

TITLE:

Outline the factors that make communication of the gospel difficult in the Western context. Starting from the Lausanne definition of culture, compare the 'church' culture in Britain with that of the general population. What are the major areas of difference?

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- 1.....*The Lausanne definition of culture*
 - 2.....*The Enlightenment World-View*
 - 3.....*Two Complicating Factors*
 - 4.....*Suggestions for communication of the Gospel*

1. *The Lausanne definition of culture*

‘Culture is an integrated system of beliefs (about God, reality, ultimate meaning), of values (what is true, good, beautiful, normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat), of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (government, law courts, temples, churches, family, schools, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs etc.) which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security and continuity.’¹

In the light of this useful working definition, there can be no doubt that there is a divide between the culture within Western churches, and that outside. In essence this is a difference between the Christian (Biblical) world-view and the predominant Enlightenment world-view. Those constituents of this world-view that militate against acceptance of the gospel will be outlined below, but from the start it should be noted that other factors in the culture complicate the relationship between the two approaches.

If we take the example of Britain, the two principal reasons for this complexity are:

- We live in a multi-cultural society. This is partly because of the post-colonial influx of people and ideas from around the world, but mainly because actually three consecutive dominant world-views currently coexist in Britain.
- The culture within churches is not ‘pure’, but deeply influenced by the external cultural situation.

These will be examined after the general overview.

2. *The Enlightenment World-View*

At the root of contemporary thinking is the principle of *rationalism*. The virtues of reason were praised during the Renaissance, and particularly by the Protestant Reformers, who were facing an entrenched traditionalism². But with the Enlightenment, reason became the sole criterion for knowledge:

Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum* came to mean that the human mind was viewed as the indubitable point of departure for all knowing.³

In other words, the supremacy of reason became an *axiom* of the world-view, and this soon began impacting on Christian faith. This is because Christianity's authority rests fundamentally on *revelation*, not pure reason.

Despite attempts down the centuries to present a rationalistically based gospel (*e.g.* natural religion, liberalism, *etc.*), revelation remains a barrier to belief for those whose assumption is that truth must, and can, be known from reason alone.

The root of rationalism has produced several fruits antagonistic to faith. A number of authors have described these in terms like *secularisation*, *privatisation*, and *pluralisation*⁴.

Secularisation probably has its roots in the philosophical nominalism of William of Ockham, which attributed a relatively high degree of autonomy to the created order and so laid the foundation for empirical science⁵. With the rise of rationalism, two parallel developments occurred.

The first was to see the search for God as fruitless, God being beyond the physical realm and therefore beyond rational investigation.

The second was to interpret the universe without reference to ‘*the God hypothesis*’ (as Carl Sagan put it), a process very congenial to the mind which placed man’s reason at the centre of understanding.

Secularisation in science and philosophy paved the way for the same to happen in other aspects of culture:

This secularisation is evident in modern political life, in scientific or technological work, in modern economic systems, and even in the production and transmission of modern culture. All the central spheres of modern social and cultural life are, for the most part, both theoretically and practically atheistic.⁶

It is therefore not surprising that God is seen as irrelevant to the lives of modern people. At most, he is responsible purely for spiritual, other-worldly matters: as often he is collapsed into his own universe and made, like the cosmos, the servant of man’s reason (*cf.* the pantheism of popular spiritual thought from *Star Wars* to the *Gaia hypothesis*)⁷.

Privatisation, the religious aspect of the general term *autonomy*, is the natural concomitant of the secularisation of ideas. Secularisation created an absolute dichotomy between the world, and the rational mind that studied it. The mind itself was not the subject of investigation⁸, and so its conclusions about meaning were not objective ‘facts’, but *subjective* ‘values’.

Newbigin, following Polanyi, points out that the fallacy in this is the assumption that reason can discern facts that are value-free⁹, but nevertheless the result in the modern world-view was that:

The factual, ontological basis for using [the language of right and wrong] had been removed. There could only be

personal choice. And what could guide that choice except the will?¹⁰

Hence the Christian claim that the gospel is objectively and universally true is deeply unpopular. Faith is a matter of ‘values’, *i.e.* private opinion, and not of ‘facts’.

