



**LESLIE NEWBIGIN**  
SUMMER INSTITUTE

**'Leslie Newbigin: Prophet to Western Culture'**

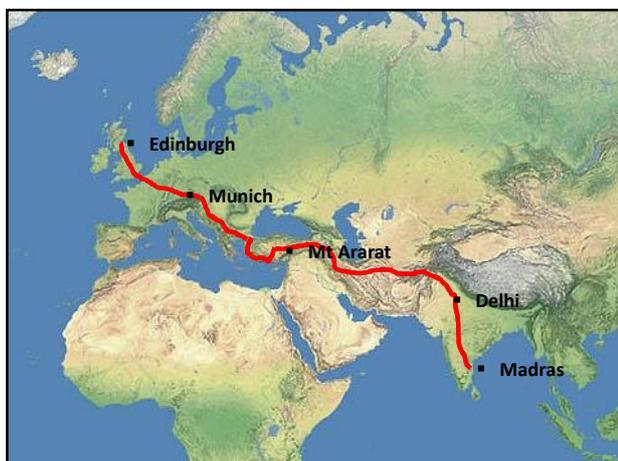
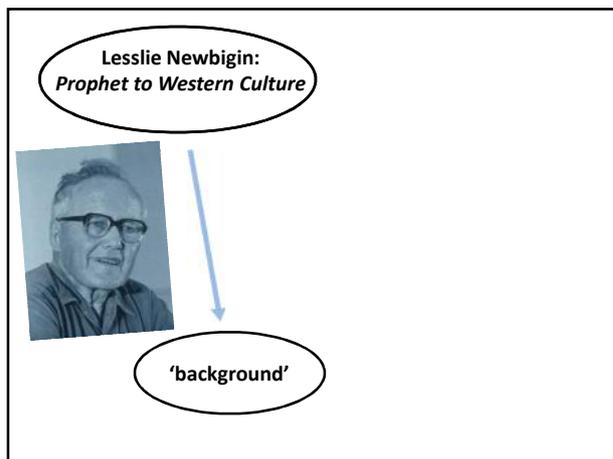
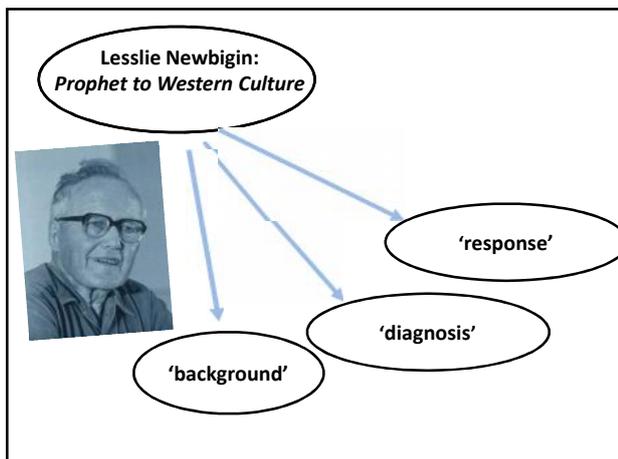
*Revd Dr Paul Weston*  
10 July 2014



England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.

*Unfinished Agenda (1993), p.236*

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Throughout our time in Afghanistan we were constantly reminded of the way in which four religions had competed for the allegiance of central Asia: Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian and Moslem. In Eastern Turkey we were vividly aware of the way in which one of the greatest centres of Christian life and thought had been completely taken over by Islam.

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Cappadocia, once the nursery of Christian theology, was the only place in our whole trip where we had to have our Sunday worship by ourselves, for there was no other Christian to be found. We took a picnic lunch and walked over the fresh green turf of the Goreme Valley on a crisp April day, explored the ancient cave churches with their vivid wall paintings and tried to come to terms with the fact that a great living Church can be completely destroyed.

*Unfinished Agenda (1993), p.227*

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... finally an uneventful journey through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Austria, savouring the gradual changes in style of architecture and of cultivation, until at 5.30am on 10 May (1974) we stopped in the centre of Munich and had our real culture shock.

*Unfinished Agenda, p.227*

8



I decided to do what I had not previously attempted: to read the whole of Barth's *Dogmatics*. It was an immensely rewarding experience. Barth condensed and Barth quoted I had found totally unimpressive. But the real Barth, and especially the famous small-print notes, was enthralling. It was a needed preparation for the much more difficult missionary experience which (as I did not then realize) lay ahead.

