

# CONFESSIONS OF A JOURNALIST: CASE STUDY OF AN EXPERIMENT IN PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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## **Introduction**

Lapido Media owes its birth in part to Lesslie Newbigin. Not that he had any fondness for the media. But his passionate belief in public truth resonated deeply with me, a journalist and emerging new believer at the time I first encountered his work. One small synopsis of his work in a small USPG publication called *Thinking Mission* proved so compelling that I even tried memorising bits of it. I was at a crisis point, a kairos moment as I searched for a more meaningful existence than the partial, confused one I was living, and I began knocking on mission doors.

It was part of God's strange providence that I should find myself from a very long way off, being sent by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, to the very mission college of which Newbigin was President. I met him at Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham on my very first evening, taken by Dan Beeby, his closest friend and associate, to the small house where he had been making bread. Terrified since I owned not a syllable of theology, I could talk about bread-making!

This encounter with the man following so searing an awakening through his work completely reoriented the rest of my life. I became Lesslie's disciple. I edited his last papers, organized the famously eclectic reading group that included theologians, bus drivers, and cardiologists as he became increasingly blind. My theological fumbleings stimulated the book

*A Proper Confidence*<sup>1</sup> as we sat chatting in the office that doubled as a bedroom in his Abbeyfield Retirement Home in London's Herne Hill. I'd been threatened with an inquisition at my mission society caused by an editorial I wrote on the text 'We walk by faith not by sight' in which I clumsily tackled the futility of scientism, saying: 'There is nothing absolutely certain in anything we preach ...' Taken out of context, this caused uproar among our already beleaguered missionaries in Pakistan. They missed the point of their own walk of trusting hope. Lesslie deftly and almost overnight produced this little book to unscramble scientism from the understanding vouchsafed by Christ and his 'follow me' way of knowing based on trust as opposed to proof; on revelation as opposed to skepticism.

Lesslie's on profound trust were manifest just months later as I kept vigil at his bedside in Dulwich Hospital where he lay dying. One of the last words he spoke, wired up to drips and heart monitors, was 'joy'. It was in the text from Hebrews 12: 2 which he spoke to me, as I held his hand. 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.' If ever there were a measure of a man and his walk of faith, this text was it.

The book we co-wrote with former Muslim and professor of history at Yale, Lamin Sanneh called *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in Secular Britain* was published posthumously in 1998. It became the manifesto for my on-going work - a PhD on Islam and the de-secularization it was triggering, whose tuition fees Lesslie personally paid from the sale of his house.

Lesslie's work seemed to justify the reasons for my unhappiness with the de-personalised world I inhabited. I was a rebel, drawn to Indian mysticism. Lesslie's urgent

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<sup>1</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence* (1995).

call to a mission to the national malaise appealed to the rebel in me. *The Other Side of 1984*<sup>2</sup> in particular touched a nerve. His analysis of the separation of thought-worlds was deeply galvanising: “We have been tempted either to withdraw into an intellectual ghetto, seeking to preserve a kind of piety in church and home while leaving the public world (including the world of scholarship) to be governed by another ideology. Or we have been tempted to regard the ‘modern scientific world-view’ as though it were simply a transcript of reality which we must—willy-nilly—accept as true.”<sup>3</sup> That was what, deep down, I had been resisting. I and many like me were inarticulately at odds with a culture that seemed to relegate our humanity to a status subordinate to the bogus imperatives of materialism, science and bureaucracy that silenced our voices. Lesslie seemed to understand and bless our revolt. Not only that, but he foresaw again and again, and not least in the book we wrote together, that such thinking affected everything, from realpolitik to economics, history, and sociology, rendering us vulnerable to a reality more harsh and brutal than we imagine, as anyone who has lived or served in a Third World theocracy or dictatorship knows. We were not only failing to plan our societies in ways that promoted flourishing, but failing to see how frighteningly complacent and stupid we were. For Lesslie the thing that seemed above all else to alarm him was the Islamic revival. For him, our identity is in the Man, Christ. It is a religious identity above all else and he saw that a denial of this by the overweening liberal, humanist ethos had been rumbled by Islam. ‘We are particularly impressed by the issues being raised in our increasingly pagan society by our Muslim fellow citizens. In the face of the manifest signs of fragmentation and moral confusion in British society, we find ourselves bound to confess that the whole question of religious identity which Islam articulates is a question which the Church ought to have been articulating. We are convicted of having allowed the

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<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984* (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984*, 32.

