin sees to be the common thread running from the detached 'scientific' view which seeks to 'explain' so much yet understands so little, to the individualism of the man or woman for whom life is essentially self-contained without any genuine relations either with the world, other persons, or God.

Many Baptists will applaud the avowedly 'missionary' stance of this book. But beware. Some of Newbiggin's targets may lie uncomfortably close to home.

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