*Unfinished Agenda, p.228-9*

9



'During the twelve years since I came back to England, and especially since I had a pastoral charge in Birmingham, I have come more and more to feel that England is as much a foreign mission field as India was for me in 1936.'

*'Our Missionary Responsibility' (1988)*

10



I have come to feel that there is an English parallel to the picture in the Ramakrishna Mission Hall. . . . it has increasingly seemed to me that instead of allowing the Gospel to challenge the unexamined assumptions of our culture, we have co-opted Jesus into our culture by giving him a minor role in what we call the private sector.

*'Christian Faith in a Secularised World' Unpublished paper (1985)*

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'The BCC's publishing department thought that it would be risky to print more than 500 copies, but it was taken up by the World Council of Churches and quickly sold 20,000.'

... 'a small blast not of the trumpet but of the tin whistle'

12



'I was quite astonished at the volume and range of correspondence that descended on me. Clearly the questions had touched a nerve, even if answers were still to be found. I was moved by letters from lay people who told me that it had illuminated their situation. A lawyer told me that he felt as if the sun had risen and he could see the landscape.'

*Unfinished Agenda (1993), p.252*

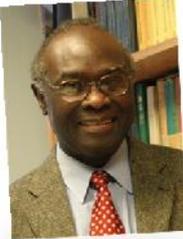
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**Dan Beeby**  
on *The Other Side of 1984*:

'... [Lesslie] has formulated clearly some of the questions which have hovered over many minds. Straws in the wind have been brought into one compact rick. He has systematized for many of us the gropings and half answers that were already ours and we are grateful.'

14



**Lamin Sanneh**

There is no doubt of the enormous influence of Newbigin and his significance for a cross cultural critique of the West. He has broken wide open the shell of Western cultural exclusiveness by insisting that from the religious point of view Western societies are to be confronted with the gospel no less relentlessly than Third World societies, the only difference being that the West may be a 'darker continent' for having reneged on its religious heritage.

*Encountering the West, 1993, p.193*

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'Having spent most of my working life in India and then come back, I have discovered – in a way, to my own astonishment – that one faces the same problem here, and that one is again in a culture where, when you attempt to communicate the gospel, you are going completely against the stream.'

*'Interview' (1988)*

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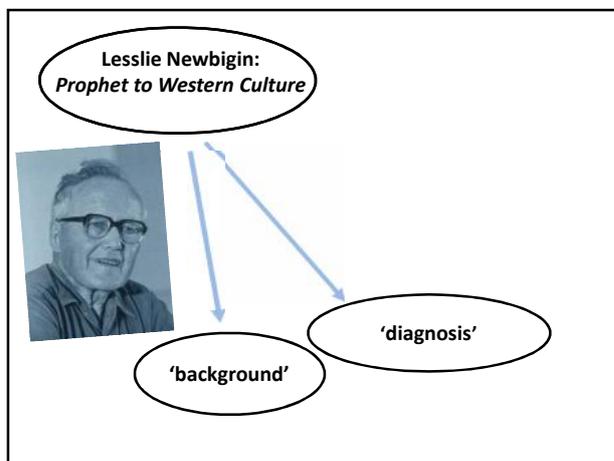