Christian witness to be so domesticated within British culture that it has ceased to be heard as the radical message that it is.<sup>4</sup>

It is increasingly obvious that he was right. Western powers have proved completely incapable of reading the signs of the times, in order to come up with policies that do not simply react ineptly and belatedly to adverse events, but predict and prepare for them. If you wear the wrong glasses, you will not be able to see, as Lesslie might have said. We didn't see the 1979 Iranian Revolution coming, nor the Rushdie *fatwa* for apostasy; the US literally did not know what had hit them on 9/11.<sup>5</sup> We were hopelessly wrong on Iraq and Afghanistan, thinking democracy can be created by coercion and troop surge. And we were wrong about whom to support in Syria, allowing the foundations to be laid for a terrifying new Caliphate by ISIS (now the Islamic State) in Syria/Iraq. The West's moral truancy is Islam's rallying cry. As Martin Luther said, Islam is the 'scourge of God's wrath'.

Prophecy is not divination; not some magical or psychic gift. It is simply an obedient and culturally-aware announcement of the Gospel within the political and social circumstances of our time. If we fail to speak of chastity, we will be engulfed by child abuse scandals. If we fail to speak up against luxuriousness and entitlement, we will get parliamentary expenses scandals. If we fail to speak of righteousness, we will get Islam which sees itself as the righteousness of an angry god. Islam is not just another religion; it is a function of Christianity's perceived failure as a religion.

The world's inability to 'see' how the spiritual dimension affects societies – the sociology of God - is the macrocosm of my own personal blind spot up to that time. That blind spot is caused by the implausibility of the Gospel in our culture. As I laboured in miserable but dogged unbelief in the newsroom, to whom could I express the deepest intimations of my heart in my work? Not some vicar in case I might get sucked into a vortex

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<sup>4</sup> From the Preface to *Faith and Power*, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Marshall, press release for the launch by Lapido of *Blind Spot*.

of “religion” and a mental capitulation from which I might never escape. It was as if the things of the spirit had been vacuumed up into an airtight place. To open my eyes just a peep to the numinous pressing in on me on all sides was to cave in to error and weakness. It was to acknowledge my inadequacy and dependency. It was to commit career suicide. Or so I believed. And yet that blind spot is deadly; causing the most pernicious delusions. A former Brahmin (high-caste) colleague I later worked with in a missionary society told me that before his conversion to Christianity, he had not known there was poverty in India. Only Christ gives us eyes to see what’s there, and a heart to feel what we see. Without Him, poverty cannot be addressed.

Journalists who should be the heralds of truth are largely off the missionary radar, and are trained to ignore religion. We exist to be avoided by the church, which is our prey, or at best, flirted with, so our spiritual salvation is a hit or largely miss affair. Prostitutes, tramps, gypsies, even politicians get prayed for—but journalists are what you might call “a lost people group”<sup>6</sup> We operate according to a rubric whose ethical deficit has been starkly exposed in the News Corp phone hacking scandal. Andy Coulson says he did not know that phone hacking was illegal. Your job is to get the story and your morality falls into line behind that single objective. For this very reason, Lesslie hated ‘expertise’ since it encouraged mono-focal vision.

And what is the story? Who governs news values? What is the context in which journalists have to struggle to make meaning? Perish the thought that one would want us writing more about *religion*; but to write about world affairs with religious intelligence is something else. Without religious literacy, it is impossible to activate the switches that stop wars and prevent famine.

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<sup>6</sup> To “blag” is the expression made famous by the NewsCorp scandal but which every journalist practises to some extent, and justifiably so, if it means nailing a crook by pretending to be someone you’re not, in order to get otherwise undisclosed information from them. This has been taken to ludicrous lengths in recent years to solicit juicy details of celebrities for no good reason other than to sell the paper.

Lesslie Newbigin's great guru was Michael Polanyi, whose work *Personal Knowledge* fired Lesslie's final challenge: the re-evangelisation of the West.<sup>7</sup> Only through trust do you encounter someone; only through loving them do you get to know them. Yet the scientific method assumes the process works precisely the other way around: that it is only on the basis of scepticism that you get at the truth. Yet a hermeneutic of scepticism destroys the very thing on which any inquiry rests. Our modern project concerns a kind of knowing that—as Richard Rohr points out in *Simplicity*—is a very destructive “left brain” rationalism that rules out intuition and revelation, and the negative results are increasingly clear.<sup>8</sup> If you chop up a body on the laboratory table, you may get to understand how it is made, but not why. And moreover you will have had to kill the person first, so you will never know him. Truth is human. Knowledge is personal. For journalists to understand the world, they must start ordinary people, those who are at the very bottom and the missionaries who understand them.

### **Conversation and orientation**

I want now to turn to the first of three events that stand out as waymarks along the road I took after meeting Lesslie that seemed to be living pointers to the correctness of his analysis. The first of these demonstrates graphically the ghettoization of an evangelical mission of which Newbigin wrote in *Truth to Tell*. Culturally “marginalized”, they refused to appreciate the role of mainstream media. The second event highlights what happens to reportage when reasonable journalists—in this case the *Times* newspaper columnist Bernard Levin—become totally secularized. And the third concerns the baleful effect of media blindness on the poor whose stories emerge out of religious worldviews that journalists can

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<sup>7</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (1958).

