Lesslie Newbigin's missional theology of religions

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Lesslie Newbigin’s theology of religions emerged out of his years of missionary service in India and his close interaction with Hindus and Muslims within that context. Newbigin further developed his Christian approach to other faiths once he returned to Britain in the 1970s and began to reflect upon the growing religious pluralism in Western society. His work engaged both Western scholars, who were just starting to address pluralism, and theologians from India and around the world, in whose lives religious pluralism had been a constant reality. While Newbigin’s theology of religions deepened over the course of many decades, a number of consistent themes appear throughout his work on a Christian response to world religions. This paper identifies the key themes in Newbigin’s missional theology of religions and discusses how his ideas have been received, critiqued, and affirmed by theologians of religion.

**NEWBIGIN’S THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS**

As Newbigin joined the Christian discussion about world religions, which gained momentum after the Tambaram world missionary conference of 1938, he argued that this debate was mistakenly centered upon “religion” as the sphere of salvation. Even before reading Karl Barth’s argument that “religion is unbelief,” Newbigin’s experiences with Hindu friends had led him to believe that the gospel’s main point of contact was within the secular areas of human society.\(^1\) Based on his reading of scripture, Newbigin holds that religion is an area of darkness, and he points out that in the New Testament the religious leaders most often rejected Jesus, while the common people welcomed him gladly.\(^2\) According to their own pious commitment to the religious law of their time, these leaders condemned Christ to death. In a similar way, Newbigin warns, Christians today are in danger of letting religion become a barrier to the gospel.

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Christians share in the common human tendency to cut themselves off from God “in the name of all that is best in the moral and spiritual experience of the race.” Therefore, against the claims of all religions, including Christianity, Newbigin insists that “religion is not the means of salvation.” All such claims are negated by the message of Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord who rose again into glory.

Newbigin also challenges the typical theological assumptions about salvation. He notes that in Christian discussions about world religions the inevitable question will be raised: Can the non-Christian be saved? Newbigin writes, “The whole discussion, if I am not mistaken, is focused on the destiny of the individual’s soul after death. But that is not at all the focus of attention in the Bible. Attention is focused on the final event in which God will complete His purpose for all humankind and all creation.” Four main concerns drive Newbigin’s argument. First, he contends that the focus upon personal salvation can become self-centered rather than God centered. He therefore poses a question that he hopes will re-orient Christians toward God’s glory. “The urgent question is not: How shall I be saved? But: How shall God’s name be hallowed, His Kingdom come, His will be done on earth as in heaven?” Second, Newbigin is concerned that the corporate nature of the Christian faith – as well as the corporate reality of human life – is neglected in the emphasis upon salvation of the individual soul. His major argument for continuing Christian mission is that “we, and all who are called to the service of God’s universal promise of blessing, cannot be saved apart from all who have not yet had the opportunity to respond to the promise.” He argues that a person’s relationship with God cannot

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4 Ibid., 177.
5 Ibid.
7 Newbigin makes a similar argument against the “soteriocentric” focus of John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others. See *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 168-168.
8 Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble*, 71.
be independent from his or her relationship with others. For those who follow Christ, this means a communal relationship within the church and an outward movement in mission to others.\textsuperscript{10} Newbigin’s third concern is tied to this focus on the corporate nature of humanity. He argues that those who emphasize personal salvation conceive of humans as individual monads who are abstracted from history. In contrast, he asserts that it is God’s purpose in Christ to work through history to bring all of creation, and all humanity together, to a worthy end. Newbigin identifies this end as the Holy City, depicted in Revelation, which is “the climax of all man’s history on earth.”\textsuperscript{11} Not only is it God’s purpose to save humans within their own history, but this has already been accomplished through the historic event of Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen.\textsuperscript{12} Finally, Newbigin sees the theological debate over who will be saved as futile because only God can give the answer to this question. Therefore, he considers it arrogant for theologians to attempt to identify who will be condemned and who will be saved at the last judgment.\textsuperscript{13}

