

THE GOSPEL AND OUR CULTURE
An Informal Network For Encouraging the Encounter

Since the initial issue of this newsletter, a considerable amount of interest has been expressed and reported from a number of quarters. In this issue, we will try to catch everyone up on that. In the process we will also raise a few questions about strategies which might need to be considered for moving "the encounter" forward and encouraging the life and witness of the North American church.

- George R. Hunsberger, Coordinator

PROVIDING FERMENT WITH "ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING"

About a dozen people have responded to the offer of a copy of "Another Way of Looking," a group study guide developed in England by John de Wit. (The offer is still open.) No feedback has yet come to me from any uses to which the study has been put. As that comes we will forward it to England so that it will help folks there refine the guide. Feedback will also help us know something about how the guide works in North America. Are the issues the same? Do the cultural elements find different expression? Are there suggestions for a revised North American version of such a study guide?

Pastor Breck Castleman (Covenant Presbyterian Church, Tallahassee, Florida) finds Newbigin's ideas from Foolishness to the Greeks "creeping into" his sermon preparation. He writes: "I feel like I have my ear to the ground and understand more clearly some of the unconscious assumptions of the congregation. I think the group study course 'Another Way of Looking' has a lot of potential for introducing people to the cultural issues faced by the American church. Several of the essays seemed especially apropos to some of the attitudes I find."

Lamar Gible (Peace and International Affairs Consultant/Representative for Europe and Asia, Church of the Brethren General Board) indicates that he has circulated the "Another Way of Looking" guide among "colleagues in our evangelism and church development offices as well as in our office responsible for curriculum development." In addition he has encouraged the Board's "World Ministries Commission and its related staff to read and discuss the Newbigin materials. We have done this," he says, "at a staff retreat and there is continuing interest in the materials."

A number of folks connected with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship are eagerly engaging the issues with which we are concerned. Scott Young, working with the "Marketplace Ministries" division, Steve Eyre, Staff Training specialist, and Paul Tokunaga, Southeast Regional Director, all find it important on their agendas. Paul has sent a copy (see enclosure) of a discussion guide prepared by Mary Thompson and used at a recent IVCF Regional Directors' meeting to dig in on Foolishness to the Greeks and develop a sense of the practical implications.

BOOKS THAT CAN HELP

Sara Talis (Director Mission Education, Society of African Missions) writes to recommend "an excellent new book by Michael J. Kirwen, titled: The Missionary and the Diviner (Orbis Books). I highly

recommend this," she says, "as an important work for the network." The reflection such a book casts back upon "Christianity's ethnocentrism" provides a unique way to get at the character of Western culture and the gospel's confrontation of its assumptions. In a similar vein I would suggest the book by Aylward Shorter called Jesus and the Witchdoctor (Geoffrey Chapman/Orbis Books).

While on the subject of books, Dr. Wilbert Shenk (Vice President for Overseas Ministries, Mennonite Board of Missions) suggests Reginald Bibby's Fragmented Gods, a study of Canadian religion (Irwin Publishers[?], Toronto). The Mennonite Board has scheduled lectures by Mr. Bibby at their Elkhart, Indiana, headquarters in the near future. Another book Wilbert is tracking down is by a British sociologist, Keith Ward. It contains an analysis of religion in British life. The British programme on "The Gospel and Our Culture" has evidently begun to make use of Ward's contributions.

VARIOUS EFFORTS

In more general terms, Wilbert Shenk writes about Mennonite efforts to address the need for "re-evangelization" of the West: "For thirty years we have been wrestling with the question of the evangelization of post-Christian society. Four years ago we undertook a study process under the auspices of the Council of International Ministries (which serves a number of Mennonite agencies engaged in international mission and service ministries) and its Europe Area Committee. Since this committee meets only once per year, the process has been somewhat leisurely. In 1985 we concentrated on the historical and sociological background of the present situation. A couple of the papers, at least in summary, will be published in the September 1988 issue of Mission Focus." In addition, Wilbert mentions that "a number of confessional groups have within the past several years established special commissions to grapple with the question of 're-evangelization.' The Roman Catholics and Lutheran World Federation, especially in Europe, have formed such groups." (If anyone has a line on the specific reflections of these groups or the fruit of their work, that would be helpful information to share in this newsletter.)

Jim Cogswell (Associate General Director, Division of Overseas Ministries, National Council of Churches of Christ) has forwarded a copy of papers from a consultation on "Mission and Secularization" held by the Conference of European Churches in November 1987. It was attended by the NCCC's Europe/USSR Office Director Michael Roshak. This was the first of a sequence of consultations, the second of which is being held this month (see the attached "Communique"). I will be glad to supply a copy of the drafts of section reports from the first consultation upon request. Or, you may write to the CEC in Geneva for complete documentation. For now, here are several excerpts:

Challenge facing the Churches' mission. Participants ...identified three manifestations of secularization in Europe: a) The comfortable and self-sufficient. Such people do not look for deep answers to the great questions of life. Physical and intellectual diversion abounds for these people; b) Those who seek for truth and for meaning in life; c) Those who have become victims of modern living (addicts, alcoholics, etc.)....