<sup>8</sup> Rohr, *Simplicity*, *passim*.

no longer apprehend: in this case the devastation of children by a “religious” war promoted by a pagan witch in Uganda that went unreported and unaddressed for 17 years.

### **Episode 1: Plane crash in Kathmandu**

The Boeing 727 that slammed into the mountain east of Kathmandu in thick fog on the morning of 28 September 1992 with the loss of all 167 on board, had not been chartered by W-mission.<sup>9</sup> But nonetheless, the Kennington-based missionary society, more used to occupying the small ads of *Evangelicals Now* than the front pages of the red-tops, found itself in the middle of an international media frenzy.

Journalists trying to find out who we were jammed the switchboard. Because many of the passengers had evidently been returning aid workers and missionaries, I took several calls insinuating that we were a travel company who had chartered a dodgy plane to send religious enthusiasts to a remote part of the world on some weird and probably covert enterprise. I was reeling, not just from the tone of the calls, but from what I’d seen out of the corner of my eye through the glass wall of my office on the mezzanine floor . . . three photographers with enormous flashguns already in the building, sitting tensely like sharks at feeding time.

Suddenly the Development Director burst into my office. “We’ve got the press here. Say nothing.”

“About what?”

“The Wilkinses. They were on that plane.”

“We can’t do that. They’re here.”

It seemed an odd reaction from a missionary keen to tell good news.

As W-mission’s editor, who was occasionally allowed to do press releases, I had to think fast.

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<sup>9</sup> The name of the society has been disguised.

“But the press are already in the building. We can’t say nothing.”

The director glared at me, repeated his “say nothing” line and left.

We did not have a “crisis management” strategy or anything so grand. The only thing for it was to find out what was happening; embargo the story and call a press conference. I had no authority to do it. But this was a huge story. Was I to leave the building? Sit there with my eyes closed? The photographers downstairs were all from the tabloids. A human interest story, the kind that comes along once in a decade had pitched us into a world the management evidently dreaded, without any warning or preparation.

I briefed Dorothy on [the](#) switchboard before phoning the Press Association to announce a press conference in two hours at the office. That bought me time to try and find out exactly what had happened, and who was in the plane.

To my dismay, the Personnel Director who had all the information I would need on the Wilkines had left the building as soon as she heard about the media interest. The General Director was on leave. There was only one other director left who would cooperate—the Finance Director Simon Sheldon, who had the great presence of mind to locate the family’s prayer card. All missionaries were required to have one as an aide memoire for their supporters. It contained a photo of the whole family, a prayer request—and a Bible text.

I managed to locate some prayer letters with information about what the family was intending to do back in Nepal for their second term of service. And I wracked my own memories of meeting them, which providentially were vivid, being impressed by their grace and gentleness; their professional skills (Andy was a hydropower engineer); their willingness to render themselves homeless and uncomfortable for the sake of the poorest nation on earth—and to do it despite their three children being small and vulnerable to illness, heat, altitude, pollution. Here was an unprecedented opportunity to talk about their lives and the



meaning in their death. Here were modern disciples of Christ, and a media pack that wanted to know.

The press conference was packed out. We told the story; answering questions as fully as we could, aware that a wrong word or headline could jeopardize the future of the whole of the United Mission to Nepal. UMN was under agreement with the Nepal Government not to “proselytize.” The rule of thumb for all missionaries posted there was to answer questions about their motivation only if asked; to let their work and their lives speak for themselves. Acutely sensitive to the common charge of “cultural imperialism,” W-mission put themselves under the indigenous church leadership or under the Nepalis who ran the hydropower projects on which Andy Wilkins was working.

As a journalist trained by *Yorkshire Post* Newspapers, I was just following instinct. But by now I’d absorbed a lot of Newbigin’s writing. I had also been seconded, at my own request, to the Gospel as Public Truth Consultation just a few months back, and a golden opportunity had fallen into my hands.

Naturally enough, every single newspaper in the land ran the story of the crash on their front pages. Several however, including the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Times*, led with the Wilkinsons’ story, with pictures, and quotes about their motivation. “Sacrificing everything to help the poor in Nepal . . . they were real Christians,” the *Mail* reported. The *Mirror* even published their prayer card in full on page 2. I cannot believe that the tabloids have ever before or since published the words of the gospel as part of a front-page lead. “I will lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 121:1–2).

Of course, for the *Mirror* the story was the ultimate bad news: God had been rumbled. The pathos of prayer unanswered and faith obliterated on a Himalayan mountainside is the

ultimate hard news story. Yet, it seemed to me as a journalist-turned-believer that we had had the last word. If you played bad news right, you could still get your side of the story told well.