A number of themes emerge from Newbigin’s discussion of inter-faith dialogue. He insists that when entering dialogue with others, Christians must acknowledge their own commitment to Christ as the ultimate authority. He argues this because he believes that there is no objective standpoint from which one can enter into conversation with another person. This is true for those who follow a particular religion and those who operate from the perspective of modern Western thought.\textsuperscript{14} All people have an ultimate faith commitment, and that must be recognized in order for a genuine, truth-seeking encounter between faiths. “The integrity and fruitfulness of the interfaith dialogue depends in the first place upon the extent to which the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 165.
\item Newbigin, \textit{The Open Secret}, 177.
\item Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 177. He raises this argument against Hans Kung, Karl Rahner and others, reminding readers of Jesus’ own insistence that one cannot know in advance what God’s judgment will be.
\item Newbigin, \textit{The Open Secret}, 168.
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different participants take seriously the full reality of their own faiths as sources for the understanding of the totality of experience.”

Along with this commitment to Christ, Newbigin holds that the Christian should recognize the presence of God in the lives of non-Christians and expect to be changed by the experience of dialogue. Drawing from the gospel of John, he affirms that Jesus is active in creation as the light that illuminates all living things. It is not the Christian’s duty in dialogue to uncover the sins and weaknesses of members of another faith. Rather they are to rejoice at the light of Christ wherever it is found and allow the recognition of sin to come through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit also works to convict the Christian partner of sin, so Christians must be prepared to receive correction as they come “with another person (Christian or not) into the presence of the cross.” With this in mind, Newbigin points to the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, in which both men were converted. Similarly, our own versions of Christianity may be put at risk, challenged, and transformed through an encounter with a member of another faith. Newbigin holds that true dialogue cannot occur in a situation that is safe from such a risk.

While Newbigin believes that true dialogue will allow Christians to join with people of other faiths to work for human freedom and justice, dialogue is not a substitute for mission. The missionary preaching of the church remains essential. Referring again to the example of Peter and Cornelius, Newbigin argues that there is no substitute for telling the gospel story. Peter was commanded to go and give the good news of Christ to Cornelius, and the church has a similar

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 187-188.
task. Newbigin rejects the common pluralistic tendency to replace evangelism with an emphasis on “Christian presence” with people of other faiths. He writes, “It is indeed true that the message with which the Church is entrusted cannot be faithfully delivered by a company of people who do not follow the incarnate Lord in his total commitment to our human condition. The Church has both to embody and to proclaim the Gospel.”

As Newbigin puts forth his theology of religions, he continually engages with other theologians, both those with opinions similar to his and those who uphold very different viewpoints. In recognizing these various approaches, Newbigin identifies his own position as similar to and different from the three customary ways of classifying the relationship between Christianity and other faiths: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Newbigin writes:

“The position which I have outlined is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.”

While theologians have generally classified Newbigin as an exclusivist, he has been recognized by others in the field for some of the unique aspects of his response to other faiths. Those who have engaged with Newbigin’s theology of religions include M. M. Thomas, John Hick, Gavin D’Costa, Wesley Ariarajah, and George Hunsberger. For the purposes of this presentation, I will focus on the critical responses that Hick, D’Costa, and Hunsberger have made to Newbigin’s work.

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22 Newbigni, “Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach,” 238-239. See Signs Amid the Rubble, 73, for Newbigin’s argument about election to bring good news of salvation to others.