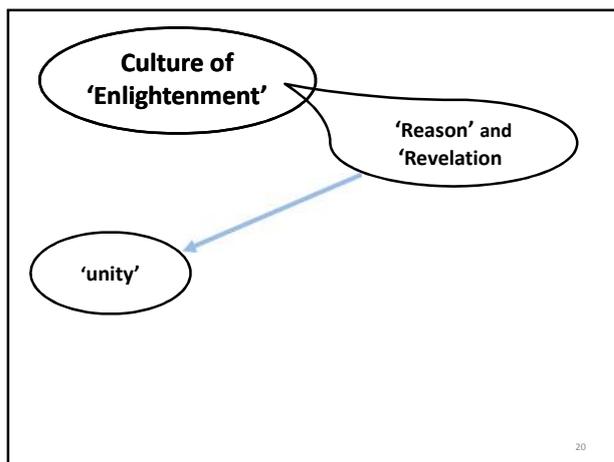
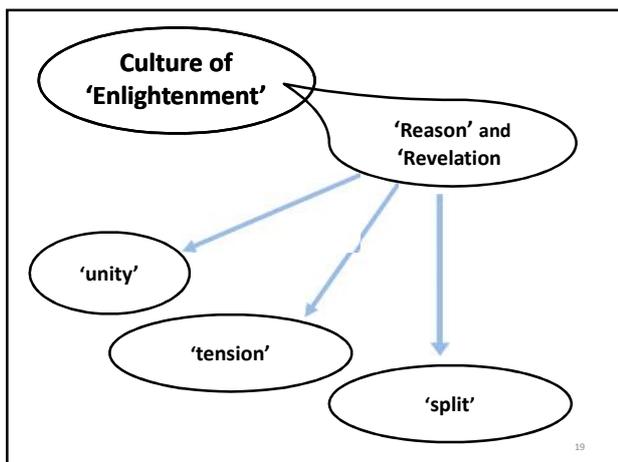
'The angle from which I am approaching the study is that of a foreign missionary.'

*Foolishness to the Greeks (1986)*



17





**Augustine of Hippo**  
(354–430)

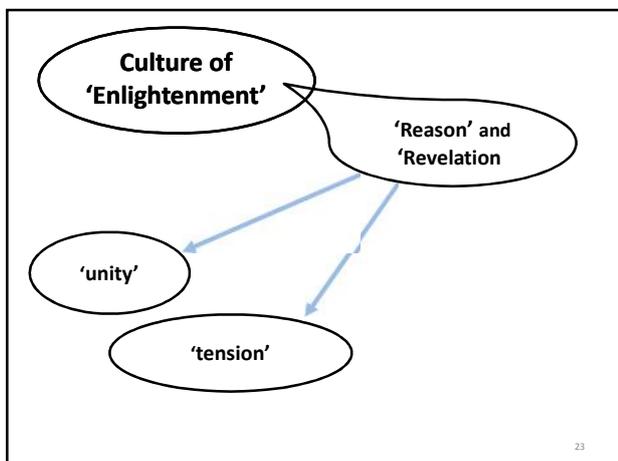
'We believe in order that we might know; for if we wished to know and then believe, we should not be able either to know or to believe.'

*Commentary on Gospel of John*

**Anselm of Canterbury**  
(c.1033-1109)

'For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but **I believe in order to understand**' (*credo ut intelligam*)

*Proslogion – chapter 1*



**Aristotle**  
384–322 BC

A map of Europe and the Mediterranean region with blue arrows indicating the flow of influence from the East (Asia/India) through the Mediterranean to the West (Europe).



**Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā**  
(c.980–1037)  
**'Avicenna'**

**Abū 'l-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Rushd**  
(1126–1198)  
**'Averroës'**

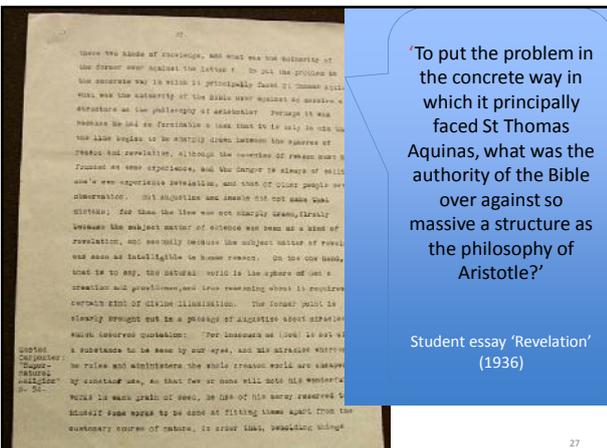
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**Thomas Aquinas**  
(c.1225–1274)

*Summa contra Gentiles*



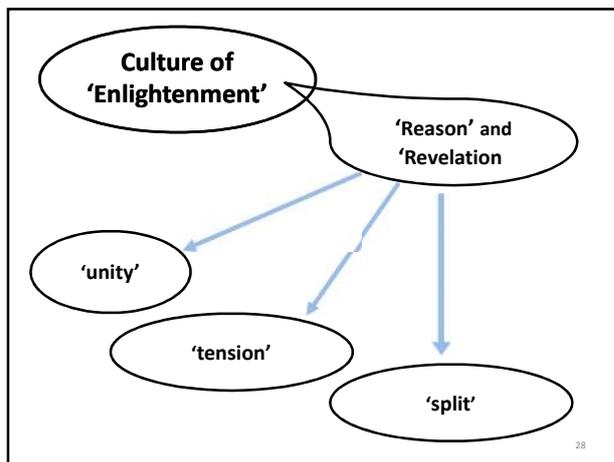
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To put the problem in the concrete way in which it principally faced St Thomas Aquinas, what was the authority of the Bible over against so massive a structure as the philosophy of Aristotle?