Yet within what Newbiggin calls the “fiduciary framework” of dogmatic neutrality that newspapers inhabit and reinforce, missions had—not surprisingly—given up trying to get any kind of a hearing. In “our culture” and for those who mediate it, faith is just a matter of personal opinion, not the basic fact on which the world is built. Secularization is reinforced by the churches’ weariness, and as Newbiggin saw it, the “adjustments they have made to the requirements of modern thought.”<sup>10</sup> When the opportunity arose, for good reasons as well as bad, mission managers literally left the building.

Few if any journalists ever get close enough to the grassroots where profound change allied to spiritual transformation happens. This is partly because you only see what you already believe to be the case. And unless you *are* a reporter with a faith, you will pursue only those stories and contacts that you, your peers and your readers regard as credible. If you’ve already ruled out Christians as sources because you or your news editor deem them to be “biased,” or weird, you will probably never meet the kind of winsome, creative world-changers I stumbled upon as a new believer; and you will certainly never get right down to the bottom of things, the slums and remote villages, where the very poor have nothing and no one to help them except the brave and the maverick for whom altruism *is* a worldview. But it was also partly an own goal: evangelical missions in Britain long ago abandoned the conversation with their detractors, and as Lesslie writes of the twin dangers of fundamentalism and liberalism: ‘If one may risk unfair caricature, the danger in the first case is that the colony of resident aliens becomes a ghetto . . .’ and that indeed is how I experienced the joyful, but blinkered certitudes of a mission with its gaze strained upon the foreign shore, oblivious of the dangerous vacuum opening up at the rear.

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<sup>10</sup> Newbiggin, *Other Side*, 32.

The experience of fighting my own mission to tell the story of a glorious contemporary martyrdom made a profound impression on me. But perhaps not so profound as a blinkered article by the eminent *Times* columnist Bernard Levin, which also contributed to the founding of Lapid Media.

It was this episode that enabled me to appreciate fully the cultural problem that Newbigin had articulated: that the knowledge that comes from reason alone is too easily put off the scent of the terrible and wonderful things that emerge from the deepest human motivation where faith and belief operate. Reason becomes captive to the systems it creates, and closed systems decay, becoming subject to randomness. We do indeed live—and die—by faith, not by sight, saved by being turned expectantly outward to the merciful in-breaking of Good News. But Bernard Levin, the most reasonable and reasoned of columnists, was blind.

### **Episode 2: Christian persecution and Levin’s “carelessness”**

The twentieth century was the bloodiest in history. No doubt Genghis Khan’s assaults on the tribal populations between China and Russia were gruesome enough, but no Tartar warlord was ever able to get as technological about killing as Hitler, Stalin and Mao were. And Christians were targets of all three. Anecdote has it that there were more deaths for the Christian faith in the twentieth century than all the previous nineteen centuries put together. This is hard to prove, but highly likely. I became aware of the extent of Christian martyrdoms in Islamic lands only when I began editing *W-mission’s* international magazine, and every day read the evidence sent in by suffering churches: a tide of murders, massacres, imprisonments for blasphemy, gang rapes, abductions, torture, quasi-judicial killings and judicial execution of Christians everywhere from Iran, to Pakistan to Egypt to North Korea. All now emblazoned across the media, of course, but twenty years ago, utterly occluded. I

had never before heard of such killings, or their motivation. The appalling toll of death reached a crescendo with the murder of pastors in Iran in 1994 just for the sin of being born Muslim and changing their mind in adulthood about what they wanted to think—which is a crime called “apostasy”; concluding with the solitary confinement over two years and imprisonment for seven years before that of the Protestant pastor Mehdi Dibaj. The defence he gave at his trial, where he faced the death penalty for conversion, read like one of the letters of St Paul:

He is our Savior and He is the (spiritual) Son of God. To know Him means to know eternal life. I, a useless sinner, have believed in this beloved person and all His words and miracles recorded in the Gospel, and I have committed my life into His hands. Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honor of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus, my Lord, and enter His kingdom sooner, the place where the elect of God enter everlasting life.<sup>11</sup>

The Amnesty Campaign to release him, in which I was peripherally involved, succeeded—but he was found, just five months after his release, in an alley in Tehran, with a bullet in his back.

Levin had criticized Christians for complaining about this. For a long while, his famous *Times* column had been required reading by a generation’s élites. It was the acme of journalistic comment. When he wrote, governments quailed. He excoriated the Soviet Union over many years, and helped contribute to a climate in which the Berlin Wall could come down.

So when Levin asked (I paraphrase): “Why are Christians bleating about persecution?”