RECEPTION OF NEWBIGIN’S THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

In all of his major works on inter-faith relations from the mid-1970s onward, Newbigin critiques John Hick’s ideas.⁴⁴ Hick’s engagement with Newbigin, however, has been minimal, although he certainly has acknowledged Newbigin as a voice on the other side of the debate. He locates Newbigin at the “confessional end of the dialogue spectrum” along with Hendrik Kraemer and Karl Barth, who uphold the Christian revelation as God’s only true revelation.⁵⁵ Of Newbigin’s stance toward inter-faith dialogue Hick says that even if such an approach remains charitable toward people of other religions, its ultimate concern is for their conversion. Hick goes on to point out the plurality of existing centers of faith, including Islam, Hinduism, and Marxism.⁶⁶ He summarizes each of these beliefs and then brings the topic back to dialogue by arguing that as long as people of different faiths remain within their own centers, full dialogue cannot occur. In response to Newbigin, he argues that if dialogue occurs between people bearing witness to their own beliefs with the intent of converting one another, it will likely result in a “hardening of differences.”⁷⁷ While he overlooks Newbigin’s assertion that the purpose of dialogue is not to persuade the non-Christian to accept Christ, he does recognize Newbigin’s acknowledgment that the Christian may be changed through the dialogue.⁸⁸ Hick agrees with this idea but questions how much change Newbigin might allow. He suggests that unless all areas of belief are considered open to change, it might turn out that the Christian was “only playing at openness” while actually holding firm to his own dogmatic conception of Christianity.⁹⁹ Hick agrees with Newbigin that the “intellectual construction” of Christianity should be called into

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Footnotes:

⁶⁶ Hick, God Has Many Names, 118-119.
⁷⁷ Ibid., 121.
⁸⁸ See The Open Secret, 182, for Newbigin’s argument about conversion.
⁹⁹ Hick, God Has Many Names, 122.
question, but suspects that Newbigin would not welcome the kind of change he believes must come through inter-faith dialogue. His suspicion is undoubtedly correct, for the intellectual constructions that Hick proposes to leave behind as the cultural baggage of Western Christianity are the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity.  

Hick also responds to Newbigin’s critique of his pluralist viewpoint. In a hypothetical conversation with a “Philosopher,” Hick answers the question posed by “one critic” who associates pluralism with the “supermarket culture of our time.” It is noteworthy that Hick does not respond to the brunt of Newbigin’s argument, which is that his “soteriocentric” move has elevated the self and its own desires above reality, rather than providing a common center for all of humanity. Instead, Hick explains that pluralism is not just a product of Western culture but that it has ancient roots outside of the Enlightenment. He offers a brief survey of world religions to show that religious pluralism is not a modern Western phenomenon and then asserts, “What is true, however, is that many of us in the West today, though not only in the West, are trying to develop this ancient insight under the impetus of our distinctively modern global awareness and with tools of contemporary epistemological religious studies.”

The final issue John Hick takes up with Newbigin is the question of whether Hick claims a privileged vantage point for pluralism. He refers to Newbigin’s statement about the “immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth which all the world’s religions are only groping after.” Newbigin makes this statement in reference to a story about blind men trying to describe an elephant. The story is told from the viewpoint of a king, who is presumably able to

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33 Hick, *Rainbow of Faiths*, 34.
34 Ibid., 37.
grasp the full reality of the elephant.\textsuperscript{36} Hick takes Newbigin’s words as a veiled reference to his own use of the story in \textit{God and the Universe of Faiths}.\textsuperscript{37} He proceeds to explain that such a claim to a privileged vantage point would be arrogant, but that he never makes this claim. Instead, beginning at the ground level with his own Christian experience and taking note of the diverse faiths around him, Hick has created a hypothesis of an ultimate divine reality in response to the problem of conflicting truth claims. He concludes, “It is an explanatory theory; and I suggest that critics who don’t like it should occupy themselves in trying to produce a better one.”\textsuperscript{38}

In contrast to the pluralist approach of John Hick, as an inclusivist, Gavin D’Costa is able to use some of Newbigin’s ideas, while he disagrees with others. D’Costa surveys the three classical approaches to other faiths and chooses the inclusivist paradigm because it holds together two essential Christian axioms: “the universal salvific will of God” and “that salvation alone comes through God in Christ in his Church.”\textsuperscript{39} D’Costa first uses Newbigin in order to criticize Hendrik Kraemer’s exclusivist paradigm. In response to Kraemer’s strict separation between the gospel and empirical Christianity, he lifts up Newbigin’s argument that Christ’s decisiveness must be interpreted in the life of the community that lives according to the apostolic testimony. On this basis D’Costa claims that Christianity and the gospel cannot be completely disjoined.\textsuperscript{40} He later states that Newbigin properly expresses the church’s historical and social significance when he identifies Christians as chosen to be witnesses, signs, and agents of God’s will. He also upholds Newbigin’s idea of the visible church alongside that of Karl Rahner, who in this case sided with Newbigin and other exclusivists.\textsuperscript{41} As he begins developing his own