Student essay 'Revelation' (1936)

27




**René Descartes**  
(1596–1650)

*Cogito ergo sum.*  
'I think, therefore I am'

29



**René Descartes**  
(1596–1650)

'Those who are seeking the strict way of truth should not trouble themselves about any object concerning which they cannot have a certainty equal to arithmetical or geometrical demonstration.'

*Rules for Direction of the Understanding*  
(c.1628)

30

**Immanuel Kant**  
(1724-1804)

Enlightenment is man's exodus from his self-incurred tutelage. . .

'Dare to know!' . . . Have the courage to use your own understanding; this is the motto of the Enlightenment.

'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784)



31

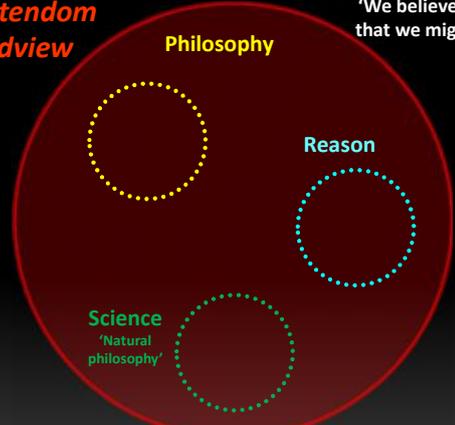
**Christendom Worldview**

**Philosophy**

**Reason**

**Science**  
'Natural philosophy'

'We believe in order that we might know'



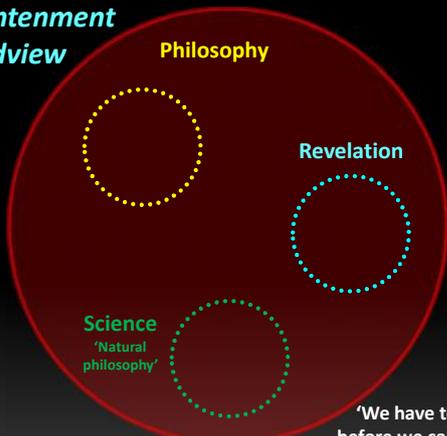
**Enlightenment Worldview**

**Philosophy**

**Revelation**

**Science**  
'Natural philosophy'

'We have to know before we can believe'



**Culture of 'Enlightenment'**

**'Reason' and 'Revelation'**



The 'Age of Reason' supposed that there was available to human beings a kind of indubitable knowledge, capable of being grasped by all human beings which was more reliable than any alleged revelation, and which could therefore provide the criteria by which any alleged divine revelation could be assessed.'

'Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach' (1993), p.233

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**Culture of 'Enlightenment'**

**'Working assumptions'**

**'Facts' and 'values'**

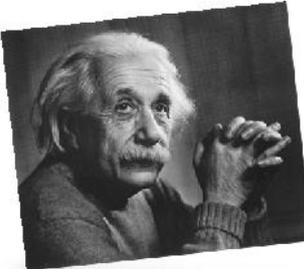
'The public world . . . is a world of facts that are the same for everyone; . . . the private world is a world of values where all are free to choose their own . . . and therefore to pursue such courses of action as will correspond with them.'

*Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), p.35-6

35

**Albert Einstein**  
(1879-1955)

We live in a time of perfect means and confused ends.



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**Culture of 'Enlightenment'**

**'Working assumptions'**

**'Facts' and 'values'**

**'Knowing' and 'believing'**

'We are pluralist in respect of what we call *beliefs* but we are not pluralist in respect of what we call *facts*. The former are a matter of personal decision; the latter are a matter of public knowledge.'

*Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989), p.27*

37

**John Locke**  
(1632-1704)

What reaches to knowledge, I think may be called 'certainty'; and what comes short of certainty, I think cannot be called knowledge.

*Letter to the Bishop of Worcester*



38

**John Locke**  
(1632-1704)

Faith is . . .

'... a persuasion of our minds short of knowledge.'

*A Third Letter on Toleration (1689)*



39

**Culture of 'Enlightenment'**

**'Working assumptions'**

**'Facts' and 'values'**

**'Knowing' and 'believing'**

**'Public' and 'private'**

Western churches have (in general) accepted the relegation of the gospel to the 'private sector' where it takes its place as one of the ways of personal salvation and abandons its claim to be the clue to the understanding of the whole public life of (hu)mankind.

*'Centrality of Jesus for History' (1979), p.200*

**Lesslie Newbigin: Prophet to Western Culture**



**'background'**

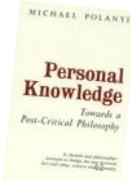
**'diagnosis'**

**'response'**

**Michael Polanyi**  
(1891-1976)

The purpose of this book is to show that complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal.

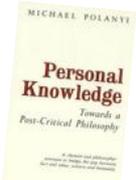
p. 18





The enquiring scientist's intimations of a hidden reality are personal. . . Yet they are not a subjective state of mind, but convictions held with universal intent.

p.311




All knowing is personal knowing – participation through indwelling.

*Meaning* (1975), p.44.



'We know God as he reveals himself to us. There is no other way to the knowledge of persons.'

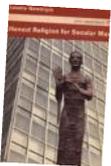
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**'focal' and 'tacit' knowing. . .**  
**'indwelling'**

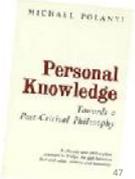
. . . as the pathway to discovery  
. . . as the basis for 'publication'

46

'Readers of Personal Knowledge by Michael Polanyi . . . will recognize in what follows my debt to this book.'

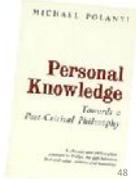
p.80



47




Newbigin resolved thereafter to reread it every ten years, and commented in the 1990s that he had certainly 'read it several times since'.



48



**'Indwelling' the Christian story**

- as the clue to Christian identity
- as the way of discipleship
- as the way of witness

49

**... indwelling the story as the clue to *identity***  
*understanding my place in the big story*



... purpose can only be known through the self-disclosure of the person whose purpose it is. If the whole frame of things and the whole human story have a purpose, we can know it insofar as the one whose purpose it is discloses it. We are bound, in strict logic, to invoke the concept of revelation.

'Our Missionary Responsibility' (1988), p.109

50

**... indwelling the story as the clue to *identity***  
*understanding my place in the big story*



This is our story, and it defines who we are. Just as character can only be truly rendered in narrative form, so the answer to the question 'Who am I?' can only be given if we ask 'What is my story?' and that can only be answered if there is an answer to the further question, 'What is the whole story of which my story is a part?'

To indwell the Bible is to live with an answer to those questions, to know who I am and who is the One to whom I am finally accountable.'

*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989), p.100*

**... indwelling the story as the way of *discipleship***  
*seeing the world with biblical eyes*



... the Christian story provides us with ... a set of lenses, not something for us to look *at*, but for us to look *through*.

Using Polanyi's terminology, I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story, *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.

*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989), p.38*

52

**... indwelling the story as the way of *witness***  
*bearing witness to what we know*



'The scientist who commits himself to the new vision does so – as Polanyi puts it – with universal intent.

He believes it to be objectively true, and he therefore causes it to be widely published, invites discussion, and seeks to persuade his fellow scientists that it is a true account of reality.'

*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989), p.47*

53

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58

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*bearing witness to what we know*



'How can this strange story of God made flesh, of a crucified Savior, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world which can be satisfactorily explained and managed without the hypothesis of God? I know of only one clue to the answering of that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: a congregation which believes it. ... There is no other hermeneutic of the gospel.'

'Evangelism in the City' (1987), pp.4-5

59

... indwelling the story as the way of **witness**  
*bearing witness to what we know*



'... to give up the quest of ... unity is to settle for something less than the Gospel.'

'All in One Place or All of One Sort?' (1976), p.306.

'The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another.'

*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), p.228

60