No one has been persecuted for their faith since Roman times, except the Jews,” his

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<sup>11</sup> Dibaj, “Written Defense,” lines 25–27. It was because of this testimony that I resolved to understand Islam, leading to a PhD dissertation on Islam in Britain at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, submitted a few weeks after 9/11.

ignorance and conceit finally threw the switches. Patrick Sookhdeo of Barnabas Fund and I, without consulting one another, simultaneously contacted Levin's office. We both sent a mass of evidence, Patrick on Iran, I on Pakistan. Clergy in the Church of Pakistan on a visit to Britain had asked me to help them publicize the abuse of the blasphemy laws, under which people were being imprisoned and condemned to death (to blaspheme the Prophet is a capital offence) on the say-so of "one bearded Muslim,"<sup>12</sup> often seeking to settle a business score. This was new news. Even the Archbishop's Interfaith Commissioner challenged me about my evidence. It is hard to imagine from this vantage point just what a leap in the dark it was to contact a *Times* columnist, especially one as venerated as Levin. What I did not suspect then was that we were on the cusp of a paradigm shift in religious literacy.

Levin's secretary—a Christian—phoned me back. The great man never dealt personally with sources for his column, she said, but he was impressed and shocked by the data. He went on to write a whole series of pieces, beginning with a shocker about crucifixion of Christians in Sudan called "Islam's Fearful Bloodletting". This was 23 March 1993 – 21 years ago. On 15 February 1994, under the title "Martyred for his faith," he even reproduced verbatim the Dibaj testimony, without topping or tailing. The ignorance of the entire British ruling class who took Levin as a standard bearer was on parade, and needed no further comment. Levin immersed himself in the subject of Islamic persecution, and I believe marked the beginning of the end of the multi-faith "all-religions-are-the-same" fallacy that governed British education policy and much else up to the beginning of the new millennium.

If the Wilkines' deaths indicated how the mission agencies strangely colluded in the privatization of their own faith, Levin's article—which was by his own under-estimation "careless"—demonstrated the prejudice and ignorance such privatization caused. Levin was sympathetic to Christianity and always wrote appropriate pieces at her great festivals, or

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<sup>12</sup> A beard was all that was required for a single Muslim testimony to be believed over against a non-Muslim testimony, and so far as I can tell is true still.

mentioned the incumbent Archbishop with somewhat exaggerated courtesy. He was often humorous and un-defensive about his own Jewishness. But his view of Christianity—though more aware and respectful than many of today’s commentators—was parochial. Any sense that faith was transformative and efficacious beyond the speechifying of bishops at Westminster, and therefore a target for cruelty by faiths foreign to it, was surprisingly lost on him. He had a common sense cultural view of Christianity in common with his class, but it did not encompass reality.<sup>13</sup>

Newbigin identified this as our culture’s epistemological problem. He wrote witheringly, as was his wont, about what characterized it: ‘. . . what matters [to our culture] about religious beliefs is not the factual truth of what they affirm but the sincerity with which they are held . . . a matter of personal inward experience rather than an account of what is objectively the case.’<sup>14</sup> Religion was no longer a matter of public knowledge but of personal opinion. It could not therefore be a force that others recognized and wanted to obliterate.

Furthermore, Newbigin profoundly influenced by Michael Polanyi as he was, prophetically saw this as the bankruptcy of the data on which reason had to work. ‘Reason can only work with the data it is given’ he writes in *Truth to Tell* (published in 1991). ‘The fuel (of the Christian tradition) is burned up, and the combustion caused by the oxygen of Greek rationalism can no longer happen. What is needed is new fuel, or to put it another way, a ‘new starting point’, a new perspective from which to ‘view the landscape through which we have travelled’. Islam, he came to realize, seemed to stimulate that new starting point.

### Episode 3: Breaking the silence about Northern Uganda

<sup>13</sup> The irony of finding myself writing this while the NewsCorp scandal unfolds like waves crashing on the beach, should not be lost on the reader. Rupert Murdoch professes to be a Christian. The former News of the World features editor Paul McMullan describes Murdoch as “puritanical.” If that is the case—and I believe it is—it is a faith that has been totally privatized. Bernard Levin wrote for Murdoch’s flagship British newspaper.

<sup>14</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 25f.