\textsuperscript{36} Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 9.
\textsuperscript{38} Hick, \textit{Rainbow of Faiths}, 50.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 74. See also page 105.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 106.
Christian theology of religions, D’Costa finds value in Newbigin’s idea that Christianity continually grows as the gospel’s encounter with new cultures brings to light the fullness of God in Christ. This, according to D’Costa, shows that “Christianity itself becomes fulfilled in and through dialogue and the process of indigenization which accompanies dialogue.”\textsuperscript{42} Finally, in asserting that the inclusivist position rejects any arrogance in its affirmation of Christ’s definitiveness, he points to Newbigin’s view that the Holy Spirit may work through the non-Christian dialogue partner to convict and convert the church.\textsuperscript{43}

Throughout his book, D’Costa offers only one direct critique of Newbigin, although he consistently rejects the exclusivist camp, to which he believes Newbigin belongs. His criticism is aimed at the fact that Newbigin follows Kraemer’s argument that one cannot know how non-Christians might be saved and must leave that question up to God. D’Costa agrees that God works in mysterious ways but believes that the response of Newbigin and Kraemer is “painfully inadequate” and brings a tension to their position which they want to relieve “without paying the price in terms of the theological implications of their answer.”\textsuperscript{44} Outside of this critique, D’Costa remains appreciative of Newbigin’s ideas, and yet it is clear that he only brings up Newbigin’s position when it can be used to argue against exclusivism. While he highlights some of Newbigin’s unique points and affirms that he has something to offer the debate, one wonders whether D’Costa’s inclusivist representation does justice to Newbigin’s full theology of religions. Indeed, in response to D’Costa’s book Newbigin asserted that it was built on a false view of salvation that focused too exclusively upon individual destiny.\textsuperscript{45}

Like Newbigin, George Hunsberger critiques inclusivist stances of Gavin D’Costa and Wesley Ariarajah, a theologian involved in the World Council of Churches discussion of

\textsuperscript{42} D’Costa, \textit{Theology and Religious Pluralism}, 124.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{45} George Hunsberger. \textit{Bearing the Witness of the Spirit} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 229.
Christianity and world religions. Hunsberger is quite affirming of Newbigin’s theology of religions, which he treats within a larger discussion of cultural plurality.\textsuperscript{46} Hunsberger also provides the most thorough and thoughtful critique of Newbigin’s ideas about Christianity and other faiths. His first criticism comes in response to Newbigin’s “agnostic position” on judgment and salvation. In the words of Hans Küng, he questions whether Newbigin is failing to do his “theological duty.”\textsuperscript{47} He asserts that Newbigin’s identification as a “witness” and not a “judge” narrows the notion of witness. In Hunsberger’s view, a witness is an ambassador or herald commissioned to represent God’s judgment.\textsuperscript{48} He also takes issue with Newbigin’s biblical interpretation, arguing that in fact, Jesus states plainly in Luke 13 that many will not enter the kingdom. Finally, Hunsberger believes that holding out for some way of salvation other than election calls into question the missionary character of the church as sign and instrument of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{49}

In raising these challenges Hunsberger does not intend to diminish the value of Newbigin’s ideas.\textsuperscript{50} He goes on to affirm Newbigin’s approach to dialogue, which he recognizes as more pluralistic than the typical pluralist approach. Whereas scholars like John Hick attempt to fit all faith perspectives together into a larger unity, Newbigin’s model for dialogue allows for the plurality of all viewpoints to be represented in the encounter. Hunsberger also upholds Newbigin’s argument that all thought flows from some faith commitment or “fundamental axiom.” This acknowledgment, he believes, brings a truthful mutual understanding to discussions of pluralism because it allows for a clearer self-understanding. Hunsberger questions, however, whether Newbigin overemphasizes this issue. He contends, “Recourse to the ‘fundamental