The last factor, *Pluralisation*, has grown as a natural sequel to this. Since there is no universally valid religious truth, then there is no means to judge between the merits of the many available opinions, and the co-existence of many views has come to be seen not just as an observed fact, but as a virtue.

As Newbiggin points out, the net result has been necessarily to devalue *all* religion. The ‘superior’, objective mind will wish to avoid all that is not universally true, and will therefore avoid reaching any opinion on religion that cannot be subsumed to reason.

The fallacy of this is that the whole sphere of religion has, *ipse facto*, already been ruled out of the world of facts. This hasn’t stopped the popular mind from espousing the ideal of a universal religion, which inevitably gets no further than a pantheistic mysticism, free of moral content. This accounts for the observation that courses on comparative religion deem all religions equal, whilst in practice denigrating Christianity for claiming *not* to be equal!

Briefly, then, to contrast the culture of the Church with the culture in which it is set, we see a direct clash in all four areas.

- The Church lives its life under the authority of God’s revelation in Scripture, and supremely in the life of Jesus. Reason is merely one

of the tools used to understand that revelation. Those outside have been brought up to believe that reason is actually the only source of knowledge, so that Scripture is only relevant if it supports the authority of reason¹¹.

- The Church sees all life as an expression of God's love and goodness. Those outside have grown up in a system that sometimes denies God, but *always* operates as though he does not exist. The irrelevance of God has been *built into* the whole structure of society.
- Christians exist as a community under the discipline of God and his word. They learn together, question each other's grasp on the truth – and indeed, submit to the authority of one apostolic tradition¹². The outsider thinks of 'organised religion' in pejorative terms, and has increasingly before him the ideal of personal autonomy (in medical ethics, legislation, marital affairs, choice of sexuality and gender, as well as in the 'spiritual' sphere). He is asked to submit to the authority of God, his word, and his community, when society at large has made 'authority' a vice.
- The gospel teaches '*one church, one faith, one baptism*'. Even amongst those who mitigate traditional teaching on the punishment of unbelievers, there is little or no place for absolute universalism. This runs completely counter to the spirit of the age, which would rather endorse the validity of rationally opposed views than deny the principle of pluralism.

Here, then, is the background to the problem of communicating the gospel within British culture. We will now look briefly at the two important factors that complicate the picture.

3. *Two Complicating Factors*

Three major world-views actually influence our present society: the remains of the old Protestant Biblical view (which in turn includes the fusion of late-mediæval and early Enlightenment approaches); the Enlightenment view, as outlined above; and the emerging Post-modern view¹³.

Enlightenment thinking has been gaining the ascendancy for over three hundred years, but has only recently become the dominant view of the common people (just as its bankruptcy has been acknowledged by the intelligentsia!). That is why a substantial number of older people, still influenced by traditional wisdom, cannot come to terms with the irreligion and shifting morality of the times. But it also explains the general alienation of the young from the churches, insofar as few churches have come to terms with the post-modern viewpoint they have imbibed.

Though this intermingling of world-views is confusing, it can be helpful in evangelism, for one need not (and must not) assume that all traces of a theistic outlook have been effaced. Amongst the young, this is often so, but even in this case a significant proportion have been to Sunday School, Crusaders and so on. One is not simply addressing someone with a different world-view, but with a series of conflicting world-views co-existing rather uncomfortably together. One is able to offer the real chance of resolving that conflict.

The evangelical churches themselves are a particular example of these overlapping world-views. Until recently, *conservatism* was the mark of evangelicalism. It had seen itself as the custodian of pre-modern ‘biblical’ truth (although the pietism predominant in the movement, in its stress on experience rather than reason, had unwittingly capitulated to the Enlightenment dichotomy of ‘facts’ and ‘values’¹⁴). But in retreating into the ghetto, it became increasingly culturally isolated.