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The small Eagle Air Cessna touched down at Kitgum airport one blustery morning in February 2003 on an inadequate strip of dust, patrolled by chickens, and flanked by a long-drop loo with its door missing. I was greeted with a broad toothy grin by a skinny man in a purple shirt and dog-collar, the Church Mission Society's Partner bishop in this most remote of all its Uganda dioceses, the Rt Revd Benjamin Ojwang. The mission regularly sent small donations to the Anglican clergy in the two northern Ugandan dioceses, but they had had no missionary there since the mid-1980s Amin era. The organization that had brought education and the Gospel to Northern Uganda in response to a request by the head man of the Acholi people 100 years earlier, now deemed it too dangerous as a mission post. A mad witch named Major General Joseph Kony had been waging war in the name of God against any whom he suspected of colluding with President Museveni. This was most of his own people in the northern belt of the country, along the border with Sudan, and more especially their children. Children were particularly vulnerable to the predations of the Lord's Resistance Army because they could be caught easily and indoctrinated. Pre-moral, and without the physical strength to resist him, they could be turned into ruthless killing machines, without compunction or fear. 25,000 such children had been abducted over seventeen years, and only half had ever returned. What I could not believe was how little we in Britain knew of this horror, despite being the largest donor to Uganda. This was a point made more poignant by the fact that Britain was not just the source of Western-style education and literacy, but also the origins of some of its founding martyrs, including Bishop Hannington.<sup>15</sup>

The whole of the north was in lock-down. No business was being done. The atmosphere itself seemed frozen with terror, as if every nerve were strained and on maximum alert. Everyone recounted tales of the most savage atrocities. And the children who survived came back with wounds and stories too terrible to contemplate; [missing](#) eyes, ears, lips,

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<sup>15</sup> See Taylor, "Taking Spirituality Seriously: Northern Uganda and Britain's 'Break the Silence' Campaign".

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sanity. How had this been allowed to go on so long? Seventeen years, and no westerners at work up there, only spasmodic calls in international forums for an end to it all, no “discourse”; what you might call the silence of the lambs.

I came home after just three days of mortal fear to launch the Break the Silence Campaign, which successfully targeted the media—from Lindsey Hilsum on Channel 4 news, to Kampala’s *New Vision* in which Museveni complained bitterly about the Church Mission Society’s interference. We flew the Bishop of Kitgum, a former shepherd, over to Britain to meet the government minister responsible, and to take a petition with Ugandan children to 10 Downing Street. We got him onto Radio 4’s *Today* programme, interviewed by James Naughtie. That helped mobilize the development world—including Human Rights Watch and Oxfam—and got the UN’s Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland up to Kitgum (“This is worse than Iraq” he memorable sound-bited). We somehow generated political will enough to kick Kony out of Uganda, and the huge 1.5million strong displacement camps were disbanded. I experienced first-hand what can be achieved by judicious partnership with the media, hooking up the international agencies and above all, mobilizing ordinary people through international church networks. More than four hundred churches in Britain were galvanized not just to pray and give to Northern Uganda, but also to send people out to learn and report back. The campaign was mentioned in speeches in parliament and the EC, and Bob Geldof filmed one of his six Africa programmes from Kitgum, put on to my office by Mike Wooldridge of the BBC. He was pictured weeping on his mobile phone to his wife. That’s how it got [to](#) you. It created at last a mandate that politicians could use. They could begin to justify spending time on understanding the issues.

Yet again, it showed how little can be achieved by reason alone, without the passions mobilized by faith. It reinforced Newbiggin’s view that unless the West is re-converted, it will continue to evangelize its own futility in its home and foreign policies.



There had been very little written about Northern Uganda. The secular world had written off this war as the madness of a voodoo priest, or the tribalism of the country's rulers. Neither analysis provided the motivation for action. The secular mindset is not adequate to address the world's problems, because its default ideology is material. There is no notion of supernatural aid. Moreover, the world's poor are spiritual and though they have little, they have to face reality in the raw, and their intuitions and resources are often far more apposite. The poor and war-locked will not respond to secular solutions, even when they're offered, because they do not reach the spot. Newbigin summed it up thus in *After 1994*: "The precondition for effective action in any field is a true perception of how things are." He adds presciently: "Our culture has been confident, during the past two centuries, that it could change the world. Perhaps we may now have to insist that the point is to understand it."<sup>16</sup>

The unending war in Northern Uganda demonstrated for me the results, this time on a truly awful scale, of our culture's blindness to the tenacious resilience of belief systems and their effects. Evil flourishes when the media fail to 'get' the existence and importance of worldviews other than their own. They get absolutely no training in this; it is something Lapido is trying to raise funds to address.

Joseph Kony's power was reinforced by fear and superstition within a revenge culture that had no authoritative legal redress. This is perfectly "understandable" only if you have not written off the situation in advance, through attitudes that are tantamount to racism. The power, shame and lack of forgiveness Uganda's armies fed upon had to be addressed at their spiritual/psychic roots, not simply dismissed. The altars where Kony literally "sacrificed" children for the magic it conferred had to be cleansed, because they were the hot, radiant core of what caused the terror and anomie in the population. Inhumanity and evil were allowed to go unpunished. In primal societies spirits rule, and take hold on personalities hospitable to

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<sup>16</sup> Newbigin, *Other Side*, 18.