\textsuperscript{46} For Hunsberger’s critique of Ariarajah and D’Costa see Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 20-21.  
\textsuperscript{47} Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 230.  
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 232.  
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 233. Hunsberger refers to Newbigin’s argument that Jesus refuses to answer the question of how many will be saved in Luke 13. See Newbigin, The Open Secret, 173.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 234.
axiom’ cannot forever exclude the debate about the relative merits of one axiom or another.\textsuperscript{51} Similarly, Hunsberger argues that Newbigin’s protest against the focus on salvation of the individual soul may be “too loud and long” because his own theology requires that the issue of an individual’s ultimate destiny “as either partaker in the corporate salvation or nonpartaker” remain part of the discussion.\textsuperscript{52} While he commends Newbigin’s claim that religion should not be separated from life in a plural society, he believes that Newbigin has not provided a clear enough distinction between religion and culture.\textsuperscript{53} Newbigin’s most important contribution to a theology of pluralism, according to Hunsberger, is his work on the missionary character of election, which sufficiently answers the problem of particularity. The idea that one is chosen to bring blessing to others is especially helpful for Christians around the world who live in dialogue with neighbors of other faiths. Despite this great contribution, Hunsberger does not consider Newbigin’s work on this point to be convincing biblical theology because he reads the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. While acknowledging that it was not Newbigin’s intention to provide a theological treatment of mission in the Old Testament, Hunsberger identifies a great need for interpreting cultural pluralism and the conception of mission in the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{54} In the end, however, Hunsberger affirms the value of Newbigin’s work, not only as a theological endeavor but as a practical contribution that serves and guides the church.\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

George Hunsberger’s final comment reveals how Newbigin stands out from others who have developed a theology of religions. Newbigin’s work is not only rooted in his years of experience in the mission field in India, but it also shows great concern for the church and equips

\textsuperscript{51} Hunsberger, \textit{Bearing the Witness of the Spirit}, 272.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 275.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 278.
pastors, church leaders, and other Christians to live as witnesses in a pluralist world. While Newbigin is often placed in the exclusivist camp by theologians of religion, he does not locate himself in any one of the classical viewpoints on other faiths. Instead, he finds strengths and weaknesses in all three positions and remains committed to the gospel rather than to any human position. In his attempt not to take sides in the debate, he shows his concern for unity and an acknowledgment that such debates within Christianity create division in the body of Christ.

It is unfortunate that theologians have not engaged more fully with the whole corpus of Newbigin’s work on theology of religions. Some, like John Hick, respond to Newbigin’s critiques briefly, but make no real attempt to engage his arguments or to answer all of the challenges he poses. Others, like Gavin D’Costa, use Newbigin primarily to advance their own opinions without allowing Newbigin’s ideas to shape their theological positions in any decisive way. While George Hunsberger offers the most appreciative treatment of Newbigin’s work, it is important to note that the main focus of his scholarly work is on the relationship between the gospel and culture, of which he recognizes theology of religions as one important aspect.

Newbigin’s impact on the larger conversation about Christianity and other faiths has not been as great as one might expect, considering the amount of literature he has devoted to the subject. Much potential remains for further scholarly exploration of his thought. Such an endeavor would be worthwhile and enriching, for his work has much to offer even to those who are tempted to dismiss him as an exclusivist. Newbigin’s ideas have been affirmed by Hunsberger and other members of the Gospel and Our Culture network, but further work could be done to develop his thought from this perspective as well. There is a great a need for Christian leaders to translate Newbigin’s work into accessible resources for today’s churches. Despite Newbigin’s attention to the church in his writings, the average Christian in America remains unaware of his thought. At the same time, American Christians express the desire for answers to
the very questions that Newbigin explores. They are curious about other faiths and unsure how to engage in dialogue or witness with their non-Christian neighbors. With this practical context in mind, Newbigin’s work on theology of religions still has much to offer in terms of educating, equipping, and encouraging Christians to bear witness to the gospel in a pluralist society.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX
Newbigin’s engagement with M. M. Thomas and Wesley Ariarajah