In perhaps the last twenty-five years, specific attempts have been made to redress this. But in opening the doors, significant elements of the Enlightenment world-view have crept in, whether in the rise of ‘liberal evangelicalism’ in theology, or in the increasing similarity in the lifestyle of churchgoers and outsiders.

This is no new problem, for syncretism is a universal complication in enculturation of the gospel. This is borne out by the significant remnant of pre-christian paganism in our Christianity – Christmas decorations, hot cross buns, and more importantly the vestiges of Greek thinking like the Platonic dualism between spirit and matter.

But it has been particularly marked in a culture which has arisen so much as a *reaction* to Christian theism. There are fewer points of reference between the Christian and non-Christian world-views than in many other societies.

The problem, then, is that a Church consisting of those whose own Christian world-view is significantly affected by modernism is seeking to

witness to a culture with the same mixture in different proportions. How is this to be attempted?

4. *Suggestions for communication of the Gospel*

Newbigin's grasp of the nature of the Church, as a community living out the story of God's intervention in history, has much to teach us¹⁵. On this analysis, it is essential to the nature of the gospel that it provides an alternative to *all* human world views, which are false because they do not take into account the reality of that intervention. Whether in paganism or in modernism, these world-views constitute 'the world', as St John refers to it, and of course being themselves corrupt they produce corrupt and sinful cultures:

The world is not the real and good world that God has made, nor any other real world, but a fantasy world of sinful imagination, a nothingness which will destroy us if we love it simply because it is nothingness and offers nothing on which we may nourish ourselves.¹⁶

The Church's task, then, is firstly to *be* that community of God, living under the authority of God's world-view as revealed in his word. This means being immersed in the events of God's revelation in history through faithful preaching, study of the word of God, and fully committed relationships both within and outside the Church.

In other words, the Bible furnishes us with our plausibility structure.¹⁷

It must involve the constant challenge of God's word to the false views we imbibe from our surrounding day by day. This is a great challenge, because we are called to be a culture *within* a culture – salt and light *in* the world, with

no option to live purely within our own, Christian, culture. It must also challenge any sub-cultural accretions that might seriously inhibit our contact with outsiders (such as odd dress codes, bizarre behaviour in worship, etc.).

It follows that a greater emphasis than usual must be placed on teaching how to live out the Christian world-view in day-to-day life – the spheres of politics, technology, commerce, culture and wherever else Christians move, and not only in the sphere of personal morality and devotion.

As Newbigin says, when the Church is able to demonstrate the world of God, not as a ghetto-culture but as a counter-culture, it will provoke the questions from those outside to which the gospel of Christ is the answer.

In truth the churches have always done this, but often with an unclear or partial understanding of the task. Because of today's greater obstacles to communicating the gospel, as described above, there is a need for clarity of vision and in some cases a major change of direction. Fortunately the gospel contains within it the means for both.

(2166 words)

¹ Lausanne, 1980

² Gay, 1998, p.110.

³ Bosch, 1991, p.264.

⁴ e.g. Guinness, 1983, p.26.

⁵ Gay, *op. cit.*, p.119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁷ It is even seen amongst evangelicals, who are forced to use a dreadful word like 'God-incidence' because they have lost hold of the doctrine of God's providence and sovereignty.

⁸ Even psychology consists of the investigation of the mind-as-object by the quite distinct mind-as-observer.

⁹ Newbigin, 1989, ch.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹¹ As Newbigin shows this is misguided, because it rests unconsciously on the authority of those who have propagated this exalted view of reason.

¹² This is true even of the Catholic and, to some extent, the Liberal churches, though the nature of the tradition is disputed.

¹³ Gay argues (*op. cit.* p.18) that ‘post-modernism’ not only has yet to be defined, but is actually just one aspect of modernism: ‘...*the essential features of “post-modernism” – however this term is defined – are demonstrably modern in origin. Indeed I would contend that “post-modernity” represents only a kind of extension of modernity, a kind of “hyper-modernity”.*

¹⁴ Bosch, 1991, p.269.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *op. cit.*, ch.10.

¹⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: an Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), quoted in Gay, *op. cit.*, p.6.

¹⁷ Newbigin, *op. cit.*, p.99.

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