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them. Spirit possession is not always schizophrenia, though in Kony's case mental illness of a most egregious kind is compounded by traditional religion. Church leaders therefore who pray in the name of a Spirit stronger than any other literally *en-courage* their flock. A turning point was reached when one man Bishop Nelson Onono of Gulu and his diocesan communications secretary Revd Willy Akena walked into the bush to find Kony. Because local villagers trusted his spiritual power, they dared to tell him where Kony's camp could be found. Kony's reputed psychic ability to read minds, and find them at night silences tongues – and without this bush intelligence no amount of secular US radar, sat nav, and braggadiocio has the slightest effect. Indeed, despite the presence of 100 US military advisers scouring the bush at present in Central African Republic, Kony and his army remain at large. I have a picture on my website of Bishop Nelson shaking hands with the fearsome leader – offering him forgiveness. In so doing, he utterly diminished Kony's stature and his magical aura. Kony has never been back to Uganda since.<sup>17</sup>

Ways also had to be found to guarantee not just safety for returnees, but *forgiveness* for their atrocities: a forgiveness this remarkable people were only too keen to administer because they had the religiously-derived cultural categories that could support it. And above all the Ugandans who were suffering had to sense they mattered to the outside world. Their sense of their own humanity had become so attenuated, they could not activate their own inner resources, until CMS provided a kind of mirror to it. Only then could the work of rebuilding homes, businesses and lives begin. As one Acholi activist said to me afterwards, after seeing some of the TV footage: “When I saw Bishop Ojwang of Kitgum actually in front of Downing Street . . . this to me felt like humanity has the same language now.”

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<sup>17</sup> These points are lost entirely on statesmen who strut the international arena. Jonathan Powell told a Westminster Faith Debate in my hearing that Kony's disappearance from Uganda was caused by the threat of the International Criminal Court! – failing to observe the fact that the arrest warrant has never been revoked, yet evidently proves useless in CAR. Powell, David Cameron's new peace envoy to Libya, to whom I spoke at the event, and with whom I subsequently corresponded, did not acknowledge my email.

That word “language” is instructive. This is the Spirit of Pentecost, linking peoples, uniting cultures. Our campaign generated a common *discourse*, despite huge disparities in culture and geography, through the bridging work of the international Anglican Church, and the compassion mobilized by the Holy Spirit. It taught the lesson that the world stays poor, angry and catastrophic because we let it stay that way. And that’s a failure of mission. CMS *saw* the issues in Northern Uganda because of its religious literacy—and that is a literacy of the human heart, whatever its trappings. The Incarnation means that the Gospel is *comprehensively* good news practically and politically, and in that faith, I was able to mobilize a media campaign that made a surprising difference.

### **Summing up**

Journalism began with the Puritan freedom of conscience struggle by men like John Milton and the Baptists of Devonshire Square. They published tracts against state repression and were damned – literally for some, at the cost of their lives. Lesslie Newbigin helps us to recover the sacred calling of all journalists: that the Good News is the lodestar by which to decide what is worth publishing. He was skeptical of ‘facts’: how journalists choose what facts to report is as subjective as any other choice we have to make, despite their vaunted claims to ‘neutrality’.<sup>18</sup> As Einstein said, what passes as facts depends on the theory you bring to the facts. The theory editors have brought for 60 years to the ‘facts’ of religion is that it is a dying niche interest. Newbigin is far more ambitious. All news derives from the good news of the resurrection. “The question is, ‘Do you believe [it] or do you not?’ Here is a fact, and of course it is not a religious fact. It does not belong to that little slot in *Time*

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<sup>18</sup> Mike McCahill, film critic for the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* described the film ‘God is not Dead’ as ‘sick filth’ in his 2014 review <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/apr/17/gods-not-dead-review>

magazine, between drama and sport, where religion is kept. It belongs to the opening section on world affairs. The Kingdom of God is at hand.”<sup>19</sup>

More often now, religion is being covered by security correspondents – an even worse and more reprehensible niche than before!<sup>20</sup> Yet the news potential of the Gospel is there in every scenario, and as I have hoped to demonstrate, enables a Christian journalist to ‘read off’ what is happening much sooner and much more effectively than others. As Newbiggin says: “The church is *for* the place Christologically . . . The Church is a movement launched into the world in the same sense in which Jesus is sent into the world by the Father”.<sup>21</sup>

Journalism practiced properly ie Christologically, is vital to the democratic process, and to the healthy and free functioning of a particular people in a particular place. This is the truth that compels me to speak up.<sup>22</sup> Says Newbiggin: “What is unique about the Christian gospel is that those who are called to be its witnesses are committed to the public affirmation that it is true—true for all peoples at all times—and are at the same time forbidden to use coercion to enforce it.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Launching Lapido**

The word “Lapido” means to “speak out” in the Acholi dialect of Northern Uganda. I chose it to honour the church leaders in a remote and terrifying place to which they succeeded in drawing the world’s attention. Lapido Media’s slogan is “Religious literacy in *world* affairs.” Its name was chosen in order to provoke questions that might testify to what happens when the media expunges religion from the political equation. World affairs reporters and the people they influence remain blind and deaf to the reasons for human deprivation and war,

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<sup>19</sup> Newbiggin, “On being the Church,” 33.

