

Lesslie Newbigin) and I went to Geneva at about the same time — soon after the third assembly of the WCC in New Delhi, 1961. We were both from India — in different ways — but had met for the first time at the assembly. He came from the missionary empire of the western church, and from the nation of my colonial masters. I had just been ordained an Orthodox priest, barely a month or so beforehand. I was in every sense a novice in the church, having lived and worked in the world as a layman for the first thirty-nine years of my life.

Our positions in the WCC headquarters were similar. He was in charge of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism; I was director of the Division of Ecumenical Action. We were both associate general secretaries and met often with Dr Visser 't Hooft, the general secretary. We started our work in the old “barracks” at 17 route de Malagnou, and I was excited about the prophetic pioneering that the WCC had already done for more than a decade by then.

I admired Lesslie for the lucidity of his linguistic expression, for the clarity with which he could present his case, for the transparency of his commitment to Christ and to the unity of the church, and for the simplicity of his lifestyle.

But our backgrounds and therefore our ideas were so different from each other. I came from a church that experienced the mission of the western church as a disruptive and in many ways destructive force. I came from a situation in which the church was one until the western missionaries came as colonists and conquered it by money and political-military power. To me, the kind of mission the western church represented was the source of disunity and unbelief while for Newbigin it was the agent of church unity. To me, Augustinian Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) represented a deviation from the teaching of Christ — a tragic deviation that has hurt humanity. For Newbigin, Augustine was a great Christian thinker, in fact the one thinker by whose standards other thinkers were to be judged.

So our views often clashed. Newbigin is a great teacher, and was a very popular missionary among the Tamil Christians of my land. Sometimes I felt he was treating me with a kind of paternalistic condescension, which he must have acquired in my country, living with doting Christian disciples.

IN TRIBUTE TO BISHOP LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The net result was that most of my ideas about what Christians should do in the world were politely ignored or actively countered, as coming out of innocent ignorance, out of lack of proper instruction by western masters of Christianity.

This is a time to pay a tribute to a great Protestant soul who has dedicated his life to serving Christ as he knew and understood, a fruitful life of fourscore years. May God grant him many more years of selfless and humble service in the vineyard of the Lord.

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