THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AS ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION?

("Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it")

A.T. van Leeuwen's enthusiasm about the desacralisation of nature (1964)

In the still very recent past, many theologians actively celebrated the Christian faith as one of the most important, if not the most important, driving forces of western civilization from which we are now reaping a rich harvest. Arend T. van Leeuwen's famous book *Christianity in World History: the meeting of the faiths of East and West* (London, 1964), is a case in point. His book is in effect a great hymn on the theme of modern technological society which he considered the product of the Judaeo-Christian religion. A long process of desacralization of nature opened the way for an open-minded and unencumbered manipulation of nature by technology and thus made it possible to successfully reduce hunger, poverty and disease. Because of the desacralization of nature — here interpreted as secularization — a new and free relation to nature became possible. The forces of nature were demythologized, divested of their mystical, divine, sacred aureole. As a result, they were no longer the object of fear and adoration and could become the object of scientific study. The central idea underlying Van Leeuwen's analysis of culture is the notion that, unlike the other religions, the Judaeo-Christian religion is not characterized by an ontocratic perspective, but by a theocratic perspective in which God alone, as the eternal and holy One, is adored. According to Van Leeuwen the prevailing notion of the other religions is the dominion of being, of natural life with its recurring cycles reflecting the eternal cosmic cycle. In the religion of Israel, on the contrary, we see a break with this static world-view, this cyclic concept of time, derived from the experience of the eternal cyclic course of death and rebirth in nature. For Israel, not nature but history is the area of divine revelation. It is there, in history, that the ongoing action of God manifests itself from the time of creation until the consummation.

Newbigin's misgivings (1966)

In 1966 the well-known English missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, favourably adopt-
ted the arguments of Van Leeuwen and expanded them by means of the fol-
lowing three assertions; firstly, that there is strong historical evidence for the
claim that the roots of modern natural science and technology lie in the biblical
concepts of humankind and nature; secondly that the driving force behind the
development of a single, unified world civilization is a secularized form of bi-
blical eschatology; and, thirdly, that the dissolution of the ontocratic perspec-
tive of society in the non-western world can be interpreted as a new stage in
the history of the struggle of prophetic religion against the totalitarian claims
of sacral society, (Lesslie Newbigin, Honest Religion for Secular Man, London,
1966).

Newbigin, nevertheless, already in 1966 added a great number of critical com-
ments regarding the three above-mentioned assertions. True enough, because of
his twenty-three years experience as a presbyterian missionary in India, he
endorsed the enormous importance of depriving the natural world of its sacral
character, which thus created the freedom to study, experiment with and to
dominate nature. It is therefore no wonder that — according to Newbigin —
the missionary in Africa and Asia also became the pioneer of technological
development. Under the guidance of the mis-sionary posts in the nineteenth and
twentieth century, new plants were imported, new agricultural methods were
developed and new industrial skills were learned. Those who have no experience
outside of Western Europe may find it difficult — so continues Newbigin — to
imagine what that liberation meant. There is nothing more characteristic in the
testi-mony of just-converted people in non-christian cultures than that feeling
of liberation from the foreboding forces dominating the natural world. But on
the other hand, and this is the other side of the coin which is attracting so
much attention today, Newbigin also mentions the story of the sudden change of
feelings experienced by those who were secretly engaged in the production of
the atom-bomb during the second World War when they came to the realisation
of what they were doing. Their sublime feeling of mastery was transformed into
one of guilt and fear.

In essence, all of Newbigin's questions come down to a single question: What
has replaced desacralized nature? Is it a limitlessly dominated, manipulated and
destructible nature? In retrospect, these questions asked in 1966 are an
indication of a reversal in West-European theology which could not be clearly
understood and worked-out in the sixties but which have fully emerged into
prominence in the eighties, certainly for Newbigin himself as can be seen in his
books, The Otherside of 1984: Questions for the Churches (Geneva, 1983) and