I. M. M. Thomas

One of Newbigin’s earliest partners in the discussion about Christianity and other religions was his close friend Madathilparapil Mammen Thomas, an Indian theologian. Their scholarly engagement began with Newbigin’s response in 1966 to a question posed by Kaj Baago on whether a Hindu must become a member of a visible Christian community to belong to Christ. M. M. Thomas critiques Newbigin’s stance on the form that the church should take, arguing that Newbigin missed the crucial issue of “the transcendence of the Church over religious communities, which makes possible the Church’s taking form in all religious communities.” In contrast to Newbigin, Thomas upholds a model of “Christ-centered Secular Fellowship” within Hinduism. Against this notion, Newbigin argues that one who is both socially Hindu and committed to Christ must have a way of expressing in a visible form that this allegiance is shared with others.

In response to Newbigin’s view that “new humanity” would be realized more tangibly in the future, Thomas argues for its realization in the present. He insists that koinonia did not refer primarily to the church but to the reality of God’s kingdom currently at work in human history. This is similar to Thomas’ main criticism of Newbigin’s book, The Other Side of 1984, which he believes overemphasizes eschatology and downplays the need for real political involvement. Thomas’ emphasis on “humanization” was fueled by his own experience in Indian society and its need for regeneration. While he agrees with Newbigin that the human community should not be the object of ultimate loyalty, he also believes that anthropology could be the entry point for understanding humanity’s eternal salvation. With this in mind he writes, “This means our mission is to make clear that salvation is the spiritual inwardness of true humanisation and that true humanisation is inherent in the message of salvation in Christ.” Despite this difference in their outlooks, Thomas considers Newbigin his partner in the work of the church to bring social change in India, which he felt was part of being Christ’s witness.

In his later book, Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake, Thomas affirms Newbigin’s critique of John Hick’s work but also questions Newbigin’s lack of concern for the common human experience. Thomas argues that Newbigin’s belief about the gospel as the final authority suggests “a person’s faith may be affirmed as final or ultimate authority in isolation from relatively valid penultimate concerns inherent in rationality, spirituality, and community.” Thomas expresses this concern for shared human values as he responds to Newbigin’s argument that all people have ultimate faith commitments. Without denying the truth of this claim, he contends that the penultimates – rationality, morality, community, and other human values – are grounded in a “transcendent ultimate.” This means that one’s faith commitment cannot be

57 M. M. Thomas, Salvation and Humanisation (Madras: CLS, 1971): 38. Thomas responds to Newbigin’s conviction about the centrality of incorporation into a visible community.
59 Ibid., 114.
61 Thomas, Salvation and Humanisation, 9.
62 Ibid., 9-10.
63 Ibid., 18.
completely separated from penultimate concerns and that Christians must place their faith alongside other faiths and other human values. In this process, he says, “Christians risk Christ for Christ’s sake,” and in doing so they reaffirm their commitment to Christ as the redeemer of all penultimate values as well as human religiosity. While M. M. Thomas’ acknowledgment of the centrality of Christ brings him closer to Newbigin’s own beliefs, in the end he wants Newbigin to recognize the presence of the Christian faith in those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ in the traditional way. In response, Newbigin continues to maintain that the minimal commitment of the Christian faith must be to Jesus Christ as the Lord of all. Of those with whom Newbigin sustained scholarly debates, M. M. Thomas engages readily with all of Newbigin’s ideas, recognizes their common viewpoints, and builds upon Newbigin’s work. It is unfortunate, however, that Thomas is recognized within the study of religions primarily for his emphasis on humanization and secular Christian fellowship, rather than for any beliefs he holds in common with Newbigin.