<sup>20</sup> Sean O’Neil at the Times writes occasionally about the Tablighi Jamaat in Newham. Caroline Wyatt, Security Correspondent for the BBC, has just been made Religion Correspondent.

<sup>21</sup> Newbiggin, “On being the Church,” 32.

<sup>22</sup> Lapido means to speak up in Acholi.

<sup>23</sup> Newbiggin, *Faith and Power*, 148.

and incapable of adequately addressing them. My friends and a very few supporters took up Newbiggin's challenge to see the Gospel as *the fact* that makes or breaks the news in the real world of other "facts"—both political and social. He dared me to "risk everything" in a radical encounter with that "real world."<sup>24</sup> If the Gospel is true when we speak it into the questions and dilemmas that face us in the public domain, we can expect difficulties—but also surprises.

Lapido Media was launched in December 2007 at the Frontline Club, a watering hole for foreign correspondents in Paddington, in the presence of some of the most senior journalists in the country who all confessed on the day that their biggest postbags always concerned any reference they had made to religion. Melanie Phillips of the *Daily Mail* and Aaqil Ahmed, later to become Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC, came. The columnist Dominic Lawson agreed to interview Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali on the subject: "Neutrality or Truth? Reporting Islam post-7/7" which was intended to challenge journalists on their equivocation about religion after the London Tube bombings. Lawson wrote his "op-ed" in the *Independent* the next day under the headline: "Could a robust Christian response be the answer to Muslim extremism in Britain?" One tiny charity inspired by an old, blind missionary sparked the debate of the week. We secured extensive coverage on the BBC news website, three stories in the *Times*, inquiries from much of the other press including *The Sun*, as well as a live half-hour studio discussion with the presenter of CNN's worldwide *Correspondent* slot.

There is still a huge mountain to climb but a number of well-funded or connected new networks and partnerships are forming, taking the high ground of the culture and using our language! Following the publication of *The Other Side of 1984* in 1983, the paradigm shift in western culture to which Newbiggin devoted his "retirement" is becoming more and more

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<sup>24</sup> Newbiggin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 31.

apparent as what threatens the “public square” in which Christians are called to bear witness, is exposed. Lapido represents a refusal to be corralled within one convenient sacred or secular ghetto bequeathed to us by the modernist fallacy. Truth cannot be diced up like that. We are a new mission – though we say it under our breath – subverting the media from within.

Time and time again, I have returned to the Newbigin texts that so inspired me: for encouragement, reorientation, a sense that my discomfiture with life is not aberrant, and as he used to say at the end of every letter, every phone-call: to keep going. There is something uniquely subversive in his work that speaks more deeply to our spiritual hunger than anything I have ever encountered. He was rightly and prophetically *against* the tide. His counter-cultural sensibility was odd in a man so much a part of the church hierarchy, and this rebelliousness was tragically missed by his feminist critics who used to speak witheringly of old white men – what you might call the Dead Theologians’ Society – who saw no women involved in his Gospel and Culture work for instance, and totally ignored me. Few people involved with Newbigin actually dared to be as free as he was: consumingly, hungrily daring to be free and daring others to be free also. He once dared to sleep on his own floor so a tramp could have his bed. He dared to fund my Ph.D. out of the proceeds of his tiny retirement house in Selly Oak from which he moved to his Abbeyfield Home. He dared to feel rich in a two-roomed bedsit in a home in Herne Hill run by a woman called Linda so gargantuan she could barely rise from her feet. ‘There’ – he would say, as you entered his little domain following the gesture of his frail translucent hand over-burdened by its great amethyst ecclesial ring: ‘Aren’t we blessed.’ He saw more than was there always – and that’s the trick. What he saw was what we need as Christian journalists to see if we are to recover a prophetic sense of what the story is all about - and point the way ahead. New wine needs new wineskins. All Christians need a new sense of calling specifically to the secular arenas

of our society. ‘We do not spend enough of our energies in training undercover agents ...’ says Lesslie. ‘It cannot be done by clergy, though they have a part. It calls for the vigorous development of lay programs in which those in specific areas of secular work can explore together the possibilities of subversion.’<sup>25</sup>

Lapido Media strives to be one such program.

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<sup>25</sup> *Truth to Tell*, p. 83.

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