What can the Churches do? In this situation of a secularized world, resignation is out of place. The great expectations invested in science and technology cannot be realized. Human beings know the limits of their possibilities and are not brimming over with a sense of

life's meaning; they are looking for guidance and for something to put fresh meaning into life. The transcendent dimension comes within the horizon of these longings.

For these reasons, the churches need to enter into dialogue with these human beings, lovingly and affectionately, in order to understand them, to learn from them and in the encounter with them to let themselves be changed in respect of language and form. Only in this way will they be able to make themselves understood in their effort to communicate the message of salvation in Christ. The Western churches are not at liberty here to commit themselves to an exaggerated activism - in the sense of the secular faith that everything can be achieved if only sufficient effort is made....

The formation of small groups should be encouraged to continue work on the theme.... Particular attention should be paid here to: the ambivalence of the process of secularization and its positive and negative features; the question of the irreversibility and inevitable advance of secularization; the origin of secularization in the Enlightenment or in God's grace to the world in the incarnation of Christ; the connection between secularization and the emergence of new religious movements; the effect of the consequences of secularization on churches and other general organizations and institutions alike, especially the loss of authority and binding character.

Jim Scherer (Professor of World Missions and Church History, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago) writes with information about another source of critical reflection: "There is at LSTC a Center for the Study of Religion and Science which deals both directly and indirectly with some of the issues in the 'Gospel and Culture' project." Dr. Thomas Gilbert is the Associate Director of the center.

FLASHBACKS FROM MISSION IN OTHER SOILS

John Gorski MM (National Director - Bolivia, Pontifical Mission Societies) writes: "While the Catholic Church in Latin America has been quite concerned about the impact of our modern secularized Western culture (also traced to the enlightenment) even before the 1979 Puebla Conference, it was Bishop Newbigin's presentation at our recent Ecumenical Mission Consultation [October 1987] that made me sense the urgency of the issue. This is paradoxical, for I had even been an advisor to the Commission on the Evangelization of Culture in Puebla, and had written my Licentiate dissertation in Missiology (Rome: 1982, unpublished) on this theme. But my concern had been the relation of indigenous cultures to the Gospel. Perhaps it was being in the U.S. for a few months that made me see how the assumptions of modern secularity influence society and even the Church.... I am invited to give missiology courses and lectures in many countries and I am incorporating this theme into the content of my presentations."

From John Gration (Chair, Missions/Intercultural Department, Wheaton College Graduate School): "I have just learned of the informal network that is being created for encouraging the encounter of the gospel and American culture. I have been keenly interested in this subject since I teach Contextualization here at Wheaton Graduate School. For the past few summers I have been going out to Zaire and Kenya and seeking to be a catalyst for church leaders there in grappling with some of the crucial issues of African culture in the light of Scripture. I have

been coming to the growing realization that this same process needs to be going on in our own context."

EVENTS TO WATCH FOR

A couple of conferences have come to our attention which are germane to the issues with which we are concerned. A conference on "Presbyterians in the 20th Century" is being co-sponsored by the Montreat Conference Center (North Carolina) and the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. It is scheduled for July 5-9, 1988, at Montreat and includes on its agenda an assessment of "cultural value changes."

More pointedly, the Overseas Ministries Study Center (New Haven) has included in next year's battery of seminars a reading week featuring Foolishness to the Greeks (Feb 13-17, 1989) and a symposium on the theme "Can the West Be Converted?" co-sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary's Center for Continuing Education (Feb 20-23, 1989). The symposium will deal with Bishop Newbiggin's thesis regarding the gospel's encounter with Western culture and will be led by Dr. Vernon Grounds (Denver Baptist Seminary), Dr. Charles C. West (Princeton Seminary) and Prof. Samuel Escobar (Eastern Baptist Seminary). This might be a good time and place for many of us interested in these issues to gather in order to wrestle over perspectives and strategies for fostering the encounter.

On June 22-23 of this year, the British Council of Churches committee on "The Gospel and Our Culture" will be assembling a group of approximately 20 people from beyond England to continue conversations about joint action on an international basis for raising the issues of gospel and Western culture. The focus of the gathering will be to explore the possibilities for holding a major consultation on the subject. Two questions which will likely enter into the picture are "What precisely is the question we are trying and needing to address?" and "What is the mechanism we should have for addressing it?" Dr. Wilbert Shenk will be attending the conversation and is -- to our knowledge -- the only North American who will be there. He has volunteered to help us reflect on directions for us in North America once he has gained a sense of the direction in which the British and international networks are moving. How we should relate to those initiatives and what initiatives we should take on this side of the Atlantic will become critical questions for many of the institutions with which we work here. And that means they are important questions for us as an emerging network to raise. How can and should we proceed jointly?

CARDS AND LETTERS

You are one of the writers for this newsletter! Send abstracts or synopses of important articles or books, details regarding programs being conducted or conversations being held, your personal reflections on things you read or hear, ideas for common action in the future, etc. Direct correspondence, news, mailing list changes or additions to:

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