Overview. This book is a mirror and a window. Its first half shows us who we are. It tells an intellectual history of the West that explains how and why today we have torn ourselves apart into factions of “fundamentalists” and “liberals” who vilify each other for being too arrogant or too timid in our claims about God. The book’s second half shows us “what kind of confidence is proper for those who witness to the truth of the gospel” (2). Thus we can begin to see Christian revelation for what it is and is not.

Faith as the Way to Knowledge. A formative moment for emerging Europe came when a people storied by the biblical narrative erupted in the midst of the classical civilization founded in antiquarian Greece and Rome (3). Greeks had convinced Hellenistic antiquity that solid knowledge was not really to be found in religious myths, but in disciplined observation and deduction. Though learned Hellenists dismissed Jews and “Nazarenes” as mere propagators of similar myths, Christians in particular insisted that something new had happened in Jesus Christ that rewrote the rules by which the Hellenists lived. The good news “had provided a new arche, a new starting point for all human understanding of the world. It could not form part of any worldview except one of which it was the basis” (4). Q: Are you troubled by the apparent circularity here?

Newbigin considers the Gospel of John, which features vocabulary that would sound familiar to both Jewish and Hellenistic audiences, but grammar that is deeply subversive: “the Word became flesh” (5). Neither audience can accept this claim on its own terms. The gospel demands that we leave all we have to follow along.

John’s language announced the death of a cosmos in which matter had been thought opposed to mind and spirit, and where the realm of immutable eternity had been thought unalterably incompatible with our world of change (6). The enfleshed Word overran these imagined dichotomies between time and eternity, sense and mind. In Christ all were in all. This was such a philosophical revolution that it took centuries to work out even its basic implications.

Among the greatest enemies of the change were pious conservatives – followers of Arius the Presbyter – who could not conceive of the Son of the Father being truly, fully divine (6). Liberal reticence to acknowledge Jesus’ divinity and fundamentalist neglect of his humanity show that our age has its own counterrevolutionaries … but that is to get ahead of ourselves.

As the insight sank in – to Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, and their followers in orthodoxy – the worldview it implied swept away old intellectual convictions that had “paralyzed” antiquity, and cleared the ground for a whole new life of the mind (7). On the basis of the catholic faith – note that well! – people began to realize that the cosmos had certain qualities that made it accessible to reliable human knowledge:

- The creation of a reasonable God whose human creatures share his image – and whose perfect image is the Son – is humanly knowable in principle. The doctrines of creation and incarnation ground the law of noncontradiction (which Eastern thought rejects) (7).
- Careful observation of a creation that has a being of its own, a relative autonomy from its creator, yields reliable insight (8). The world is not simply the glove under which God arbitrarily flexes his hand (as orthodox Muslims believe).
- The unity of creation (“heavens and earth,” “visible and invisible”) holds all things in common and makes them similarly open to scientific investigation (8). By contrast,
animists and polytheists posited independent motives and means behind the different elements. Likewise, the philosophers had observed that things move linearly here on earth but circularly in heaven, and concluded that the two realms must obey different rules, making knowledge of one inapplicable for understanding the other.

The materiality of Christ affirms the original and ultimate goodness of creation, and thus the material character of salvation. God’s refusal either to abandon creation to destruction or rescue us from it both drove sacramental practice and affirmed physical means of healing (8). Christians further salvation not by ushering each other “out of the matrix” but by eating together and creating hospitals.

All this was a new beginning, sustained not by its own resources but by the truth of the good news. It was not an achievement of human investigation, but a response to a free gift, an acceptance to an invitation to know someone (10-11). That makes all the difference. Newbigin believes that apart from God’s invitation and gift, human knowledge is aimless, asking questions and arriving at answers but never knowing which questions to ask – where to start, how to proceed, or when to stop. The Christian story gives direction that is indispensable to authentic human knowing.

To illustrate and confirm his point, Newbigin appeals to the collapsing world of pagan antiquity in Augustine’s day (12). Augustine, a child of antiquity, a lover of Virgil and student of Middle Platonism, saw with epic vision the true shape of human history, a vision that was still eluding his pagan contemporaries and causing them to misinterpret the decline of Rome. In The City of God against the Pagans, he brilliantly chronicled the intersection of pagan and Jewish antiquity in the Christian moment that had now arrived to fulfill both. What Augustine did for pagan Rome, Patrick did for Celtic Ireland and the Benedictines did for Germanic Europe (cf. 13 and see Robert Cahill’s How the Irish Saved Civilization).

Was this revolution a good thing? Newbigin thinks so. But of course he does – he is a Christian! Pagans disagreed, and detractors persist even now. How do we decide who is right?

Not, Newbigin insists, by finding some principle more fundamental than these perspectives from which to judge them. No such principle exists; “there are no insurance policies” (14). What we shall soon see is that later, a European intellectual movement called the Enlightenment tried to underwrite one anyway (see chapters 2 and 3).

Newbigin ends by considering the implications of that claim. First, if we follow the philosophers or the Enlightenment and pursue a more fundamental principle or body of knowledge from which to judge, we will assume our knowledge is more certain than we will if we follow the evangelists. If the Christian story funds our knowledge and if we are still in the middle of that story, then we walk only by faith (14, cf. Heb. 11-12). The security of our knowledge depends on Christ’s trustworthiness, not ours. *Q: Do you live that way in your intellectual life?*

Second, founding knowledge on principle makes seeing prior to acting, theory radically prior to practice. Christian life does no such thing. Knowledge and obedience are mutually dependent. We do not wait to act until we see clearly, for apart from acting in obedience we will never see at all (14-15).

*Q: Would you like to talk about the Christian liberal arts now?*