
Newbigin’s first chapters analyze the environment in which westerners have grown used to interpreting the Christian faith. He describes a cultural context, often called *modernity*, which orders knowledge by sorting all claims into two separate categories. The first is absolute, objective, public *fact*, which exists regardless of whether anyone recognizes it (“2+2=4”). The second is relative, subjective, private *value*, which lies entirely in our minds (“God is love”).

This epistemological *paradigm*, or way of ordering, gaining, using, and teaching knowledge, is both so invisible to us and so influential that it is essential for us to understand it. First, it is not the only such way. In fact, historically it is not even a very popular one. It claims to be a universal arrangement (10, 18), but in fact it arises through peculiar historical circumstances in the Europe of the last three centuries (1-3).

Modernity has arisen out of the Christian way, challenged it, and eclipsed it so fully that today it supplies the ‘plausibility structures’ even of Christians (8-9). It claims to offer freedom of conscience. Yet it coerces the acceptance of the things it calls ‘facts’ (e.g., through mandatory education). And it discourages the universalizing of claims it calls ‘values’ or ‘opinions’ (by condemning as ‘judgmental’ the public assertion of one’s values) (14-16).

In this environment, whether a claim counts as a fact or a value becomes a major social battle. For instance: Does a doctrine of creation (of any kind) belong in the public domain? Should French Muslim girls be allowed to wear headscarves in school? Is evangelism intolerably rude? Is sincerity all that really matters in religious belief? (25-26).

This is the world we take for granted. Yet the modern paradigm is breaking down. Moderns strive for absolute certainty about the “factual” world and freedom from the bias of subjectivity, but human minds seem incapable of either (27-29). Moreover, as philosopher of science Michael Polanyi shows, even scientists rely on subjective commitments, faith, doubt, intuition, and engagement to know and discover (19-22, 30-35). So do the rest of us. We learn not by separating objectivity from subjectivity but by respecting their interrelationship – by “indwelling” everything from the tools to the vocabulary and the conceptual paradigms we use in life (34-36). *Q: How did you learn to add? How did you learn who God is?*

Likewise, neither ‘fact’ nor ‘value’ as modernity understands them describes fundamental Christian claims such as “Jesus is Lord.” These are public in being universal, yet personal in not being coercive (5-6, 10-12). *Q: So what is that claim if it is not a statement of fact or value?*

Modern Christians struggle to make sense of Christianity with their modern paradigm. Some respect the fact/value dichotomy by reducing Christianity to a set of objective facts. Others do it by reducing Christianity to subjective interpretation or feeling. Modernity is thus responsible for the existence of warring ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘liberal’ Christianity (24).

Modernity is responsible for relativizing the claims of Christian faith, turning it into ‘a religion’ among many (9-10). Even many conservatives do this – when they try to prove that Christianity meets modern standards of reasonableness. Even their ‘successes’ are retreats from apostolic faith that have generally hastened Christianity’s demise (2-3). Moreover, according to the modern paradigm, only values communicate purpose. If values lie in human consciences, the universe is amoral and human beings are sovereign moral agents who supply its purpose (16-18, 36-38). Such relativism both exalts us and serves the modern state’s need to turn religious difference into multicultural diversity and keep the civil peace (25).

The Christian faith offers us a radically different paradigm – the good news – and invites us to indwell it so we may live confidently though not infallibly: that is, faithfully (38).

*Telford Work read the material, wrote the presentation, edited it, and fact-checked. (You will credit each presenter here for only the roles he or she played in producing the presentation.)*