



## EDITORIAL OVERVIEW: WHAT'S NEXT?

*This Issue will be a major 12-18 month project framed around a proposal about the new situation of the modern West and the reframing of the challenge of a missional engagement.*

*In terms of mission the Euro-tribal churches across the West are in a new situation.*

There is broadening awareness that the modern West is well into a massive unraveling. This dis-ease is only exacerbated now as the world has plunged into the scary, anxious space of a pandemic. Our well-ordered, taken for granted worlds are not working. The narratives of liberalism and neoliberal economics are increasingly unable to address this malaise. In their waning legitimacy new questions are emerging: What takes their place? and by extension, 'What's next?'

We have lived for a long time inside an overarching story about the passing of Western Christendom and about a new age characterized as 'secular' and dominated by narratives that give little space to the Christian story. Christians have come to see themselves as marginalized, as exiled, as relegated to a new dark time in which the Christian story carries little sense of meaning for a majority of people. Christian posture and mission is shaped by this imagination. That response is understandable but it may not be the whole story or an accurate overview.

This issue of *JMP* questions this common framing of our situation. Is it any longer the case? Are we in a new space? Can we see our missional vocation from a different perspective? Are we in a place where we haven't been before? Christendom is long gone but are we in a space where this secular narrative, so inimical to Christian imagination, is itself unraveling? Can Christian life address the new question of 'What's next?'

If this is the new situation many of the metaphors and ways of being Christian in the West are no longer helpful. Notions such as exile, for example, no longer describe the situation. Narratives of marginalization, so central to how many Christians understand themselves today, may misdirect us. Can we reimagine a missional engagement with the West?

Indications of such change is evidenced by the ending of liberalism's hegemony and the question 'what's next?'. On both sides of the Atlantic the publication of important books is arguing that an overarching secularized ethos shaped by liberalism has failed and is indeed unraveling. Such proposals would hardly have received a comment a decade ago but, today, are part of asking the question 'What's next?' The current pandemic only exacerbates this anxiety.

The question 'What's next?' is about what story will shape the West. What makes this a different kind of question than the ones asked in a secular age, which presumed all religious stories to be little more than private preferences, is that the road we're now travelling isn't making those distinctions, which makes it a critical moment for Christians. We are in a new situation where nothing is off the table. The story shaping much of the 20th century that became the reflexive stance of churches is that the Christian narrative has nothing to offer the socio-cultural, political-economic life of the West. Churches largely acquiesced to this prevailing myth by withdrawing into a privatized spirituality of bourgeois morality that has had nothing to say to this moment. But in the unraveling, this myth is undone, rather like the unmasking of the Wizard of Oz. In this new moment Christians have the opportunity to shape the question of what's next. This was at the heart of Newbigin's question 'Can the West can be converted?'

### **Newbigin and the Question of What's Next.**

Newbigin's legacy and the missional conversation it spawned, has much to say about how we respond to this question. When Newbigin was writing from the late 60s forward it was in the context of a dogged myth that caused most people (even within the churches) to miss the brilliance of his work. His insights were too often turned into ecclesiocentric techniques for fixing the churches rather than a powerful

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engagement with the myth that had become cemented into Western popular (and academic) imagination through the Enlightenments of Europe and the new secular doctrine of progress. It's still simple to state because it is still in us:

*Once there was a golden age of Graeco-Roman civilization that shone as the bright light of human achievement. That light was snuffed out with the emergence of the Christian religion especially in the form it took through Paul. With the fall of Rome the West was plunged into the Dark Ages. Only in the 15th century did that ancient light return as humanists jumped over the long dark ages back to the light of that previous time. With this new beginning came a renewing of the human, a bold movement of light (progress) that gave back to humanity its power and dignity. There came a new rationalism, a method, a way of knowing that finally displaced the superstition and fideism of religious (Christian) belief. There was reborn a world all but lost. In this modern West religion has a place for a personalized faith separated from everyday, practical life.*

In addressing the 'What next?' Newbigin challenged the assumptions of this myth by arguing that the Christian story was at the core of the West's identity and essential for its future. In a different way this is the argument Tom Holland makes in his recent book *Dominion*.<sup>[1]</sup> But even right up to the present moment the churches continue to read Newbigin through ecclesiocentric eyes, hoping his *missional* frame might save them from their own unraveling.

A great deal has shifted over the past thirty years. As the modern project unravels so does its primary myth. It is increasingly clear that neither have the ability to explain what is happening or offer clues about what comes next. We are in new territory that calls for something more than strategies for the self-survival of churches. The question of what's next invites Christians to offer a compelling rationale for the re-birthing, or re-rooting of the Christian narrative, in the very soil that was originally shaped by that same narrative, and arguably collapses without it.

[1] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (NY: Basic Books, 2020).



## Alan Roxburgh

TMN founder, consultant, pastor, teacher and writer with more than 30 years experience in church leadership, consulting and seminary education.

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