II. Wesley Ariarajah

Another inclusivist divergence from Newbigin’s theology of religions comes from within the World Council of Churches. A general understanding of the WCC’s own movement on inter-faith issues can be gained from the work of Wesley Ariarajah, who was director of the WCC subunit on “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths.” In preparation for the 1996 conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Brazil, Ariarajah wrote the introductory pamphlet for a study on “Gospel and Cultures.” While providing an overall picture of developments in the ecumenical movement, Ariarajah upholds the need for particular representations of the gospel within diverse cultures. He seems to support those who recognize Christ as the center but remove all boundaries and allow for “endless ways to appropriate the mystery of Christ.” He refers to the controversy at the 1991 WCC assembly in Canberra, Australia, provoked by Churn Hyun-Kung’s attempt to represent her faith in context. She did so by relating the Holy Spirit to *ki*, the concept life energy in traditional North East Asian thinking. Geoffrey Wainwright refers to this event as revealing “the dangers of a ‘pneumatology’ let loose from Christ.”

While Ariarajah attempts to remain objective in the WCC pamphlet, his divergence from Newbigin is apparent in his work after the 1996 assembly. He points to the revolution in ecumenical and missionary thinking that has come through inter-religious dialogue and the seeking of community with members of other faiths. He then identifies Lesslie Newbigin as an example of those members of the missionary movement who are rooted in the past and have

65 Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake*, 7.
68 For an example see references to Thomas by Ariarajah in “Wider Ecumenism,” 327 and Knitter, 111-112. Although Knitter notes Thomas’ attention to promoting justice and new humanity, he ultimately dismisses Thomas’s ideas due to his understanding of salvation through Christ alone, a similarity he has with Newbigin.
70 S. Wesley Ariarajah. *Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications:1994), xi. Ariarajah maintains the centrality of Christ but the rejects the emphasis on the “finality” or “uniqueness” of Christ because this limits interactions with people of other faiths. See his discussion of this issue in *Hindus and Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 211.
72 Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 422.
refused to take on this new perspective. Of Newbigin and these others he writes, “Instead, they blame dialogue for the considerable confusion within conservative circles about the purpose and goals of mission at a time when religions, freed from the power distortions of the colonial era, are asserting themselves as equal partners.”

Ariarajah refers to a crisis within the “conservative missionary enterprise” and its temptation toward fundamentalism, and he argues that the impact of inter-faith dialogue has made it impossible to return to the mentality of Tambaram. He later notes Newbigin’s affirmation of being in relationships with people of other faiths, but implies that Newbigin is wrong in expressing concern for the changes in ecumenical theology and the blurring of lines between religious traditions.

In Ariarajah’s mind, Newbigin represents those who want Christians to “dig our trenches even deeper in order to guard what they consider to be the ‘truth of the gospel’ against relativism.”

Ariarajah’s major point in contrast to Newbigin is, “If the oikoumene is the whole inhabited earth, and if God is the creator of all that is and intends to bring all things to their fulfillment, it is no longer conceivable that large sections of the life of the people can be left outside the focus of the ecumenical movement.” With this he argues for a wider ecumenism beyond just Christian ecumenism. This is lifted up in contrast to Newbigin’s “narrow understanding of salvation history,” which seeks only unity among Christians and views other faiths as misguided. Drawing upon the title of the final chapter in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Ariarajah contends that rather than representing a loss of “confidence in the gospel,” this new ecumenism expresses a new “confidence in God” that is rooted in the gospel.

In reference to such trends in thought, Newbigin comments on his experience at the 1996 assembly in Brazil and notes with sadness that the WCC has lost its original missionary passion. He warns that both the demand for unity between churches and the demand for justice among nations must be rooted in what God has done in Christ. Although he shares Newbigin’s interest in ecumenism, Wesley Ariarajah has taken this commitment in a different direction. He appreciates Newbigin’s work on the gospel and Western culture, but is frustrated with what he sees as Newbigin’s insistence on an outdated missionary mindset.

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75 Ibid., 216.
77 Ariarajah, “The Ecumenical Impact of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 218. Ariarajah’s viewpoint comes from his own Sri Lankan context in which the majority of people live by other faiths.
81 See Ariarajah’s note about Newbigin’s contribution to analyzing Western culture in “Gospel and Cultures,” 41.